

DRUM, DANCE, AND THE DEFENSE OF CULTURAL CITIZENSHIP:
BÈLÈ'S REBIRTH IN CONTEMPORARY MARTINIQUE

By

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To the memory of my beloved Grandma Ernestine S. Francis
(1922–2001)
I carry your sweet spirit with me everywhere I go

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AGEM	Association Générale des Étudiants Martiniquais (General Association of Martinican Students)
ALCPJ	An Lot Chimen Pou la Jénès (Another Path for the Youth)
AMEP	Association Martiniquaise d'Éducation Populaire (Martinican Association of Popular Education)
APAL	Asé Pléré Annou Lité (Enough Crying, Let's Fight)
BUMIDOM	Bureau pour le développement des migrations dans les départements d'outre-mèr (Bureau for the Development of Migrations in the Overseas Departments)
CMAC	Centre Martiniquais d'Action Culturelle (Martinican Center for Cultural Action)
CNCP	Conseil National des Comités Populaires (National Council of Popular Committees)
DOM	Département d'outre-mèr (Overseas Department)
DRAC	Direction Régionale des Affaires Culturelles (France's Regional Direction of Cultural Affairs)
JEC	Jeunesse Etudiante Chrétienne (Christian Student Youths)
MIM	Mouvement Indépendantiste Martiniquais (Martinican Independence Movement)
PPM	Parti Progressiste Martinique (Martinican Progressive Party)
RLDM	Radio Lévè Dubout Matinik (Radio Get Up, Stand Up Martinique)
SERMAC	Service Municipal d'Action Culturelle (Municipal Service of Cultural Action)

GLOSSARY OF FRENCH AND KRÉYÒL TERMS

Associations loi 1901	Associations of the law of 1901, the French equivalent of non-profit organization, for sports clubs, arts groups, and other special interest groups
Bagay Vyé Nèg	Pejorative Kréyòl expression for old, unsophisticated aspects of black culture
Bamboulas	Nocturnal (or Sunday afternoon) drum-dance gatherings organized and practiced by enslaved Africans during the slave era, documented throughout the circum-Caribbean region
Béké	White minority population of slave planter descendants who make up less than one percent of Martinique's total population.
Bèlè légliz	Church bèlè
Bèlè Linò/ Samaritain	Bèlè from the northern town of Sainte Marie, whose repertoire of bèlè styles is the most widely practiced across the island today
Bodzè	A bèlè step that is commonly used in the flirtatious, playful exchange between female-male partners, especially during the <i>monté o tanbou</i> sequence toward the drummer. It is a movement that involves pelvic-torso isolation, hip-switching, and bent-knee posture (especially when danced by a woman).
Callaloo	A popular West Indian stew, used as a metaphor for female sexual arousal in bèlè lyrical content
Carré	The dance square in the quadrille choreography made up of four dancers (two female-male couples)
Chyen Bèlè	A term of endearment to describe someone who dances bèlè frequently and cannot seem to get enough of the dance
Conte	(or kont) Kréyòl storytelling tradition in Martinique with a conteur (kontè) whose role is similar to that of a West African griot
Coordination Lawonn Bèlè	Coalition of different bèlè cultural associations (loi 1901) that organizes the calendar of annual swaré bèlè parties and delegates different responsibilities for advancing the bèlè movement
Danmyé	Martial art tradition in Martinique, sometimes used interchangeably with <i>ladja</i>
Débrouillardism	Economic cunning, informal earning, hustling

Djab	The devil
Djouba	Haitian dance step representing agricultural work and danced for the Vodou Iwa Kouzen Zaka
DKB	Danmyé – Kalennda – Bèlè
Doudouisme	Stereotypical image of the Antillean sweetheart whose meaning has evolved over time into a folkloric commodity (or stock character)
Enterrement de vie de garçon	Bachelor party
Fanm Djok	An idea of Afro-Martinican womanhood, a woman who is proud and stands strong in the face of everyday life difficulties without giving up. She works to earn a living and raises her children, in many cases as a single mother
Foyalais	An urban resident of Fort de France
Grajé	A bèlè movement that uses the bottom of the feet to graze the ground's surface, and represents the grating of manioc
Gwo ka	Guadeloupe's traditional drum-dance practice
Haute Taille	Another creolized style of quadrille dancing in Martinique that has preserved more European characteristics
Jounen Moun Bèlè	A full day of bèlè activities (discussions, debates, workshops) organized annually by the Coordination Lawonn Bèlè in Martinique
Jupe	A skirt
Jupon	A petticoat worn beneath the skirt
Kavalyé	A male dance partner
Kay bèlè	A bèlè house, a constructed dance space for bèlè activities
Kolèktif 5 Fevryé	Coalition of organizations and social movements that led the 2009 general strike activities in Martinique
Koudmèn	A helping hand; used interchangeably with <i>konvwa</i> or <i>konbit</i> when referring to work teams or a group of helpers

Koumandè	Master singer of bèlè who commands the flow of activities during a swaré bèlè (less common today)
Kouzen Zaka	The lwa of agriculture and rural life in Haitian Vodou
Ladja	Martial art tradition in Martinique, sometimes used interchangeably with <i>danmyé</i>
Larèl Swaré Bèlè	A set of principles, morals, and ethical guidelines devised by the Coordination Lawonn Bèlè around which many bèlè activities are practiced and transmitted
Lékòl bèlè	Bèlè school
Lwa	Spirits in the pantheon of Haitian Vodou
Madras	A vibrant, colorful plaid fabric that is used in Martinique's traditional creole apparel and costumes. The square handkerchief worn around the waist of the danm bèlè is usually made from a madras cloth
Mannyè Viv	A way of life, used in bèlè to describe the ancestral values and practices associated with Martinican traditional (historically rural) living
Marronage	The enactment of resistance to oppression, particularly colonial or racist oppression, small-scale (<i>petit marronage</i>) and large-scale (<i>grand marronage</i>)
Moman bèlè	A bèlè gathering/party that is less formal than the traditional <i>swaré bèlè</i> , but similarly functions through the open participation and unscripted rotation of dancers, singers, and drummers. Participants often bring something to eat or drink and share amongst other guests
Monté o tanbou	A sequence in the bèlè linò choreography whereby dancers are displayed in the center of the circle to playfully interact with their dance partners, and give a danced salutation to the drummer
Nèg Mawon	Mythical image depicting a black man blowing into a conch shell and grasping a machete, representing liberation and resistance to slavery
Poto mitan	A pillar or a central pole used in the Haitian Vodou ritual space, often used as a metaphor (in both Haitian and Martinican Kréyòl lexica) to describe a person of strength and resilience
Quimbois	Martinique's folk healing and conjuring tradition comparable with

	American Hoodoo or Jamaican Obeah, and largely dismissed in public life as old superstition or witchcraft
Sociétés	Groups of enslaved Africans that were grouped by African ethnic affiliation and served as mutual aid associations
Swaré bèlè	Formal, ceremonial gathering of bèlè practitioners who convene for an evening/late-night of dancing, singing, and drumming; functions through an open, unscripted rotation of participants
Tanbou/Tambou	Drum
Tanbouyé	Drummer
Tibwa	Two wooden sticks used by a secondary percussionist who beats a steady tempo on the back of the drum
Tonbé Lévé	Literally translates as “fall and get back up,” a dance movement in bèlè whereby the dancer bends/leans forward, then back to an upright position while swinging their arms in a downward-upward motion. Represents the agricultural movement of using a machete to cut sugarcane
Veillée Culturelle	The traditional funeral wake tradition in Martinique that includes conte (storytelling), and traditional music and dance, to celebrate the life of the deceased
Vévé	Religious symbols in Haitian Vodou that are drawn/traced onto the ritual space, usually with cornmeal, to invite the spirits to ceremonial activities
Wondi - Déwondi	The demi-circle (counterclockwise then clockwise) danced by the ensemble of bèlè dancers during the opening sequence of bèlè linò sets

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This dissertation examines the ways in which cultural activists in Martinique use the expressions of the *bèlè* drum-dance culture to affirm or contest claims about cultural identity, difference, and belonging. *Bèlè* is an Afro-Creole set dance and drum complex that was practiced by enslaved Africans and their descendants in rural Martinique during the colonial period. Throughout Martinique's colonial history and well into the 20th century, the practice of *bèlè* was repressed by the Catholic Church and denigrated by France's national model of assimilation, nearly erasing the tradition from Martinique's cultural landscape. Over the last 30 years, however, cultural activists and artist intellectuals have mobilized at the grassroots level to reinvigorate this rich set of traditions.

The extended field research for this dissertation was carried out over the course of 18 months, beginning in January 2013 and ending in August 2014. The methodology used in this research includes participant observation, open-ended and semi-structured interviews, the collection of life histories, and archival research. Photography and videography were also employed for visual elicitation interviews.

Data analysis highlights a particular set of debates that persist about how the *bèlè* tradition should be transmitted, and what function(s) *bèlè* practice should serve in Martinican society. This research addresses these debates as they relate to: political and economic life; conceptions of spirituality and religion; expressions of gender and sexuality; and pedagogy and national education. The evidence gathered in this research suggests that these debates among followers of the *bèlè* movement contribute to the formation of a distinctive Martinican cultural citizenship.

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

What are you doing, my friends? You behave like cannibals, like savages! The more I try to raise you up, the more you lower yourselves. You make me ashamed. Am I not a negro like you? Then do as I do, imitate the Whites! They alone will civilize you. Do not imitate the mulattoes. What use is the drum? Don't you see what the Whites use for their dances? Like them, use the violin. Then my daughters and I will come to your dances.

- Cyrille Bisette, 1849

<i>Sé manmay-la paré pou tjué tambou-a</i>	These people are ready to kill the drum
<i>Sé gran-nonm lan di mwen</i>	The elders told me
<i>Tambou-a sé an moun</i>	The drum is someone
<i>Fodra nou tchembé'y</i>	We must hold up
<i>Fodra nou swanyé'y</i>	We must care for it
<i>Mwen ka mandé lavi ba tambou-a</i>	I demand life for the drum
<i>Mwen lé ba'y lavi-a!</i>	I want to give it life!

- Eugène Mona's *Tambou Serié*, 1984

The above quotes come from two legendary figures in Martinique between 19th century post-emancipation and 20th century post-departmentalization. Cyrille Bisette was an elite mulatto abolitionist whose heroic legacy is debated in contemporary island political discourse (cf. Baber 1985; Bongie 1998, 2001). On the heels of Martinique's 1848 slave emancipation, Bisette addressed a mixed crowd of newly freed blacks and white planters at a banquet. Displeased with the blacks' chosen form of entertainment and recreation, he implored them to reject the drum—the very instrument that had served as a catalyst for igniting revolt on the eve of emancipation—and embrace what he considered to be more tasteful styles of French music and dance (Forster and Forster 1996:27). Eugène Mona was one of Martinique's most acclaimed musicians, whose untimely death in 1991 at the age of 48 left the island in great shock and mourning. Praised for his radical, barefoot performance style and wide breadth of sacred wisdom

that radiated in his musical compositions, Mona remains in the collective memory of cultural activists as a game-changer during Martinique’s heightened moment of cultural alienation. His tribute song to the drum and to his companion drum masters, *Tambou Serié* (Serious Drum) denounces those who tried to eradicate the drum, and commands new life for the beloved instrument, insisting throughout the 12-minute track that the drum must be cared for, honored, and even venerated as a divinity. In the song’s refrain, he asks why we are not listening to what the elders and ancestors have to say, singing “*Gran-nonn lévé gran-nonn palé, mwen lé sav poutchi nou pa ka tann*” (Mona 1984). I begin my dissertation with these two references because they are illustrative of Martinique’s ever-changing cultural landscape of accommodation and resistance to French subordination, and the island’s complicated relationship with the drum in public life.



Figure 1-1. Map of the Caribbean, courtesy of worldatlas.com.



Figure 1-2. Map of Martinique, courtesy of worldatlas.com.

This dissertation examines how cultural activists in contemporary Martinique, a Caribbean island of the Lesser Antilles, use expressions of the *bèlè* drum-dance culture to affirm or contest claims about cultural identity, difference, and belonging. *Bèlè* is an Afro-Creole set dance and drum complex that was practiced by enslaved Africans and their descendants in rural Martinique during the colonial period. Throughout Martinique's colonial history and well into the 20th century, the practice of *bèlè* was

repressed by the Catholic Church and denigrated by France's national model of assimilation, nearly erasing the tradition from Martinique's cultural landscape. Over the last 30 years, however, cultural activists and artist intellectuals have mobilized at the grassroots level to reinvigorate this rich set of traditions.

Cultural struggles in Martinique, a *département d'outre-mèr* (DOM, Overseas Department of France) since 1946, have produced a distinctive variant of French citizenship and Antillean identity, and these struggles have historical roots long before the moment of integration with France. This political status extends to Martinican residents the same set of rights and privileges afforded under full French citizenship in the metropolitan departments of France (voting, parliamentary representation, social security and public services). Martinicans have a multifaceted notion of citizenship, involving their legal belonging to the French nation-state as well as cultural sensibilities that attest to their Caribbean identity. This dissertation aims to explain this paradox through an investigation of *cultural citizenship*. Renato Rosaldo defines this concept as “the right to be different (in terms of race, ethnicity, or native language) with respect to the norms of the dominant national community without compromising one's right to belong, in the sense of participating in the nation-state's democratic processes” (Rosaldo 1994:57). Martinique is characterized by an undeniable loyalty to the French nation-state that exists alongside expressions of Martinican specificity and Caribbean belonging. Therefore, cultural citizenship is an appropriate analytical framework for exploring the degree to which Martinicans negotiate their French national belonging while asserting their Antillean difference, particularly in the practice of *bèlè* and other related drum-dances.

Development and Dependency from a French Antillean Perspective

A disjunctive relationship between full-fledged French citizenship and cultural identity in the French Antilles has manifested with the project of assimilation, a by-product of the island's integration with the French state (Miles 2001). According to the assimilationist model upon which French national belonging is premised ideologically, Antilleans become legally French if they conform to French societal norms (Beriss 2004; Price and Price 1997). Especially since the 1960s, there has been a heightened valorization of French values, behaviors, and patterns. Scholars have analyzed from various points of view the alienating effects of departmentalization and the perpetuation of neocolonial power relations with France.

Political scientist Justin Daniel (2001) describes the construction of dependency in Martinique as a strategy utilized by political and economic elites. Maintaining alliances with those holding political power in mainland France has worked to the advantage of Martinican elites to attain one of the highest standards of living in the Caribbean. Daniel's analysis of domination in the French islands distinguishes between self-sustaining development and dependent economic growth to demonstrate that despite the increases in GDP in Martinique and Guadeloupe since departmentalization, there has been a dramatic decline in local production, particularly of sugar, rum, and bananas, and unemployment remains a rampant issue for islanders. In Martinique, agriculture accounts for only 6 percent of GDP, and the small industrial sector a mere 11 percent. The service sector makes up 83 percent of the economy, and even tourism, one of the more lucrative income-generating sectors in the Caribbean, is a struggling economy in Martinique relative to neighboring islands (cf. Miles 2012). For the most part, the island's economic growth has been the result of public and social monetary

transfers. Daniel goes on to explain that “the desire to attain the same level of development as the mainland has led to giving priority to policies of redistribution and allocation of the resources” (2001:63). This has created a welfare state whereby social policies designed to support highly developed societies are imposed upon a small underdeveloped island.

One of my interlocutors once expressed to me that one comes to Martinique, sees the big houses and the nice cars, and assumes that they are as well off as France, but in reality, they are much more like other "Third World" countries and poor Caribbean islands (interview, May 22, 2009). The economic realities and the illusion of development in Martinique are partly shaped by what Katherine E. Browne (2004) describes as *débrouillardism*, also known as economic cunning or informal economic activity that, she argues, is a product of creole values. In her ethnography, *Creole Economics: Caribbean Cunning Under the French Flag*, Browne explains the widespread participation in the informal economy among Martinicans who are finding alternative strategies to deal with unemployment, low salaries, consumerist values, and high standards of living. She suggests that this approach to earning undeclared income is a form of cultural resistance and identity assertion, because it represents the creole consciousness of the Martinican people—subversive earning while proudly accepting economic assistance from the metropole.

Martinican intellectual and writer of the *créolité* literary movement Patrick Chamoiseau describes the situation of dependency and development in Martinique as one of “silent domination” (Chamoiseau 1997:18). French citizenship and the “blind” consumption of goods produced externally have produced this level of French cultural

and economic hegemony. Criticizing this culture of consumption, Chamoiseau writes about the spread of roads, buildings, shopping malls, and luxury cars as symptomatic of this “new” domination, different from colonial domination and plantation slavery in that it “enthalls and seduces people rather than violently coercing them” (Vincenot 2009:70). For Chamoiseau, the illusion of development and modernization has “destroyed the island culture and traditional lifestyle” (Ibid).

I first traveled to Martinique in 2009 to explore the ways in which cultural workers were involved in a general strike and political unrest earlier that year (Chapter 4). I placed particular emphasis on those involved in the *bèlè* cultural revival movement because during the strike, *bèlè* was used as a medium for igniting the public in demonstrations and protest repertoires. My preliminary research carried out in 2009 and 2011 pointed to the centrality of *bèlè* promoters in debates over local cultural development and identity. *Bèlè* activists position themselves as protectors of Martinican heritage, making claims of cultural difference from France while maintaining their dual sense of belonging within the Caribbean region and the French nation-state.

The question of cultural identity and difference from France in Martinique has received a significant amount of attention from the prominent intellectual movements of *négritude* (Césaire 2000), *antillianité* (Glissant 1989), and *créolité* (Bernabé, Chamoiseau, & Confiant 1989), as well as the postcolonial philosophical contributions of Frantz Fanon (1967). Anthropologists have interrogated the cultural politics of Martinique’s disjunctive relationship with France, ranging in context from “creole economics” and informal earning practices (Browne 2004) to the discourse on sexuality, homophobia and liberal rights frameworks extended by French citizenship (Agard-Jones

2009; Murray 2000). Anthropologists have explored cultural expressions and issues of representation in Martinique to discuss elements of “folklorization,” or “postcarding the past” (Price and Price 1997; Price 1998), and the simultaneous accommodation and resistance to French modernization (Gerstin 2000). Music research shows how a renewed interest in Caribbean identity and the rise of Martinican national consciousness has led to the emergence of popular music forms that integrate traditional Martinican characteristics with other diasporic musical elements (Berrian 2000; Cyrille 2006; Guilbault 1993). While the potential of political sovereignty in Martinique has been rendered futile, questions of cultural sovereignty and difference are almost always up for debate (Constant 2001; Daniel 2001; Miles 2001). This research highlights the significance of local meanings, representations, and cultural practices in Martinicans’ negotiations with France, particularly among *bèlè* activists.

Theoretical Framework

Drawing on recent developments in how “differentiated citizenship” (Holston 2008) is defined and conceptualized in anthropological literature, this research explores how Martinicans use *bèlè* to negotiate their demands for cultural distinctiveness while embracing extra-local emblems of Caribbean and Afro-diasporic identity, and navigating the system of assimilation and French national belonging. My interlocutors often describe the *bèlè* community as its own small society in Martinican society, and the *bèlè* movement is commonly characterized as a project of cultural resistance, whereby practitioners (re)claim aspects of local identity that were historically repressed and nearly dissolved through French cultural assimilation; however, the movement is not exclusively associated with a political project for Martinique’s independence or state sovereignty. Debates persist around whether or not *bèlè* as an expression of resistance

should operate within, or entirely subvert, the dominant structures and values imposed by France. The chapters of this dissertation examine these debates as they relate to political life, local economic solidarity, conceptions of spirituality and religion, expressions of sexuality and gender identity, and dance pedagogy and the French national education system. The resultant body of data reveals that these debates contribute to the formation of a distinctive Martinican cultural citizenship. An analysis of cultural citizenship in the context of Martinique will enhance our anthropological understanding of Caribbean identity, cultural politics, and diaspora studies, as these issues in the French Caribbean present a distinctive case regarding the uneven legacy of French assimilation and colonialism. This project builds upon two key bodies of literature in anthropology and related social science disciplines, specifically citizenship and cultural politics.

Citizenship

In his influential 1950 essay *Citizenship and Social Class*, T. H. Marshall defined citizenship as the legal status of an individual who makes claims of membership and belonging to a national community with specific rights, privileges, and duties (Marshall 1977). Assuming integration and equality for all members of the citizenry, this universalist approach has been challenged in contemporary societies where legal citizenship is inclusive of some groups while rendering others invisible (Kymlicka 1995; Spinner 1994; Young 1989:250). Challenging traditional understandings of citizenship is especially important in the context of global economic restructuring and the globalized movement of people and ideas. The call for alternative conceptualizations of citizenship from the perspective of racial, ethnic, class, gender, and linguistic difference has been advanced by a number of anthropologists and other social scientists (Caldwell 2007;

Delanty 2000; Flores and Benmayor 1997; Holston 2008; Ong 1996, 1999; Rosaldo 1994; Tang 2010).

Cultural citizenship involves the right to be different along the lines of ethnicity, race, class, and language, while maintaining the rights afforded under legal citizenship and participation in democratic processes. It refers to the right of citizens to assume cultural identities outside the dominant conception of national belonging “without compromising the right to belong” (Rosaldo 1994:57). According to this framework, cultural difference should be valued as a resource, and not condemned as a threat to the nation-state (Flores and Benmayor 1997). With regard to immigrant and refugee identities, cultural citizenship has been used to describe “subjectification” (Foucault 1989), a process of self-making and being-made through the negotiation between immigrant subjects, civil society, and the authority of the nation-state (Ong 1996:738). Subject-making not only occurs through the imposition of dominant cultural norms by the nation-state, but also through the deviation from those norms that is enacted in collective struggle (Tang 2010:43). The cultural practices and beliefs that emerge from subjectification have larger material implications for the everyday social relations between host societies and minority or migrant communities. Even though Rosaldo’s original use of cultural citizenship did not refer specifically to the realm of art and expressive culture (1994:58), scholars have since extended the term to include aesthetic values, popular culture, and expressive production. Richard Flores (1997) writes about the relationship between cultural citizenship and aesthetic process, arguing that, “those enactments and practices that forge a sense of community and belonging lead to renewed experiences of identity, and provide a social space for the formation of

collective practice and its concomitant forms of power” (Flores 1997:125). Flores suggests the investigation of cultural citizenship in cultural performances because they are public events where expressions of self and society are articulated and negotiated.

Cultural Politics

Cultural politics is another important and related area of anthropological scholarship that informs this dissertation project. Glenn Jordan and Chris Weedon (1995) write that “cultural politics focus on struggle over meanings, values, forms of subjectivity and identity” (1995:19). These struggles are quite often visible in the production of festivals, visual art, dance, music, and other cultural practices and performances (Reed 2010; Rivera 2010; Sutton 2002). The question becomes, whose culture is represented and whose culture is erased? Which cultural forms sell, and which forms are likely to obstruct the nation’s agenda? How are cultural policies formulated to support or marginalize artistic development and heritage projects, and what do they mean in terms of larger power relations?

As the literature in anthropology and ethnomusicology has shown, vernacular aesthetic traditions and cultural performances in the Caribbean serve as sources of heritage preservation, nationalist discourse, identity assertion, and in some contexts reformist and radical social change (Bilby 1985; Daniel 1995; Fernandes 2006; McAlister 2002; Moore 1997; Scher 2010; Thomas 2004). Anthropologists explore cultural politics in different contexts to understand how a society’s cultural sector and expressive forms are used for constructing and contesting narratives and representations of the dominant national culture, authenticity, and belonging (Beriss 2004; Daniel 1995; Davila 1997; Suárez 2010; Thomas 2004). Attention has also been given to the politics of music and dance performance in tourism development, and their

implications for nation building (Babb 2011; Cohen 2010). Research often reveals that the cultural forms of marginalized groups are either repressed or strategically co-opted for the benefit of the dominant group, having profound implications in the society's social order.

Chapter Organization

The extended field research for this dissertation was carried out over the course of 18 months, beginning in January 2013 and ending in August 2014. The methodology used in this research included dance participant observation, open-ended and semi-structured interviews, and the collection of life histories. I also employed photography and videography, and I carried out archival research. My primary objective was to understand what functions *bèlè* serves for its diverse community of participants, across generation, class, gender, urban/rural background, and educational experience. For some, *bèlè* can have political and/or economic significance. For others, the practice of *bèlè* has immense spiritual or therapeutic value. The chapters of this dissertation are organized to reveal a set of debates that point to the complexities of tradition and modernity in struggles for cultural heritage preservation, especially in postcolonial, post-plantation societies.

Bèlè is a Caribbean dance term that is not easily classified or defined. In Chapter 2, I present a descriptive overview of *bèlè* as a family of Afro-Creole drum-dance variants found throughout the Caribbean region. I then go on to discuss the different historical influences that contributed to the creation and development of Martinique's *bèlè* drum-dance complex. Finally, I recount the story of *bèlè*'s decline and subsequent revalorization in contemporary Martinique, where it has evolved into a vibrant subculture under the conditions of postcolonial integration with the French state.

Chapter 3 on dance research methodology is a reflexive, (auto)ethnographic account about my journey as a dancer of *bèlè*. Using reflexivity as a methodological and analytical tool, I consider the different ways in which my positionality influenced the research process. My interlocutors' remarks about my identity as a black American woman, and my participation as a dancer of *bèlè*, often elicited conversations that spoke directly to the questions guiding my project. According to many of my *bèlè* counterparts, our mutual belonging to the African diaspora and our shared cultural sensibilities as African descendants explain my ability to execute the dance of *bèlè* in its great complexity and to understand the emotional, communicative power of *bèlè* performance.

In Chapter 4, I use the protests of the 2009 strike in Martinique as a point of departure for discussing the various ways in which leaders of the *bèlè* movement have helped to refashion political and economic sensibilities among followers of the movement. I will demonstrate how the appropriation of *bèlè* for advancing nationalist discourse has stimulated an ethos of resistance and solidarity for its practitioners through highly structured activities, manifestations, and modes of inculcation. Following my ethnographic analysis of the *bèlè* spaces where much of the consciousness-raising and inculcation occur, I will consider alternative perspectives from those who oppose the politicization of the *bèlè* public.

Chapter 5 interrogates the less-explored interface of *bèlè*, religion, and spirituality. The first objective of the chapter is to examine the increasing visibility of *bèlè* performance in the Catholic Church, a fusion genre called *bèlè légliz*, as an attempt to refashion the liturgy with Afro-Martinican cultural references that were once prohibited

by the dominant religious order. Debates persist around whether or not *bèlè* proponents should seek recognition from a religious institution that historically repressed the tradition, and if Church *bèlè* is compatible with the movement's larger mission of resistance. Secondly, I interrogate African-inspired philosophical orientations to spirituality that a subset of *bèlè* activists engage, drawing upon the rituals, practices, and symbols of African and Afro-Caribbean religions. The cosmologies of African and Afro-Caribbean practices such as *Vodou*, *Santería*, *Candomblé*, *Spiritism*, and *Quimbois* are important emblems of black spiritual authenticity for these individuals who denounce the dogmatic nature of the Catholic Church, and the Church's connection to Martinique's colonial history. Finally, I will analyze the assertion that *bèlè* is a spirituality in and of itself—a point of view held by an increasing number of practitioners who consider *bèlè* to be an integral part of social healing in a society that has suffered a “cultural genocide” under French assimilation (Glissant 1981:173).

I have chosen to dedicate Chapter 6 to the women of *bèlè* because so much of the leadership and public discourse in the *bèlè* revival are male-dominated. Women play a central role in the ongoing transmission of *bèlè*, both on and off the dancefloor. In this chapter, I analyze *bèlè* performance as a space for women's transgression of “respectable” sexuality and gender norms and the associated morality debates around appropriate dance conduct. *Bèlè* is a communicative dance, with some courtship-style choreography involving four female-male couples. In a society where black women are stereotyped and devalued as dependents of the welfare system and shamed for being overtly sexual, *bèlè* becomes a transformative space where their performance of a provocative sensuality is applauded and celebrated. In the playful, flirtatious game of

certain *bèlè* choreographies in which the woman is the object of her male partner's pursuit, she ultimately decides if she will submit or retreat. My evidence suggests that this aspect of *bèlè* performance, whereby women are valorized for their sensual dance prowess, brings a remarkable sense of affirmation and confidence, while provoking discussions about decency, morality, and respectable dance behavior.

In Chapter 7, I conclude the dissertation by discussing the integration of *bèlè* into the national education system, and I address an ongoing debate about tradition, modernity, and the politics of (French) national allegiance in the transmission of *bèlè*. Some leaders of the *bèlè* movement find that teaching *bèlè* in formal school settings based on a rigorously codified dance pedagogy is an appropriate strategy for putting young Martinicans in touch with their roots. Others criticize this approach, arguing that the improvisational spirit that is intrinsic to black dance culture—the spirit inherited from the ancestors—is weakened through French-influenced manners of pedagogy and standardization. With the imposition of French educational guidelines, defenders of the tradition have been required to modify their modes of transmission at the expense of their affective and spiritual foundations to satisfy bureaucratic expectations and appease the concerned parents of school-aged children, particularly those who have internalized negative images associated with the tradition.

My project in Martinique is of theoretical importance in that it pushes us to recognize the variegated understandings of (non)sovereignty and enactments of citizenship among postcolonial subjects, a theme that has long characterized the Caribbean region as one of “fragmented nationalisms” (Knight 1990). This work fits squarely with the objective of presenting more studies of the non-sovereign Caribbean

and placing those analyses alongside those of “nominally independent” nations that are asymmetrically affected by neoliberal reforms and global economic restructuring (Bonilla 2012; also see Cohen 2010 for a discussion of “ambivalent sovereignty” in the British Virgin Islands). This should be of growing concern to anthropologists, especially as we witness the increasing integration of political units into the European Union, in which French Antilleans hold membership. Local meanings and practices grounded in cultural difference in the French overseas departments should not pose the same threat to French nationalism and assimilation (Stolcke 1995) that they once may have, and they should have a new significance for local and regional affairs.

This project also adds nuance to anthropological scholarship that investigates nationalism through dance, performance, and expressive culture, because the Martinican context offers an alternative to the future of political autonomy. Popular opinion maintains that Martinique cannot achieve greater autonomy, let alone a movement toward independence given its small size and economic dependence on France. My research will closely examine the new relationships and interactions that arise with cultural heritage projects and practices that promote local cultural autonomy while the populace maintains an allegiance to the French nation and ostensibly enjoys the benefits of European integration.

CHAPTER 2

BÈLÈ AS ACCOMMODATION OR RESISTANCE: A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

In contemporary Martinique, *bèlè* is not simply the name of a traditional dance; the term *bèlè* is used to describe *an mannyè viv*, or a way of life. It is a subculture that is organized around participation in the island's rich complex of Afro-Creole drum-dance practices.¹ Despite the tradition's near erasure from the Martinican cultural landscape, especially in the years of intense assimilation to French culture following World War II, *bèlè* and its associated practices like *ladja/danmyé* and *kalennda* flourish today among a minority community of devoted cultural activists dedicated to the cause of preserving Martinique's Afro-Caribbean cultural specificity (Table 2-1).²

Because *bèlè* is a folk tradition, partially adapted from European court dances by enslaved Africans, and several versions of *bèlè* can be found across different island communities, the story of *bèlè*'s origins during the slavery era is fraught with conjecture about accommodation, imitation, and creative resistance.³ Some perspectives would have it that blacks merely sought to replicate the styles and mannerisms of their white masters when they danced the *quadrilles* of the local bourgeoisie. However, the legacy of *bèlè* in Martinique, as with other Afro-Creole expressions of the Black Atlantic, can be interpreted as a story of creative duplicity, resilience, and camouflaged resistance under the dreadful conditions of slavery. In this chapter, I present a descriptive overview of

¹ Here, I borrow Richard D. E. Burton's conceptualization of "Afro-Creole," referring to a tradition that is primarily African-inspired, but created and/or transformed under New World conditions with the convergence of indigenous, European, and African cultural influences (Burton 1997).

² Table 2-1 identifies the specific Martinican movement and dance styles that I observed and focused on in this research.

³ These terms are considered in this chapter as they have been theorized by scholars of chattel slavery who treat *accommodation* and *resistance* as a "dialectic" (Genovese 1976:658), rather than a dichotomy (cf. Mintz 1974:76). The spectrum comprises different strategies of survival based on both subtle and overt forms of accommodation and resistance through which the enslaved navigated and subverted the system of bondage (cf. Buckridge 2004; Gaspar 1993; Schwartz 1977; Wood 2003).

bèlè as a family of drum-dance variants found throughout the Caribbean region. I then go on to discuss the different historical influences that contributed to the creation and development of Martinique's *bèlè* drum-dance complex. Finally, I recount the story of *bèlè*'s decline and subsequent revalorization in contemporary Martinique, which has evolved into a growing subculture under the conditions of postcolonial integration with the French state.

The Conundrum of Pan-Caribbean Dance Continua

While this dissertation focuses exclusively on Martinique's *bèlè* subculture, it is important to first contextualize *bèlè* as belonging to a pan-Caribbean continuum of interrelated practices that have developed into separate national variations of folk dance over time. A number of Caribbeanist scholars have assumed the challenge of categorizing, describing, and connecting the origins of the region's creolized folk dance traditions (Daniel 2009, 2010; Gerstin 2010; Manuel 2009). Throughout the Caribbean region, traditional dance repertoires comprise various set dances that were created, synthesized, and sustained under the creolizing processes of European colonialism and settlement, African enslavement, indentured labor migration, and postcolonial heritage preservation. Although many of these dances were adapted from European court dances, such as the *contredanse* and *quadrille* styles documented throughout the region as early as the 17th century, some have more obvious ancestral links to their West and West-Central African precursors than others.

There is a bit of perplexity regarding how these dances can be accurately mapped, traced, and categorized due to the "scattered, sketchy, and contradictory" nature of historical material and colonial-era travel writing on black dance traditions

(Gerstin 2010:11).⁴ Pan-regional survey studies of Caribbean dance have pointed out the various overlapping and interchangeable names used to identify these dances in different island societies, even in circum-Caribbean mainland settings such as Louisiana. For example, dance anthropologist Yvonne Daniel's integrative analyses of the region catalog these dance terms and their various cognate spellings as *quadrille/kwadril*, *bèlè/belair*, *haute-taille*, *affranchi*, *bamboula*, *bomba*, *tumba francesa*, *calinda/kalennnda*, *chica*, *lewoz*, and *djouba/juba*, all of which are related and share overlapping origins, but belong to specific island locales (Daniel 2009, 2010).⁵ Julian Gerstin (2010) writes about the "tangled roots" of neo-African dances as circum-Caribbean cultural products that were created under the related experiences of colonialism and enslavement, but within distinct colonial contexts—especially in the former French colonies with high concentrations of Bantu-speaking Africans from the Congo-Angola region. As he points out, there is much confusion about the dances that we call *kalennnda*, *bamboula*, *juba*, and *bèlè*; what someone would call "*kalennnda*" in the northeastern region of Martinique may appear to be a completely different tradition than what one would call "*calinda*" in Trinidad. Conversely, some dances that share the same spatial configuration, choreography, and movements may have two different names.

The European colonial lens through which these dances were first interpreted left a trail of arbitrary, generalized descriptions in the written record. Assumptions of

⁴ It is not my goal to take a full inventory of the multitude of dance variations spanning the Caribbean region that share the same names or aesthetic qualities. Other scholars have made great strides in the project of sorting, classifying, critiquing, and tracking the discrepancies in descriptions of Caribbean dance styles that were (mis)labeled by colonial-era chroniclers (see Daniel 2009, 2010; Gerstin 2007, 2010).

⁵ This list is by no means exhaustive, but rather a few of the more prominent examples.

sameness in the labeling of some dances among early chroniclers were often based on racist, stereotyped images of hyper-eroticism and “frenzied” black bodies (Gerstin 2010:20). With other dances, where the dancers’ movements appeared more stately and elegant, blacks were assumed to be merely imitating the European court dances of their masters. This was especially the case for domestic servants who had greater exposure to the European mannerisms of the planter class. One could argue, however, that the resemblances between these synthesized dances were based on shared values expressed in the form of competitive display, satirical song, flirtatious play, and/or ancestor reverence.

