



From Dancers to Writers: Literary Representations of Afro-Descendant Dance in Spiralism

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Abstract

What do the slaves do during the Night, when the master is far away and replaced by the storyteller? In the Americas —at the heart of slavery, and particularly in the Caribbean— this is the moment of the lawonn [round dance], a time of drums, songs, tales, and dance. The master is afraid, and the drums are forbidden. But the slaves continue. They appear to be 'dancing only', but something else is happening. Despite the 'Night' of the boat hold and countless days and nights working on the plantation, an incredible force drives them to move and perform forbidden gestures. This paper will explore various texts by Francophone Caribbean writers to explore how literary writing portrays dance and the dancing bodies. In Haiti, the poet Frankétienne (1936–2025) named 'Spiralism' as a vital force that characterizes the lives of slaves, as defined in two texts that blend theoretical and poetic frames inspired by Afro-descendant ancestral dances preserved within enslaved communities. From Frankétienne to Chamoiseau's Night, the spiral is immediately associated with dance and movement—freeing the body. Since the spiral emerges from dance, and dance from the spiral, can literary writing reproduce this same spiraling force present in dance to achieve a form of final liberation, merging the two artistic practices?

Keywords: Dance, Spiral, Martinique, Haiti, Francophonie, Patrick Chamoiseau, Aesthetic, Text

'I was like these slave-dancers, doomed to the arabesques of remembrance'¹

—Patrick Chamoiseau, *Writing in a Dominated Land*, page 233.

What do the slaves do during the Night, when the master is far away and replaced by the storyteller? In the Americas, at the heart of slavery, and particularly in the Caribbean, this is the moment of the *lawonn* [round dance]—a time of drums, songs, tales, and dance. The master is afraid, and the drums are forbidden.² But the slaves continue. They are 'only dancing', but something definitely different is happening. Despite the 'Night' of the ship's hold and countless days and nights working on the plantation, an incredible force drives them to move and perform forbidden gestures. This paper explores various texts by Francophone Caribbean writers to address how literary writing portrays dance and the dancing bodies. From a poetic perspective on dance, it interrogates the position of the slave within the plantation system as represented in literature, focusing on the precise moment when body and words converge within one single reality of a talking body—a body singing of freedom—in the moment when words dance.

Talking and writing about dance is never easy, but the Francophone literary space of the Caribbean seems to have engaged with it in a very specific way (Bernabé Chamoiseau *Confiant* 1989). Writers gave Afro-descendant dance a space between description and dream, inviting a new type of 'choreography'. Martinican writer Patrick Chamoiseau (1953–), a disciple of Edouard Glissant (1928–2011), focuses on the writing of slavery in both colonial and postcolonial Francophone contexts (Bonilla 2015). Furthermore, he explores the moment when

1. "J'étais comme ces esclaves-danseurs, livrés aux arabesques d'une mémoire". I translate.

2. 'The Békés-Masters made the first drums forbidden. They were made the African way, in mined tree-trunks. When the slave traders found them useful for the work shifts (the slaves were circumventing the ban with mouth rhythms), they allowed the drums...' ("Les Maîtres-békés interdirent les premiers tambours. Ils étaient fabriqués à la mode africaine dans des troncs d'arbre fouillés. Quand ces esclavagistes les découvrirent utiles aux cadences de travail [les esclaves déjouaient l'interdiction par des rythmiques de bouche], ils autorisèrent des tambours ..."). I translate. (*Écrire en pays dominé* 156)

slaves dance. In *Slave Old Man*³ (1997), Chamoiseau follows the journey of an old man who flees from slavery on a plantation, gets lost in the woods and is pursued by his master and his mastiff. The slave, a 'maroon'⁴, undergoes a final transubstantiation and becomes a dancer, a writer, and is recognized as a man rather than just a slave after encountering a stone indigenous to the Americas. In this hybrid text, between novel and poetry, the Night becomes a metaphor for the woods, for freedom, and for the experience of creation. Chamoiseau returns to this experience of the Night in two theoretical works: *Écrire en pays dominé* [Writing in a Dominated Land] (1997) and *Le conteur, la nuit et le panier* [The Storyteller, the Night and the Basket] (2021). These works allow him to develop political reflections by presenting writing as a space of liberation in a colonized space, in *Écrire en pays dominé*; and aesthetic ones by reporting on the importance of dance and music in the Caribbean and their connection to freedom, in *Le conteur, la nuit et le panier*. From these three texts by Chamoiseau, this study delves into the linguistic and intellectual world of Francophone Caribbean writing (Glover 2008) to explore dance as a literary embodiment of Spiralism.

