Rhythms of the Afro-Atlantic World

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“To Carry the Dance of the People Beyond”:
Jean Léon Destiné, Lavinia Williams, and
Danse Folklorique Haïtienne
MILLERY POLYNÉ

During the week of April 7, 1951, the Haiti Tourist Information Bureau (HTIB) and the city of New York sponsored a series of cultural events celebrating Haiti Week of New York. The festivities not only served as a platform to display the finest in Haitian culture but also functioned as an “appeal for collaboration” for the U.S. government and its citizens to fully participate in the economic revitalization of the Haitian republic. Key to the bureau’s “appeal” was building a sound tourist industry in Haiti that encouraged “Americans from New York and other states of this great Sister Republic [to] get better and better acquainted with this Tourist Paradise that Haiti represents.” The HTIB’s reference to the United States as a “Sister Republic” echoed Franklin Roosevelt’s Good Neighbor Policy, a U.S.-centered foreign policy that promoted nonintervention and cooperative economic and cultural programs in the Americas. Although there are ample critiques of asymmetrical hemispheric relations between the United States, Haiti, and a number of other Latin American countries, the Haitian government still courted collaborative financial ventures with the United States in order to alleviate Haiti’s struggling economy.

Haiti Week proved to be a critical moment in the development of Haitian tourism. Haitian cultural festivities in New York City were organized on the heels of significant political transition and economic depression in Haiti, particularly the coup d’état against President Dumarsais Estimé by Paul E. Magloire in May 1950. Furthermore, operating within a politically charged environment of the cold war, where the absence of sociopolitical freedoms in the
United States due to the threat of communism often pushed the more radical activist/intellectuals to call attention to the “cultural realm,” Haiti Week can also be understood as a tool—or, rather, the stage in which—to advance the notion of material and cultural advancement. The reports and advertisements in the News of Haiti, an official publication of the HTIB, trumpeted Haiti’s modern technical projects (construction of new roads and buildings), which offered the illusion of progress. Material advancement in Haiti accentuated the “illusions of pleasure” for the middle-class North American traveler despite the aftereffects of the nineteen-year U.S. occupation of Haiti, which offered minimal structural improvement and held the country in arrears to a number of U.S. investors. Celebrated Haitian and African American artists, dancers, and literary figures such as Jean Léon Destiné, Katherine Dunham, and Jean Brière participated in Haiti Week programs, clearly sending the message that cultural arts, at this particular moment in time, served as Haiti’s most valuable resource.

This essay focuses on the development of danse folklorique Haïtienne (Haitian folkloric dance) by Jean Léon Destiné and Lavinia Williams and on how they employed it to entertain, to educate their audiences on Haitian culture, and to technically train Haitian dancers in the 1940s and 1950s. As early as the middle 1930s through the 1950s, the advancement and consumption of Haitian cultural arts gained full support by the Haitian government in order to develop Haiti’s tourist industry. In fact, many Caribbean administrations encouraged tourism during this time in order to complement industrialization and answer the dilemma of debt, unemployment, and failing economies. The emerging popularity of Haitian dance, along with painting and music, attracted curious tourists and artists and also helped reinvigorate Haitian cultural production and consumption, which, in many ways, perpetuated elitist notions and racist images of Haitian culture as exotic and primitive.

The challenge for Haitian artists to escape “the trivialization of its culture as either exotic or demonic” in the minds of foreigners remained overwhelming. Influenced by the racist travel narratives and zombie films that proliferated the American landscape during U.S. occupation (1915–34) and postoccupation (1934–57), such as White Zombie (1932) and I Walked With a Zombie (1943), many tourists were intrigued by notions of a “primitive” and “mysterious” Haiti. Haiti was the Africa of the West, without the long voyage, and maintained some semblance of U.S. influence. Scholars Gérard Magloire and Kevin Yelvington assert: “In the anthropological imagination of Haiti with its legacy of colonial and neocolonial ethnography, itself a cousin to travel narratives, ‘Africa,’ ‘Vodou’ and ‘Race’, among others, have remained key images in the rep-
representation of Haiti as a whole.”8 This “anthropological imagination” intersects with popular ideas, and the images of “Africa,” “Vodou,” and “Race” become “synecdoches, standing for ‘African savagery’ as part of a larger colonial discourse on the religions of ‘primitive’ people regarded as fetishistic, superstitious, [and] cannibalistic.”9 Dance, Haitian folkloric dance in particular, among other cultural art forms, served as the vehicle for which many tourists would authenticate their racist and paternalistic beliefs. Destiné and Williams proved not to be completely successful in overcoming such bigoted perceptions of vodou and its sacred dances. Nevertheless, Destiné’s and Williams’s innovation and transmission of Haitian dance educated dancers and their audiences to Haitian and West African–based cultural heritage(s), helped to attract tourists, and also demonstrated that the cultural arts enhanced the modern project of economic and cultural development.10

I argue that their work sought to codify Haitian dance—discipline it, classify it, and theatricalize it—so as to exhibit Haiti’s art form and its cultural ambassadors on the world stage and to educate their audience to Haitian history and culture. From the late 1940s to 1956, the “golden age of tourism” in Haiti, Destiné and Williams transformed the pedagogy of Haitian folkloric dance by establishing national institutions in Haiti that focused on the technical development of dance (i.e., floor stretches, body conditioning, ballet training, choreography classes, etc.).11 The creation of a polished, well-conditioned and professional group of dancers, influenced by the class and cultural education of Destiné and Williams, presented a perceived cultured and more agreeable image to middle-class, liberal vacationers from the United States and Europe. More important, the establishment of cultural institutions and the training of Haitian dancers affirmed the creation of an alternative world by black dancers where African-based art forms were celebrated and in consistent dialogue with Western culture.

