I was in elementary school the first time I saw a murdered dead body. I was on my regular route to school walking down the hills with my oldest sister. I was holding her left hand and my little sister was holding her right hand. This road was rarely traveled by cars so it was not strange that there was no traffic that morning. Seeing so many people gathered on the street side, however, was definitely weird. I could not have been older than nine years old. I knew something was wrong because the moment we turned the curve, my sister pulled both of us in and covered our eyes. I was a child; I was curious. The moment she loosened her grip on our faces, I peeked under her arms, followed the line of blood to a bloody white sheet that covered what I would later learn was the machete-cut body of a morning thief. I did not eat anything for two days. The streets of Montagne Noir were home to me, and until that day, home was a safe place.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, home is “the place where one lives permanently.” Based on [commonly-understood] societal definitions, home is a shelter; a place where you feel comfortable, where you are welcomed, cared for, and free to be who you are. My definition of home was a place where you feel safe, [where] you are safe; a place of joy, laughter, and love. A place with occasional disagreements that get resolved by the end of the day. A place where I could venture the world with my friends. However, that place only existed in my imagination and my mother’s protective bubble. Home, the place I sometimes got tired of because it was so mundane, was only a temporary escape from the real world.

Living in a constant state of insecurity normalizes suffering, tragedies, and death. Insecurity forces people to move from one thing to the other as if nothing happen; these traumas concentrate until the heart and the body are no longer able to contain it. In Haitian Creole, the word *ensekirite* refers to the “social vulnerability that accompanies the crisis of the Haitian state.” The dictionary definition of vulnerability is “the quality or state of being exposed to the possibility of being attacked or harmed, either physically or emotionally.” The physical *ensekirite* of Haiti is that it is no longer safe for its people to exist in. The emotional *ensekirite* of Haiti is the unspoken and untreated trauma and depression that has accumulated up to the point of severely affecting people’s physicality. A state of non-living “is the presumed state of day-to-day life in Haiti.” In this essay, we will explore the insecurity, generational trauma, and what anthropologist Erica Caple James terms, the “haunting ghost” of victims of said insecurity and trauma throughout Haiti’s history. We will be engaging with literature on trauma and memory in Haiti, experiences in performance-based processes with colleagues, my own performance creation, and my life experiences to research patterns of insecurity and tragedies in Haitian history, establish how trauma is carried in

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1 James, Erica Caple. “Haunting Ghost: Madness, Gender, and Ensekirite in Haiti in the Democratic Era,” 135.

2 ibid,138.
the body, and explore ways of healing, releasing, and moving forward.

On February 7th of 2019, people took the streets of Haiti protesting corruption in the government, initiated by the “disappearance” of money from the Petrocaribe development funds. During the first week of what turned into many months of protests, nine people lost their lives including a young man, Roberto, who was helping his mother move her komès (merchandise) away from running mobs and tear gas. According to [Roberto’s mother] Pricil, her son was shot by a policeman and she did not report it at the police station because “she fear[ed] retribution from the very same person who killed her son.” Before reading any [other] articles or watching videos of the protests, I was haunted by the picture of this mother’s distraught face, her bloody fingers hugging each other on top of her wrapped head, sitting on the body of her murdered son, not knowing what to do next. For many women and mothers in Haiti, selling on the street side is the only way to make a living. The importance of these side businesses is proven when we consider the fact that even in the middle of violent protests, people still come out to sell. For so many people, selling one cabbage means that their kids will not go to sleep on an empty stomach. In the country’s recent state of political chaos, not only is their already difficult way of making a living threatened, Haitians are made to fear the people who are meant to protect them because those people, the policemen, the politicians, the government, they too, are perpetrators. This story impacted me even more when I realized that in the two hundred sixteen years of Haiti’s existence, not much has changed for the majority of Haitians to make life in their country safe, humane, or livable. For two hundred sixteen years, Haitians have been surviving. [Despite its triumphant beginnings,] Haitian history also consists of violence, injustice, enslavement, discrimination, and protest. Later in this essay, we will consider the act of surviving as a form of protest in itself. But before the protest, comes the reaction to injustice. How does one react when enslaved, controlled, made to live in fear, or when their existence is continuously threatened?