In Haiti, where the land is marked by slavery, the poet Frankétienne (1936–2025) invents the 'Spiralism', a literary movement using the image of the spiral as a metaphor of a vital force (Kauss 2007). The Spiralist authors blend theoretical and poetic frames in two fundamental texts defining their movement: *L'Oiseau schizophone* [The Schizophone Bird] (1998) and *Ultravocal* (2004). For Frankétienne, in a context of oppression – a dictatorial regime but also slavery – this spiral is a breath: a physically, aesthetically, and politically intense dynamics. For them, Spiralism is carried by two essential elements: chaos (Azérad 2017) and movement. Inspired by Afro-descendant ancestral dances preserved within enslaved communities, Frankétienne adopts the form of the spiral not merely as a geometric figure, but rather by

3. [*L'esclave vieil homme et le molosse*, Paris, Gallimard, 1997], trans. Linda Coverdale, New York/London, The New Press, 2018.

4. See Edouard Glissant. *The Fourth Century* [Le Quatrième siècle]. Paris: Seuil, 1962. Translated by Betsy Wing. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2001.

drawing on fractal geometry. Originally, the fractal had been defined by mathematician Benoit Mandelbrot as: 'a geometry of nature, based on statistical chaos. But it has a broader use. It is a geometry of nature, and a geometry of chaos' (1995, 188).⁵ In the Afro-descendant cultural context of the Caribbean, the spiral's geometric form appears in dance as a force connected to nature and its expression through chaos.⁶ Yet the Francophone writer describes this chaos in positive terms in the journal *Dérives*: 'There is a fecund chaos.'⁷ (1986/1987). In contrast to stillness, chaos becomes a wellspring of a dancing movement (Murdoch 2021). It becomes a necessary force, one that liberates from slavery and initiates both a literary and an aesthetic movement: Spiralism.⁸

From one island of the Caribbean to another, I suggest that Chamoiseau engages with the spiral as defined by Frankétienne, returning both to its Afro-descendant origins (Sloat 2010) and to its geometric form as embodied in dance: 'Like in the *Cahier*',⁹ dancer, drummer, singer, storyteller riding a spiral falling and then rising.'¹⁰

5. "A l'origine, la géométrie fractale était une géométrie de la nature qui faisait appel de façon constante au chaos statistique. Mais à l'usage son rôle s'est énormément étendu. C'est une géométrie de la nature, et c'est une géométrie du chaos." I translate.

6. Chamoiseau uses the mathematical context to transform it into a literary concept. Thus, the primordial chaos corresponds to his descriptions of the Caribbean: chaos is not only necessary but also impossible to avoid! 'Living in the West Indies is like being dipped in a sauce where salt, onion and pepper are potential calamities [...] No need to be very old in the West Indies to have lived one of these calamities written in potentiality [...] Me, with no track record, I still carry several typhoons in the worry of my memories.' ("Vivre aux Antilles revient à être plongé dans une sauce dont le sel, l'oignon et le piment sont des calamités potentielles [...] Nul besoin d'être très vieux aux Antilles pour avoir vécu une de ces calamités inscrites dans le probable. [...] Moi, sans aucun palmarès, je traîne déjà plusieurs cyclones dans mes tracas de mémoire." I translate. (*Le conteur, la nuit et le panier* 50).

7. "Il y a un chaos qui est fécond." I translate.

8. Marie-Édith Lenoble (2008) characterizes Spiralism as a scale invariance (the same irregularity at any level), a chaotic macro-ensemble but a micro-literary logic, a minimalistic element constituted by the sound unity, an infinite energy.

9. Patrick Chamoiseau references here Aimé Césaire's *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land [Cahier d'un retour au pays natal]* (2001): 'Rally to my side my dances / you bad nigger dances / to my side my dances / the carcan-cracker dance / the prison-break dance / the it-is-beautiful-good-and-legitimate-to-be-a-nigger-dance / Rally to my side my dances and let the sun bounce on the racket of my hands' (49–50).

10. "Comme dans le *Cahier*, danseur, tanbouyé, chanteur, conteur chevauchent une spirale qui s'effondre puis qui monte." I translate. (*Le conteur, la nuit et le panier* 165).

