Un loc' de riddims in meh body for liberation

Collette Murray

Abstract

This reflection is about the author's lived experiences in social dance practices within the Caribbean diaspora and its transnational ties to Africa, as explored through a commissioned research-creation titled *Un loc' de riddims in meh body*. The experiences inspired five artworks representing embodied dance geographies in social environments that facilitated dance liberation. During the creative process, Edward Kamau Braithwaite's 'tidaletics' served as a framework that influenced Murray's excavation of her African diasporic identity, as well as her experiences with past and contemporary dancing in Carnival practices, and moments of emancipation. Murray describes nuances within her dancing body as an intentional act to engage with kinaesthetic expressions from different ethnocultural communities, and why this is emancipatory in the Black and Free research project in Kitchener, Ontario, Canada. Murray creatively decolonized the Canadian museum experience through the presentation's integration of visual arts, dance performance with live music, and community-engaged arts.

Keywords: Blackness, emancipation, African-diasporic dance practices, tidaletics, decolonizing museums, body geographies, carnival, Black feminism

Positionality

My research-creation involved stages that positioned Blackness and freedom, especially from a privileged position within settler colonialism. Although I am on traditional Treaty 13 lands of the Anishinaabe, Chippewa, Haudenosaunee, and Mississaugas of the Credit and Wendat peoples, I acknowledge my privilege to learn, practice, and create African and Caribbean arts across the treaty lands to which my South American family migrated. I hold a responsibility to reconcile relations with the waters and lands and engage peacefully with Indigenous communities while I advocate for my community. I grapple with a colonial nationality, where I can celebrate my culture and experience global cultures in my city and through travel, but still face assumptions about, or am questioned about, where I am from.

As an African diasporic dance practitioner and educator born in Toronto, Canada, I navigate complex and challenging dynamics within policies, work cultures, and various institutional politics across the Canadian dance sector, public education, and academia. I dance through life while being occasionally judged by my outward appearance, hair texture, skin tone, speech, and the tonality of my voice. The way I show up in the world, occupy space and assert myself comes from pivoting around those who underestimated me, from protecting myself from anti-Black racism, misdirected anger, and stress aimed in my direction to many life-changing lessons. I make daily choices defending my humanity and face racial battle fatigue while not succumbing to societal pressures and expectations of assimilation. I continue to navigate this choreography of life within an ever-evolving socio-economic and political landscape, both locally and globally. I am constantly moving and problem-solving, providing service to and for many, dodging unjustified anger. I walk a delicate line to support disability justice, student-centred needs, and university governance in my full-time role as the only Black staff member in a university department. I advocate for cultural dance education, African diasporic dance practices in non-proscenium spaces, and reducing

anti-Black racism in art education and the dance sector. I navigate the challenges of being an active artist in the Canadian dance ecosystem while also pursuing academic studies, teaching, and providing leadership support as the Board Chair of a 35-year-old dance service organization—ensuring that these types of performances align with my mission and ethics. However, engaging in a research-creation project was a welcome medium to perform a vulnerable project that honoured myself and the rhythms of my bodily movement.

Decolonizing the museum

Black dance artists often lack opportunities to create new artworks in Canadian museums. A Westernized museum is an unexpected site where an ephemeral experience is frequently hidden and not readily visible. *Un' loc de riddims in meh body* was my commissioned exhibition in Southwestern Ontario with Dr. Naila Kaleta-Mae's Black and Free research project, funded by the Ontario Ministry of Colleges and Universities in Canada. To transform this type of Westernized space into a conversation about performance and identity, my process involved weaving an intersectional and embodied experience through dance, rhythm, and liberation. Thinking beyond a wall mount or an easel, but through a personal performance art narrative to decolonize the way I, and the audience, interact within a Canadian museum.

Patrons interpreted and experienced content beyond the quiet contemplation of a museum exhibition. I offered a personal reflection that evolved into a creative intervention, and a window into African diasporic dance content in an alternative space. The artist talkback followed my live performances of neo-traditional African ballet of Liberté, a Guinean rhythm performed for the country's entry into the independence era from colonial France. I surprised the audience with a live engagement to calypso rhythms as a Moko Jumbie, dancing on stilts and completing my talkback on my stilts. I transformed the passive audience into an active one, inviting them to stand and walk towards the artwork, reading the visuals closely. This multi-sensory experience

surrounded the art, where the audience read the projected descriptors and viewed the video screen. I created a community art-engaged experience with live rhythms in the background. I decolonized the formal museum space by Caribbeanizing it, tapping into a vibration of folkloric codes that centred the audience on an intersectional arc of dance, visual arts, live polyrhythms, and masquerade. I aimed to translate and unlock the ephemeral elements of freedom and joy in my body depicted in the artworks. I encouraged patrons to form a performance circle around my artworks to create a social setting that would allow them to dance freely and rhythmically respond, marking the closing of the presentation.