Oppressors have used violence and fear to keep their victims silenced through generations of abuse and injustice. According to Jim Taylor from Psychology Today, “The human instinct to survive is our most powerful drive.” Therefore, the human will to survive is greater than most instincts, even that of fighting if it means surviving. That same idea is used by/against people to exercise control. Haitians – countrymen, mulattoes, rich and poor, even the leaders (emperors, presidents, dictators), have used violence and fear to control those less powerful and more vulnerable than them. In the case of leaders, their abuse of power, while causing major damage to the present citizens, also affects the generations to come. This is what it means to raise a new era; to raise a generation of children in fear, silenced. We see the example with Papa Doc’s regime. During the presidency

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3 The protests went on for months leading to a country lockdown, peyi lok.
4 Kiley, Sam. “Her Son Was Shot Dead in Front of Her. And She Says a Policeman Did it.”

5 As shown in the timeline.
of Francois Duvalier, Marcel Nurma and Louis Drouin, two members of Jeune Haiti – a group of 13 young Haitian men who travelled back to Haiti to overthrow Duvalier – were captured and publicly executed on November 1964. In Create Dangerously, Edwidge Danticat writes,

> On the day of the execution, he decreed that government offices be closed so that hundreds of state employees could be in the crowd. Schools were shut down and principals ordered to bring their students. Hundreds of people from outside the capital were bused in to watch.6

By subjecting people to watch executions, Francois Duvalier used human bodies as an instrument of power, a warning that if anyone else were to oppose him, they would pay with their lives/their bodies and in many cases, the bodies of their family members and friends. The human body becomes collateral damage. The young people, forced to watch public execution, watch their families, friends, and neighbors forcefully/legally arrested, tortured, raped, imprisoned, and disappeared, grow up with the fear of being next. They grow up silenced and traumatized. They grow up surviving and teaching their children to do the same. As time goes by, justice is unserved, stories remain untold, pain and trauma are not treated, leaving a nine-year old girl and her sisters stumbling upon the dead body of a petty thief on their way to school.

The 2019 protests during which Pricil lost her son are only the most recent iteration of violence that permeates everyday life in Haiti. In “Haunting Ghost: Madness, Gender, and Ensekirite in Haiti in the Democratic Era,” James describes her experience with insecurity (ensekirite in Kreyòl) and stories of horror during her time providing physical therapy to women and rape survivors between 1995 and 2000 in Martissant, Haiti. During her service, which doubled as ethnographic research, James met Sylvie, an activist in the community who helps people who were victims of makouts during the Duvalier dictatorships.7 One day, Sylvie brought James on top of the mountains to collect herbs. James soon realized “the true reason for this walk, [was] to show me another site in which the horrors of the past still manifest.”8 There Sylvie explained how a father and his son, George and Joseph Garcia, had been killed by machetes and their bodies mutilated and burned, presumably over disagreement on land-ownership.

When James interviewed Danielle Garcia [wife and mother], she told James that in 1996, upon coming back from andeyo (the countryside), her son and husband were missing. She found them four days later, cut up, her husband’s tongue and forearm missing, on the land where Erica James and Sylvie were collecting herbs. When Danielle came back from reporting what provide personal protection and get rid of (arrest, torture, kill) those who opposed him.

6 Danticat, Edwine. Create dangerously: the immigrant artist at work, 1.
7 Makout, also known as Tonton Macoute, was special/secret unit within the Haitian paramilitary force put in place by Francois Duvalier, Papa Doc, to

8 James, Erica Caple. “Haunting Ghost: Madness, Gender, and Ensekirite in Haiti in the Democratic Era,” 142.
she saw, the bodies had been set on fire. Although it was known that the father had been lured out by a friend, no one dared to name the perpetrators in fear of retribution, not even journalists would report the tragedy. Six months later, Mathieu [Danielle’s oldest son], a policeman, when told that he would meet the killers of his family, was also trapped and killed in broad daylight and by people known in the community. Danielle was later threatened by the perpetrators, who burned her house. She had no way of making a living to take care of her remaining children, one of whom suffered severe mental illness following the tragedy of the family. Marking more murders left uninvestigated, more justices unserved, and the accumulation of untreated pain and trauma. These stories of horror and violent oppressions become Haiti’s past, present, and future.