From Frankétienne to Chamoiseau's *Night*, the spiral is immediately associated with dance and movement, freeing the body. Since the spiral emerges from dance, and dance from the spiral, can literary writing reproduce this same spiraling force present in dance to achieve a form of final liberation, merging the two artistic practices? Drawing from literary texts by Patrick Chamoiseau, Edouard Glissant, and Frankétienne, I will first focus on how literature reveals the historical significance of dance in the plantations, where dance serves as a means of bodily liberation. Second, I will examine the poetic possibility of 'getting out of the circle' of the *Night* in a more specifically stylistic and literary perspective. Finally, I will circle back to the poetic potential of Caribbean writing as a space of dance and freedom.

1. Spiraling Dance and Freedom of the Bodies

Historically, in the world of the 'Habitation',¹¹ the slave's body is co-dependent on the social and organizational system of slavery. After the ship's hold and the sales, the sudden dehumanization paradoxically grants new value to the slave's body. The slave is seen as a working body before being recognized as a man. In this system, the slave bears the weight of 'work' that drives the body from one action to the next. However, the slave also inhabits another world, where the body can become another: the *Night*. In his literary texts, Chamoiseau develops this concept from Glissant's definitions in *Poetics of Relation* (1997): the 'Night' refers to the twilight moment of storytelling and song in the plantation. It marks both the time when the slaves stop working, distanced from the gaze of the White masters, and the time when anything seems possible. In Chamoiseau's *Écrire en pays dominé* (1997), this transitional moment is described as the shift from day to night:

The work holds consciences from sunrise to the sunset. After the harassing work in the fields, under the moonlight we work at the Cassava *gragé* or at the endless. Fatigue numbs the

11. In Chamoiseau's vocabulary, the 'Habitation' is the main house in the plantation.

Being. [...] Sometimes, it fails or breaks (nocturnal suicide or broken despair against the Master's wraths) but most of the time it stays welded to the body's back. The body is the major arc. Each crump of flesh receives the yearning of life. The voice is silent but the body dances. Dance. Dance. This ultimate body in which one fully anchors.¹² (154)

In the literary descriptions made by Chamoiseau, the Night allows the working body to transform into a dancing body for the slave. It remains a body, but gains a new function beyond that imposed by slavery (Foucault 1977). Though still far from revolution, this marks the first step toward the body becoming an autonomous *being*: freeing itself from the definitions produced by the plantation system. In a dialectical moment, dance irrigates the space of labor, and the body becomes a dancing body even within the codified, rule-bound space of slave-driven day of work:

If dance is allowed, we will support it by drums and mouth, foot, hand rhythms. If it is forbidden, we will save it further away and nothing will be perceived other than the wind shaking. And we will dance, dance. We will dance during the field harvests. We will dance back. We will dance during the *veillées* storytelling¹³ (ibid.)

Through the shift from present tense and the infinitive, Chamoiseau moves to a derivative future tense. We 'dance', and we 'will dance'. Whatever the weather is, dancing becomes essential. The slave is not

12. "Le travail tient la conscience du soleil-levé au soleil-déposé. Après les harassements du champ, on s'active sous la lune aux gragées du manioc ou aux interminables. Fatigues engourdissent l'Etre. [...] Parfois, elle défaillie ou se rompt (suicide nocturne ou désespoir brisé contre la pétarde du Maître) mais le plus souvent elle demeure soudée aux assises du corps. C'est le corps l'arc majeur. Chaque miette de ses chairs reçoit des appétences de vie. La voix reste muette mais le corps danse. Danser. Danser. Ce corps ultime dans lequel on s'échoue tout entier." I translate.

13. "Si la danse est permise, on la soutiendra avec tambours ou des rythmiques de bouche, de pieds, de mains. Si elle est interdite, on la réfugiera dans un loin qui ne laissera filtrer qu'une tremblade du vent. Et on dansera, dansera. On dansera durant le labourage des champs. On dansera en retour. On dansera aux *veillées* de travail." I translate

only 'a' body but he owns his own body. He can drive it, and make it dance.

