

Acolyte Training
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The Acolytes of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church (AME Zion Church) are a religious organization that dress and act in a uniform manner, including their walk, style, and bowing.

The Acolytes set the mood for the worship service by being the first to enter the sanctuary while carrying the candle lighter, which represents Jesus as the light of the world. They light the candles to represent when the spirit has entered and snuff the candles out at the end of the service to signify when the spirit has left. In most churches, acolytes can be coed. But in many, they are roles only given to young girls.

The first time I felt like a “real woman” was when I became an acolyte.

Training to become an acolyte means that you are finally growing up, being a part of the clergy, and doing something right. You bring the flame in at the beginning of the service and kill it at the end. You prepare the sanctuary for worship and act as an example of servitude. But what happens when you realize the goal that you’ve been taught to work towards, the goal of servitude, vesselhood, and womanhood, is more chasm than compass? There are things beyond yourself that you can’t see because of the instructions you’ve been given. Because of your training.

In protestant churches, walls are bare, absent of idols and anything that could distract from the Word of God. But through the Acolytes’ eyes, the candle snuffers tower over them, and the walls are covered in colors and secrets. This project is a chance to reconsider the community and the space that contained my developing personhood. For a second glance through the eyes of an ever-evolving gender and definition of self.

During the experience of making this project, I dealt with months of flare-ups with chronic illness. In this time of back-and-forth and uncertainty, I found myself increasingly interested in reluctant religious impulses. A sense of connection to the forms of comfort that have turned into an unwilling reflex, finding its home in my knees and elbows. Seeping far into my joints and between the threads of hair I adorn. This project slowly became an experiment to find where those reflexes are within myself, within my art, and within my collaborators. I want to see how far my knee will jolt when struck. And feel what it means to exist with the matted nature of history, gender, and the necessity of home.

Along with the installation, the performance explores the community found in the liminal space created when one transitions from one state of being to another. In that in-between, the Acolytes exist as almost nothing as they transition from child to clergy member, from girl to woman. In the performance, they explore that nothing together and each decides what it means to complete training. Changing their shoes signifies the end of the transition and their arrival at their next state: Acolyte and Woman.

This project was a labor of love, full of important interviews and conversations with family and peers. Allowing myself to reimagine a space and experience that sculpted my ideas of identity and relationship to play has meant the world to me. I am forever inspired by the tiny worlds under the pews of sanctuaries, in the corners of fellowship halls, and in the hallways of any of the places I've ever considered home.

This project is for my mom. Thank you for making room for curiosity and play. You are my heart. Thank you to Autumn, Kaizei'le, and Zoe for their hard work and thoughtful collaboration.