- 1961 – **Jacques-Stephen Alexis**, novelist and communist activist, is ambushed with his colleagues, arrested, tortured, and executed at Mole Saint-Nicolas for being a communist and opposing the policies and ways of living in Haiti.
- 1964 – **Marcel Numa and Louis Drouin** are publicly executed for trying to overthrow the Francois Duvalier regime along with 11 other young men – in the same year occurred the **Jérémie Vespers** known as the massacre of 30 or so family members of the young men “Jeune Haiti” who were all killed in battle or executed.
- 1993 – **Alèrte Bélance** is captured in the place of her husband by paramilitary men, hacked with machetes and left her for dead at Titanyen.

- 2000 – **Jean Léopold Dominique**, a well-known journalist and pro-democracy activist, was assassinated in front of his radio station. One of his workers also died in the attack. The prime suspect, a senator then, claimed parliamentary immunity. Over the years, evidence disappeared, suspects and witnesses died mysteriously, Dominic’s family were threatened, and the case was never solved.

[And these are just the well-known figures in our recent history.] Years after years, violence and death are left uninvestigated, unanswered, politicians’ “political” crimes are pardoned, no justice is brought to the families, and no peace for the dead. Re-enforcing the uncertainty and insecurity of day-to-day life, continuing the generational trauma, creating *haunting ghosts*, and there isn’t a system to support people’s healing – for them to tell their stories, express their anger and pain, thus tending to their trauma.

In the mist of the injustices and insecurity, Haitians have found a temporary release. Loss, pain, and confusion is often mourned by screaming *anmwey*. Although it is most often used as a cry for help, I believe it is also a form of physical and vocal release. According to composer and conductor Sydney Guillaume, “to cry “Anmwe” is to convey pain, emotional torment and heartache on the deepest level.”9 *Anmwey* is one, if not the only, vocal form of expression that has not been taken away or been made to fear.10 When I saw the picture of Pricil...
sitting on top of her dead son with her arms wrapped around her head, I imagined that she had been screaming annwey for a while. I remember the time a woman selling vegetables on the side of the street had screamed annwey while holding on to her waist and head after a taxi driver had crushed all her vegetables with his tires and drove off as if nothing happened. I remember my mother screaming annwey with her arms over her head, her knees on the floor, and her eyes towards the sky, with fear that my brother was lost in earthquake rubbles. I remember hearing the voices that made my blood boil, my limbs tremble, as the cries of annwey rose above the dust that had covered the city after our slippery ground had shaken. I believe that when people cry out annwey it serves the purpose of asking for help but in most cases when this cry is used, it means that the situation is beyond help. Therefore, the cry out is used to channel emotions so strong that, in any other case, might have caused instant physical harm or psychological breakdown to the person.

An example of this occurred at my grandfather’s funeral. All of his 7 children were crying their hearts out, some screaming their lungs out. All but one. His youngest child, (my uncle), who cared for my grandfather throughout his living years, who took care of much of the logistics for the funeral, was the “strong” one through the wake and the service. The Sunday following my grandfather’s burial, my uncle passed out in the middle of a church service. Later, I was told that it was due to holding so much tension in his body (perhaps also overworking as a distraction). I remembered all the times I got headaches from refusing to cry when tears were clouding my sight and all the times I could not breathe because I refused to scream when words were suffocating my throat. I wondered if both my uncle and I would have felt better had we given in to our body’s need to release. If trauma is transferred through silence perhaps it is released through speaking up/ speaking out. There is so much power in our breath and our voices.

When Haitians release their anger through protest, they are met with judgement and punishments. Haitians have long protested their way of living through manifestasyon, violent protest, which is characterized as an uncontrolled mob whose goals are to disrupt, destroy, and steal. Even outside of Haiti, political protests are characterized as violent mobs. Choreographer Susan Leigh Foster writes, Classic theories of political protest envision the body as an agitated irrationality, propelling individuals into the chaos of mob performance… Subsequent theories conceptualize protest as the calculated pursuit of narrowly defined interests which emerges when the political or economic opportunity to leverage a complaint present itself [all of which are true to Haiti]… Both dismiss the body, either by conceptualizing protest as a practice that erupts out of a bodily anger over which there is no control, or by envisioning it as a practice that uses the body only as an efficacious instrument that can assist in maximum efficiency.