While I expressed my emancipatory joy in my 2023 presentation, I was able to communicate with a non-dance audience at the MUSEUM, an experimental art and museum site in Kitchener. Future exhibitions in 2024 and 2025 displayed only the visual art portion, a standard way that left the audience to interpret the imagery. The third showing featured video content from my Q&A session and the visual exhibition on display at the Ken Seiling Waterloo Region Museum in Kitchener, Ontario, Canada.

Exhibition

In honour of the UN International Decade for People of African Descent (2015–2024), I developed five artwork designs that represented moments of a non-linear and transnational journey in dance, spanning the Caribbean to the African continent. Edward Kamau Braithwaite's Tidalectics inspired me as an excavation of an African diasporic past. I resonated with this "framework for exploring the complex and shifting entanglement between sea and land, diaspora and indigeneity, and routes and roots" (Nwadike, 2020, p.59). Braithwaite's concept of tidaletics is the excavation of the history of colonialism and the Middle Passage and the impacts on people of African descent, where the dynamic has "waves surging forward, hitting shores, rolling around and retreating to the sea only to repeat this process for as long as

the tide lasts, whether in high tide or low" (p. 57). As a methodology, I metaphorically interpreted the concept to mean a sometimes-turbulent engagement in the lows (racial discrimination and barriers) and highs (achievement and cultural engagement) of life, to understand myself and explore my coping strategies for seeking and experiencing emancipation.

J'ouvert/Phagwa

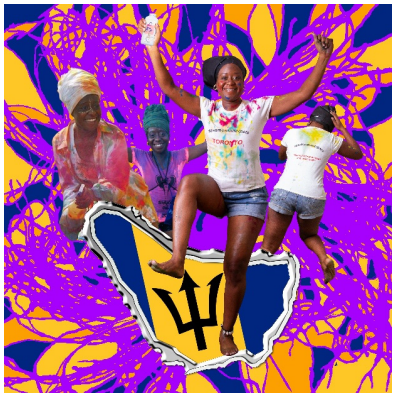

Figure 1 Collette Murray's loc'd hair is wrapped in headdress and while dancing, the face and body is covered in colors during J'Ouvert in Barbados and an archived memory participating in Phagwa/Holi in Toronto. Reprinted with artist's permission.

While celebrating Cropover in Barbados (a harvest festival marking the end of the sugar cane season) after Emancipation Day, the start of Caribbean carnival is where my body conceals its identity with colours. This imagery drew inspiration from the Break of Day, where the face and body were concealed in mud, paint, powder, or water. The contemporary J'ouvert (French phrase 'opening of day') emerged from the 19th-century Canboulay Riots in Trinidad, originating when ex-slaves burned sugar plantations and symbolically took the pain and labour associated with sugar molasses to cover their bodies.

My body's immersion is a commemorative act of masquerading with a purpose tied to an ancestor's celebratory experiences of ending dehumanizing labour in the plantation yards. The imagery represents the sensory expression, releasing work tensions, as the body is concealed in colour and earthly elements, creatively radiating joy within the body. In my lived experience, the torso sways, my body is winin', and my feet are chippin' across a sea of people in a night procession. The social

environment during this ritual is vibrant and exhilarating. My T-shirt in the image coins my phrase, 'Emancipate my mind and my waistline.' That is a testimony of vulnerability, to pause overthinking and open my pelvic region, unravelling a circumference of waist angles, colouring the atmosphere. My eyes greet other souls, and my spirit is attuned to the rhythmic pace of the crowd as I chip in unison with a community of strangers to music until the sun rises. I reflect on a parallel experience of ancestral pain of inhumanity and limitations towards displaying your culture, language and dancing by colonialists. Yet, I open my upper and lower torso and lunge my arms forward to throw powdered colours in rhythmic joy during a contemporary Phagwa/Holi. The parallel event was a special archival moment with the late Christopher Pinheiro, a textile artist, carnivalist and cultural visionary in his 2007 community arts activation at Luminato's *Carnivalissima* at Toronto's Harbourfront Centre. Referencing the Phagwa/Holi Festival of Indo-Caribbean cultures in Guyana and Trinidad & Tobago was to highlight the significance of the Hindu ritual, which marks the beginning of the spring season as a symbol of new beginnings, forgiveness, and good triumphing over evil. My African-diasporic body feels a sense of release from respectability politics and a desire to join in this jollification to connect with cultural references of my Indo and Afro-Guyanese heritages, while clearing negative energies to renew my spirit through dancing freely.