Daniel’s (2009, 2010) comparative Caribbean field research analyzes the various *contredanse*- and *quadrille*-derived styles of the region as expressions of values and dance behaviors related to identity, ancestor reverence, and the experience of colonialism. The dance styles falling on this creole dance continuum include different formations and spatial configurations, such as circle dancing, square dancing, and line dancing, and they communicate “contrasting cultural values” between the enslaved blacks and their white masters (2009:148). Daniel also highlights the neo-African values of camouflaged resistance, parody, regality, and aesthetic “coolness.”⁶ Coolness in a performative sense reflects “calm, calculating, knowing, smooth, ‘slick,’ deliberate and purposeful behavior” (2009:149). For enslaved Africans, these values, combined with “reliance on the ancestral past” transformed European dance styles to “reflect old understandings [the beliefs and convictions of African ancestors] in new ways” (2009:150). On the continuum of creolized *contredanse/quadrille* adaptations,

⁶ The notion of “coolness” in black culture and aesthetics was developed by art historian Robert Farris Thompson (1974), and later applied to the analysis of African diaspora dance by Brenda Gottschild (2002).

bèlè stands out among dance scholars as one that is more clearly linked with African dance behaviors (Cyrille 2009:188).

Defining *Bèlè* as a Regional Folk Tradition

Bèlè is a Caribbean dance term that generically refers to the *contredanse*- and *quadrille*-derived folk traditions that most successfully integrated African aesthetic elements and musical accompaniment (Cyrille 2009; Daniel 2009, 2010, 2011; Wason 2010). *Bèlè* traditions include aspects of European court dances, but communicate different attitudes and values rooted in Afro-Caribbean cultural sensibilities. Different dances with the name “*bèlè*” exist in various Caribbean locales, and although these adaptations share overlapping historical trajectories and stylistic qualities that traversed the region with inter-island circulation and travel during the colonial era, each island’s *bèlè* tradition is practiced and performed differently. Variations of *bèlè* share the same basic logic, involving dance partners who playfully interact with one another in the center of a circle through intricate foot patterns, dynamic arm movements, turns, and bent-knee, flat-footed body orientation. The playful (and at times competitive) interactive style between dance partners is reminiscent of the Congo *minuet*.⁷ Through expressions of salutation, dancers also interact with the drummer who provides the percussive musical accompaniment of polyrhythmic drum patterns based on the dancers’ movements.

In *bèlè* traditions, the goat-skinned conical drum is accompanied by call-and-response singing with a lead singer and a chorus of background singers. In Martinican *bèlè*, there is also the added *tibwa* percussive accompaniment—two wooden sticks that

⁷ The Congo *minuet* is an 18th century New World adaptation of the European *minuet* partner dance whereby partners face and cross over one another with fast, intricate foot patterns.

are beaten on the side of the drum with a steady tempo. The performing ensemble of dancers, drummers, and singers is normally encircled by a crowd of participating spectators who clap their hands, sway their bodies, and join in by singing the song's refrain. All of these elements, when functioning together in harmony, provide the spirited energy that is necessary for a successful *bèlè* event.

Different versions of *bèlè* developed according to local island specificities, and the *bèlè* variations that survive today have become emblems of national community formation across the Caribbean region (Daniel 2011). In other words, each version of *bèlè* is tied to a specific island's unique national identity; hence, no island's version of *bèlè* is identical to the next. The history of *bèlè* as a folk tradition that was transmitted orally and kinesthetically, rather than through written literature and codified text, presents a challenge to scholars aiming to trace the dance's pure origins.⁸ Dance specialists have largely relied on the observations of European colonial writers such as Father Jean-Baptiste Labat (1722) and M. L. E. Moreau de St. Méry (1796) as historical evidence of the dances practiced by people of color in Caribbean plantation societies.

Bèlè is understood to have its creole origins in the French colonies of Grenada, Saint Domingue, Martinique, and Guadeloupe, and to have later traveled to other Caribbean island territories that were once occupied by French settlers, including St.

⁸ A note on vocabulary and the concept of "folk tradition": In Martinique, the terms "oral tradition" and "orality" are preferred over "folklore" by *bèlè* activists to describe the tradition. This has to do with their criticisms of folklorization, and the problematic ways in which "folk culture" tends to be understood in public life as traditions frozen in a fixed, sterile past—what Richard and Sally Price (1997:13) refer to as "pastifying" in the Martinican context. As described in subsequent chapters, *bèlè* activists contend that *bèlè* is a living, ever-evolving culture and caution against the essentializing and exoticizing effects produced by folkloric representations.

Lucia, Dominica, Carriacou, and Trinidad (Franco 1999; Johnson 2012:150).⁹ Some studies of *bèlè* argue that the dances are adaptations of African mating, fertility, and harvest dances that integrated western European dance elements of 18th century *quadrille* and *contredanse* performance (Honychurch 1988:63). In societies where both *quadrille* and *bèlè* exist, it is clear that the two dances have absorbed elements of one another (Wason 2010:227). Unlike the more African-inspired *bèlè* that is accompanied by goat-skinned drums and other percussive instruments, traditional *quadrille* performance is accompanied by melodic instruments, and is danced with erect body orientation, moderate foot and arm movements, and simple turns and curtsies between partners—characteristics that signified elegance, grace, refined taste, and high culture according to European manners and aesthetic standards that established the prevailing dance hierarchy.¹⁰ If we think of Caribbean *quadrilles* as a dance spectrum, with some variations being more African-influenced, and others more European, Martinique’s *bèlè* repertoire has dance elements that are more recognizably inherited from Africa.

Martinican *Bèlè*: Questions of African Resistance and French Accommodation

There are different interpretations regarding the origins of the term *bèlè*, based on both French and Congolese lexicons (Rosemain 1986:49). Some interpretations posit that *bèlè* is a creolized derivation of the French expression *belair*, meaning pretty tunes. This was the name given to improvised call-and-response songs that accompanied collective work activities and dance gatherings among bondsmen and bondswomen (1986:51). Other interpretations turn to the Congolese terms *boela* and

⁹ For information about *bèlè* in: St. Lucia, see Crowley 1957:7; Guilbault and Embert 2007:380; Dominica, see Caudeiron 1988:27; Honychurch 1988:36-7; Trinidad, Grenada, and Carriacou, see David 1994:162; Herskovits and Herskovits 1964:158-9; Pearse 1955:30-1; Roberts 1972:117.

¹⁰ Compare, for example, Martinican *bèlè* with another Martinican *quadrille*-derived dance *haute taille*.

mbele as the original sources of the name *bèlè* (Cyrille 2002:241; Gerstin 2010:27). Moreover, the circular, square, and double-line configurations observed in Martinique's *bèlè* repertoires can be traced to French and Congolese traditional dances. European colonial observers tended to characterize Africans dancing *bèlè* as poor imitations of the French *quadrille*, but today's cultural activists who embrace more Afrocentric orientations to history are likely to emphasize the dances' Congolese origins, and reference the *quadrille*-inspired choreography as a strategy of camouflaged resistance exercised by the enslaved. Here, I examine a set of explanations regarding both Congolese and French influences that contributed to *bèlè*'s development in Martinique.

Inferences from Congo/Angolan Culture

Understanding Martinique's African background and influences on the island's black dance culture requires some discussion of the cultural geography and ethnic composition of the French slave trade. In the French colonies, earliest arrivals of the 17th century came from Senegambia, and to a lesser extent, the Bight of Benin. After the 17th century, however, the Senegambia region was much less important than the Bight of Benin and the Congo region for supplying enslaved Africans and populating the French Caribbean islands (Dubois 2004; Eltis 2000; Geggus 2001). French focus shifted away from Senegambia to the Bight of Benin during the first quarter of the 18th century, and to the ports of the Loango coast during the second-half of the 18th century, a "boom" period in which West-Central Africa became the leading supplier to large French vessels (Geggus 2001:123).

In 1914, a British missionary and explorer by the name of John H. Weeks published a written account of his experience living among the Bakongo peoples of southern Congo. In describing a number of customs, habits, rituals, and "native

amusements” observed over the course of his thirty-year stay, he writes, “every kind of event gives an occasion for a dance...they are danced into the world at their birth, and they are danced out of it at their death.” He states that, “in their dances there are two formations—the circle, and opposite lines” (1914:127-8).¹¹ Certain aspects of the dances he describes as *boela* and *mbele* bear semblance to some characteristics of Martinican *bèlè*. According to Weeks’ description, *boela* is danced in a circular formation to the rhythms of a medium-sized drum, and dancers use a cloth under the armpit or tied around the waist as a belt (1914:132). Weeks also includes a description of the game *mbele*, which is played with drum and song on “moonlit nights” (1914:121). With the formation of the Christian Church, some of the rules were modified because the drums “badly excited” game participants, “causing them to lose all self-control” (Ibid).

In Father Labat’s 1724 description of a dance he observed in Martinique, he explains that men and women stand in opposite lines, and with a signal from the drum, the men and women approach one another and strike their thighs. They then back away from one another, turn, and advance with the same movement each time the drummer gives them a signal ([1724] 1972:401-3).¹² The dance that he is describing is a dance called *mabèlo* in Martinique’s contemporary *bèlè* complex. Interestingly, this exact same choreography of *mabèlo* line dancing, whereby partners take turns striking their thighs and bellies, appears to be a prominent dance feature among ethnic groups in Central Africa. Weeks described this choreography in his observations of the

¹¹ The double-line formation described here is also used in the “longways” *contredanse* of Western Europe, and has been observed among the Aradá people of West Africa (Manuel 2009:13).

¹² This case is one in which Labat arbitrarily labels the dance “calinda,” leading to much confusion in what we call *calinda* and *kalennda* today.

Bakongo (1914:128-9), and it has also been described as a dance called *semba* in Angola (Desch-Obi 2008:129).

Beyond the Congolese-Angolan dance influence, the percussive techniques used in Martinican drum-dances also have their origins in Congolese culture (Gerstin 2010:32). In Martinique, the goat-skinned conical drum is played in a transversal style whereby the drum rests horizontally on its side. The drummer sits across the drum's body, uses her/his heel to alter the pitch of the drum, and s/he is accompanied by another percussionist sitting behind the drum, beating two wooden sticks upon the drum's side with a steady tempo (known in Martinique as the *tibwa*). The transverse drumming technique with wooden sticks on the side has been recorded by ethnomusicologists working in the Congo and throughout the Caribbean region (Bilby 1985:187; Kubik 1998:678; Lewin 1998:898). Images of the Baaka ethnic group in the Congo also capture this practice of sitting astride a drum laying horizontally on the ground (Kisliuk 1998:92, 188). Identifying those elements that appear to have their origins in West-Central African dance and music culture is only part of the challenge of recovering origins. The *quadrille* styles imported from Europe during the colonial era also left an imprint on the spatial configurations used in the *bèlè* group dances observed in my research.

French Quadrilles

Dominique Cyrille's historical analysis of creole *quadrilles* explains how European court dances that used both square and line group formations arrived in the Antilles from France through colonial settlement. French *contredanse* variants, adapted from the English country dance, comprised groups of female-male partners facing each other in a longways line configuration; a potpourri of those dances later developed into

quadrille square choreographies danced by four couples, which later crystallized into five different dance figures, or floor patterns: *le pantalon* (pants), *l'été* (summer), *la poule* (hen), *la pastourelle* (shepherd girl), and the *finale* (De Garmo 1868:87-8). The names were based on the songs originally played for each figure.

Cyrille argues that European court dances traveled to the Antilles from Europe during the 17th century as missionaries attempted to eradicate African traditions and behaviors and replace them with more “restrained European attitudes” (Cyrille 2009:192). In the 18th century, however, these dances continued to be imported to the Antilles for the enjoyment of French planters and aristocrats on the islands who were nostalgic for Parisian forms of entertainment. Different creolized adaptations of the *contredanse* and *quadrille* developed through the inter-island migration of planters and their slaves, free blacks searching for opportunities of upward mobility, and maroons fleeing enslavement and finding refuge in the neighboring islands. Planters would often travel between islands with their performers, and dance masters from France were hired to come and teach the fashionable court dances to planters’ children. Africans and their descendants eventually became familiar with European dance aesthetics and what those aesthetics signified. Though it is likely the case that free people of color in urban settings sought to imitate and assimilate elitist attitudes and behaviors associated with *quadrille* performance, I am not convinced that this was the goal for enslaved blacks who modified *quadrilles* into creative inventions of their own. It is important to call into question notions of accommodation, mimicry, and resistance (passive, camouflaged, or otherwise), in an effort to understand the different functions that *bèlè* practice served for bondsmen and bondswomen during the slave era.

Imitation: A Form of Flattery or a Form of Survival?

Scholars present different scenarios of how *bèlè* developed into the variations observed in Martinique today. During the slavery era, *bamboulas* were a common activity for the enslaved population. Sometimes described as nocturnal drum-dance events (Desch-Obi 2008:128), sometimes described as the “dance of Sunday afternoons” (Rosemain 1986:22-3), *bamboulas* were held on weekends and holidays when the enslaved had free time from work and were permitted to socialize. They would travel near and far, sometimes several miles, and the food was often provided from their own provision grounds and gardens (2008:128; Labat 1724:154). According to Jacqueline Rosemain (1986), slaves were grouped by *nation* (African ethnic groups) to better maintain order and control (1986:24). Many of the black dance traditions described in the written record from this time period were observed at these gatherings.

Father Labat paints a picture of these events as dance circles orchestrated by a drum he called “baboula” [sic], fabricated from and named for the bamboo tree trunk. From Labat’s description, we understand the significant role of the drummer, who improvises the rhythmic sequence based on the dancers’ movements (Labat 1724:153-4; Rosemain 1986:24). *Bamboulas* were also common among mutual aid associations, or *sociétés*, which organized semi-private “community performance rituals” (2008:127). Mutual aid societies were in place to raise money and purchase freedom for the enslaved, pay for burial arrangements, practice worship and religious activities in a concealed environment, and organize entertainment events. This mutual aid tradition familiar to most plantation societies during the slave era promoted solidarity, reciprocity, and exchange (Lincoln and Mamiya 1990:242). According to Gerstin, the *bamboulas* of mutual aid societies, organized around the principles of solidarity and community

exchange, provided the blueprint for the rural organization of *swaré bèlè* tradition discussed below (Gerstin 1996:117).

Some perspectives maintain that free people of color and blacks who worked closely with their masters as domestic slaves had greater familiarity with French styles of ballroom entertainment, and thus, sought to reproduce the *quadrille* repertoires and mannerisms that they had observed among white dancers (Cyrille 2009:200). Blacks who possessed minimal knowledge of the *quadrille*, and who had not acquired the skills for dancing it in its truest French form, improvised and integrated dance behaviors of their own. By the early 19th century, blacks in the rural plantation settings of Martinique had adopted the choreography of European *quadrille* spatial choreography and merged it with the African-based musical expression of drumming and call-and-response singing that was traditionally used in *bamboula* gatherings (Gerstin 1996:120).

Some colonial observers found imitation of the *quadrille* among people of color to be an impressive enactment of social integration, while others considered such imitation an offensive bastardization or “profanation” of a sophisticated dance form (Granier de Cassagnac [1842] 1844:220). In the writings of Moreau de St. Méry, for example, we see his appreciation for free-born, well-educated mulattoes who learned the *contredanse* from French dance masters; “According to St. Méry, they danced it as well as if not better than many whites” (Cyrille 2009: 200; Moreau de St. Méry 1803:40). When reflecting on his observations of the enslaved and the newly freed, however, he argued that they could not execute a “true reproduction” of that which “only the graces can reproduce” (Moreau de St. Méry 1803:39). He found more pleasure in watching blacks perform their own dances:

When they resist their unfortunate tendency to imitate, negroes have charming dances, all their own, coming originally from Africa as they do; and the Creole negroes love their dances particularly, because they have performed them from earliest childhood...In the Congo, the Senegalese and other African farmers and shepherds love the dance as a relaxation and a source of voluptuousness. From all Africa, negroes who settled in the French colonies with comparable climate continue their love for the dance—a love so strong that though exhausted by work they find the strength to dance, and even to walk several miles to and from the place of this delight (Moreau de St. Méry [1796] 1976:51-52).

Moreau de St. Méry insisted that ballroom styles required careful, serious study for perfect execution, rather than mere approximation of the steps ([1796] 1976:48). Learning to dance the *quadrille* meant that one had successfully dissociated oneself from the inferior classes. Cyrille argues that over time, with the increasing participation of people across class and color, court dances helped to close social gaps between whites and blacks (2009:202-3). According to this perspective, people of color adopted European traditions to distance themselves from African traditions that were discouraged. African dance forms, especially among rural field laborers, were perceived to lack the decency, control, and moderation required for proper *quadrille* performance. Such styles of music and movement were commonly described by colonial writers as repetitive, vulgar, and unpleasant (Du Tertre [1671] 1973; Granier de Cassagnac [1842] 1844; Labat 1724). This would explain why so many white observers were offended to see European court dances appropriated by blacks.

The assumption that blacks simply imitated *quadrille* performance during the colonial era in order to accommodate the status quo and behave more like their white counterparts should be problematized, as this is only one side of the story. As we understand from Simon Gikandi's discussion of mimicry and counterculture in his 2011 book *Slavery and the Culture of Taste*, slaves' replication and adaptation of European

styles and tastes was actually a way of parodying their dominant counterparts. He uses the example of John Canoe festivities in Jamaica as an example, writing that “John Canoe had two faces and functions: one imitated the culture of taste; the other mocked it” (2011:273). Although this kind of play and duplicity could not mean true liberation for the enslaved, “the performance of a counterculture of taste was essential to the transformation of enslaved Africans from chattel to subjects” (Ibid:271). Disfiguring the colonists’ most esteemed and precious traditions beyond recognition brought some degree of human dignity and belonging in an institution that denied their existence. The dancing body of the slave, its animation, its “celebration of excess” (Ibid:280), was the antithesis of European cultural sensibilities, and polite reserved behavior.

Following the line of thinking that blacks did not always aim to assimilate by dancing the *contredanse* and *quadrille*, some argue that they often appropriated elements of European court dance as a strategy to disguise their ritual practices that were repressed by missionaries and colonial law (Cyrille 2002:224). Rosemain tells us that the improvisatory songs and dances of slaves, what she calls *belairs*, were not just whims of imagination or bodily expression; “they were their prayers. They guided their activities. They helped God revive his presence, and infuse them with strength and courage” (1986:52). *Bèlè* was a creative means for preserving their rites and ceremonies under an oppressive colonial regime. If they could execute sacred dance movements (i.e. fertility dances) in the format of a *quadrille*, and give the impression that they were adopting European traditions, their practices would not be easily recognized by the authorities as ritual practices and punished according to the

established slave codes; to outside observers, it would simply appear as though the slaves were amusing themselves.

In the context of Dominica, for example, Norris Stubbs (1973) argues that *bèlè* likely served African belief systems long ago. Janet Wason (2010) points out in her analysis of *bèlè* in Dominica that although African spiritual traditions were largely eradicated by the Roman Catholic Church, Afro-Caribbean ceremonial elements, such as drinking rum, drumming, and dancing persisted through the practice of *bèlè*, but the dance eventually lost its connection to African religious beliefs (2010:235). Wason found among her research subjects that spiritual communication is an important aspect of *bèlè*, although the dance today is considered recreational, and it is not tied to a specific religious tradition.¹³

Even though African music and dance were prohibited when it served religious purposes, it was certainly permitted and even encouraged when it served work purposes, because it helped to generate revenue for planters. Beyond imitation, accommodation, and camouflaged resistance, slaves also practiced *bèlè* as a communal work activity (Gerstin 1996; Wason 2010). Rosemain identified work-related forms of *bèlè* group expression that form the foundation of *bèlè*, beyond the common *bamboula* gatherings (what she calls *belairs de sociétés*) and the gatherings organized by mutual aid societies (what she calls *belairs des sociétés*). What Rosemain identified as *belairs d'ateliers* were improvised song and dance that accompanied collective plantation work, and helped to keep field laborers in sync while executing tasks (i.e. cutting cane, clearing fields, grating manioc) through their collective voices and

¹³ I explore the religious and spiritual functions of *bèlè* practice in greater depth in Chapter 5.

movements (1986:51). *Belairs des coups de mains* (or *koudmèn* in Kréyòl) were song and dance gatherings that accompanied smaller group work in gardens, on provision grounds, or in any other group work activity beyond the forced labor of plantation work, which served the planters for economic gain. *Koudmèn* gatherings involved blacks working together (Horowitz 1967:32-3, 87), for themselves in their free time, praising their deities of agriculture and offering a helping hand to their neighbors, so the music and dance were much more animated and joyful (Lafontaine 1982:89; Rosemain 1986:58). Wason uses a historical example in Dominica whereby a town priest organized a *bèlè* group to work, sing, dance, and drink rum through the night while digging the grounds for the construction of a new church (2010:235-6).

The *tanbou bèlè* would remain a powerful symbol of resistance and rebellion, on the eve of, and in the wake of, France's 1848 abolition of slavery. The drum in Martinique has a legendary role in the story of slave emancipation. According to historian Dale Tomich (1990), 1831 was a moment marked by music and dance gatherings in the towns among slaves, circulating the revolutionary ideals of *liberté, fraternité, égalité*. As slaves convened in the center of town to sing, play drum, and dance in the double-line formation, they blocked the streets, and sang songs related to the French Revolution, integrating lyrics to represent the colonial situation (1990:88).¹⁴ In 1848, just before abolition was declared, unrest ensued in protest of the arrest of an enslaved man, Romain, who refused to comply with slave codes prohibiting the use of drums (AM4 1994, 1998; Hélénon 2011:19; Mondésir 2012:24). Because of Romain's legacy, the *bèlè* drum has come to represent rebellion and freedom in Martinique.

¹⁴ This image of rebellion is one that would be reproduced in future political uprisings, including the 2009 general strike in Martinique.

Bèlè's Pre-revival Eclipse in Martinique

The rural *bèlè* heritage of Martinique was maintained after abolition through inter-familial systems of reciprocity and informal economic exchange.¹⁵ The *bèlè* repertoire from the North Atlantic coast, for example, remained intact among large families of *bèlè* practitioners from Sainte Marie and the nearby communities of Trinité and Gros Morne. These families were primarily made up of smallholder peasants who also worked jobs in cane fields and on banana plantations, and they often mixed their full-time plantation employment with other income-generating activities, barter, and gift-giving. This created strong rural networks that frequently united village residents through *koudmèn* work groups, celebrations, and dance gatherings.

From the time of abolition up until World War II, the rural structure of *bèlè* performance functioned through the organization of participatory, open-air gatherings called *swaré bèlè* during holidays and special occasions. Families would take turns planning and hosting *bèlè* parties at their homes, using a rotating system of reciprocity to share in the responsibilities, such as preparing the food, constructing the dance space, and spreading news of the event—much like the collaborative structure used by mutual aid societies. The early *swaré bèlè* system helped to uphold an informal economic network whereby money could be earned from charging admission and selling food and drinks. Friends and family would stay all night talking, eating, drinking, singing, drumming, and dancing—a continuation of the *bamboula* dance gatherings of their ancestors.

¹⁵ Much of these details of *bèlè's* history from the moment of abolition to the contemporary revival were recounted in Julian Gerstin's 1996 dissertation, and the liner notes of the *Martinique: Cane Fields and City Streets*, an album of the Alan Lomax 1962 Caribbean Voyage Collection (Gerstin and Cyrille 2001). These details were also substantiated by my research consultants during my fieldwork.

Following WWII, and the 1946 departmental integration with the French state, Martinique witnessed a major wave of urbanization (Murch 1971:19), with a mass rural flight to the capital city Fort de France. With this post-war disruption of rural life, *bèlè* and its related traditions were eclipsed by other commercialized music and urban dance forms, particularly popular genres such as *biguine*, *mazurka*, jazz, and later *zouk*, as well as imported genres like *konpa*, *soukous*, and funk (Berrian 2000:221; Gerstin and Cyrille 2001; Guilbault 1993:32). Workers migrated from countryside communities to urban centers in search of new employment opportunities, mainly in civil service (1993:8), weakening the inter-generational network of rural families that had long preserved the communal practice of the island's drum-dances. By the late-1950s, urbanization had caused the *swaré bèlè* system to disintegrate and the performance of *bèlè* in rural public life had fallen into oblivion (Gerstin 1996:129). High-powered modernization projects based on the French model of development were kicked into gear, and pressures to assimilate to French bourgeois culture became more apparent in the media, the education system, economic change and consumption patterns (Price 1998:180-1). Local traditions, like those associated with *bèlè*, *danmyé*, and *kalennda* were degraded in favor of European high culture—what Martinican intellectuals like Aimé Césaire and Édouard Glissant would later refer to as “cultural genocide,” or “genocide by substitution” (Burton 1995:5; Glissant 1981:173). French cultural workers such as André Malraux from the Ministry of Cultural Affairs lobbied for the establishment of French cultural centers in the French DOMs, but in Martinique, this was met with great opposition by local artists and nationalist politicians.

A number of factors contributed to the ongoing (albeit peripheral) survival of *bèlè* during its post-war eclipse in the 1960s, principally the emergence of folkloric performance troupes, the early audio recordings of *bèlè* families from Sainte Marie, and the cultural programming initiatives of Aimé Césaire during his tenure as mayor of Fort de France. As Gerstin (1996) explains, “[d]uring *bèlè*’s ‘eclipse,’ from the late 1950s well into the 1970s, folkloric troupes served as a conduit through which rural *bèlè* performers established urban reputations for themselves and for their music/dance” (1996:134). Many of these performers were from the northern Atlantic commune of Sainte Marie, which had its own strong tradition of *bèlè* and was relatively accessible from Fort de France.

Romanian folklorist Anca Bertrand worked with the Office of Tourism and had a mandate to develop the arts for the tourist market based on her knowledge of the island’s folklore. She assembled performers from Sainte Marie in performance groups, and organized programs for them around the island, recorded discs of their performances, and assisted in the earliest radio broadcasts of *bèlè*. She also edited and contributed articles to the cultural review magazine *Parallèles*. She worked with renowned *bèlè* singer Emile “Ti-Emile” Caséus and other members of the Caséus family, recruiting *bèlè* performers from their countryside homes in Sainte Marie and bringing them to the city stage of Fort de France (Cally 1999; Zamor 1999). She diffused knowledge of Martinique’s lesser-known and largely denigrated folklore and cultural heritage, and she participated in its “necessary revalorization” (Zamor 1999:348). In one of her *Parallèles* articles, written in 1968, she noted that tourists, especially those who were bored with lying around in the sun, were eager to discover

the heritage and folklore of the island, where “they would find the natural spirits of their hosts” (Bertrand 1968:75-6).

This sort of project was part of a larger pattern in postcolonial cultural development in other parts of the Caribbean during the same period. For example, Deborah Thomas (2004) writes about how cultural policy in postcolonial Jamaica relied heavily on the government’s appropriation of the island’s rural folk traditions to define a national identity of creole nationalism. Katherine Hagedorn’s work (2001) points to a similar trend in Cuba’s cultural policy, which sought to place folk religious expressions on the national stage through the secularized performances of *Santería* by the *Conjunto Folklórico Nacional de Cuba*. What sets Martinique and Guadeloupe apart from the independent island nations of the Caribbean is that folkloric cultural development occurred simultaneously with the assimilationist project of French integration. Independent island nations were more concerned with defining themselves apart from their European colonial powers and their enduring cultural legacies. In the French Antilles, which became overseas departments of France around the same period, cultural development worked in tandem with modernization and assimilation.

Bertrand’s commitment to developing folkloric performance in the tourist market of Martinique led her into a collaborative relationship with Loulou Boislaville and Ronnie Aul. Loulou Boislaville was a Martinican author, composer, interpreter, and director of the *Groupe Folklorique Martiniquais*. The *Groupe Folklorique*, established the same year as Martinique’s 1946 departmentalization, was known for performing folk traditions such as *biguine*, *mazurka*, and *valse* through theatrical staged renditions, but Boislaville desired an enhanced professionalism and organization that the group lacked. In 1966,

he reached out to Katherine Dunham-trained African American choreographer Ronnie Aul, who had previously worked in France with the Ministry of Cultural Affairs.

Boislaville and Aul worked together to professionalize the *Groupe Folklorique*, and they collaborated with Bertrand to establish relationships with Sainte Marie performers, and integrate *bèlè* into their choreographies. The performance of *bèlè* moved from its organic context among rural family networks to choreographed, staged renditions, primarily at hotels and on cruise ships, and the *Groupe Folklorique* traveled to the United States, Europe, and toured the Caribbean with their productions. They danced in colonial-era costumes, and they modified the traditional *bèlè* choreographies as staged adaptations that would appeal to local and international audiences alike.

During *bèlè*'s eclipse in the early 1960s, there were rare audio recordings among Sainte Marie's most prominent tradition bearers. In 1959, a young student architect by the name of Franck Hubert studying in Paris traveled back to his island home in Martinique for vacation. He routinely spent his vacations at his grandmother's home in the rural town of Gros Morne, the town next to Sainte Marie. One day, he witnessed for the first time a *bèlè* performance featuring Ti Emile's group, *Les Foulards Jaunes*, organized by Aimé Césaire's brother-in-law and colleague Aristide Maugée, who was the mayor of Gros Morne. Struck by the rich sound of *bèlè* music and song, Hubert retrieved his tape recording device and recorded what he could of the performance. When he returned to Paris, he passed the recording along to the *Association Générale des Étudiants Martiniquais* (AGEM – General Association of Martinican Students), which was part of the already established anticolonial student movement of Césaire's era in France. They proposed to make a disc of the recordings, but the sound quality

was not very good, as there was too much background noise from the live performance. He returned to Martinique the following year with a plan to record a clearer set of songs that could be used in the production of a disc. He was invited to join Ti Emile, drum master Féfé Maholany, and the acclaimed *bèlè* singer Simeline Rangon at her home, and it was there he recorded an immense collection of songs (interview, May 3, 2014). From these recordings the disc project finally came to fruition as the first recorded disc of *bèlè*, and later became an essential reference for the next generation of *bèlè* revivalists, cultural activists, and musicians learning the tradition.

In 1962, American ethnomusicologist Alan Lomax toured the Lesser Antilles with his recording equipment to carry out musical research on cultural overlap across the different islands (Bilby and Marks 2001). Upon his arrival in Martinique, Lomax made contact with the celebrated Grivalliers family of Sainte Marie, which was made up of several talented singers, drummers, and dancers. “Ti Raoul” Grivalliers’ legendary voice is the one heard primarily on those recordings, and is accompanied by drummer Florent Baratini (Gerstin and Cyrille 2001). Ti Raoul, who occasionally performed with the *Groupe Folklorique Martiniquais* was only 20 years old at the time of Lomax’s encounter, and he survives today among several of his siblings who have also contributed to the *bèlè* movement.¹⁶ Like the recordings of Franck Hubert, Alan Lomax’s collection also became a precious resource for the next generation of cultural activists.

In 1976, Aimé Césaire, then longtime mayor of Fort de France, reorganized the city’s cultural activities under the *Service Municipal d’Action Culturelle* (SERMAC –

¹⁶ Ti Raoul’s brother, Berthé Grivilliers, also a singer of *bèlè*, was very active at the time of my research and passed away just after my return from the field.

Municipal Service of Cultural Action), and commissioned Ti Emile to offer *bèlè* trainings in the city with the administration's new cultural programming initiative. Even though it was the renowned intellectual and politician who advocated for Martinique's 1946 departmentalization, Césaire envisioned a Martinique that would be politically assimilated with France while preserving a distinct cultural heritage (Miles 2001:48-9). The purpose of SERMAC was to combat the ensuing cultural alienation, and *bèlè* would help Martinicans to draw upon their own local cultural references. At the time, the 1970s cultural nationalist communities of the French Antilles emerged as a response to the strong French assimilationist presence on the islands, and had placed Guadeloupean *gwo ka* drum music (and secondarily other African drum traditions like djembe and congas) at the forefront of the struggle for cultural authenticity. The movement for cultural identity had a greater impact in Guadeloupe, where separatist political orientations toward independence from France were stronger; therefore, Guadeloupean *gwo ka* and modernized *gwo ka* fusion genres resonated with radical artistic circles in Martinique, and far outweighed the *bèlè* drum tradition, which had been relegated to the margins of stereotyped folkloric performance that the *retour aux sources* (back to roots) movement sought to combat. *Gwo ka* music represented a more authentic connection with Africa and was a symbol of anti-imperialism, while the *bèlè* drum was generally perceived as a folkloric artifact; *bèlè* performance had become a folklorized symbol of *doudouisme* (sweet lover), a costumed touristic persona comparable with minstrel stock characters of the U.S. and associated with a pastified image of Martinican rural life.

Ti Emile had already established his reputation beyond the neighborhoods of Sainte Marie through various presentations of his folkloric groups *Les Foulards Jaunes* (later called *Lévé Yo Ka*) and *La Fleur Creole*, and through his involvement with the *Groupe Folklorique Martiniquais*. Once Césaire and the municipal secretary of Fort de France, Renaud Degrandmaison, discovered the great potential in developing *bèlè* outside the rural quarters of Sainte Marie and beyond the stage of folkloric performance, particularly for youth activities, Ti Emile was identified as the most appropriate candidate for the job. He offered *bèlè* trainings three times per week at the cockfighting pit of Dillon on the outskirts of Fort de France to large numbers of students recruited by Degrandmaison from the *Association Martiniquaise d'Éducation Populaire* (AMEP - Martinican Association of Popular Education). As the number of students grew, and as awareness of the *bèlè* tradition spread across the city's popular class, Ti Emile's counterparts from Sainte Marie began to assist him with his classes. This format of *bèlè* education at SERMAC was carried on by Jean Claude Lamorandière and Josy Michalon, professionally-trained dancers who were also employed by SERMAC in the mid-1970s, teaching traditional dance classes.

***Bèlè's* Rebirth: Giving the Drum New Life in Contemporary Martinique**

Prior to the 1980s *bèlè* revival, the first small wave of Martinican activist-intellectuals educated in France to have an invested interest in *bèlè* in the 1960s included the likes of Franck Hubert, and his contemporaries Victor Anicet and Marc Pulvar, each of whom spent a significant amount of their time during vacations from school in Sainte Marie at the homes of *bèlè* elders. By the end of the 1960s, Marc Pulvar had become a major link between the rural agricultural workers and tradition bearers of Sainte Marie, and the growing circles of politicized artists and cultural

activists. He was a devoted nationalist, committed to the emancipation of oppressed agricultural workers, and had been moved by the traditions associated with the *bèlè* drum complex that symbolized the spirit of resilience and resistance among the island's poor rural sectors. He grew particularly close to one of Sainte Marie's dance legends, Emile Laposte, with whom he organized different projects up until Laposte's death in 1975.¹⁷

In the late 1970s, the next wave of young (mostly male and middle-class) activist-intellectuals returned to their island home, following years of university study in Paris. Many of them were involved with AGEM in Paris, which was part of a larger radicalized student movement led by Antillean, French Guyanese, and African labor activists and cultural workers pursuing their studies in France. Disillusioned by their experiences with racism, cultural alienation, and second-class treatment 7,000 km from home in the metropole, and newly radicalized by Marxist political ideology, these activists returned to Martinique with a mission to "culturalize their anticolonial, nationalist politics" (interview, July 28, 2014).¹⁸ Having listened to the earlier recordings of *bèlè* recorded by Anca Bertrand and Franck Hubert, they were especially touched by their island's rich drum and song tradition.

By the early 1980s, the students of AGEM had returned home to Martinique, and began collaborating with other local youth organizations in Fort de France to discover more about Martinique's drum heritage. Notable organizations include AMEP, *An Lot Chimèn Pou la Jénès* (ALCPJ - Another Path for the Youth), *Asé Pléré Annou Lité*

¹⁷ See "À la mémoire de Marc Pulvar" on the AM4 website, <http://am4.fr/hommages/marc-pulvar/>, accessed February 1, 2015.

¹⁸ Chapter 4 provides a more in-depth analysis about the ways in which nationalist political orientations merged with the revival of *bèlè*, and the associated debates around the political functions of *bèlè*.

