The Caribbean as a Pole of the African Diaspora

Emilie Jabouin and Karla Etienne

Keywords: Caribbean, Africanism, experiential, embodied knowledge, dance, spirituality, community, diasporic connections, Ayiti

Byen Pre Pa Lakay – The work is ongoing (Haitian proverb).

Ke ke ke ke ke ke ke Ke ke ke ke ke ke ke Ke ke ke ke ke ke ke Ke ke ke ke ke ke (bell pattern), *yanvalou*, the life-giving welcome rhythm of water and supplicating undulations is a Haitian folk rhythm that translates into a movement vocabulary centered on the pelvis and the spine. Yanvalou speaks about the principles of life through its cadence. As two Afro-descendant francophone women raised in Haitian households in Turtle Island (Canada), we took on the task of sharing and entering in conversations about Caribbean dance. Our initial aim to explore the connections between the Caribbean and Africa, with particular attention to the historical and ongoing cultural, social, and spiritual exchanges—not merely as a linear flow from Africa to the Caribbean, but also underlining the exchanges between these two spaces—was a compelling one. Yet, this inquiry raised a set of complex and layered questions more difficult to pinpoint than we, as guest editors, and the contributors had originally anticipated.

Centering Ayiti (Haïti) in this conversation of dance is meant to raise questions about origin (not in an essentializing way), including: 1) what elements of the past still live in us; 2) the centrality of dance and movement in everyday Caribbean contexts; while 3) having us part with "matter-of-factly" narratives about who we are as Caribbean

people and descendants, especially as it pertains to African roots, its aesthetics and expressions. This project was originally dreamed up with Ayiti as a starting point in mind and the ways in which the dances, or rather rhythms of movement express historical connections and everyday life. We designed it this way because, we cannot deny Ayiti's early creation as a sovereign nation in 1804 and its deeply-rooted and celebrated connection two large families of peoples who make up vodou and its life principles: the Taino and the Africans. In what was imagined as the 'New World', on the island of Quisqueya, the successful revolt of formerly enslaved Africans and Taino people gave birth to Ayiti in 1804—'the mountainous place' in Taino language. The three families of rhythms and the centrality of the drums preserved over centuries celebrates a uniquely African and American merger between Rada (West African), Kongo (Central African), and Petwo (Taino and African) rhythms. Emilie's experience, 'while teaching the *Yanvalou* water dance, associated with present-day Benin, every Nigerian person who has ever joined my class or crossed paths with me has expressed that they recognize *Yanvalou* as their rhythm.' This raises further questions about the African connections or any other connection that is less examined when engaging in conversations of Caribbean dance. Ayiti emerged as a symbol of freedom, not only for its people, but also as what was/is possible in a Caribbean space when focusing on African elements as central parts of nationhood. Ayiti also stood as an affirming land of refuge for African Canadians and African Americans who, throughout the 1800s and beyond, sought more than legal emancipation: they sought belonging, dignity, and self-determination—to simply be. In this sense, the Caribbean became a pole of safety and a site for new explorations of self. The Caribbean is a pole connecting various Afro-diasporic experiences.

The revolution of 1804 challenged the status quo in more than one way, because it was rooted in the collective and the dance. The *Bwa Kayimam* ceremony that marked the beginning of the Haitian Revolution on August 14, 1791—or War of Independence—was rooted in ritual, an honoring of the spirits. Freedom was rooted in dance.