Movement and musicality

The imagery reflects the communication styles of Caribbean ancestors, banned from drumming by British colonial rule in Trinidad and Tobago due to fear of inciting rebellion. In parallel with an archived moment, I learned Malinke musical language, training on a kenkeni drum in Conakry, Guinea, with Mohamed Diaby and Sekou Keita. The intensity, time, space, and distance my arms and hands beat the bell and drums is to honour the resilience of our people through non-verbal communication.

Figure 2 Artwork on musicality where Collette is centered in Tobago's tamboo bamboo procession, surrounded by the collective memories of playing kenkeni in Guinea, and grazing a scratcher to add polyrhythms in Toronto riddim section. Reprinted with artist's permission.

To face political subjugation, one must employ creative strategies to evoke a performative intervention that sustains the communal practice of instrumentation using culturally available materials. My body's contact with a tamboo bamboo stalk, pounding the ground, rhythmic timing in scraping sonic frequencies against a scratcher from my days performing with a Toronto riddim section at fetes. These archived moments represent transnational continuity and how African retentions stored within my body carried polyrhythms from Africa to a Caribbean island and arrive in North America. It serves as a reminder of cultural resourcefulness and survival, as the instrumentation never ends in colonialism. The transcendent rhythm stimulates head swaying, a rocking torso side to side, a shoulder bounce, and an undulating neck and spine. The call-and-response relationships inspired an elation within the body. The resourceful mind used the heartbeat's pulse to create new rhythmic possibilities with objects in one's natural environment. My body is creatively adaptable, listening intently and responding with a contracting torso that pulsates its internal polyrhythms. My hips sway, and my feet tap the ground's surface to create a vibrational frequency. My body is communicating layers of rhythms, shedding all self-doubt to rebel and function as an instrument carrying forward the rhythmic sovereignty of a people.

Diasporic carnival

The following image depicts the descendant ritual of carnival, which has been extended across Caribbean islands to Antigua. I use imagery of playing mas in various sections of a masquerade band in Toronto and

Antigua. It was my release from microaggressions, whiteness, and targeted, condescending, and discriminatory slights toward my personhood. Revisiting a dancing state of freedom is a ritual for me as a descendant whose family was impacted by the British Slave Trade Act that commemorates the significance of the 1834 Emancipation Proclamation on August 1, marking the end of the planter class's control over African people and their bodies. I ask myself, "What did our formerly enslaved ancestors do with their freedom?" The political commentary within my mind translates through performative gesturing, where my body enacts its right to exist in a euphoric state and embodies Jamette behaviour. My melaninated body dancing as an Afrodescendant woman is not obscene but a reclamation of an empowered vessel of motion and jubilation.

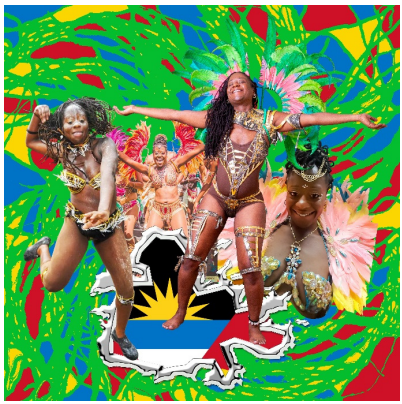

Figure 3 Artwork depicting Collette's inner joy dancing in Carnival masquerade in Antigua and the memories of playing diasporic mas in Toronto's Carnival. Reprinted with artist's permission.

