Archiving Collective Memory: Performance in the French Caribbean

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Abstract

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The colonial annihilation of the colonized's histories and cultures is perhaps nowhere starker than in the Caribbean. Indigenous populations were victims to genocide owing to European invasion; Africans, brutally amputated from their languages, religious cosmologies and spiritual traditions were trafficked across the Atlantic and enslaved; forests were destroyed on a mass scale to clear for sugar plantations, causing species depletion. Since cultures in both the Americas and Africa were predominantly oral, many were erased with their perished populations. In this article, I examine how performance from the French-speaking Caribbean – Martinican lasotè and bèlè, and Guadeloupian gwoka – might become archives of collective memory. The musician Christian Dahomey alludes to gwoka as 'what is left when everything is forgotten'. The gwoka musician Rozan Monza describes it as 'memory-music' and 'resistance music'. I examine how these practices become vessels not solely of trauma provoked by colonialism, but of resistance to the oppression of people, and destruction of land. I analyse this repertoire of embodied performance practices, seeking to reveal their intergenerationally embodied collective commemoration of loss, and their celebration of survival. Significantly, I ask how they might contribute towards reconstructing decolonial notions of identity and community, as well as non-exploitative – one might say ecological – relationships with the land. I end by arguing that performance can generate knowledge that resists the fetishized materialities of the conventional archive. The transience and absence left by the impossibility definitively to archive performance can be understood as an opening, rather than a void. Instead of congealing into grand narratives of the past, which could perpetuate exclusion through dogmatic prescription or restriction, performance's intangibility and spontaneity, the fact that it depends on participation and presence for its production and reproduction, can become a privileged site for potential.

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The colonial annihilation of the colonized's histories and cultures is perhaps nowhere starker than in the Caribbean. Indigenous populations were victims to genocide owing to European invasion; Africans, brutally amputated from their languages, religious cosmologies and spiritual traditions were trafficked across the Atlantic and enslaved; forests were destroyed on a mass scale to clear for sugar plantations, causing species depletion. Since cultures in both the Americas and Africa were predominantly oral, many were erased with their perished populations. The co-editors of *Caribbean Literature and the Environment* state, 'Caribbean writers observe the need for deeper historical knowledge but recognize that the search often leads to discontinuity in the historical archive' (DeLoughrey *et al,* 2005: 20).

In this piece I examine how performance from the French-speaking Caribbean – Martinican lasotè and bèlè, and Guadeloupian gwoka – might become archives of collective memory. The musician Christian Dahomey alludes to gwoka as 'what is left when everything is forgotten' (quoted in Camal, 2012: 169). The gwoka musician Rozan Monza describes it as 'memory-music' and 'resistance music' (in Sitchet, 2019: 1).[2] I examine how these practices become vessels not solely of trauma provoked by colonialism, but of resistance to the oppression of people, and destruction of land.

1 My grateful thanks to Jean-Marc Terrine, who has generously shared his extensive knowledge of Martinican cultural practices with me.
2 Unless otherwise stated, translations are mine.

Nonhistory and the Repertoire

Only a Borghesian delusion would claim that archives are exhaustive.[3] Archives are never comprehensive. But the inclusion in, or exclusion from archives are not random: they depend on power differentials. The most significant, and oft-cited intervention into archive studies is Jacques Derrida's *Archive Fever*, which begins by tracing the term's origins. In Ancient Greece official documents would be filed in the *arkeion*, initially denoting the residence of the *archon*: the superior magistrate. The archives' contents were therefore determined and maintained by those in authority (1996: 2): 'There is no political power without control of the archive, if not of memory' (*ibid*.: 4). Since those in power are custodians of a given society's archive, the histories, cultures and identities of groups marginalized by that society owing, for instance, to their gender, sexuality, 'race', religion, class or disability, are likely to be absent. Those who operate archives decide what is valid and invalid; what survives and what disappears.