Haitian folkloric dance and Haitian paintings were arguably the most prominent and popular cultural art forms exposed to the international public. During the presidencies of Dumarsais Estimé and Paul Magloire (1946–56), the cultivation of Haitian art forms prospered because of noiriste state support, which promoted a dark-skin, populist agenda, and an effective public relations campaign that advanced Haiti’s cultural capital so as to fascinate and charm potential tourists.12 However, this essay concentrates on the role of Haitian folkloric dance as opposed to Haitian painting or sculpture, because of its international exposure and acclaim, its choreographers, the magnitude of its audiences, its participatory elements, the frequency of its performances, and also its sym-
Biotic relationship with *vodou* religion and the growth of tourist entertainment structures such as hotels, clubs, and theater venues. Dance performances occurred in school auditoriums, theaters, open-air sites, and nightclubs entertaining small and large audiences on a nightly basis. The popularity of folkloric dance shows in theater settings motivated several hotels and clubs in Haiti to host performances similar to Broadway musicals and to appropriate the names of *vodou* divinities such as Hôtel Ibo Lele and its Shango Nightclub. Secular *danse folklorique* functioned as a more visible and tangible manifestation of sacred *vodou* ritual, the latter of which troubled the presidents Sténio Vincent (1930–41) and Élie Lescot (1941–46). The air of hopefulness that followed the end of U.S. intervention had also ushered in state-sponsored repression of sacred *vodou*, where Vincent and Lescot believed it to be politically and culturally regressive to the state and the (re)formation of Haitian national identity. Yet the state deemed folkloric dance—believed to be bled of its sacred elements—a viable cultural commodity to attract tourism. Therefore, folkloric dance, arguably more than Haitian painting, deserves particular attention to the growth of Haitian tourism, national development, and cultural nationalism.

**“WE HAVE AN ARTIST”: JEAN LÉON DESTINÉ AT THE INTERSECTION OF FOLKLORIC DANCE AND VODOU**

In September 1935, some conservative elements of Haitian society, particularly Haitian elites and print media sources such as *Le Matin*, applauded President Sténio Vincent’s legislation against *les pratiques supersticieuses* (superstitious practices). However, revisions in the penal code of the same year stated that popular dances or Haitian folkloric dance, void of any sacred ritual or sacrifice of livestock in submission to deities, were legal, despite their inextricable connections with *vodou*. Scholar Kate Ramsey asserted that these legislative changes occurred due to the development of cultural nationalism during the U.S. occupation period, which “mark[ed] the moment when it became politically desirable . . . for the state to distinguish popular dance from prohibited ritual.” Popular dance became evidence of a national culture and of Haitian cultural progress, while religious rituals perpetuated notions of Haitian primitivism and inferiority.

Since the late 1930s, the Catholic Church in Haiti promoted an antisupersitious campaign with the support of the state. Intrusions by the Haitian police and Catholic clergyman on *ounfò* (temples) and other sites where Haitians were suspected of participating in *vodou* ceremonies disrupted worship and in-
stilled fear in the practicing Haitian peasantry. Jean Léon Destiné, who was educated in Catholic churches and schools in St. Marc, possessed firsthand knowledge of the church's power on the Haitian aristocracy and middle class. Coming from a middle-class family of “modest means,” Destiné explained that the Catholic Church “told us [Haitians] it [vodou worship] was a sin [and that] you’re going to hell. All of us accepted it.”

In Haitian social politics, there existed a stark conflict between Christianity and vodou. Within the Haitian elite, Christianity operated antithetical to the complex philosophical and religious beliefs of vodou, the religion of the Haitian masses. It was perceived as backward and contradictory to Catholic theology. Yet the Haitian peasantry and certain indigéniste scholars, such as Jean Price-Mars, who critically advanced the cultural production of the Haitian masses, deemed vodou as symbiotic with Catholicism and also African-based. As Michel-Rolph Trouillot asserts, “to different degrees, they [elite and peasantry] shared religious beliefs rooted in the same African-dominated cosmology and took part in similar rituals.”

This theological division along the lines of class was clearly noted by both Destiné and Katherine Dunham as they navigated the waters of folkloric culture and the illegal sacred rituals of vodou. Destiné stated, “Folksongs to them [the Haitian elite] were vodou songs—which is stupid! The minute there is drumming they think it’s vodou.” Dunham, an African American dancer and anthropologist, noted, upon her initial research trip in May 1935, how President Vincent “paid deference to ‘folklore’ for the sake of the growing interest of tourists in the island” but that “an air of secrecy clothed all the serious ceremonies.” The Haitian government, according to Dunham, frowned on “investigations” that unearthed the schism between “the thin upper crust of the Haitian elite . . . [and] the black peasants, who really were by numbers and by historical content and character and humanness . . . the true Haitian people.” Destiné’s and Dunham’s remarks highlighted that class divisions, particularly ruptures triggered by elitist cultural denigration of vodou belief systems and vodou-inspired art forms, operated at the intersection of danse folklorique and vodou.