(APAL - Enough Crying, Let's Fight), and *Jeunesse Etudiante Chrétienne* (JEC - Christian Student Youths). Collectively, the leaders and members of these associations turned to the source of *bèlè* drum-dance traditions to confront what they considered to be an island-wide crisis of cultural identity and assimilation (Chapter 4). With other *bèlè* students, they established a tradition of going from Fort de France to Sainte Marie to watch *bèlè* specialists perform in their home communities.

They worked with elders and tradition-bearers to cultivate their knowledge of the *bèlè* culture that had nearly dissolved with the rapid modernization and assimilation projects imposed by France, and to reorganize the structure of *bèlè* in Martinican public life, which had been limited to the model of folkloric performance for tourist spectacles. Setting themselves apart from folkloric performance troupes, the revivalists used a grassroots-oriented approach to challenge exploitative, touristic representations of Martinican culture, and promote *bèlè* as a living culture through the formation of various community-based cultural associations. With the help of the elders from Sainte Marie, they revived the *swaré bèlè* system that had collapsed with urbanization and other societal changes. Much of the story of *bèlè*'s revival focuses on the traditions from Sainte Marie because they received more visibility in Martinican public life with the folkloric performers of Ti Emile's generation. These traditions were also more visible during the post-war wave of urbanization, as Sainte Marie was relatively accessible from Fort de France compared with other regions of the island. However, other regional variations of *bèlè* that survived through oral and kinesthetic transmission were integrated into the revivalist movement. For example, Julien Saban was a specialist and important reference in the excavation of *bèlè* from the northern town Basse Pointe

(*bèlè baspwent*), and Espélisane Sainte-Rose from the southern commune of Anse d'Arlets was a primary reference for *bèlè* of the south (*bèlè lisid*).

It is important to note that many of the middle-class *bèlè* revivalists, raised to identify as French, had parents who prohibited them from practicing *bèlè* when they were children, a time when assimilation was quite strong. *Bèlè* practice was long-associated with negative stereotypes such as *bagay vyé nèg*—a pejorative Kréyòl expression for old, unsophisticated aspects of black culture—or *bagay ki ja pasé*—something of the past, or outdated. It was the culture of old cane cutters who drank too much rum and acted uncivilized—certainly not compatible with the postcolonial assimilation mission that saturated popular culture and the French national education system. Even today, despite the fact that it is increasingly becoming en vogue to learn *bèlè*, the community of *bèlè* practitioners remains a small minority in Martinique (less than 1.5 percent of the total population). Most Martinicans either continue to ignore or reject *bèlè* as part of the local heritage, or they admire it from a distance as folklore while taking very little interest in learning.

Since the 1980s launch of the *bèlè* movement, the revivalists have worked to reverse negative stereotypes and promote more affirming images of the *danmyé-kalennda-bèlè* (DKB) complex. They have created several *bèlè* schools and developed a rigorous dance and drum pedagogy based on a written, codified system of the *bèlè* repertoire. The public performance of these traditions is sustained by the *swaré bèlè* system—participatory performance gatherings whereby “initiated” dancers, drummers, and singers—those who have an advanced command of the repertoire—come together

on a scheduled date (once or twice per month) to play *bèlè* until the early hours of the morning.

Unlike professional folkloric troupes that present Martinique's traditional culture in staged, choreographed renditions—often criticized for reproducing exoticized stereotypes of Antillean culture—these open, participatory performance gatherings function through an unscripted rotation of skilled practitioners. The *swaré bèlè* is ceremonially organized to uphold the values of honor, respect, collectivity, and solidarity that are transmitted in *bèlè* schools and guided by a shared moral order. These events also provide a space to pay homage to the ancestors and protest the legacies of racism, colonialism, and capitalism. The professional folkloric model of *bèlè* performance was the dominant image of *bèlè* after WWII, before the revival. Even though the folkloric troupes are criticized by the *bèlè* revivalists for perpetuating denaturalized, stereotyped images of *bèlè* and of the rural past, they are also credited with having diffused the *bèlè* tradition through the professional performance model, raising awareness about the indigenous roots of Martinique. The folkloric performance structure also provided a means for poor performers from the rural countryside, many of whom worked on plantations, in factories, or as informal vendors, to supplement their income.

Today, the *bèlè* subculture continues to flourish and grow, owing in great part to the 1980s activists and revivalists. The practice of *bèlè* and other associated traditions is organized, maintained, and taught through the work of several cultural associations spanning the island's urban and rural towns. Most of these associations, born of the collaborative efforts of the 1970s and 1980s youth groups mentioned above, exist today as *associations loi 1901*—the French equivalent of a non-profit organization, chartered

by the law of 1901 declared for sports clubs, arts groups, and other special interest groups. Therefore, their funding and administrative operating depends on the French government. The majority of these *bèlè* associations belong to a coalition, the *Coordination Lawonn Bèlè*, which seeks to achieve overlapping goals for advancing the *bèlè* movement. The coalition meets annually for the *Jounèn Moun Bèlè* (*Bèlè* Community Day), during which they confirm their calendar of *swaré bèlè* dates for the year, have seminars related to drum, song, and dance technique, and discuss/debate the state of affairs in the *bèlè* movement. Each association selects a date for hosting an annual or semi-annual *swaré bèlè*, and those *swaré bèlè* are intended to function through the principles of cooperation and solidarity, respect for the elders, and honor to the ancestors. Therefore, members are encouraged to attend the events of other associations. They have all formed their own individual versions of *lékòl bèlè* (*bèlè* schools), based on a (mostly) shared and agreed-upon pedagogical orientation. They also share an agreed upon moral guide, called *Larèl Swaré Bèlè*, which governs the etiquette, conventions, and behavior of formal *swaré bèlè*. Although each association belonging to the coalition maintains its own identity, many of them tend to promote to their members some version of nationalist political thought, and an ethos of resistance to racism and colonialism. They encourage specific economic practices and strategies to uplift the local economy—local artisans, local farmers, small vendors, and the like.

In the early 2000s, under the leadership of then-mayor Guy Lordinot, the municipal government of Sainte Marie launched the initiative *La Maison du Bèlè* (the House of *Bèlè*), a museum exhibition and cultural institution located in the Sainte Marie neighborhood of *Reculée*. The goal of *La Maison du Bèlè* is to bring greater recognition

to the old tradition bearers and encourage their involvement in today's *bèlè* activities. Indeed, many of the leaders of the urban-based revival and founders of the *bèlè* associations scattered throughout Fort de France and across various island communities do their part in paying homage to their elders who passed the tradition onto their generation of cultural activists. The elders receive special tributes at the *swaré bèlè* gatherings organized by the associations, and their transportation from Sainte Marie to various *swaré bèlè* and other events is arranged by the *Coordination Lawonn Bèlè* and *La Maison du Bèlè*. A high priority for the members hosting the event is to make sure the elders are comfortable in their reserved seating, having an enjoyable time, and able to participate in the performance rotation.

La Maison du Bèlè goes a step further in giving the elders a more engaged, professional role in the ongoing transmission of *bèlè*. Drummers, singers, and dancers from prominent rural *bèlè* families, like Grivalliers, Rastocle, Cébarec, and Jupiter (to name a few), have been officially designated by the institution under the concept *Les Maîtres du Bèlè* (*Bèlè Masters*), and they have had various opportunities to produce studio albums and travel internationally for performances and workshops. *La Maison du Bèlè* has also initiated artist residency programs whereby local and foreign cultural workers are invited to come and exchange with the *Bèlè Masters*. Funding for *La Maison du Bèlè* comes through different levels of governmental support, including the *Direction Régionale des Affaires Culturelles* (DRAC – France's state-level Regional Direction of Cultural Affairs), the *Conseil Régionale* (Regional Council), *Conseil Générale* (department-level General Council), and Sainte Marie's municipal government.

La Maison du Bèlè's museum exhibit takes visitors on a journey recounting the story of *bèlè*'s survival among large rural families of practitioners, and the cultural activists of contemporary times. Photos and biographical sketches provide guests with a glimpse of the everyday lifeways of the countryside that fostered the development of the island's drum heritage. Rather than mythologizing *bèlè* elders as folkloric heroes of a frozen past, the vision of *La Maison du Bèlè* is to bring their past and present contributions to life. Therefore, aside from the exhibit, interactive programs and lessons are in place to give guests a hands-on experience with the dance and music.

Despite the fact that many of the *Bèlè* Masters are fatigued and aging, they hold contracts with the institution to protect their professional engagement and ensure fair recognition and compensation for their work. One day in 2011, I had the occasion of having lunch with Audrey, *La Maison du Bèlè*'s first director and daughter of Mayor Lordinot (who at the time of our meeting, no longer worked with the institution). She explained how rewarding it was for her at the inception of the project in 2003 to unite the families of Sainte Marie under a single cultural heritage entity. It is no secret that notable *bèlè* families from the Sainte Marie area have their own history of family rivalries and competition. Audrey and I talked about how her approach gave the elders an opportunity to work together, collectively expressing their own voices, visions, and authority regarding the direction of the institution's projects. She took her time to assess and culminate the different conceptions of *bèlè* held by the elders and the active associations of the *Coordination Lawonn Bèlè*, and apply them in *La Maison du Bèlè*'s programming. From my meeting with Audrey and my subsequent encounters with the *Bèlè* Masters over the course of my extended field research, I get the impression that

there exists a remarkable sense of gratitude for the high esteem brought to the rural network of *bèlè* actors by *La Maison du Bèlè*.

As I note in the introductory chapter, the *bèlè* community is often described as its own society in Martinican society. How have *bèlè* proponents negotiated and redefined the terms of belonging to the French state as the island's cultural citizens, and in what ways do their ideas accommodate and/or subvert the imposed model of French national membership? This dissertation attempts to answer these questions through a close examination of the discourse, counterarguments, and proposals for alternative strategies of *bèlè* development. The chapter that follows is an (auto)ethnographic reflection on dance ethnography that explains my methodological and analytical approach to formulating research questions and organizing my analysis of the *bèlè* movement's most salient issues.

Table 2-1 Movement and Dance Styles Observed in Research

Name	Description
Bèlè Samaritain (Bèlè Linò)	<p>A set of 6 bèlè dance/music styles from the northern Atlantic commune Sainte Marie and surrounding communities. These dances use the <i>quadrille</i> dance configuration of eight dancers: Four <i>danm</i> (female dancers), four <i>kavalyé</i> (male dancers). Each of these dances open with the <i>wondi – dewondi</i>, when the group moves in a counterclockwise direction, then reverses the circle in a clockwise direction to return to their places.</p> <p>After each of the two <i>carré</i> (squares) have completed their sequence, each couple dances a <i>monté o tanbou</i> sequence, whereby the two dancers dance in the center of the circle in playful exchange, and dance toward to drummer to give him/her a salutation. This set of dances, especially “<i>bèlè</i>” and “<i>bidjin bèlè</i>,” are the styles most frequently practiced in public <i>bèlè</i> gatherings (<i>swaré bèlè</i>, <i>moman bèlè</i>, <i>bèlè mawon</i>, etc.).¹⁹</p>
Bèlè	<p>Sometimes called “<i>bèlè balansé</i>,” “<i>bèlè kourant</i>,” or “<i>bèlè cho</i>” to indicate a heightened energy of the dance. The movements are more dynamic and have a greater intensity.</p>

¹⁹ “Bèlè Linò,” Vimeo video, posted by “CMaddox7,” August 20, 2015, <https://vimeo.com/136842090>. To access video, use password: UF7684.

Table 2-1 Continued.

Name	Description
Bidjin Bèlè	Sometimes called “ <i>bèlè dous</i> ” to indicate a softer energy of the dance. The rhythms are less rapid, and the movements are more calm, fluid, or gentle. In most cases, the dancers are more flirtatious or coquettish in their interactions.
Bèlè Pitché	Danced with moderate energy, and includes an accentuated break in movement or striking of the feet each time the drummer plays a marked beat in the rhythmic sequence.
Gran Bèlè	Sometimes referred to as a dance of prayer because of its solemn character, as dancers move fluidly in a continuous circular pattern.
Bélya	Referred to as a call to assemble, gather, and congregate, for example to announce important news or relay a story. This dance can also express hope. During the <i>monté o tanbou</i> sequence, couples move to salute each of the other six dancers in a counterclockwise direction.
Bouwo	Sometimes called “ <i>mazouka bèlè</i> ,” “ <i>marin bèlè</i> ,” this dance is not seen as frequently as the others in the <i>bèlè linò</i> repertoire. Uses the same choreography as bélya for saluting the other six dancers during the <i>monté o tanbou</i> , and uses only the gesture called “ <i>alé-viré</i> .”

Table 2-1 Continued.

Name	Description
Lalin Klè	A set of five “full moon” group dances. ²⁰
Mabèlo	Danced in double-line formation, whereby partners approach one another with the signal of the drum and the chant “ <i>zip, zap, zabap</i> ,” and bump their torsos/pelvises against one other.
Kannigwé	Danced in double-line formation, remcouples follow the commands of the lead singer, who instructs them to move forward, backward, change places, and hold and dance with one another in ballroom style movements and turns.
Bénézwel	Two variants: One danced in a single-line formation, another danced in a double-line formation. All dancers begin with the movement “ <i>tonbé-lévé</i> ” as they form their lines and take their places. Females shift into the “ <i>bidjin bal</i> ” movement while the males continue the “ <i>tonbé-lévé</i> ,” and with the signal of the drum, femsales and males dance toward one another using the “ <i>grajé</i> ” movement.
Ting Bang	Danced in circular configuration, whereby dancers move in a successive counterclockwise direction, striking their feet while facing the person next to them, and then doing a half-turn to repeat the same movement facing the person on the other side.

²⁰ “Lalin Klè,” Vimeo video, posted by “CMaddox7,” August 20, 2015, <https://vimeo.com/136844083>. To access video, use password: UF7684.

Table 2-1 Continued.

Name	Description
Woulé Mango	Meaning “rolling mango,” danced in circular configuration, whereby dancers lock arms, and each dancer takes a turn dancing in the center to salute the other dancers, before falling into and rolling around the circle of locked arms. The objective of the game is to keep the arms locked as the dancer passes by each set of linked arms.
Ladja/Danmyé	Combat/martial art tradition between two combatants in the center of a circle. ²¹
Kalenda Yonn Apré Lòt	Solo dance featuring competitive interplay between the dancer and the drummer. Described as “ <i>yonn apré lòt</i> ” meaning one after the other, because of the successive rotation of soloists. When one soloist completes her/his turn, another solo dancer follows immediately behind. ²²
Bèlè Baspwent	<i>Bèlè</i> from the northern commune of Basse Pointe. These dance styles, like those found in <i>bèlè linò</i> , are called <i>bèlè</i> , <i>bidjin bèlè</i> , <i>gran bèlè</i> , and <i>bélya</i> . However, they are not danced in the same way as <i>bèlè linò</i> , and their choreographies include both double-line and circular formations. There is closer and more frequent face-to-face interaction between dance couples, and with the drummer.

²¹ “Ladja/Danmyé,” Vimeo video, posted by “CMaddox7,” August 20, 2015, <https://vimeo.com/136824868>. To access video, use password: UF7684.

²² “Kalenda,” Vimeo video, posted by “CMaddox7,” August 20, 2015, <https://vimeo.com/136826520>. To access video, use password: UF7684.

Table 2-1 Continued.

Name	Description
Bèlè	
Bidjin Bèlè	
Gran Bèlè	
Bélya	
Bèlè Lisid	<p><i>Bèlè</i> from the south of the island (primarily the town of Anses-d'Arlet). These dance styles, like those found in <i>bèlè linò</i>, are called <i>bèlè</i> and <i>gran bèlè</i>. However, they are not danced in the same way as <i>bèlè linò</i>, and there are different choreographic variants for both styles.</p>
Bèlè	
Gran Bèlè	
Kalennda Lisid	<p>Sometimes called "<i>mayoumbé</i>." A group dance open to an unlimited number of participants (couples) who dance together in playful harmony, executing any variety of steps they wish to execute in sync with the drummers' rhythmic sequences.</p>

CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY: *REFLEXIVITY AND POSITIONALITY* IN DANCE (AUTO)ETHNOGRAPHY

The extended field research for this dissertation was carried out over the course of 18 months, beginning in January 2013 and ending in August 2014. The methodology used in this research included dance participant observation, open-ended and semi-structured interviews, and the collection of life histories. I also employed photography and videography, and I carried out archival research. During my short, preliminary research trips to Martinique in 2009 and 2011, I quickly learned that my ability to gather answers to my research questions, and to analyze the experiences and perspectives of my *bèlè* interlocutors, would depend on my understanding of the dance itself. Dancing *bèlè* as a method of participant observation became an almost daily research activity during the course of my extended research. As I discussed in the previous chapter, *bèlè* and the other drum traditions like *kalennda* and *ladja/danmyé* fall within a larger complex, or continuum of related practices that all use Martinique's *bèlè* drum, the *tibwa*, and call-and-response music. Even though this research is centered on the repertoire of set dances called *bèlè*, the DKB (*danmyé*, *kalennda*, *bèlè*) cultural movement is a wider heritage project that aims to valorize and diffuse the range of styles associated with the island's indigenous *bèlè* drum. This means that the participants and observers of the *bèlè* public are more or less engaged with all of these traditions.

As someone with a background in dance and performance, I was well positioned to engage with research interlocutors in everyday dance settings. Participant observation is an effective method for getting to know the people around us in a social setting, and becoming acclimated to their everyday routines (Emerson et al. 1995:1-2).

In my research, participant observation allowed me to use my body in movement and my written notes to understand the process of preserving and promoting local cultural forms and traditions. Immersion in the *bèlè* community gave me a sense of the key issues being debated by different actors who are involved with *bèlè* cultural programming and performance. It also allowed me to record and follow the cultural sensibilities, habits, and consumption patterns of research participants. Observations were recorded extensively in field notes, logs, and jottings (Bernard 2011:292). I interviewed *bèlè* dancers, singers, and drummers, as well as workers in cultural heritage management. Open-ended interviews were conducted in the early months of field research to detect matters of importance to the groups of interest (Schensul et al. 1999:121). As the project progressed, after I had come to identify the key issues and master the French and Kréyòl languages, I carried out semi-structured interviews using interview guides with selected participants. These interviews were recorded on a tablet with digital audio and video recorders. Interviewees were asked a series of questions about their personal background and demographic information. They were also asked questions about the different functions that *bèlè* practice serves in their everyday lives. Questions often elicited comments related to their assessment of cultural programming, the impact of assimilation and the meaning of French citizenship, perceptions of nationalism, independence, and the colonial legacy, and the importance of local cultural expressions in Martinique. On occasion, life history interviews were conducted with important actors of the *bèlè* revival to capture “narratives of experience” from those involved with the preservation and revival of the tradition (1999:138). Life histories

helped me obtain a clear understanding of how *bèlè* was treated historically, and the motivations behind the 1980s *bèlè* revival.

Photography and videography were used to visually capture the practice and discourse of *bèlè* activists and practitioners. Events that were video recorded were later watched with dancers, drummers, and singers to stimulate conversation on dance styles, as well as the planning and execution of different cultural programs and performances. I completed a video elicitation study with a small group of *bèlè* elders from the northern commune of Sainte Marie, heralded as the birthplace as *bèlè linò* (*bèlè* from the north, *bèlè Samaritain*), the most widely practiced style of *bèlè* in Martinique today. This method “elicit[ed] critical commentary” on the style and meaning of *bèlè* dance expression (Reed 2010:21). The group of elders was recorded performing together, and later participated in a group interview while watching a series of recordings with directed questions on the function and meaning of their performance style. For example, we spent time talking about how styles of dance and song have changed, evolved, or been transformed with the urban renewal or across generations.

Because *bèlè* is a tradition that was orally and kinesthetically transmitted, there is not much historical material to be found in Martinique’s official archives and collections. I did, however, make good use of the records and literature held by *bèlè* associations dating back to the early 1990s. For example, the quarterly bulletins of the association AM4 (1991 – present) include event announcements, information on the progress and activities of the association and the wider *bèlè* movement, critical reflections about the place of *bèlè* in Martinican society in historic and contemporary times, and guidelines for students and followers of the tradition. I also found it useful to peruse the old calendars

and programs of the *Centre Martiniquais d'Action Culturelle* (CMAC – the Martinican Center for Cultural Action), also known as The Atrium, a large performing arts center featuring dance and theater productions, music concerts, film screenings, and art installations, located in downtown Fort de France. CMAC is a large cultural institution funded and administered by the French state as well as the regional and departmental councils. Therefore, it has a somewhat controversial history for its implication in assimilationist cultural programming. At the time of its founding in the mid-1970s, it was intended to foster the valorization of local folk culture and French metropolitan culture, but some might argue that it was not a fair balance. Over time, The Atrium has become Martinique's national stage, encouraging the exchange of artistic works from Europe, the Americas, and the Caribbean. In perusing the previous programs of The Atrium, I had a sense of what kinds of local, metropolitan, and international arts programs were favored and showcased by this Martinican cultural institution.

As a dance ethnographer, I regularly attended and participated in *bèlè* dance classes 3-4 times per week with various cultural associations. I learned to dance primarily with *Tanbou Bô Kannal*, *Mi Mes Manmay Matinik* (AM4), *Lézinisyé*, *Madinn Yo - Lakou Trankil*, and to a lesser extent other associations that offer *bèlè* classes. My goal was to gather a wide range of conceptions of *bèlè* beyond that of one single association and observe different modes of transmission. I also attended forums, conferences with panels of *bèlè* specialists and intellectuals, festivals, and I danced at participatory performance gatherings, such as *moman bèlè* and *swaré bèlè*, tourist presentations, and one staged performance celebrating the 40th anniversary of *Tanbou Bô Kannal*. Employing the notions of *positionality* and *reflexivity*, this chapter explains

the ways in which my dancing enabled me to: 1) establish a good rapport with potential research participants; 2) enhance my understanding of the Kréyòl language, which comprises the *bèlè* music and dance vocabulary and is primarily spoken in *bèlè* settings; 3) discover and interpret a range of local attitudes, manners, and expressions communicated through *bèlè*; and 4) access a complex system of embodied knowledge and values that holds great importance for an increasing number of Martinicans. But first, a word about the intellectual tradition that helped to inspire this project.

The Legacy of Katherine Dunham: Reflexivity and the Dancing Body as a Research Tool

My research interests in dance were largely inspired by the legacy and work of Katherine Dunham. Katherine Dunham was a world-renowned choreographer and dance anthropologist who worked with various dance communities of the African diaspora to understand the function of dance and sacred embodied knowledge, primarily in the Caribbean, but also in Latin America, the U.S., and West Africa. Although she is more popularly known for her contributions to the entertainment industry and the world of modern dance, notably from her work with the Katherine Dunham Dance Company, much of her intellectual work resonates with scholars such as myself who investigate anthropological issues through the lens of artistic expression and creativity.¹ Her famous Dunham technique was developed based on the rigorous dance research methodologies she applied in her fieldwork throughout the mid-20th century, most prominently featuring sacred dance expressions practiced by Afro-Caribbean populations (Chin 2014). In 1935 and 1936, Dunham traveled to Haiti, Jamaica,

¹ Dunham pursued her training in anthropology at the University of Chicago, where she had the opportunity to work with notable figures such as Robert Redfield, Edward Sapir, and Bronislaw Malinowski. She was also advised by anthropologist Melville Herskovits from Northwestern University who had a reputation as an intellectual authority on African diaspora anthropology.

Trinidad, and Martinique; among the four island societies in which she immersed herself, it was in Haiti that she found her second home, among practitioners of the Haitian Vodou religion to which she became an initiate. She analyzed the practice of sacred dance repertoires to understand how Vodou shapes the material conditions of Haitian society. Franz Boas reminded Dunham, just before her departure for the islands, that as a dancer she would discover cultural knowledge that was inaccessible to non-dancers (Aschenbrenner 1999:142).

Dunham was a pioneer, pushing boundaries in the academy in ways that no one else had dared. As Faye V. Harrison (1990) reflects on her pedagogical approach, she writes that Dunham (along with some of her contemporaries like Zora Neale Hurston) “successfully sought powerful ways to bring anthropological understanding to audiences much wider than that of an academic readership” (1990:2). Dunham was known for integrating performance and demonstration into her academic presentation style (i.e. in conference settings or in front of panels of judges evaluating research proposals), and her approach has proven to be methodologically effective in gaining insight to emic perspectives.

Other dance ethnographers have followed this approach (although they, except Yvonne Daniel, unfortunately do not always acknowledge Dunham as the progenitor), arguing that dance participation is central in gaining an in-depth understanding of dance culture as social process, political action, and embodied knowledge (Buckland 1999; Daniel 1995, 2005; Reed 1998; Sklar 1991). With the poststructural and postmodern turn in anthropology, the terms *reflexivity* and *positionality* emerged as new ways of challenging objectivist social science, which all too often ignores the power dynamics

between the researcher and the researched, or outsider and insider. In James Clifford's (1986) introduction to the anthology *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, he calls for new ethnographic approaches, particularly those which are experimental and reflexive, in order to dismantle colonizing representations of the "Other" and offset the relations of power and difference that characterize ethnographic authority. Feminist ethnographers responded to this critique, notably in the 1995 collection *Women Writing Culture* (Behar and Gordan 1995), by reminding Clifford and colleagues that women anthropologists had been writing innovative and liberatory ethnography for years. Through much of the twentieth century, these women were "exiled," their contributions erased from the canon, as anthropologist Ruth Behar would argue. They were often dismissed or met with criticism for blurring the disciplinary lines between anthropology and literature, lacking scientific rigor, and having personal experience situated within their analyses (Behar 1995:4-5). With shifting intellectual currents, these debates have opened the door for contemporary anthropologists to engage and produce theoretically-grounded knowledge in diverse ways, without running the same risk of being silenced.

As both methodological and analytical tools, reflexivity and positionality allow the researcher to assess and evaluate how her own identity influences the process of data collection and the culminating interpretations of data. With reflexive writing, the ethnographer is personal in style and transparent about how she navigates fieldwork dilemmas and negotiates her difference from her research subjects, while simultaneously trying to immerse herself and become one with the community. Lanita Jacobs-Huey (2006) defends the practice of reflexivity when she writes,

being reflexive enables a researcher to critically consider her or his own cultural biases and negotiate various ways of seeing while investigating and “translating” culture(s). A reflexive perspective is also particularly sensitive to the socially constructed nature of knowledge production (2006:132).

Gina Ulysse makes a compelling case for reflexivity as “a new mode of academic activism” (2007:6). Her political commitments and her “alter(ed)native perspective” allow her to engage research interlocutors and consultants as theorists of their own experiences (Ibid:6-7). In her ethnography *Downtown Ladies: Informal Commercial Importers, a Haitian Anthropologist and Self-making in Jamaica*, Ulysse reveals to readers the ways in which her field research experience was impacted by her racial identity, color, nationality, class, education, and self-presentation (specifically her preferred style of hair and clothing). This mode of ethnographic storytelling lays out a fascinating portrait of the power dynamics at play in Jamaica’s cultural, political, and economic landscape. Reflexive approaches to the ethnographic enterprise have become integral to the important agenda of “decolonizing anthropology” (Harrison 1997), and more specifically feminist anthropology (Bolles 1995), whereby key concerns include the politics of representation, ethnographic authority, and the anthropologist’s positionality. It is my goal to add to this important anthropological intervention.

While most anthropologists are inclined to make the claim that these approaches have their roots in poststructural and postmodern anthropology, it is important to acknowledge that Dunham was an early foremother of reflexive anthropology, long before it became en vogue (Davis 2014:108-10). Elizabeth Chin (2014) argues, “well before American ethnographers turned to such questions as reflexivity, experimental writing, and performativity, Dunham made use of these strategies...” (Chin 2014:80).

Unfortunately, because Dunham was not taken seriously as an anthropologist, her early interventions in the field were often overlooked.

Doing Dance Ethnography in Martinique

During Dunham's brief 1930s field research in Martinique, she focused much of her time and attention discovering *ladja*.² In fact, her observations of this martial art combat tradition inspired her ballet production of *L'Ag'Ya*.³ However, compared with her Haiti experience, Dunham was left a bit unfulfilled by the dance culture of 1930s Martinique. In 1935, she wrote a letter to Herskovits reporting that "the people are much amalgamated," and that "there is much more to be done here psychologically than artistically or anthropologically" (Dunham, cited in Clark 1994:197). She goes on to write that "there is just nothing to see, but I hang on, hoping" (Ibid). My work in Martinique, 80 years later, seeks to reconcile Dunham's disillusionment with Martinique's cultural landscape. Indeed, Dunham's observation that the people were "amalgamated" is an early indication that colonial assimilation had nearly eradicated aspects of black religious heritage and dance culture for which she longed in the pursuit of her research interests.

In my research, my objective was to understand how the *bèlè* community defined itself apart from the model of national belonging and assimilation imposed by France. With departmentalization as a strategy for decolonization, Martinicans faced enormous pressure to reject their Antillean cultural specificity, and embrace French culture in order to be fully recognized as members of the French state. *Bèlè* cultural activists do not

² Ladjas fighters, "Ag'Ya Danmyé Ladjas Compilation," YouTube video, 3:33, posted by "Capoeira Science," December 21, 2006, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RI4CEEse_fl.

³ Katherine Dunham, "Ag'Ya, 1947," YouTube video, :46, posted by "Hilton Sousa," November 30, 2006, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iM8xp_1R9Ew.

exclusively identify as French citizens; they identify as African descendants, practicing an Afro-Creole tradition that was created by their enslaved ancestors, and they unapologetically make claims of belonging to the African diaspora, challenging the legacies of racism, colonialism, and economic exploitation that have impacted black people all over the world. They are invested in enactments of cultural *marronage* (resistance), valorizing cultural traditions and values that were historically repressed and discouraged by the colonial regime. *Bèlè* activists make concerted efforts to find points of connection with their Afro-Caribbean counterparts from neighboring islands of the Antilles, as well as Africans from the continent, through their travels and cultural exchanges with practitioners of other African-derived traditions. They have worked to transform an educational system where the curriculum has rendered the presence and cultural contributions of Afro-Creoles invisible. These are all conclusions that I have been able to arrive at by being fully engaged and immersed as a dancing practitioner of *bèlè*.

People's remarks on my participation as a dancer of *bèlè* often elicited conversations that spoke directly to the questions guiding my project. Had I not danced, and, in turn, received feedback and commentary on my progress and style of dancing, I would not have come to understand the full range of values upheld within the *bèlè* community. All too often, researchers observe from the sideline, like a fly on the wall, taking notes and making observations. While this might help the researcher to maintain some objective distance from the research community, observations of this kind are limited in scope and lack the breadth of understanding that can be achieved through full immersion and participation. This is especially important for foreign scholars who are

regarded by research subjects with some suspicion, because our goals and objectives are often not clear, and people are protective about the details of their everyday lives, and about the traditions that they passionately defend.

On several occasions, even before I had come to comfortably understand the French and Kréyòl languages without an interpreter, I heard comments such as “it’s because you are a *négresse* that you understand *bèlè* the way you do,” or “it’s because you are a *négresse* that you can dance *bèlè* with the comfort that you do,” and “yes, you come from the U.S. but you are a black American, so it is in your spirit; *nou tout sòti lafrik* (we all come from Africa).” My identity as a black American woman and an outsider interested in Martinique’s traditional dance culture impacted not only how I was received and perceived by Martinicans, but also how I would receive and perceive the information that was shared with me. According to many of my interlocutors, it is our mutual belonging to the African diaspora and our shared cultural sensibilities and resilience that explain my ability not only to execute the dance in its great complexity, but also to integrate and deeply understand the emotional, communicative power of *bèlè* performance. Dunham recounted similar experiences, writing that it was her racial affinity with the people of Haiti that made her integration and her ability to key into and master the special art of Vodou’s sacred dance almost seamless (Dunham 1983[1947]:15).

This kind of reflection may sound arrogant, which is not my goal. All this is not to say that my foreignness did not present its own set of challenges—challenges that should be pointed out here for what they revealed about the values intrinsic to *bèlè*. It would be remiss if I did not disclose the fact that many in the *bèlè* community had their

suspicious about me upon my arrival, and for good reason. *Bèlè* activists have worked diligently to recover aspects of the *bèlè* culture that were almost lost through *bèlè*'s eclipse, and to combat negative images and stereotypes associated with the tradition. Therefore, they are vigilant about protecting *bèlè* from any form of misrepresentation. I noticed early on in my field research that cultivating certain relationships would take time, and I understood that not everyone would warmly receive my presence. It would require that I remain patient, taking the time to make my intentions known and my purpose clear, and devote my energy to learning from people of various backgrounds (class, education, rural/urban, etc.). I took my time to carefully craft my formal interview questions, after months of close observation and informal interviews. And I would have to be open and receptive to criticism about my dancing.

Just as my interlocutors readily gave me praise for my efforts at integration and my ability to execute the dance, they also critiqued me and pointed out my flaws. There had been established a certain level of affinity, comfort, and familiarity that opened the lines of communication and dialogue. From the conversations and critiques regarding my dance style, I came to understand the importance of humility and non-verbal communication as ancestral values of *bèlè* practice.

Humility

One should not practice *bèlè* with the expectation of achieving stardom. When you are dancing *bèlè* you are engaged with a complete ensemble of fellow dancers, drummers, and singers, and although playful or competitive display are important elements of the group interaction, you are not there to put on your own personal show. You are there to celebrate and rejoice, to release and pray, to unite and exchange with others. Adding to the principle of humility, dance students are encouraged to wait until

they are truly ready to dance publicly, especially at *swaré bèlè*. Even though the performance sequence at *swaré bèlè* functions through an unscripted, unplanned rotation of dancers, singers, and drummers, there is an understood code that one should not dance at these events unless s/he has mastered and can comfortably execute the full repertoire of *bèlè* choreographies, placements, and movements/steps, and understand her role as part of a larger collective ensemble. If one is not “initiated,” or prepared to dance to any given *bèlè* style or song that may be spontaneously played, then it is not yet her or his time to dance at a *swaré bèlè*, especially not before a *bèlè* elder or a more advanced practitioner who is ready to take their place in the rotation. The idea is to honor those who have come before you, and respect your *bèlè* comrades. Without this code of respect and humility as operative guidelines for participatory dance rituals, it would be impossible to achieve the optimal energy required for a successful *bèlè* event.⁴ The feedback that I received following these occasions gave me the ability to interpret the *bèlè* ethical code from an insider’s perspective.

Communication

When I first began dancing *bèlè*, I had a difficult time discerning the appropriate dance behaviors for certain dance situations. By observing my advanced interlocutors, I noticed that on some occasions, the dancers interacted flirtatiously and playfully with one another; on other occasions, the dancers projected a more reserved or unforthcoming attitude; and still on other occasions, the dancers appeared to be engaged in a sort of competition. Before I understood the range of songs and dance

⁴ Some of my closer interlocutors could say I learned this the hard way the first couple of times I danced at *swaré bèlè*. After I had spent a few weeks intensively participating in *bèlè* classes and closely observing the functioning of *swaré bèlè*, I felt I had reached a competent level of mastery to begin dancing publicly. While I would not go so far to say that I “broke” the energy of the *swaré bèlè*, it was clear to me and other observers that I did not dance with comfort and ease.

situations that call for specific styles of partner and group interaction, I often found myself dancing in ways that would be deemed inappropriate to knowledgeable onlookers (i.e. dancing too openly with more advanced male dancers, and not yet mastering the game of pursuit and retreat between male-female dance couples, not smiling or making eye contact with my partner). One evening, after dancing at *Lakou Trankil*, I asked some of my interlocutors how they interpreted my dance that evening, and one responded with the questions, “what is it that you’re communicating while dancing a particular style of *bèlè*? And how well are you communicating with the rest of the ensemble while you’re dancing?” (personal communication, April 26, 2013).

