"Thrill of a Billion Eyes": The Prancing J-Settes

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“THRILL OF A BILLION EYES”: THE PRANCING J-SETTES

THESIS

A Thesis
presented in partial fulfillment of requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts
in the Department of Southern Studies
The University of Mississippi

by

Mary Paige Blessey

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ABSTRACT

“The Prancing J-Settes” is the dance team that marches with the Sonic Boom of the South marching band at Jackson State University in Jackson, Mississippi. The group is credited with originating a unique form of dance that has come to be known as “J-Setting.” While J-Setting remains most popular in the southern United States, mass media platforms have brought the dance to audiences all over the country and world, with examples including Beyoncé’s music video for “Single Ladies (Put A Ring On It)” and the Lifetime Channel’s reality television series Bring It! My goal with this paper is to go to the source—the Prancing J-Settes—to hear their definitions and explanations of the dance culture that takes their name. I conducted a series of interviews with current and former members of the Prancing J-Settes, as well as one former Sonic Boom band director, and one sociologist whose work focuses on intersections of race, gender, class, and pop culture in the South. My hope is that this combination of responses will give the reader some understanding of who the Prancing J-Settes are and what they do, and may provide a starting place for conversations on related issues of cultural and historical context. This paper is intended to be reflective in nature and serves mainly to accompany a short documentary thesis film I have produced on the same topic. All interviews with respondents were conducted between 2015-2016.
DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to the Prancing J-Settes of Jackson, Mississippi, whose hard work and dedication to their craft contributes meaningfully and beautifully to the culture of Mississippi and the world.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you to my committee, Andy Harper, Ted Ownby, and Katie McKee, for your patience and support.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The idea for this project started a few of years ago while I was scrolling through Beyoncé videos on YouTube, an activity I cannot claim is uncommon for me. I do not remember exactly where I saw the reference—whether it was in the comments section, a linked article, a recommended video—but somewhere I saw it mentioned that one particular section of the choreography in Beyoncé’s music video for her 2008 hit song “Single Ladies (Put A Ring On It)” uses a dance style called “J-Setting.”

This was the first I had heard of the term. Some quick research told me that the word originates from the “Prancing J-Settes,” the dance team that marches with the Sonic Boom of the South. The Sonic Boom is the renowned marching band of Jackson State University, a historically black college and university located in Jackson, Mississippi. The band, which dates back to the 1920s but did not get the name of “Sonic Boom of the South” until the 1970s, has earned an impressive reputation within the marching band world through the years.\(^1\) The Boom has performed on national television at events such as the Motown 30\(^{th}\) Anniversary special in

\(^1\) Transcript, Dowell Taylor Oral History Interview I, July, 13, 2016, by Mary Blessey.
1990 and the NAACP Image Awards in 2003, and they are regularly invited to participate at the Honda Battle of the Bands, the prestigious HBCU marching band showcase held every year in Atlanta, Georgia. They are known for their powerful sound (hence the name), technical precision, flashy marching style, energetic drum major performances, and, of course, for their eye-catching all-female dance line, The Prancing J-Settes.

While they are members of the marching band—JSU officially calls them an “auxiliary group” of the Sonic Boom—the Prancing J-Settes have become something of a cultural phenomenon unto themselves. Over the years, the J-Settes, as they are often called for short, developed their own unique take on the majorette form of dance commonly found at predominantly black schools in the South. Their precise and high-energy performances have put their name on the map within HBCU marching band culture and earned them a devoted following of fans. As sociologist and Memphis native Dr. Zandria Robinson told me when I interviewed her on the subject, “I don’t think anybody growing up black in the South in the 70s, 80s, and 90s doesn’t know about the J-Settes.”

The first squad of the Prancing J-Settes was formed in 1971. In the preceding decades, the band had marched with traditional, baton-twirling majorettes. In 1970, the director of the majorettes, Shirley Middleton, went to the president of the university and asked if they could “put down their batons,” a moment that has attained almost mythic status in the Sonic Boom’s history. As their website says, “Dr. Peoples agreed and thus legends were born.” The name “Prancing Jaycettes” became official in 1971, and the spelling was changed to “Prancing J-
Settes” in 1982 due to “a name conflict with a local organization known as the Jackson Jaycees/Jaycettes.”

Today, a quick google search opens the floodgates to thousands of videos and photos of the J-Settes performing with the Sonic Boom at football games, basketball games, parades, pep rallies, and other events throughout the years. The Sonic Boom’s official YouTube page regularly posts videos of the band and the J-Settes performing, but many of the videos available online are posted unofficially by friends and fans. These videos typically receive tens or hundreds of thousands of views from people all over the world. The comments sections on YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, Bandhead.org, and other virtual spaces where followers keep up with their favorite HBCU marching bands are full of adoring fans professing their love for the Prancing J-Settes and debating which member, outfit, or routine is their favorite.

The Prancing J-Settes created a unique form of dance, but, of course, it did not emerge out of a cultural vacuum. The early Prancing J-Settes were influenced by their environments and the style they created shares important similarities with other African American majorette dance lines across the South. As is often the case when new cultural trends like this emerge, many of these dance groups were probably developing their styles in a similar direction around the same time as the J-Settes. Yet each group still has their own distinguishable “twist” on the style. Southern University’s Dancing Dolls, Alcorn University’s Golden Girls, Alabama A&M’s Stingettes, and JSU’s Prancing J-Settes may all dance in a similar genre, but each maintains its own unique take on the shared form.

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7 Bandhead.org is a website that calls itself “The bandhead social network.” It primarily focuses on HBCU marching bands, and users can post videos and comment, similar to YouTube. See: http://www.bandhead.org
The J-Settes’ particular style has had a profound influence on dance culture around the South, and in recent decades, people have begun referring to the style as “J-Setting.” The term is often used to describe anyone dancing in a range of styles that originate from the Prancing J-Settes. In particular, “J-Setting” has become very popular in the black gay community in the South, where queer and gender-nonconforming men have embraced the dance form and visual aesthetic, and have developed their own unique interpretations of it. Zandria Robinson remembers the impact the J-Settes had on people of all genders growing up, saying, “When we would see other people doing the majorette style of dancing, everybody was trying to be like the J-Settes. So, that was just a part of who we were. Little girls wanted to be majorettes. Little boys wanted to be majorettes! Everybody wanted to be majorettes.”

According to some accounts, J-Setting began spreading to the gay club scene after male students watched the Prancing J-Settes perform at football games and began to do the choreography in the stands alongside the band. Kelly Virella writes in “J-Setting, A Southern Dance Form, Marches North to Philadelphia”: “The dance appealed to Jackson State’s gay male students who began performing it at night clubs, morphing it into a new form by combining it with other dance traditions like hip hop, ballet, jazz, and crumping. It’s become a big part of gay cultural events in the south, such as the Atlanta Gay Pride Parade, where teams of men J-Sette against each other.”

It should be noted that men have actually played a role in the creative development of the J-Settes’ dance style since the beginning. One of the choreographers who worked with Shirley Middleton on the original squad of Prancing J-Settes was a man named Hollis Pippins. JSU’s

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8 Transcript, Zandria Robinson Interview, October 19, 2016, by Mary Blessey.
website says he was “a JSU twirler and a dancer of high performance in his own right, [who] took great pride in providing the J-Settes with excellent choreography.”¹¹ In “J-Setting in Public: Black Queer Desires and Worldmaking,” Lamont Loyd-Sims writes about Pippins:

“Middleton also had the help of Hollis Pippins, a former twirler at JSU, who worked with the Prancing J-Settes as a choreographer. According to one particular blogger who describes him as a member of “the boys’ club”, it was rumored that Pippins was gay. While there is not much written that elaborates on Pippins’ contribution to the early formation of the Prancing J-Settes, his existence and work is a reminder of men’s early influence on the majorette style. Many j-setters often explain that the style of dance began with women, but this bit of information regarding the history of JSU’s majorette style illustrates how gay men have also been creative influences on the style.”¹²

So, there is a longstanding connection between communities of female majorette dancers and queer male dancers in the South. Today, the styles of J-Setting performed in gay clubs and at “J-Sette battles” in the southern United States plays a major role in the popularization of the style.

In the last decade in particular, there has been a huge increase in nationwide, and even worldwide, interest in J-Setting. Some point to Beyoncé’s use of the dance in “Single Ladies” as a major catalyst for this. The style has also been featured and discussed by cast members on the Lifetime Channel’s reality television series, Bring It!, which follows a community majorette dance team for children and teenagers in Jackson, Mississippi called the Dancing Dolls.¹³ The J-Setting style can also be seen on the Oxygen Channel’s reality television series The Prancing Elites Project, which follows the Prancing Elites, an all-male J-Setting group from Mobile, Alabama (and whose name is an homage to the Prancing J-Settes). So, the style and the term “J-

¹³ Not to be confused with the Dancing Dolls of Southern University, the majorette dance line that marches with their marching band, the Human Jukebox. The SU Dancing Dolls are considered one of the Prancing J-Sette’s main rivals.
Setting” are becoming more recognized outside of the South due to the mass media exposure. Some dance schools around the country have even started offering “J-Setting” classes and workshops to students who want to try their hand at the dance.\textsuperscript{14}

After learning more about this vast and vibrant culture of J-Setting, I found it impressive that all of this traces back to one dance group in Jackson, Mississippi. The Prancing J-Settes have had a significant impact on mainstream popular culture, but this origin story often gets left out. Certainly there are many people across the world who have seen their creative product—particularly its incorporation into the choreography for “Single Ladies”—but know nothing about the women at Jackson State University who created it. I wanted more people to meet the originators of this dance and hear them tell their story in their own words. So, I decided to make this the topic of a short documentary film I am producing for my thesis project in the Southern Studies program at the University of Mississippi.

At first, I wanted my project to cover not only the original Prancing J-Settes, but also the ways J-Setting has spread and the various interpretations that exist today. However, I quickly learned that due to practical and logistical limitations, that was far too broad of a scope for this particular project. I realized I needed drastically narrow the topic for both the film and this paper. As a result, this project will focus exclusively on the official Prancing J-Settes of Jackson State University. As I see it, this film and paper combined will attempt to provide a look at the origin story of “J-Setting,”\textsuperscript{15} and perhaps may provide a jumping off point for others to explore various exciting and equally valuable dance cultures that have developed after and around the Prancing

\textsuperscript{14} Transcript, Chloé Crowley Oral History Interview, February 29, 2016, by Mary Blessey.

\textsuperscript{15} Because I have limited the focus, in this paper I use the term “J-Setting” to refer only to the dance culture of the official Prancing J-Settes. I choose to capitalize the term because I am referring specifically to the Prancing J-Settes, rather than to a broader scope of dance culture involving j-setting in general, which I often see written in lower-cased letters. For this paper, terms such as “J-Setting,” “the J-Sette style,” and “J-Sette culture” are essentially used interchangeably.
J-Settes. But for now, my goal is to learn more about the Prancing J-Settes—who they are, how they dance, and why it is meaningful, both to the dancers themselves and within broader cultural contexts.

My primary method of research was conducting oral history interviews with current and former Prancing J-Settes. Their responses from my interviews form the bulk of this paper, and part of the value of this project is to have those responses on academic record. As much as possible, I want these women to speak for themselves, and I want readers to interpret for themselves. I also interviewed Dowell Taylor, a former band director of the Sonic Boom of the South, to give his take on the dance style and to provide some needed historical background on the band in general. Lastly, I interviewed Dr. Zandria Robinson, a sociologist whose work focuses on intersections of race, gender, class, and pop culture in the South. I chose her in part because she has written about Beyoncé and her southern cultural influence, including an article published in Rolling Stone that mentions the Prancing J-Settes and their influence on the pop star. I choose to include some of Robinson’s interview responses in the paper simply to provide possible points of analysis and cultural context for the reader, and myself, to consider—I do not mean to suggest by including these remarks that they speak definitively on the J-Settes or that they constitute the only academic analysis the subject warrants.