Emerging from the force of Frankétienne's spiral, the reclamation of the body allows the slave to be born again into reality. As Frankétienne describes the spiral, the slave seeks to 'move at the same time as reality, to board reality, not to stay outside of reality, but to board the same train.'¹⁴ Through dance, the slave comes closer to reality, attuned to its rhythm and movement. Facing the stillness imposed by the labor of slavery, the spiraling dance arises from an essential chaos, offering movement and dynamics (Chamoiseau and Morgan 2008). As Chamoiseau explains in *Écrire en pays dominé*, there is only one (dance) step between the dehumanization imposed by slavery and the generative chaos of the spiral.

The [drum] rhythms were used to serve—in a tangled ambiguity—the interests of the Master and the reconstruction of the broken bodies of the slaves. The memory of these bodies comes by snatches. It is not continuous. It is broken too. Sequential. Heterogenous. Polyrhythmic. [...] Thanks to the rhythms, the person smothered in the slave emerges.¹⁵ (156–157)

Throughout the Night, the slaves dance to the polyrhythmic beat of the drums. This chaos is spontaneous, and liberating. Emerging from the chaos of the Night in the hold, the spiraling chaos of polyrhythmic drumming gives rise to transformation: in literature, the body of the slave becomes a dancer. Not only a body, but a person.

In the writing, the presence of the dancer's body implies the revelation of the slave as a being-dancer: 'The Being comes back in the dance [...] Everything is elaborated through the gesture in the gesture.

14. "Essayer d'être en mouvement en même temps que le réel, s'embarquer dans le réel, ne pas rester au-dehors du réel, mais s'embarquer dans le même train." I translate.

15. "Ses rythmes [du tambour] y servaient – dans une ambiguïté indémêlable – les intérêts du Maître et la reconstruction des corps esclaves brisés. La mémoire de ces corps remonte par bribes. Elle n'est pas continue. Elle est brisée aussi. Séquentielle. Hétérogène. Polyrhythmique. [...] Grâce aux rythmes, la personne étouffée dans l'esclave émerge." I translate.

In this wonderful silo that is the body, recalled by the tremor of living'¹⁶ (*ibid.*). As Chamoiseau writes in *Le conteur, la nuit et le panier*, from a first gesture comes the being. The slave moves from a dominated body to one that leads toward being. He reinvents himself as a dancing being: 'With his hands, with his limbs, with his elbows, with his legs, with a secret rhythm, with a will, with an intention, he is sculpting inside and outside of him the framework of a new existence'¹⁷ (171). In other words, gestures give another meaning to the movements,¹⁸ and the body becomes himself. In the spiral, movement not only shapes the body but also its actions, creating a new self through dance, distinct from the identity imposed by slavery. The body dances. And above all, the being dances. For Chamoiseau, especially in the context of slavery as represented in literary texts, dance becomes an ontological vocation through which the slave is (re)defined as a man. As night falls over the plantation, the spiral carries the slave into a chaotic dance that reveals the self: not only as a body, but also as being. As a vital and creative force, the spiral urges the slaves to break out of the circle of the Night and pursue that revelation, into another body, and into another spiritual space. 'The spiral-work is constantly moving,' says Frankétienne (1986). You cannot stop while dancing with the spiral. Nor can you stop moving with it.

2. Transubstantiation

In Chamoiseau's literary texts, Frankétienne's notion of chaos becomes even more fundamental. In *Le conteur, la nuit et le panier*, Chamoiseau presents the emergence of the slave's being as coming from a symbolic death—one that leads to the revelation of the human being concealed by slavery:

16. "L'Être revient dans la danse [...] tout s'élabore par le geste dans le geste. Dans ce formidable silo qu'est le corps qui se rappelle par la secousse du vivre." I translate.

17. "Avec ses mains, avec ses membres, avec ses coudes, avec ses jambes, avec un rythme secret, avec une volonté, avec une intention, il sculpte en lui et autour de lui le canevas d'une autre existence." I translate.

18. See Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish. The Birth of the Prison.*, III.1. Docile bodies.

For a creator, this death-resistance can be symbolic. / It can get erected into a rebirth. / It is the collapse that, because of its inner movement, becomes an elevation. / [...] The dancer dances with death, he dances with his own death.¹⁹ (171)