11 The word manifestasyon itself only means protest, but when used in Haiti or to refer to Haiti, violence is anticipated. Can also be described as smaller revolutions.

Such views assume that protesters are simply people out of control who need punishment, hence the phrase “protest as a practice that erupts out of a bodily anger over which there is no control.” Do these people not have a right to be angry and show it? Maybe we should think through the role of anger as fuel for embodied protest as a way to “see” their mobilization differently. When someone lives in a state of constant insecurity and fear, not only do they always have something to be angry about, they also have no control over it due to the fact that, as much as insekomite is the day-to-day life of a Haitian, anger is also the day-to-day emotion of a Haitian. The fact that people, in spite of the risk, willingly get up every day, walk to school, go to markets, sell on the street side, walk at night, exist, is a protest. By choosing to create a life where surviving is the only option, by putting their bodies on the line in order to be heard, Haitians choreograph protest daily, and the uncontrollable anger is as much a part of it as anything else.  

Such a way of life comes with traumatic effects, often untreated or unknown to the point of physical manifestations. Returning to Danielle’s story, she was left alone, no house, no income, to take care of herself and her children. Considering that over fifty percent of the Haitian population lives under the poverty line, imaging what losing all major incomes can do to one’s ability to survive. Danielle describes to James that she is experiencing pain, “my head hurts and it reaches into my back and chest.” This suffering goes back to pre and post slavery where the cycle of constant hurt with no time of healing began - - because you had to keep going, there was no time to pause, you paused only when you died. Therefore, Haiti is not only suffering from day-to-day trauma, but it is also living under the shadow of generational trauma. Danielle was walking alongside her oldest son minutes before he was killed. Their bodies were likely not even in the ground when her house was burned. While mourning, she had to figure out how to keep her children fed, constantly worrying that they were not going to school, one of whom she no longer knew the whereabouts because his mental illness took him to the streets. And still, no justice to her or the dead, no proper burial, not even the chance to process her losses and trauma before she had to get back on her feet. Because when you live in ensekomite, before you can realize that violence had been done, another one is happening and like the other ones, no one talks about it, yet everyone carries it in their heart, mind, and body.

These stories tell us that the body will eventually express its grief, one way or another. In cases where the body is left to express on its own, the results can be painful, even tragic, as we see with the story of Danielle’s son, who eventually removes all his clothing and take the streets, lost for weeks if not more. The body is an archive, a vessel with limited capacity. Haitians carry deportation of Haitians from the US, Chile, and Venezuela; and by the overall difficulty/inability for Haitians to get a visa to any country.

13 Others chose to protest by leaving and search for new homes. Most often then not, they are met with rejection as we can see with Dominican Republic chasing people of Haitian descent out of the country; the

14 James, Erica Caple. “Haunting Ghost: Madness, Gender, and Ensekinite in Haiti in the Democratic Era,” 144.
generations of trauma in addition to their day-to-day struggles. Fortunately for us, our bodily archive has many access points, one of which is dance.

One of my most recent experiences was being a part of my friend Sophie’s senior project. Through her movement research, focused on the bodily archive, we’ve identified a loss, located it in our bodies, then wrote the memories attached the loss, with which we created individual movement phrases. Sophie also provided us with her own choreography which I used as a vessel to express feelings of loss that I otherwise would have been too afraid to access with my own movement. I struggled in the beginning to identify my loss. I started by labeling my losses (friendship, routine, home) as insignificant, small because they felt replaceable. But the more we danced together, the more I attended to my body, the more I realized that when I moved to the US in 2012, I never processed and mourned the loss of childhood memories, supportive friendships, culture, routine and familiarity. Before then, I had never processed the trauma of smelling burning human flesh on my way back from school the same day I saw a dead body on the street. I never mourned the loss of my safe place, my protective bubble, the world of my imagination, and so much more because like many other Haitians, our conditions of living force us to move from one thing to another without the time to process the first thing – people live day-by-day on survival mode. So when Sophie asks us to describe a word with our own words, reflecting on the process, I chose “release” – letting go, healing, being relieved of a heavy burden; to breath in, finding the tension in the body, the heart, and the soul; remembering the horrors of those traumas, and breath out to find comfort and release the spirits, the haunting ghosts – because “release” is what that experience had felt like to me.

