

**AN INTERVIEW WITH CONTEMPORARY CHOREOGRAPHER
JEAN APPOLON ON *TRAKA*, A WORK IN PROGRESS**

Danielle Legros Georges
Lesley University

Jean Appolon is the Boston-based choreographer, master teacher, and artistic director of Jean Appolon Expressions (JAE), a contemporary dance company that combines modern dance technique and Haitian folkloric dance. His recent works have served as meditations on such topics as the “lakou” and its loss in the Haitian imagination, social oppression including homophobia in Haiti, and Haitian history.

He was interviewed by Danielle Legros Georges, Professor of Creative Writing at Lesley University and Poet Laureate of the City of Boston from 2015 to 2019.¹

Danielle Legros Georges (DLG): Would you talk a little first about your background as an artist?

Jean Appolon (JA): I received my earliest dance training and performance opportunities in Port-au-Prince with the Viviane Gauthier Dance Company and the Folkloric Ballet of Haiti. I continued my dance education here in the United States at the Harvard and Radcliffe Dance Program, the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, and the Joffrey American Ballet School where I graduated with a BA from a joint degree program with The New School.

DLG: After which, you launched a career as a dance educator and choreographer . . .

JA: While studying at Alvin Ailey, I was moved to see the huge influence of Haitian dance on contemporary American dance, from its appearance in classes in Dunham and Horton technique to Afro-Caribbean classes. Because of this, I wanted to experiment with creating something Haitian in America. I began teaching and choreographing in 1995.

DLG: Through your work you have addressed salient issues in contemporary culture, particularly in Haitian transnational culture(s). Given the meaning of the word “traka” in Haitian Creole (such a multipurpose umbrella term



FIGURE 1. *TRAKA*, DECEMBER 2018. DANCERS IVANA CHAN, ALYSSA HOLLEY, MEGHAN McGRATH, AND MCEBISI XOTYENI SHOWN HERE DEPICTING THE STRUGGLES OF MENTAL ILLNESS. PHOTO BY WAYNE LAKE. REPRINTED WITH PERMISSION

for “anxiety,” “hardship,” “trouble,” “tribulation,” “nuisance,” “worry,” “difficulty,” “problem,” “dilemma,” “challenge,” “upheaval,” “messy situation,” and so on), why would you call the word to you? What led you to “traka,” or “traka” to you, as a concept to be explored through dance?

JA: Since I left Haiti in 1993, I’ve had the idea in my head to make a work called *TRAKA*. My father was killed in 1991 in the Aristide coup. I have been carrying this trauma for a long time. When I left Haiti, I thought that when I had a dance company I would do a work that would take on some of this trauma; not only my personal trauma but the trauma that many of us have been dealing with: historical trauma since 1804 and more recent social trauma, especially after the earthquake.

Three or four years ago, after I made *Vwajaj* [a choreographic work exploring the immigrant experience], I decided that my next piece would be about mental health and mental illness and what Haitian people, both in Haiti and here in the States, are dealing with. There are some issues we have been ignoring for many years. I feel that *TRAKA* is relatable to Haitians.

DLG: Yes, I think as a culture we have integrated folks struggling with mental health and normalized mental illness—saying things like “That’s just the way the person is” and “As long as they’re not throwing rocks in the street”—but haven’t normalized talking about mental health and thinking about treatment. Moreover, I don’t think this normalization is limited to Haitians and Haitian culture. I know you’ve collaborated with experts in mental health in the making of this piece. How did this come to be?

JA: There is a great Haitian American woman and psychologist named Guerda Nicolas, to whom I spoke three or four years ago in Haiti when she was working with an organization called “Hope on a String” in Arcahaie. Then, I raised with her a few questions about health and mental health, especially as I was working with students in Haiti.

DLG: Through your JAE Summer Dance Institute?

JA: Exactly. I asked how I could incorporate strategies that would address such issues in my work. She shared that this was a very important matter and that she would be happy to help us process it. When I told her about some of the difficulty I was finding in working with students in Haiti, she started to give me some facts about why students could behave in certain ways. Those factors and addressing the challenges we were looking at told me that the work that JAE is doing in Haiti was bigger than we thought it was.

The Dance Institute in the summer in Haiti is an opportunity to get kids who are disadvantaged to come, audition, and be selected for a one- or two-month program. The program gives them access to dance education and exposure to dance vocabulary: ballet, modern, but mostly with a focus on Haitian folkloric technique. We also focus on and start by giving participants something for their mental health: yoga and meditation, which we do every morning.

DLG: Why yoga?

JA: While I was studying, yoga really helped me in training my body. Yoga is a form of body conditioning, which can help you prepare for ballet, modern, and other demanding dance techniques. That’s one of the reasons I reinforce the kind of understanding that comes from this practice. This practice and technique also really helped us approach our students better, and it helped them get centered to start the day. Many of these kids haven’t had access to any of this kind of training. Some have dance groups in their neighborhoods, but many don’t have access to the

technical aspects of this work. We found meditation helpful, especially to give the kids a break from the problems they are dealing with at home. The kids themselves say that after meditation, they feel more light.

DLG: It feels like you're sharing with these young people strategies they can use in everyday life. About how many students participate in the annual institute?

JA: Back when we first started in July 2006, we had fifty students, but we are up to one hundred now.