When the slave dances, a symbolic death occurs. Yet it retains the 'fecundity' of the spiral and leads to immediate rebirth: the spiral becomes both elevation and liberation. In *Slave Old Man*, Chamoiseau describes this phenomenon as a dance making the slave free, focusing on the maroon who flees the plantation. In a moment of spiraling death, when the slave performs a final dance upon encountering a stone indigenous to the Americas, he repossesses not only his body but also an existential and syntactic 'I'. We enter a spiraling chaos: 'A dance of inner celebration breaks out. [...] Destructions of limits... Celebrations! Celebrations! I am pleased, lord of dances.' (ibid.) Upon encountering the stone, the slave enters a 'circle of flames' and goes into a 'dance of inner celebration' that affirms his humanity through the joy of movement. This dance is particularly striking within the narrative, especially given that the slave had always refused to dance. But in Chamoiseau's text, the slave, during his time on the plantation, persistently declined to join the group in the *lawonn*:

One never sees him dancing at *veillées*. [...] He has stayed in his corner, for years on end, sucking a pipe of macouba tobacco that sculpts his face in its severe glow. Certain dancers and *tambouyé*-drummers reproach him for his apathy. (8)

While on the plantation, the old man did not want to dance, his refusal appearing as an act of resistance. The man was already rejecting the *lawonn* and the circle²⁰ and yet, it is precisely in becoming a maroon that he leaves the circle.

19. "Pour un créateur, cette mort-résistance peut se faire symbolique. / Elle peut s'ériger en lieu d'une renaissance. / Elle est un effondrement qui, dans son mouvement même, se fait élévation. / [...] Le danseur danse avec la mort, il danse avec sa propre mort." I translate.

20. 'The one who enters to dance, paces up and down the limits of the circle created by the assemble.' "Celui qui entre pour danser, arpente les limites du cercle créé par l'assemblée." (Le conteur, *la nuit et le panier*) I translate.

Frankétienne defines this circle in a surprising and quite violent opposition to the spiral: 'The spiral is like breathing. Spiral means *life* by opposition to the circle which, according to me, translates death'²¹ (Jonassaint 1986). Paradoxically, Frankétienne uses here one of the main characteristics of the relationship to Africanity, and proposes to redefine the circle as a necessary step toward an initial liberation, albeit one that remains insufficient.²² For Frankétienne, the circle is not only characteristic of the Night and of the African diaspora (Daniel 2011), but also a form tied to the structure of the plantation. In Frankétienne's terms, the circle is reinvented as a spiral—a moving, open circle. The maroon has left both the plantation and its circle; he has entered a spiraling dance and become free.

In Chamoiseau's text and in the voice of the slaves he represents, the maroon is described with a very specific vocabulary: 'So and so escaped', he writes in *Slave Old Man* (24). The body has 'escaped'—it has left the circle and the group in order to flee and become free. Yet, in *Slave Old Man*, the slave must go through a symbolic death first. This symbolic death leads him to dance and ultimately to liberation through the spiral. This 'after' of death is described by Glissant as a beginning, as he writes in *Malemort*: 'Dlan is a carrier in a body-slope'²³ (1975, 13). In this scene, people are carrying a corpse during a funeral, which is a moment lacking in Chamoiseau's text. In between presence and absence, these lines are opaque. Glissant, on the contrary, shows a procession in which the porters hold a body (supposedly a corpse) which begins to dance. The line 'He is dancing. I am telling you that he is dancing!'²⁴ (*ibid.*, 15) is repeated several times in the anaphoric psalmodies of the coffin bearers, and also

21. "La spirale est comme une respiration. Spirale signifie vie par opposition au cercle qui, selon moi, traduit la mort." I translate.

22. For Chamoiseau, the circle is most of the time limited to a dual dynamic: a closed circle, related to the notion of pleasure in folklore, and dance fighting technics—damier, badia, belaire, etc.—both too 'orthodox' according to him. With Glissant (*Treatise on the Whole-World*, 2020), Chamoiseau calls to go further: it is now necessary to go over the circle.

23. "Dlan est porteur dans une descente de corps" I translate.

24. "Il danse, je te dis qu'il danse !" I translate.

appears in the description of the body itself. The person is dead, but the body is still perceived through its 'swaying hips' and 'moving body'. Glissant also introduces another element—the body exhibits a spiraling movement ('he was flying in circles'²⁵) and attempts to escape from the circle once again: 'he was falling along the procession, waiting to be called back there. He was falling'²⁶ (ibid.). Between the coffin-bearers and the body, the image of the body falling alludes to the possibility of stepping out of the row, in another repetitive movement: 'The outstretched leg corrected the movement, before the body—or the mind—unrestrainedly hovered on this sort of High-Plateau, venturing body-mind out of himself [...] the other leg, heavy creation tearing itself away from its original plasma, would throw the body towards another slope [...] Falling rolling'²⁷ (ibid.). Glissant shows a deeply physical movement: a leg²⁸ that continues to move, dance, and resist.