Bodily and musical communication with the *bèlè* ensemble is one of the most important elements of the dance. Are you listening to the rhythmic pattern that the drummer is playing for you, and are you executing footwork that lets the drummer know that you are in sync with him or her? Do you have the kinesthetic sense to know when your movements and body placement are harmonized with the other dancers participating in the *quadrille* (square dance-style choreography)? Are you attentive to the varying degrees of intensity in the singer’s voice, which signal the kind of energy that your movements should match? Do you understand the coded metaphors of the Kréyòl lyrical content? Are you dancing too openly/seductively with (or conversely, too withdrawn or detached from) your partner? All of these questions are pertinent to the element of communication in *bèlè*, and to the questions guiding my larger project. The *bèlè* tradition was built on the principles of collectivity, solidarity, and sharing in communal activities, all of which require multiple styles of communication. These communicative values were creatively enacted and transmitted as strategies of

camouflaged resistance by the enslaved ancestors, and are defended today by *bèlè* tradition bearers. This is a precious piece of embodied knowledge that I would not have come to understand without my full participation and immersion in the dance space.

Dance expression has always been a source of therapy and affirmation in my life; my dance background combined with my research interests in dance and other folk healing rituals of the African diaspora allowed me to recognize the transformative power of dance in the lives of Martinican diasporic subjects dealing with their distinct set of social issues. As I draft my notes for this section of my dissertation, I cannot help but tune into the #blacklivesmatter manifestations taking place in my home city Baltimore, Maryland demanding justice for Freddie Gray, and draw comparisons with expressions of resistance in Martinique. According to Fanon's ([1963] 2004) analysis "On Violence" in *The Wretched of the Earth*, the dance and possession rituals of colonized peoples are sources of liberation, to exorcise the muscular and emotional tension that is characteristic of the colonized body. In Baltimore, the images of the Michael Jackson impersonator, dancing skaters, *capoeiristas*, West African dances, local marching band bands, and sage smudging rituals to purify the streets, all lead me to reflect on the significance of drum-dance rituals like *bèlè* and *danmyé* that animated the streets of Fort de France during the 2009 strike protests (discussed in Chapter 4). The connection here is important and warrants serious attention. These contemporary street healing rituals that we are witnessing during heightened moments of revolt and resistance to injustice have meaning as expressions of the oppressed, and they have deeper roots in the subjective experience of colonial and racial subjugation.

My integration in the *bèlè* community as a dancing participant observer took me to a variety of settings where the tradition is practiced and performed. What follows is a series of vignettes and descriptions of the places, people, and situations I encountered in my quest to understand the representation and modes of transmission of *bèlè* in everyday life. It was in these contexts that I met and befriended my interlocutors, explained the purpose of my research, and initiated open-ended conversations related to the project. Some situations were more comfortable than others. Some occasions were playful and convivial, while others had a more solemn ambiance. Some encounters humbled me in my role as an eager and earnest dance student, while others necessitated that I defend my presence and purpose in order to protect my professional integrity as a researcher.

Using my body as a research tool, I executed dances and movement styles based on the culmination of my observations, notes, interview responses, and personal sensibility. In fact, there were times when I questioned whether I was dancing too much, and not writing enough. It is my hope that what I recount here regarding my dance immersion experience, as a method of acquiring embodied knowledge, will enrich the stories and the analyses found in the chapters that follow, painting a picture of the *bèlè* social world that captivated me from my first visit to the island. I want to begin by reflecting on my experience with *bèlè* transmission and my immersion in both formal and informal learning settings. These fieldnote excerpts highlight the early, initiatory phases of my learning *bèlè*, and my dance maturation over the years of study.

Formal and Informal Learning in the Bèlè Scene

It is May 2009, during my first research trip to Martinique. I spent the first couple of weeks here telling the folks who have graciously hosted me that I was looking for a bèlè dance class. I don't have a car to get around on my own, and public transportation is either unreliable or non-existent in the evenings when bèlè classes are held. Therefore, my hosts have offered to drive me to and from the downtown Fort de France neighborhood of Bô Kannal so that I can participate in the classes on Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays with two different associations. All female students are required to wear a long, wide, flowing skirt and a plaid madras scarf tied around their waist, so my host Josette lent both items to me. We should also wear leggings, biking shorts, or a petticoat beneath the skirt.

The classes are structured to begin around 7:00 pm with a warm-up session to the sound of live drumming and singing. Seeing as how I have not yet mastered French or Kréyòl, and cannot understand the singer's lyrics or the instructions of the dance teacher, I simply follow my classmates during the warm-up, jumping, bending, stretching, and gliding across the floor in a circular pattern. Once the warm-up is complete, there are two hours of non-stop movement. The teacher shouts out the Kréyòl names of steps and movements belonging to the bèlè linò repertoire, which students are to execute in across-the-floor exercises, but unlike your typical dance studio, there are no mirrors to monitor your progress or the accuracy of your movements. When she shouts out the movement names, "alé-viré!" and "kabel!" and "tombé-lévé!" and "bodzè!" I am lost. Each dance movement has a name, and so far I have counted eleven different kinds of steps...so I look around and mimic whatever my

classmates are doing with their feet; I'll work on mastering the arms and the attitude later.

After about a half-hour of across-the-floor exercises, where the training emphasis is on footwork and mastering the base steps, students are instructed to break into groups of eight (four couples), and put the steps into practical dance situations using the traditional quadrille square-dancing choreography of four couples. This is where things begin to get really confusing for me because I do not understand the instructions for following this choreography, as they have been communicated in Kréyòl by the dance teacher. I excuse myself from participating to sit on the side and observe the first few sets. I notice that when the teacher shouts "chanjman!" or "déplagé!" dancers trade places with the person dancing beside them, or across from them, in the four-person square formation. But I don't immediately understand the sequence or pattern. When one or two dancers make an error in the choreography, the teacher will shout "recommencez!" or "reprann!" (meaning start over, or try again). In one of my classes, the dance teacher (who does not speak any English) knows that I am not Francophone or Antillean; she was informed of this when my hosts dropped me off and explained the purpose of my visit to Martinique. She encourages me to participate anyway, pulling me from my seated position on the wall and inserting me in the quadrille; she non-verbally guides me step-by-step through the dance patterns.

At around 9:30 p.m., after the students have spent 45 minutes to an hour rehearsing several bèlè styles in the quadrille formation, like "bèlè cho," "bèlè dous," "bèlè pitché," "gran-bèlè," and "belya," the class begins to wind down with stretching exercises, also to the ongoing sound of live drumming and singing. The dance classes

are a little intimidating and very physically demanding. The bent-knee body orientation, intricate footwork, and pelvic-torso isolation require good cardiovascular health and a strong breathing capacity. Embarrassed about my lack of language proficiency, I keep my mouth shut and I don't ask any questions. I just watch and repeat. The dance classes can have anywhere from 15-40 students in attendance at one time (depending on the association's membership numbers).

After three or four dance classes, students are beginning to catch on to my foreignness. The teachers have begun announcing my presence as a visitor during routine announcements (and in many cases, applauding my brave efforts to learn without prior knowledge of the dance or language proficiency). One of my teachers is stern, but loveable, with her bold mannerisms, her frank style of communicating, and her fierce dance prowess and technical skill. With the exception of two or three people, all of the students, drummers, singers, and teachers are of African-descent. After attending a few classes, I do note that one of the bèlè schools seems to have more social class diversity; some middle-class professionals come to bèlè class straight from work.

Those with the slightest competency in English begin probing with questions about the duration of my stay in Martinique, the reason for my visit, my field of study as a graduate researcher, and whether or not I had training in other styles of dance. Curiosity about the strange American girl who is always smiling, naïve and eager to participate, continues to mount with each class visit. People are making friendly gestures to assist me with translations and explanations when I appear to be lost or unable to follow. "Don't worry, don't be afraid. When you hear the drummer play a

break in his drum pattern, that is your signal to change places with the dancer next to you,” one woman explained in English as she watched me struggle to master to quadrille choreography. “For the monté o tanbou, you first dance facing your partner, then you and your partner dance toward the drummer to salute him,” she continued.

At the end of my five-week stay, and after three weeks of what felt like non-stop participation in dance classes, I was able to say that I had acquired the introductory base for dancing most of the Sainte Marie bèlè styles taught to first-level students, known as debutants in the French language. People complimented me for learning in three weeks what most students learn in three months.

When I returned to Martinique for five weeks in May 2011, and subsequently in January 2013 for extended fieldwork, I had become a familiar face to many of the bèlè instructors and student participants in the *Bô Kannal* neighborhood. I also had enough familiarity to begin exploring classes outside of Fort de France. I was well acquainted with the basic structure and framework of bèlè transmission, and the pedagogical orientations used in dance class settings by the associations. Therefore, I was ready to use my integration in the dance classes as a routine method of participant observation. The ambiances in class settings vary by association, with some being more rigid in structure than others. Some associations follow a strict protocol for managing student engagement and teaching the base steps, while others permit a more flexible path for discovering one’s bèlè personality, or developing personal dance flair by building upon the base repertoire. As a foreign researcher, I found some learning settings to be warmer with familiarity and sociability, which helped to seamlessly facilitate the development of new friendships and bonds; others were more stringent, or “by the

book,” which may have made it more challenging to cultivate relationships with leaders and fellow students.

People were often curious enough to inquire about the nature of my work, the pace at which I was learning the dance, and the different associations I had frequented. Some of my friends admitted that early on, they did not understand why I was dancing so frequently, and why I was present at every event. They observed and monitored my progress, and at times, some teachers would correct or critique movements that I had learned elsewhere. Once I had comfortably mastered the base repertoire of steps, I was encouraged to sharpen my ability to execute variations of those steps, and “find my own personality in the dance.” Most dance students identify with a more advanced dancer, using that person as a mentor, model, or inspiration, but are discouraged from cloning that person’s style so that they may nurture their own personal dance identities. A number of people told me, “okay, we see you know how to dance *bèlè*, but now we’re waiting to see, who is Camee? What is Camee’s dance?” Developing my own dance identity was a challenge as I navigated different dance schools as a participant observer, because of the variations in pedagogical approach across different associations, and styles of offering critical feedback. I do not regret this approach, however, because I was able to compare different conceptions and styles of instruction and learning.

Once I was well acquainted with various group-learning models in *bèlè* schools run by the associations, I sought out informal and personalized methods of learning. I occasionally visited with rural *bèlè* elders in Sainte Marie, or met with dance teachers at their homes for individual study. Sometimes this would involve actually dancing, for

example, when an older drummer like Clothaire Grivalliers was generous enough with his time to pull out his drum and play while instructing me on how to dance the *kalennda*, while his sister Fortuna provided the vocal accompaniment. At other times, it meant simply sitting still and listening to them talk; talk about how *bèlè* was when they were growing up, talk about how *bèlè* has evolved over time, and talk about how today's generation of dancers and musicians differs from previous generations.

I would spend hours sitting at work with Marie-Andrée Lapoussinière, an older dancer from Sainte Marie who runs a small roadside fruit and vegetable stand. Marie-Andrée has danced *bèlè* her whole life, having grown up in a village setting where the tradition was part of everyday rural life. While taking a break from tending to customers, I once showed her a video on my tablet of a *bèlè* party I had attended earlier in the year. After seeing me dance, she complimented my efforts and then offered a critical reflection that spoke to generational and/or regional differences in movement style. “*Atchèlman, zot ka soté twòp!* (You girls nowadays are jumping too much!),” she would say, emphasizing the importance of footwork and connection with the land. “*Pozé kò'w, ou ka kouri twòp vit!* (Take your time, you're moving too fast!)” When she saw my ability to swivel my hips and execute torso-pelvic isolation, however, she would smile and laugh, nodding in approval, and say “*wi gadé, ou ka brennen byen!* (yea, look at that, you move well!)” Though such comments were often accompanied by jokes filled with sexual innuendo and humor that are characteristic of creole culture (and especially *bèlè* culture), she was complimenting my ability to play on the flirtatious expression of sensuality in dance situations, which is an important subject of analysis that I will revisit in Chapter 6.

Swaré Bèlè, Moman Bèlè, and Bèlè Mawon: Occupying Public Space with Participatory Dance Rituals

The public participatory gatherings where *bèlè* practitioners assemble for dancing, drumming, and singing are organized in the form of *swaré bèlè* and *moman bèlè*. The main difference between *swaré bèlè* and *moman bèlè* is the level of formality and structure.⁵ The traditional *swaré bèlè*, usually hosted by a *bèlè* association, or in some cases by a prominent *bèlè* actor or a family of *bèlè* actors, is ceremonial in tone, and follows a general set of formalities (*larèl swaré bèlè*) in order to achieve smooth functioning of the event. These open-air gatherings require much planning, including the construction of the dance space, which involves securing wooden slabs to the ground, unless the event is held in a cockfighting pit, or on an earthen floor.⁶ Hosts must also arrange seating, prepare the food, set up the stereo sound system, and publicize the event (Figure 3-1).

Swaré bèlè events promote the open, unrehearsed participation of “confirmed” or “initiated” practitioners, but ethics and guidelines are in place so that order around traditional values, like respect for the elders and mutual solidarity, can be maintained. There is an expectation that dancers will be appropriately dressed for respectable self-presentation and to optimize movement potential while dancing. This is especially the case for women who dance in long, wide, flowing skirts or dresses, worn over a petticoat and a plaid madras scarf tied around their waists. At these events, food is provided for sale (or offered free of cost to those who participate in the *swaré* by dancing, singing, or drumming). The event typically begins around 7:00 p.m., and

⁵ A more thorough description of the traditional *swaré bèlè* is provided in Chapter 6 of this dissertation.

⁶ There are too many risks of injury associated with dancing *bèlè* on concrete or tile flooring.

depending on the number of performers, can end anywhere between 1:00 and 3:00 a.m. If *ladja/danmyé* combatants are present, they normally warm things up with a few matches, before the *bèlè* dancing begins. Sometimes, one of the hosts will keep a list of those waiting to enter the rotation of dancers to make sure everyone gets a fair opportunity, but a hierarchical system based on age or skill level is also respected.

The *moman bèlè* operates similarly to *swaré bèlè*, but requires less planning and does not formally impose the strict protocol used in the organization of a traditional *swaré*. Participation is more open to different skills levels, including beginners who wish to apply what they have learned in *bèlè* schools to practical dance situations. Most practitioners would agree that *moman bèlè* are more relaxed and convivial, because there is less pressure to follow protocol, adhere to strict moral codes, and compete with other dancers for a spot in the rotation. It does not have the same ceremonial or ritualistic quality as the *swaré bèlè*, so people are really in attendance for amusement, to release stress, and to socialize with friends. Food and beverage are usually handled potluck style; if you want to participate, bring a dish or something to drink. This practice commonly functions along gendered lines: female participants are asked to bring a quiche, tart, or cake, and male participants are asked to bring beverages. Therefore, the planners are not always responsible for providing food.

Over the last four years, a group of young *foyalais* (residents from Fort de France) has launched something they call *bèlè mawon* (maroon *bèlè*) gatherings, which also have the casual, informal ambiance found in *moman bèlè*. *Bèlè mawon* gatherings are more or less spontaneous (planned and announced just a couple of days in advance), and take place in downtown Fort de France, on the boardwalk beneath the

kiosk facing the famous Parc Savane (Figure 3-2). Invoking the mythical image and concept of the *nèg mawon* (the maroon rebel) that is symbolic in the social imaginary of Martinican cultural activists, *bèlè mawon* gatherings symbolize the occupying of a widely-frequented public space in the center of the capital city with the *tambour bèlè*. This beautified, revitalized park area that lines the waterfront attracts many domestic and international tourists. *Bèlè mawon* participants randomly select dates to convene in this space to rejoice and celebrate their right to dance and sing to the beat of their own drums (Figures 3-3, 3-4, 3-5).

On the morning of October 31, 2013, *bèlè mawon* organizers announced via Facebook and text message that they would be assembling that evening to celebrate the release of Thierry Dol, a young Martinican engineer who was one of four French hostages kidnapped and held by Al Qaeda in Arlit, Niger since September 2010; Dol and the other three hostages were set free earlier that week (Figure 3-6). When I asked my interlocutors why they decided to call this gathering in Dol's honor, they responded that it was to pay tribute to the courage and resilience of one of their own. They danced and played *bèlè* until after midnight, and improvised new lyrics to classic *bèlè* tunes, such as "*Bélya pou Thierry!*"

Because of my frequent attendance and participation in these events, I quickly earned the title "*chyen bèlè*" (*bèlè* dog), which is an endearing term to describe someone who cannot seem to get enough of *bèlè*, or cannot resist the urge to dance at every occasion. Whenever I wanted to take a break from dancing to just observe, I would intentionally leave my dance skirt at home or in my car. In such instances,

acquaintances would greet me with the question, “*où est ta jupe?! (where is your skirt?!),*” because they were not accustomed to seeing me observe from the sidelines.

Annual Holidays and Observances

There are specific holidays throughout the year that call for high participation in *bèlè* activities. *Samedi Gloria* (Holy Saturday), as the first Saturday following the 40-day observance of Lent in this predominantly Catholic island-society, is one such holiday. During Lent, all dance parties (including *bèlè*) are suspended; therefore, practitioners look forward to this day to recommence their dance gatherings. I did not anticipate that my first experience with *Samedi Gloria* in 2013 would take me from one town to the next, over the course of 18 hours. My morning began under the kiosk of Fort de France described above for a *bèlè mawon* gathering. At around 2:00 p.m., the *bèlè mawon* crowd began to disperse, with attendees asking one another, “see you soon in Lamentin?” or “see you tonight in Sainte Marie?” Most of my acquaintances returned to their homes to quickly shower and head to the large open-air market in the center of Lamentin, where the annual *ladja/danmyé* Samedi Gloria gathering takes place. Religious holidays, such as *Fêtes Patronales* (Patron Saint Feasts), *Samedi Gloria*, and *Lundi Paques* (Easter Monday), hold special importance for *ladja/danmyé* combatants, especially those who spend the period of Lent recharging their strength, physically, spiritually, and mentally preparing themselves for a day of fighting (Figure 3-7).⁷ Later that evening, as the *danmyé* gathering in Lamentin began to wind down, friends and family began carpooling for the long drive to the Pitt Casérus in Sainte Marie (cockfighting pit owned and operated by the celebrated *bèlè* drummer Félix Casérus,

⁷ This is a fascinating observation, given the image and treatment of the drum in the context of Martinique’s religious order and colonial religious repression (the subject of Chapter 5).

brother of Ti Emile). Attendees of this event socialize, dance and play *bèlè* until the early hours of the morning, often returning to their homes around 4:00 am.

Martinique's annual observance of Emancipation Day on *22 Mé* (May 22) is another festive occasion for *bèlè* enthusiasts, particularly to honor the heroic act of the slave Romain, whose public defiance of the prohibition against drumming, and subsequent arrest, ignited the 1848 unrest that marked the end of slavery. Much like *Samedi Gloria*, *22 Mé* activities are organized morning, noon, and night in different island communes; a busy day in which I found myself, again, driving to three separate events organized in three different towns. One of the evening gatherings organized by a small group of young women dancers at the Bay-front restaurant *Chez Claudette* (affectionately known in Kréyòl as *Kay Klodèt*) in Fort de France, has become one of the highlights of *22 Mé* in recent years. This event attracts large numbers of practitioners and spectators throughout the afternoon and evening, for what feels like a never-ending rotation of dance/music sets. The organizers rent out the entire restaurant, decorating the space with bright, festive string lights, palm and banana leaves, and poster-sized images of various *bèlè* practitioners, and they prepare a traditional meal of *ti nain morue* (saltfish and green plantains) in large quantity to serve each guest in attendance.

Though it is common in most *swaré bèlè* to see women dancers decked out in beautiful skirts and dresses, this festive occasion is one where *bèlè* fashion seems to reach new heights. One of my friends and interlocutors, a *bèlè* dancer, seamstress, and dress designer who I will call Sisi, receives an increasing number of custom-orders each year as the *danm bèlè* (female *bèlè* dancers) prepare for this momentous occasion; in 2015, during my brief, post-fieldwork visit to the island, she told me she

barely slept the week of 22 *Mé* because she kept receiving requests, but she is happy to do it, because it is an additional source of income, and *bèlè* and sewing are two of her passions. She even accommodated my last minute request for a custom-made *jupon* (petticoat) two days before the event. I also observed this tendency toward *bèlè*-inspired fashion on 22 *Mé* among some of my male drummer friends, who dress especially for the occasion in shirts with hand-painted *bèlè* drum images.

***Bèlè*: A Celebration of the Life Cycle**

Bèlè is transmitted as a dance of the earth, a dance that encourages land and human fertility, and celebrates the life cycle. Many *bèlè* followers see *bèlè* as an appropriate way to memorialize the life of deceased loved ones, particularly those who contributed to the *bèlè* movement, to welcome new life, to rejoice in love and nuptial rites, and to animate birthday parties. Even I had the occasion of hosting a *moman bèlè* for my 30th birthday in 2014, which essentially provided me with insight to all that goes into planning and carrying out a successful *bèlè* event.

I once received an invitation to participate in an invite-only *moman bèlè* with a small group of my friends, and it was only the day before that I realized the purpose of the gathering: it was for an *enterrement de vie de garçon*, which literally translates as “burial of life as a young boy,” but is the French equivalent of the term “bachelor party.” In France and in Martinique, like the U.S. and other parts of the world, the bachelor party is a prenuptial ritual to commemorate the last days of single living, and commonly entails group outings with heavy drinking and encounters with exotic dancers. In this case however, our small co-ed group of friends were transported by boat to a small islet off the coast of François to participate in a simple gathering of *bèlè* music and dancing. Going against the conventional image of intentional hedonism and debauchery

characteristic of most bachelor parties, this group simply wanted to have a good time dancing to the drum and socializing with friends. Similarly, small groups of *bèlè* performers are recruited to provide one of many forms of entertainment at wedding receptions.

Throughout a woman's pregnancy, and especially in the first trimester, she is often cautioned against dancing *bèlè* because it is a very physically demanding activity that requires bending, stomping, jumping, and turning. If she cannot resist the urge to dance, she is encouraged to dance "*plus posé*," or more sedately than she ordinarily would. However, I observed some pregnant women eager to dance when she and baby have reached full-term. When I questioned the reason for this, and expressed concern over the potential health risks, the women would confidently smile and explain that dancing *bèlè* towards the end of the pregnancy encourages labor, and is helpful for the muscles used in the descent of the baby during birth. I once drove with a friend to a *bèlè* event just days after her expected due date. On the way there, she told me she was not sure she would dance, but insisted that if she felt compelled by the drum, she would not hold herself back. Indeed, during the event, she calmly danced a couple of sets, and on the way home she explained the birthing benefits associated with dancing during the last stage of pregnancy. Two days later, I received a message that she had gone into labor and given birth to a healthy baby boy.

Just as *bèlè* is used by some Martinicans to mark the beginning of new life, it also has a revived role in funerary ceremonies in recent years, particularly when the deceased was active in the *bèlè* movement. In most Afro-Caribbean funeral traditions, drum, dance, and storytelling are characteristic of the traditional wake ceremony, and

bèlè is said to have historically played such a role in Martinique. However, the traditional aspects of the funeral wake in Martinique (what they call the *veillée culturelle*) have almost dissolved, as the majority of Martinicans today have traded the lively *conte* (storytelling), music, and dance rituals, for the modern, quiet viewing ceremony among close friends and loved ones.

In November 2013, Eric Gernet, who played a central role in the *bèlè* revival movement as a founding member of AM4, *Tanbou Bô Kannal*, and other performance groups and cultural associations, lost his battle against cancer. His funeral wake was my first experience at a *veillée culturelle*, which was held outdoors in the heart of the *Bô Kannal* neighborhood, and attended by at least three hundred people. Eric was a drummer and *danmyé* combatant who is remembered for his wide breadth of knowledge and expertise of traditional drum culture and *danmyé* ritual. As gatherers convened to mourn his loss, *bèlè* and *danmyé* practitioners reflected on his life and his many contributions to the militant cultural movement of the 1980s and beyond. People gathered to cry, laugh, hold onto and console one another, view his body, and pay their respects to his family. Whispers and murmurs could be heard among small circles, just a few feet away from the dance space, as people exchanged commentary about the contentious debate surrounding *chlordécone* (the controversial insecticide that has heavily contaminated the island due to its unregulated use on plantations), and Martinique's high cancer rates as they relate to islanders' excessive exposure to chemical pollution (cf. Agard-Jones 2013).

There were hours of *danmyé* matches between several combatants; one fighter recounted his observation that the space was filled with an intense spiritual presence.

This was especially evident for him when the renowned singer and *danmyé* specialist Victor Trefte (who was one of Eric's closest friends) sang the *danmyé* classic *Pa ni pasé lanmèn oswé-a*. "The hair on my arm was standing," he said. "I had chills during this special moment, I was almost moved to go into the circle and fight while Victor was singing that song" (interview, February 15, 2014).

In my research experience, many of the common difficulties and obstacles of doing field research in a foreign country were overcome by a shared racial affinity with the majority of my interlocutors. Even when verbal communication was a challenge, before I developed a more advanced proficiency in French and Kréyòl, I was able to communicate through the language of dance. Despite the differences in native language, despite the administrative obstacles of working in a French department as a foreigner, despite the many differences that set me apart from the community of research subjects, I successfully carried out field research through my full immersion as a dancer and passionate observer of the rich *bèlè* tradition.

I did however face a number of challenges and concerns preserving my professional identity as a graduate researcher. While I appreciated the warm, open welcome that made for my smooth integration in the *bèlè* community, there were instances where I had to inform and remind others that I was not practicing *bèlè* to draw attention to myself, acquire fame, become a celebrity, or exploit and appropriate the tradition for personal gain. I was delighted, and even honored, to receive and accept invitations to perform with groups that had come to understand my purpose in Martinique. For example, in October 2013, members of *Tanbou Bô Kannal* with whom I was well acquainted invited me to travel with them to St. Lucia to participate in the

annual *Jounen Kréyòl* festivities. I also had the opportunity to perform with *Tanbou Bò Kannal* in July 2014 (towards the end of my field research) for the association's 40th anniversary concert (Figure 3-10). I hoped that my participation in such activities would not be misinterpreted as egocentric or self-interested. On occasion, I was put on the spot for media interviews and announcements that drew unwanted attention. I wanted to be open and responsive to any inquiries regarding my interest in *bèlè*, but I did not want my humility or the primary objectives of my project to be questioned by key interlocutors. I was eventually able to strike a balance as I developed strategies for navigating uncomfortable situations, and publicly communicating my research purpose without compromising my professional integrity and my relationships with supportive collaborators.

The above reflections are intended to give a sense of the people and places encountered in my research and described in the chapters that follow. An understanding of cultural citizenship in the context of Martinique's *bèlè* movement requires an overview of the different personalities and settings implicated in the key issues that are analyzed throughout the remainder of this dissertation. In the following chapters, I address a set of debates brewing in the *bèlè* community pertaining to political discourse and economic activity, spirituality and religious orientation, the respectability politics of gender and sexuality performance, and the growing presence of *bèlè* in the national education system. Even though the *bèlè* movement generally functions through the spirit of collectivity and cooperation, ideas about how *bèlè* should

be advanced continue to evolve, and in some cases become fragmented from the larger mission.

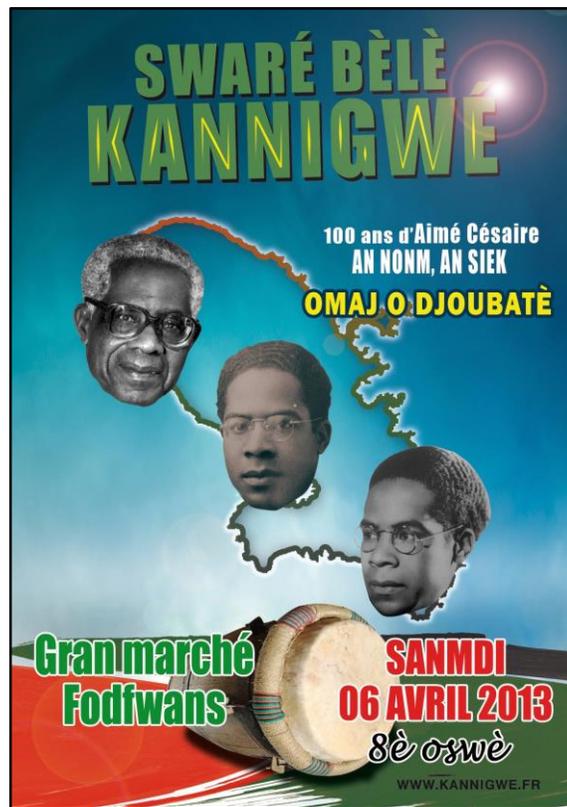


Figure 3-1. 2013, Flyer for Association Kannigwé's Swaré Bèlè



Figure 3-2. 2015, the kiosk of downtown Fort de France during *Bèlè Mawon* gathering, photo courtesy of Benny René Charles



Figure 3-3. 2015, Dancers at *Bèlè Mawon*, photo courtesy of Benny René Charles



Figure 3-4. 2013, Dancers at *Bèlè Mawon*, photo courtesy of Valou Fitt-Duval



Figure 3-5. 2013, Drummer at *Bèlè Mawon*, photo courtesy of Valou Fitt-Duval



Figure 3-6. Thierry Dol, Martinican hostage held by al Qaeda 2010 – 2013



Figure 3-7. 2014, *Ladja/Danmyé* match on *Samedi Gloria* (Holy Saturday) in Lamentin



Figure 3-8. 2014, Dancer performing a solo *kalennda* during 22 *Mé* (Emancipation Day) celebration, photo courtesy of Valou Fitt-Duval



Figure 3-9. 2015, Dancers performing a *bélya* during 22 *Mé* (Emancipation Day) celebration, photo courtesy of Valou Fitt-Duval



Figure 3-10. 2014, researcher Camee Maddox performing in *Tanbou Bô Kannal's* 40th Anniversary Concert, photo courtesy of Valou Fitt-Duval

CHAPTER 4
*MATINIK LÉVÉ!*¹ (RE)FASHIONING POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC SENSIBILITIES IN
THE *BÈLÈ* REVIVAL

***Bèlè* and the 2009 General Strike**

In early 2009, general strikes were mobilized in Martinique and Guadeloupe, paralyzing the two island economies for more than a month. The strikes, organized by coalitions *Kolèktif 5 Fèvryé* in Martinique and *Liyannaj Kont Pwofitasyon* in Guadeloupe, led to riots, curfews, and protests against economic exploitation.² The coalitions were formed by labor unions in conjunction with artists, feminist activists, and other progressive organizations and community associations on the islands. Demonstrators voiced their dissatisfaction with the neocolonial conditions that persist on the islands today, as the vestiges of slavery remain deeply embedded in contemporary labor practices and both islands remain politically and economically dependent on metropolitan France (Browne 2004; Bonilla 2010, 2011).

During the strike, cultural activists and artists became engaged in ways that electrified the public with the performance of local drum-dance expressions and protest songs. Demonstrations were mobilized on a daily basis, businesses were shut down, and cruise ships loaded with tourists were turned away. The landscape of political unrest was marked by thousands marching in red t-shirts with a screen-printed image of the island and the collective's slogan "*se pou la viktwa nou ka alé*" to recognize the strike and the collective's organizing efforts.³ Protest repertoires were ignited by the

¹ Martinique, Rise Up!

² The English translation for these coalitions are "The February 5 Collective," named after the date the strike activities commenced in Martinique, and "Alliance Against Profiteering" in Guadeloupe.

³ Translates in English as "we are going for victory."

sound of the *bèlè* drum, with dances and *danmyé* fights setting the tone with a rebellious energy. Flags waved through the air with the colors red, black, and green, symbolizing spirit of Black Nationalism. Road blocks were set up, stores were forced to close, and graffiti was spray painted on buildings with racially-charged slogans such as *béké racis!* (racist *béké*).⁴ Riot police were sent all the way from France to settle the unrest with tear gas and batons. Cars, tractors and garbage cans were set ablaze, stores were looted, and for the first time in history, Carnival was canceled.

Although economic hardship and work-related issues were at the forefront of this turbulent event, the strike reflected other grievances, including questions about cultural alienation and the problem of assimilation on the island. In many ways, these are intersecting issues and the demands for cultural sovereignty are the result of years of political disillusionment, deteriorating economic conditions, and a perpetual relationship of dependency on France. Martinique's residents have been entitled to French citizenship since the French Revolution, and they ostensibly reap the benefits of French modernity and development. However, not all of the guarantees of this incorporated status have been fulfilled, and departmentalization as a decolonizing strategy has had its share of backlash.

Having observed the significant place of *bèlè* cultural activists in strike activities and in framing demands for cultural sovereignty, I formulated questions about how the *bèlè* movement has influenced the political and economic orientations of the *bèlè*

4 *Béké* is the term used to identify the white minority population of slave planter descendants who make up less than one percent of the island's total population, and are concentrated in the town of François. They control much of the island's economic wealth, and racial tensions between the *béké* community and African-descendants persist in present times.

public.⁵ In this chapter, I will discuss the various ways in which leaders of the *bèlè* movement have helped to refashion the political and economic sensibilities among followers of the movement. I will demonstrate how the appropriation of *bèlè* for advancing nationalist ideological discourse has stimulated an ethos of resistance and solidarity for its practitioners through highly-structured activities, manifestations, and modes of inculcation.⁶ I begin with an overview of Martinique's political-economic landscape since the island's 1946 transition to *département d'outre-mer* (DOM), and the disillusionment left behind in its wake. I will also discuss how *bèlè* became a manner to culturalize the progressive political orientations of youth activists and intellectuals during the 1980s moment of radical militancy. Following my ethnographic analysis of the *bèlè* spaces where much of the consciousness-raising and inculcation occur, I will consider alternative perspectives from those who oppose the politicization of *bèlè*.

This debate is a clear illustration of how cultural development becomes contested terrain, fraught with contradiction and competing narratives, despite the larger objective of unifying a national community under a shared cultural identity. It fits within the body of anthropological scholarship that deals with Caribbean nationalisms and different modalities of blackness and creoleness, and more specifically, the complex ways in which Black folk culture becomes appropriated to advance specific political ideologies (cf. Thomas 2004). The case presented here from the shores of Martinique is an

⁵ I use *bèlè* movement when referring to the prominent actors/leaders, artist-intellectuals, and the larger set of activities around which *bèlè* practice revolves. I use *bèlè* public to refer to the followers of the movement, such as *bèlè* students, members of cultural associations, and audiences of non-practitioners who simply enjoy watching the tradition in a community-based performance context.

⁶ By highly-organized activities, I am referring to the activities planned and organized by associations or the *bèlè* coalition (i.e. *swaré bèlè*, *jounen moun bèlè*, etc.); manifestations refer to group performances or demonstrations that are intended to highlight or provide the entertainment for a specific social or political cause; and modes of inculcation refers to the shared discourse and rhetoric used in *bèlè* schools, the establishment of written moral codes and value systems, theory seminars, and so on.

interesting illustration of how notions of citizenship get reworked in non-sovereign national contexts by minority communities (in this case, the *bèlè* community), whose members negotiate terms of community belonging that fall outside the conventional frameworks of French national identity. In the case of the *bèlè* movement, it is important to interrogate which actors set the terms of belonging with overarching ideological claims and demands, and to draw attention to the voices and narratives that receive less attention in the public discourse.

The *bèlè* community is often described as its own small society within Martinican society, whose members offer variegated conceptions of *bèlè*, and different perspectives on the best course of action for advancing the movement. Cultural nationalism is what drives the thinking of many *bèlè* followers. This overarching ideology is one that promotes Martinique's shared Kréyòl language, local traditions, alimentation, and island territory—the specificities that mark their difference from France. However, the degrees to which these cultural nationalists desire state sovereignty vary. Some subscribe to political nationalist movements and wish to see Martinique pursue independence from France. Others are more invested in seeing Martinique achieve a greater degree of autonomy within, rather than apart from, the French state. And still others have leftist political orientations in the struggle for greater class equality and fair labor practices. This chapter presents a set of examples regarding the controversial link between *bèlè* and political and economic life.