Beyond offering Robinson’s responses as possible points of inquiry, this project mostly attempts to let the J-Settes tell their own story. Their responses are privileged throughout the paper and are always presented before Robinson’s or even Taylor’s, who is of course affiliated with the culture being documented but himself was never a Prancing J-Sette. The J-Sette’s answers come first because that is the primary motive of this project: to let the J-Settes talk about the J-Settes. This is part of the reason I have forgone the traditional theoretical analysis one
might expect to see in an academic thesis paper. I am aware of scholarship from African American studies, women’s and gender studies, ethnomusicology, dance studies, performance studies, pop culture studies, southern studies, and other areas that would be applicable to the topic at hand. However, I have decided to conduct a project in which I attempt to insert myself and my interpretations as little as possible. My main goal is to create a record of current and former J-Settes telling their stories, and I invite future scholars to draw on this record for their work in the aforementioned disciplines and beyond. But for this particular project, I want the respondents to speak for themselves, unaccompanied by my analysis as much as possible.

In addition to filming interviews, I recorded footage at some of the J-Settes’ practices and games. I attended practices in the gym, as well as one of their practices with the whole band outside. I filmed at the 2015 JSU vs. Alcorn University football game, following the J-Settes with my camera the whole day, including before the game while they got ready, on bus to the game, in the stands, in the locker rooms before their halftime show, and on the bus on the way home. I did the same for of the JSU basketball games in 2016. Capturing some of this behind-the-scenes footage was an important part of the process because I want to depict not only the J-Settes’ performances, but also the hours of hard work that make those performances possible.

From the beginning, I knew this topic required moving picture as the primary medium for storytelling, rather than just conducting interviews and writing a traditional thesis paper. Dance is a physical, visual language. We can attempt to describe it in words, but the words always fall short. Many of my respondents point this out in their responses; several of them say they cannot find the words to describe their dance and insist that “you just have to see it.” To tell this story only in written words would be a disservice to the dance. A visual art form needs a visual medium to communicate its story. You need to see dance to understand dance. This is why it is
so important to have the short film as the primary means of documenting the Prancing J-Settes and their story.

This project—both film and paper—is by no means exhaustive. It is impossible to cover everything, of course. One particular limitation of this project is the interview sample; all the respondents I was able to interview are from the younger generations of Prancing J-Settes. The oldest J-Sette alumna I interviewed was on the squad 1998-1999. I made efforts to contact and gain permission to interview alumni from earlier years, but so far I have been unable to secure interviews with them. As a result, the project focuses mostly on what J-Setting is now, as opposed to the evolution of the dance culture over the decades.
CHAPTER 2

REFLECTION PAPER

I. LIST OF INTERVIEW RESPONDENTS

*Chloé Crowley*

Chloé Crowley is the current director of the Prancing J-Settes, a position she has held since 2012. She grew up in Jackson, Mississippi. She was a J-Sette from 2005-2008 and served as captain in 2008. Her mother and sister were both J-Settes as well. She holds a master’s degree in Dance Education from New York University.

*Shanika Lee*

Shanika Lee was a Prancing J-Sette for the 1998-1999 school year and is currently the owner and head dance teacher at Purple Diamond Dance Company in Jackson, Mississippi. The studio organizes two community dance teams, the Purple Diamond Dance Team (ages 12-17) and the Diamond Misses Dance Team (ages 6-11). Lee offers classes in majorette dance, as well as other styles including jazz, hip-hop, ballet, modern, and tumbling. The Purple Diamonds have
been featured repeatedly on the Lifetime channel’s reality television series Bring It! The show centers around one of the Purple Diamond’s rival community teams, the Dancing Dolls, who are coached by Dianna Williams. The Purple Diamonds and the Dancing Dolls are two of the local community teams that often produce dancers who go on to become Prancing J-Settes at JSU.

*Dowell Taylor*

Dowell Taylor was the director of the Sonic Boom from 1984-1992, and again from 2012-2015, and is now retired. He attended Jackson State University and was in the band from 1972-1976, serving as a graduate assistant in 1977. Among other notable achievements during his tenure, he arranged the current version of “Get Ready” played by the Sonic Boom, which is the band’s signature song. His wife was also a Prancing J-Sette.

*Dominique Martin*

Dominique Martin was the captain of the J-Settes for the 2015-2016 school year, and was the captain at the time of our interview. She was on the squad from 2012-2016. She is from Augusta, Georgia. She was scouted to become a J-Sette by a J-Sette alumna who taught a majorette dance workshop in Augusta that Martin attended.

*Patresa Cox*

Patresa Cox is a current J-Sette and has been on the squad since 2015. She is from Jackson, Mississippi.

*Cipreuna Church*

Cipreuna Church is a current J-Sette and has been on the squad since 2013. She is from Lotto, Oklahoma but grew up in Jackson, Mississippi.
Alexsis Shorter

Alexsis Shorter is a current J-Sette and has been on the squad since 2015. She is from Utica, Mississippi. Growing up, she danced with the Mahogany Dancers in Utica, Mississippi and then with Dianna Williams’s Dancing Dolls in Jackson, MS. She has appeared on the Lifetime Channel’s show *Bring It!*

Kristen Smith

Kristen Smith is a current J-Sette and has been on the squad since 2015. She is from Jackson, Mississippi. She danced with the Purple Diamonds in high school and learned under Shanika Lee, a former Prancing J-Sette. Kristen has appeared on the Lifetime Channel’s show *Bring It!* Smith’s mother was a Prancing J-Sette in the 1980s.

Zandria Robinson

Zandria Robinson is an assistant professor of sociology at Rhodes College whose work explores intersections between race, gender, class, pop culture, and the South. She has formerly been a professor of Southern Studies at the University of Mississippi. She is the author of *This Ain't Chicago: Race, Class, and Regional Identity in the Post-soul South*. In 2016, she published an article in *Rolling Stone* entitled “Beyoncé’s Southern Black ‘Formation,’” in which she mentions the Prancing J-Settes and their influence on the pop star.
II. J-SETTING: GENERAL DESCRIPTIONS

So, what does this dance created by the Prancing J-Settes look like? Many people have tried to describe it, but I wanted to go to the source and ask the J-Settes themselves. I quickly learned that this was not always an easy question to answer. Almost all the women at some point tell me some variation of, “It’s hard to describe—you just have to see it.” Many point out the style’s incorporation of elements from several different genres of dance, including ballet, jazz, modern, lyrical, hip-hop, and African dance, with the addition in recent years of gymnastics. “A little bit of everything” is commonly part of the answer. Some of the women attempt to define the dance by describing the feel or attitude of it; they use general descriptions like “classy” or “energetic,” or they describe the way the crowd is awed by the dance. I think the best way to get closer to an understanding of J-Setting—besides seeing it, of course—is to hear as many accounts as possible and then consider the commonalities between them. Following are the responses I got to this question in my interviews.

Chloé Crowley:

“I think what’s different about the J-Sette style is that it incorporates and encompasses all different things. Like, you may have a pirouette and a battement here, but then you have a shake and a pump-pump over here with it. So, it incorporates, I guess, a bit of African, jazz, ballet, and then you have the acrobatic sense of it that’s just been incorporated in the late ‘90s, early 2000s. And it’s like you see these dancers, and they’re moving and they’re doing all different things, and they can do a cartwheel here, and then they get back up, they’re doing something else here, and they’re doing it, and then they get up, and they just march off like nothing happened, just like ‘Boom, [snaps fingers]...
there it is.’ So, I think that’s the wow-factor of it. And I think that’s what makes it different.”

Shanika Lee:

“J-Setting is a style of dance that has definitely evolved over the years, but it’s something that’s very, very popular here in the South. It’s a form of dance that’s very—it has a hip-hop twist to it, but it is majorette. It’s a lot of high energy moves, a lot of precision, arms, acrobatics, a lot of just body movements. It’s just a very energetic form of dance. It’s kind of hard to explain, you have to really see it to understand what it is… It’s kind of in a league all of its own. However, there are jazz, modern influences, as well as hip-hop—you incorporate that into it to make it what it is… When you look at the J-Sette form of dance, you see a lot of different elements. You see jazz, you see hip-hop, you see some ballet because there are a lot of leaps and turns and twists. You see the acrobatics definitely. So there is a little bit of everything that’s mixed up in there… It has evolved into this form of dance that everyone loves to see.”

Patresa Cox:

“J-Setting is basically dancing with class… Like, you have class, and then you have this powerful, other type of, you know, appearance to you. So, basically, J-Setting would resemble, like, a horse—it’s beautiful, you know, it has the beautiful mane, but it prances when you see it, and you can hear it coming when you see it [laughs]. Yeah, so that’s what I would describe J-Setting to be.”

I ask Cox if she could elaborate on what makes it “powerful,” and she replies:

“I used [that word] because mainly, like when we’re marching, we have to use a certain type of, sense of—how can I say this? Like, a sense of, I guess, powerful? [sic] [laughs] A sense of powerful movements when we’re doing stuff like that. Like, when we’re marching in, our legs have to be high, and we have to hit the ground really hard with our boots. So, it’s like when we’re marching, you’re going to hear that click-clack sound, like a horse… And also when we’re doing field shows, you have to do everything full out. Nothing should be half done. Stands—full out. Everything with all you got, that’s why I said powerful. Use everything.”

Dominique Martin:

18 Transcript, Chloé Crowley Oral History Interview, February 29, 2016, by Mary Blessey.
19 Transcript, Shanika Lee Oral History Interview, July 13, 2016, by Mary Blessey.
20 Transcript, Patresa Cox Oral History Interview, February 26, 2016, by Mary Blessey.
“Basically, like I said, J-Settes, our style is bucking. That's what we're known for, our signature bucking, but when we do routines and stands, we incorporate lyrical type things and ballet moves. It's not just strictly bucking because, you know, we can't just have a routine full of bucking because that [laughs]—we will probably pass out because that's really tiresome. We have to transition between different moves from modern and jazz and ballet. Like, "Do you have a suggestion?" We say it. "Oh, you all can do this move, like, the hip-hop move or whatever," and, "Okay, that's cute. We can use it." It's not like, "Oh, that's not J-Sette. Oh, that's not J-Sette." If it looks good, we're going to do it. So, it can be jazz, modern, or like I said, ballet. We do a lot of lyrical. We've been doing a lot of lyrical lately, but we kind of incorporate everything. We keep everything fresh and new, so it's pretty much really, really diverse, and you never know.”

Cipreuna Church:

“I would describe the Prancing J-Settes as the face of the band. You're going to always see them first, the girls. When you think about them, you think about dancing, probably make-up, someone everyone looks up to, and wants to be like. I would just say outgoing really... I would describe our style of dance as energetic. Some people call it J-Setting, but we kind of call it bucking or prancing because not everything we do is hard. We also do soft moves as well. I would say it's kind of a mixture of all dance styles together, because we can also switch it up. One year we did a hip hop dance. It's not all just bucking or majoretting; it's like all a mixture of everything together... I would probably put J-Setting and bucking in the same thing because when you think of J-Setting, that's just our style; but bucking is when we're doing hardcore stands, like more energy, like fast songs and probably like a more mid-tempo song. With majoretting, I would say majoretting is more with the times, maybe, but not more with dancing. I would say J-Setting and bucking is a term to its own or with each other, where majoretting is just twirling probably batons, to me.”

Alexsis Shorter:

“J-Setting is all about style and swag, and I don't know. Can't really just describe what is J-Setting because it's so much. We do so much. We do jazz, lyrical, high kicks, toe-touches, death-drops—all that. It's like, in the stands, which is my personally favorite. It’s just a lot put into one. You can't really just answer that with a straight answer—“What is J-Setting?”—because it's just so much.”