Destiné’s recollections of this class and legal conflict and its connections with Haitian national identity can be traced to an incident involving Lina Fussman-Mathon (a pioneering Haitian folkloric dance artist, pianist, and composer), a small group of young Haitian male singers/dancers, and the Haitian police. One Saturday night, Fussman-Mathon brought four boys (including Destiné) to a vodou ceremony in the rural section of Port-au-Prince, in order to expose them to the indigenous rituals and dances of the Haitian peasantry. Fussman-Mathon deemed it critical for their training because her dance and
singing troupe had been formally invited to the National Folk Festival in Washington, DC. According to Destiné, this trip was his first direct introduction to vodou culture. Destiné trembled when he arrived at the ceremony, because he believed that he and the group committed sins against the Catholic Church. During the ceremony, members of the Haitian police force arrested the group of observers and participants. Destiné recalled the police reprimanding them, yelling, “Don’t you know you are not supposed to be here?” Once they were brought back to the police station, Fussman-Mathon made a telephone call to government officials explaining that they were preparing for the folk festival in Washington, DC. The group was soon released with a strict warning. The troupe’s release from police custody probably stemmed from several factors: President-elect Élie Lescot’s support of the folk festival, the fact that the troupe trained to represent Haiti in the United States, and the influence of Fussman-Mathon and the boys’ middle-class families. Yet the state’s crafting of a modern image for Haiti was being challenged by the promotion of Haitian folklore, particularly dance, and its dependency on so-called primitive elements of the vodou religion.

In May 1941, Fussman-Mathon’s folkloric troupe attended the National Folk Festival held in Constitution Hall, Washington, DC. Considered to be an example of Pan-Americanism at its best, the festival encouraged hemispheric cultural exchange and understanding. Destiné remarked that Haiti was one of the few countries that represented African culture in the festival. To his surprise, “there were no Cubans and no Brazilians” performing at the event. Brazil and Cuba, he asserted, were “the two strong African-influenced countries that could compete with Haiti,” and “now we [the Haitian folkloric troupe] were the only real one that would bring Africa!” Destiné’s excitement about the troupe’s representation of a West African–derived cultural past fused with Haitian elements may have been a product of many years of reflection on his part. However, it addresses varying angles of cultural perception and authenticity. From Destiné’s reading of the event, the dancers performed Haitian songs and dances inextricably linked with West African traditions, memories, and philosophies. Their creative involvement in the folk festival also afforded them the opportunity to travel, to obtain some level of notoriety and possibly access to monetary or cultural resources.

The Haitian state believed that the troupe’s participation figured into a larger Pan-American project that could potentially reap the benefits of increased tourist activity and positive exposure for the nation. The reconciliation of these two views manifested itself in inter-American programs and Haiti’s
nouvelle cooperation, which explored ways to expand and strengthen relations between Haiti and the United States. African Americans, Caribbeans, Latin Americans and a few U.S. government officials understood that building and improving cultural programs and the exchange of ideas (economic, technical, and artistic) across boundaries might “break down some of the racial barriers in the U.S.” and in the international arena. During the early 1940s, Walter White, executive secretary of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), conveyed serious concerns to Nelson Rockefeller and others about the “success” of the Good Neighbor Policy if the United States did not address the issue of “color prejudice” and also highlight some of the contributions nonwhite citizens made to inter-American affairs. Robert G. Caldwell, a cultural relations official in the U.S. government, agreed with White. Caldwell affirmed that the United States could not “overlook . . . the fairly complex racial question of Latin American peoples.” Several intellectual and educational programs were implemented at the state and federal level, but few critically addressed race, racism, and imperialism in the Americas.

The performance by the Haitian folkloric troupe at the National Folk Festival received enthusiastic reviews from the U.S. press, and according to Destiné, they frequently sent newspaper clippings back to Haiti. Destiné claimed that the Haitian people “couldn’t believe” the overwhelming positive response given by American audiences: “You wouldn’t dare do those things in [the Haitian] public . . . and Washington was loving it.” The troupe’s exposure and acclaim planted the seed in Destiné’s mind that he might have a future in dance in the United States, where monetary resources were more available and where audiences were much more welcoming.

When the troupe returned to Haiti, Destiné was forced to think about how he would make a living. He learned typography at the Haitian newspaper Le Nouvelliste during the summer of 1941 and later returned to the United States on a print media scholarship from the Rockefeller Foundation. Philanthropic organizations like the Ford and Rockefeller foundations often tailored their grants to U.S. foreign policy initiatives. In this case, President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s Good Neighbor Policy and the ideals of Pan-Americanism encouraged technical development and international exchange in the Americas. Destiné’s Rockefeller grant functioned as an example of inter-American exchange. It was during his two-year stay in the United States that Destiné made initial contact with the world’s leading dancers and choreographers, such as Martha Graham, Katherine Dunham, Pearl Primus, and Sierre-Leonean dancer Asadata Dafora, in order to learn the technical aspects of modern dance.
Haitian officials and cultural elites heard about Destiné’s performances in the United States and were impressed by his ability to garner support and interest in Haitian folkloric dance. Haitian cultural officials asked Destiné to perform in Haiti—stating that the government would only invite “the elite and the educated, not the masses. This is art and you will be able to attract tourists.” Destiné served now as an official cultural ambassador. Friends, Haitian politicians, and officials communicated to him that the government needed to send him back to the United States “to make people realize that we [Haitians] have an artist.”

By the late 1940s and early 1950s, Haiti’s officials concentrated on exporting culture and attracting tourists’ foreign capital because it demonstrated Haiti’s cultural advancement and produced modest gains in the service economy. At the same time, the ripple effects of tourism placed a significant strain on the country’s infrastructure, such as an increased need for electricity, a central water supply, and a sewage disposal system.

By 1946, Destiné returned to the United States with the intent of entertaining and educating American audiences on folkloric dance. Changing U.S. perceptions of African-descended peoples remained critical during the World War II period, when racial discrimination and hegemonic colonial governments in Africa and the Caribbean still reigned. Haiti proved to be a contested space where blackness and indigenous cultural expression battled the prevailing images and stigmas of black primitiveness and inferiority. Haitian educational institutions such as the Bureau d’Ethnologie in Port-au-Prince attempted to counteract beliefs in black inferiority, particularly concerning the rural black masses of Haiti. While working at Le Nouvelliste, Destiné attended classes at the bureau to learn more about vodou, Haitian folklore, and how the Haitian masses retained aspects of West African traditions. Studying under Jean Price-Mars, Destiné remembered that Price-Mars’s text *Ainsi parla l’oncle* (So Spoke the Uncle) became “the first book that started to open our eyes to tell us that we are not of European descent.” This book highlighted the syncretic nature of African culture in Haitian life, which propelled many within the Haitian elite to question, “Who are we—Frenchmen or African?” Destiné believed that Haitians were rooted in a West African cultural heritage, even though many of the Haitian elite did not want to believe it.