Dance has been the only consistent happy memory throughout my existence because when I dance, the movement becomes a feeling. It grounds me and makes me aware of what I am feeling physically and emotionally. At the same time, dance has been my escape, a chance to build a world where suffering is not the norm, a world with no violence and guilt, a place where the living and the dead can co-exist in peace. I have found that place in my personal practice which combines Haitian Folklore, West African dance, and contemporary dance – contemporary for its lyrical/expressive ability, West African for its energetic, joyful, and relatable abilities, and Haitian Folklore for its spiritual and soulful abilities.

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My ears were the first responders
A young boy at the end of the room set a steady beat inviting other drummers to join in a blessed and sacred experience
As the sound travelled in my body, my head became holder of the beat
The first drummer to accept the invitation joined in with a rhythm twice as fast on the Manman
Manman (mother) is a big drum that serves as a time-setter, the backbone of the rhythm, with the flexibility to carry the dancers into another realm
When I looked at my reflection across the room, the rhythm was already in my shoulder
A third rhythm came in with three strikes of the hand at the center of the drum followed by four quick responding
strikes on the side (left right left right), and the last strike would bring the cycle back to the beginning of the three strikes. This was the Segon, a mid-sized drum that created a base rhythm for the Manman dance on and travel across the room, within dancers’ bodies. Another drummer joined with a rhythm that quadrupled the tempo, non-stop, beating on the Boula with two drumsticks, a small drum that literally snatches your soul. By the time that fourth rhythm came in, I was fighting to hold back my torso from falling towards the ground. My spine refused to stay still, my heartbeat had joined the fourth rhythm. The sound filled the room and the space felt sacred. The drums were calling, I heard, I listened but I did not respond. I wonder if the spirits were unpleased with me.***

Haitian dance has its roots in Vodou, a religious practice originated in Western Africa, brought to Haiti in times of slavery and has since suffered and evolved with time. In an earlier paper about complex dance practices, I wrote, In the article “Haitian Vodou Ritual Dance and Its Secularization,” Henry Frank dedicates a paragraph to Yanvalou, “a dance of supplication in honor of Agwe, the deity of the sea and Damballah, the snake god of fertility” (Frank, 111). I find this to be an ironic combination when you consider Haitian’s relationship to the sea and the life aspect of fertility. In a master class with Haitian dancer Sebastien Duvilaire, before dancing Ibo, the dance that “characterizes the majestic temperament of the Ibo people,” we learned the story of our Ibo ancestors who decided to take their own lives rather than live enslaved (Frank, 112). The character of Killmonger tells us in Black Panther, “Bury me in the ocean with my ancestors who jumped from the ship because they knew death was better than bondage.” Also keeping in mind that during the dictatorship years of the Duvalier family, the major means of escape for Haitian was through the sea on small canoes; more people died at sea than made it to safety. Some died due to poor quality of journey and others, like their Ibo ancestors, chose death over bondage in prisons. For Haitians, the sea is a dark place, a representation of death, yet it is also a sacred space where spirits live, rich with history and healing powers. On the other hand, Damballah, snake god of fertility, is a representation of life. This short layer into Vodou is an example of how deep the layers of that religion are. It is a vessel for stories, history, and a direct connection to our ancestors. My most impactful experiences learning Haitian dance have been occasions in which the origin/stories of the dance held equal importance to the movement, respect was given to the ground that holds us and our ancestors, the music – live or religion taboo and persecuted its practitioners, destroying drums and temples in the process.
recorded – had a soul of its own, and I experienced an overall feeling of joy, release, and healing from sharing space in a community of [Vodou] practitioners and believer, learning about my culture, and remembering things I wasn’t aware my body had knowledge of. My writing continued,

As I was dancing, I was remembering (re-membering) the stories of Haiti, stories of death, stories of life, stories of misery, and stories of revolution. The movements became vessels for all the feelings and as they exited my body, on each step, I was able to feel them differently than when I had begun.