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21 Transcript, Dominique Martin Oral History Interview, March 7, 2016, by Mary Blessey.
22 Transcript, Cipreuna Church Oral History Interview, March 2, 2016, by Mary Blessey.
23 Transcript, Alexsis Shorter Oral History Interview, March 8, 2016, by Mary Blessey.
I also ask Dowell Taylor to give his description as a former band director. He begins by explaining the difference between the way the J-Settes danced in his time versus today:

“They’re not comparable [laughs]. You can’t compare them. The basic template is there, but the style has changed… Compared to today’s J-Settes, the J-Settes back then were dancing in slow motion [laughs]. In other words, they were doing perhaps a move to every other beat—every four counts, or eight counts, they would make a move. These girls [today] do a beat every eighth note [laughs]. It’s just—the dances are so complex, and so physically demanding. I would assume that based on the styles of the ‘70s, at the time, that was high cotton. That was dramatic stuff they were doing, using—dancing to tunes like “Kool Aid,” and—I’ve forgotten the names of some of them, it’s been so long ago. “Fight the Power.” A whole lot of things they were dancing to, but over time, the dances just incrementally became more intricate each year. And today, the girls from the ‘70s will look at these girls today and say, “What are they doing?” [laughs]… The uniqueness of the steps, the eye-catching moves. You’re being progressive, but not suggestive. You know, you’re—you don’t want to be provocative, but you’re trying to be an educator [laughs] while dancing. Now that’s a tough one! [laughs] But they’ve managed to incorporate a lot of different current techniques and styles into this presentation, and I believe that it has gotten to the point where they just can’t take it any further. All you can do is, is do variations of it. And maybe, it’s just the fact that they got there first. I don’t know. I’m not sure. Because you see the dance everywhere. The dance is just unique. Just unique. I can’t find many things, many other things to say about it to determine why it’s so enduring and it’s so everlasting, but it is.”

III. COMPARISON TO OTHER HBCU DANCE GROUPS

The J-Sette style falls within the larger tradition of majorette dance typically performed at predominantly black schools in the South. As such, it shares many similarities with the way majorette dancers perform at other HBCUs in the region. This would include groups such as the Dancing Dolls of Southern University, the Golden Girls of Alcorn University, the Stingettes of Alabama A&M, and others. All of these groups play off of a similar style. For instance, they all include captains who dance in the front row by themselves and lead the rest of the group. The

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24 Transcript, Dowell Taylor Oral History Interview, July, 13, 2016, by Mary Blessey.
styles draw on a diverse sampling of dance traditions like the ones mentioned in the above, such as including jazz, ballet, lyrical, hip-hop, African, majorette/drill team, and tumbling. Every group has their own variations of various prances and marches when they march in parades or at football games. Majorette dancers perform in an assortment of dazzling, form-fitting uniforms. These are just some of the similarities. But each group maintains its own signature style and may include certain moves or traditions that are exclusive to that group. I asked some of the J-Settes what they think distinguishes them and their style from these other groups. Similar to the general descriptions, this proved to be somewhat difficult to answer. Chloé Crowley gives the most specific answer about differences in technique:

“I would say we do more grounded work. A lot of the other teams that we see, they’re more—we’re more flat-footed, we dance flat-footed. Most of the other teams we see dance on relevé, they dance on their toes. And theirs is kind of a little bit more prissy. Ours is a little more in-your-face, with a little prissy, with a little pizazz, I guess I would say. That’s my own opinion. So, that’s what I’d say ours is more grounded and flat-footed whereas other teams are a little more prissy.”

Alexis Shorter shares some strong opinions about the differences between teams:

“Like, I know I'm on J-Settes, but we are the best. There is no even question about it. We are what girls want to be. And the other colleges, they probably not admit to it, but they probably want to be us. I don't know. I hate to sound so cocky but it just true... [laughs] It's like we are more clean. We're clean. We have technique and a way that we’re doing it. It's like, say, for instance, the Golden Girls. They are from Alcorn. They are more wild... They don't have a style; they don't have a technique that they go by. They just dancing. They basically just learning the moves and dancing. That's the difference between us because we're focusing on being clean and everybody else is focusing on things... Just “I'm out here fixin’ to buck,” or something like that. They focusing on that. We focusing on being clean and everybody be in sync... Like they’re not on my level. I'm sorry, but they’re not. They’re not on my level because we—okay, with the hands,
and the head. The head got to be a certain way, or the leg got to be a certain way. The arm got to be a certain way, you know? It's like, with them, they just dancing. You can tell. You can just look at their videos. You can tell. If you can pull up a video it's like “Golden Girls versus J-Settes.” The Golden Girls, their video would be so different from ours because it's like their stands is nothing but some remix things of ours.

IV. LEAD AND FOLLOW

When the J-Settes dance in the stands at a football game, they perform a series of short sequences of choreography called “stands.” A stand is a short routine, usually only one or two 8-counts long. An “8-count” usually correlates to one measure, or bar, of a song. So, a stand is a very short sequence of movements that is typically one or two measures long. This term “stand” is commonly used among majorette dance groups to refer to these short routines. Like most majorette dancers, the Prancing J-Settes perform in a lead-and-follow movement pattern when they do stands. The captain, who dances in the front row by herself, will stand up (the J-Settes typically sit while they are not dancing) and perform the stand once by herself, and then the dancers behind her will repeat it. There are a variety of ways this can happen. Sometimes the captain performs it once and then sits down while the rest of the squad repeats it behind her. The captain might also do the stand once alone, and then repeat it a second time joined by the group. Another common pattern is to go by row—the captain does it first, then the entire first row behind her, then the second, then the third. Sometimes each dancer on the squad may perform the stand alone, one-by-one until it comes back around to the captain. There are many different ways it can go, but the captain is always leading, and the squad follows.

The J-Settes have a system of vocabulary and hand signals they use when they perform stands. First, when the captain starts off a stand routine, it is called “throwing a stand.” She performs the stand and then “throws it back” to the squad. Before she starts, she will use a
certain hand signal to let the women behind her know what pattern they will use to repeat it; the
captain will do something like point her finger in the air or cross her arms over her head to signal
a certain pattern. Some of these formation patterns have names. For example, when the stands
are performed in a spiral—where each J-Sette does the stand one-by-one, going around in a
circle until it gets back to the captain—they call it “cinnamon roll.” To signal the the cinnamon
roll, the captain would do a spiral motion with her finger in the air before she starts dancing.

Patresa Cox explains why it is necessary to use these hand signals at a football game:

“She can’t just shout it because of the crowd. We’re not going to be able to hear,
especially if there’s a lot of us, some people wouldn’t be able to hear it on the last row. She
would have to throw a hand signal indicating if she wants it to be all together or
something like that. […] You have pay attention to her, and she will throw which
formation she wants to perform.”

The J-Settes also use certain terminology for the rows of their formation, which are arranged by
height after the captain. The captain is in the front row by herself. The first row behind her has
the shortest girls, and that row is named “Short and Sassy.” The row behind that, the middle row,
is named “Magnificent Middle.” And the back row is named “Tall and Tough.” The shortest
person on the team each year is called the “Ace.” The tallest person is called the “Tail.”

This uniformity in the lead and follow style is not limited to the dance. There is an
established choreographed way in which the J-Settes perform many of their movements and
actions at the football game. For example, when they first enter the stands, or return from their
halftime field show, they have a choreographed way of sitting down. They sit down one-by-one,
creating a ripple effect, sometimes dramatically throwing their leg up in the air or flipping their
hair. These routines are called “sit-downs,” and the J-Settes practice them before the game each
week. They also follow a ripple pattern—starting with the captain—when they dramatically whip

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27 Transcript, Patresa Cox Oral History Interview, February 26, 2016, by Mary Blessey.
off their capes at the beginning of each game. There are many other small details where they act in unison, such as when they walk out of the stands all holding hands and stepping with the same foot. Dominique Martin elaborates:

“It's basically just to keep order and just to keep all in accord. Everything that we do we kind of has a routine for it. Like when we walk anywhere we hold hands [and] we have to stay on the same foot. It's just the way that we stay uniform. When we sit down we have a certain routine to sit down. We have to do it together because we're one squad; e do everything as one. [...] Everything has a choreographed move or routine. [...] Everything has a ripple or a move to it. [...] Like, when we turn around, we do it one by one. Everything has like a flow to it. But then everything should really be based off me, the captain, and what she does. But that's what we practice on. Like just being able to catch what I throw, and they learn the routine so when it's time to do it, they'll know it. Even when the music's not playing. Like, the whole cape thing—we whip it off together one by one, but it's—everyone knows what to do.”

Most HCBU majorette teams adhere to a similar lead-and-follow style when they perform, so, while this is a signature characteristic of the J-Sette style, it is not exclusive to the J-Settes. I asked several of the women if the J-Settes were the first to use this technique, but no one knew for certain. Chloé Crowley suggests it is a component of majorette and marching band style in general, saying, “I think it’s more specific to majorettes in general. Because that’s typically how I’ve seen them. Even if you’re a majorette and you’re twirling a baton, you do something and the people behind you do it as well. Or even in marching band, the drum major calls something out or sends a signal and the band follows.”

V. SIGNATURE MOVEMENTS

I asked most of the women if they could name any of the J-Settes’ signature moves. I was looking for some more specific examples that could help explain what J-Setting is in terms of

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28 Transcript, Dominique Martin Oral History Interview, March 7, 2016, by Mary Blessey.
29 Transcript, Chloé Crowley Oral History Interview, February 29, 2016, by Mary Blessey.
movement, rather than describing the feel or character of it. Answers were varied, as the J-Settes have an extensive repertoire of movements that are considered classic to J-Setting. Many of the women laughed that they could not think of all of them. But from the answers they did give, there were some clear stand-outs that were mentioned by almost everyone. I have compiled some of these most common answers, but this is by no means intended to be an exhaustive list.

A. Bucking

Usually, the first and most enthusiastic answer I got to the question was “bucking.” The J-Settes are famous for this move. One must see it to understand, but following are some descriptions the women gave of the movement.

Shanika Lee:

“In the J-Sette form of dancing, we have coined a lot of terms. One in particular is called bucking. And it’s a high-energy move where you are moving your pelvis for the most part. It’s kind of a hip-hop move, but [it’s] another thing you would have to see in order to understand exactly what it is. Our ancestors a lot of the times utilized a lot of gyrations in their movements, and that has kind of trickled down to what we do today, so you kind of see those African influences.”

Patresa Cox:

“Bucking is basically arching your back while you dance, but you have to make a certain type of shape when you do it, and it’s basically ensuring that you’re dancing properly for a J-sette. So, yeah, you have to learn how to buck before you can get out into the stands… It’s sort of a type of posture, plus type of hands, plus where your arms go, plus if it’s [your] head, you know, like a hair-whip, or what my feet are doing—it’s like everything combined into one. So, say for instance if she’s doing a fast stand, you have to arch your back, along with doing the hands—also squatting—you have to squat, you can’t just, you know, sit here and try to buck without squatting, so… It’s a lot… [laughs] Bucking is basically a sense of posture, plus the movements of the stand, or field show,

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30 Transcript, Shanika Lee Oral History Interview, July 13, 2016, by Mary Blessey.
or march that comes with the performance. You have to not only arch your back, you have to stick your chest out and stick your butt out as well. So, it’s all of that, plus the arm movements, and squatting… It’s crazy how hard—like you would think bucking would be easy, ‘Okay yeah, you’re just arching your back.’ No. No, it’s not easy [laughs]. It’s very hard… Bucking can be hard because you get tired, and some people are not that flexible. Or sometimes some people might not just be tired, but might just be tired from that day. Like it’s not because you can’t do it, you’re just exhausted from a hard day of practice.”

Kristen Smith:

“I would say it’s moving your back, but it’s kind of—you have to see it here [points to ribcage], or you have to move your arms. So I would say it’s something that you do hard, and you have to move your back. Because they always told me at band camp that I did ‘baby bucks.’ And baby bucks are those bucks that nobody can see. Like, if I’m in the stands, and I’m dancing, and you’re all the way over there [points], you wouldn’t see me doing this [demonstrates small motion], but you would see me doing this [demonstrates larger motion]. Like, you could tell the whole difference… So, I say bucking is something fast, big, that’s moving your chest and your back… It’s a particular movement that you have to put a lot of force in, and it’s tiring. But if you’re not tired, you’re not bucking [laughs].”