This 'body-mind' complex shows that dance is not only a physical action, but that it also transfers to the 'spirit', which reaches toward another reality: 'This unique body was swinging along the rhythm of the real music which helped it to rush downhill but also allowed it to imagine a dreamt dance'²⁹ (ibid.). Between the 'real dance' and the 'dreamt dance', the body is transformed, and one dance becomes multiple. The 'circle of the substitute representative'³⁰ (ibid.) becomes entwined with a body leaving the circle to enter the spiral. In Chamoiseau's *Le conteur, la nuit et le panier*, the alliance between body and mind becomes a creative force:

25. "Il filait en rondes" I translate.

26. "Il tombait au long du cortège, attendant d'y être appelé. Il tombait." I translate.

27. "La jambe tendue redressait le mouvement, avant que le corps—ou l'esprit—sans retenue planât sur cette sorte de Haut-Plateau, aventuré corps-esprit hors de lui-même [...] l'autre jambe, création lourde s'arrachant de son plasma originel, venait jeter le corps vers une autre déclive [...] Tombant roulant." I translate.

28. 'A non-ordinary state, at the other end of this world but with which I can live this world, this broken leg, this poor wrinkled body, this pitiless monster tensed in front of me.' (*Slave Old Man* 107).

29. "Ce corps unique balançait au rythme de la danse réelle qui aidait à dévaler le chemin mais permettait aussi d'imaginer la danse rêvée" I translate.

30. "Ronde des suppléant" I translate.

This emotional spring, this creative force that artists use is a mind-opening as much as a body opening, or even better: liberation of the mind, liberation of the body. An opening to the potentialities of an alliance between body and mind. [...] This trouble is a 'movement-starter'.³¹ (174)

Creation seems to emerge from a dual reality: a physical and mental doubling, where body and mind transcend one another. Both as an opening and as a spring, the spiral acts as a revelation that 'makes them move' and act. The movement of the spiral is therefore not only a liberation of the body through dance (Smith 2019), but also a way to make languages and senses dance: to liberate words themselves. For Glissant, it is essential to conceive of this *chaos-monde* [world-chaos] in the Caribbean (Marchetti 2006), because the chaos of the spiral lies in the center of the action: 'We were turning around Chaos, knowing that this thought goes in the opposition direction than the commonly accepted idea of chaotic, and opens an unexpected outlook: Relation or Totality in movement'³² (Glissant 1997). In Glissant's words, everything is connected to the spiral: you 'turn' and you 'circle', the movement is still present, but dance shifts to another space. Liberation continues within the spiral, but through words this time.

3. Making a Language – When Words Are the Spiral

In *Le conteur, la nuit et le panier*, Chamoiseau uses the funeral procession scene depicted by Glissant in *Malemort* in order to reflect on writing and the act of writing. For him, the narrative organism follows the movement of the spiral: 'Description of the fluid and changing articulations of a narrative organism. [...] each rhythm develops a

31. "Le jaillissement émotionnel, cette forge créatrice à laquelle ont recours les artistes, est autant une ouverture de l'esprit qu'une ouverture du corps, ou mieux: libération de l'esprit, libération du corps. Une ouverture aux potentialités d'une alliance de l'esprit et du corps. [...] Ce trouble est une 'mise-en-mouvement'." I translate.

32. "Nous tournions autour de la pensée du Chaos, présentant qu'elle circule elle-même à contre-sens de l'acceptation ordinaire du chaotique et qu'elle ouvre sur un donné inédit : la Relation ou totalité en mouvement" I translate.