In colonial contexts this 'control of the archive' is all the more vexed; the consequences all the more devastating. Informed by ideologies of racial, cultural and religious superiority, dominant powers during colonial occupation determined what was relevant, producing a highly selective version of history. The events, facts or artefacts that the colonial curators of history on the one hand gathered and accumulated, or on the other omitted from official accounts, produced narratives from which colonized communities' cultures, languages, and above all experiences of violent colonial oppression, were absent. This void was filled with the glory of colonial victories and merits of Europe's civilizing mission. History became a fantastical fiction fabricated by and for the oppressor. As Derrida notes, political power manipulates both the archive, and memory. For this reason some historians refer to the systematic erasure of history and culture and their absence from posterity, as 'memoricide' (Massalha, 2012: 88-119).

Martinican author Édouard Glissant specifically critiques colonial history: 'History is a highly functional fantasy of the West, originating at precisely the time when it alone "made" the history of the World' (1989: 64). Understanding the French Caribbean via the periodization of French history studied and recorded by French historians – successive republics, world wars, the appointment of colonial governors

3 In his essay 'La biblioteca total' and his short story 'La biblioteca de Babel', Argentinean author Jorge Luis Borges imagines a universal library, which would become an all-encompassing archive. The short story 'El libro de harena' features a book with an infinite number of pages.

– produces what Glissant calls 'discontinuity beneath the apparent continuity' of official chronology (*ibid*.: 91). Knowledge of French history contributes nothing to Caribbean identity or community. Glissant thus describes the Caribbean as 'the site of a history characterized by ruptures':

> **Our historical consciousness could not be deposited gradually and continuously like sediment, as it were, as happened with those peoples who have frequently produced a totalitarian philosophy of history, for instance European peoples, but came together in the context of shock, contraction, painful negation, and explosive forces. This dislocation of the continuum, and the inability of the collective consciousness to absorb it all, characterize what I call a nonhistory. (ibid.: 61-2)**

The nonhistory of genocide, enslavement and massive destruction of ecosystems appears as jolts, 'shocks [...] and explosive forces', which barely break the pristine façade of French historicity.

The fact that colonized, or formerly colonized people are totally alienated from official history results in a situation, explains Glissant, where 'the negative effect of this nonhistory' is 'the erasing of the collective memory.' (*ibid*.: 62) The cultures, identities, and above all histories of resistance initiated by colonized people were removed from public memory by the 'the sly trickery of the dominant ideology' (*ibid*.: 62). To address this memoricide, to 'repossess their historical space', 'the French Caribbean countries needed to break through the dead tissue that colonial ideology had deposited' (*ibid*.: 62). Glissant proposes that '[b]ecause the collective memory was too often wiped out, Caribbean writers must "'dig deep" into this memory, following the latent signs that they have picked up in the everyday world.' (*ibid*.: 64, translation modified) Colonial history has 'wiped out' the collective memory of indigenous and Afro-descendant people, preventing its transmission. By 'digging deep' through the sedimented layers, the 'dead tissue' of colonial history and ideology, hidden memories can be retrieved, however incompletely, to tell new collective narratives, on which societies and values can be founded. Derrida enquires, 'Is it possible that the antonym of "forgetting" is not "remembering", but *justice*?' (1989: 77, original italics) Resuscitating the casualties of the colonial archive's systematic eradication becomes a decolonial act.