Alexsis Shorter:

“Bucking is when you popping in your back, but you doing it hard. With the J-Settes, we have a certain way that we buck. You can buck low or you can buck high or you can buck medium. We want to stay—we don't want to get too low because that’s ratchet. That’s like the Golden Girls. Golden Girls do that. You would see us buck, but we'll be right here, and we'll still be out-dancing them, but they’ll be that low. It's just the difference between us… Bucking high is like you ain't doing nothing. You just up there and you just popping your back. That's what you don’t do—buck high. It's not really a certain level that you have to buck, it's how you doing it. You popping your back hard with your bottom. It's like that.”

Dominique Martin:

31 Transcript, Patresa Cox Oral History Interview, February 26, 2016, by Mary Blessey.
32 Transcript, Kristen Smith Oral History Interview, February 29, 2016, by Mary Blessey.
33 Transcript, Alexsis Shorter Oral History Interview, March 8, 2016, by Mary Blessey.
“Bucking is a very intense movement. Signature movement of J-Settes. It requires all of you, from your head to your toes. Everything has a movement, everything has placement. It's like a very forceful movement... It's really like a very, very deep arch in your back. It's like if you move your chest, you move everything. It's like a one-movement type move and it's really, really powerful. And that's what we're known for because nobody else bucks like we do... It's really difficult to master. It took me awhile to actually master how to buck... It's a phrase that we use, like when our backs are arched and our chests are out, that's called a buck. So, when we're doing that movement, we're arching our back and we say buck. It's not like we do a whole routine and we're bucking the entire routine, because we're not arching our back the entire routine.”\(^\text{34}\)

B. Prancing & Marching

When the Sonic Boom marches into the stadium before a game, or down the street during a parade, the Prancing J-Settes have an extensive repertoire of marching and prancing styles they use.\(^\text{35}\) Their signature styles of prancing are what influenced the name Prancing J-Settes. Shanika Lee speaks about prancing:

“But the prancing—there’s a form of marching called prancing. And it’s a very intricate move that you do with—you twist your hips, and you’re on your toes, and it’s kind of like you’re prancing, galloping like a horse. It’s a very, very graceful move that takes a while to master, but it’s very beautiful when you see it. They did the prancing more so back in the 70s and 80s. We don’t do it as much now, but it’s still a very important part of J-Setting.”\(^\text{36}\)

One of the most famous marches the J-Settes do is called the “Salt and Pepper,” which dates back to the original J-Settes of the 1970s. It involves lifting the knees high and throwing the arms out in front of the chest, alternating left and right, while the hands do a “flicking” or “throwing” motion, the way one might throw a pinch of salt or pepper. Following are some

\(^{34}\) Transcript, Dominique Martin Oral History Interview, March 7, 2016, by Mary Blessey.
\(^{35}\) I am still not entirely sure after my interviews whether “prancing” and “marching” are two different things, the same thing, or one is a subset of the other. Some of the women seemed to use these words interchangeably, while others drew a distinction.
\(^{36}\) Transcript, Shanika Lee Oral History Interview, July 13, 2016, by Mary Blessey.
descriptions of the Salt and Pepper, along with mentions of other prances, marches, struts, and
walks that the J-Settes perform.

Patresa Cox:

“Basically when we prance, it’s like when we march. And we call it “Salt and Pepper.” We would have alternate arms and legs, you know, little swing side-to-side, and like I said, you would hear the click-clacking of our boots. And all of that combined into one is basically prancing… [It is called “Salt and Pepper”] I guess because you’re flicking with your right hand, you know, you’re throwing the salt, and then you’re throwing the pepper with your left. So that would be salt and pepper… We have Salt and Pepper, and we have Swing and Sway. We have the Pull, the Scarecrow… We have another march where we have one hand on our hip and the other one’s out here rocking from side to side in tabletop… We have another one where both [hands] are out. And we have two more where our hands are on our back, and we’re just, you know, prissing our way down the street. And we have another one where it’s the same thing, but our hands are on our heads.”

Dominique Martin:

“We have our salt and pepper which is one of the moves that we do during parades. We have different marches. But we're really known for Salt and Pepper, bucking, the Scarecrow, and the Pull, and our Pretty Girl Walk and our J-Sette Strut. That's what we're really known for… [The Salt and Pepper] is pretty much a constant flick of our arms, and that's how we march down the plaza in parades or if we're going different places, how we maneuver. One of the ways we maneuver through the parade, our different struts and walks, just like a little—like, when we’re tired, or in between parades, or if we're just walking with the band, we do like little struts, different arm movements… It's just different ways to keep moving when we're marching with the band.”

Shanika Lee:

“Salt and Pepper is a march. Marching is different from prancing. So there are various marches, but Salt and Pepper is one of the marches. We have what we call Swing March, or Wrist March. We also have J-Sette Walk, which is when you swing your arms and there’s a particular way that you move your hips and move your legs.”

37 Transcript, Patresa Cox Oral History Interview, February 26, 2016, by Mary Blessey.
38 Transcript, Dominique Martin Oral History Interview, March 7, 2016, by Mary Blessey.
39 Transcript, Shanika Lee Oral History Interview, July 13, 2016, by Mary Blessey.
Kristen Smith:

“One thing that I say was the hardest thing for J-Setting was learning how to Salt-and-Pepper J-Sette, and if you don’t know what Salt and Pepper is, it’s marching. When I say band camp week, my captain stayed on me, like from the time it was time to—like, I hated them saying it was time to march because I knew for the life—no matter how hard I went into my room and I practiced, no matter how hard I asked my sisters to help me—Mrs. Crowley, I asked everybody—it took me a season to get that march. Because I’m like, “Okay, you know, I’m doing it right.” “No, you’re not doing it right, your hands are not up, your elbows are not up, you’re not flicking.” It was always something that I wasn’t doing right, so I would say Salt and Pepper. Chairing your leg, they call it “chair leg,” was probably the hardest thing for me being a j-sette. MB: Is “chair leg” part of the Salt and Pepper march? Mmhm, getting your—if you hear a person say “chair march,” that means getting your leg up, having your leg up like in a chair. That was probably the hardest thing for me to learn how to do.”

C. Burning Boots

As Cox mentioned above, when the J-Settes prance or march, “you can hear it coming when you see it.” Part of the J-Sette style involves the dancers stomping the ground very hard with their boots. This creates a strong, grounded aesthetic to the look and sound of J-Setting. They emphasize combining these more forceful movements like stomping and bucking with smoother, more lyrical movements influenced by ballet, jazz, and modern. When they dance in the stands, the J-Settes often stomp their boots on the bleachers in front of them, which produces a loud sound. The squad refers to all of this as “burning boots,” the idea being that they are stomping so hard, they are burning their boots into the ground (or bleachers). As Kristen Smith says, “burning boots means stomping a hole in the ground from just marching.” The J-Settes wear a signature style of white Nancy boots which help create a loud sound when they stomp, as

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40 Transcript, Kristen Smith Oral History Interview, February 29, 2016, by Mary Blessey.
41 Transcript, Patresa Cox Oral History Interview, February 26, 2016, by Mary Blessey.
42 Transcript, Kristen Smith Oral History Interview, February 29, 2016, by Mary Blessey.
well as that audible “click-clacking” sound when they prance and march. Boots have become somewhat of an emblem of the J-Settes. It is common to see references to the boots on the J-Settes’ social media, where they often include an emoji of a boot in their posts; fans use it in their comments as well. For example:

![Screenshot from the Prancing J-Sette’s imgrum page, http://www.imgrum.net/user/thrillofatrillion/2202230590](http://www.imgrum.net/user/thrillofatrillion/2202230590)

**JSU PRANCING J-SETTES 💙꿉️シュ**

*(@THRILLOFATRILLION)

Notice that the heart is blue for JSU’s colors, blue and silver. The tiger face is for their team, the JSU Tigers.
It is also common to see the boot emoji used in conjunction to the fire emoji, to represent “burning boots.” For example:

Screen shot from J-Sette’s imgrum page, http://www.imgrum.net/user/thrillofatrillion/2202230590

D. The Ramp

The home stadium for JSU’s football team is Mississippi Veterans Memorial Stadium called “Memorial Stadium” for short. It is located off of North State Street in Jackson, Mississippi and is separate from the main campus of JSU. The particular design of this stadium includes a series of ramps that zig-zag up from the field to the stands, behind the goal post on the west end of the field. When the Sonic BOOM marches into Memorial Stadium before a game,
they come in through the east entrance to the stadium, and march all the way to the zig-zag ramps on the opposite end. Then they march up the ramps and into the stands where the fans are sitting, and go all the way around until they get to the band’s section of the stands. Once they get to their section, they stay there to perform during zero quarter, the game, and fifth quarter (with the exception of their halftime routine, which they perform on the field). Over the years, the J-Settes have developed certain routines they do when they march up the ramp, and the call the routines “ramps.” Each week before a home game, the J-Settes come up with the ramp for that game. One key element of any ramp routine is the “ramp kick.” This is, as the name suggest, a certain type of kick the J-Settes do when they march up the ramp. This particular move is a crowd favorite and has become something loyal J-Sette fans look out for when the Boom marches into Memorial Stadium. Dominique Martin talks about the ramp:

“So when we say, "Let's practice the ramp," we're talking about the routine that we made up for that week at the home game. But yeah, it changes every time we have a home game. We don't do the ramp at an out-of-town [game] or at someone else's stadium; we only do ramps at our stadium… I’ve noticed that, like I said, most schools don't have ramps, so a lot of schools come to our stadium, [and] they I guess realize that they want to make a whole ramp routine, [and] we’re just like, “Really? Y’all don't even have a ramp, so what are y'all doing?” So, they take advantage of that when they come. It's cute, but, you know [laughs]. I think it's flattering because they get to come to our stadium. It's different. So, they get to do something that they can't do on a regular basis, which is perform on the ramp. I like that part about it because it makes it a little different.”

Kristen Smith speaks about the ramp kick:

“A ramp kick is a kick that you do, and you have to give all your force… When you do a ramp kick—I don’t know if you’ve heard of like a hitch kick?—but it’s kind of like a…you have to bend your leg. One is bent and one is straight, and you have to put like “Pow!” force into it, or else it’s going to look like a straw, and it’s going to not be twelve

43 Jackson State University plays in the Southwestern Athletic Conference (SWAC), which includes extra quarters before and after the game where no football is played and just the bands perform. The quarter before the game starts is called “zero quarter,” and the one after the game ends is called “fifth quarter.”
44 Transcript, Dominique Martin Oral History Interview, March 7, 2016, by Mary Blessey.
o’clock. I don’t know if you’ve heard of twelve o’clock—what your kick is supposed to be like—you know like twelve o’clock? Well twelve o’clock is what? Straight up. So when they say have your kick at twelve o’clock, your leg has to be straight up, like beside your ear.”

E. Hand Positions

The J-Settes have certain vocabulary they use to talk about different hand positions and movements. Here are some of the hand positions they showed me:

- “Blade” – when all fingers are closed together and pointing straight out, cutting through the air like a blade
- “Ball” – when hands are in a fist, making a ball shape
- “Pretty” or “Pretty Fingers” – when the index finger is pointing out and the rest of the fingers are falling softly
- “Table” or “Table-top” or “Tea Cups” – fingers are closed together and pointing straight out, like in “blade,” but the thumbs are sticking out perpendicular, creating a right angle
- “Jazz” or “Jazz Hands” – this is the same as “jazz hands” in the classic jazz style, when all fingers are separated and pointing straight out.

When the J-Settes use a certain hand position, they say their hands are “in” that position. The hand positions are combined with different arm movements. Both hands can be in the same position, or left and right can be different, as is the case during the Salt and Pepper march, where one hand is in ball while the other is performing the salt/pepper flicking motion (which has no particular name and is exclusive to the Salt and Pepper). Dominque Martin explains:

“We have the pretty fingers. We have the teacups. Jazz hands… Blades… So, everything has a placement. Everything has a specific hand movement. So, I’ll say, "Okay, for count

45 Transcript, Kristen Smith Oral History Interview, February 29, 2016, by Mary Blessey.
one, it's teacup. Count two is pretty fingers," so everything has a set hand movement as well."46

These hand positions and the particularly ways in which they are incorporated help create the unique look of the J-Sette style. As some of the women mentioned in their descriptions of J-Setting, this close attention to detail and uniformity is part of what they believe sets them apart from other dancers.