The history says that Cécile Fatiman, a *manbo* [priestess] started to dance, got taken by a *lwa* [spirit], Èzili Dantò, and did the ultimate sacrifice that led to the beginning of the revolution. The project of Ayiti born out of the revolution was always to inspire liberation for all enslaved people, all nations, and especially to provide a path for the Caribbean to be free. Decades later, it sparked the Emancipation Act of 1834 that partially freed from enslavement Africans and their descendants living in British colonized territories. This first successful revolt by formerly enslaved people created a place and also the project of Ayiti. The island, also known as Boyo, became a cultural, social, and political reference point for the rest of the Caribbean since it had been baptized Ayiti in honor of the keepers of the land—the Taino—and because it maintained a strong connection to African roots via a Vodou worldview, while acknowledging Taino contributions. Ayiti became a pole to look to because the drum remained central to cultural and everyday social life. For instance, drummers have passed on stories of Trinidadian and Tobagonian knowledge bearers travelling to Ayiti to recuperate the cultural knowledge that was threatened by the British banning of the drums in the 1800s. These geographic places and spaces—North America, the Caribbean, South America, and Europe—are deeply interconnected, as reflected in the contributions to this volume. Thus in the twentieth-century, during global conversations around Negritude, African national revolutions and independence movements across the Caribbean, artists and visionaries, such as Jean-Léon Destiné in Ayiti and Pearl Primus from Trinidad and Tobago who was dancing in the United States, engaged with questions of dance, Caribbean identity, and African expression as one of the roots of the Caribbean. They did so in ways that marked the conversations about these connections in profound ways. Today, we celebrate generations of artists and knowledge keepers who do the same for us. The contributors represent lived experiences and identities in either two of these geographic poles, or are positioned either in North America/Europe with a lineage from the Caribbean/South America, or are located in the latter region. The

contributors themselves navigate these entangled geographies in their positionalities, worldviews, and current locations.

This *Conversations* issue reminds us to lean on those who have come before us in dance and in the world of ideas, and who have paved the way to think about the connections to Africa, as well as the uniqueness of Caribbean dance, movement, and motion. Dr. L'Antoinette Stines and her 'L'Antech' dance technique is a pillar—a technique of liberation—in that it dives deeply into questions and bodily iterations of how Caribbean people move, and the roots of those expressions grounded in African origins, among the many other cultural influences of movement in the Caribbean.

In the present moment, as terrorizing groups destabilize Port-au-Prince and threaten the lives and livelihoods of people, Ayiti's significance becomes even more pronounced. As Michaël Brun's song '*Bayo*' featuring Strong G, Baky, and J. Perry suggests, Ayiti is the pulse of the world. Or, in the words of Haitian dance and drum elder Peniel Guerrier, 'Haiti is the light of the world.' Ayiti provides a lens into the global condition, revealing both the possibilities and fractures of human experience. It stands as a site of greatness and struggle, a space where time, place, spiritual dimensions, and modes of living are always connected to the land. This *Conversations* edition brings together multiple perspectives, some complete pieces and others works in progress. Some authors of these pieces are publishing their work for the first time, exploring and articulating Caribbean identities, expressions, and their entangled histories with depth and nuance. The authors contributed by offering testimonials, stories, personal research, academic research, a movement piece, and more specialized texts reflecting the diversity of perspectives and experiences on the subject under discussion. Both experiential knowledge primarily, and academic knowledge were thus highlighted in this issue.

What is beautiful in the curated responses to this call is the multiplicity of ways in which the contributors engage with African performance aesthetics and expressions—such as the prevalence of dreams, circular dancing and dance formations, distinctive dress (including long flowing

white skirts), the prevalence and importance of body and movement isolations, evident connections between the material moving and spiritual worlds, carnival expressions, and more broadly, the embodied act of 'living' the dance in question. The concept of African aesthetics was defined early in the works of scholars, including (but not limited to) Robert Farris Thompson, Brenda Dixon Gottschild, Kariamu Welsh-Asante, who spoke of these using similar principles. Elements such as spiritual syncretism, blurred traditions, and reiterations of Caribbeanness beyond the geographic Caribbean—manifesting as forms of creolization or reinvention—also emerge as central to the African traditions, knowledges, and ways of being that inform the contributions to this volume, even when not explicitly named as such. Throughout, the contributors translated a shared desire to explore that which remains under-examined within Afro-Caribbean dance forms and conversations in the context of community, ritual, and spirituality. In some instances, this took the shape of addressing historical erasures—such as in Puerto Rican scholar Isabel Padilla's study of *kokobalé*, which explores *donde los kokobaleros viven la cultura y buscan maneras de preservar la* [trans. where practitioners of *kokobalé* live their culture and seek ways to preserve and protect it]. Or, it was a reminder to reclaim and center African-rooted vocabularies and cosmologies of movement. Thomas Talawa Prestø, for instance, articulates this in Parts 1 and 2 of his contribution through the concept of '*selfpolyfication*'— a framework for understanding the ubiquity of having multiple centerpoints working with multiple histories and intentions in African diasporic dance traditions.