Glissant, along with Caribbeanists including DeLoughrey, Gosson and Handley argue that this memory retrieval might be achieved via Caribbean literature. Little attention is directed at performance as an archive of collective memory. Nigeria's first professor of dance studies Jeleel Ojuade notes how dance and other live African performances were often condemned under colonialism for being 'unchristian'. He

adds that to this day they are not treated with the same seriousness as literature or philosophy (Ojuade, 2025). Latin-Americanist Diana Taylor abandons the notion of the archive, which for her is too associated with the exclusionary functions not just of governments and institutions, but also of writing, texts and historical narrative. Instead, Taylor favours the *repertoire* of 'embodied memory: performances, gestures, orality, movement, dance, singing – in short, all those acts usually thought of as ephemeral, non-reproducible knowledge' (2003: 20). First, these practices are often excluded from archives, conspiring towards to their invalidation. Second, unlike literature or philosophy, they are often practised by society's more marginalized members. Accommodating performance can decentre 'the historic role of writing introduced by the conquest', states Taylor (*ibid*.: 17). Embodied performance can become an 'act of transfer', capable of transmitting 'social knowledge, memory, and a sense of identity through reiterated [...] behaviour.' (*ibid*.: 2-3) Taylor encourages scholars to 'shift our methodologies', to expand our understanding of what comprises 'knowledge', and accommodate embodied practices (*ibid*.: 16).

Developing Taylor's conceptualization of the archive, performance scholar Rebecca Schneider also highlights live spectacle's exclusion: '[i]n the archive, flesh is given to be that which slips away. According to archive logic, flesh can house no memory of bone.' (2011: 100) Schneider adds to Taylor's inventory of practices habitually omitted from historical accounts: 'orature, story-telling, visitation, improvisation, or embodied ritual practice' (*ibid*.). In a special issue entitled *Outing Archives, Archives Outing*, Black British theatre-makers Alexandrina Hemsley and Seke Chimutengwende note that many cultural practices have survived in the African diaspora thanks to what they call the 'intergenerational embodying of archive' (2021: 201). Performance embodies acts of transfer, since practices like storytelling or movement – what Hemsley and Chimutengwende call 'body-thoughts' – are preserved by passing from voice to voice, or body to body, making audible and visible what has forcibly been silenced and concealed.

I analyse a repertoire of embodied performance practices from the French-speaking Caribbean, seeking to 'dig deep' into their intergenerationally embodied collective commemoration of loss, and their celebration of survival. Significantly, I ask how they might contribute towards reconstructing decolonial notions of identity and community, as well as non-exploitative – one might say ecological – relationships with the land.

Lasotè: 'A Way of Living'

If vocabulary is a semantic archive; if ethnology, anthropology and musicology are archives of human practices and cultures, then lasotè is excluded, since no word – in English or French at least –encapsulates its inseparable fusion of drumming, percussion, music, song, movement and farming, which all aggregate into a proposition for a way of 'inhabiting the earth' (Duriveau and Terrine, 2015: 12).

The origins of lasotè, a Martinican practice, can be traced to the French Empire's Second Abolition of Slavery in 1848 (*ibid*.: 14).[4] The Guédon Act of 1855 obliged formerly enslaved people to remain on plantations owned by *béké* (the elite white minority), where the exploitation of workers and the land simply continued by another name. Emancipated Martinicans in the Nord Caraïbe region opted out of the plantation system, instead occupying Les Pitons: steep forested mountainsides linked by footpaths (*ibid*.: 14-15). Refusing to acquiesce to ongoing colonial domination, *lasotè sosiété* (*sociétés*: 'societies') actively rejected both the plantation system's abject working conditions and its devastation of the land via agro-industrial practices, which cultivated crops mainly for Europe's mass markets.

Although the precise derivation of the term lasotè is unclear, it is associated with the Creole for *sol* and *terre* ('ground' and 'earth'), referring ostensibly to farming.[5] Combining indigenous Caribbean crop rotation, *bitjué*, with small-scale agricultural practices originating in Africa, the first *sosiété* cleared small plots of forest and grew vegetables and fruits near streams, used for irrigation. Implementing *bitjué*, trees were cut to stumps which could regenerate, forests thereby re-establishing themselves when communities moved to the next plot (*ibid*.: 52, 62, 69, 82). The inhospitable inclines rendered mechanical farming redundant and in any case the *sosiété* rejected intensive farming. Instead of ploughing, which accelerates soil erosion, farmers broke clods of earth, tossing the soil to aerate it and creating a fine layer, ready for sowing. Optimal planting and harvesting days were calculated according to the *dékou lalin* (*découpe de la lune*: lunar calendar) (*ibid*.: 207). The altitude was suitable for cultivating root vegetables like manioc, sweet potato and yam, along with sweetcorn, coco and peanuts (all indigenous to the American tropics); and carrots, turnips, pistachios and coffee (imported during the Columbian exchange). Medicinal plants like basil and citronella were grown to treat people and livestock; and crops