According to Destiné, some African Americans during the interwar and post–World War II period refused to be associated with African culture; in addition, their knowledge of Haiti was quite limited. At the same time, black American intellectuals and artists like Katherine Dunham, Langston Hughes, and Paul Robeson proved essential in providing an alternative racial and ideo-
logical framework of Africa and the Caribbean for many U.S. blacks. Additionally, these individuals advanced Destiné’s career to a wider audience. Dunham invited Destiné to become a guest artist in her Broadway production *Bal Nègre* (1946). Langston Hughes requested him to sing and perform at parties in New York City. When the New York City Opera produced William Grant Still’s production *Troubled Island*, a tragic story about the reign and death of Haitian emperor Jean-Jacques Dessalines, Hughes alerted Still about Destiné’s dancing skills. By 1948, Destiné formed his own dance company and performed at a number of sold-out venues. His popularity allowed him to be in a position to entertain and educate American audiences on Haitian culture and also helped him to continue to establish relationships with African American intellectuals and artists.

In 1949, the Haitian government asked Destiné to organize a national dance troupe for its celebration of the bicentennial anniversary of the founding of Port-au-Prince, Haiti’s capital city. La Troupe Folklorique Nationale served as the best publicity for Haiti. Under the leadership of President Dumarsais Estimé, the Bicentennaire Exposition Internationale showcased Haiti’s excellence and advancement in cultural arts. Painters, dancers, and musicians played an essential role in inter-American cultural diplomacy. African American educator and race leader Mary McLeod Bethune’s invitation to a presidential ceremony at the bicentennial exhibited Haitian/African American linkages to a common struggle. President Estimé honored Bethune at a “very dignified” ball at the royal palace for her tireless work on the improvement of Haitian education and the lives of Haiti’s orphans. The ceremony organizers called on Destiné, now considered a Haitian cultural ambassador, to perform his heralded *Slave Dance*. This routine interpreted the evolution of enslaved African descendants from the point of bondage to their physical and psychological emancipation. At the moment of rebellion, Destiné struggled with the chains that imprisoned him and eventually broke free, energetically dancing throughout the ballroom, demonstrating the emergence of a revolution and the beginning of a free black republic.

Bethune seemed to interpret the dancer’s breaking of the chains as an action with a very modern relevance. When Destiné severed the chains, Bethune walked over to the fallen chains, picked them up, struggled with them, and broke them again. This was a significant and symbolic gesture performed in 1949 in front of Haitian and international dignitaries. Racial discriminatory practices, racial violence, and social and economic inequality still plagued Bethune’s United States. Bethune’s connection with Destiné’s *Slave Dance* ex-
emplified African American hardship in the United States and echoed the transnational political and cultural engagements between both groups in the post–U.S. occupation era. Destiné’s artistic vision complemented the Haitian cultural roots of the peasantry and consequently entertained audiences by communicating an art experience that offered cultural awareness of Haitian life. His success served as one of the components that helped bring notoriety and European and American capital to an emerging tourist industry in Haiti.

Lavinia Williams and the Technical Training of Haitian Dancers

Lavinia Williams’s participation in the cultural events of Haiti Week (mentioned at the beginning of this essay) in the spring of 1951 set the stage for her thirty-year relationship with the black republic. During these festivities, Papa Augustin, a Haitian drummer and cultural consultant to Katherine Dunham’s dance company, invited Jean Brièrre, a poet and director general of the Haitian State Tourist Office, to Lavinia Williams’s dance school in Brooklyn, New York. After watching Williams’s technique and approach to modern dance, Brièrre remarked that it was “the kind of basic technique that I want my people to learn.” Within two years, Alphonse Cimer, Haiti’s Master of Drums and also Destiné’s drummer, mentioned to Williams that the Haitian government planned to invite a foreign dance teacher to improve the technical skill of Haitian dancers. Subsequently, with the help of Haitian cultural officials, the Haitian government invited Williams to become a national dance instructor for a period of six months. Excited, Williams wrote to Roger Savain, minister of propaganda, in December 1952, “it has always been one of my fondest ambitions to be given the chance to call upon my dance knowledge, and varied dance background, and present this knowledge to the people of Haiti.”

The Haitian government’s offer to Williams highlights the question, why did Haitian officials seek out a non-Haitian to teach dance in Haiti? I contend that the Haitian government sought out classically and formally trained modern dancers who brought “technical” and “disciplined” training to Haitian performers. During this period of intensifying Haiti’s exposure through tourism and cultural exchange, the Haitian Office of Tourism believed that Lavinia Williams also brought prominence and possibly access to U.S. cultural resources. In April 1957, the Haiti Sun reported, “Haitian artists, until a few years, knew nothing about modern dances, tap dancing or ballet. Now there are hundreds of young people assisted by a French teacher, several Haitian and Ameri-
can teachers, who are being trained in other forms of the dance.”

Williams’s dance pedigree, which included several years of experience with Eugene Von Grona’s American Negro Ballet (1937–39), Agnes de Mille’s production of Obeah (1940), Katherine Dunham’s company (1941–45), and Noble Sissle’s USO tour of Shuffle Along (1945–46), proved instrumental to her earning the national instructor position and significant to the perception that Haiti, culturally at least, continued to move forward.