F. Tumbling/Gymnastics

Starting in the late 1990s and 2000s, the Prancing J-Settes have increasingly added stunts, jumps, and gymnastic moves to their field show routines. Patresa Cox lists some of the moves they typically do:

“We could do different types of kicks, [such as] a fan kick. We could do jumps, different types of jumps, toe-touches, herkies, leaps... Cartwheels, round-offs, elbow cartwheels, one-elbow cartwheels, splits, roll-overs... It’s just a whole variety. It’s a lot of stuff that we do, as far as movements and stuff like that.”47

Shanika Lee explains one of the particular acrobatic moves the J-Settes are known for, the “death drop”:

“In J-Setting, we do a lot of acrobatic moves. There’s something we call a ‘death drop.’ That’s when you basically throw your whole body down to the floor, you throw your legs up, and it appears that you are actually just falling out. And it’s a very— it looks very risky, but it’s not a very difficult move, but it looks that way.”48

46 Transcript, Dominique Martin Oral History Interview, March 7, 2016, by Mary Blessey.
47 Transcript, Patresa Cox Oral History Interview, February 26, 2016, by Mary Blessey.
48 Transcript, Shanika Lee Oral History Interview, July 13, 2016, by Mary Blessey.
VI. **VISUAL AESTHETIC**

Prancing J-Settes’s physical appearance and aesthetic plays an important role in defining the dance culture of J-Setting. They are known for their various hair styles, make-up styles, uniforms, capes, and signature white Nancy boots. For instance, Cipreuna Church even mentions their make-up when defining the J-Settes in general, saying, “When you think about them, you think about dancing, probably make-up… Someone everyone looks up to, and wants to be like.”49 Zandria Robinson also mentions the makeup and clothes when describing what she believes is southern about the J-Settes, saying, “When I think about the J-Settes, I think about—not just sort of the precision of the dance, but I also think about the aesthetic presentation, and I think more so than anything, the aesthetic presentation of beauty. Like make-up, the hair styles, the sparkles, the tassels, the glitter, the tights…”50 The J-Settes take great care in their visual presentation and uniformity, and this has become one of the hallmarks of the J-Sette style.

First and most important for their visual aesthetic are the uniforms. The J-Settes have an extensive assortment of eye-catching and figure-flattering uniforms. The uniforms are always very feminine and made to fit in a way that celebrates the female form. Most are some combination of JSU’s school colors, blue and silver. A few are orange and black and/or tiger print, for the school’s team, the JSU Tigers. Each season, they wear a combination of new uniforms and older ones saved from years past. Dominque Martin talks about some of the J-Settes’ uniforms:

“...We have a lot of traditional uniforms. And we try to get a couple new uniforms a year… But we keep the old uniforms just in case we want to wear them. Our uniforms go way back, like, probably to the 1980s, probably the ‘70s, actually. We have uniforms for

49 Transcript, Cipreuna Church Oral History Interview, March 2, 2016, by Mary Blessey.
50 Transcript, Zandria Robinson Interview, October 19, 2016, by Mary Blessey.
days. A lot of them are really, really old, but we have new ones as well. So, it just depends on what we want to wear.”

To help keep the uniforms organized, each one has a name. While I was filming one of the J-Settes’ practices, Chloé Crowley gave me a tour of their uniform closet. Some of the uniform names include “Dallas,” “Five Star Chick,” “Sexy Back,” “Car Wash,” “Tina,” “Jungle Fever,” and “Tiger Girl.” Crowley explains that they are often named after a certain song or something they associate with the uniform. For instance, the name for “Sexy Back” was inspired by a hit song that came out the year they got that particular uniform, “I’m Bringing Sexy Back” by Justin Timberlake. Crowley says the uniform made them think of that song, so they gave it that name. “Tina” was named because it reminded them of a style of dress Tina Turner was known for wearing. “Tiger Girl” is orange and black tiger print. According to Crowley, “Tiger Girl” is the fan favorite out of all the uniforms, and it receives the most comments and applause both at the games and on social media. There are countless more examples; the uniform closet is lined from floor to ceiling with dozens of bins of old uniforms. Dominique Martin elaborates on some of the names:

“Very diverse… we have one uniform called ‘car wash,’ and it literally look likes rags, you know those little things that hang down in the carwash? It looks like that, but, you know, that’s the style of that uniform. We have another style called ‘Brady Bunch,’ to where it looks like the Brady Bunch, like bell-bottoms. We have different styles, we don’t have one look, we have different… personas. Not a set look, just different styles of uniforms.”

Some of the women I interviewed emphasized body type when they described the look of the Prancing J-Settes. At tryouts, the judges look for a certain physique, and there is a stage in the try-out process called “Body Cuts.” At this stage, the judges consider the women’s figures

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51 Transcript, Dominique Martin Oral History Interview, March 7, 2016, by Mary Blessey.
52 Transcript, Dominique Martin Oral History Interview, March 7, 2016, by Mary Blessey.
and decide whether they qualify to continue on to the subsequent stages of tryouts. Patresa Cox explains:

“After interviews we have a stage which is body cuts. If you don’t pass body cuts, you don’t make it to the next stage which is your own individual dance. Now, they’re basically just looking to see how your body flows, and get a good sense of style of dance you have… Body cuts is basically to see if your body is kind of fit for the type of uniforms that we wear. Sometimes we have full body suits; sometimes we have two pieces. Yeah, that’s basically what it is—how your appearance looks in the uniforms that we give.”

Chloé Crowley explains that she almost had trouble making the squad her first year because she was so small. Shanika Lee tells me she did not make the squad the first year she tried out and believes it was partly because she was also “so skinny.” Alexis Shorter says she made an effort to lose weight before tryouts to get down to the right size. So, I heard from women who had been considered both too small and too big for the J-Sette ideal body type. Crowley explains her experience:

“When I auditioned and made it, I was very small, and they look for a particular body type. And I think those were the two hardest things—me branching out of my shell and moving more, and my weight. But I made it through.”

I asked her to elaborate on the particular body type they look for, and she explained:

“It’s not a word, it’s not anything I can tell you. It’s more of a look. And being on the director’s side [now], it’s not ‘Oh, you have to have 32-24-38 or something like that… It’s just a proportion that is looked for when you have on the uniform. The uniforms are always provided. Yeah, it’s just a body proportion type thing.”

The uniforms they wear, the body type selected for at tryouts, the hair, the make-up—all of these elements combine to create the look that the Prancing J-Settes are known for. While I was

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53 Transcript, Patresa Cox Oral History Interview, February 26, 2016, by Mary Blessey.
54 Transcript, Chloé Crowley Oral History Interview, February 29, 2016, by Mary Blessey.
55 Transcript, Chloé Crowley Oral History Interview, February 29, 2016, by Mary Blessey.
filming at the Martin Luther King Day Parade in Grenada, Mississippi, one fan turned to me and said, “My brother calls them ‘God’s gift to America.’”

VII. SLOGAN AND THEME

When the Sonic Boom performs at their halftime show, the announcer introduces the Prancing J-Settes as “The Thrill of a Billion Eyes!” when they run onto the field. This has become basically the slogan for the J-Settes. The squad will frequently hashtag this phrase on social media in photo and picture captions or any posts about the J-Settes. It is common to see #ThrillOfABillionEyes or sometimes #STILLtheThrillOfABillionEyes, often used in reference to alumni. Over the years, the number of “eyes” has changed. It started out “a thousand eyes,” then eventually became “a million eyes,” then “a billion,” and I have even seen “Thrill of a Trillion Eyes” on social media. I am not sure whether all of these are used interchangeably, or if there is a current version that they prefer, but “a billion” is the version I have noticed the most, and the one my interview respondents usually used. So, I am using that version for consistency.

Dominique Martin talks about “The Thrill of a Billion Eyes”:

“Well, it's one of our main slogans, the Thrill of a Billion Eyes. Pretty much, it just means how we're dancing—we're dancing in front of a thousand people, a billion people, and all their eyes are on us, so with the thrill of a billion eyes, the thrill of a thousand eyes… But that's pretty much what it means, like everyone's eyes are on us. The thousands of people… The millions of people who are in the stadium or are in the facility or wherever we're at, the eyes are on us, and we seek that attention. We get it, and it's for the thrill of a billion eyes.”

Dowell Taylor explains that the phrase was coined by one of the Sonic Boom’s former band announcers:

56 Not in the sense of a copyrighted slogan, to my knowledge; just in the sense that people have been calling them that for years.
57 Transcript, Dominique Martin Oral History Interview, March 7, 2016, by Mary Blessey.
“One of the major components in the band’s history was the “Voice of the Sonic Boom.” The Voice of the Sonic Boom was created by Dr. Jimmy James Jr., and he was a person who created that sound, created “The Thrill of a Thousand Eyes” with the J-Settes, et cetera. And he started that in 1971, and that [phrase] is still being used today.”58

The J-Settes also have a catchphrase or motto they have begun using in recent years, which is “Bucking, Prancing, and Burning Boots.” This refers to three of their most popular moves. Alexis Shorter calls the phrase the J-Sette “theme.” When I asked Shanika Lee about the phrase, she responds that it came after her time (which was in the late ‘90s), so she will “let the younger girls talk about that.”59 So, the squad adopted “Bucking, Prancing, and Burning Boots” relatively recently. It is frequently used and hashtagged in reference on the internet.

VIII. AFRICAN AND AFRICAN AMERICAN DANCE HERITAGE

The J-Setting style includes movements that share a lineage with African forms of dance. As Shanika Lee says, there are moves from certain African traditions that have “kind of trickled down to what we do today, so you see those African influences.”60 Some of the respondents mention bucking as a move that shares similarities to African dance. Another example is what Chloé describes as the “grounded, flat-footed” style of dance, including strong lower body movements, a squatting stance, and stomping. The J-Settes also sometimes perform poly-rhythmic movements. This is when certain body parts are isolated and move to the count of one

58 Transcript, Dowell Taylor Oral History Interview, July, 13, 2016, by Mary Blessey.
59 Transcript, Shanika Lee Oral History Interview, July 13, 2016, by Mary Blessey.
60 Transcript, Shanika Lee Oral History Interview, July 13, 2016, by Mary Blessey.
rhythm, while another body part is moving to the count of a different rhythm. These examples illustrate how the movement of J-Setting has roots in certain African music and dance traditions.

In our interview, Chloé tells me a particular story about taking an East African dance class at New York University when she was there working on her master’s degree in Dance Education. She was able to pick up many of the moves more quickly than other students in the class, and her teacher, who was from Africa (she did not say what country), noticed and asked her about it. They discussed the matter and eventually concluded that her background in J-Setting was responsible for her advantage over other students learning these moves, especially the isolated polyrhythms, because of the similarities found between the two traditions. This is Chloé’s account:

“I went to school in New York, and of course no one there had ever seen [J-Setting], but out of all the genres of dance that we studied, it’s most comparable to African dance. And I don’t know if you’ve ever seen African dance or anything like that, but it’s more, like I said, more grounded, and more—I don’t know, I guess grounded is the word I’m looking for… When I took East African [dance class], and the teacher was actually one of my classmates, and he was saying, you know, “You’ve got it, yeah, you’ve got the hip part, you got this part…” And after class he would always say, “How do you have this? I’d say, “Well I did this in college, this is what my collegiate dance team did.” And of course, he, being from east Africa, had never head of the Prancing J-Settes in Jackson, Mississippi, but when I showed him a video, he just looked and was like, “Oh yeah, I see the hip there and the foot part there, and I see the stomping and this this and that.” …. When we went back and watched videos on YouTube of the J-Settes, he was noticing things that I never noticed before, being a J-Sette, and it was more so the isolations, where you have your hips here, but your arms are doing something different. And I think that was the hardest part for the other students in the class, to be able to isolate the hip, and do an arm here, or do something with your feet but something totally different with your head, or, you know just different movements with your body, but it’s all coinciding to make one big, grandiose movement… The counts would be different, or the isolations would be different. So, even if you’re isolating and doing a head in ballet and pointing your toes and you’re doing battements, your head may be following your battements, or

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61 Worlds of Music: An Introduction to the Music of the World’s Peoples definition for polyrhythm: “This simultaneous occurrence of several rhythms with what we can perceive as a shifting downbeat is called polyrhythm. Polyrhythm is characteristic of the music of Africa and wherever Africans have carried their music.”
your arms. When you go to east African or J-Setting how it is now, your counts vary. So, the head may be slower and not necessarily on the same beat as your hip, or your head may not be the same as your arms, and so on.”62

Every few years, the Sonic Boom performs a special halftime show routine that pays homage to the 1988 film, Coming to America. During this performance, the J-Settes perform choreography that emphasizes traditional African movements. They wear special uniforms and headdresses for this performance that are styled to pay tribute to African heritage. The Sonic Boom and the J-Settes have been performing this “Coming to America” routine since the 1990s.