4 Slavery was first abolished during the French Revolution in 1794 but reintroduced by Napoleon in 1802 before finally being abolished in 1848.
5 Other explanations suggest that the term might come from *l'assaut de la terre*, referring to hoeing the ground; or from *assoto*, the Haitian vodou term for drum (Duriveau and Terrine, 2015: 75).

were combined according to the nutrients provided by a particular plot (*ibid*.: 170). *Bitjuê*'s flourishing biodiversity countered the plantocracy's hyper-homogenous monocultures, which degraded soil and threatened species. The produce supported the self-sufficiency of the *sosiété*, who dried crops for consumption out of season, and sold at markets. To this day this green ribbon of forest, fifteen kilometres by six, resists intensive farming methods, maintaining an ethics of kinship with the land. Different *sosiété* offer their hoeing and harvesting services to neighbours *quid prop quo*, a system which survives under the name *koudemen* (*coup de main*: 'lending a hand').

The conditions for these alternative communities cannot be romanticized: they were arduous. But from the outset *bourè* (*laboureurs*: 'workers') have been accompanied musically by a group comprising:

> ***kriyè-bwatè*** (*crier-battre*: 'chanting-drumming'). Four or five singers chant couplets in unison. Chants can comprise onomatopoeic rhymes not necessarily bearing semantic sense; humorous and surreal tales; storytelling; or satirical attacks on figures of authority (*ibid*.: 114).
>
> ***ti-bwa*** (*petit bois*: 'small wood'). With small hardwood drumsticks, the singers tap a long horizontal piece of bamboo, supported on stands.
>
> ***tanbouyé*** (*tamboureur*: 'drummer'), of which there are usually two.
>
> ***konè*** (*conque de lambis*: 'conch shell'). The conch is traditionally used in the American tropics to announce births, deaths and other significant events.

The musicians always position their instruments to face the *bourè*. In this way they show solidarity with the *bourè*, motivating them as the cut back vegetation, hoe or harvest (see Figure 2). As the *bourè* advance up- or downhill to the next furrows, the musicians reinstall their instruments while the *bourè* rest. The *bourè* work *kan-t-é-kant* (*côte-à-côte*: 'side-by-side') in two parallel lines, emphasizing the collective nature of their endeavour. Repeated conch blows provide the rhythm to which the drumming, chanting and *bourè*'s audible exertions synchronize, all following the same 'score' (*ibid*.: 83). The musicians' function is not merely to offer moral support. Highly skilled, they are often invited to play at weddings, funerals or carnival (*ibid*.: 53.). The *bourè* combine strenuous labour with artistic flair, juggling their scythes to the rhythmical beat or throwing their hoes high into the air and catching them deftly

by the handle. In the same way that dance accompanies music, culture here accompanies cultivation. Indeed, in the first comprehensive written account of *lasotè*, by Martinicans Isambert Duriveau and Jean-Marc Terrine, describe these circus-like skills, known as *yo ka fè sik*, as 'performance' (*ibid*.: 74).



Figure I
In the background five *kriyè-bwatè* play the *ti-bwa*. In front of them is a row of five *tanbouyé*, at the end of which is the *konè*. In this modern-day lasotè roles are distributed between women and men. Copyright Mathias Terrine.