Born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Williams’s first memories of dance were joyful and painful. She recalled how she gyrated on top of a box at home to impress her family. During the degrading years of Jim Crow segregation, she entered through the back door of a segregated Virginia dance school to take ballet lessons.

Studying ballet in the 1930s, Williams encountered racial discrimination as a young African American woman in a white ballet world. In an interview, she stated, “Being brought up in America you were told you were not supposed to be a ballet dancer because you’re black and your behind is too big, and your feet are flat. . . . I could never get a job in America as [a] black ballet dancer because they took away that part of me, [they] took away my ballet technique and made it modern or acrobatic.”

Although Williams finally obtained work in ballet, specifically working in Eugene Von Grona’s American Negro Ballet at Harlem’s Lafayette Theatre, her statement highlights the prejudice that black dancers encountered with respect to the black female body and African Americans’ approach to dance. African-descended dancers could not escape the primitive trope in the dance world, which, in the minds of some blacks, did not necessarily carry a negative connotation. It was often characterized as a source of origin or basic.

Yet ideas on the primitive within the larger North American society and elite dance circles racialized and made inferior notions of primitive dance—images that blacks believed they had to continuously counteract. The description in the 1939 program for the American Negro Ballet perpetuated the belief that black dance was instinctive, simple, and primitive.

The stirring imagination of the Negro and his innate understanding of the fundamental values have left deep, permanent impressions on the arts. In the dance, however, this talent has been confined chiefly to dance-hall jazz and African rituals . . . These limited dance forms—while reflecting man’s elemental character—have provided no outlet for the deeper and more intellectual resources of the race. In his search for expression the Negro has made several attempts to enter the serious dance but he has been handicapped by economic conditions and the lack of artistic opportunity.
Although the quote attributed the marginalization of black dancers to socioeconomic inequalities and the “lack of artistic opportunity,” it is also important to note that even the American Negro Ballet deemed “dance-hall jazz and African rituals” as “limited dance forms” and not “serious dance,” thus reinforcing hierarchies of cultural forms and the primitive nature of African-descended peoples.

After working with Von Grona’s American Negro Ballet from 1937 to 1939, Williams joined Agnes de Mille’s production of *Obeah* in August 1940. It was during this production that Williams acquired an interest in the culture and art of the Caribbean, which Williams asserted was “the missing link to Africa” and one of the roots that many black Americans ignored. Her skill and interest in Caribbean culture(s) made her transition to Katherine Dunham’s company in 1941 smooth.

Williams’s experience in the Dunham Company profoundly influenced her understanding of dance and the ethnology of dance in countries of African descent. In order to prepare and understand the Dunham technique, Williams noted the importance of understanding an ethnic group’s art as a way to better comprehend a people’s identity. Participation in a culture and obtaining a so-called authentic knowledge of why people danced and for what purpose proved central to the Dunham technique and Williams’s understanding of dance. In her journal, Williams wrote, “Beginners should be well acquainted with the history of primitive peoples . . . [and] make a careful study of authentic rhythms in song and dance and of their native costumes and customs.” Additionally, Williams noted the significance of culture and movement as opposed to imitating it; this was vital to creating a better dance form, to producing a superior theatrical production, and to teaching students how to improve human relations.

Williams’s upbringing in the Christian church also facilitated her transition to *vodou* religion and other Caribbean faiths. Williams, who recalled her grandmother being blessed with healing powers, remembered watching people in church catch “the holy ghost.” She maintained that she was drawn to the “Holy Rollers [and] the Sanctified people.” These experiences, Williams noted, prepared her for participation and education in *vodou* and for recognition of the differences between *vodou* worship and Christian worship. While in Haiti, Williams was possessed three times. In an interview, she remembered her possession experience to be one of elation and clarity.

You are at the peak in your mental approach to who you are, and the cycle goes up—and you come to terms with yourself, mentally, physically, everything. It’s like a happy meeting with yourself. But in the U.S. when you get to the height,
somebody’s going to come and say “a heathen” [and] bring you smelling salts because sometimes they pass out.⁴⁹

Williams’s early Christian experiences provided her with a space to embrace vodou culture in Haiti. In addition, her participation and possession in vodou rituals carved out a space where she continued to learn and develop folkloric dance and also to realize the significance of being free of restraint or social judgment.

Discriminating opinions from friends surfaced when Williams decided to accept the teaching position in Haiti. Some of her friends commented, “Well, you want to go to the West Indies, that’s like taking coals to Newcastle. They [West Indians] already know how to shake.”⁵⁰ Common racial/ethnic stereotypes regarding African-descended peoples and their “intuitive” knowledge of dance persisted within U.S. cultural spaces, as in the American Negro Ballet’s 1939 program description and Destiné’s early perceptions about African Americans. Williams, as well as other dancers and participants in vodou and folkloric dance, emphasized the tremendous amount of training and practice involved in dance performance. To such misinformed assertions, she responded, “It’s not shaking that’s important . . . There is a discipline to knowing how to shake, that is important.” Furthermore, Williams argued, “I know when I analyze the shoulder movements, for instance, it is like mathematics. Everything is according to music. The African and West Indian beat is so technical, that you can’t just get up and do anything.”⁵¹ Thus, Williams’s formal training, her association with Dunham’s company, and her extensive international travel shaped her into an ideal candidate for Haitian officials.

