

MY OWN
LIBERATION:
EMBODYING
THE
INCORPO-
REAL

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In Haitian Vodou cosmology, one spirit can occupy multiple bodies, two spirits can occupy one body, and a spirit can possess infinite genders. Does the meaning embedded in Haitian cosmologies—or Black cultures in general—change when being performed away from the land of their genesis, by bodies that do not carry these genetic memories? Does performing Black culture at a distance from its roots require an intentional devaluation of its meaning? How has migration transformed the culture that is stored within my own body? These questions became blaringly apparent during the creation of *My Own Liberation*.¹

My Own Liberation (MOL) is a Black Indigenous Transgender Futuristic choreographic work commissioned for Taipei Capital Ballet's *Play With Ballet* programme. Before applying to this programme, I had recently obtained permanent residency in

¹ In the early stages of creation with my Ballroom parents, discussions of Transgender identity, survival, resilience, and community care led to 'I am my own liberation' emerging as the central conceptual framework for the piece. This is one of the closing statements in the HBO documentary *The Stroll*. Iconic Father Izzi, was a major contributor to the documentary. The title reflects an understanding of liberation not as something granted externally, but as an ongoing practice of reclaiming identity, history, and agency despite systemic oppression.



Taiwan and was eager to pursue opportunities previously unavailable due to my visa status. Lee Wei Chao, my former teacher from when I studied at Alonzo King's *Lines Ballet Training Program* (LBTP), is Taiwanese and was visiting family here in Taipei. Over dinner at a local Haitian restaurant, Exotica, he suggested I apply for this programme. The programme asked choreographers to advance ballet as an art form while playing with the very idea of what ballet is. Using Haitian Vodou Cosmologies, fused with Ballroom and ballet, I depict a community undoing the effects of apocalyptic colonial ecocide. These Vodou cosmologies—used to create the narrative, movement, and character relationships—are the root of the Black Indigenous Transgender Futurism.

MOL is set in the near future. It's the end of all worlds.² The sky is raining bombs, and all life on Earth is on the brink of destruction. Seven minutes before the Earth collapses into complete devastation, the ancestors stop time, and the Lwa³ of

2 Inspired by an excerpt from a poem I wrote that informed *Oyana 1.01*, premiered as a part of Kate Freer's *The Stars Hold Our Stories*, New York Hall of Science, 2018.

3 /lwa/ – Haitian Kreyol word for spirit, or a manifestation of a universal law.

Vodou gather to fuse the queer performance art of Ballroom with Vodou rituals, and host an apocalyptic-realness Vodou ritual ball.

Five performers play the roles of three Lwa and manifest in five physical forms. The main character is Marassa, the Divine triplets and unruly children of the Vodou Pantheon—representations of multiplicity and balance. Danbala and Ayida Wedo, the serpent Lwa of creation, act as the Masters of Ceremonies for this apocalyptic-realness ball. They are considered the grand Lwa; archetypes of creation that are always revered with high honours. In *MOL*, these Lwa use the paramount liberation technology of dance to turn back time and undo centuries of cataclysmic ecocide through rituals that acknowledge Papa Lebga, Papa Loko, Marassa, Danbala and Ayida Wedo, and Erzulie Danto.





The genesis of this piece can be traced across nearly two decades of personal and artistic experience. In my youth, dance was how I began liberating myself from an extremely conservative religious upbringing that condemned my queer transgender identity and indigenous Haitian heritage. While my experience was atypical, being raised in an extremist Christian cult, much of my generation of the Haitian diaspora were affected by trauma resulting from decades of racist tropes in the media, depicting all Haitians as savage voodoo cultists participating in sexual deviance and human sacrifice. Growing up in Colorado, many only understood Haitians as refugees, or only knew of Haiti through church mission trips. These things, compounded with the stereotype of Haitians being the reason for the HIV/AIDS pandemic⁴, made my queerness a difficult burden for my family.

- ⁴ During the HIV/AIDS pandemic, Haiti was inaccurately labeled the origin of the virus and Haitians were blamed for its spread by the CDC. Haitians were listed as one of the 4H; homosexuals, heroin-addicts, hemophiliacs, and finally Haitian, which was viewed as the “primary risk” group. This caused extreme racism and xenophobia towards Haitians. A travel and blood donation ban resulted. This also led to HIV+ Haitian migrants being detained and imprisoned at Guantanamo Bay.