Dominique Martin talks about this particular tradition:

“Sometimes, certain years, we do tributes for Homecomings, like [for] the older generations. So we have an African tribute, called ‘Coming to America,’ like the movie Coming to America. We do kind of like a tribute to that movie and reenact that dance style, and it’s an African piece, so we have to learn that to a ‘T’ and perform that… [The ‘Coming to America’ show] is the African piece that we do because they did it in previous years before us, so we either bring those back, you know, just to please the older crowd and to say, ‘You know, we still remember what you guys did. We still know it.’ And that's what we do pretty much. We just basically to pay tribute to the older women. But like I said, Coming to America was a movie, and it was an African-type movie, so we did that routine from that movie and previous squads did it… Previous years’ squads did it, like Miss Crowley did it. Years after her did it, and we did. I've done it twice, so yes, it's like a tradition thing that we do, J-Settes do.”63

Zandria Robinson speaks on the Sonic Boom’s “Coming to America” tribute routine:

“Yeah, I mean, they are ambassadors for popular culture, in much the same way that Alvin Ailey’s dance troupe is an ambassador for popular culture. And Coming to America is reflective of that culture, and is widely recognizable, in the same way that the band is going to play Earth, Wind, and Fire all the time because it’s something that’s recognizable. It creates community experience, it creates community buy-in, that allows the audience to be transported and participate more in this shared productive space. So, even if they’re not able to dance, or they’re not on the dance floor, they can recognize that and feel not only a comfort in what’s happening, but a connection to something they

62 Transcript, Chloé Crowley Oral History Interview, February 29, 2016, by Mary Blessey.
63 Transcript, Dominique Martin Oral History Interview, March 7, 2016, by Mary Blessey.
already know. And then Coming to America is such an interesting popular culture piece for its—one, for its cult classic-ness, but also for its engagement in these really problematic tropes about Africa, but connecting, even in that superficial way, black people to a diasporic consciousness.”

The connection to African dance traditions is an important aspect of the J-Settes and their dance culture. Robinson speaks more broadly on the cultural significance for African Americans to have ties to African dance heritage:

“And so, anytime we can participate in the liberatory practices that our ancestors did to make it through, whether it’s dance, whether it is song, whether it’s food cultures, whether it’s oral traditions, then we have to do that. And dance, being the thing that we can all share—not everybody can cook, not everybody can sing [laughs]—but in one way or another, everyone can move their body to the beat. It is a really fundamental cultural practice that articulates who we are, and who we have been, and where we have come from, and I hope for the future where we might be going.”

Chloé Crowley speaks generally about HBCU marching band culture, the music they play for their fans, and how that contributes to a sense of community and shared experience for black students:

“I think the culture is different and I think it’s important to African American students because it’s something that they’re familiar with. You can basically say that the zero quarter and the fifth quarter is like the party of the game because the way the band plays and carries themselves is the way the fans are going to feed off of the band… I think that’s the fun part of the game, and also when the team is winning, everybody’s doing good, everybody’s having fun, and it is music we can all relate to. So, it’s music we know, it’s music that we can sing and shake my pom-pom to that song, or I like that song, or ‘That’s my favorite song I hear on the radio and now the bands playing it so I’m really having a good time.’”

IX. FEMALE BOND AND COMMUNITY

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64 Transcript, Zandria Robinson Interview, October 19, 2016, by Mary Blessey.
65 Transcript, Zandria Robinson Interview, October 19, 2016, by Mary Blessey.
66 Transcript, Chloé Crowley Oral History Interview, February 29, 2016, by Mary Blessey.
Since their formation in 1971, the Prancing J-Settes have been an all-female dance team. This squad allows women to convene in entirely female spaces, e.g. at practice and other events, to participate in the creation of a female-centric art form that is created, performed, and controlled by women. In this space, these women get to socialize with one another, work together, and support one another. Many of the women on the squad refer to their fellow J-Settes as their sisters. There is a strong sense of community and support. This is the case with the high school and community dances teams that many of the J-Settes have participated in since they were young girls. Following are some of the women’s responses relating to the female culture and sisterhood of the Prancing J-Settes, as well as the empowerment young girls can find in dance growing up.

Chloé Crowley:

“I think [dance] is very important because it’s another outlet for girls to be able to dance, from sports. For me it was important. It helped me keep my grades up because I knew my parents wouldn’t let me dance anymore if my grades slipped. And then at Jackson State, you have to keep a certain GPA to be a J-Sette. So, it actually helped me academically as well as socially… I think it builds self-esteem. A lot of times, people ask questions like “What else do you do on campus?” So, it builds self-esteem to be able to dance and keep a GPA, or do other things while being a J-Sette.”

Patresa Cox:

I mean, [the J-Settes] are like your sisters. Of course you love them, and of course you’re going to fight, but they’re always going to have each other’s back. They’re always going to have my back, and I’ll always have theirs. So, sometimes we’ll play and stuff like that, and we’ll, you know, finish doing what we have to do. And sometimes, we don’t want to even speak to each other. So, it’s basically like a big family… We go to other events like basketball games together. Sometimes we’ll even go eat lunch together. It’s basically like

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67 As discussed in the Introduction, Hollis Pippins is credited as choreographing early routines for the J-Settes, but he is the only male documented as working with the squad in any official capacity. In consideration of that, I think it is fair to generalize the dance style and culture of the official Prancing J-Settes (as opposed to j-setting at large) as being mostly created by, performed by, and controlled by women, past and present.

68 Transcript, Chloé Crowley Oral History Interview, February 29, 2016, by Mary Blessey.
we see each other every day, so that’s who we hang out with every day, plus our other friends that we have outside of J-Settes. So it’s like, basically they’re just regular friends.”

I ask Cox about the J-Settes going to church together recently as one of their squad group activities. She explains:

“Basically we organized a time for us to go to church when it was around Christmas time. And we all decided we wanted to wear blue, you know, come in looking unified. And it was a very spiritual time for me, having my sisters here with me going to church, and stuff like that. We had a great time. Then after we went to church, we actually went out to eat. So, it was like a Sunday dinner. It was lovely.”

Alexsis Shorter:

“It's fun. You really get a sisterhood. You can really call these people your sister, but it's like we have our moments. We argue and stuff just like real sisters. It's like on J-Settes, you're going to get real sisters. You can really call this person your sister.”

Kristen Smith:

“Community dance team, I would say it helped me build confidence. As a child, I was always kind of—I mean, I liked dancing, but I was always kind of shy, to myself. I didn’t really know how to express myself, so when I started dancing, performing, being majorette—not saying ballet didn’t help me express myself, but it’s kind of a more calm style of dancing. And when I started doing majorette and drill teams, you have to get out there, you have to smile, you have to be presentable. It’s like when I got out there, I was a whole different person, being that my director or my coach stayed on me about what I needed to be. So, I would just say that community dance team, it’s like a sisterhood, but it’s also helping you build confidence and helping you come out your shell, if you’re kind of like a person that’s in your shell. Not only if you’re a person who’s in your shell, if you’re out and you like attention, that would be a good field for you to go into. Because it really helped me get out of my shell, and people that are already out of their shell, it just kind of brings them higher. But it’s really helped me. Like my coach, she always stayed on us about our academics. If you weren’t academically strong, you weren’t able to perform. It’s just a lot of stuff that helped me grow as a person, that I would say anybody from a community dance team would be able to say. So it’s a great experience.”

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69 Transcript, Patresa Cox Oral History Interview, February 26, 2016, by Mary Blessey.
70 Transcript, Patresa Cox Oral History Interview, February 26, 2016, by Mary Blessey.
71 Transcript, Alexis Shorter Oral History Interview, March 8, 2016, by Mary Blessey.
72 Transcript, Kristen Smith Oral History Interview, February 29, 2016, by Mary Blessey.
Shanika Lee:

“My J-Sette influence definitely has a big impact on how I teach my young ladies. The goals and the morals and the standards that were instilled in me as a J-Sette, I try to instill those same morals in my girls because, if you don’t teach them to set their standards high, then they’re not going to ever reach their full potential. So, you have to set the bar up here so they can meet that bar… I think it’s important for young ladies to participate in whatever sport or whatever activity they would like to be involved in because it’s just important to not have too much idle time. Dance is a sport I think that, while it enables you to express yourself, you know, by utilizing your body, it also helps to free your mind. There’s something about dance, you get to just get lost in dance. You know, if you’re having a bad day, if you’re having situations going on, a lot of girls always tell me, ‘When I come to practice, I leave it at the door. When I’m dancing, I don’t think about any of that.’ So, while they’re getting an opportunity to show their talent, it’s also like a stress-reliever. Also, I try to surround my girls with positive things. I also try to involve them in other experiences such as community service, you know, sisterhood building—we try to do mentoring, so we try to make sure that they get a well-rounded experience. But I think it’s just very important for our young ladies of today to be involved in something.”73

Zandria Robinson gives her interpretation of the importance and liberating nature of these kinds of dance cultures for young women and relates these practices to a broader social and political context:

“Operating your own body and moving in a way that you choose for your own pleasure and purposes, and in some cases for a partial scholarship, is liberatory. We should be able to move our bodies in whatever way we want, when we want, without anybody telling us what to do, when to do it, how to do it. And again, the choreography piece of it, and the moving in unison, is a collaborative woman’s space. That—whether it’s on the side of the fields, in the front of the band, behind the band, in a practice—is a communing kind of space where woman can affirm each other. How many spaces are even like that in our society, and here’s one that is a black woman-created space that’s rooted in a legacy of uplifting black communities and black women in particular. So, both from a sort of individual woman perspective, and a community perspective, any of these kinds of dance forms that require this kind of precision and choreography, are spaces where people are giving the finger [laughs] to a society that says that you shouldn’t move in these ways. I

73 Transcript, Shanika Lee Oral History Interview, July 13, 2016, by Mary Blessey.
mean, like, you can be killed for just walking down the street, and being black, so to move—that’s always why people need more literacy around dance, as a liberation practice… I think it’s one of the things that is a rite of passage and is an ownership space. And in a context where black women might not have much to pass down to their daughters, being able to pass down a rich cultural legacy that is representative of women, and representative of the community more largely, teaches this kind of pass-it-down thing that has helped black people for multiple generations. And this is not something that is just unique to the J-Settes. I think about Kim Marie Vaz’s work on the Baby Dolls of New Orleans. That is something—like you have to get into the Baby Doll culture, and then you are taught the dances by folks who are in there, like it’s a very—now, Baby Dolls has been opened up to different genders, but it’s primarily women, and it was these women-led communities. And I think owning something in a society that tries to prevent you from owning anything, and takes things that you own. They can’t take that. And I think that’s important for women to have something that cannot be taken.”  

X. **BEYONCÉ J-SETTING IN “SINGLE LADIES”**

The music video for “Single Ladies (Put A Ring On It)” was a cultural phenomenon that spread the dance culture of J-Setting around the world, whether some viewers realized they were seeing J-Setting or not. Beyoncé does not J-Sette during the whole video; she performs the style for only a few 8-counts about midway through the video. As Kristen Smith says, “Beyoncé did a stand” in the video. The video was also notably inspired by a 1960s dance routine starring Gwen Verdon and choreographed by Bob Fosse called “Mexican Breakfast.” While some were unaware, many viewers familiar with the Prancing J-Settes and broader J-Setting culture immediately recognized the part of “Single Ladies” where Beyoncé “does a stand,” and discussion about this online and in the media increased J-Setting’s popularity and exposure. To date, the “Single Ladies” video has 530,709,051 views on YouTube.