Disillusionment in the Post-departmental Era

Nearly a century after the 1848 abolition of slavery when decisions regarding decolonization were being made, Martinique's political leaders, notably Aimé Césaire, opted for departmentalization with the French state; the goal was political assimilation,

but with the preservation of a distinctive cultural heritage (Miles 2001:48-9). According to Césaire, it was the responsibility of the French government to guarantee progress and equal treatment for the French Antillean population that was vulnerable to lingering forms of oppression and inequality by the island's racial power structure (Hintjens 1995:23). Many supporters of departmentalization were initially motivated by its economic promise, and laborers of the old plantation system were persuaded by the benefits of social security (Miles 2001:49). The years of suffering endured during the Vichy regime of WWII created a general sense of panic around severing ties with France, and Martinicans celebrated De Gaulle's victory as one of their own. When the policy of departmentalization was introduced in 1946, Aimé Césaire addressed the French National Assembly insisting that the French government would also benefit from the integration of the *vieilles colonies*, or old colonies (Césaire 1946).

There eventually came a time, though, when left-leaning activists no longer convinced that departmentalization could truly mean liberation from the colonial past would argue that the guarantees of progress were left unfulfilled, or being realized too slowly. Miles describes the contradiction that confronted Césaire, writing that:

Césaire soon grew disappointed with the direction that statehood was taking. "The assimilation which you are offering us," he announced to the National Assembly in 1948, "is but a caricature of that which we demanded" (Miles 2001:49).

Consequently, leftist, autonomist, and independentist political parties advocating greater autonomy began to form, including Césaire's *Parti Progressiste Martinique* (PPM) founded in 1958. The *Mouvement Indépendantiste Martiniquais* (MIM) was later founded in 1978 by Alfred Marie-Jeanne, and the two political parties have dominated island politics in the post-departmental era. Intellectuals responded to the cultural crisis

of departmentalization and assimilation by celebrating the island's creole specificity and spearheading a literary movement, *créolité*, which was largely a critique of Césaire's *négritude* for essentializing blackness.⁷ Édouard Glissant (1981) became one of the leading voices of cultural critique at this moment, arguing that Martinique was undergoing a "cultural genocide" from the rapid changes brought on by the departmental transformation (1981:173).

Justin Daniel (2005) describes how activists began to politicize their West Indian identities once the contradictions of assimilation evolved, and conflicts around the experience of departmentalization were revealed (Daniel 2005:66). This disillusionment was even more apparent in the activist network of French Antillean migrants in France—particularly those of the BUMIDOM era who were encouraged to go to France and pursue better work and educational opportunities.⁸ Many of the return migrants who came back to their island home did so with disdain and resentment, based on the indignities of discrimination and racist exclusion in France. Michel Giraud (2005) writes, "this situation...[which] gives France a detestable image, highlights all the reasons there are to doubt the effectiveness of citizens' equality that departmentalization was supposed to devote" (2005:101, my translation).

⁷ It is worth mentioning here that the ideas advanced by *créolité* thinkers also have contradictions that further complicate matters of cultural identity on the island, as pointed out by Richard and Sally Price (1997). Price and Price criticize the creolists for accommodating the French modernizing project while celebrating a "pastified" Martinique and promoting a "feel good" nostalgia around their creole history and culture, leading to folklorization and commodified cultural products (1997:15).

⁸ Bureau for the Development of Migrations in the DOMs (BUMIDOM). From the period of 1963 until 1981, BUMIDOM developed work recruitment programs that encouraged labor migration to the metropole from the overseas departments and provided training to recruits, leading to an exodus of French Antilleans and Réunionians motivated by the prospect of upward mobility. The overseas departments were drained of young workers who ended up in unskilled labor positions.

Since departmentalization, the traditional agricultural economy of Martinique has nearly vanished. Hypermarket chains providing basic goods dot the tropical landscape, and continue to expand to the benefit of *béké* business owners. Many of my interlocutors have commented that local food production should be more widely supported, but they do not have access to the land because “the French state and the *békés* own it all, and *békés* only produce for exporting” (interview, June 14, 2009). Nearly three-quarters of national revenues are from French assistance (Daniel 2001:62-3; West-Durán 2003: xxv; Browne 2004:39-40). The unemployment rate in 2000 was near 30 percent, having increased “through the stagnation of tourism and industry” (INSEE 2000:61; Daniel 2001:63; Browne 2004:39).⁹ About two-fifths of the population have immigrated to metropolitan France for jobs (Hintjens 1992:71; Anselin 1995:113; Berrian 2000:3-4). Decisions are made in metropolitan France by politicians who do not know the everyday experiences and realities of Martinicans; thus, their policies are not culturally grounded or locally informed.

The grievances resulting from this situation, coupled with the island’s so-called identity crisis, created the need for cultural activism and a sense of cultural autonomy that would affirm the everyday popular classes of Martinique, along with their cultural expressions that were historically denigrated. The activists have devoted their energy to grassroots cultural programming that encourages cross-class participation and aims to offset the alienating effects of assimilation, which have been most operative in the media, the French national education system, and the consumer economy. People in Martinique are much more likely to be informed of French current events than the affairs

⁹ According to INSEE’s 2009-2010 edition of the *Tableaux Economiques Réginaux* (TER), unemployment has gone down to 23.5 percent.

of their island neighbors like St. Lucia and Dominica. They are more inclined to purchase imported products from high-end grocery stores and retailers (especially in Fort de France and surrounding suburbs). Children are educated to understand the culture, manners, and historical contributions of France, and master the French language, but are discouraged from embracing the vernacular language and expressive culture.¹⁰

The agitation of those political movements in the post-departmental era never materialized into a real change in Martinique's political status. In fact, MIM has conceded its call for independence as a primary objective, and has instead come to prioritize their negotiations for a different degree of autonomy. The general consensus is that Martinique is not ready for independence, evident in the fact that voters continue to reject the prospect of increased autonomy, and express great anxiety over France's austerity measures in recent times, as it threatens their access to French public services (Miles 2012). The idea of a "genuine Martinican nationalism" that champions a rupture from the *mère-patrie* has been weakened or outright abandoned by many of the radicals of the 1980s (Bishop 2013:99). Therefore, the patriotic struggle has become concentrated in the realm of cultural resistance, and *bèlè* has become one of the most visible badges of honor.

In addition to the influence of the PPM and MIM in shaping radical political perspectives, other political parties and organizations contributed greatly to the

¹⁰ There is currently a debate about public "teeth-sucking"—an expression (usually of annoyance) used by black people internationally, and affectionately known as the onomatopoeia "*tchip*" among French Antilleans; the sound is made by sucking in air through pursed lips and clenched teeth. Initiatives have been put in place by the French school system to prohibit the use of the *tchip* in the school settings, because according to their logic, it is an impolite habit that is inappropriate for professional life. This happened after French Guyanese Minister of Justice, Christiane Taubira, "tchipped" the far-right politician Marine Le Pen in a televised interview.

formation of the up-and-coming cultural militants of the 1980s. Most noteworthy is the far-left, radically-independentist *Conseil National des Comités Populaires* (CNCP), which is described as a Marxist-Leninist-Maoist movement. The cultural wing aligned with this political party is the organization *Asé Pléré, Annou Lité* (APAL, Enough Crying, Let's Fight), and the youth wing of APAL is *An Lòt Chimèn Pou La Jénès* (ALCPLJ, Another Path for the Youth). Cultural activist and philosophy teacher Edmond Mondésir played a significant role in creating a link between *bèlè* activities and leftist politics. He was a very active member in the political activities of CNCP and APAL, and he helped mentor the young people in ALCPLJ.

These youth circles were engaged in what could be described as an apprenticeship in local traditions that drew from the ancestral principles and expressions of Martinique. They would assemble for group gardening activities, construction projects, and drum and dance trainings, and travel by group to Sainte Marie to observe and learn from the elder *bèlè* specialists.¹¹ This was a way to revive and instill the values of solidarity, collectivity, and respect for the elders—values that were deemed to be on the path of dissolution with the rapid modernization and assimilation of the society—what Glissant referred to as the “depersonalization” of an exploited colony (1981:173). Moreover, this type of consciousness-raising was carried out in a way that would be enjoyable and entertaining for an alienated generation of impressionable youth who grew up in the throes of rapid cultural change.

Other progressive youth organizations that were committed to the cause of popularizing *bèlè* include *Lavwa Pitchan* from the Fort de France neighborhood of *Bô*

¹¹ The Kréyòl vocabulary used to characterize these activities include *konvwa* (convoy), *konbit* (teamwork), and *koudmèn* (help; group work).

Kannal, the *Jeunesse Etudiante Chrétienne* (JEC, Christian Student Youth), and activists from *Association Générale Etudiante Martiniquais* (AGEM, General Martinican Student Association based in France). Many of the members of these three associations came together in the mid-1980s to found what is now the largest drum-dance association on the island, *Mi Mes Manmay Matinik* (AM4 - Look at the Manners/Ways of my Martinican People). This association has been most impactful on the *bèlè* movement in terms of their recruitment and membership numbers, and a rigorous research-based codification and systematization of various drum-dance expressions, particularly the different regional variants of *bèlè*, *kalennnda*, and *danmyé*.

The young activists of the 1980s generation were drawn to the *bèlè* activities of these associations, and motivated by the message that *bèlè* is a living culture, not a folkloric product frozen in the past, an idea that was common based on touristic representations of the folkloric troupes. It was not *bagay vyé nèg*, or a thing for vagabonds, drunks, and jezebels, as many of the parents of this generation believed and taught their children. *Bèlè*, as a living culture, would become a space where the everyday lived experience and socio-political realities of Martinicans could be reflected and acknowledged in a directed and structured. Therefore, a certain level of social awareness and politicization would be constitutive of the *bèlè* experience.

Rézistans and Solidarité: Bèlè Culture as the Key to Martinican Nationalist Thought

One of the greatest points of pride within this group of cultural activists was the reinstatement of the *swaré bèlè* system that had nearly dissolved in the decades preceding the revival (Chapter 2). As the number of allied cultural associations promoting *bèlè* have increased, and many of them have unified under the umbrella

coalition *Coordination Lawonn Bèlè*, they now have a highly organized system of planning and executing their *swaré bèlè* activities to maximize participation, diffuse principles and values, and have a wider impact on society. The annual calendar of the Coordination allows each association to choose and inscribe the dates of their *swaré bèlè*; in the spirit of solidarity, each association encourages its members and students to attend the events and activities of other associations, and this system helps them to avoid scheduling conflicts. In this section, I reflect on some of my ethnographic observations of how *bèlè* transmission is linked with shaping political and economic sensibilities in contemporary Martinique.

Fieldnotes: *Swaré Bèlè* AM4 Fort de France – January 25, 2014

When I first arrived at the open-air gathering in the Fort de France neighborhood Bô Kannal, I set up my tripod and camera, and took my seat. The theme of this swaré bèlè is Rezistans!: Hommage aux Résistants (Resistance: Tribute to the Resisters). Publicity for the event included two fist images pointing upward in the style of the Black Power fist. I received a pamphlet that was circulating the audience space surrounding the dance floor (constructed from large slabs of wood in the shape of a square). This pamphlet, printed front and back and titled “La culture danmyé-kalennda-bèlè : Expression de la résistance martiniquaise” summarized the theme for that evening’s tribute and the biographies of the three recently deceased honorees: Pierre Alier, Eric Gernet, and Nelson Mandela. Pierre Alier was a doctor and militant comrade of Aimé Césaire who passed away last month. His biographical sketch outlines how he dedicated much of his long life to the battle against colonialism, and improving the everyday lives of Martinicans by spreading fundamental ideas about identity, dignity, and responsibility. Eric Gernet, who passed away in November, was a founding

member of the Association AM4 and one of the formidable cultural activists of danmyé, kalennda, bèlè, and Carnival music. Celebrated as a “poto mitan” (pillar) in the cultural activities at Bô Kannal, Gernet dedicated his life to excavating and preserving the technical and spiritual elements of Martinique’s drum traditions. Mandela, who died in December, is described here as a “great figure of Africa and of humanity” whose fight against apartheid shows us that the ultimate goal of realizing all humanity is the fight for emancipation. The pamphlet concludes with the statement, “in a country as ours, culture without consciousness of who we are and what we want to be, can only get bogged down in the objectives and forms designed by the Other. In danmyé-kalennda-bèlè, we know who we are, and what we want to be.”

The pamphlet includes reflections on slavery as a dehumanizing system of exploitation resisted by the ancestors, and the dehumanizing legacy of racism and political assimilation that contemporary Martinicans fight to resist in present times. As it is January, the pamphlet also highlights other significant dates in the month of December, during which various historical events occurred (i.e. insurrections, strikes, the death of Frantz Fanon in December of 1961, the airport blockade of December 1987 that prevented Jean-Marie Le Pen—leader of a far-right political party in France— from entering the country, and the deaths of other important militants who passed away in the month of December).

More and more spectators and participants arrived, eventually reaching around 250 guests total, while the festivities commenced, beginning with children fighting danmyé, and then they moved onto the adult segment of danmyé. Before moving on to the bèlè segment of the program, AM4 founding member and longtime teacher of bèlè

Georges Dru takes the mic to reflect on the struggle for liberation and equality, and the individual contributions of the three men being memorialized. He mentions the role of the Church and colonizers in dehumanizing Africans all over the world. Between his reflections of each individual honoree, there is a short dance/music sequence presented by a designated team of AM4 members. This dance tribute sets the tone with a profound sense of honor, respect, and gratitude for those who fought to defend the dignity and freedoms of Martinicans and African descendants around the world, and it introduces the open-participation bèlè segment of the evening's festivities.

Nelson MANDELA Eric GERNET Pierre ALIKER

ASSOCIATION MI MES MANMAY MATINIK

A partir de 19h **AM4**

SWARÉ BÈLÈ

RÉZISTANS

Soirée hommage aux résistants

ANCIENNE ECOLE MARCEL PLACIDE

BÒKANNAL

Samedi 25 janvier 2014

Restauration et buvette sur place

Association Mi Mes Manmay Matinik – AM4 - BP 40067 - 23 rue Yves Goussard - 97254 Fort-de-France Cedex
 Tel/fax : 0594 71 53 02 - Portable : 0694 24 36 34 - Email : siege@am4.fr
 site : www.am4.fr - Facebook : Mi Mes Manmay Matinik

Figure 4-1. 2014 Flyer for AM4's Swaré Bèlè

This vignette is only one of many such events that I observed over the course of my field research. It illustrates the ways in which *swaré bèlè* are dedicated to nationalist themes and ceremonially organized to pay homage and tribute to militant historical figures, local and international. At another *swaré bèlè* organized by the François school of AM4 (held in February of each year), the group opened their presentation with a procession of dancers, singers, and drummers marching with fire torches, followed by a speech commemorating the events of February 1900, known as the first major labor movement in Martinique's history. The movement started with a large strike in the northern plantations of the island, soon spread to other communes, and ended fatally with the death of 10 strikers. The speech given at the *swaré bèlè* was a protest against racial violence and oppression endured by black workers under an unjust system of racial inequality and unfair labor practices. The dancers of the opening presentation, dressed in black and red, carried their torches as they entered the circular dance configuration. Many wore black t-shirts with the word *rézisté* printed on the back.

These are examples of how the militant spirit of *maronnage* and resistance is ceremonialized and enacted in public *bèlè* spaces. The principle of *koudmèn* is sustained by the group efforts of association members, working together to set up and break down the dance space, sell food and beverage, ensure the comfort and enjoyment of the elders, and manage the general flow of activities. One of the main objectives of these events is to honor those who fought for liberation and defended the local culture. This practice of organizing *swaré bèlè* around a central theme to memorialize important cultural or political figures, or some significant historical event like labor strikes is not uncommon. The space is often decorated with palm leaves,

banana leaves, floral bouquets, poster-sized portraits of deceased honorees, bulletin boards with photos related to activist activities, torches, and processions of special guests and elders. Even though *swaré bèlè* are open, participatory gatherings, and there is no scripted sequence of when participants will take their turn to dance, drum, or sing, there are specially-designated moments set aside for tribute or commemoration, and to feature the work of the association hosting the event. There are also times in the program when a spoken word artist or a *kontè* (storyteller) might deliver a piece of his or her choosing, related to the subject of that evening's tribute. Martinique's Emancipation Day 22 Mé (May 22) is now a time when the legend of Romain, and his revolutionary use of the *bèlè* drum that opened the door for emancipation, are brought to life and celebrated with the practice of *bèlè*, *danmyé*, and *kalennda* in different communes all over the island. On the flyers for the association Kannigwé's annual *swaré bèlè*, there is an image of the island that overlaps an image of the *bèlè* drum, and the flyer is embellished with the colors of black, red, and green. There is also an image of Aimé Césaire, and his famous quote "*genocide par substitution*" (genocide by substitution)—marking his critique of the assimilationist presence in Martinique.

Politicization of the *bèlè* public occurs in other ways outside of the *swaré bèlè* context. Drum-dance manifestations are frequently used to rally progressive political and social campaigns, "aiding us to reconquer our spaces with our sound, our instruments, and our dances" (AM4 1993, my translation). The more committed militants of the associations are expected to be present at such events, as it instills in participants a more socially conscious worldview regarding issues of structural racism, colonial domination, capitalism, and globalization. For example, in 2004 when the large

supermarket retailer Carrefour began construction of a new store location in the southern town of Rivière Salée, *bèlè* activists participated in blockades and protests on site with their drums and dances. Sometimes, the associations will hold theoretical meetings and seminars to exchange with their members about the philosophical vision of the groups to which they belong, and the larger mission of the movement. Even though most associations do not explicitly indicate ties to a specific political party, their rhetoric usually reflects an unspoken expectation or hope that their members will be more attentive to or critically engaged with political and economic affairs.

It should be discussed here that the *bèlè* movement also promotes practices to foster local economic development, and there are opportunities for people to earn their living solely from the practice of *bèlè*, though it is rare. Professional group performance (i.e. folkloric troupes) has economic benefits and has long-been an option for practitioners and performers, although the folklorized style of *bèlè* representation faces its share of criticism from the *bèlè* militants. There is an understanding that professional *bèlè* performance was a manner for poor and working-class rural artists to make supplemental earnings. Though some people have been accused of using *bèlè* in an unethical manner for their own financial advancement, there is a general consensus that Martinicans should produce and consume with their own local resources—and this includes cultural products. I frequently heard the line “*fait avec ce qu’on a ici*,” meaning let’s do with what we have right here at home. Buy local, eat local, drink local, develop the economy from within; the idea is that people should not be so dependent on products imported from abroad. By this, they mean any variety of “products” ranging from beverages to music genres.

Followers of *bèlè* are encouraged to shift their consumption practices away from those benefitting major multinational corporations, and support local producers, artisans, and small-scale vendors. Shifting the mentality away from dependency on France is a meaningful principle to instill, in light of neoliberal economic restructuring and increasing austerity in France. The 2009 strike was a 38-day suspension from engagement with the global economy, because ports and retailers were blockaded. During this time, the people got a taste (for lack of a better word) of what a rupture from the French system would look like, which is an important point to which I will return in my conclusion.

Many of my ethnographic observations point to informal systems of exchange and a burgeoning solidarity economy among members of the *bèlè* community.¹² For example, seamstresses who are also *bèlè* practitioners receive frequent requests and special orders to design and sew *bèlè* skirts and dresses for women dancers. This can be profitable because the long, flowing *bèlè* skirt is a major marker of women's *bèlè* identity. The *danm bèlè* (woman dancer) is expected to be appropriately dressed for all organized *bèlè* events, and unlike folkloric troupes whose dancers wear uniformed, stereotypical creole costumes, non-folkloric group dancers choose their own outfits for *bèlè* events. Uniformity is not the goal of these gatherings, which falls in line with the idea of unscripted, spontaneous performance. Therefore, many women dancers put thought and energy into what they will wear to special *bèlè* events, to make an impression with their individual styles of skirts and dresses (more on this in the Chapter 6 discussion of women's gendered performance). Seamstresses and dress designers

¹² See Satgar (2014) for a recent collection of essays on solidarity economy.

who are integrated in the *bèlè* movement have been able to earn additional income from this flow of custom orders.

The question of whether or not *bèlè* should be used for commercial ventures or for making a living is one that must be more closely analyzed in future research, but warrants some acknowledgement here. There are certainly opportunities to earn a supplemental income or salary for those who teach *bèlè* classes or have their own associations that operate independently from the government (meaning those that do not receive public subventions, though the majority of the associations do receive subventions as *associations loi 1901*, and therefore do not have the means to compensate their teachers). Money for the associations is raised from the annual registration fees of members and students.

At the time of my research, the commercial venture *Lakou Trankil* had proven to be a small-business success. It is an outdoor *bèlè* dance space, also known as a *kay bèlè* (*bèlè* house) in the heavily wooded, lush green mountains of Gros Morne. The dance space is a dirt-packed adobe floor, intended to recreate the rural village ambiance of *bèlè*, as it was before the tradition moved to the urban center. It is located on the land of an independent farmer, and is the site of various cultural activities and weekly *bèlè* parties held on Friday nights. The concept of *Lakou Trankil* is to bring *bèlè* to life in a convivial space, outside the context of traditional *swaré bèlè* and professional performance. Beyond mere entertainment on Friday evenings, the economic function of selling food, partly provisioned by what is planted on site in the owner's garden, brings additional earnings to the *Lakou Trankil* family team. They also charge a small fee to guests participating in the 1-hour *bèlè* initiation class held before the start of the *swaré*

bèlè. At the time of my research, *bèlè* allies were encouraged to support this innovative cultural and commercial operation.

Bèlè album production is another aspect to consider. The production and sale of both traditional *bèlè* and modern *bèlè* fusion genres has been on the rise over the last two decades. This has helped to affirm and bolster the reputations of elders from Sainte Marie, while also taking advantage of the financial benefits. AM4 has produced eight albums with various styles of traditional music. The 2001 *Bèlè Boum Bap* project (*bèlè*-hip-hop-dancehall) fostered an intergenerational collaboration between young and old *bèlè* artists and was positively received by followers of the island's Hip-Hop Kréyòl movement. Two *Bèlè Légliz* albums (2009 and 2014) have been produced and distributed, and the *Bèlè Légliz* team has held sold-out concerts, proving to be a profitable economic undertaking. Edmond Mondésir has produced 16 albums total throughout his time in the *bèlè* movement (some with his *bèlè moderne-jazz* fusion group *Bèlènou*, some solo albums). These are just some examples among other creative works that integrate *bèlè* expressions and have been successfully produced and distributed. These albums do not have nearly the same impact in Martinique as commercialized genres like zouk, reggae-dancehall, and rap music, but they do bring increased media attention and recognition to the *bèlè* movement.

The lyrics of *bèlè* music cover many different areas of everyday life in Martinique, from love, sex, and courtship, to political and economic realities. Since the 1980s revival, *bèlè* music has adopted a more explicitly subversive tone. Because of Edmond Mondésir's high profile in island politics and the APAL, his music has always included some radical political content. A recent example is his commemoration of the 2009

labor unrest. *Se pou la viktwa nou ka alé* (album title) reflected the demands of the movement and the overall nationalist unity observed among the strikers. Song titles include *Nou désidé chanjé lavi-nou* (*We are deciding to change our lives*), *Bésé lé pri* (*Lower the prices*), and *Solidarité kè fé nou genyen* (*Solidarity will make us win*). The media have played a marginal role in creating a stronger link between *bèlè* and political orientations. APAL has its own radio station (Radio APAL) that regularly features programs dedicated to advancing *bèlè*, playing the music of *bèlè* artists, announcing upcoming *bèlè* events, providing the publicity for *swaré bèlè*, and interviewing important actors in the *bèlè* movement. MIM's radio station *Radio Lévè Dubout Matinik* (RLDM - Radio Get Up, Stand Up Martinique), features a weekly broadcast each Saturday morning, also devoted to the *bèlè* community.¹³ It is rare to hear *bèlè* music played on the radio in Martinique with the exception of these two radio stations, and because both stations are linked with independentist political parties, there is a wide assumption that the *bèlè* community is exclusively made up of revolutionaries. The examples provided here give the larger impression that in order to be a good patriotic Martinican, one must be involved in *bèlè*, and conversely, that in order to be a faithful follower of the *bèlè* movement, one must be a left-leaning nationalist or favor independence for the island's political future.

“Culture is Culture, Politics are Politics”: the Paradox of Politicizing *Bèlè*

One late-night/early-morning as I was walking to my car to head home after a *swaré bèlè*, one of my interlocutors approached me while shaking his head. “I did not come here for that,” he said. “The tribute was nice, but a *swaré bèlè* is really not the place to impose this political discourse. Especially if it's really only a discourse for so

¹³ I was invited by both radio programs to do interviews and discuss my research on air.

many of these people. I know my culture, and I know who I am, I don't need *bèlè* to remind me to be a good nationalist" (personal communication, date concealed for anonymity purposes). Right away, I recalled a conversation I had months earlier with another dancer, who insisted that *bèlè* should not be co-opted as a political strategy. "Culture is culture, politics are politics. *Bèlè* is our identity, it is not political" (interview, February 17, 2014). Such comments are reactions to the idea that one must be a patriot, and subscribe to certain political ideologies in order to practice *bèlè*; the idea that people practice *bèlè* only because they are lost in their identity and *bèlè* helps them "feel" more Martinican. According to this line of thinking, one should not have to do *bèlè* based on the political orientations imposed by activists in order to "feel" more Martinican, or to become a more conscious consumer. When one knows who s/he is and has an understanding of the culture of Martinique, s/he does not need the influence of *bèlè* militants or politicians to affirm this and tell her/him how to live day to day; that knowledge is an inherent part of one's worldview and daily routine inherited from generations of familial norms and patterns. Continuing this argument in one of my interviews, someone added,

You should not be pressured to change your attitudes or habits because you practice *bèlè*. Just be true to who you are, and if you decide you want to practice *bèlè* or *danmyé*, do it because you genuinely care about the practice, not because of politics (interview, February 17, 2014).

Part of this critical outlook on the politicization of *bèlè* simply has to do with the rhetoric being pompous, preachy, or sententious in manner and tone, as some have expressed to me. The socialist/communist rhetoric from which they draw is very much rooted in a French radical syndicalist tradition that is not as easily translatable to the cultural realities of Martinique. Miles (1986) makes a similar observation that,

even as the Martinican left-wing parties reject French values and politics, they do so in the highly vociferous, ideologically hairsplitting, and purer-than-thou manner which is evocative of at least the postwar Left in France, if not reminiscent of the stridency and intransigence characterizing French politics since the Revolution (Miles 1986:45).

The other side of this critique has to do with the contradiction that many of the people behind this rhetoric, and those who absorb the discourse, are very much embedded and implicated in the very system they claim to subvert. “All of these people memorize a discourse of nationalism, and none of them are willing to give up their jobs as functionaries” (interview, February 17, 2014). Someone who once worked in cultural programming among the rural elders of Sainte Marie expressed to me in an interview that

most *bèlè* activists talk about *bèlè* as a nationalist art, but I do not belong to this ideology. When you work in cultural heritage management, you cannot be a Martinican nationalist for independence, and then go ask the French state for money to support your projects, you know? So in my work, I made it clear that I was not doing politics in anything I was doing. Personally, I am not convinced about the seriousness of that ideology, because if you observe well, you will see that the pro-independency in Martinique work for the state. They are either teachers, or, you know—it’s a contradiction (interview, 2011).

The problem, it seems, is not the fact that *bèlè* practitioners also work as civil servants of the French state, but rather that they promote ideas of resistance to the French colonial system upon which so many of them depend. Can you be a good militant of *bèlè* if you buy champagne, or Coca-Cola® products, and eat McDonald’s®? For some, the answer is why not, so long as there is a balance in consumption practices and awareness of how one is implicated in the capitalist system. For others, this is a major paradox and point of contention, and here is why: the idea that capitalism and multinational corporations are threats to Martinican self-determination circulates with the

nationalist, anti-capitalist discourse of the *bèlè* movement, but the application of this conviction in everyday life is not as easily realized by members of the *bèlè* community.

Militants of *bèlè* respond to these criticisms by saying that the choice to operate independently of the French system is very limited, because it is a system that is imposed, regardless of how conscious you are as a thinker and consumer. The nationalist discourse and consciousness-raising efforts are approaches to help Martinicans see life on the island and the world at large through a critical lens, different from the inevitable frameworks, and patterns of thought and behavior imposed by French assimilation. It is not their immediate aim to uproot or sever ties from a system that is well-entrenched in Martinique from 400 years of oppressive domination; what they can do, however, is function within that system through alternative practices and ideologies that challenge the status quo in promoting progressive change. Independence or state sovereignty as the solution to Martinique's problems is not necessarily the position that *bèlè* militants universally advocate.

If *bèlè* militants are criticized for the paradox discussed above, it begs the question, should independence be the ultimate objective of *bèlè* cultural activists? Is independence a realistic political option for a microcosm island society like Martinique? Scholars of the Caribbean have recently become more interested in the question of non-sovereignty and nominal sovereignty (cf. Bonilla, forthcoming), revealing perspectives of everyday people who imagine other possibilities and visions of postcolonial political formation that do not proclaim state sovereignty as the most viable path to self-determination.

When I first began my preliminary fieldwork in 2009, I was quick to generalize and romanticize the *bèlè* revival as a revolutionary, anticolonialist movement. I had prepared for my research by reading about the political activist component of the *bèlè* movement, and once I arrived in Martinique I mistakenly conflated the experiences and political orientations of all practitioners because I had not yet been immersed in the community long enough to gain exposure to alternative points of view. My initial understanding was that all *bèlè* practitioners are against Martinique's departmental status and desire state-sovereignty. I now understand the situation as much more complex and nuanced, because the community of *bèlè* practitioners is politically fragmented—they do not universally envision a future of Martinican independence (Gerstin 2000).

There is a minority of those who believe that independence for Martinique can be a realistic goal, and that Martinique can develop a self-sustaining economy, if only Martinicans would change their mentality and stop being so dependent on France. It is common for Martinicans to reference Haiti as an example of the unfavorable outcomes of independence, but some use more suitable comparisons, like Dominica and St. Lucia, which like Martinique are small in size, independent, and capable of producing goods and services for themselves and the global economic market.

In my interviews, many of the people to whom I raised the question “would you like to see Martinique gain its independence” responded that Martinique is not ready for independence. “It can be a dream—it would be great,” Colin explained, “but too many of us are under a mental assimilation. Even those of us who do *bèlè*” (interview, July 11, 2013). Colin continued, “me I'm for more autonomy, then independence later. No, I

correct myself. I am for independence, but we don't produce anything here! Even Dominica, they make soaps, shampoos... they are independent and they survive" (Ibid). Most of my respondents from the bèlè community were proud to claim nationalist ideological orientations ("*Me, I'm not independentist, more nationalist*"), but as the aftermath of the strike proved, Martinicans are not prepared for such an abrupt change in political status. Their version of nationalism is that of a cultural nationalist, in the sense that they are proud to defend and promote Martinique's cultural specificity, and in many ways favor increased autonomy in certain sectors of the society, such as education, cultural programming, and economic development.

This narrative of a cultural nationalism fits squarely with Miles' argument that the "disjuncture between affirmation of identity and rejection of sovereignty feeds the inner conflict and collective tension..." (2012:15). After 38 days of suspended economic activity and local solidarity, business returned as usual and shoppers eagerly awaited the reopening of their favorite supermarkets and retailers. For some, it was a nightmare that they would never want to relive again. Moreover, in January 2010, less than a year after the strike, Martinique voted in a referendum to change its status to one that would grant them more autonomy, and the people overwhelmingly voted against it, rejecting any proposition for real institutional change.

As Miles argues, "a case can be made for the ongoing attempt to create a *juste milieu* between cultural self-assertion and continued political attachment to France. At a basic level, that is what the 2010 referenda [in Martinique and Guyane] were basically about" (2012:25). While the results of the referendum indicates a certain disillusionment with the radicalized political climate of the strike and the prospect for greater political

power, new demands for cultural autonomy emerged in the 2009 moment of heightened racial and class tension.

Shortly after the strike, in 2009, I had an interesting conversation about *bèlè* with a tourism professional and politically moderate *bèlè* drummer, whom I will call Terry. Terry considers himself a committed and enthusiastic supporter of tourism. He is also proud of his Martinican identity, and values the relationship that Martinique has with France, because he views the syncretic influences of African and European cultures as something unique, and something to be celebrated. Terry was staunchly opposed to the strike, because the tourist industry was very negatively impacted by the hostility that exploded during that month-long period. When I asked him if *bèlè* activists were often categorized as leftists, independentists, nationalists, and revolutionaries, he replied:

It is a trend to associate a musician who plays *bèlè* as a leftist. It's strange. I refuse to associate *bèlè* as a music of the leftists. It is not revolutionary. For me, *bèlè* is a way of living but it is also an art. It's a very rich art, taking its source and its roots from the countryside, from our grandfathers and our forefathers. It's a cultural legacy, our heritage. You're American, would you associate jazz with a leftist? (interview, June 10, 2009).

If Martinicans are to be concerned about developing a self-sufficient economy, then it would seem that they cannot afford to lose opportunities for tourism development.

Radical political attitudes in the *bèlè* movement, however, could create barriers for *bèlè* to really penetrate the tourist market.

To conclude, I would like to consider the larger implications of citizenship and belonging brought on by the debate regarding whether or not *bèlè* should be used to advance nationalist political attitudes and economic practices. There seems to be an overarching perspective, what could be considered a moral authority or superiority that guides the public discourse of *bèlè* and sets the standards for what true Martinican

cultural nationalism entails. This is an example of cultural politics in the postcolonial Caribbean that illustrates the disjunctive relationship between representations of a national culture, and the lived realities, desires, and expressions of the popular class, particularly when cultural expressions become appropriated by political circles (cf. Thomas 2004). As nationalist and independentist narratives steer the discourse and direction of the *bèlè* movement, I cannot help but notice that other voices and perspectives are marginalized, or altogether silenced.

Some people raise concerns, for example, that it is always the same group of middle-class intellectuals and activists speaking for the community, and leading to a *bourgeoisization* of the tradition. “How come the elders from Sainte Marie who were born into this tradition do not get called to do public talks about the meaning and function of *bèlè* in our society?” (personal communication). Others are concerned that women play such a marginal role in the public discourse of *bèlè* development, because the 1980s revival was spearheaded by men. These are important questions to ask as the *bèlè* community continues to increase in numbers. Most of the cultural associations described in this dissertation do not officially state their affiliation with a specific political party, because they do not want to alienate or lose the interest of prospective followers who do not subscribe to leftist political ideologies. This is especially the case as more and more middle-class Martinicans join the *bèlè* public. However, the associations use a coded language of militancy that seems to make nationalist sentiments a prerequisite for belonging to the movement, and that also seem inconsistent with Martinique’s lingering colonial relationship with France.

From what I observed in my interactions with elders from Sainte Marie, they are happy to see societal perceptions of their expressive culture, which was once regarded with great contempt, move in a more positive light. *Bèlè* has acquired a more celebrated place in Martinique's cultural landscape, and they are eager to participate in the larger mission of instilling greater appreciation for local traditions. It is clear, however, that *La Maison du Bèlè* and the majority of *bèlè* actors from Sainte Marie do not have the same preoccupation and/or engagement with militant nationalist politics. It is my sense that anxieties around cultural alienation differ along the lines of age/generation, rural/urban experience and upbringing, and educational background. Young and middle-aged urban Antilleans (especially those with middle-class or elite backgrounds) have been subjected to a distinct type of coercive assimilation that necessitates a more oppositional or subversive nationalist ethos. The definition of *bèlè* as an expression of cultural *marronage* (resistance) is painted with a broad brush that may not be attentive to variations and nuances in lived experience and access to power and resources. In the chapters that follow, I examine other debates in the *bèlè* movement that speak to the overlapping contradictions discussed here.

CHAPTER 5
SACRALIZING AND RITUALIZING *BÈLÈ* PRACTICE: A DIALECTIC OF
SPIRITUALITY

*When I'm dancing bèlè and I'm in my carré, I find my Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, and while I'm doing my monté o tanbou, I pray... I either give thanks, or I deposit my problems.*¹

- Noémi, a longtime *danm bèlè* (female dancer),
Interview, July 25, 2013

You can't have the 'culturel' without the 'cultuel' (worship), and one cannot be a good practitioner of bèlè if one does not integrate worship and devotion into their practice. This means when I do bèlè I give worship to the divinities around me, the four elements of nature, the stars and the moon—and all of these elements are in bèlè.