Attending LBTP in San Francisco was an early opening and shaping of my worldview: my first exposure to a multi-ethnic ballet institution and my introduction to Haitian Vodou folkloric dance. A brief study of Vodou dance in San Francisco with Haitian master artist Djenane St. Juste was particularly transformative. It was the first time Vodou wasn't something dangerous, shameful, and demonic. I entered those classes carrying so much trauma. I encountered a profound sense of connection that I had never felt in my ballet training. In fact, my spine realigned so abruptly that it took me a week to figure out how to walk again. Later, St. Juste told me this was the Lwa awakening in me. Her classes opened the doors for me to travel to Haiti six years later, where I continued to unlock ancestral memories that had long been suppressed.

Dance has been a necessary tool for my liberation and for understanding how to embody my ancestry and gender. Indeed, it enabled me to secure a grant that funded my return to Haiti in 2016 to research queer and transgender identity in Haitian Vodou culture. This was my first time going to Haiti—the realization of a lifelong dream that enabled me to embrace the full magnitude of my identity. Right

before I began my journey, Lwa came to me in my dreams. The first was Erzulie Dantor. I actually had to research who she was to understand that it was her. The next was Papa Legba. Both dreams were prophetic, but the dream with Papa Legba revealed how he had come to me in physical form in the past. A Hougan⁵ in Haiti also told me stories about Danbala and Ayida Wedo. I told him of recurring waking dreams or visions I would have of them. He advised me that if they lead me into water in these dreams, I should not follow, as the water would take me. I confessed that I had had that vision many times—they had taken me to the bottom of the ocean and revealed a cave that we passed through together. It led me to the edge of the universe, where we flew together through the cosmos. He was shocked. He told me that this meant that they were my head spirits, or main guardians.

Witnessing Vodou ritual in an indigenous context (which included queer Haitians), seeing actual spirit possessions take place, visiting sacred sites where I felt spirit, and having these occurrences validated by local Vodouwizans⁶ allowed me to feel full

⁵ Hougan – Male identifying Vodou priest

⁶ Vodouwizan – a person who practices Haitian Vodou





authenticity in who I am. I hadn't had the words for my experience when I was in San Francisco, but after my return to Haiti, I compared the experience of folklore training to when Avatar Aang unlocked the Avatar State in *The Last Airbender*. I felt all my ancestors guiding my body through the movements and whispering their profound knowledge to me in the encoded language of rhythms. These experiences revealed to me how the body can function as an archive, carrying histories that survive migration, colonization, and cultural erasure. So many experiences from that time directly influence *MOL*.

When I am presenting work about these experiences, their depth of meaning gives me a great sense of urgency to demand respect from institutions and audiences. I have noticed over the years that many institutions feel comfortable with presenting works that are intentionally devoid of meaning or cultural significance, as if these institutions use art as a form of metaphorical white noise to filter out and distract the masses from ongoing colonial genocide. This is what I mean by the *intentional devaluation of meaning* that is often my experience as a Black Transgender artist. This has felt particularly clear to me in Taiwan, where Black culture is very

often reduced to interesting stuff for consumption and social currency, with very little regard for the physical Black bodies that are actively part of the community. While I am happy to see others around the world finding liberation in the cultural labour of my ancestors, this prevalence of devaluation presents obstacles for Black creators, especially if they are actually part of the local artistic ecology. The expectation is that they have something to offer that is immediately extractable. Specifically in the production of *MOL*, I had to defend many aspects of this piece as being essential.

MOL functioned as an act of cultural translation. I chose to challenge the forms of ballet by casting performers from other disciplines alongside trained ballet dancers. This juxtaposition of performers was an important part of the piece. Rather than attempting to represent any single tradition directly, the work exemplifies how embodied liberation requires diversity. Haitian Vodou and Ballroom are, in themselves, a fusion and memory of indigenous practices that colonialism attempted to erase. I want to continue to showcase that legacy and continuum in a futuristic sense. Of course, futurism requires a strong understanding of the past;



the farther back we can direct our gaze, the clearer our future becomes.

In reference to the animism prevalent in Haitian Vodou, I imagine a world where digital technology has become part of spiritual rituals, and holographic light projections serve as portals and doorways into the spiritual realm. The staging featured a futuristic Vodou altar—the background lit with visual projections featuring the veve⁷ and visual themes of the Lwa honored in each section of the piece. Directly downstage of the background is an altar with a projector centered and aimed at a veil hung from the ceiling. For most of the piece, the three ballet dancers playing Marassa performed complex contemporary ballet movements downstage of the altar installation. During those times, Danbala and Ayida Wedo stood in the veil, framed by the light of the second projector—ethereal and godlike. The visuals featured original 2D animations that illustrated the theme of fertility—rainbow fish and flowers layered with footage of migrating butterflies, blossoming flowers, streams of fresh water, and lush greenery swirling around the dancers like a halo.