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74 Transcript, Zandria Robinson Interview, October 19, 2016, by Mary Blessey.
There are various ways to interpret the use of J-Setting by a global popstar in the mainstream commercial arena. Some think it is great and see it as a compliment to the Prancing J-Settes and J-Setting more generally, and a celebration of the culture. Others have questions about how and to whom credit and contribution should be given. Some J-Sette alumni and others believe no one who has not danced as an official Prancing J-Sette at JSU should perform the dance style. There is no shortage of people, from professional culture writers to everyday commenters, weighing in about this particular issue on the internet, and many make strong arguments from various angles. But I think it is important to go to the source, the original Prancing J-Settes, and hear their take on the matter. This is not to say that theirs is the only opinion that counts, but that their voices should clearly be included in the dialogue.

Keep in mind that it is difficult to fact-check the accuracy of some of their answers—e.g. when some of the women claim Beyoncé “came out and said” this or that—because I have not been able to find any official comment from Beyoncé or her record label on the matter, nor have I been able to find a well-known news source that quotes Beyoncé herself in an interview about the matter. It is probably safe to assume that most of the available information about what Beyoncé thinks or does not think, has said or has not said, regarding the use of J-Setting in “Single Ladies” is rumor and speculation. However, factual accuracy is not my purpose for including the J-Settes’ responses (and this is not to say that their responses are not accurate—I just cannot be certain). That being said, their telling of whatever it is they have heard, accurate or not, perhaps reveals information about how they perceive and experience this cultural event. And in the event they have received false information, that may be revealing in and of itself in certain ways. I make no attempt to come down on any particular side of the issue. Following are the
different responses I got about Beyoncé—as well as other people who are not official Prancing J-Settes—participating in the J-Sette style of dance.

Chloé Crowley:

“I’m trying to even remember where I was when the video came out. I think I had graduated [from JSU]. I wasn’t at Jackson State anymore. My sister was a J-Sette then. And I remember it being, you know, like an outrage, like, “Oh, Beyoncé took this from us…” But actually it was her choreographer. And not to say that her choreographer took it, but like I said, it was something he saw, I’m guessing, on YouTube, on one of our videos, and was just like, “Oh yeah, this fits perfectly for the song,” and they just took it and rolled with it. And we’re all looking like, “Well, are they going to say anything? That they got it from our video, or that they got it from us, or give us credit or anything like that?” I think that was the biggest issue that most alumni J-Settes had, and the J-Settes that were on campus at the time. It’s the credit that we don’t receive so much. When you do something—true, we didn’t write and say this is ours and nobody else can do it, because that’s just not how dance is—dance is universal. Just like us, or me taking that east African dance class—[the teacher] wanted to share with us what was, you know, his form. Because it was very hard for him to grasp ballet, it was very hard for him to grasp the jazz dance style. But, just like our teachers were teaching us, he wanted to teach us what was true to him and what was natural in his body, whereas ballet might not be natural to anybody, or [to] a specific person. So, I think it’s more so the credit that everybody looks for, just [for them to] say, you know, ‘Hey, we’re doing it totally different, but this is where it derives. You know, we looked at this video, and we saw it, and we then thought of something else, and we added it in here, and we took this out, but we still saw this video first.’ I think that was the main thing for everybody. It was just kind of, you know—whatever.” [MB: So, the first you heard of it, you saw the video, and you knew immediately, that’s J-Setting?] Yeah, it was one specific 8-count—it was like ‘Yeah, that’s us all day long.’ But it was totally different… The move was similar but the form was different. Whereas our arm would be completely out to the side, hers were kind of bent, or, you know, something like that… But it was just one small little part. And then I think it was the, I guess you would call it—I’ve heard somebody call it the ‘call and response,’ where one person does something and the people behind them follow, that thing, but every dance team does that because you always have a head, and then you have people that follow, so that’s not anything specific to J-Setting; it’s just somebody has to tell everybody else what to do… Like I said, I don’t think it was her, I think her choreographer showed her and said, ‘Hey, I’ve got something new that we’re going to do,’ and she was like, ‘Okay, I like it, and we’re going to go with it.’ And I think a lot of alumni were like, ‘Oh, Beyoncé stole this,’ and she really didn’t. It’s, you know, not to
cause blame or send blame to anyone, but I just think that’s how it went down, and it just went from there.”

76 Transcript, Chloé Crowley Oral History Interview, February 29, 2016, by Mary Blessey.
Shanika Lee:

“I think with the spread of J-Sette form of dancing, I think a couple years ago, you know, Beyoncé had a couple moves in her video, [and] with the show Bring It! that has come about, you have people now all over that are teaching that style. I kind of have a little bit of, I guess, mixed feelings about that, because being a J-Sette, or having been a J-Sette before, I know that there are particular things that you can’t pick up just by looking at the form of dance. So, when people are saying that they’re teaching ‘J-Sette’ style of dance, it’s kind of like, well, you really need to have been taught that in order to teach it. However, the more generalized type of dance, which is majorette form, I can see other people teaching that. But just teaching ‘J-Setting,’ I think that needs to be left up to the J-Settes… For instance, the marching style of J-Settes—it has to be taught by another J-Sette. You know, you can try to emulate it, but it’s very intricate. So, you have to be taught that. In order to teach someone else that, you have to know the exact technique. Because if you think that you’re doing it correctly, and then you get out there, and you’re not, it’s obvious that you were not taught by a J-Sette… I mean, it’s definitely flattering that ‘J-Setting’ is now a coined term, but it’s just that it’s a sensitive issue because for those of us that have put in that blood, sweat, and tears, in order to get out there and do what we have to do to say that we were a J-Sette. It’s like something that we really hold special and dear to our hearts, and we feel like, to be honest with you, we’re the only ones that can say that we’re, you know, J-Setting. If that makes sense. Not to be selfish, but, you have to be there to understand or have to have gone through it to understand, I think… I remember when I initially saw the ‘Single Ladies’ video, and I recognized an actual stand routine, and I was like, ‘Wait a minute, that looks like a J-Settes stand.’ So, I know when I saw the video, that’s what I initially thought. And then, that’s when the whole thing got started about, you know, one of Beyoncé’s choreographers was saying that he had done J-Setting, and that’s when the whole term became, you know, really, really widespread. So, while it was very flattering that, you know, Beyoncé wanted to utilize this form, it was kind of like, well, are you really J-Setting? Because who taught you this? Were they a J-Sette? But like I said, you know, it was a lot of publicity, and it was really a platform that we were able to utilize, to kind of get our name out there… [MB: And when you say “a stand,” do you mean literally an 8-count where the exact moves in the exact order were from something the J-Settes had done, or did it just look like the style, or what?] No, this was—it was, I will say, it was very similar. It was not exactly the same, but it was very similar, enough where I could recognize it and say, ‘Okay, well I remember that. We did this, but we did it this way.’ [MB: So, something where it was clear that whoever had choreographed this had looked at a video?] Definitely, definitely. [MB: Do you think she did it well?] I do! [laughs] I think that she did a great job. I think that Beyoncé definitely did a great job in the ‘Single Ladies’ video with doing the J-Sette form of dance. [MB: And do you think that helped popularize
the term ‘J-Setting’ more?] I do, I think that, while here in the South it was definitely, you know—J-Settes have been around since the ‘70s, so we were definitely popular already. But I do think that that gave us the actual term, you know, ‘J-Setting’ or [to] ‘J-Sette’—that really, really catapulted it across the country.”

Dominique Martin:

“Like I said, that's another type, that's another fan thing. In my opinion, it's flattering, the fact that they're taking what we do and spreading it, you know, making it a style. That’s very flattering. I mean, just like, okay, cool. Like I said, we can't be, “Ugh, they took that from us and that's ours and duh duh duh.” Like I said, at the end of the day, I think it's flattering. I don't think of it as, “Uh, you know, I don't know how I feel about that,” because at the end of the day, that's still—that's still us. That's what we do. That's our thing. You know, the fact that the world's doing it, it's kind of like, “Wow.” [The J-Settes] kind of set, you know, we set a trend. So, I don't look at it in a negative light. Of course, people do it differently. You're not going to be able to do it like us, the originators, but you, you know, you're going to try. You're going to attempt, so it's going to look different with different people... So, I think it's great. You know, that it's spreading like that and just becoming a style, and that's just my personal view. People might have their own views on it, but I think it's great. The fact that different people do it, different squads do it, people look up to us and try to do what we do and—I don't know, I just think it's amazing... And you know, wow, like people look up to us and they actually try to be like us and it's just—I like it, personally. And, like I said, we can't just sit there and focus on who's doing our stuff or trying to be like us or whatever. That's not what we're about; we're just about performing, entertaining, and that's what we're doing. You know, we're influencing others to do what we do, and that's amazing. [MB: And what do you think about Beyoncé using the J-Setting style in her video?] Once again, that's flattering. Like, Beyoncé? And I love her, so I was like, ‘Yes, Beyoncé.’ I love it. And that just goes to show how viral everything gets. Like, YouTube is amazing. The internet is crazy. For Beyoncé to—what? That's unheard of. So, it's kind of like, it's...it’s breathtaking. Like, not only are we on the Lifetime Channel or our style is on Lifetime, and different squads around us are doing our stuff, but we have a celebrity kind of basing what she—a performance, or a dance move, off of what we do too. So it's just kind of like, ‘Wow.’ Look what we're doing. You know? It's amazing. Like I said, it's nothing to be upset about. It's pretty much like we're having a positive influence on different people and inspiring different people to do different things, from younger girls, to males, to celebrities, so it's amazing. It’s life-changing really, actually, just thinking about all these people are doing our stuff and I don't know, it's—[laughs]—I’m really at a loss for words for it, actually, because I'm still trying to process everything like—wow. We're really

77 Transcript, Shanika Lee Oral History Interview, July 13, 2016, by Mary Blessey.
world-known, and people legit know what we do and are trying to attempt to do it, and it's just amazing. That's just the bottom line: amazing.”

Cipreuna Church:
“I would say online is a big way people know [about J-Setting] because Rolling Stone put out an article about Beyoncé, and in the article, she said from her video ‘Single Ladies,’ she said she got the style from the Prancing J-Settes. I kind of feel like when people say stuff like that, it kinds of draws people to go to YouTube and look and say, ‘Okay, let me see what the Prancing J-Settes are.’ They'll kind of like our style more. Just like with Sam Sparro—we did his song ‘Sally’ at the Honda Battle of the Bands, and he gave us some feedback. He was like, ‘These amazing dancers,’ so it like when—celebrities put it out like that, it kind of gives people more options to say, ‘Okay, let me look them up. Even if I've never heard of them, let me look them up,’ and they'll start liking us more.”

Alexsis Shorter:
“It's cool, but that’s the only thing I can really say. It's cool. It's interesting.”