On April 23, 1953, she arrived in Haiti with her two daughters and was met by a committee of Haitian delegates, including Emerante de Pradines, a popular Haitian singer.⁵² Her technical responsibilities included dance instruction at the Lycée des Jeune Filles, training several teachers from the Bureau of Sports, offering physical culture classes and body conditioning exercises to the members of La Troupe Folklorique Nationale, and also acting as a special instructor to the troupe. Claude Barnett, founder of the Associated Negro Press, reported that Williams’s “technical skill” facilitated the development of Haitian potential in the field of dance. He asserted:

What Miss Williams has done, of course, is to establish a systematic pattern for developing the Haitian potential for basic African dances; a potential that has long been a part of the island’s culture, by applying technical skill; a sort of
blending of the cultures of the two countries in one art form . . . The ballet, voodoo dancing, the Latin rhythms and acrobatic dancing, as developed to a high degree on the American stage, have all been fused into what has come to be regarded as the Afro-Haitian dance.\textsuperscript{53}

The Haitian government and African American leaders like Barnett maintained that Haitian dancers needed technical training in order to advance and attract tourists and modernize aspects of Haitian culture.

In fact, during this era of post–World War II development, the social, political, and economic aspects of Caribbean and Latin American societies were entrenched within a language of modernization. Modernization was often defined by a nation’s ability to move progressively forward in technological and industrial development. It also encompassed cultural arenas, particularly dance and art in the Caribbean. \textit{Vodou}-inspired folkloric dance, rooted in the cultural memory and modern experience of racial slavery and New World cultural syncretism, underwent a calculated transformation by black dancers and choreographers that required classification, disciplining, and packaging so that it could be shared with the modern world through formal dance instruction, African-based cultural awareness, and tourist entertainment. Rex Nettleford, a noted dance scholar, encouraged the “systematisation” of dance knowledge and history in order to build a “sound technique.” Nettleford’s ideas about the disciplining of Caribbean dance articulated the transmission of an Afro-modern consciousness made possible through sharing of cultural information, history, and talents among African-descended peoples in the Americas.\textsuperscript{54}

In November 1954, Williams founded the Haitian Academy of Folklore and Classic Dance (HAFCD), a manifestation of the classification of Haitian dance. The academy married modern dance, classical ballet, and secular Haitian dance in order to create an innovative Haitian folkloric dance tradition. Williams sought to “carry [the] ‘dance of the people’ beyond its present ‘accepted’ stage and develop it so that it can be interpreted, classified and appreciated by all students of the dance and art lovers in general.”\textsuperscript{55} HAFCD offered courses in ballet, choreography, and folkloric dance, each performing a particular function in the development of the modern Haitian dancer. Ballet, as stated in Williams’s text \textit{Haiti Dance}, operated as the classic foundation of dance, a universal language that conveyed a “mastery of body mechanics to increase the grammar and vocabulary of the dance for individual students.”\textsuperscript{56} Trained Haitian choreographers, well-versed in the technique and methods of Martha Graham and Louis Horst and the “movement and exercises from . . . Katherine Dunham,
Michael Kidd, Helen Tamaris [and] Kyra Nijinsky, created new designs and modifications to sacred dance. Finally, the study of folkloric dance provided an understanding of the form and function of *vodou* dance and song and also its relationship to Haitian history.

For Williams and associated Haitian officials it was not simply a matter of incorporating European forms and exercises into Haitian dance in order to legitimize it or the cultural modernity of Haiti. Similar to the Bureau d’Ethnologie, which utilized European scholarship, the HAFCD served as an educational institution whose objective was to establish the significance and to promote the historical and cultural traditions of the Haitian masses. Nevertheless, Haitian sacred culture was being transformed—demonstrating the malleability and fluidity of a culture whose existence was being threatened by Haitian antisuperstitious laws. Subsequently, the academy created culturally astute dancers—or, rather, ambassadors—for Haiti. Régine Mont-Rosier, an advanced ballet student at the academy, became one of Haiti’s cultural ambassadors during the late 1950s, when she earned a scholarship to Ballet Arts at Carnegie Hall in New York City. Mont-Rosier’s significant press in Haiti demonstrated not only Williams’s success as an instructor but also Haiti’s production of another potential artist.\(^{57}\)

Williams’s technical training and her relative fame as an American dancer proved to be a perfect match for Haiti. With the full support of the Haitian government, Williams became a central figure in tourist and socially elite circles. Williams broadcasted *Glimpses of Haiti*, her radio program, three nights a week in order to expose and educate tourists to the richness of Haitian history and culture.\(^{58}\) The national and international popularity of Haitian folkloric dance, coupled with the growing reputation of Haitian “primitive” art, created a sense of national pride for many Haitians, even among some Haitian elite, who typically shunned the cultural production of the masses. According to Gérarde Magloire and Kevin Yelvington, “folklore had been made to serve nationalist movements,” and similar to the ways it was utilized in the texts of Jean Price-Mars during the violent years of U.S. occupation, folklore was being resurrected to complement the perception of President Magloire’s *noirisme* and also to build nationalist fervor in favor of the government’s modernist projects.\(^{59}\)

Williams’s training in ballet bridged a gap between participating elites, the black middle class, and the masses. Although Williams explained that she initially received the most resistance from Haitian elites, who claimed “ballet belonged to [them]” or that their children were forbidden to dance folklore, the dance institutions allowed children of varying classes to interact in later years
and introduced the Haitian masses to ballet as well as to the secular danse folklorique.

It is clear that Williams envisioned Haiti as a potential center of black cultural production in which “people could come from all over the world for study, and for rhythmical inspiration.” In July 1954, Williams asserted that with the cooperation of the Haitian government and its people, “not only will a new group of tourists be coming to Haiti, but they can help us to realize an establishment which may someday incorporate not only dancing, but music, painting, drama, opera, and all of the other related subjects to help found a University of ‘Beaux Arts of Haiti.’”