DLG: I met you years ago, taking your dance classes in Cambridge, where you had—and still have—an extremely popular Saturday class, a huge following of dancers, and a successful Boston-based contemporary dance company. What led you to return to Haiti to establish the Dance Institute in Port-au-Prince?

JA: I first returned in 2001. I went back with my grandmother. When I landed I had never imagined Haiti was as small as it appeared to me then. When I lived there I felt Haiti was a huge country. Ignited in my head were the questions *Why isn't Haiti getting better? Why are all the schools where I studied dance starting to close?* As a result, I started going back to teach in private dance schools around Haiti and at the Viviane Gauthier Dance School, where I had studied as a young person. I saw a lot of young kids who didn't have money to attend classes but who were so interested in dance.

On one trip, in 2006, I brought a good friend and mentor, Nailah Bellinger, and I went through my Vodou initiation. She was my godmother. When I emerged from the temple, I decided to give a free class as an offering. There were more than seventy people who attended. After I finished teaching the class, they were very moved. Nailah said: "You need to go back to your country to do this work." I said to her: "I don't want to be killed just like my father." And I told her that I would only go back if she considered coming with me. Shortly after that we started the program, in July of that year. We started the program with the money in our pockets.

Our first classes took place at ENARTS, the National School of the Arts. This was through a connection made by a friend of mine, Carine Avril, with the director at the time, Thurgot Theodat. He knew the need, and because he was an artist himself, he was truly elated when we started the program there at the school. Later the ENARTS leadership changed, and in 2011 we luckily found, through my good friend Menahem Laurent, a new and our current institute home at the Oloffson Hotel.



FIGURE 2. *TRAKA*, DECEMBER 2018. DANCER MCEBISI XOTYENI, SHOWN HERE EMBODYING FREEDOM. PHOTO BY WAYNE LAKE. REPRINTED WITH PERMISSION

DLG: So, you were working with these kids in dance, and discovered that there were other needs as well.

JA: Major needs. To me, it seemed there was a lot of trauma that sometimes disallowed the kids from being fully present. Sometimes they couldn't respond to what they were being asked to do. We were worried about why that was. We started to ask questions and began doing some evaluation. We felt we needed to provide something stronger than just dance training. There was insecurity in Haiti. Some kids were hungry, malnourished, and many had a lot of post-traumatic stress. Some of them walked four hours just to come to our program. We asked ourselves how we would address the serious problems these kids had. We had little funding at the time, but little by little we started to feed them and bring specialists who could do workshops around mental health, around sex education, around self-confidence and self-esteem, and who could help them deal with the poverty they were living with. We encouraged kids to be more open with us and encouraged them to develop their own groups where they could train other kids, to engage in peer training. To me that is one of the most important aspects of our work in Haiti.



FIGURE 3. *TRAKA*, DECEMBER 2018. DANCERS IVANA CHAN, ALYSSA HOLLEY, MEGHAN McGRATH, AND MCEBISI XOTYENI ENGAGE IN MOVEMENT ILLUSTRATING THE DAILY TRAVAILS FACED BY HAITIANS AND CITIZENS GLOBALLY. PHOTO BY WAYNE LAKE. REPRINTED WITH PERMISSION

DLG: Do the same kids expect to come back the following year?

JA: Every year we try to take 20 percent old-timers, and 80 percent new people. We want to give a chance to new kids. We want to spread the love around. What we feel we're doing in part is spreading love. We try to spread the love around.

DLG: Speaking of spreading the love around, and returning to *TRAKA*: In making this, and other work, you often engage other artists as collaborators . . .

JA: This is the first time I am collaborating with two artists to make this work, this time musicians who are making new work for this piece: Fadil Cantave and Val Jeanty. They blow my mind. They're both Haitian American, and to see the depth of their roots in Haiti truly impressed me. They do both roots music and electronic music. We also have a young visual artist who came from Haiti just last summer named Wisthon Thimé. He did the painting on the dancers' costumes for *TRAKA*. There is more

painting to come for other costumes that will make their way into the larger piece.

DLG: I understand you also work very closely with your dancers, challenging the old notion of the choreographer as singular genius whose dancers execute his will (though not to take away your genius credential!). Would you talk about that relationship?

JA: It is a magical one. My dancers are the executors of the movement and the story, so they are my first critics about how a work can be spectacular. With every project they challenge me to go as far as I can. They are my inspiration and they are my worst critics when I start projects. Facing them every day and bringing the material to them can be daunting. I always try to prepare myself well and hope they will be able to digest the work and appreciate it. Most of the time they have a lot of questions that they want me to answer right away. For example: *Why are we doing this kind of movement? What does the movement mean? Why don't we move this way instead of that way?* This makes my job very challenging, to be able to deliver to my dancers so they can deliver to the audience.

DLG: Do you feel your work asks questions, or answers questions, or raises issues?

JA: I truly hope that one day my work can answer and ask questions. That is what I am really working hard to do. I ask questions and try to answer them in the work. My mission as a choreographer is to expose. Expose, for example, the issues that we deal with every day as a people and as a nation. Now, living in the United States as a Haitian, my work becomes triple—considering Haiti, America, and the people themselves.

The premiere performance of TRAKA will take place in the spring of 2020.

Note

¹ This interview took place at Banboche 2018, a JAE fundraising event at Arts at the Armory in Somerville, Massachusetts, on Saturday, December 15, 2018. For more information about Banboche 2018 and JAE, please visit <https://jeanappolonexpressions.org/events/2018/12/15/banboche-2018>.