- Izaak, an experienced *chantè bèlè* (*bèlè* singer),
Interview, May 1, 2014

What is the significance of such statements about prayer and worship in a cultural revival movement that has prioritized cultural nationalism and resistance from a nonreligious standpoint? How does one come to terms with claims of numinous experience and encounters with the divine in a dance culture that has been commonly understood and promoted as a secular tradition?² What do these claims mean in a small island society like Martinique where the dominant religion is Roman Catholicism and African religious heritage has been rendered invisible? I know plenty of practitioners and specialists of the *bèlè* subculture who would question or deny the validity of the claims quoted above. Conversely, I know others who hold similar conceptions of the *bèlè* experience and are searching for ways to make sense of what

¹ In the choreography of *bèlè* from Sainte Marie developed from the quadrille, the *carré bèlè* is the square-dancing segment of the sequence, whereby two female-male couples dance face-to-face in the formation of a square, and swap positions so that the dancers may exchange partners. The *monté o tanbou* is the segment of the dance sequence following the square-dancing, whereby each couple takes a turn dancing together in a moment of playful display, and they accompany one another dancing toward the drummer as a manner of giving salutation to the drummer.

² By numinous, I am referring to the term coined by Rudolf Otto (1917) that points to feelings of awe, wonder, and fascination as they relate to religion and spirituality.

they have observed in their personal practice of the tradition. In recent years, the *bèlè* revival movement has become a hotbed for a new spirituality politics that was not readily apparent to me when I first encountered the tradition in 2009. When I arrived in Martinique to pursue dissertation research on the cultural politics of the *bèlè* revival, I did not anticipate that my project would evolve to address questions of spirituality and religion. Dance scholars of the Caribbean who inspired my work had covered the terrain of sacred dance in black religious contexts, and as far as I could see, my developing project on the secular *bèlè* tradition would not have a place in this vast body of research. Over time, I noticed that my interlocutors were indeed offering their spiritual interpretations of *bèlè* practice, and that their conceptions of spirituality were spiraling into a colorful debate about the beloved drum/dance tradition that gained many of its proponents for nonreligious purposes and activities over the last three decades.

In this chapter, I use a dialectical approach to analyze a set of competing narratives and perspectives about the place of spirituality in the practice of *bèlè*. In analyzing different spiritual interpretations of the tradition's ancestral roots, and its contemporary function in the everyday lives of practitioners, my aim is to illuminate the inherent assumptions and contradictions at play. The range of perspectives considered here come from practitioners with different orientations to religion, but who ultimately wish to bring validity to their numinous experiences with Martinique's drum culture. The dialectic problematizes the sacred/secular dichotomy and reveals a continuum of spirituality that comprises religious, supernatural, and nonreligious conceptions of *bèlè*.

Leaders of the *bèlè* movement initially focused on the transformative potential of *bèlè* for refashioning political and economic sensibilities, raising social consciousness,

and promoting solidarity and an ethos of resistance to the French neocolonial presence on the island (Chapter 4). Therefore, the existing research on *bèlè*'s resurgence in Martinique has centered exclusively on the secular functions of the tradition. *Bèlè* revival has been characterized as a new social movement, a strategy for defending the island's cultural heritage against exploitative touristic representations, and a space for creating a renewed sense of belonging (Gerstin 2000; Cyrille 2002; Pulvar 2009). Although these are important contributions to how we understand the entanglements of national identity and expressive culture in the French DOMs, this is only part of the story. None of these works have addressed the spiritual aspects that are being (re)claimed and debated in contemporary *bèlè* practice and discourse.³ My goal is to enrich his body of research by investigating the less explored interface of *bèlè*, spirituality, and cultural citizenship.

Presently, many *bèlè* enthusiasts are searching for and arguing the legitimacy of *le côté sacré* (the sacred aspect), in both past and present *bèlè* practice. Observers have a difficult time making sense of these assertions because the *bèlè* drum-dance complex is not explicitly linked with a specific religious heritage on the island and Martinique does not have a sacred dance structure that serves ritual functions, such as those dance rites presiding over the ceremonies of Haitian Vodou, Cuban Santería, or Brazilian Candomblé. According to Martinican musicologist Dominique Cyrille (2002), possession dances have not been documented in Martinique since 1902, and unfavorable attitudes about Vodou persist in the wider Martinican social imaginary

³ This is not to say that other scholars working on *bèlè* missed or ignored these aspects; rather, the debate has become more public and visible over time, and people are talking about these issues in ways that they were not 15-20 years ago.

(2002:240-1). Most remnants of African religious heritage in Martinique have dissolved, and what remains is the folk practice *quimbois*, a healing and conjuring tradition comparable with American Hoodoo or Jamaican Obeah, and largely dismissed in public life as old superstition or witchcraft.

It is important to note that although the *bèlè* revivalists of the 1970s-80s are applauded for their important work of recovering and diffusing the tradition, they are also criticized for letting the emotional and spiritual aspects of the practice fall by the wayside. The more prominent leaders of the revival considered themselves atheist at the start of the movement, and thus, had very little interest in *bèlè*'s connection to a higher supernatural power. Their Marxist-Communist inclinations against religion as a tool of the colonizer and the bourgeoisie did not permit them to pursue the *bèlè* revival from spiritual or religious standpoints. There was and still is a general consensus that some earlier adaptation of *bèlè* dancing served ritual purposes for black religious worship during the slave era, such as fertility/fecundity dances and harvest dances, which would have required some sacred knowledge of nature and cosmology. However, this cannot be substantiated with precise evidence due to early colonial-era campaigns to repress and eradicate those religious practices. Therefore, some observers find spiritual conceptions of *bèlè* to be inauthentic, frivolous attempts to (re)invent sacred elements that may or may not have existed before. Some criticize spiritual interpretations of the practice to be "new agey," misguided, or outright exploitative creations linked with the island's unrelenting identity crisis.

It is not my goal to evaluate and authenticate the claims discussed in this chapter, nor to argue one point of view as more legitimate than another. What is more important

and much more interesting is to analyze how and why ideas about religion and spirituality in the context of *bèlè* practice are evolving, and what the dialectic of spirituality suggests about Martinique's uneven relationships with France, the Caribbean, and the wider African diaspora. There is a wide array of perspectives to consider, and only a sample of them could be included in this chapter to shed light on an ever-growing debate. One area of the debate to be analyzed here involves the increasing visibility of *bèlè* performance in the Catholic Church, a fusion genre called *bèlè légliz* (Church *bèlè*), as an attempt to refashion the liturgy with recognizable Martinican cultural references that were historically prohibited by the dominant religious order. Supporters and opponents of the *bèlè légliz* project have been open to discussing the inherent paradox of this initiative, and both sides of the debate warrant closer analysis.

Another line of thinking to be engaged here deals with African-inspired philosophical orientations to spirituality that a subset of *bèlè* activists engage. If contemporary *bèlè* expressions are indeed the secularized adaptations of ancient African religious rites that were transformed by the ancestors, forced to abandon their sacred practices under enslavement and religious repression, how and why do present-day *bèlè* actors strive to recover and maintain those aspects of their identity? Their perspectives offer critical insight into the history of French colonization and the Catholic Church as a key driving force behind the island's assimilation.

Finally, I will analyze the assertion that *bèlè* is a secular spirituality in and of itself, comprising its own set of values, ethics, and morals. According to this line of thinking, *bèlè* has a spiritually transformative potential that does not require the imposition of a

specific religious framework. Many people holding any one of these three perspectives consider *bèlè* to be an integral part of social healing in a society that has suffered a “cultural genocide” with lasting emotional and mental health impacts under French assimilation (Glissant 1981:173). I will conclude by situating this work within recent Afro-Atlantic religious scholarship that problematizes the ways in which anthropologists decipher and analyze the contemporary practices of so-called African-derived religions. It is important to consider my implication in this debate as a foreign researcher working with a contentious subject that has many assumptions about the African past at play.

The Anthropology of Sacred Dance in the Afro-Atlantic World

The interrelationship among dance, music, spirituality, and religious syncretism has held a significant place in anthropological studies of the Caribbean and the wider African diaspora. Early contributions include Melville Herskovits’ (1941) *Myth of the Negro Past*, in which he developed his ideas about African retention and religious syncretism—analytical categories for understanding African American and Afro-Caribbean modes of religious expression that emerged through symbiosis under the New World conditions of colonization and enslavement. In his discussion of “Africanisms in religious life” he wrote about song, dance, and drum as integral components of spirit possession in group religious experience (1941:215-21). Anthropological foremothers and early pioneers of the study of Afro-Caribbean culture and religion, Zora Neale Hurston (1938) and Katherine Dunham (1969), remarkably detailed the ceremonial function of initiated drummers and dancers in invoking the *lwa*—spirits of the Haitian Vodou pantheon. Both women left an indelible mark in Caribbeanist anthropology with their vivid descriptions of the Rada and Petro rites, highlighting specific drum and dance styles executed for the individual deities. Ruth

Landes (1947) documented the experience of trance in Afro-Brazilian Candomblé, and Cuban anthropologist Lydia Cabrera recorded the sacred musics of Afro-Cuban religion, which complemented her extensive ethnographic writings on the subject, notably her 1954 text *El Monte*. St. Clair Drake (1970) made the important link between resistance and Black religious expression.

Dance anthropologist Yvonne Daniel (2005) has dedicated much of her career to deepening our understanding of Afro-Caribbean sacred dance in contemporary times. In her comparative analysis of Haitian Vodou, Cuban Yoruba, and Bahian Candomblé, she illustrates the complex ways in which African-inspired religious worship depends on dance, the key to accessing a sacred system of embodied knowledge. Although this area of scholarship has appeared most prominently in studies of Haitian Vodou and the African-derived orisha traditions of Cuba and Brazil, the ritual dances of Jamaica's Maroon and Kumina traditions have also received some scholarly attention, notably by Kenneth Bilby (2008) and Jacqueline Cogdell DjeDje (1998).

All of these studies point to the drum and bodily movement as keys for mediating communication with the spirit world, creating the conditions for emotional transcendence, and unifying individuals who share common beliefs and values. Going beyond exaggerated stereotypes of black, frenzied bodies in trance-like states, this scholarship has helped us move away from the tendency to essentialize African diaspora expressive culture. They contribute to our contemporary understandings of religion's relationship with African diaspora identity politics and nationalism (McAlister 2002), tourism and political-economy (Hagedorn 2001), and transnationalism and globalization (Matory 2005), anthropological concepts that have been central in the

study of Caribbean postcolonial modernity.

Martinique's rich drum-dance heritage remains an under-analyzed part of this intellectual conversation. Today, Roman Catholicism is the predominant religion of Martinique, with approximately 85 percent of the total population and an Archbishop presiding over 54 priests. Catholic holidays and feasts for the Saints are observed regularly on the island, and Catholic adherents make annual pilgrimages to the island's Sacred Heart Church in Balata (a replica of the Sacred Heart Church in Paris). Evangelical Protestant religions are on the rise, Hinduism came to Martinique with 19th century immigration from South India (although most Hindus in Martinique also identify as Catholic), and there are also small Jewish and Islam communities.

The Roman Catholic Church can be viewed as one of the driving forces behind assimilation long before emancipation and departmentalization. The 1685 Code Noir established by King Louis XIV in French colonies enforced the conversion and baptism of enslaved Africans. In Martinique, religious educational orders and catechism became especially intense in the years immediately preceding emancipation. These programs were commissioned by the French government in 1830 and led by the Brothers of Christian Instruction (Schmieder 2014). Despite the success of such orders in converting Martinique's majority black population to Catholicism, the *quimbois* conjuring and folk healing tradition went underground and continued to exist alongside Christianity.⁴

The oppressive conditions of Martinique, namely the Code Noir and prolonged

⁴ There were parallels in other Catholic-dominated colonies. For example in Haiti, Vodouists are often Catholic and undergo rites of passage in the Church. As the saying goes, "Haiti is 70 percent Catholic, 30 percent Protestant, and 100 percent Vodou."

colonial ties with France, would not permit African religious practices to flourish as highly organized systems of faith, as we see in the more prominent Afro-Atlantic religions of Haiti, Cuba, and Brazil. In her discussion of religious repression in Haiti, Kate Ramsey (2011) points out that the Code Noir did not contain laws explicitly forbidding African-based religious practice. There were, however, articles and provisions prohibiting slaves belonging to different masters from assembling and participating in nocturnal music and dance gatherings (2011:35). Also like Haiti, Martinique faced its share of anti-superstition campaigns. During the Bourbon Restoration era following the fall of Napoleon (1815-1830), Martinique witnessed a surge of poisonings, allegedly by slaves they called “obis” (obeah men, sorcerers), accused of poisoning white masters, livestock, and other slaves (Savage 2012). The poisonings created a widespread fear of traditional healing and medicine. According to historian John Savage, “[o]fficials charged with combating the poisoning phenomenon looked increasingly to any and all manner of African cultural practices that could be identified among the enslaved as potential factors in the crimes” (2012:153). He continues, “[i]n particular, healing practices came increasingly to be identified with malevolent witchcraft and poisoning, thereby undermining not only the survival of African spiritual practices but also the common medical practices used in plantation life” (ibid). It was obeah’s association with revolutionary resistance, rather than healing, that provided the rationale for society-wide repression of Black folk culture.

Primitivist stereotypes and prejudices extended to Martinique’s drum-dance traditions, and persisted through the post-emancipation era; even one of the island’s leading anticolonial intellectuals Frantz Fanon revealed his unease with folk religion as

a disruption to the evolution of humanity (Fanon 1967:126; Settler 2012:8). Throughout most of the colonial period and well into the 20th century, the practice of all regional variants of *bèlè* and other associated drum traditions was discouraged by occidental religious thought and the use of the drum was prohibited by the Catholic Church. In the following section, I will discuss the shifting perception of *bèlè* in the Catholic community through the emergence of *bèlè légliz*, and analyze some of the competing conceptions of *bèlè* as a liturgical expression.

Refashioning the Liturgy: *Bèlè Légliz*

Over the last decade, more Catholic adherents have grown to appreciate *bèlè* and there has been an increasing visibility of *bèlè* performance in the Catholic Church. The *bèlè légliz* project is a concept and fusion genre that attempts to refashion the liturgy with new expressions adapted from the *bèlè* repertoire. It is best described as the dialogic inculturation of Christian worship activities and evangelization of the local island culture. The goal is to strengthen the Church through the impulse of Martinique's traditional culture, bringing together the values intrinsic to both Christianity and the island's rural community life (i.e. *lespri bèlè*, the spirit of *koudmèn* group work and solidarity discussed in previous chapters).

Despite the drum's troubled history with the Catholic Church, there have been campaigns since Martinique's post-departmental era to reverse the effects of religious persecution of the drum and integrate local cultural markers into Catholic worship activities. The Second Vatican Council of the 1960s implemented liturgical changes in order to address increasing cultural diversity through the synthesis of traditional culture and faith (Gundani 1994; Rasing 2002). In 1965, with the authorization of the Vatican II liturgical reforms and influence from the social justice stance of Liberation Theology,

local priests in Martinique, notably Father Antoine Maxime and Father Louis Elie, encouraged the inculturation of the church and the liturgy through the use of vernacular expressions in worship activities, such as drum music (not *bèlè*), dance, and the translation of religious texts and hymns in the Kréyòl language. The 1960s was also a period during which pressures to assimilate to French culture and modernize Martinican public life was quite strong. Therefore, the priests faced a number of challenges and difficulties. The drum had long been considered a diabolic symbol associated with old rural blackness and alcohol consumption, and choir members felt uneasy singing traditional hymns in Kréyòl because French was the official language demanded in all formal institutions. These mid-20th century efforts to integrate local expressions into Catholic mass activities were not widely popular, and transforming the unfavorable attitudes toward Afro-Creole traditional culture would require the efforts of cultural activists and cultural workers in non-Church settings.

In 2005, the new *bèlè légliz* committee was initiated by Father Montconthour and established *bèlè* artists who participated in the 1980s revival movement. Their platform asserts that “the inculturation [of the Church] must permit Martinicans to truly be themselves in connection with their faith,” as articulated by Father Montconthour in a 2009 television news program entitled *Donner la chance à Jésus d’être Créole*, meaning “Give Jesus a chance to be Créole.”⁵ Proponents of *bèlè légliz* define it as a creative adaptation of *bèlè*, using the spirit, aesthetics, and values of *bèlè* and the repertoire of drum patterns and dance movements as a framework for developing liturgical expressions. It is not to be misunderstood as a diluted or misappropriated

⁵ Father Montconthour, “*Donner la chance à Jésus d’être Créole* (Give Jesus a chance to be Créole),” *Le Jour de Seigneur* video, accessed May 15, 2015, <http://bcove.me/hnvpdv0s>.

version of traditional *bèlè*, but rather an artistic endeavor that uplifts the ancestral creole culture in the name of God. In a promotional video for the 2012 Annual Festival of Fort de France, whereby the *bèlè légliz* team performed in a concert called *Transandans*, the artistic director of the *bèlè légliz* committee K'zo insists that "it's not *bèlè* in church; it's Church *Bèlè*."⁶ It's a different kind of expression and execution of *bèlè*'s base steps and gestures.

Following this line of thinking, I have heard remarks like, "there are things you would do at a *swaré bèlè* that you would not do at church." Let's consider the dance step *bodzè* as an example. In traditional *bèlè* dance contexts, *bodzè* is a step that is commonly used in the flirtatious, sensual exchange between female-male partners in the *bèlè* dance sequence, especially during the *monté o tanbou* toward the drummer. It is a movement that involves pelvic-torso isolation, hip-switching, and bent-knee posture (especially when danced by a woman). The arms can be positioned in a variety of ways when executing this step in the playful exchange with your partner, depending on what you want to communicate; they can be placed on your hips to highlight the lower-torso accentuation, they can be used to twirl and play with the skirt, they can be opened up toward the dance partner, inviting the partner to come in closer, or they can be gestured toward the drummer as a form of salutation. The execution of a liturgical *bodzè* in a church setting, toward an altar or choir for example, would require some modification and would have a different intent. For this reason, *bèlè légliz* supporters argue that the dance of *bèlè légliz* is not the dance of *swaré bèlè*. They use a gestural language, and each movement has meaning that comes from the liturgy. Thus, it is not intended to

⁶ Casimir "K'zo" Jean-Baptiste, "Festival de Fort de France 2012 – Mag 6," Vimeo video, 14:45, posted by Vianney Sotès, 2012, <https://vimeo.com/69515169>.

comprise the same repertoire of movements found in traditional *bèlè* practice (personal communication, July 25, 2014).⁷

The *bèlè légliz* team draws their inspiration from Bible Psalm: 96:1-3 and Psalm 150: 1-6, instructing devotees to sing for the Lord, and to Praise the Lord with dance and the sound of instruments.⁸ Because the drum was historically perceived as a tool of the devil's work, the *bèlè légliz* team emphasizes the utilization of the instrument as a tool for glorification. Here I quote one of the creators of the genre: "God asked us to dance for Him, to Praise Him, so we do it with what *we* have here: *our* bodies, *our* instruments, *our* culture" (interview, July 25, 2014). He argues that Martinique should not have to import gospel expressions from the U.S. or elsewhere when they have the cultural resources to develop their own liturgical styles of dance, music, and Kréyòl translations of religious text. The emphasis on "we" and "our" suggest the Church as an emerging institution of cultural sovereignty, where Martinicans are free to creolize worship with local references that were historically discourage and prohibited.

John Burdick (2004) has observed a comparable phenomenon in the revised liturgy and rituals of the Catholic Church in Brazil, and how liturgical adjustments correlate with Brazil's shifting racial politics and religious economy. In Brazil, Black Pastoral agents of the progressive Catholic movement used Candomblé instruments, samba music, stylized capoeira, and other elements of Afro-Brazilian culture that were historically demonized to reshape worship activities in the "Afro Mass" (2004:28). As

⁷ *Magnificat* is the liturgical dance group that performs in most *bèlè légliz* activities, at church, in music videos, and in live concerts. The group is made up primarily of pre-teen and teenaged girls, and their choreographed work combines the base steps of *bèlè* with praise dance movements.

⁸ You will also find references in the *Bèlè Légliz* (2009) album liner notes to 2 Samuel 6, about King David dancing before the Lord and playing instruments with the Israelites.

Burdick elucidates, this was one of the Church's recruitment strategies of inculturation for dealing with Brazil's increasingly competitive religious market.

Bèlè légliz did not begin to have a marketable appeal until about six years ago, when albums devoted to the *bèlè légliz* project were produced and distributed by *Mizik Label*, and *bèlè légliz* performance groups began giving concerts. Even today, many churchgoers are displeased with the presence of the *bèlè* drum in the sanctuary. Despite some backlash and criticism, *bèlè légliz* has proven to be a commercial success based on record and concert sales. My conversations and interviews with my *bèlè* interlocutors, both Christians and non-Christians, often led to commentary either in favor or in opposition to the *bèlè légliz* project. Those in support of the project argue that this is an innovative strategy to put Martinican Christians in touch with their local roots. They can be proud of who they are by overcoming the hostility of the past, and now have a manner of recognizing themselves in the Catholic worship of God. *Bèlè légliz* proponents also argue that the project brings deeper meaning to the *bèlè* value system by putting the values in practice, beyond mere entertainment and amusement.

Bèlè légliz has also faced its share of scrutiny. I have heard some express their disagreement with the liturgical adaptation of musical content, bodily movements, steps, and gestures comprising the true *bèlè* repertoire. Traditional *bèlè* dance movements and lyrical themes that would be considered indecent or vulgar in a church setting have been modified for a Christian audience, but according to some, this is a problematic manner of sanitizing the practice to adhere to Christian dogmatic standards.⁹ The quote cited above, "you won't do *bodzè* at church the way you do *bodzè* in a *swaré bèlè*,"

⁹ This debate also pertains to the expression of sensuality and gendered subjectivity, discussed in Chapter 6.

speaks precisely to this area of debate, and some find such statements to be troubling. The swinging of the pelvis, hip accentuation, and bent knees in *bodzè* are characteristic features of Black dance expression, with different variants found in the majority of African-diasporic dance contexts. Such movements of the black dancing body were historically perceived through a European colonial lens as hyper-sexual, lewd, and distasteful. To adapt this movement as a liturgical expression for a Christian audience, with an erect, upright body orientation, reduced hip-accentuation, and arms lifted in an upward direction in the manner observed in most praise dances, the meaning of the step is altered from its original intent; one way to interpret this modification is rather than inviting your partner for a game of seductive play, you are inviting Jesus into your heart. *Bèlè légliz* artists respond by saying that the objective of *bèlè légliz* is not to put traditional *bèlè* at church, because if that were the case, the Archbishop would have never accepted the idea.

The paradox of *bèlè légliz* has been noted, even among some of those who participated in its development as *bèlè légliz* team members. One evening, after attending a *bèlè légliz* concert, I agreed to drop off one of my more specialized consultants, a highly regarded singer and cultural activist who played an instrumental role in the 1980s revival movement. He had just performed in the show, and as we drove through the streets of downtown Fort de France, he told me he was not entirely comfortable with the performance; he had even told the priest his opinion that *bèlè légliz* is a big contradiction. When I probed about his reflections, he recounted a story about an encounter he had recently with a woman on the street. The woman came up to him, saying “Misyé Guerrier, I really appreciate your music, your voice, I appreciate

everything you have done to advance the traditional culture of Martinique; but one thing I can't agree with is *bèlè* at the Church. Why are you doing this?" In a serious tone, he responded to the woman "*mwen lé mété djab an légliz*" (I wanted to bring the devil to the Church). We laughed about the irony of this encounter the rest of the way home.

Misyé Guerrier's reflections, though humorous and sarcastic, draw attention to what some consider to be a serious problem with the *bèlè légliz* project. This idea that *bèlè* is of the devil, and therefore, unsuitable for Church settings, still drives the mentality of so many devout Catholics on the island. Formal complaints have been filed with the Archbishop of Fort de France, and there was even a heated conflict outside of Church in the town of François, when a *béké* caused a big stir about a *bèlè légliz* demonstration during that morning's Mass. In response to situations like this, *bèlè légliz* leaders argue that when people do not know or understand something, they will always try to diabolize it. Leaders of *bèlè légliz* are receptive to the opinions of their critics, and have been diplomatic in advancing the project. To address complaints that the drum is not appropriate for the acoustics of the sanctuary, for example, one of the *bèlè légliz* musicians designed a new *bèlè* drum that has a more delicate sound for Church music.

Should *bèlè* activists who also identify as Christians look to their former oppressor, the Church institution, to approve and legitimize the island's indigenous drum tradition? This question seems to be a central point of controversy. The problem does not seem to be that *bèlè* practitioners cannot also be Christians, but rather that *bèlè* activities and Christian worship activities have an irreconcilable history. According to this line of thinking, *bèlè* and Church are not compatible to share the same public space; the implications of this become clearer when we consider other philosophical orientations to

spirituality in the *bèlè* community that fall outside the institution of the Catholic Church.

Cultivating African Diasporic Cosmologies on the *Bèlè* Cultural Landscape

Another line of thinking found among a subset of *bèlè* activists engages African-inspired philosophical orientations to spirituality. Their spiritual interpretations concern *bèlè*'s complex, symbolic interrelationship to the land, the ancestors, and the cosmos. As previously stated, when I arrived in Martinique to begin my extended field research on *bèlè*, I was not prepared to ask questions about the connection between traditional (secular) *bèlè* and African-derived sacred practices. However, my academic training as an anthropologist of the African diaspora and particularly the Caribbean had well prepared me to quickly take notice of certain symbols, remarks, and observances with a heightened curiosity.

Did I just notice him pouring libations? Was that some kind of offering? I asked myself after watching a drummer tip his cup of rum to the earth-packed adobe flooring of *Lakou Trankil's* outdoor *bèlè* dance space one Friday evening.¹⁰ I later made a comment about this to the drummer and I learned that my suspicions were correct.¹¹ Just earlier that week, when I went to *Lakou Trankil* for a private afternoon dance lesson, my dance teacher was lighting a bush of incense in a small smudge pot. *Was this some kind of ritual practice for purifying the space?* When I asked the reason, he responded that it was “for the spirits” (personal communication, March 5, 2013). He then commented that Martinicans are so concerned with the fast-paced life, and they forget about the spiritual elements. What I was witnessing during these early days of

¹⁰ A more detailed description of this space can be found in Chapter 4.

¹¹ I am aware that libation pouring is a practice that exists in various cultural and religious contexts around the world, but I immediately read it as an offering of ancestor reverence, and wanted to know its meaning in this particular social space.

fieldwork was the (re)enactment of subtle rituals that were intended to enrich the everyday spiritual lives of certain *bèlè* practitioners. Although I had initially understood *bèlè* as a secular tradition, it would be important for me to try and make sense of this engagement with the spirit world in *bèlè* spaces.

For some *bèlè* practitioners, ancient African cosmologies and the Afro-Atlantic belief systems of Haitian Vodou, Cuban Santería, and Brazilian Candomblé have become important references of Black sacred knowledge; systems of sacred knowledge and practice that once existed in Martinique, but were mostly dispelled by colonial oppression. These particular *bèlè* interlocutors are inclined to reject the dogmatic nature of the Catholic Church, and draw from other systems of faith wherein they recognize more of themselves and their culture. Take for example Amadou, a *ladja* fighter, drummer, and dancer, a staunch critic of the Catholic Church and vehement defender of the Vodou religion. When I first met Amadou, I had become accustomed to seeing *bèlè* drums in bare, plain barrel form, without any aesthetic enhancement (Figures 5-1). I was immediately struck by the *vévé* image painted in red and white that adorns his drum and the thin rope that stretches across the face of the drum (Figure 5-2).¹² He identifies this particular *vévé* as the symbol of conjuration, which is important for his protection. As a combatant and specialist of the *ladja* tradition, Amadou carries out special rituals to prepare his mind, body, and spirit for fighting. He once recounted his trip to Brazil, whereby he exchanged with capoeiristas and identified Shango as his orisha—Shango being the warrior deity of strength, thunder, music, dance, and drums; this also explains the paint color choice of red and white on his drum. When I asked

¹² *Vévé* images are the sacred designs drawn on the ground with cornmeal for Haitian vodou ceremonies.

him the purpose of the thin rope stretched across the drum's face, he explained that the rope produces sounds with special frequencies and vibrations that enable altered states of consciousness.



Figure 5-1. *Tanbou bèlè* (bèlè drum)



Figure 5-2. *Tanbou bèlè* with *vévé* painting

Another example is G r me, who associates *b l * with the *Iwa Kouzen Azaka* (or *Zaka*) - the deity of agriculture and guardian of farmworkers and their families in the Haitian Vodou pantheon of spirits (Daniel 2005:112); *Kouzen* is a comforter of the poor, and in Haiti's Vodou practice of syncretizing African deities with Catholic saints, *Kouzen's* Catholic counterpart is St. Isidore, the patron saint of farmers and laborers (Ramsey 2011:8). In Haiti's repertoire of sacred dance, there are certain movements that dancers use to invoke *Kouzen* and announce his arrival to the ceremony.

Katherine Dunham (1983) wrote that they "bend low in the movements of planting and hoeing...[their movements] typify mountain people working in the fields" (1983:52).

According to elders of the *b l * tradition, *b l * is "une danse de la terre"—a dance of the land and earth. It was practiced by enslaved agricultural laborers who cut cane and grated manioc to the sound of the *b l * drum, and danced as a source of release after a hard day's work. Many of the dance movements in the *b l * repertoire represent movements executed in field labor. The movement in *b l * called *tonb -l v * for example, whereby the dancer leans forward and backward while stamping their feet and swinging their arms forward and backward alternately, embodies the act of cutting sugarcane (one hand is holding the stalk of cane while the other arm swings the machete in a steady, rhythmic pattern). *Graj * is the name of another movement, whereby the pattern of the dancer's feet evokes the image of grating manioc.

G r me has spent the last few years researching the possible links between Martinican *b l * and the lore of *Kouzen Azaka* in Vodou. Writing about *Kouzen's* dances in Haiti, Yvonne Daniel writes about a dance called *mayi* (from the Mahi nation): "*Mayi*...is a quick-paced, foot-slapping, agriculturally-rooted dance within Rada rituals

and is immensely important in Haiti's agricultural society" (2005:112). There is another dance in Haiti called *djouba* that is danced for *Kouzen*, and it is performed to a drum that Haitians call the "*Matinik*" (Cally 1990:18-19; Johnson 2012:151). This drum is played in the same manner that the *bèlè* drum is played in Martinique, and the movements of *djouba* resemble some of the movements found in Martinique's *bèlè* repertoire. "For playing *djouba*, the drum is laid on the ground and played with hands and feet, because *djouba* spirits live in the earth" (Averill and Wilcken 2008:130).¹³

According to Gérôme, these connections are not mere coincidence. His vision implies that this aspect of Caribbean religious heritage has flourished in Haiti, free from the restraints of prolonged colonial repression that caused the disintegration of African belief systems in Martinique. Some overlap in the traditions of Haiti, Martinique, and elsewhere in the Caribbean is to be expected because the Caribbean has always been a place of movement, travel, and migration; enslaved Africans were moved from one colony to the next frequently enough for these traditions to have circulated centuries ago, taking on different meanings and uses in their new socio-cultural environments.

I would like to reflect briefly on black people's physical and symbolic attachment to the earth, as Kimberly N. Ruffin (2010) analyzes in her book *Black on Earth: African American Ecoliterary Traditions*. Writing about African descendants in the U.S. context, Ruffin argues that their "love for the land" was not compromised or destroyed by the grueling, horrific experiences of slavery and forced labor in the fields. After a hard day's work on large plantations under bondage, they maintained their collective group commitments to farming the provision grounds that would nourish themselves and those

¹³ Alan Lomax, "Haitian Djouba Dancing," YouTube video, 1:46, posted by "Cunya jele mue," November 15, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KxwoYua9ju0>.

around them, ensuring the survival of their communities. According to Ruffin,

this “love for the land” produced a tangible commitment to the self and nonhuman nature through agriculture. It helped African Americans use work to “achieve a bodily knowledge of the natural world” and express dedication to their own survival. Doing so allowed the enslaved to experience ecological beauty in the midst of incredible burdens (2010:32-3).

This kind of spiritual devotion to soil, land, earth, and all other elements related to agricultural life among African descendants warrants more serious attention. In the U.S. South, the enslaved danced and played music to glorify their Creator and their ancestors in the fertility of the soil, the harvest of their crops, and “the renewal of the life process” (Stuckey 1987:64). Like the significance of *Kouzen’s* lore in Haiti, *bèlè* has become a vehicle for urban and rural Martinicans to express their deep appreciation and respect for the land and memorialize their ancestors who possessed special systems of knowledge of the natural environment for their communities to prevail and be resilient under harsh, unimaginable circumstances. That spirit of survival, resistance, and solidarity lives on in the collective memory of *bèlè* activists today.

What do we make of the cosmic circle that sets many of Martinican drum-dances into motion? The opening sequences of *bèlè* and *kalenda* dances, as well as *ladja/danmyé* matches, involve the dancers moving in a counterclockwise circular formation. Most of my interlocutors comment on the mystic energy of the counterclockwise dance formation as a characteristic feature of black sacred dance when asked about their spiritual interpretations of the tradition. As Martinique was heavily populated by Central Africans from the Congo-Angola region, and *bèlè* is said to have partial origins in Congo-Angolan culture, it makes sense that certain aspects of religious symbology from Central Africa are reinterpreted in the practice of *bèlè*

drumming and dancing. T.J. Desch-Obi (2002) writes about the ritual entrance to the circle for *danmyé* combatants, called *kouri lawonn* (running around the circle) as a Central African retention (2002:365). Throughout his influential text *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America*, Sterling Stuckey (1987) impressively highlights the spiritual significance of the sacred circle that survived in New World religious contexts like the Ring Shout of the U.S. South. “The use of the circle for religious purposes in slavery” he writes, “was so consistent and profound that one could argue that it gave form and meaning to black religion and art” (1987:11). He goes on to argue that “the circle became the chief symbol of heathenism for missionaries, black and white, leading them to seek either to alter it or to eradicate it altogether” (Ibid). With this information, one can deduce that *bèlè*, as a secular adaptation of the French *quadrille* square-dance format, was the outcome of such eradication campaigns. The circular opening of *bèlè* dance sequences, however, remains one of the key components of the practice today.

The circular in the opening of Martinique’s *bèlè* dance sequence, called the *wondi-déwondi*, involves the eight dancers moving (or running) behind one another in a counterclockwise direction. Once they have completed a semi-circle, they reverse the direction of the circle and run back to their places in a clockwise rotation; following the *wondi-déwondi* cycle, dancers then break into their square-dancing sequence. The symbolic significance behind the *wondi-déwondi* has been interpreted by my interlocutors in a couple of different ways. One person explained that the spiritual energy of the cosmic counterclockwise circle was too powerful when danced in Martinique’s *bèlè* context, having a transcendental effect on the dancers; with the

religious repression of colonial times, they were forced to modify the dance by reversing the counterclockwise procession in the opposite direction, to avoid provoking supernatural manifestations of trance and spirit possession.

According to another conception, which draws heavily from Egyptian cosmic knowledge, members of the *bèlè* ensemble are responsible for receiving and communicating solar and/or lunar energy to the spirit world. As Izaak explains, this is why the drummer should position the drum so that its head faces the sun or moon. The dancers open the *bèlè* sequence by dancing counterclockwise, consistent with the moon's orbit of the earth. The dancers reverse their circular procession in a clockwise direction, however, because they must go back and gather the positive cosmic energy that descends from the moon as it orbits the earth. Izaak explained that cosmic energy is also transmitted through the inverse triangle that is formed by the drummer's foot and two hands as s/he strikes the drum, passing through the body of the drum to the spirit world; therefore, it is the drummer who gives the offering.¹⁴ As I reflect on this exchange with Izaak, I recall that in response to my astonishment, he concluded by saying, "our ancestors were so intelligent...these are extraordinary things. *Bèlè is a High Mass, Madame!*" (interview, May 1, 2014).

¹⁴ In listening closely to the lyrics of Mona's *Tambou Serié* (excerpted in the Introductory chapter) you find many references to this spiritual interpretation of the drum. Certain aspects of the symbolic significance of the circle for communicating solar energy to the spirit world can also be interpreted using the Kongo cosmogram described in Robert Farris Thompson's "four moments of the sun" analysis (Thompson 1981).