synchronization of their bodies, which react to the evolutions of the slope until it makes a continuous collective dance. The leader gives the tuning note, and the bodies coordinate³³ (219–220). Writing becomes a physical act, almost a collective choreography ('synchronization of the bodies') aligning bodies in a particular order, initiated by the 'tuning note'. More than muscular effort, the focus now shifts to 'words': 'Each word comes from the nebula of its analogies, its forces; writing uses its configurations in order to draw, dance, sing, walk in suspension. [...] Mastering it is like abandoning it to the forces appearing, sculpting the dance'³⁴ (*ibid.*). Writing becomes a synonym for dancing, as if writing were a way to enter the movement of the spiral through a special force. Returning to a fundamental night and to the chaos of the spiral in *Le conteur, la nuit et le panier*, Chamoiseau seems to identify this force to a rhythm. He writes a polyrhythmic world: 'Polyrhythm is a generative vibration. It transforms rhythm into an acting force, a rhythmic thought'³⁵ (86). Here, Chamoiseau refers to polyrhythm as the simultaneous multiplication of rhythmic patterns, one of the main defining elements of Afro-descendant musical identity. Yet he refers to polyrhythm not only as a thematic reference, but both as a literary and aesthetic principle in the form of 'rhythmic thought'. For Chamoiseau, polyrhythm becomes a means not only of moving the body to rhythm (here, multiple rhythms) in accordance with a specific identity, but also of thinking through that very movement. In other words, Chamoiseau invites the reader to think through multiple rhythmic parameters rather than a single one, which would be characteristic of Western music. Ultimately, these multiple patterns

33. "Description des articulations fluides et changeantes d'un organisme narratif. [...] chaque rythme développe une synchronisation de leurs corps, lesquels régissent aux évolutions de la descente jusqu'à en faire une danse collective continue. Le meneur donne le la, les corps se coordonnent." I translate.

34. "Chaque mot survient avec la nébuleuse de ses analogies, avec ses forces; l'Ecrire y capte des configurations par lesquelles il dessine, danse, chante, chemine en suspension. [...] La maîtrise se fait dans l'abandon aux forces qui surgissent, sculptent la danse." I translate.

35. "La polyrhythmie est une vibration génératrice. Elle fait du rythme une force agissante, une pensée rythmique." I translate.

converging in a singular musicality becomes a stylistic device. He adds: 'The one who knows drum-writing knows writing, practices writing'³⁶ (86–87). Therefore, writing becomes a rhythmic and identity-rooted practice, but also a musical and kinetic one. Through this essential spiral movement, Chamoiseau shifts from rhythm to movement, and from movement to writing itself, as illustrated in *Le conteur, la nuit et le panier*:

The catastrophe-moment allows the creation to capture forces intertwined.

He perceives rhythms.

Rhythm is a sensation. Sensations trigger images, ideas.

An ensemble of sensations makes a resonance.

An ensemble of resonances makes a movement.

An ensemble of movements makes a shifting.

The shifting reveals the *configurations of forces* [...]

They are the ones that, from one work to another, will make the work³⁷ (220).

These lines reveal a very specific structural phenomenon: rhythm emerges from catastrophe, and is followed by sensation, ideas, resonance, and later movement, 'shifting', and, again, the forces...

Semantically or syntactically, the spiral is everywhere—it represents the infinite accumulation of the same motif—and seems to recall Frankétienne's *L'Oiseau schizophone* launching the spiral:

A stupefying journey to the ultimate frontiers of the imaginary, in an intensely lucid delirium, marked by the wounds of burning words. A linguistic revolution, deep down. A fire of paradoxes. An inflamed spiral of violences and horrors. An

36. "Celui qui sait écrire-tambour, connaît écrire, pratique l'Écrire." I translate.

37. "Le moment-catastrophe permet au créateur la captation d'un emmèlement de forces. / Il y perçoit des rythmes. / Le rythme est une sensation. Les sensations déclenchent des images, des idées. / Un ensemble de sensations donne une résonance. / Un ensemble de résonances donne un mouvement. / Un ensemble de mouvements donne une mouvance. / La mouvance révèle des configurations de forces. [...] / Ce sont elles qui, d'œuvre en œuvre, donneront l'œuvre." I translate.

efflorescence of myths and symbols. With, on the one hand, the awful descent. [...] And on the other hand, glimpses of fugitive beauties [...] punctuated by the palpitations of a mystical choir.³⁸ (Frankétienne 1998, 11)

In evoking threat and fugitive beauty, Frankétienne recalls Baudelaire's poem "A une Passante".³⁹ He also evokes paradox, fire and madness embedded in language itself, defining the force of the spiral. Words emerge from this same force in order to achieve expression.