I 'cock back n roll' my undulated hips or 'tic-toc' my pelvic region, tilt my torso front and back to start winin' and 'jukkin.' I listen to the melody and lyrics of a song's chorus while behind the music truck. If it resonates with my rhythmic spirit, my head falls back, and I release a movement vernacular of choice. I am alone with the music, while surrounded by thousands of people. I start with chippin' or ground by body with a slight knee-bend and opening of hips and pelvic to groove side-to-side. With my torso frolicking in varying acute angles, I calculate the circumference to swing my hips into loops of a figure-eight. I dip and roll my waistline, winin' to tempos, compelling me to flow to a groovy soca song. I can be provocative in pelvic thrusts, gyrating my emancipated waistline. When a power soca tune plays, my assertive torso is ready to jump up spontaneously, making decisions to joyfully wave my arms and wine my sorrows away for hours and

days. I assert power in how an African-diasporic woman's body shifts judgment away from morality or religiosity to an empowered and carefree state of being. I can dingolay against societal conditions in the street masquerade. This mental zone is my safe space to be free. I crave diasporic carnivals, where I resist, let my guard down and communicate joy through rhythm, procession, social dance and community theatre.

Stiltdancing reimagined

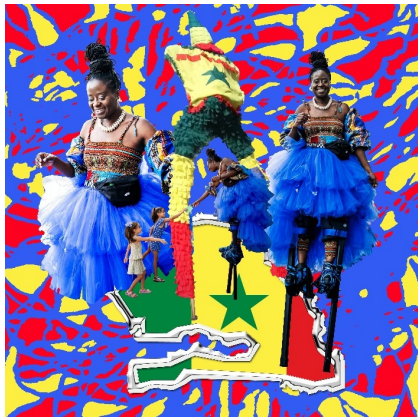

Figure 4 Artwork depicting Collette's channeling the spirit of African stilt dancer in Senegal and gaining empowered confidence when reimagining her Moko Jumbie portrayal. Reprinted with artist's permission.

As a masquerade tradition from Western Africa, the dancer on stilts is a known entity. Extended to the Caribbean as a traditional carnival character, the Moko Jumbie is known as both a trickster and an overseer and protector of a village. Origins from Senegal (known as Thiakaba) and among the Mali (Dogon people) extend to the stilt tradition in the Caribbean islands. The secret societies of knowledge, with their concealed identities and heights, are cosmologies of masquerade. As a cis female, joining the stiltdance practice is a powerful way to express my identity and spirit, freed from the everyday mask of conformity. I remove the mask of code-switching and emotional regulation when facing anti-Black racism and the measured responses to microaggressions to avoid the trope of being labelled the angry, Black woman who is harmed by another's ignorance.

My recollection of first seeing an African stilt dancer dates to my 2017 travels to Senegal for dance. Still, my entry into embracing the moko culture, which transcends patriarchy and ageism in the arts, was

inspired by the encouragement of Caribbean practitioners in Carnival. My dancing body takes risks to stand tall, assertive and to move as an empowered spirit. As a mature Afrodescendant woman, I take on a sense of responsibility and participation in the stilt tradition, driven by a passion to educate people on the practice and highlight connections between the Caribbean and Africa. While men on the African continent historically perform stilt dances, I affirm my confidence in Canada by channelling female agency at another level. Laughter, smiles, curiosity, joy, fear, and genuine connections are made with the intergenerational audiences I encounter as Coco Moko Jumbie.

Dance as oral history

There is a responsibility to have a voice and educate others about dance from African diasporic communities. I do not take this for granted. It is a privilege to be invited to international conferences to share discourse. This new form of oral history is an intellectual choreography, where one's critical interpretations and dance experiences in the Caribbean and North America are shared across countries from the African continent, where I am judged on my authenticity and relevance as a Canadian-born artist. There is an internal pride, personal triumph, and freedom when I stand affirmed as an artist speaking about my insights, queries and contributions to the dance field. When an elder comments, "the ancestors are proud", my soul humbly smiles. I was fortunate to present my exhibition in Ghana at a 2023 carnival arts conference and actualized the symbolic and

Figure 5 Artwork depicting Collette's centered in dialogue about African diasporic dancing body as an empowered form of oral dissemination. Her affirmed spirit draws from an embodiement archived through dance. Reprinted with artist's permission.

empowered image of the artwork.

The conversations bridged the historic and contemporary divisions between how African, Caribbean, and Black people dance, introducing new understandings about our dance practices across various dance environments. Intellectual growth is part of the liberation gained when I question, listen, and exchange ideas. All feedback and interactions are a what I define as part the oral dissemination that dance scholars can participate in to debunk the absence and disconnection around identities, culture, and knowledge systems, but also in the differing ways we innovate dance. As I rebuild my access to dance epistemologies of people of African descent, I steer away from the limited knowledge I carried in my body for years towards a fuller version of myself.