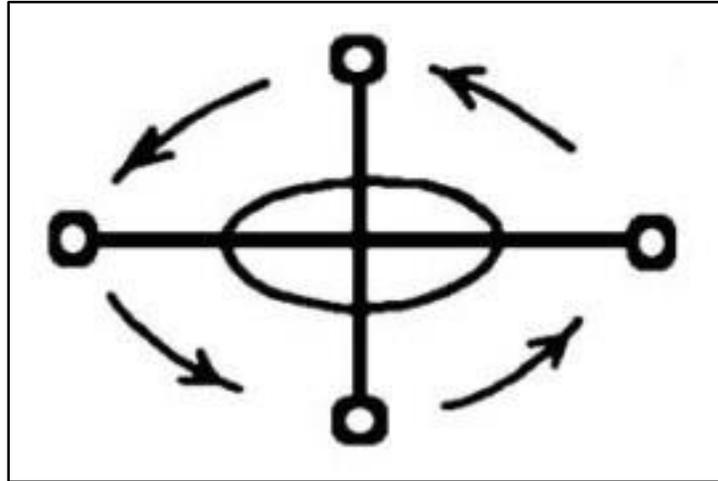


Figure 5-3. Kongo cosmogram

In addition to the above exegeses, *bèlè*, *kalennda*, *lalin klè*, and *danmyé* are believed to serve many other spiritual functions, which warrant closer analysis in future research. These can be understood as legends from a time, post-emancipation/pre-departmentalization, when Martinique was its own “civilization”—before the civilization was destroyed by French colonial domination and assimilation. These legends involve wakes and funerary traditions, initiatory rites of passage, sacred offerings, and so on. Before concluding, I offer some reflections about the assertion that *bèlè* is a spirituality in and of itself, one that does not need to be linked with a specific religious heritage to validate its transformative potential.

***Bèlè* as Martinique’s Secular Spirituality**

“Doktè ka ba la djèwizon, mé bèlè ka djèwi mwen san fason”
(Doctors can give the remedy, but bèlè heals me without medicine)

- Noémi, a longtime *danm bèlè* (female dancer),
 Interview, July 25, 2013

Ideas about spirituality and religion in the *bèlè* revival movement have evolved over time as practitioners of today’s generation attempt to sacralize and ritualize what

has long been treated as a secular tradition. Beyond the realm of political mobilizing and economic solidarity, *bèlè* is said to have a tremendous impact on participants' emotional health and spiritual growth. Many *bèlè* practitioners claim to have turned to the tradition to reconcile feelings of alienation and vulnerability associated with the French national model of assimilation. I argue that these practitioners attempt to legitimize or make sense of their transformative experiences by mapping different (at times, incompatible) spiritual narratives onto a performance space that does not have any explicit connection to a specific religious heritage.

One day, Izaak recounted for me his spiritual path with *bèlè*, starting with the 1980s revival movement to present-times. When the *bèlè* movement first began, he immersed himself in the radical political discourse and activities of youth movements, and identified as an atheist militant more concerned with syndicalism and the defense of Martinican cultural nationalism. He spoke with great passion and humility, in a manner that I would describe as simultaneous repentance and deliverance, recounting how he used his involvement with *bèlè* to elevate his political consciousness, and establish his reputation as a cultural activist, without giving anything back to *bèlè* spiritually. He behaved as if it was he who chose *bèlè*, to uplift his political convictions, but failed to realize that it was *bèlè* who had chosen him. "*Bèlè* gives so much to us; it gives socially, financially, politically, but we fail to realize how it gives spiritually. We take, take, take from *bèlè* and we don't offer anything in return." After enduring a number of life's difficulties and suffering, and eventually hitting what he described as rock bottom, he took a break from the *bèlè* movement to reflect. He later returned to the movement with a more profound conception of spirituality and respect for his Creator and

ancestors; a conception that would emancipate him and henceforth permeate his practice of *bèlè*.

Social scientists have analyzed the alienating effects of departmentalization in Martinique (Beriss 2004; Burton 1995). Martinique has been characterized as the “schizophrenic island” (Miles 2012), fraught with structural assaults on the mental health of its inhabitants grappling with the question of identity and purpose. Political scientist William F. S. Miles, who has long analyzed the effects of assimilationist statehood in Martinique, echoes Frantz Fanon’s observations about “pathologies of assimilationist colonialism” leading to “anxiety, stress, frustration, and contradiction;” a “social suffering” that cannot be resolved with a change in Martinique’s political status (2012:10-11).

Following the work on “structural violence” (Farmer 2004; Harrison 1997), medical anthropologist Raymond Massé (2007) writes about “idioms of distress” in Martinique that result from Martinique’s so-called identity crisis, and feelings of incompetence and low self-worth resulting from the island’s prolonged economic dependence on and political subordination to France. Massé’s analysis challenges the perceived relationship between poverty and distress by considering the high level of suffering and mental illness in a place like Martinique, where the standard of living (wealth, resources, and access to biomedical services) is relatively higher than other Caribbean island societies (2007:8). One of my interlocutors, drawing a parallel between the realities in Haiti versus Martinique, told me that Martinicans think it is the Haitians who suffer from poverty, but Martinicans “are suffering in their minds,” because “they don’t know who they are, and they want everything that France has. At least Haitians know who they

are and what they are doing” (interview, February 15, 2013).

So how is *bèlè*, as a vehicle for spiritual transformation, implicated in this complex reality? Though the idea of a civil or secular spirituality may seem like an oxymoron, it is a topic that is currently undergoing serious discussion and investigation among certain leaders of the movement. Actors in the *bèlè* movement have done tremendous work in encouraging its followers to uphold a system of values, ethics, and morals rooted in the ancestral heritage of Martinique. The tradition is said to comprise its own set of convictions, as a way of life (*bèlè sé an mannyè viv*). Participation in *bèlè* and other related traditions has helped to craft an alternative worldview, different from that which has been imposed through colonial domination. Participants gather for weekly, monthly, and annual (nonreligious) rituals and ceremonial gatherings to rejoice, communicate, give reverence, and promote the spirit of *bèlè* as it was inherited from generations past. For many, it is an emotional release that serves as a healthy alternative to meditation or yoga. Indeed, the *bèlè* dance space can become one’s altar or prayer bench, where s/he can give grace and invocation; it can be the place where one releases her/his pain and tension. Once, a woman explained to me how she cried during her entire *carré bèlè* and *monté o tanbou* sequence at a *swaré bèlè*, as she grieved the loss of a loved one.

And what do we make of people’s claims of transcendent experience in this nonreligious drum-dance context? Occasionally, I came across *bèlè* practitioners who profess to have experiences with trance while dancing *bèlè*, especially dances like *gran bèlè* and *kalennda*, which were both reputed to be dances of prayer; was I to take these claims as literal or sincere? How was I to decipher the authenticity of trance accounts

as they were reported to me? How was I to read certain (infrequent) performances in which the dancer appeared to have slipped into an altered state of consciousness? There are many who think such claims are untrue or impossible because the conditions that mediate trance states (like spirit possession rites observed in other religions) do not exist in Martinique and are not practical in the contemporary *bèlè* space (although there is some consensus that this aspect still exists for certain initiated practitioners of *ladja/danmyé*).

Some people criticize these claims as misconceptions, or as misguided attempts to create spiritual interpretations of transcendence that would only be attainable by highly-specialized ritual authorities and initiates in African religion.¹⁵ However, it would be remiss not to unpack and take seriously what these claims mean in this dialectic of spirituality. If we consider the literature on musical ecstasy and trance, scholars writing on secular and sacred musics agree that “it is not the music itself that directly causes the trance effect, but the total event—how individual physiology becomes coupled with a psychological experience embedded within a particular cultural tradition and an immediate social/ritual event” (Ansdell 2014:269). The notions of “deep listening,” “trance consciousness,” and “magic through emotion” as conceived by ethnomusicologist Judith Becker (2004) helps to make sense of secular trancing or near-trance experience. She defines trance as “a bodily event characterized by strong emotion, intense focus, the loss of the strong sense of self, usually enveloped by amnesia and a cessation of the inner language” (2004:43).

¹⁵ Though I think we should be careful about those who attempt to invent a sacred quality about *bèlè* through exaggerated or untrue accounts of trance, I am influenced by the perspective of Raquel Romberg (2014) who writes about the contested terrain of “faked possession” and the controversy around authentic spiritual presence; these are subjective experiences (2014:229).

With these arguments in mind, perhaps we should modify our framework for what qualifies as “trance” as it relates to the dancing black body, outside of traditional religious ceremonial contexts. If we move away from the idea of trance as spirit possession, which characterizes the ritual activities of African-inspired religious practices, we can have a different appreciation for what trance means in the context of Martinique’s *bèlè* culture. We can understand secular trance as being transported to a state of immense joy, pleasure, inner peace, and a sense of healing. It does not have to be an encounter with an identifiable deity or spirit, but rather a state of immense emotional transformation.

Problematizing the Anthropology of Afro-Atlantic Religion

This portion of my research is influenced by recent scholarship on Afro-Atlantic religion and spirituality that critically examines the complex ways in which ethnographers *and* practitioners of Afro-Atlantic spirituality (mis)recognize, conceive, reframe, and write about religious expression in the quest of recovering “pure” or “authentic” African origins (Matory 2005; Johnson 2007; Capone 2010; Palmié 2013). These interventions problematize the essentialization of black religiosity, and call attention to how religious economies and the “commerce of memory making” (2007:45) shape black religious experience. Taking this critique a step further, Stephan Palmié’s (2013) more recent contribution to this conversation examines the making of Afro-Cuban religion as an anthropological subject of study, and calls out the ways in which anthropologists have been complicit in the creation of such religious products.

In shaping this part of my project, I have also come to terms with anthropologists’ tendency to dismiss or overlook Christ-centered cultural movements and change in Caribbeanist and Latin Americanist scholarship. This “disciplinary bias” against

Christianity (Louis 2014:10) is most likely due to overarching generalizations of Christianity as a tool of oppression and domination. While I have largely concurred with this perspective in my own critical engagement with Christianity, this tendency ignores the region's increasing religious pluralism and spiritual diversity, shifting religious economies and markets, and the influence that other religious orientations are having on Christianity, and vice versa. John Burdick (2004, 2013) has done a nice job of showing, for example, how progressive Catholics (2004) and evangelicals (2013) in Brazil are implicated in contemporary struggles around black identity politics. I also find the work of Bertin Louis (2014) on the Haitian Protestant diaspora useful in understanding contemporary Caribbean religious diversity.

In my work, I aim to pull Martinique from the margins of African diaspora religious scholarship to show how the perception of *bèlè* as a secular expression is changing and adapting to contemporary desires and demands for genuine spiritual transformation. Miles' neo-Fanonian analysis of Martinique argues that the "political attempts to institutionally repair the fraught relationship with France by redefining Martinique's juridical status will not salve the deeper identity-based grievances" (Miles 2012:10). The tendency to sacralize the *bèlè* tradition, with both Christian- and African-inspired religious interpretations, and secular notions of healing, illustrates a spiritual defiance of the legacy of French colonialism. Rather than mulling over which spiritual narrative is legitimate, or warrants more scholarly attention over another, I see this as an occasion to situate Martinique's drum-dance heritage and spirituality politics in an ever-expanding intellectual conversation about the complex anthropological subject we call Afro-Atlantic religion.

CHAPTER 6
“A GENERATOR UNDER HER DRESS”: *BÈLÈ* AS A SITE FOR WOMEN'S
TRANSGRESSIVE SENSUALITY AND GENDER PERFORMANCE

In the previous chapter, I concluded with a discussion of *bèlè* as a source of emotional and therapeutic relief, serving a purpose of secular spirituality and social healing for many people whose senses are transformed through deep immersion in the practice. This chapter is a suitable companion piece to that discussion, because it explains the affective interpretations of *bèlè* from a gendered perspective. In this chapter, I explore the liberatory potential of *bèlè* performance through the lens of sensual expressivity and erotic subjectivity, particularly as they relate to Afro-Martinican women's struggles and material realities. I have chosen to dedicate this chapter to *les dames/danm bèlè* (female *bèlè* dancers), because so much of the leadership and public discourse around the advancement of the *bèlè* movement are male-dominated. Women play a central role in the ongoing transmission of these traditions, both on and off the dance floor.

In what follows, I analyze *bèlè* performance as a space for women's transgression of respectable sexuality and gender norms, and the associated debates around appropriate dance conduct. This analysis requires a thorough description of the traditional *swaré bèlè*, the various *bèlè linò* dance styles performed in *swaré bèlè* contexts, and the different meanings, purposes, and expressions ascribed to each style. *Bèlè linò* is a communicative dance, with courtship-style choreography involving four female-male couples in the quadrille format, danced with varying degrees of intensity based on the style of song. In a society where black women have been historically stereotyped and objectified based on colonial notions of sexuality, shamed as dependents of French public assistance, and suffer disproportionately at the hands of

family violence (Leonard 1997), *bèlè* is an emancipatory space where the performance of a provocative sensuality and erotic power are, for the most part, applauded and celebrated. In the playful, flirtatious game of certain *bèlè* choreographies in which the woman is the object of her male partner's pursuit, she ultimately decides if she will submit or retreat. My evidence suggests that this aspect of *bèlè* performance, whereby women are valorized for their agility, power, and sensual dance prowess, brings a remarkable sense of affirmation and confidence, while provoking discussions about decency, morality, and respectable dance behavior.

Many of the observations gleaned herein were gathered at traditional *swaré bèlè* events, and through informal and semi-structured group discussions with women dancers.¹ I have chosen to focus on this aspect of women's sensuality as a chapter theme because it is one of the aspects that peaked my interest from the time of my first contact with the tradition. I was especially drawn to the ways in which the *danm bèlè* commands the dance space in her exchange with the *kavalyé* (male dance partner), and demands the attention of onlooking spectators. The range of attitudes, emotions, facial expressions, maneuvers, and playful devices used in her performance are all indicators of a profound sense of control, confidence, and comfort in her moving body. Even though the dance involves a high degree of improvisation, the fluid exchange between dance partners gives the impression that the *danm bèlè* is calculated, deliberate, and all-knowing in how she exercises her authority. I have also chosen this theme as a chapter subject because the debate regarding sensual expressivity seems

¹ I am referring specifically to long-time female dancers (*danm bèlè*) of the tradition who have been dedicated members of the community through their frequent participation in *swaré bèlè*, and as teachers and students in *bèlè* schools.

to receive less attention, and deserves serious reflection regarding its larger implications for the *bèlè* movement, and for what it reveals about the society.

I begin with a discussion of Peter Wilson's classic 1969 essay on reputation and respectability, and subsequent scholarship that has problematized Wilson's arguments of gendered behavioral patterns. I will then move on to a discussion of women's material realities and everyday struggles in Martinique, and a discussion of how women are generally represented and perceived in Martinique through public images and tropes of black womanhood. Indeed, shifting power relations and post-emancipation notions of upper-class respectability have had an influence over how these tropes were constructed since the colonial, slavery, and post-emancipation eras, up until contemporary times. As I will show in my analysis, black women use the performative space of *bèlè* in ways that challenge pejorative stereotypes and gendered norms through embodied expressions of liberation, autonomy, and power. This kind of sensual expressivity and performance of erotic power has been questioned by others in the *bèlè* movement who use traditionalist principles and moral standards to assess the appropriateness of excessive sensual dance behavior. When analyzed against the backdrop of women's everyday struggles, and with careful consideration of *bèlè*'s ancestral origins in fertility rites, serious discussion of desire, pleasure, and therapeutic release in *bèlè* performance is necessary.

Gendered Behavioral Patterns in the Caribbean: Unpacking Wilson's Reputation and Respectability Thesis

In 1969, Peter Wilson conceptualized the "reputation/respectability" dichotomy as an analytical framework for understanding competing value systems and gendered behavioral patterns in Afro-Creole societies. This hypothesis states that in Caribbean

societies, there exists a double standard of morals in which men are expected to exercise and exploit their freedoms of virility, resistance, and opposition in public life while women, as passive accommodationists to the colonial legacy, are expected to uphold the morals, values, and institutions imposed by European hegemony. According to this perspective, kin networks and households are female-centered, and the man remains marginal in the domestic realm. Thus, the values associated with reputation direct him to publicly perform and participate in activities in the public sphere to make a living. From early youth, the male is reared to understand the meaning of *machismo* as an ideology of power, and learns that the man's role is to be aggressive, outspoken, and hypersexual. He migrates in search for work, and reproduces offspring through both marital and extra-marital partnerships.

“Respectability,” on the other hand, is an upper-class value system generally imposed on women that emphasizes the colonial ideals and institutions of the Church, domesticity, education, and marriage. According to Wilson, women (and older men) have passively adopted these European cultural values and moral codes, and only occasionally overlap their values with those of the reputation paradigm. Reputation, then, is associated with masculinity, lower-class norms, public performance (i.e. acting out in the streets and convening in rum shops), hypersexuality, mobility, and economic strategizing. However, Wilson's conceptualization assumes that women in the Caribbean, as passive recipients of imposed European standards, do not assert agency or resistance to the norms inherited from colonialism.

Anthropologists who work on gender in the Caribbean, such as Tony L. Whitehead, Jean Besson, and Carla Freeman have offered a more complex reading of

Wilson's framework in order to problematize the assumptions and over-simplifications in his work.

In his research on masculinity in Jamaica, Tony L. Whitehead (Whitehead 1986) illuminates the symbiosis between reputation and respectability as a dialectic, or masculine "balance" in the everyday negotiations of Jamaican men (1986:228).

Whitehead's application of the reputation/respectability model in post-plantation America (1997), in an effort to understand black masculinity outside of the Caribbean context, references the importance of this "balance" which is maintained by men who express themselves with characterizations of "reputation" in specific contexts, even though they have ultimately proven themselves to be respectable men by abiding the law, working for financial stability, and exhibiting their spirituality. Whitehead writes,

Although it is potentially disruptive to social order, young males are allowed to express reputational traits. Masculine maturity, however, is marked by bringing an end to such expressions and channeling them into culturally defined units of time, space, style, and sociocultural contexts" (Whitehead 1997:422).

In her "reconsideration" of the reputation/respectability framework, Besson provides examples from her research in Martha Brae, Jamaica, and other regional examples, to illustrate how women have integrated the values commonly associated with male-oriented reputation. She writes, "...village women participate in all the main dimensions of reputation identified by Wilson as male-oriented, namely landholding, indigenous cults, entrepreneurial skills, titles and procreation" (Besson 1993:22). She also argues that Black women were active agents in slave uprisings and they continue to have an integral role in the oppositional culture and resistance of Afro-Creole communities (Ibid:30).

Carla Freeman's (2000, 2014) work in Barbados among "pink-collar Bajans," or women who work in the informatics and data processing sector, also recontextualizes Wilson's reputation/respectability paradigm, showing the gendered nature of movement, "strategic flexibility," and "occupational multiplicity" (Freeman 2014:23; 179). As respectability is sought through the institution of marriage, middle-class women are simultaneously engaged in male-oriented reputation practices for economic autonomy. Freeman sees reputation and respectability not as a dichotomy, but rather as a flexible dialectic. While many women hold the respectability values of marriage and family with great importance, Freeman shows how they also desire economic independence, autonomy, and professional careers (Freeman 2000:109-111); thus, she sees reputation and respectability as inextricably linked. This research illuminates the ways in which flexibility and adaptability, traits that are usually associated with the male-oriented "reputation" paradigm, with regards to performance and economic activity for instance, can actually be seen in domains traditionally associated with respectability, like marriage. Caribbean women enact aspects of both reputation and respectability simultaneously, with the entanglement of public/private life, and entrepreneurship and marriage.

Black Womanhood and the Politics of Respectability

The notion of respectability politics also holds a place in the context of U.S. black diasporic feminist scholarship. "The politics of respectability" was first used and theorized by Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham (1994) in her book *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920*. In this work, Higginbotham analyzes the mobilizing efforts and activism of black women in the National Baptist Convention, and shows how ideas around black girls' and women's

manners were transformed through pamphlets and speeches on ways to behave in the quest for dignity, believed to be achieved or ascribed through educational opportunity and economic success. Promoting the manners and behaviors of the dominant group was an effort to prevent black people from embarrassing themselves, and would help to streamline assimilation and white acceptance. It was a political strategy to combat ideas about racial inferiority, and a manner in which black people could show their white counterparts that they could take individual responsibility for their behavior and subscribe to the norms of white society. It was intended to unsettle racial stereotypes, not through “mindless mimicry of white behavior” (1994:187), but as an enactment of resistance, challenging assumptions of white supremacy that deemed black women as incapable of becoming respectable citizens and contributing to society in meaningful ways.

Since Higginbotham’s articulation of the concept, respectability politics and its implications for black people all over the world have been widely debated by scholars and cultural critics in various contexts. Critics point to respectability politics as a manner of shaming black cultural sensibilities and spreading intolerance of cultural difference. They also view the politics of respectability as a way of regulating black people’s adherence to social norms and moral standards imposed by the dominant society, to which minorities are encouraged to assimilate.

Black feminist scholars working in various diasporic contexts especially take issue with respectability politics as a tool for repressing black female sexuality (Collins 2004; Cooper 2004; Lee 2010). Writing about black working-class women’s rejection of

respectability standards embodied by white, middle-class femininity, Patricia Hill Collins (2004) argues,

Working-class Black women in urban areas wanted respect but saw the contradictions that plagued this version of respectability. Sexuality was one of the few realms in which masses of African American women could exercise autonomy, and thus tangibly distinguish themselves as free women both from the sexual exploitation of slavery as well as the demands of having thirteen babies in insular Southern rural families (2004:72).

Angela Davis (1998) elucidates how black women of Blues culture “defined their sexual selves in terms much closer to erotic sensibilities about black female expressiveness, sensuality, and sexuality” (Collins 2004:73), and she argues that the Blues “provided a cultural space for community-building among working-class black women, and it was a space in which ‘the coercions of bourgeois notions of sexual purity...were absent’” (Davis 1998:44).

These perspectives from the U.S. context undoubtedly have resonances with the wider African diaspora, and particularly with the case that I present here from Martinique. As I will address later in this chapter, similar issues are at stake for black women in places like Jamaica and Haiti (cf. Cooper 2004; McAlister 2002; Thomas 2004) where the historic impact of enslavement and post-plantation disparities and oppressions persist along the lines of race, class, and gender, shaping elitist attitudes around sexual normativity and the expression of black female sexuality. Whether it is in U.S. Blues culture, Jamaican dancehall, or Haitian *Rara* processions, black women across the diaspora engage in counter-hegemonic modes of expression to challenge conservative, bourgeois norms of respectability. Martinique’s assimilation to the French state has had its share of gendered consequences, and the implications bear heavily on the everyday lives and public perceptions of black women. In Martinique, African

descended women deal with everyday economic hardship, violence (physical and structural), and pressures to repress their sexuality and black cultural sensibilities by subscribing to the elitist, Eurocentric norms imposed through French neocolonial assimilation and the Catholic Church. Questions of sexuality and the subversion of respectability politics are relevant to the narratives I gathered in my field research on the practice of *bèlè*. What follows is a description of the material realities that disproportionately impact women on the island, and have created a need for women to redefine their image through the assertion of female agency and autonomy.

Black Womanhood and Struggle in Martinique

In Chapter 4, I provided an overview of the socio-economic realities in Martinique, particularly how despite islanders' relatively higher standard of living compared with those of less developed Caribbean nations, Martinicans suffer from high rates of unemployment and high costs of living. In the 2009 strike, women and feminist activists contributed greatly to the mobilizing efforts because women have so much more at stake under a system of gender inequality. Women are much more vulnerable to the problem of high unemployment than their male counterparts. In 2012, the unemployment rate for women was 23 percent compared with 20 percent for men, and women represent 60 percent of unemployed eligible jobseekers (INSEE 2012). Women are more likely than men to be clustered in the lowest-paid and part-time formal sector work (37 percent vs. 21 percent) (Browne 2004:186), and they are disproportionately employed in positions for which they are overqualified based on academic background and training. Women earn 2,400€ less per year than men and are commonly subject to sexual harassment in the workplace, which, according to my interlocutors, has become so normalized that little has been done to implement change.

In her research on *débrouillardism* and informal economic activity, Katherine Browne (2004) explains that women are less likely than men to benefit from the informal sector because of their commitment to the family and household responsibilities. Additionally, women in Martinique are disproportionately subject to gender violence, which has emerged over the last 20 years as a major public debate and a primary focus of feminist activism, next to wage equality and unemployment. On an almost daily basis, one can hear or see anti-violence campaigns about how women suffer high rates of conjugal/domestic abuse, and young girls are all too often the victims of family sexual abuse (cf. Leonard 1997; Union des Femmes de la Martinique website).

One-third of the households in Martinique are headed by single parents. Among them, 90 percent are female-headed, and three out of five single mothers are unemployed (INSEE 2003). The matrifocal or single female-headed household is not an uncommon family form of the Caribbean. Matrifocality and women's independence and autonomy have long been subjects of Caribbeanist social science research (Clarke 1957; Gonzalez 1970; Herskovits and Herskovits 1964; Slater 1977; Smith 1956, 1996; Smith 1965). As previously discussed, many early studies of gender tended to emphasize women's confinement to the domestic sphere (cf. Wilson 1969). Feminist anthropologists have since documented women's activities in both private and public life. Women have always acted as caregivers in the home, while simultaneously earning an income outside the home, especially when fathers are absent or unable to substantially contribute (Barrow 1986; Besson 1993; Bolles 1996a). Afro-Caribbean women play instrumental roles in public life as informal importers and earners (Harrison 1998; Ulysse 2007), industrial workers (Bolles 1996b; Safa 1995), and informatics

employees (Freeman 2000). With longstanding ideas about Afro-Caribbean women's independence, there is the unintended consequence of these women being negatively viewed as "overburdened superwomen castrating and evicting men from the family" (Dagenais 1988; Momsen 1993:5).

In Martinique, this traditional notion of matrifocality and the independent superwoman is especially complicated by the modern French welfare system, from which poor, single mothers in Martinique benefit (Leonard 1997). The high costs of living in Martinique make the structural realities of unemployment and wage inequality, combined with a poor public transit system, significantly less manageable for single mothers who are typically left with no other option than public assistance. In the 1990s, the rate of welfare payments to single mothers was four times higher in Martinique than in France. As it is true in other parts of the world, where "controlling images" (Collins 2000) manipulate public perceptions of black women, the everyday struggles for women in Martinique have produced tropes of black womanhood that have their roots in the colonial era and have evolved to fit contemporary circumstances (cf. Leonard 1997). Representations of black womanhood that have their roots in colonial, racist, or patriarchal oppression often create a need for black women to challenge societal norms and redefine themselves in public life with more affirming images.

Tropes of Femininity and Womanhood in Martinique

Jill Leonard's 1990s research on women in Martinique is useful for understanding tropes of black womanhood that have circulated the Martinican public imaginary (Leonard 1997). During the colonial era, the image of the *doudou* dominated in popular representations of Black female sexuality. As a construction of colonial romance and the white European gaze, the *doudou* was a sweet, docile, submissive sex object

whose only function was to pursue the acceptance of her white oppressors, and fulfill the desires of her white lovers. After emancipation, when assimilation projects were firmly established on the island, this image of the pleasure-seeking *doudou* was relegated to the margins of folklore and commodified nostalgia, and replaced by notions of the self-sacrificing *maman doudou*—a woman who embodies French values of respectability and the virtuous woman as defined by the Church. The *maman doudou* works inside and outside the home, doing whatever it takes to fulfill her motherly role as provider and caretaker of her children. However, she does so with aspirations of achieving upward mobility and successful assimilation in the French national community.

In the 1970s post-departmentalization era, after the traditional agricultural economy had disintegrated, and Martinique became a dependent state of social monetary transfers and subsidies from France, the image of black womanhood would change once again. The black welfare woman who has access to the public assistance benefits guaranteed by French citizenship would become liberated from the traditional upper-class values of respectable femininity and mothering. Leonard's research highlights that, "in the 20th century, responsibility for neo-colonial power relations, economic dependence, and cultural assimilation have been displaced onto women in social science and welfare discourse" (Leonard 1997:iii). Because black women in Martinique have always been identified with white acceptance, assimilation, and dependency in popular imagery, and men have been at the forefront of struggles for cultural sovereignty, women are erased as agents of local cultural production and activism.

This could serve to explain why men hold the more visible intellectual and leadership roles in the *bèlè* movement, which in a way conceals or diverts attention away from women's central roles in the life and transmission of *bèlè* practice. "As formerly colonial subjects and now as subjects of the French welfare system and neocolonial policy," Leonard writes, "Martinican women do not have much opportunity to define their own needs as women" (1997:193). Feminist activism on the island generally remains influenced by French feminist theory and praxis, and thus, has little cultural and vernacular resonance with everyday Black women on the island who are concerned with making ends meet and caring for the family (Maddox 2015).

The contemporary *fanm djok* persona, sometimes used interchangeably with the expression *poto mitan*, is a woman who is solid and proud, who stands strong in the face of everyday life difficulties in Martinique without giving up. She works to earn a living and raises her children, in many cases as a single mother. She is creative and strategic in how she finds solutions to her problems. She has the capacity to conceal the pressure and suffering that she endures (i.e. as a battered or violated woman, or a woman who has been abandoned by her husband, or is experiencing economic strain), through her self-presentation as an autonomous individual.

While some people think this idea of the *fanm djok*, or the *poto mitan*, is a legend that justifies the structural violence and poor treatment inflicted upon Martinican women, and diverts attention away from sexist patriarchal oppression, others see this image as a badge of honor; as an appropriate response to the legacy of misrepresentation and distorting of women's conditions and their central role in society. The *fanm djok's* strength and autonomy cannot be undermined, and her bold, public presence and

cannot be repressed. The public perception of women is constantly changing and evolving with shifts in larger power relations. I argue that *bèlè* performance is a space where the *danm bèlè* evokes the image of the *fanm djok*, embodying a spirit of strength and resilience, challenging gender norms and hierarchy, and unsettling elitist notions of respectable public behavior with her sensual expressivity.

In order to support this assertion, it is necessary to give an illustration of the *bèlè* performance contexts where these dance situations occur. What follows is a description of the traditional *swaré bèlè* (distinct from staged performances or folkloric spectacles), and less formal gatherings that are akin to the *swaré bèlè* (i.e. *moman bèlè* and *bèlè mawon*). It is in these settings that the *bèlè linò* group dance repertoire with four female-male couples is primarily performed.

The “Traditional” *Swaré Bèlè*: Sensual Expressivity and the Role of the *Danm Bèlè*

The typical *swaré bèlè* in Martinique is an open-air gathering of dancers, singers, and drummers who come together on a specified date and time to play *bèlè* until the late-night/early-morning hours. These events, held one or two weekends out of the month, are commonly organized and hosted by a specific *bèlè* association, though it is not uncommon for an individual or a small group of individuals to host *swaré bèlè* apart from association activities. Although the old *swaré bèlè* system prior to the revival was rural-based, *swaré bèlè* now take place in various urban and rural districts all over the island. The gatherings are generally open invitation, and are publicized through word-of-mouth, *bèlè* school announcements, radio announcements on Radio APAL and RLDM, printed flyers, and in the age of social media, through “texto” (large group text messages), and social media posts. The attendance of large audiences is always

encouraged and desired, and participation in the unscripted rotation of *bèlè* songs and dances is open to all practitioners who have an advanced, or at least intermediate, command of the *bèlè linò* repertoire of group dance styles (Table 2-1).

Long ago, when *swaré bèlè* were held primarily in Sainte Marie, organizers charged an entry fee to all guests. In present times, with the goal of bringing *bèlè* to life and making it accessible to all Martinicans, they are now open to the public free of charge. Food and drinks are available for sale, and normally if you dance, drum, or sing, you receive a ticket for a free drink and a plate or sandwich in exchange for your participation. The meals can be anything from *coq au vin* or stewed pork, to vegetable soup and ham sandwich.

Most *swaré bèlè* will begin around 7:00 or 8:00 pm, starting off with a few *ladja/danmyé* matches if there are fighters present. This helps to “warm things up” with the sound of the drum, the voices, and the energy of the fighters. Around 9:30-10:00 pm, the organizers will use the microphone to welcome guests, announce and acknowledge the presence of other allied associations, give a special tribute, and introduce a short presentation of dances planned by the association. After the presentation of four or five dances, the organizers will announce that the floor is open to all desiring participants: dancers (*kavalyé/danm*), drummers (*tanbouyé*), *tibwatè* (secondary percussionists), and lead singers (*chantè*), backed up by any number of chorus singers (*lavwa dèyè*).

There is a special way of understanding how the unscripted rotation of performers functions. According to the unique protocol understood by *bèlè* practitioners, each dancer, singer, or drummer will play five to six songs before giving

up their place to the next eager performer. The number of participants in an ensemble is limited to eight dancers, two drummers, and one lead singer at a time, and when there are many performers in attendance, some are willing to wait hours before taking their turn to dance or play. The objective is to maintain an atmosphere of open, unregulated entertainment, but some limits must be imposed in order to maintain positive energy and ensure everyone gets a turn. With the ideas of “solidarity” and “collectivity” at the foundation of these events (as cited throughout this dissertation), participants must comprehend the ethical code of sharing in order to ensure their fellow performers have an opportunity to take part in the event.

There is also an age- and skill-based hierarchical code that is understood among the practitioners at these events. There are a number of reasons why the *swaré bèlè* limits its participation to “initiated” practitioners who have mastered the full repertoire of dance and song styles. One must have the self-awareness to know when it is a good time to take her/his place in the performance space. For example, even if a dancer has been learning *bèlè* for over two or three years, and has mastered the repertoire of *bèlè linò* dance styles, it would not be wise for her to take her turn when the ensemble comprises seven other elders or long-time dancers. This is why the principles of humility and respect for those who came before you are instilled in *bèlè* students. The idea is to optimize the conditions for a successful, high-energy event, which is difficult to achieve if the rotation is not well executed and if attendees lack self-awareness.

During the *swaré bèlè*, the lead singer plays the role of *koumandè* (commander), assessing the *swaré*'s energy level and deciding which of the various styles s/he will sing next. The *koumandè*'s role is to provide a reasonable variety of song/dance styles

to keep the *swaré bèlè* interesting for the audience and the ensemble of drummers and dancers who are eager to perform their wide breadth of skills. Of the six *bèlè linò* styles listed in Table 2-1, each is intended to serve a certain function, communicate a certain attitude, and evoke a specific kind of emotion in the dancers and the observing public. For example, *bèlè balansé*, also known as *bèlè kourant*, is intended to communicate a sense of tenacity or euphoria through high-powered dynamism. Others, such as *gran bèlè* and *bouwo*, have more of a solemn or meditative character; this is no surprise because *gran bèlè* is frequently referred to as a dance of prayer, and *bouwo* is a story about heartbreak. Some styles communicate an inviting, cheerful welcome and sense of gratitude or hope, such as *bélyà*. And *bidjin bèlè*, often used interchangeably with *bèlè dous*, has a sweet, charming, and at times seductive character.²

The coded Kréyòl lyrics of *bèlè* songs are a form of storytelling that communicates aspects of everyday life in Martinique. Thematic content in the songs' lyrics generally correspond with the energy of the drum patterns and the dancers' movements. Song topics can range from political issues with messages of *rézistans*, to songs about heartbreak or sadness. Some songs make reference to God and the supernatural world, and some other songs recount stories of love, romance, and sex. The latter category, typically sung to *bidjin bèlè/bèlè dous* songs, is where the expression of sensuality and erotic power manifests.

² It is important to note that these categories and characterizations are not mutually exclusive or rigid. Across the six dance styles discussed here, there is some fluidity in mood and intention. What I have described is a simplified breakdown based on general patterns of the repertoire that I observed or had explained to me.

The *bidjin bèlè* choreography follows the traditional *bèlè linò* quadrille sequence involving two *carré* (square formations) danced by eight dancers (four dancers per *carré*). After each *carré* has danced its set, each of the four *danm-kavalyé* couplets takes their turn to dance with each other in playful or competitive exchange, and then accompany one another toward the drum for the *monté o tanbou*, as a salutation or expression of gratitude to the primary music-maker.