7 Symbols used to call the Lwa. An example of how Haitian Vodou fused Indigenous American and African practices.





Within these movements was a recurring consideration of the politics of “passing.” I kept coming back to my experiences with “passing” and how Haitian Vodou and Ballroom both use passing as a survival technology. Haitian Vodou resisted genocide by disguising Vodou prayers as Catholicism to avoid the death penalty during the period of enslavement—complicating rigid binary identities in the process. Ballroom similarly uses “realness” categories to teach trans children survival skills. In this regard, the Lwa have provided me with a sanctuary. Their complexity, many being transgender or “mixed race,”⁸ showed me that my ancestors created a place for me long before I was born. As I continue to navigate the passing politics of my heritage as a racially-ambiguous-presenting Haitian-American, compounded by being neurodivergent and transgender, these cosmologies continue to empower me to liberate and honour who I am. I don’t pass as female, although my whole life, I have been scrutinized for being too feminine. In fact, for much of my

8 The Haitian Vodou cosmology differs from its African ancestors in that there are Taino Lwa and new Lwa. These new Lwa are the children of the Native American and African spirits, with also one European spirit that came to the island and married a Lwa that is the descendant of the African and Taino.

early dance career, I was told I was not hireable due to being too femme when I dance, only to be told I’m not femme enough after coming out as transgender. When put into the context of Haitian Vodou, I understand that when I dance, my spirit comes out. Since my spirit is undeniably female, dance is an embodiment of my spiritual legacy that intrinsically “Blackens,” “Africanizes,” “Indigenizes,” and “queers” ballet whether I intend to or not. I wanted the movement to reflect the complexity of this experience, what it represents in myself and the Lwa.

A notable conversation with friend and colleague Mario Lamothe about the complexity of the Lwa Marassa also evoked considerable context and meaning. As he put it, Marassa represents ‘1+1=3.’ Within the realities of this spirit, the *plus*, the in-between, or the binding force between is not nothing—it is something to be quantified. Marassa is inherently non-binary; they are one soul in two or three bodies. At the same time, this could be true of Danbala and Ayida Wedo, but perhaps in reverse: ‘1+1=1.’ Danbala and Ayida could be seen as similar





to a two-spirit⁹. They are two different entities that are intrinsically tied. One can not manifest without the other. These stories are wrapped in endless metaphor and could be argued as an ancient and ongoing understanding of quantum physics¹⁰.

Beyond this, these philosophies of '1+1=3' and '1+1=1' are lucrative inspirations for group choreography. For those playing Marassa, I told them to consider that the negative space between them was not empty but part of the choreography, that they were all playing one character in three bodies, even as they performed different movements simultaneously. For the two playing Danbala and Ayida, I wanted them to look like opposite sides of a magnet, who always longed to be together even when separated by space. Danbala is the cool and stoic father of creation, associated with rain, lightning, and cosmic knowledge. While Ayida is the rainbow serpent

9 A pan-Indigenous American umbrella term used by some Native American and First Nations people to describe individuals who embody both masculine and feminine spirits.

10 Marassa makes me think of the very nature of matter and energy, how an atom is 99.9% binding energy and .01% matter. Danbala and Ayida could be a metaphor for DNA, and they are often represented by two serpents coiling together in a double helix, the two making one.

of possibility, associated with magnetism and cosmic fertility. Since Danbala and Ayida are the ancient ones, I felt it was appropriate that they were performing the Ballroom categories and that Marassa, the unruly children of the cosmos, perform more balletic movements. While Ballroom could be considered a younger art form and culture than ballet, I argue that Ballroom has much deeper roots.

Due to the nature of genocides like the transatlantic slave trade, queer Indigenous cultures had to learn to constantly recreate themselves from within spaces of hiding and refuge—similar to lineages of Haitian Vodou. I see Ballroom as a contemporary iteration of past rituals that honour Black/Indigenous transgenderism, which have been encoded in genetic memory. I used the Haitian Vodou dance *Yanvalu*¹¹ to reenact a ritual spirit possession at the opening of Danbala and Ayida's section—right before the music transitions into the traditional tracks

11 Yanvalu: A constant, fluid, and serpentine undulation of the spine and arms that embodies the spiraling nature of creation and the cosmos. It is a very slow, articulate, and meditative dance.





of Oldway¹² Ballroom. I used this combination of references to highlight my argument that Ballroom movements and music are direct descendants of Haitian Vodou, among other Pan-American, African, and Indigenous American traditions and cosmologies. The clean precision of Oldway aligns perfectly with Danbala's stoic nature. Ayida performing face and European Runway¹³ also made sense to me as a way to portray her magnetic, multifaceted, and more flamboyant nature.¹⁴ Indeed, the transition from ritual movements into the Ballroom categories felt seamless. To me, these Vodou cosmologies

12 Oldway (Old Way Vogue): The foundational dance style of Ballroom. It is characterized by precision, sharp angles, symmetry, and graceful movement. Walkers channel fashion magazine poses and Egyptian hieroglyphics to tell a story or face off against rivals.