Institution building and social and economic development through cultural exchange, tourism, and an effective promotion of racial and cultural identity proved to be the manifestation of her internationalist ideals. The *Haiti Sun* reported that Williams was not only “developing choirs and cultivating the voices of the young Haitian” but also giving Haitians “an appreciation and a pride for their national art.”

Lavinia Williams spent the next several decades in Haiti and other countries of the Caribbean, teaching, dancing, and embracing Haitian culture. Indeed, it was a source of spiritual inspiration and creative fulfillment. When she heard the drumbeats in Haiti, which she deemed the “heartbeat in the bosom of Mother Africa . . . that mediates you from the unknown to the known,” she knew she belonged there. Her dance pedagogy sought to bring recognition to Haiti’s shores and also to complement the work of the Bureau d’Ethnologie by educating many Haitian dancers on the form and function of Haitian folkloric dance so as to enrich their understanding and appreciation of Haitian and West African culture. She claimed that renowned dancer Isadora Duncan accomplished the same type of work: “She discovered modern dance and went all through Europe and Russia, and she sort of said that there’s another way of doing things. And I’ve said the same thing with my black people.”

**CONCLUSION**

For Destiné and Williams, dance was indeed a form of entertainment. However, the art of these dancers possessed larger social and political implications that meant considerably more to them and Haitians than pure amusement. By advancing *vodou*-inspired Haitian culture, these dancers made a bold statement against an incredibly class-conscious Haitian society that ignored and demeaned art forms possessing peasant origins. These artists understood that creativity could be used as currency to aid in the advancement of Haitian na-
tional identity and possibly further develop cultural pride and consciousness in the African diaspora. The popularity and evolving representation of Haitian folkloric arts operated as one of the means to address challenges to modern development in Haiti.

The activities of these Afro-modern dancers proved significant because these endeavors utilized the realities of antiblack and antipeasantry prejudices to advance a black internationalist consciousness and because they served as a means to develop Haiti through tourism and cultural redemption during the postoccupation period. The fusion of dynamic “folk” customs and “modern” ingredients were not contradictory but affirmed the culturally redemptive histories and experiences of African-descended peoples with Western dance forms, institutions, and discourses in order to produce new ideas, organizations, and conversations.64 With the international recognition of Haitian art forms, Haitian folkloric dancing was one way to articulate Haiti’s right to participate in inter-American and global affairs.

Notes


3. For more critical responses to U.S. Pan-Americanism, see Millery Polyné, From Douglass to Duvalier; Sheinin, Beyond the Idea; Aguilar, Pan Americanism; Ramirez Novoa, La Farsa del Panamericanismo; Martínez, De Bolívar a Dulles.

4. Plummer, Haiti and the United States, 137.

5. On March 15, 1951, News of Haiti reported the building of fifteen industrial centers throughout Haiti and the paving of new asphalt roads. Also, it informed readers of President Magloire’s “New Deal” in Haiti, where “155 one and two-family dwellings” would be built in St. Martin Delmas, a suburb of Port-au-Prince. Scholar Michel-Rolph Trouillot asserts that Haiti became a nation of “projects” between 1946 and 1956 but that these development ventures, programs, and economic missions served only as an illusion of progress (Haiti: State against Nation, 140).

6. Cuba, Jamaica, the Dominican Republic, the Bahamas, and Puerto Rico were some of the islands that supported tourism as early as the 1930s. See Schwartz, Pleasure Island, 108–9. Also see Ramsey, “Without One Ritual Note.”

7. The quote is from a comment made by Dr. Cary Fraser at the Association for the Study of African American Life and History Conference, October 1, 2004.

9. Ibid.
10. Sibylle Fischer’s work on the “disavowal” of Afro-Cuban art during the Age of Revolution proves to be significant to understanding the contributions of art to modernization. Fischer argues that art—“both visual and literary” (and I would add performative art)—and its representation “is part of modernization” and that “to the extent that modernization makes the environment representable, it is part of an artistic process; it is almost as if perspective were as much a quality of the world as of its representation” (Modernity Disavowed, 76).


12. Walter White, executive secretary of the NAACP, and his wife, Poppy Cannon, organized and implemented a detailed public relations campaign for Haiti in the late 1940s through the mid-1950s. White and Cannon, in conjunction with the Haitian government, dedicated themselves to change the image of Haiti and transform it into an economically viable and tourist-friendly destination.

13. According to a 1959 souvenir book and shopping guide entitled Joie de Vivre en Haïti, four major hotels, including the Casino International, Hotel Castel Haiti, Hotel Ibo Lele, and Hotel Riviera, all held evening dance shows—in some places as much as two or three times a night. Souvenir book is in author’s possession.

14. Ibo Lele is a nation of divinities remembered with a seven-mouthed pot. Shango is considered to be the god of thunder. See Consentino, Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou.


17. Destiné, interview.


19. Destiné, interview.

20. Dunham, Island Possessed, 3.

21. Ibid. (my italics).

22. The influence of Lina Fussman-Mathon—or Lina Blanchet, as many knew her before her second marriage—cannot be understated. It is critical that more research be done on her artistic career in Haiti.

23. Destiné, interview.

24. For more information on the events and controversies leading up to and after the National Folk Festival, see Ramsey, “Without One Ritual Note,” 7–42.

25. Destiné, interview.

26. Nouvelle coopération was a term President Sténio Vincent used during the post-occupation period. It designated a new independent Haiti and the formation of an egalitarian partnership between Haiti and the United States along economic, political, and cultural lines. See Verna, Haiti’s “Second Independence.”

