



SIMBI: An Inner Transformation through Dance and Ancestral Heritage

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Abstract

My name is Laura Beaubrun. I am a dancer, choreographer, art therapist, and educator. Originally from Haiti, I have been living in Lausanne, Switzerland, since 2001. Today, I wish to share an intimate and transformative experience that manifested through my body and through dance, an experience that revealed me to myself and opened the path to a deep reconnection with my ancestral heritage. This journey began with traditional Haitian and Vodou music, more specifically through the song Simbi Dlo, an ode to the spirit of water, performed by my brother Paul Beaubrun. It was a revelation: my body became a space of memory, a bridge between generations, between the visible and the invisible. Dance, as an embodied language, became the channel through which this memory was reactivated, allowing me to access buried dimensions of my being and my history.

Keywords: visible and the invisible, body a space of memory, embodied language, ancestors, Lakou, nature, lwa

Introduction

I am Laura Beaubrun, a dancer, choreographer, art therapist, and educator. Originally from Haiti and living in Lausanne, Switzerland since 2001, I wish to share here a deeply intimate and transformative



« *Simbi* » video performance. Music credit: Paul Beaubrun, music «*Simbi Dlo*». For the full video, visit the online journal at: <https://journals.publishing.umich.edu/conversations/>.

experience lived through my body and dance. This experience opened a path toward profound reconnection with my ancestral heritage. This journey began with the song *Simbi Dlo*, an ode to the spirit of water, interpreted by my brother Paul Beaubrun. It awakened buried memories within me and allowed me to embark on a healing journey through movement, music, water, and ritual.

1. The Awakening of a Bodily Memory

For two months, I danced relentlessly to *Simbi Dlo*, moved by an inner calling. A color, blue, of water, sky, and the infinite, emerged strongly in my visions. The hypnotic rhythm, the deep percussion, and the repetition of words like a mantra, *Simbi Dlo mwen ye, DangbeAllah Wèdo mwen ye* « I am Simbi Dlo, I am DangbeAllah Wèdo », resonated within me in an inexplicable way. I felt compelled to give form to this sensation, which led to a video project in which I embodied the central figure, inspired by an unexpected proposition from my brother.

When faced with the image of my own body in the video, I felt a deep confrontation, with its vulnerability, its inherited memory, and its cultural imprints. Yet a voice within me rose, affirming the truth

of my gesture. A dream later confirmed this intuition, an African woman, her breasts adorned with diamonds, whispered to me: "And so what?" A call to authenticity, to self-acceptance, to transcend the social gaze.

2. *Simbi* and the Memory of Water

In the Haitian Vodou tradition, *Simbi* is a serpent-spirit, connected to waters, springs, and ancient knowledge. The dance I practiced became a form of invocation, an embodied ritual. While dancing, I was not merely moving: I became a conduit, the body as a living archive.

Water, which according to research in both the natural and social sciences carries memory, became the mirror of my own inner waters. Studies in human perception and well-being suggest that water can reflect and influence emotional and cognitive states (Nichols, 2014; Emoto, 2004; De Leo, 2023). My body, largely composed of water, also became a receptacle of memory, a space where the invisible could manifest.

Dancing *Simbi Dlo* was like opening a door into the unconscious, between what is frozen and what seeks to be released. I felt an ancient, almost archetypal energy arise in me, a force both familiar and profound. This process helped me face my fears and release inherited, transgenerational memory.

3. The *Lakou* and Cultural Grounding

The *lakou* is a Haitian communal space where people live in deep relationships with nature, ancestors, and spirit. This bond is universal: original cultures « often wrongly called "primitive" » cultivated these connections between body, cosmos, and community.

As a choreographer and researcher, I came to understand that these ritual forms of expression are gateways to our cosmic essence, to the Self.

In Vodou spirituality, the *lwa* are universal energies, like medicinal plants. *Simbi*, *Erzulie*, *Ogou*, *Legba*...each carries a specific transformative quality. By connecting with these forces, we awaken supreme consciousness within us. That is what the *lakou* revealed to me: we are beacons, living *mapou* trees, rooted in timeless wisdom.