13 European Runway: A fashion category focused on highly expressive, dramatic, and modelesque performance. Walkers incorporate exaggerated, feminine gestures and editorial poses inspired by textbook runway models like Naomi Campbell.

14 One significant moment saw Danbala and Ayida walking *runway* in the pattern of their Veve. One can call a Lwa with their Veve drawn on the floor, oftentimes using cornmeal. If more discretion is needed, like during the times of enslavement, drawing the Veve in space through gesture or walking patterns will also have the same effect. It makes me think of how *runway*, and the emphasis on walking in certain patterns, can have deep cultural significance that may not be obvious to an outsider's gaze.

being used to create narrative, movement, and character relationships looked like a true depiction of Afro-Futurism—a Black future deeply rooted in its past.

Looking back on my experience of trying to embed this knowledge within ballet, I realize that in Taiwan, like most places, ballet prioritizes a white, Western cultural proxy. Meanwhile, the current gold rush for importing black culture has the effect of commodification, extraction, and decontextualization of our history of liberatory struggle. While giving agency to Black bodies is not a panacea, it is a place to start in humanizing the exotic other and creating meaningful opportunities for bilateral cultural exchange. When it is an exchange and not extraction, as I witnessed with my cast, a new and sincere expression of culture is born out of authentic community. The meaning of the culture changes in that it has expanded to new possibilities. The systemic, subconscious bias that resulted in some devaluing my work was outshined by the dedication and ability of my cast.

When I first moved to Taiwan, I felt that I had lost my connection to the Lwa. Unlike during my experiences in San Francisco and Haiti, their presence felt much quieter. But what I have realized is



that my connection to them has changed. Haitian Vodou is meant to travel and embrace the new spirits it encounters. While the expression of my genetic memories has changed and adapted to the land I am on, this authenticity can not be overwritten by migration. Ballet has been globalised, usually as a way to compel non-Western societies and bodies to assimilate into violent, white supremacist values. But with this globalisation, the opposite can also be true: the collective liberation that comes when we honour the cultures encoded in Indigenous bodies.





Credits ¹⁵

Papa Dambala – Berto Gold / Vase Mizrahi
Mama Ayida Wedo – Veronique Bailey (貝妮可)
Marrassa – 翁佩珊 Jenny Wong, Juliette Fehrenbach, 杜筱琪 Hsiao-Chi Tu

Installation and Visual Design – Jean-Paul Weaver,
Oyanakaona Peaches Infiniti
Original Altar Piece Painting – Hsiang Cyan Peaches
2D animation – 春雄
Runway Coaches – Pedro Gabriel, ALUIN
Music Production – Iconic Father Izzi Starz Infiniti,
DJ Chip Chop Ninja

Photographs provided by Play Ballet
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¹⁵ I faced many experiences that devalued my work in the process of developing this piece. My cast was like a little bubble of safety. They really saw the value in my vision and the feedback of the runway coaches and dramaturge. They were eager to understand more and often surprised me in how they pushed me to add further context. They met challenges with curiosity and a strong drive to work beyond their comfort zone to truly embody my knowledge and vision. The experience of community that I was working to convey was exemplified by my cast.

Dramaturge – Mario Lamothe¹⁶, Father Don'Té Peaches Lauren¹⁷, Jean-Aurel Maurice¹⁸
Music Production – Iconic Father Izzi Starz Infiniti,
DJ Chip Chop Ninja

¹⁶ PhD, Performance Studies, Northwestern University, Evanston, IL USA, Assistant Professor of Black Studies and Anthropology
¹⁷ Founder & Overall Father Don'Té Peaches 007, Cuauhtemoc Peranda School of Arts, M.F.A., Ph.D. candidate in Critical Dance Studies at UCR focusing on intersectional vogue theory through an Indigenous & Black lens, within and beyond the Queer and Transgender, Black & Latinx House Ballroom Scenes.
¹⁸ Community is essential to black culture; thus, I brought in my family who embody expertise in Ballroom—specifically, through conversations with my Iconic Father, Izzi Infiniti, and my Father, Don'Té Peaches. They gave me and the dancers invaluable context, knowledge, and feedback.