On redécouvre un autre univers linguistique dansé à travers les contributions de Claire Massy-Paoli et la présentation de la danseuse haïtienne Laura Beaubrun, qui nous rappellent que le langage du corps en mouvement vaut plus que mille mots. Massy-Paoli nous invite à s'enlacer dans le spiralisme de la danse, qui donne naissance au spiralisme littéraire des auteurs haïtiens et martiniquais, Frankétienne, Glissant, et Chamoiseau. La pièce de danse de Beaubrun rappelle le mouvement et le corps comme conduits spirituels et protecteurs de

la mémoire. [English: We rediscover another linguistic universe—one that is danced. This is powerfully conveyed through the contributions of Claire Massy-Paoli, and Haitian dance artist Laura Beaubrun's movement piece, who remind us that the language of the body, simple gestures, and bodies in motion express more than words ever could. Massy-Paoli invites us to entangle ourselves in the spiralism of dance that gave birth to literary spiralism in the writings of Haitian author Frankétienne and Martiniquan voices of Glissant and Chamoiseau. The dance piece shared by Beaubrun recalls that movement and the body are spiritual conduits and protectors of memory.]

Kieron Dwayne Sargeant explores traditional Limbo practices in Trinidad and Tobago, alongside Deirdre Molloy's mapping of resonances among African and African diasporic movement traditions. Both offer deeply personal explorations on how to piece together practices rooted in ancestral origins and transformed through displacement and international connections. These traditions shift and evolve, adapting to new geographies and temporalities, while continuing to carry spiritual meaning and embodied knowledge. Through movement, song, and ritual, spiritualities are revived and lived anew.

Contributors Webster McDonald and Queen Mother Ireka Jelani describe faith-based performance in Jamaica and Barbados, offering witness to ancient, deeply embodied forms of knowledge—largely inherited from African past-present ways of knowing—along with other lineages that often go unspoken. In Jamaican Revivalism—where Kumina and Revival intersect— this spiritual performance becomes a site of resistance, reclaiming through queerness spiritual embodiment as a form of liberation. Queen Mother Ireka Jelani commits to embodied knowledges through movement and dance in Spiritual Baptist services, bringing to the forefront the symbolism of the dances, movements, and sounds that stem from these African-derived spiritual and religious forms.

Finally, interviews, questions, encounters, and travels spark new collaborations and insights from Annie Elizabeth Franklin who writes about Jamaican *Brukup* through her interviews with Albert

'Ghost' Esquilin and Collette Murray, who reflects on the practice and celebration of carnival and migrations between the Caribbean, South America, North America, and the African continent, as well as on her travels. In their work, Caribbean movement is both an act of remembrance and a reverberance to Africanism—manifesting through space, time, and multiple dimensions that remain ever-present.

This journey through each contribution served as a powerful reminder of the Caribbean's complexity—its deep, and at times, ambivalent engagement with Africanism. While many dance traditions in the region draw from African roots, those roots are not always strictly physical or traceable to a single origin; they may emerge from the land itself, from the histories and cosmologies that have shaped how the Caribbean has been imagined and lived.

Working on the larger question has revealed something profound—how, why, when, and through which articulations does the Caribbean continue to keep Africa alive in its lands, bodies, songs/breathing, rhythms, visual expressions, and cultural practices. As guest editors, we understand that the challenge of articulating Caribbean identity, or understanding the Caribbean solely through its relationship with Africa, is a question that remains open, and always in motion like its dances, music, spiritualities and ways of living.

Byen Pre Pa Lakay