4. Implicit Methodology: The Ritual of the Moving Body

I did not follow a formal academic methodology, but rather an embodied, intuitive, experimental approach. My tool is the body. My method is ritual.

Listening to rhythm, repeating gestures, inner visualization, creating a space of trust, these are the foundations of my artistic and therapeutic process.

Each dance becomes a laboratory of transformation, where ancestral knowledge, cellular memory, and spirituality converge.

Clarification Note: On the Use of the Term “Primitive”

When I use the term “primitive expression,” I mean it in its etymological sense, from Latin *primitivus*: first, original.

It is not a value judgment nor a reference to colonial exoticism. Quite the opposite, it refers to a return to essence, to the roots of sacred, intuitive, and universal human expression.

These ancient forms of bodily, sonic, and symbolic expression are what I aim to honor in my work, for they hold a knowledge of life that remains profoundly relevant today.

In this context, “primitive” is used with anthropological, historical, and artistic intention, in resonance with the research of Katherine Dunham, African American anthropologist and choreographer, Integrates Haitian ritual dances into her artistic practice, recognizing their complexity and cultural significance (Dunham, 1969). Herns

Duplan, Haitian dancer and pedagogue, developed the approach of Expression Primitive, exploring the notion of « oraliture » and living tradition in Haitian popular arts (Duplan, n.d.). Both acknowledged in so-called primitive forms a symbolic and embodied wisdom, cultural resistance, and a transformative potential, individual and collective. These expressions are thus revalued here as powerful languages that remain vital in contemporary art-thérapy.

Conclusion

Through *Simbi Dlo*, I experienced a radical reconnection to my ancestral memory, to water, and to dance as a rite of passage.

This work opened a space for deep transformation, where my body could once again become a living temple.

I continue to dance, not to perform, but to remember. To transmit. To circulate an ancient memory that simply asks to be heard, honored, and released.

Remèsiman (Thanks, in Haitian Creole)

Mwen salye Bondye Manman mwen ki nan syèl la, ki nan tout linivè a, ki nan nou e andeyò nou. Mèsi pou lavi, pou limiè w. Mèsi pou tout zansèt nou yo, pou tout lwa yo, zan yo, pou tout sa ki te la avan nou epi ki kontinye akonpaye nou sou chemen lanmou ak libèté. Mwen Se Simbi, Mwen se Vodou, Mwen se Lavi.



Intuitive dance representing the dancing spirit. Photo credit: Lauren Pasche.



Evoking the fluidity of the spirit of water. The figure, in white, lies on the water with arms outstretched. Photo credit: Lauren Pasche.



Photograph with drapery representing the mystery of the spirit. Photo credit: Lauren Pasche



Moment of embodied meditation, focused on ancestral memory, stillness, silence, and quest. Photo credit: Lauren Pasche.



Meditative body, speaking gesture. Photo credit: Lauren Pasche.



Photo crédit: Lauren Pasche.



A figure seen from behind, bare-chested, wearing a blue beret. The bluish atmosphere evokes the depth and fluidity of the water element. Photograph by Lauren Pasche.

Glossary:

- *DangbeAllah Wèdo* or *Damballah Wèdo*: In the Haitian Vodou pantheon, *Damballah* is the serpent-spirit creator, associated with wisdom, flow, and purity. He is linked to the rainbow, fresh water, and cosmic union. His consort, *Ayida Wèdo*, is also represented as a celestial serpent, guardian of balance and fertility. Together, they symbolize the circulation of energy between heaven and earth.
- *Mapou*: Also called *fromager*, the *mapou* is considered sacred in Haiti. It is the largest tree in the country (reaching at least 30 meters). Historically, the *Tainos* « the island's original inhabitants » revered this majestic tree, believing it was inhabited by spirits. Today, in Haitian Vodou, it is a symbol of strength, wisdom, grandeur, and magnificence.

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