27. Rayford Whittingham Logan Papers, box 3, Personal Diary 1941 folder. At a luncheon with Maurice Dartigue (a Haitian educator), Richard Pattee, and Charles Thompson (chief of the Division of Cultural Relations in the U.S. State Department), Logan was optimistic about the development of inter-American cultural relations because Pattee and Thompson were “very liberal.”
28. Robert G. Caldwell to Walter White, October 7, 1940, NAACP Papers, Group II, box A 609, folder 5, General Office File Good Neighbor Policy. See also, in the same collection, Walter White to Sue Thurman, September 10, 1940; Walter White to Nelson Rockefeller, October 4, 1940.

29. See Hanson, Cultural-Cooperation Program; U.S. State Department, Program of the Interdepartmental Committee; Trueblood, U.S. Cultural Relations Program. At the local level, African Americans, Caribbeans, and a few liberal whites in the United States believed in the importance of informing the American public about two main issues in the context of inter-American affairs: first, there existed a significant population of African-descended peoples in Latin America and the Caribbean; second, their struggles and achievements proved important to the success of race relations in the United States and of Pan-Americanism.

30. See Berman, Carnegie, Ford, and Rockefeller Foundations; Cueto, Missionaries of Science.

31. Destiné, interview. Interestingly, during Destiné’s scholarship period, he picked up the name Jean. Destiné’s original name is Léon Destiné, but he added Jean since he performed considerably and did not want the scholarship committee to hear about his extracurricular activities and possibly think that he was not fulfilling his academic duties.

32. Destiné, interview.

33. For a better understanding of Western perceptions of Haiti and its people, see Dash, Haiti and the United States.

34. Destiné’s opinions about African American consciousness of Africa and black history in the Americas are valid. However, it is important to note the rich history on African American anticolonialism in Africa and the Caribbean. See the growing literature on African Americans and U.S. foreign policy in the twentieth century, including Plummer, Rising Wind; Von Eshen, Race against Empire; and Dudziak, Cold War Civil Rights.

35. Destiné assembled La Troupe Folklorique Nationale with dancers through Lina Fussman-Mathon. La Troupe Folklorique also had a fifteen-piece orchestra named Jazz de Jeune, three drummers, and several singers. According to Destiné, many Haitian dance teachers were upset with him because he visited Haiti sparingly and could recruit dancers away from Haitian teachers, possibly leaving them unemployed.

36. Americans and the U.S. government were invited and also participated in the bicentennial events. The Haitian government invited President Harry S. Truman and Eleanor Roosevelt as guests to the exposition (although they did not attend), and the U.S. Congress established a commission known as the United States International Exposition for the Bicentennial of the Founding of Port-au-Prince. See Pamphile, Haitians and African Americans, 153.

37. See Mary McLeod Bethune to Arabella Denniston, July 29, 1949, Mary McLeod Bethune Papers.

38. Destiné, interview.

39. Lavinia Williams to Roger Savain, December 2, 1952, Lavinia Williams Collection, box 2, Miscellaneous Letters folder (hereafter, the Williams Collection is cited as LWC). Roger E. Savain wrote Williams back, stating that Williams would also be “the
special instructor of the National Folklore Troupe of Haiti.” “In addition to that,” he explained, “the Department of National Education will guarantee you $50.00 a month, and it would like you to teach plastic dance only to the girls in one Lyceum and one Normal School” (Roger E. Savain to Lavinia Williams, January 22, 1953, IWC, box 2, Correspondence Letters Received, 1952–71).

41. Lois Wilcken asserted that during Paul Magloire’s presidency, Haitian intellectuals “expressed the need to temper Afro-Haitian dance with the aesthetic standards of ballet and modern dance” (“Spirit Unbound,” 116).
42. Murray, interview.
43. Lavinia Williams, interview with Annette McDonald, IWC, box 1.
44. Destiné, interview. See also Torgovnick, *Gone Primitive*; Lemke, *Primitivist Modernism*.
45. Lavinia Williams, interview with Annette McDonald, IWC, box 1.
46. IWC, box 1, 1942–45 folder. Williams was still working for and learning from Katherine Dunham at this time.
47. The Dunham School and Dunham’s company institutionalized this ethnological technique and aimed to provide a well-rounded education for its students. In January 1946, Dunham wrote to Williams discussing the expansion of the Dunham School in New York to include theater courses and cultural courses such as acting, elementary French, and general anthropology. Dunham wanted to give students “every chance to become equipped for the human race” (Katherine Dunham to Lavinia Williams, January 17, 1946, IWC, box 10, Katherine Dunham folder).
48. Lavinia Williams, interview with Annette McDonald, IWC, box 1.
49. Ibid. According to Williams, she participated in *vodou* ceremonies at least once or twice a month.
50. Lavinia Williams, interview with Annette McDonald, IWC, box 1.
51. Ibid.
52. Williams Yarborough, “Haiti,” 42.
54. LWC, box 19, Printed Matter—Caribbean Dance folder. Lavinia Williams proceeded to teach Haitian folkloric dance, ballet, modern dance, and other Caribbean forms of dance in Jamaica, Guyana, and the Bahamas. See “American Teaches Haitian Dances.”
56. Ibid.
57. LWC, box 4, Regine Montrosier folder.
58. Many of these programs were rebroadcast on Chicago radio stations, presumably because of her close relationship with Claude Barnett and his wife, Etta Moten Barnett, who were based out of Chicago, Illinois. Etta Moten Barnett hosted her own radio show in Chicago and, at times, broadcasted her show from Haiti.
61. Haiti Sun, no date, LWC, box 4, Regine Montrosier folder.
62. Lavinia Williams, interview with Annette McDonald, LWC, box 1.
63. Ibid.

Bibliography


Destiné, Jean Léon. Interview with the author, July 9, 2002, Harlem, New York City.


Mary McLeod Bethune Papers. Library of Congress, Washington, DC.