Chamoiseau describes the same phenomenon in *Le conteur, la nuit et le panier*: 'The singer extends the body of the dancer, and dances by himself first, and then develops his own authority in the power of a breath where sounds and words get repeated, where the verb is already delineated, and where Speech is announced. *In the most accomplished of these evolutions, the singer becomes the storyteller, master of Speech*'⁴⁰ (86–87). In Chamoiseau's words, the dancer becomes master of speech.⁴¹ In *Slave Old Man*, he presents a character who embodies this dancer-storyteller figure: the old man himself. Yet, as we have seen, the old man is an anti-dancer: 'The old man has never joined in at the slaves' celebrations or the *veillée* storytelling, when the *paroleurs*-talkers tell how to defeat the mastiff. He does not dance, does not speak, does not react to the cattle-bell summons of the drums' (28). This old man is neither a dancer, nor a singer, nor a storyteller. However, he possesses a surprising spiraling

38. "Un voyage ahurissant aux ultimes frontières de l'imaginaire, dans un délire intensément lucide, marqué par les brûlures des mots incandescents. Une révolution langagière en profondeur. Un incendie de paradoxes. Une spirale enflammée de violences et d'horreurs. Une efflorescence de mythes et de symboles. Avec, d'un côté, la descente épouvantable [...] Et, de l'autre, l'entrevision des beauté fugitives [...], rythmée par les palpitations du cœur mystique." I translate.

39. The relationship between Baudelaire and beauty has been explored by these writers. See Chamoiseau's book *Baudelaire Jazz*, Paris: Seuil, 2022.

40. "Le chanteur prolonge le corps du danseur, danse d'abord lui-même, puis développe sa propre autorité dans la puissance du souffle où se répètent des sons, des mots, ou déjà se dessine le verbe, où s'annonce la Parole. Dans le plus accompli de ses évolutions, le chanteur se transforme en conteur, maître de la Parole." I translate.

41. 'You enter a *la-ronde* to dance or to talk.' "On entre dans une *la-ronde* pour danser ou pour parler." I translate.

power over others. The old man of *Slave Old Man* carries the spiraling force within himself: a creative force realized in silence.⁴² He creates through stillness—the old man allows the slave to become the writer.

Between silence and shouts, stillness and dance, the dancing spiral searches for language. From Frankétienne to Chamoiseau, through Cesaire and Glissant, the freedom of language emerges through a dance of words: dance has become language. The chaos of the spiral, as defined by Frankétienne, becomes a form of liberation, and these texts an invitation to leave behind the polished language of the circle to join a linguistic *chaos-monde*. In theorizing Spiralism, Frankétienne gives a name to this intense aesthetic, political, and literary principle. He reflects on the indefiniteness suggested by the geometric form (the fractal) and seeks to open it—the spiral is a movement expanding, an intensity where chaos finds its place. Starting from chaos, chaos unfolds at every scale. Yet, within it, a rhythmic harmony emerges and never ceases. This infinite force animates the movement of the dancer in the Night, the same force found in Chamoiseau's descriptions. In these literary texts, the *lawonn* surpasses the circle, and eventually fades; the polyrhythm of the drums is resonating, making the dancer's gesture impossible, but also inviting the slave to become a maroon. In Chamoiseau's, he leaves the circle and chooses the force of the spiral: the chaos of freedom. In this final apparition of the spiral, slavery and the plantation are left behind, and the spiral is ultimately re-invented. The narrative closes the spiral going with the slave's death, but the full 'narrative organism' opens onto a new dance, and the gesture of the spiral becomes language: like the spiral, words repeat, circle back, and continue to move. In literature, the dancing body becomes a gesture, speaking and liberating, pushing forward. The aesthetic force of the spiral transcends the political limits of language, the text gains a body, and the dancer is no longer a slave—he has become a writer.

42. 'His presence reinforces the drumming of the *tambouyés*. [...] In his company the dancers – without realizing it – discover unsuspected muscular resources. [...] And he, undaunted, accepts this gift. He plays the drums without playing them. He joins in the dancing while remaining stock-still.' (*Slave Old Man* 28)

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Claire Massy-Paoli is in the department of French and Italian at Princeton University. After spending years in France where she studied literature and philosophy at the Sorbonne and the Ecole Normale Supérieure, she gained first-hand experience teaching French as a junior lecturer at Johns Hopkins University. In between French theory and aesthetic, she is interested in contemporary literature and performing arts (dance and music). Her interdisciplinary approach covered more specifically Marcel Proust and Christian Gailly, at both ends of the 20th century. Aside from academia, she is also a literary and music critic (French correspondent at the Metropolitan Opera).

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