Creation process

First, I reflected on the term 'Black' as an external categorization and labelling of our phenotypes and personhood by the Western world, which did not originate in our parental or ancestral homelands. I navigate how Blackness became a hegemonic, global signifier, but served as a racial and colonial subjugation of identity. Over time, I have come to realize that we claim a Black identity in collective solidarity. Still, I have unmasked this term to self-identify all parts of my family's migration history and the tri-continental relationships. These include the Western and Central African ties of four ethnic groups,[1] as well as the African and Indo-Caribbean influences of my Guyanese heritage in South America, and my North American experience in Caribbean migrant communities.

Second, I analyzed my positionality and identity, influenced by Edward Kamau Braithwaite's theorizing. Braithwaite's understanding of Pan Africanism was a catalyst that shifted his thinking and theorizing of a "deep interest in the exploration of the impacts of cultural dislocation, multiculturalism, identity politics, the politics of difference

1. Hausa, Fulani, Tikar peoples of Cameroon and the Bubi peoples of Equatorial Guinea are represented in my matrilineal family.

and the politics of recognition on African societies and the African psyche in the modern world" (Nwadike, 2020, p. 56). I resonated with this activism as I felt dislocated from understanding how I came to exist, the internal dissonance, and the need for cultural references that permitted me to explore, examine and express who I am in Canada.

At the core, the Caribbean undergirds my dance experiences and has permitted me to make connections to the African continent. I now refer to myself as an Afrodescendant of African peoples, representing and drawing from tidaletic relationships in Caribbean carnival, as well as regional African dance practices, and the exposure I had to many Caribbean countries before extending to African countries.

Conclusion

For the five distinct themes, I collaborated with a graphic designer to bring my thoughts to life in an interpreted reality. At each geographic site, my body transforms into a liminal state of emancipation, morphing fluidly into the movements associated with the cultural practices. This dance liberation process affirmed my Afrodescendant identity, allowing me to be defenseless, represent as a living archive and be in relationship with different ethnocultures that welcomed me into their social dance practices. I see a sense of belonging and the joy of learning alongside social communities from archived images of myself immersed in cultural practices. The Caribbean was the entry point to renew, recalibrate, and assert my sense of self and freedom in dance, and then make further connections to embed myself in the context surrounding the African dance knowledge I had studied. Through this process, also learned that the ritual of dances and the lived experiences develop an Afrodescendant woman's body as a repository of culture.

I read Ufanela Uqavile's (2001) discussion on Black women theorizing on postcoloniality and feminism, which is reimagined together through creative media and the spaces they choose to occupy and determine

the structure of their lives. A key point raised about the diaspora was the agency to reclaim a relationship to an African identity by people of African descent is as crucial to any liberatory project of detangling identity. Uqavile theorized that African-diasporic women rediscover, reimagine, and redefine themselves through a social arena, challenging the meanings of what it means to be a Black woman. Through this research-creation, I discovered that I am an Afrodescendant woman occupying dance spaces in the Caribbean streets and through carnival environs to reimagine, affirm my femininity, connect with cultural retentions and feel safe from oppressions. This is the dance liberation I continue to create and emulate repeatedly.

Author Biography

Collette Murray is an award-winning dance artist-scholar, cultural arts programmer, educator, and arts consultant whose work bridges performance, education, and advocacy. With over 25 years in Canada's arts sector, Coco specializes in Afro-diasporic dance from the West African region, Caribbean folk styles, carnival arts, and stilt-dancing as *Coco Moko Jumbie*. Her multifaceted practice is rooted in reclaiming cultural narratives and amplifying African diasporic traditions through performance, community engagement, and scholarship. Miss Coco's artistry spans teaching, guest lecturing, mentorship, and publishing, with a focus on equity and anti-racism in the arts. She is currently pursuing a doctorate in Dance Studies (York University), deepening her commitment to integrating African diasporic arts into Canadian public education and advancing culturally relevant dance pedagogy. Murray holds a Master of Education, Specialized Honours BA in Race, Ethnicity and Indigeneity and the Certificate of Anti-Racist Research and Practice from York University, and a Sociology BA from University of Toronto. In 2023, she received the National Award for Outstanding Leadership in Justice, Diversity, Equity and Inclusion from the National Dance Education Organization.

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