Lasotè performance sublimates oppression into creativity in ways that establish the practice as a vital repository for Martinican resistance. The Afrodescendant Black body was the site of dehumanizing forced labour during enslavement. Martinican writer Frantz Fanon (2008 [1952]) in the past, and Black performance specialist Harvey Young (2010) today, highlight how that same body continues to endure racist stereotyping. Martinican environmental philosopher Malcom Ferdinand's brief mention of performance in his essential body of work dedicated to Caribbean decoloniality notes how dance provides 'ways momentarily to escape policies that literally crush bodies.' (2024: 468) The manual work undertaken during lasotè is certainly gruelling, but together the *bourè*, *kriyè-bwatè*, *ti-bwa*, *tanbouyé*, and *konè* affirm bodily autonomy and dignity through artistry.



Figure 2
In the foreground a *kriyè-bwatè* chants, motivating the row of *bourè* in the background. Copyright Mathias Terrine.

Lasotè is not simply a farming technique, nor just a folk performance. It becomes a philosophy: an anticolonial means to create community and a mode of working sustainably with the land. Lasotè rejects wholesale what Ferdinand calls 'colonial habitation'. Begun in 1492 with Christopher Columbus's arrival in the Americas, four hundred years of conquest were fuelled by a vision of colonized people as resources and the world as capital, both exploitable for the sole benefit of a European minority. In Tao Leigh Goffe's exposé on the Caribbean's long history of resistance to colonial barbarism, *Dark Laboratory*, the author proposes the term 'ecological philosophy' (2025: xxii). Lasotè is, in the words of Duriveau and Terrine, 'a holistic way to apprehend and inhabit the earth': a way of living grounded in freedom from exploitation of people, and the land (2015: 12, 17, 25).

The notion of an ecological oneness is not straightforward in the Caribbean. In *Decolonial Ecology: Thinking from the Caribbean World* Ferdinand explains how the European Enlightenment created a 'fracture' between Man and the environment, which Man now mastered via scientific 'progress' (2022: 4). For Glissant, too, any recovery of an idea of primordial wholeness with the natural world is complicated in the Caribbean: 'the French Caribbean people did not relate even a mythical chronology of this land to their knowledge of this country, and so nature and culture have not formed a dialectical whole that informs a people's consciousness.' (1989: 63) The Caribbean's violent history of environmental devastation and enforced labour resulted in the fact that, for Glissant, a relationship between people and the land is not instinctive. Glissant does continue, however: 'The creative link between nature and culture is vital to the formation of a community.' (*ibid*.: 63) He also appears to contradict himself slightly as he describes how colonized people countered the alienation of a single European historical time that systematically wrote them out, by adhering to what he calls the 'natural nature of time'. There is a 'persistence', he writes, 'in considering time in terms of a natural experience (we study time as the product of the link between nature and culture and the phenomenon that among our peoples emphasizes the "natural" nature of time).' (*ibid*.: 92) Despite the brutality of the relationship between Caribbeans and the land, Glissant seems to suggest that adherence to a kind of ecological time, which repudiates nature/culture binarism, constitutes part of an anticolonial struggle. I propose that lasotè consciously seeks to repair the 'fracture' between Man and Nature by connecting with the 'natural nature of time'.

Lasotè's environmental consciousness is evident in its farming practices. I propose additional ways in which it might be described as ecological. The drum's talismanic role in Caribbean resistance and participation in the construction of maroon socie-

ties is well recognized. Since it communicates over long distances, it was used to rally revolts. Plantation masters knew its rebellious potential and in many colonies it was banned, for instance by Louis XIV's Black Code, in 1685. Drums in the Caribbean can act as 'a medium for activating ancestral memories', in other words, as repositories for ancestral resistance and struggle (Jong and Williams, 2022: 210). Scholars including Camee Maddox-Wingfield, specialist in Martinican bèlè, which I analyse presently, also explain the drum's spiritual capacity to facilitate divine connection (2021: 175). The drum becomes a key mediator for communication with ancestors and deities belonging to African and Afro-diasporic religious pantheons: 'an instrument that facilitates emotional transcendence through bodily movement' (*ibid.*: 181). The drum also participates in ecological relationality. Martinique's most important literary figure, the playwright, poet, anticolonial philosopher and politician Aimé Césaire's great play *The Tragedy of King Christophe* conveys this connectivity:

> **Do not break, cage of my breast!**
> **Beat drums, my pulse, beat,**
> **The toucan's beak breaks open the fruit of the raffia-palm**
> **I greet you toucan, great drummer!**
> **[...]**
> **The kingfisher snatching up branch after branch of the oriflamme**
> **invents for itself a sun-drunken break of daylight**
> **I greet you kingfisher, great drummer!**
> **drummer-cock**
> **drummer-toucan**
> **drummer-kingfisher**
> **Drum! My audible blood.**
> **Beat, great summoning drum of my heart**
> **My initiates! My children! When I die**
> **the great drum will sound no more.**
> **Well then, let it beat, let it beat, let the great drum**
> **beat me a river of blood**
> **a hurricane of blood and life**
> **My body! (2015: 90-1)**

In Christophe's emotional monologue, delivered when he accepts that his own death is nearing, he evokes drums. His beating heart and pounding pulse; the toucan's and kingfisher's pecking beaks; the flowing rivers and raging hurricanes, beat to the same

rhythm. Specialist in Caribbean performance Jason Allen-Paisant notes how Césaire drew inspiration from the ways in which, in pre-modern African cultures, the human was not severed from nature (2022: 577). Via African practices, notably drumming, this oneness between the human and non-human world, brutally fractured in the Caribbean, might begin to emerge. Ferdinand evokes how the contact between the drummer's hands and the drum's stretched animal skin generates vibrations that 'remind us of the sensitive powers of the body and the earthliness of existence in the world.' (2022: 212) In lasotè the *tanbouyé* sit astride their drums, both feet firmly planted on the ground. They quite literally channel the earth's energies up through their bodies, through their hands, and into the drum. As the drum is situated on the ground, these energies also flow from the earth, through the drum and into their bodies, in multidirectional flows. The drum's rhythms take part in the ecology of living beings, and non-living elements.

The rhythms of the music and chants, along with the *bourè*'s dance-like movements, can produce a state of trance, sometimes enhanced further by the consumption of rum. Through musical incantation, chanting, drumming and repetitive movement, personhood, control and mastery can be surrendered, inducing altered states of consciousness. Uncoincidentally, lasotè lyrics are referred to as *pawol mofwazé* (*paroles transformées*: 'transformed words') or *gajé* (*possédé*: possessed), suggesting this transformatory potential (Duriveau and Terrine, 2015: 94; Terrine, 2026: 76). Traces of the African Yoruba divinity of vegetation, *ache*, are apparent in lasotè's intrinsic respect for the sovereignty, subjectivity and intentionality of all beings and elements (*ibid*.: 163). The altered state enabled by incantatory rhythms, experienced collectively during lasotè, can open a portal between the apparently different realms of the self and our surroundings, troubling the perceived boundaries between physical and spiritual, human and environment, conscious and unconscious, mind and body.

If the drum and trance constitute two of lasotè's ecological properties, fertility rites offer a third. The libidinal inferences of the two *tanbouyé*, astride their drums, suggest how lasotè music becomes a supplication for the fertility of humans, and the land. A creolized, syncretic genre, lasotè can be traced to fertility practices on both sides of the Atlantic. The Kalinago, indigenous to some Antillean islands, venerated the spirit of manioc, whom they believed guaranteed the fertility of the land (Montbrun, 1984: 117). In addition, the two lines of *bourè* are said to represent male and female genders, further emphasizing fertility (Duriveau and Terrine, 2015: 100); and the striking of the soil is said to emulate sexual penetration and fertilization. Ecological dimensions are thus embedded and embodied in lasotè.