This reflection emerged out of a dance I composed to pay homage to the haunting ghosts of Haitians who have lost their lives fighting for a place [Ayiti] we call home and to those who are still living the fight. Erica Caple James refers to haunting ghosts as the spirits of the dead and living to whom justice had not been served – for example, Danielle believed that the misfortune that followed the death of her family was her punishment from the spirits of her husband and sons due to her inability to provide them a proper burial and resting place. The phrase haunting ghosts stood out to me because it reflected the guilt I often feel when writing about/ talking about/ dancing about Haitian misfortune and traumas. I never had experiences with Tonton Macoutes, I have never lost a son to violent protest, I have never had to discover the bodies of my family hacked and burned. Do I have the right to use these stories just because I’m Haitian? I did not grow up in the times where human bodies were so visibly used as collateral damage.

I am not the only one who shares that feeling. In Create Dangerously, Haitian-American writer Edwidge Danticat writes, “Anguished by my own sense of guilt, I often reply feebly that in writing what I do, I exploit no one more than myself. Besides, what is the alternative for me or anyone else who might not dare to offend? Self-censorship? Silence?”16 I read this quote whenever my sense of guilt gets in the way of my work. It reminds me why I started this journey of breaking the silence, the generational trauma, starting with me. Because, as Wize’s senior project so beautifully reminded me, “The silence continues to isolate us.” Instead of guilt, I try to think of my relationship to these stories as an echo chamber the same way I think of movement as a vessel for feelings. Later in her writing, Danticat describes an echo chamber as “gathering and replaying voices from both the distant and the local devastation” because our speaking through writing or dance, is “adding one more voice to a chorus of bereavement and helping to explain what so many of us were feeling, which was a deep and paralyzing sense of loss.”17 This leads me to another reason why the phrase haunting ghosts resonated with me. It described the feeling I am left with every time I read a book, read an article or the news, or see a picture that reflects the horrific and traumatizing reality of Haiti [Haitians]. In response to this finding, I wrote,

With knowledge comes responsibilities
Forgotten responsibilities are punished

17 ibid, 158-159.

Another example of the importance of participation in my peers’ division 3 projects –Fynta’s Tending Little Me and Wize’s Harabayeho.
Our punishment as a nation is haunting ghosts
Simply speaking their names and telling their stories no longer puts them to rest
How do you put to rest what you carry in your heart mind and body daily?
Where is the justice? Where is the healing?
With responsibilities come work
Undone work backfires
Our backfire is unspoken trauma and depression
We don’t know that our day-to-day lives could be more than struggle and surviving
Is that knowledge?
Are we responsible?

Through dance, I began to let go of my trauma by remembering Haitian culture, accessing my childhood memories, embodying history [his/her-stories], and sharing/speaking out the process in order to appease my haunting ghosts. In order to do so I decided to create a dance performance using Haitian Folklore, West African dance and contemporary dance. The performance, A Life, a Soul, a Future, invites viewers and dancers to enter and navigate different worlds; some in the past, some in the present, others in the future – that will allow them to search and create a "happy place," to re-member culture, and to celebrate and mourn life while acknowledging past and present traumas. Haitian culture - dances, songs, stories - is the vessel into that exploration. I felt it was important to celebrate/acknowledge the good and the bad and while mourning the losses because, through the words of Edwidge Danticat,

Grappling with memory is, I believe, one of the many complicated Haitian obsessions. We have, it seems, a collective agreement to remember our triumphs and gloss over our failures. Thus, we speak of the Haitian revolution as though it happened just yesterday but we rarely speak of the slavery that prompted it. [...] In order to shield our shattered collective psyche from a long history of setbacks and disillusionment, our constant roller-coaster ride between saviors and dictators, homespun oppression and foreign tyranny, we cultivate communal and historical amnesia, continually repeating cycle that we never see coming until we are reliving similar horrors.18

The description of my dance suggests the ideas of joy and happy place. Although they are important aspects of my project, in order for this performance to truly honor the living and the dead, it was important for me to establish that the objective was not [only] to hold onto and share the happy memories, the triumphs. This statement felt especially important because, in a time when remembering and sharing play such a crucial role in the breaking of the silence and the generational trauma, I am reminded that under oppressive regimes, not only are memories manipulated by outside forces - such as the destruction of controversial work of literature, music visual art – memories are also manipulated.

18 Danticat, Edwidge. Create dangerously: the immigrant artist at work, 63-64.
for survival, people are forced to forget out of fear of torture and death in order to move forward.