The *bèlè dous* performances tend to be the most entertaining parts of the *swaré bèlè* because the coquettish and seductive manners of the *danm bèlè* are intensified and reinforced by the reactions of her *kavalyé* and the observing public, especially during the *monté o tanbou*. There are several things to note in this single thirty-second segment of the dance; the way the *danm bèlè* is gazing at or sizing up her *kavalyé*, inviting him to come in with a charming smile, or daring him to come closer with a conceited or supercilious glare. She might try to seduce her *kavalyé* with isolated hip motions, like the winding hip roll, pelvic contortions, or a side-to-side hip tick, all while striking or stroking the ground with her bare feet, perfectly in sync with the drummer's rhythms. She might *bidjiné* side-to-side, or forward and backward, approaching and withdrawing from her *kavalyé*.³ Anticipation to see the outcome of the game builds in this thirty-second encounter, especially if the dance partners are exhibiting a high degree of sensual tension. It is clear that in this moment, the *danm bèlè* derives great pleasure and satisfaction from the control she has over the dance situation. If and when he advances, she may receive him with a warm embrace, she may elude him with a

³ *Bidjiné* is a dance term derived from the popular dance *biguine* in Martinique, whereby the dancer alternates shifting weight from one foot to the other with a slight hip accentuation added to each step.

smooth dodging maneuver, or she may simply grab him by his waist and execute a single strike against his belly and pelvic region with hers.

There is also a dress code attached to the *danm bèlè*'s identity that must be respected for the many functions it serves. She arrives to the *swaré bèlè* adorned with a long, wide skirt (or a dress) and a petticoat underneath. The magnitude of the skirt's width and length, and the petticoat, must permit the dancer to maximize her movement capacity to spin, jump, and squat as she pleases without discomfort or bodily exposure. When she first takes her place to dance in the *carré*, she announces her arrival by assertively tying the square *madràs* scarf folded in the shape of a triangle around her waist. The Kréyòl expression used for this small ritual is "*maré ren mwèn*," or "fasten my waist," which can also be interpreted as "brace myself." According to my *danm bèlè* interlocutors, this is a way of announcing "*sé mwèn ki là*," or "I am here, I have arrived." Historically, this piece of fabric was used by working women in field and domestic labor to prevent injury and secure her back and waist through all forms of movement, like lifting, bending over, squatting, and so on. But it also secured her midsection while dancing, and this marker of the dancer's identity has been preserved in the contemporary practice of *bèlè*. She often uses her skirt as a prop for flirtatious play, lifting and fluttering the fabric to entice the *kavalyé*, wrapping its ends around her waist, or holding the ends up on her side while she twists and turns.

While all the different styles of *bèlè linò* give the dancers an occasion for collective affirmation, to exhibit their agility, strength, improvisational skill, and finesse, the *bèlè dous* songs often contain lyrical content that, coupled with the tantalizing sound of the drum, lures the dancer into another dimension of erotic sensation. For many

female dancers, this is an occasion to proudly flaunt their sensual prowess, and data analysis of interview narratives suggests that this can be profoundly therapeutic for women facing any range of personal life difficulties. Let's consider a couple of song examples.

Example #1

Chorus:

“Manmzèl-la brennen kò'w ba mwen”

“Lady Move Your Body for Me”

*Lafèt ô maren an kè dézabiyé'w
 Brennen kò'w ba mwen
 Soukré kò'w ba mwen
 Lafèt ô maren ayayay yayay
 Lafèt ô maren kalalou'w tou cho
 Gadé manzèl-la ka brennen ti-kò'y
 Gadé manzèl-la ka soukré ti-kò'y
 Manman'w pa la, papa'w pa la
 Gadé manmzèl-la ka koulé siwo
 Kalalou'w tou cho
 Kalalou'w bandé
 Kriyé manmzèl-la mwen lé manmzèl-la
 lafèt ô maren an kè dézabiyé'w*

The feast of Marin, going to undress you
 Move your body for me
 Shake your body for me
 The feast of Marin, ayayay yayay
 The feast of Marin your *callaloo* is too hot
 Look at that lady moving her little body
 Look at that lady shaking her little body
 Your momma is not here, papa is not here
 Look at that lady dripping her sweet syrup
 Your *callaloo* is too hot,
 Your *callaloo* is sticky
 Call that lady, I want that lady
 The party of Marin, going to undress you

In this particular song, which is intended to have a mesmerizing feel to it, the singer encourages the woman to move in a suggestive manner. The singer uses the words *callaloo* (a popular West Indian stew) and syrup as metaphors for female sexual arousal, and tells her how irresistible she is to him.

Example #2

Chorus:

“An jénératè anba wòb-la”

“A Generator Under Her Dress”

*Larenn désann anvil
sa'y ni i ka pòté ban nou
Sa'y ni ki bon ki dou kon sa?
An gwo bildozè anba wòb-la
Mé sa'y ni ki bon ki dou kon sa?
An santral nikléyè anba wòb-la
An motè avyon anba wòb-la
Sa'y ni ki bon ki dou kon sa?
An santral vapè anba wòb-la
Ni an loto kous anba wòb-la
Mé sa'y ni ki bon ki cho kon sa
Twa wòch fouyé difé anba wòb-la
Dé tranch mandarin anba wòb-la
Aaaa Larenn désann anvil,
sa'y ni i ka pòté ban nou
Sa'y ni ki bon ki dou kon sa?*

The Queen is coming to town,
What is she bringing for us
What does she have, so good so sweet like that?
A big bulldozer under her dress
But what she have, so good so sweet like that?
A nuclear power plant under her dress
An airplane motor under her dress
What does she have, so good so sweet like that?
A steam engine under her dress
She has a racecar under her dress
But what she have, so good so hot like that?
A three-rock cooking fire under her dress
Two slices of mandarin under her dress
The Queen is coming to town,
What is she bringing for us
What does she have, so good so sweet like that?

This song recounts a story of a woman, who the singer refers to as a “queen,” going into town, and what she is carrying with her “under her dress” (her genitalia) is interpreted as a powerful machine in one instance, and a sweet slice of mandarin in the next. From an emic perspective, this song can be understood as an homage to the queen’s erotic power, and in dance situations where this song is performed, the *danm bèlè* can transform into the song’s protagonist, accentuating certain body parts in her movements and conveying an attitude of superiority to push the boundaries of sensual play.

Songs of this nature incite emotions of pleasure and desire, and enhance the game of pursuit and retreat between the *danm* and her *kavalýé*. In such dance situations, whereby the woman is stimulated to the point of sensual or erotic expressivity, her performance is generally cheered on and applauded by the observers, who will respond with smiles, laughter, hand-clapping, gasps, shouts, and even interjections by the singer holding the microphone. This kind of limelight *danm bèlè*

performance also encourages competition with the other women in the *carré*. Each of the four women has her turn to face-off with her *kavalyé* during the *monté o tanbou* segment, and when the mood strikes, the *danm bèlè* might try to outdo the erotic display of the preceding dancers, making for a rather entertaining set of performances.

Pleasure and Erotic Experience in *Bèlè*: Liberation or Exploitative Exhibitionism?

One evening in July 2013, I organized a group interview with eight women whom I had observed most frequently at *bèlè* classes and in *swaré bèlè* gatherings over the course of my field research (some of them I had known since 2009). The participants are all women who have visible roles in the *bèlè* community as dance teachers and long-time practitioners. I had befriended them through my frequent participation in their dance classes, and was struck by the sincere camaraderie shared among them. I have heard them refer to their group as *lafanmi bèlè* (*bèlè* family), a group of friends who have a special affinity for one another, developed through the experience of bonding in *bèlè* gatherings. Moreover, I was completely enamored of their various individual dance styles, not only in the way of their sensual dance prowess, but also their impressive, intricate footwork, and the confidence and boldness with which they perform. This group interview would turn into an evening of laughter, gossip, and contemplative reflection about the ways in which *bèlè* enriches each of their lives.

During the same four-hour discussion in which these women revealed the different spiritual and therapeutic aspects of *bèlè* practice, they also shared comments about how *bèlè* has humbled them and raised their social consciousness over the years of their integration into the tradition. Almost all of them claimed that they did not choose *bèlè*, but that *bèlè* chose them. “*Bèlè* is not a place where one searches to become a star, and humility is very important” one woman shared (interview, July 25, 2013).

Another added that the social consciousness function of *bèlè* carries over into other areas of life. For example, many women stop straightening their hair and come to appreciate a natural hair aesthetic through self-transformation achieved in the *bèlè* tradition. Some of them grew up in the era when *bèlè* was discouraged by their parents. I recall one woman sharing that when she was a teenager and told her mother that she wanted to sign up for a *bèlè* class in the 1980s, her mother said it was “*bagay bakanal*,” or something practiced only by vulgar drunks and indecent women.

Eventually when the conversation turned to the subject of healing and spirituality, they began sharing how the power of the drum and dance transports them to a higher state of joy and pleasure, especially when all of the right elements are in place for a strong *bèlè* ensemble. Most of them agreed that there are times when *bèlè* is the perfect remedy for relieving stress and tension, and making one feel good through emotionally trying circumstances. “Some people prefer to go lay down on a couch in a psychologist’s office to find solutions to their problems, but me, I go to *bèlè*.” The fact that *bèlè* has such a powerful effect means there are also times when one must take a break, and suspend her practice for a period of time; but the urge to dance is hard to resist. Suddenly, one of the women who I will call Solange interjected: “maybe this will shock some of you, but it’s okay, we’re all girls here. One time, I had an orgasm during my *monté o tanbou*.”

Everything and everyone in the room seemed to freeze, coming to a complete standstill for two to three seconds before they all exploded in laughter. Solange maintained a very serious composure, however, when I exclaimed, “what?! That’s possible?” and probed for further explanation. The entire room responded with a

collective “yes, it’s possible!” and Solange continued, naming one of her favorite drummers who was playing the drum at the time. She asserted, “it took me to another dimension...I was somewhere else.” I asked was it the *tanbouyé* who produced this sensation, or was it her *kavalyé*? “It was everything, all of the elements involved. There are certain songs that really touch you, that give you another sensation, give you chills everywhere” she claimed, while caressing the flesh on her arms. “Then you go back home late at night after the *swaré bèlè* has ended, you take your shower, and you’re still just”... She stopped abruptly and did a gesture to indicate that she lies in her bed, and she is still excited from the events of the evening. She then concluded her anecdote by saying, “it’s all linked: the spirituality, the sensuality, and the sexuality.”

This potent narrative, and the compelling conclusion about the interrelatedness of spirituality and sensuality, recalls the claim that *bèlè* has its origins in fertility and fecundity rites. As discussed in the previous chapter, even though the *bèlè* movement was launched as a secular revival to serve the nonreligious functions of cultural nationalism, many practitioners have interesting ways of drawing from the ancestral sacred functions of the practice. Solange’s narrative reveals her keen awareness of *bèlè*’s spiritual base, as a dance that celebrates both land *and* human fertility; historically, these dances were interpreted as rites of sustenance and sensuality, as the regeneration of life is central to African religious belief. Lucie Pradel (2000) argues that,

[t]he gestuality associated with fertility and fecundity represents a unifying point between Caribbean dances. The gestures associated with the presence of phallic gods—hip movements, stimulated acts of coitus and dancers’ evocative attitudes—symbolize the victory of life against death. This body language...celebrates the triumph of the forces of life, the indissoluble link between the fertility of earth and man (2000:97).

Although this kind of sensual expressivity in the practice of *bèlè* has been argued to have a therapeutic function, as a source of healing and tension release for Martinican women, it has also been met with less-explored points of contention from activists in the *bèlè* movement.

I have heard interesting commentary, mainly from men in the *bèlè* movement, but also from some women practitioners, who take issue with excessive sensuality in the *bèlè* dance space. During a conversation with one of the male leaders of the *bèlè* revival movement, he began to share his reflections regarding a public *moman bèlè* gathering that he had recently observed, which I also attended. He asked if I was there that particular evening, and said “you saw there were people there who are well-trained in *bèlè* and have learned how to dance for a long time, with various associations, but these are people who maybe think traditional *bèlè* practice is too regulated. So they dance, but what they are doing is *bèlè* porno!” (interview, May 20, 2014). He continued by citing some of the *bèlè* elders from Sainte Marie who argue that “*atjèlman, moun ka brennen ren yo twòp, bèlè sé épi pyé’w* (nowadays, people are moving their waists too much, *bèlè* is danced with your feet).” He asserted that the elders have been saying this for over twenty years.

The concern is that as the dance evolves and dancers continue to integrate other modern influences into their movements, they are losing sight of the importance of the feet. “You never forget about the feet when you’re dancing *bèlè*...never. Because if you're dancing to the sound of the music, matching your feet with the drum, even if you are dancing a *bèlè dous*, the game of your feet is going to bring everything else together.” This comment was to emphasize that added accentuation of the hips and

waist are not necessary when your feet are doing the work, and this is how *bèlè* is supposed to be danced, according to traditional conventions of the practice. Your feet “sign” the ground and make an authentic, tangible connection with the land. He claimed that excessive movement of the hips and waist, and excessive sensuality in general, denaturalizes the source of the tradition. “This is a deformation. They should leave that for the folkloric troupes. If you know the difference, you don’t put that in traditional *bèlè*. And these people know the difference.” He concluded his reflection by arguing that dancers who are doing what he calls “*bèlè* porno” are doing it for self-exhibitionism, not for the collective of the *bèlè* ensemble. Following this line of thinking, other critics of erotic display and sensual expressivity in *bèlè* argue that it is unclean (*ce n’est pas propre*), and that women who dance with excessive hip, pelvic, and torso accentuation do so because they a) simply wish to show off, or b) they have not mastered the command of footwork.

The critiques of “*bèlè* porno” seem to come from a well-meaning place, having to do with the colonial gaze on hypersexualized black bodies, and the repackaging of traditional culture as folklorized cultural products for tourist consumption. However, I would argue that the *danm bèlè* performers discussed in my analysis above, who unapologetically express their sensuality in these performative contexts, and appreciate the *bèlè* space as one where pleasure and desire can be expressed and applauded, have a deep sense of what they are doing as agents of their own self-presentation. Rather than seeing these women as victims of sexist objectification, or offenders against the traditional, authentic conventions of *bèlè* expression, it is useful to consider

their dance styles as embodied expressions of resistance and empowerment in the face of adversity that challenge elitist notions of respectability.

It is unclear whether or not these critiques are grounded in a sincere traditionalist concern that the dance will evolve into a “denaturalized” hypersexual dance practice, and dancers will lose sight of the base steps and movements of the repertoire; or if the critiques are grounded in longstanding Eurocentric biases and gender norms inherited by the middle-class about decency and purity, which tend to police public expressions of sexual autonomy by black women. According to dance anthropologist Judith Hanna (2010), “[s]ome Whites deemed the black dance vocabulary of hip swinging, pelvic rotation and thrusts, torso undulations, and shoulder shimmying as immoral” (2010:226). The imposition of European norms and values on Afro-Caribbean communities is viewed by many as an assault on black aesthetics and cultural sensibilities. In light of this perspective, what do expressions like “*bèlè* porno” and comments about the denaturalization of the tradition tell us?

From one point of view, one could argue that the Kréyòl lyrical strategies and metaphors used in traditional *bèlè* songs like the two cited above, among many others, call for the bodily expression of sensuality and eroticism; this is an aspect of Afro-Martinican culture that could not be sanitized or erased through assimilation, because the songs have been transmitted as part of a deep oral tradition. The above examples are old songs composed by rural elders from Sainte Marie; they are not recent compositions belonging to a younger generation’s repertoire. The sexual innuendo found in the Kréyòl lyrical content, as Elizabeth McAlister (2002) points out in the context of Haitian culture and Rara performance (what they call *betiz*), has historical

depth (2002:60). Generational differences may be evident in the style of bodily expression (i.e. feet versus hip accentuation), but the sexual thematic content in song is a long-standing feature of *bèlè* culture.

Moreover, critics of erotic display who are concerned with maintaining the ancestral, spiritual base of the *bèlè* tradition that has largely dissolved from Martinique's cultural landscape seem to overlook the sacred base of *bèlè* as an adaptation of fertility rites. The consensus among leaders of the *bèlè* movement is that *bèlè* is a dance of fecundity. Historically, women were prohibited from playing the drum, because of the power and importance of the female reproductive system and taboos related to a woman's menstrual cycle. Fertility dances are intended to encourage and celebrate women's ability to produce offspring, and therefore, expressions of sexuality are central to such practices (cf. Hanna 2010).

Similar debates have been found in Jamaica's politics of respectability, and the island's celebrated and contested dancehall genre. Anthropologist Deborah Thomas (2004) and Jamaican cultural critic Carolyn Cooper (2004) have both advanced arguments in defense of female enactments of "slackness" in dancehall culture.⁴ Thomas uses the notion of "ghetto feminism" and draws a distinction between the "respectable blackness" of middle-class creole nationalists, and the "revolutionary" blackness of Jamaica's popular class (Thomas 2004:229). Black lower-class Jamaican women identify sexuality as a primary source of power in their lives, because it challenges the pursuit of respectability as a gendered assumption, and it gives them "public affirmation of [their] female agency" as a critique of patriarchy (Ibid:253). As far

⁴ Slackness is a term used in Caribbean culture to denote vulgarity or indecency, particularly in music and dance performative contexts. The term is most commonly applied in Jamaican dancehall culture.

as dancehall scholar Carolyn Cooper is concerned, explicitly sexual performance that was denigrated as lewd and immoral by colonial ideology could actually be understood as secular recontextualizations of African fertility deities like the Yoruban orisha *Oshun* (Cooper 2004:103-5). Cooper appreciates dancehall's ability to validate Black women's "full-bodied female sexuality" (Ibid:86).

These arguments resonate with what I have observed in the Martinican *bèlè* context. Should the *danm bèlè* have the freedom to pursue pleasure and fulfill certain desires through dance performance, as an exercise of her autonomy and sexual agency? Or does this threaten the traditional base of *bèlè*, which emphasizes the art of footwork more than any other part of the body? It is important to consider the question of misogynistic objectification in these discussions. Most feminist critics of explicit rap music, dancehall, and other commercial genres take issue with the ways in which women's bodies and female sexuality are used for derogatory, heterosexist lyrical assaults and visual shock value. Indeed, as Natahsa Barnes (2000) points out in her discussion of Trinidadian wining, these dances can be an "act of libidinal self-assertion" that "exists uneasily with the pleasures and real dangers of commodification and fetishism" (2000:105).

This seems to be the concern embedded in statements about *bèlè* porno; *doudouiste* imagery and discourse are what Europeans used to sexually objectify black women during the slavery era, and the *doudou* became repackaged in post-emancipation Martinique as a folkloric commodity. The activists of the *bèlè* revival have worked hard to reverse the *folkdoudouiste* trope in Martinican cultural representations, and exoticized, hypersexualized depictions of local dance traditions are hallmarks of

folkdoudouiste performance. This point serves to validate their concerns over “denaturalizing” *bèlè* with excessive eroticism.

From another point of view, sexualized body language outside of touristic performance contexts can be seen as black women’s “battles over gender power” and their “right to public space” (Cooper 2004), because public images of black womanhood have always been constructed by the dominant classes; the *bèlè* dance space allows women to liberate themselves through erotic play and challenge elitist visions of culture imposed by outsiders. In the *bèlè* dance space, women can present themselves as the *fanm djok* and the sweet *doudou*, a woman who is both desirable and desiring, on their own terms.

Some women playfully refer to *bèlè* as their “second husband,” or as one of their lovers, or the love that never leaves you or lets you down, and I have heard women sometimes joke, “be careful about who you hang around after a *swaré bèlè*, because with that sexual energy, you never know what can happen!” Perhaps invoking the feminine power of the ancestral deities of love and fertility found in African and Afro-Atlantic religious heritage is what affirms Martinican women as they overcome life’s everyday difficulties and hardships, even if those religious practices no longer exist in Martinique.

To conclude, I would like to point out other significant aspects of this debate to consider for future research. Many of the assumptions of this research and of the *bèlè* movement at large are heteronormative, with little to no consideration of how members of the LGBTQ community are situated in this practice. I did not encounter many *bèlè* practitioners who openly identify as same-gender loving, but my overall perception is

that the *bèlè* social space is welcoming to those who do. That being said, some observations deserve to be questioned here.

I have heard comments under people's breath about women dancing too sensually with one another in ways that may be inappropriate, or some kind of threat to the traditional (heterosexist) female-male choreography. As women dancers continue to outnumber the *kavalyé*, many dance situations call for female-female participation in place of the traditional configuration of female-male couplets, and in many cases, the sensual flirtatious play is even more exaggerated when it is between two *danm bèlè*—especially if the two dancers are friends. Whether this kind of homoerotic play is in the spirit of friendly competition (i.e. which woman can be more arousing to the observing audience), or homoerotic desire is up for question. Sometimes at a *swaré bèlè* when male participation is low, the person on the microphone will announce something to the effect of "bèlè is to be danced by four males, four females! That's the way it's supposed to be! Where are the men?!" There seems to be some panic regarding male recruitment and transmission, or concern that the dance will evolve or deviate from its heteronormative intent if male participation does not increase at a proportionate rate to accommodate high female participation. In light of such shifts, the *bèlè* community could benefit from a more serious engagement with issues of gender, sexuality, eroticism, and desire in the tradition. As *bèlè* activists argue, this is a living culture that is not frozen in the past, and it will continue to evolve with other changes in Martinican culture and social life.

CHAPTER 7
CONCLUSION: *BÈLÈ* REVIVAL, PEDAGOGY, AND THE POST-CREOLE
IMAGINATION

One late Thursday afternoon, I stopped to do some food shopping before going to my *bèlè* class later that evening. While I was out, I crossed paths with an older dancer from Sainte Marie, and told her about my plans to attend a *bèlè* class. She smiled, and inquired about the different *bèlè* schools where I had concentrated most of my learning and research activities. She then laughed and said, “when I was coming up, we didn’t learn to dance *bèlè* like that. Now you all have *schools*, for *bèlè*! That’s nice...when I was a little girl we learned by watching the people around us, family, neighbors, and we repeated it, simply like that” (personal communication). Emphasis was added to the word “schools” because the idea of a school for *bèlè* seemed so uncharacteristic for her.

This encounter made me wonder, how different would the impact of *bèlè* be in present times had the revivalists not codified the steps and developed a standardized pedagogical system that could be taught in contemporary educational settings? How different would the transmission process be without the creation of *bèlè* schools, and *bèlè* baccalaureate school programming? In this concluding chapter, I examine a set of competing narratives around the transmission of *bèlè* in Martinique’s national education system, which is by extension of Martinique’s integrated departmental status, the French national education system. Some leaders of the *bèlè* movement find that teaching the tradition in formal school settings based on a codified dance pedagogy is a strategy of *petit marronage*, putting young Martinicans in touch with their roots. Others criticize this approach, arguing that the creative, improvisational spirit intrinsic to black dance culture, and the spirit of *rézistans* inherited from the enslaved ancestors, is lost

through a Eurocentric, French-imposed model of pedagogy and standardization. How might *bèlè* cultural activists in Martinique create a sense of belonging within an assimilationist educational system that has historically rendered Afro-Creoles invisible, and has denied their cultural contributions to the French national community? Drawing from Michaeline Crichlow's (2009) notion of "homing" and the post-creole imagination, I conclude this dissertation with a discussion of *bèlè* pedagogy as a quest to transform the school system into a more "homely" space. Situating *bèlè* pedagogy as the pursuit of what Crichlow would call a modern freedom—one that simultaneously accommodates and circumvents pressures of French bureaucracy and global power dynamics—my goal is to consider how the other debates analyzed throughout this dissertation are implicated in this struggle.

Certainly, the arguments for and against *bèlè* pedagogy, and *bèlè* in the national education system, resonate with other contentions about the function of *bèlè* practice in political and economic life, spirituality and religious orientation, and gender and sexuality expressivity. With the imposition of French educational guidelines, defenders of the tradition have been required to modify their modes of transmission at the expense of the emotional and spiritual foundations to satisfy bureaucratic expectations and appease the concerned parents of school-aged children, particularly those who have internalized negative images associated with the tradition. This discussion, which points out the tensions of tradition, modernity, and the cultural politics of French national allegiance in the transmission of *bèlè*, is an appropriate way to culminate and conclude the full body of data analyzed in this dissertation, and reflect about the future direction of research.

“Homing” French National Education Through Afro-Creole Dance Pedagogy

In her book *Globalization and the Post-Creole Imagination: Notes on Fleeing the Plantation*, Michaeline Crichlow (2009) challenges scholars of creolization and the Caribbean to think about how our conceptions of “resistance” might be adapted to acknowledge forms of accommodation and mimicry as crucial components. According to Crichlow’s perspective, scholars of post-plantation Caribbean societies should decenter the analytical category of resistance as one characterized by “ostensive opposition and conflict,” and be more attentive to the politics and complexities of accommodation, because through “the harsh realities of marginalization in global processes, Caribbean populations maneuver toward full citizenship” (2009:74; 79). Contemporary power dynamics have political impacts on Afro-Creoles who are constantly “limboing” in the struggle for place and the homing of their modern freedoms. Certain enactments that may appear to be accommodationist in the *bèlè* movement might be better interpreted as practices of resistance that influence, and are influenced by, Martinicans’ ongoing relationship with their imperial power. The *bèlè* baccalaureate option is one such practice, which involves exercising some degree of power within the French system that has been imposed through postcolonial assimilation. What is considered “home” for Martinican cultural activists—*bèlè* culture—is recreated in an unhomey space—the French-administered system of education. Here, I illustrate how Crichlow’s argument on “homing,” belonging, and citizenship has resonances with the case of *bèlè* pedagogy in Martinique.

***Bèlè* Pedagogy, Transmission, and the (French) National Education System**

Since the 1980s launch of the *bèlè* movement, the revivalists have worked to reverse negative stereotypes and promote more affirming images of the *bèlè* tradition.

Several *bèlè* schools were created based on a mostly shared pedagogical approach to dance and drum—one that is based on the research gathered by the revivalists, which, over time, was codified and systematized into a written repertoire. For successful high school completion, students in Martinique are awarded the *baccalauréat* diploma after completing a number of exams in different subjects of study. *Bèlè* is now offered in Martinican high schools as an elective option, and enrolled students are required to pass a danced and written examination to successfully complete the requirements. Many of the *bèlè* revivalists advocated for and successfully won approval for creating the *bèlè* baccalaureate option in the mid-1990s. This required further standardization of their codified dances that could be taught to high schoolers, and that could be used by a panel of judges (physical education teachers) as an evaluation tool for high schoolers sitting (in this case dancing) for the exam to obtain their diplomas.

To pass the exam, students must dance in groups of eight (forming the *quadrille*), and execute the base steps and choreography belonging to the *bèlè linò* repertoire (Table 2-1). The team of musicians that provides the live musical accompaniment sing and play a set of *bèlè linò* styles, and students must be prepared to dance to any given music selection. Students must also demonstrate the capacity to dance a *kalennda* solo for up to thirty seconds. For the written portion of the exam, students must answer a series of questions related to the history of *bèlè*, notable elders and tradition bearers from Sainte Marie, associations and prominent members belonging to the *Coordination Lawonn Bèlè*, *Larèl Swaré Bèlè* (i.e. appropriate dress standards for participating in a *swaré bèlè*), and the general principles and values associated with *bèlè*'s “way of life.”

The integration of the *bèlè* baccalaureate option into the education system has ignited some controversy; as demonstrated in the other chapters of this dissertation, debates persist around whether or not *bèlè*, as an expression of so-called “resistance” should operate within, or entirely subvert, the dominant structures and values imposed by France. Black adolescents in Martinique have been deprived of representations of their local culture as a result of a French universalist curriculum model, one that fails to deal well with ethnic “others” and has little relevance to Martinique’s cultural specificity. For advocates of the *bèlè* baccalaureate option, this is a form of passive resistance, or a subtle form of opposition that challenges the system of French colonial domination from within. It is a way to negotiate some form of cultural sovereignty within a system of political non-sovereignty. It gives the youth a sense of empowerment to promote their Afro-Caribbean identity, which is commonly discouraged in the assimilationist school system. Take for example the “tchip” debate noted briefly in Chapter 4. “Tchip,” also known as “teeth-sucking” in the English language, is an expression of annoyance used in black cultures around the world; the sound is made by sucking in air through pursed lips and clenched teeth. In 2015, French educational bureaucrats launched a campaign to prohibit “tchipping” at school, because it is considered to be impolite, goes against French manners and norms, and is unacceptable in professional life.

Bèlè revivalists who defend the use of a standardized pedagogy argue that because of modernization and the imposition of French educational models, modes of learning and transmitting dance must be adapted to accommodate new conditions. Indeed, older generations of *bèlè* practitioners who were raised in rural settings had a completely different experience with *bèlè* acquisition. They belonged to the rural

“*mannyè viv*” (way of life) upon which *bèlè* was founded, and through which *bèlè* survived its eclipse. They had frequent exposure to the practice in its most organic contexts, outside of structured learning settings. A young girl in Sainte Marie could spend just a few years of her early childhood, observing and repeating the *bèlè* expressions of her mother, or aunt, or cousin, without step-by-step instructions, or specific names coded to identify each gesture.

In the 1980s, however, *bèlè* was known, practiced, and understood only in a handful of countryside neighborhoods, and among a small number of folkloric troupes that performed for tourists. The new urban, (and mostly French-educated) generation of interested observers and students had been accustomed to French pedagogical frameworks. Transmitting *bèlè* to large numbers of students who were not immersed in the rural settings that fostered the survival of these traditions would require more advanced approaches, beyond the observation, kinaesthetic transmission, and muscle memory that is characteristic of many non-western dance cultures and expressions. According to this line of thinking, a system of references, gesture names for base movements and variant steps, and standardized teaching formats would be required in order to reproduce *bèlè* culture in Martinique’s post-departmental era of assimilation; hence, the expansion of *bèlè* schools, and the creation of the *bèlè* baccalaureate option. Now that this has become the most common approach to *bèlè*’s diffusion over the last twenty years, *bèlè* can be taught to large numbers of student participants at a time, and the number of new students grows each year. Though the *bèlè* community is still composed of a small minority of Martinique’s total population (making up less than 1.5

percent), *bèlè* revivalists see their work and progress as a victory in the struggle for cultural sovereignty, filled with great promise for generations to come.

The growing number of *bèlè* schools and the *bèlè* baccalaureate option speak directly to the premise of *cultural citizenship*. Renato Rosaldo (1994) argues that cultural citizenship involves asserting cultural difference and embracing cultural specificity without compromising the right to belong, participate in democratic processes, and utilize public services. The fact that *bèlè* activists have made tremendous strides in reversing negative perceptions of *bèlè* in Martinican society, and persuading French educational institutions to recognize and take seriously the *bèlè* tradition as an integral part of the island's heritage, should signal a monumental shift in how citizenship is marked and defined in contemporary times. In my field research, I did encounter critics of the *bèlè* baccalaureate, and even revivalists who participated in the early development of *bèlè* pedagogy, express regret over the rigid systematization of *bèlè* transmission. I asked one *bèlè* teacher whose conception of *bèlè* differs from that used in the *bèlè* baccalaureate model, "but isn't it a good thing, to diffuse the tradition to many people all over the island, and to see so many people able to participate in *bèlè* activities thanks to the expansion of schools and educational programming?"

"What's more important...quality or quantity?" he replied. "I'm not so concerned about gaining more people in the *bèlè* movement, or having the most people in my class. The numbers aren't so important. I care about *how* people are doing *bèlè*, if they doing it well, and knowing that what they are doing is true" (interview, February 15, 2014). In this conversation, my interlocutor referenced the Europeanized dance

pedagogy model used by most *bèlè* teachers as a deviation from the organic process of kinaesthetic transmission, because it lacks the rich and diverse elements and influences that are central to black cultural (re)production. It is an extract of Afro-Martinican culture that has been removed from its foundation, and recontextualized or repackaged for new tastes and standards. With codification and systematization, *bèlè* actors invite the risk of uniformity and the loss of spontaneity. This particular group of critics does not agree with the idea of diluting and sanitizing the tradition in order to attract numbers and adhere to French institutional frameworks; at the base, the dance contains elements of black culture (i.e. African religious symbology, sensuality, *marronage*) that would be deemed vulgar, indecent, or subversive through a French lens of cultural hegemony. They argue that *bèlè* taught within French constructs compromises the dance's authenticity, and they find it contradictory to promote an ethos of resistance to French colonialism, while simultaneously accommodating the French neocolonial system.

There are also critics with more moderate opinions, who are happy to see *bèlè* taught in the public school system, but who take issue with with the evaluation process. Someone once said during an interview, "I think the *bèlè* baccalaureate option is a good thing, but the jury and the people evaluating students should be people who have the knowledge. The jury is often made up of *métropolitains* (people from France) who teach physical education but do not know anything about *bèlè*" (interview, May 1, 2014). The panel of judges to which he refers is often comprised of French teachers who are trained in sports education, and are given a sort of crash-course in the codified repertoire of *bèlè*, in order to have some capacity or reference for assessing students taking the exam. This is an issue that some find hugely problematic, but one that I

believe is being slowly resolved, as more and more *bèlè* practitioners obtain degrees and diplomas in sports education and take on faculty positions in the school system.

Perceptions about the everyday function of *bèlè* in Martinican society have evolved over time as today's generation of practitioners attempt to connect the tradition to everyday constructs of modernity. How does this debate intersect with the other issues analyzed in this dissertation? To conclude, I would like to consider a set of queries to be considered in future research, as these debates continue to unfold and influence the ever-changing societal perception of *bèlè*. Let's return to the question about the political functions of *bèlè* practice discussed in Chapter 4. How are high school-aged students to interpret the politicized discourse of a cultural movement that stresses resistance to colonial domination, when their primary source of education (outside of the home) is one administered by the neocolonial power structure? Some could argue that it is not possible to preserve the link between *bèlè* and oppositional politics among future generations if critical, anticolonial sentiments and perspectives are silenced, marginalized, or censored in French institutions.

The question of spirituality and religious orientation is also important to consider here. Many mature adult practitioners of *bèlè* claim to have turned to the tradition to reconcile feelings of alienation and vulnerability associated with French assimilation. Beyond the realm of political mobilizing and economic solidarity, *bèlè* has a tremendous impact on participants' emotional health and spiritual growth. According to some perspectives, the spiritual and emotional functions of *bèlè* are compromised with the standardization, uniformity, and codification. Moreover, with French secularization of public spaces and institutions, one of the keystones of French nationalism, how can the

sacred aspects of *bèlè* be transmitted—for example, its basis as a fertility rite, a dance of fecundity, its interpretation as a possible element of Vodou practices, or its adaptation as a Catholic liturgical expression in *bèlè légliz*? Religious symbology and doctrine are taboo subjects in French public schools, and in Martinique, there is already a widespread fear of or disregard for African-inspired expressions of spirituality. How will *bèlè* activists reconcile this rift in future developments, as the movement continues to grow?

Finally, how are the notions of sensuality and erotic expressivity received among school supporters of *bèlè*, and French education administrators? Can these aspects be transmitted to school-aged children in Martinique, given the gendered respectability norms imposed in public life? How will the dance evolve if this element becomes diluted, repressed, or discouraged in order to appease and accommodate parental and bureaucratic concerns? These are all important questions that highlight the ongoing struggle of balancing tradition and modernity; resistance and accommodation; and Africanity and Europeanness in contemporary Martinique.

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Camee Maddox received her Ph.D. from the University of Florida in the fall of 2015. She completed her Master of Arts degree in 2010, also at the University of Florida, and she is a graduate of Towson University where she completed her Bachelor of Science degree in 2007. Camee's scholarly activities are wide-ranging, and she has worked in a variety of settings as a researcher, an educator, and a museum docent. She is the proud recipient of many awards, including the Mellon Graduate Fellowship for International Study, the Ruth Landes Memorial Research Fund, the McKnight Dissertation Fellowship, and the University of Florida's Zora Neale Hurston Diaspora Fellowship. Camee has previously worked at the Smithsonian Institution's Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, and has conducted ethnographic field research in Martinique over the last several years.