Kristen Smith:
“I mean, I totally knew about Beyoncé because I’m the biggest Beyoncé fan. I’ve been ‘Uh-oh-ing’ since I was three and four—I didn’t know how to do anything else. So, I kind of knew that [J-Setting] was big, but I didn’t know that it was just ‘Oh my god’ until I found out that Beyoncé had did it, like in an article. Like, she got the little stand that she did in the video from the J-Settes, so I thought that was so cool that we could touch somebody, or influence people. For Beyoncé to want to imitate our style, I feel like that’s a big accomplishment. Over the years, somebody who doesn’t even know us, or somebody who just watched our videos over years or over time would want to teach somebody how we dance, or be impacted by that. [MB: And what do you mean Beyoncé did ‘a stand’?] Like, when you do a stand, it’s basically like you’re throwing an 8-count, meaning you have moves that equal one 8-count… I noticed in her video, she threw it like she was throwing a stand. Like, if you come to our games, you see our captain do something, and then maybe the row behind her does something. Beyoncé kind of did a move, and then the two young ladies that were in ‘Single Ladies’ kind of did the same...
thing. So, I felt like maybe that’s where she was kind of putting the little J-Setting affect in there. I felt like that was totally cool.”83

Again, Zandria Robinson has never been a J-Sette, but I was interested to hear her interpretation as a person who studies southern culture and focuses particularly on some of the key issues involved in this matter, such as race, gender, class, pop culture, southern culture, and cultural appropriation. She also published an article in Rolling Stone magazine in 2016 —mostly about the release of Beyoncé’s single “Formation”—in which she mentions the Prancing J-Settes, writing, “Beyoncé has a long history of using her pop platform to make her regional birthright explicit. For 2008’s ‘Single Ladies,’ she drew on choreography inspired by Jackson State University's Prancing J-Settes.”84 The Prancing J-Settes took a screen shot of the article and posted this article to their official Instagram page. So, her opinion on the subject lends an interesting an interesting perspective. Following is an excerpt from my conversation with Robinson on the topic of Beyoncé and the “Single Ladies” music video:

[MB: So, about the Beyoncé thing, I’ve looked online and only found sources of dubious credibility quoting the choreographer, and so on. What do you know about that? Have you heard if she’s ever acknowledged it herself?] Yeah, I know the same thing that everybody else does, that choreographer—and I mean you, you see the choreography. Like, you can’t even deny that that’s the choreography. I mean, I think that there are a lot of ways that people might imagine that it’s some innovation, but it is that particular aesthetic, it’s even—I mean, there are leotards [laughs], so it’s the aesthetic and it’s the choreography. [MB: Do you know, when you said she was quoted as saying—] Right, she was, when she talked about—she was talking about how difficult it was, like, this—it was new for her, right, so she—the quote is that, um… I wish I knew where this was—where the choreographer brought it to her, and she had never seen anything like it, and she was like, “Woah, I want to try this,” and that it was difficult work to do. [MB: And you don’t remember where you saw that?] Because I’ve been trying so hard to find an official record of her saying it…] You know ain’t no official Beyoncé statements unless she… [laughs, trails off] But, like, we know that that’s the choreography, and I don’t think

83 Transcript, Kristen Smith Oral History Interview, February 29, 2016, by Mary Blessey.
she’d be like, ‘No, I didn’t use J-Sette choreography.’ … This a question about, like—the need for a verbal source is a problem. We are talking about language of the body, and that is not something that we are even literate enough in to be able to recognize. Like, I can recognize that choreography because I’ve been watching it my whole life, like that particular style. And it immediately jumped to my mind, and I think it’s about a certain kind of literacy that’s not necessarily going to be validated in traditional ways. It’s that same problem of the mind-body dualism and how we source the information about it.

There was another Beyoncé video where—it’s the video for ‘Countdown,’ and people were saying, ‘Oh, well she took the choreography from this,’—I don’t know what, I don’t know if it was Italian or something—so, she took the choreography from [some] video. And so then they put the videos side-by-side, and it was that. So then, I think Beyoncé’s people responded back, ‘Well, we’re paying an homage to this woman.’ So, I feel like, this is not something that is uncommon for her, or for major people in general to do… But it’s about this epistemology of knowing, like, you know that’s your work out there.

[MB: And what would you say to people who need that verbal confirmation to know that it is indeed “J-Setting”?] You’re not literate in bodies, and you should get literate in bodies. Can you dance? Let me see you do it. Like, those are the kind—I think this is a really important—it goes back to the question of the economics about the J-Settes not getting paid as much, not being as eligible for as much funding—like we think that the body is something that just does these things naturally, that there’s no rhyme or reason to it. And we particularly think that black bodies do these things—black women’s bodies do these things naturally, and I think that that’s a fundamental fallacy that we have to explode if we’re going to be able to talk about the multiple kinds of knowledges, of body knowledge, of quote-un-quote “intellectual knowledge.” But even to separate it in that way is to give primacy to one, and not the other. Like, the body is a sort of kind of intelligence… But the body, and being in touch with the body, and this kind of stuff is important.”

XI. WHAT IS SOUTHERN ABOUT THE PRANCING J-SETTES?

Finally, I asked the respondents what, if anything, makes the Prancing J-Settes and their style of dance distinctly southern. Many have pointed out that the general style is most popular in the southern United States, and if the point of origin is Jackson State University in Jackson, Mississippi, then that is certainly located in the South geographically. But it was not always easy

85 Transcript, Zandria Robinson Interview, October 19, 2016, by Mary Blessey.
for my respondents to decide whether J-Setting is distinctly southern, and if so, to give examples of why or how so. The range of answers I received are as follows.

Chloé Crowley:

“I don’t know if it’s more Southern… I haven’t even really seen northern dance teams to be able to compare, which I guess I haven’t done my homework. But yeah, that’s a very good question.”

Shanika Lee:

“Let me think, I don’t know how I could put that into words. I mean, it’s just more popular in the South. I mean, you have HBCUs, of course, all over. [But] they’re mainly here in the south, so that’s when you are going to see the majorette style of dancing more so with HBCUs, so with that being grounded more in the South, you’re going to see it here more often. Like I said, you can go other places as well and see this form, but it’s much more heavily centered in the southern region.”

Patresa Cox:

“I do see a sense of southern culture within the J-Settes because you mainly wouldn’t see this type of dance style in, like, northern—like a northern region, except for like Chicago or something like that, or somewhere around that area. But it’s more famous within like Mississippi or Texas—basically the southern area of the country. So, yeah, I would say it’s more of a southern…related to southern culture… I guess it’s because of the type of environment that we’re in, that’s why it’s different—like different in the HBCUs in the south [than] in the north—it’s the way we project ourselves, the way our tradition was made for us to even, you know what I’m saying, be able to do it now. So, maybe their tradition in the earlier years was different from ours. So, yeah. I think that’s why.”

Cipreuna Church:

“I would say J-Setting representing the country, it gives them a flavor of what Mississippi's about. Sometimes they think we're just about food and blues and stuff, so it gets them thought to be like even though we've never seen them, ‘Oh my God, it's a dance scene. We've never seen this culture.’ I know dance teams up north, they dance

86 Transcript, Chloé Crowley Oral History Interview, February 29, 2016, by Mary Blessey.
87 Transcript, Shanika Lee Oral History Interview, July 13, 2016, by Mary Blessey.
88 Transcript, Patresa Cox Oral History Interview, February 26, 2016, by Mary Blessey.
nothing like us, and it's like being down south you get to see every variety of dance, but we're more prone to seeing the Dolls or the Stingettes. We really don't know any dance scenes from up north, so for them to look at us and see our style, it's a big thing. We wouldn't think that we've gotten that far, to where people look at us on YouTube and try to learn it. I knew nothing about the [J-Settes] classes in Florida [before this interview]. That's a big surprise to me… I would describe the difference as us—we dance like more hardcore, more energetic to songs. I would say up North, they dance kind of like more softer than us. I can't really describe their style, but it's like, I know it's not our style. It's kind of more of like softer. Their band is not really known up there, so it's kind of like we don't really know because they're not closer to us to know, so yeah… When I was in high school, I used to always look at different dance teams. Some I came across dancing, some up north. I now look and I say, ‘Well, that's kind of different than us.’ Some stuff will catch your eye, but some, you'll be like, ‘Oh, that's a little different. I don't know if I would like it,’ so it's a lot.”

Dominique Martin:

I don't necessarily feel like it's a southern type thing. Like I said, we have people in Chicago doing what we do. So, I'm not really going to say that “Oh, it's just a South thing,” because obviously it's not. You know? Everyone's doing it. And people have their own little twist on things, but overall, we're all—we're ultimately marching band dancers. Or have a certain marching band feel to it, so I don't just feel like southern dancers do southern things. And northern dancers do their own things. Kind of just like individually, you know ranked, and just do different—Alcorn, for example, has their own style, but they're still southern and, you know, we still do what we do and we're still southern. […] Us being down here, we have different styles, but we're still southern. So, it's not just like a southern thing; it's a school thing that you do at your own school.

Kristen Smith:

“I feel like it’s very southern. You know, it was here, adopted in the Jackson, Mississippi. So I feel like other people—I wouldn’t say they based majorette off J-Setting, but I feel like it was something that was really big in Jackson, which is southern, so I feel like that southern type of dancing just kind of spread it on, with the years, just kind of built up and up and up, and I feel like that’s how it's traveled. Not just with J-Settes, you know, maybe other teams have majorette as well. So, I feel like, yeah, [it] kind of started here, and as it started, kind of progressed its way to other places.”

89 Transcript, Cipreuna Church Oral History Interview, March 2, 2016, by Mary Blessey.
90 Transcript, Kristen Smith Oral History Interview, February 29, 2016, by Mary Blessey.
Zandria Robinson, who writes about southern black culture in her book *This Ain't Chicago: Race, Class, and Regional Identity in the Post-soul South*, reflects on the southern-ness of the Prancing J-Settes:

[MB: What is Southern about the J-Settes?] ‘Oh, that is so tough… Everything. [laughs] When I think about the J-Settes, I think about the—not just sort of the precision of the dance, but I also think about the aesthetic presentation, and I think more so than anything, the aesthetic presentation of beauty, like make-up, the hair styles, the sparkles, the tassels, the glitter, the tights. I think about black southern belle debutante culture. Like, this is the debutante when she goes to do dances, in a way. We don’t often times think about debutantes as dancing in ways that might be perceived as sexually suggestive. But in fact J-Setting allows for some of those ‘impulses,’ quote-un-quote, to be tamed in a very respectable presentation. Even the boots [laughs], we are talking about a very specific kind of southern articulation. I mean they could be cowgirls—sometimes they have hats! You know, right, so it’s these…band accompaniment—women band accompaniment cultures that are southern in general, and then black girls with the hairstyles and different kinds of ways of doing the make-up, and different kinds of ways of styling the outfits that are especially southern. I don’t know where you can find that kind of choreographed aesthetic presentation outside of the South, and the care that goes into those kinds of things outside of the South—outside of the American south in the Americas. Now, in the ‘Global South,’ quote-un-quote, people do that too. Like, when I think of the ways, the care that Dominican girls maybe, like, put into their hair, different things like that. Like, this is what southern girls, black southern girls are doing as well. And so this kind of focus on uniformity—aesthetic uniformity, I think is particularly southern. [MB: Why do you think that’s particularly southern?] I think that…there’s less emphasis on the individual in some ways in the South. We are groups, we are communities, we are representative of a community. When we go out, we need to look like we’re representing a community. We need to be identified and identifiable. And so that kind of uniformity—one it’s about kind of, like, politics of beauty in general in the South. But two, it is also about representing a community in a way that is uniform, that doesn’t allow for misinterpretation of where you came from. I think that in other spaces you’re allowed to be more of an individual, but in the South, you are your mother’s child. You are this or that person’s daughter. Or you belong to this church, or you belong to this community. It’s like a family reunion t-shirt, but aesthetically beautiful. [laughs] Right? You know, like when southerners have—like, have you seen, like, groups of black people in family reunion t-shirts? [laughs] … And growing up, there was so much dressing alike, like groups of people being like, ‘We are going to all today wear these colors and we’re going to stack these socks in these ways.’ Whereas, in other regions, expressing your
individual, sort of, identity and finding out what that was, seemed to be more paramount.”91

XII. CONCLUSION

The Prancing J-Settes are the originators of a unique style of dance that is recognizable by its movement and visual aesthetic. This type of organized dance culture provides community, support, and a positive sense of identity for the women involved. It creates opportunities to engage with and honor African American culture and African dance heritage. Women who have danced as Prancing J-Settes have a range of opinions regarding the definition of the style, adaptations of the style by outsiders, and whether or not there is something distinctly southern about the dance form. Considering these issues and the interview respondents’ responses will hopefully inspire the reader to reflect on various related cultural issues of race, gender, class, pop culture, and southern culture. By reading and comparing these various responses about the J-Settes and J-Sette dance culture, we get closer to understanding the Prancing J-Settes and their unique dance culture. That is the purpose of this project—to give voice to the originators of this dance culture that has been seen across the world.

91 Transcript, Zandria Robinson Interview, October 19, 2016, by Mary Blessey.
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