In putting together this performance, I had the opportunity to work with eight amazing dancers who helped me bring to life another aspect of my purpose in creating dances. I want the work I’m doing now to grow into a practice that can help reduce the number of souls that, if left untreated, would need appeasing/closure, by teaching/sharing dance as a vessel to express and feel. Some of my dancers’ reflections read as,

“After I dance, I feel so energized and like there is a weight off my shoulders. It is a form where I can express myself/ my emotions, as well as ask questions, portray stories, and be alone or with community.”
“I dance to explore my body, my creativity, and my freedom. I dance to connect with my cultural lineage as well as cultures I’m surrounded by.”
“It is a balance of trust, accountability, exchange and transference - the work doesn’t get done unless we do it, so holding onto is important in embodying others’ stories.”

These reflections let me know that dance already serving as a tool of expression. Combined with work like Sophie’s exploration of the bodily archive or Wize’s use of laughter in story-telling, dance can began to interrupt the cycle of fighting for home, fighting injustice/for justice, revenge, tragedy, revolt, and celebration – within which there is little to no space for processing and healing.

While offering viewers and dancers an entrance into different worlds – an alternate/additional mode of expression – through Haitian culture, A Life, a Soul, a Future also served has my personal healing practice. The time I spent choreographing, teaching, and leading rehearsals helped me find my healing language.

I explored the idea of singing while dancing for my piece. Singing, along with listening to myself sing, with heavy breath, brought me to tears. It’s like the feeling of release after you’ve screamed of frustration, excitement, or joy. When you’ve been holding something in for too long, when you’ve been carrying the stories of so many people, the intensity of those realities begins to weigh on you. Dance has been my way of physically releasing but this exercise reminded me that my exploration started with the idea of silence for survival - losing the ability to express/release vocally. For the first time in a while, I felt comfort from hearing my voice, my breath. Although I am scared to give myself the permission to use my voice, I now know it is as important to practice expression/release through dance, as it is to practice expression/release verbally.

As productive as this experience has been for me, I am still unsure of what level of healing is possible for people who are still living in Haiti, reliving the same horrors every day. When I talk to my classmates [living in Haiti], when I read their posts on social media, I see that they are tired, they are scared, suffering, and they are angry. Nothing is improving but they have to keep going. What does healing look like for them? Danielle is an example of someone who is physically suffering from trauma but unable to identify her hurt as trauma, therefore
eliminating any hope of treating it. When I try to talk to my
friends in Haiti, they dismiss their traumatic experiences (their
schooling disrupted for months due to protests, getting robbed at
gun point, getting news of neighbors shot to death by motorcycle
thieves) as way of life, *e konsa l’ye wi* they say, “that’s the way
it is.”

In “The Culturally Sensitive Assessment of Trauma,”
Hinton and Good write,

> In many other cultural and historical contexts, events that
in the modern West would be considered psychologically traumatizing are thought to cause psychological damage not because of their emotional impact but rather because of their directly damaging effects on the body; the bodily damage syndromes have psychological symptoms as secondary symptoms. 19

Regular traumatic experiences are combined with generational
trauma and the damage is beyond emotional or psychological. A
country -- a [huge] group of people -- that is affected by trauma
to the point of directly affecting people’s bodies, is not a free
country. The oxford definition of freedom is “the power or right
to act, speak, or think as one wants without hindrance or
restraint.” Danielle was restricted by fear of retribution; she was
restricted by the ghosts of her family; she was restricted by the
trauma of violence that she and her ancestors experienced.
People living in Haiti right now are restricted by poverty,
violece, natural disasters, corruption, foreign interferences,
miseducation, and more. What freedom is there for them to
grasp?

In her book *Amour, Colère et Folie*, at a time banished
by the Duvalier regime, Marie Vieux-Chauvet writes, “La
misère, l’injustice sociale, toutes les injustices au monde, et elles
sont innombrables, ne disparaîtront qu’avec l’espèce
humaine.” 20 *Misery, social injustice, all injustices in the world,
and they are countless, will only disappear with the human
species.* I continue to dance to feel, dance to remember, dance to
heal, in hope that Haitians will find release and healing before
they are no longer part of this world. In the meantime, each move
I make, each music I let marinate my soul, each breath I let out
of my body, is a stand-in for a life, a soul, and a future.

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Bibliography


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