Along with other traditional practices in the French Caribbean, lasotè all but disappeared over the course of the twentieth century. In 1946 the islands of Martinique and Guadeloupe, along with the mainland territory of Guyana, gained status as French overseas *départements*. Acquiring rights equal to metropolitan citizens, notably suffrage, social security and public services, came at a price. It is true that in the 1950s and 1960s drinking water, electricity, health facilities and schools were brought to overseas *départements*, most of whose inhabitants had lived in abject poverty during colonialism. After departmentalization, these territories were now under enormous pressure to assimilate into mainland French administrative structures, the administrative systems of the Fourth (1946– 1958) and Fifth Republics (1958–) launching 'a variety of social, cultural, and economic projects to integrate them into the French "family."' (Childers, 2016: 1) In an extension of top-down, asymmetrical colonial dynamics, edicts imposed by France's Ministry for Agriculture were imposed on overseas *départements* by 'researcher-master-colonials' in their laboratories and greenhouses in mainland France, to use Ferdinand's terms (2024: 124, 318). France's programme of rapid industrialization forced agro-capitalist ideologies on Martinique, and other overseas territories. As a condition for subsidies and loans, farmers were obliged to adopt mechanized techniques and use chemical fertilizers, promoted aggressively by marketing campaigns, which enticed them with promises of greater crop yields and profits. Some manual farming practices like *bitjué* were outright banned. The *béké* agrarian class continued to target European markets and local staples were increasingly replaced with the foodstuffs of global capitalist commodity culture like bread, pasta and rice, destroying local economies and obliterating the overseas *départements'* self-sufficiency, mutating them into 'heavily dependent consumer societies in which virtually everything had to be imported from France.' (Childers, 2016: 171)[6] This in turn threatened Creole cuisine, for which locally sourced ingredients became scarce. As Kristen Childers puts it, 'the success or failure of French policies aimed at assimilating citizens of its colonial empire hinged on the translation of a certain definition of "Frenchness" into the practical matters of daily life: food, housing, family relationships, jobs.' (2016: 6)

The French education system proscribed the Creole language and other local cultural practices, dismissing them as archaic. The aspiring urban middle classes were reluctant to pass them down to their children, fearing they might appear less 'civilized' and that their prospects would be compromised. Lasotè, bèlè, gwoka and other tra-

6 Childers explains that whereas in mainland France the Monnet Plan countered US capitalism by prioritizing subsidies for housing , precipitating the *Trente Glorieuses* – thirty years of economic prosperity – it was not implemented in the French Caribbean, where 'consumption of imported foods, new clothes, and cars became the measure of equality between the metropole and the DOMs.' (2016: 171).

ditional performances were associated with rural poverty and deemed 'backward'. Owing to their association with rum they were considered 'obscene' and debauched by the church (Bourgine and Lichen, 1995); and drums would be confiscated by the police, and destroyed (Berrian, 2022: 126). In Guadeloupe the church stigmatized *tanbouyès* as 'degenerate', even threatening to excommunicate them (*ibid.*). Some local performance practices survived, in a highly exoticized form, for tourist resorts.

For Ferdinand vernacular knowledge, archived in everyday practices accumulated from generation to generation, becomes 'a refuge where people from the Caribbean can recognize something of their history, and draw strength from it.' (2024: 93) Glissant refers, as I have stated, to the 'nonhistory' and 'discontinuity' provoked by the erasure from the archive of the stories, experiences and cultures of colonized people. The alienation of French Caribbeans from their history and cultures was only exacerbated by French assimilationist ideology and global capitalism, which almost annihilated whatever existed of pre-colonial, anticolonial, indigenous vernacular knowledge.

The late 1970s, however, witnessed something of a revolution in culture. Encouraging elders – the traditional bearers of ancestral knowledge – to share memories before they and their expertise disappeared, Martinique and Guadeloupe succeeded in reviving music, dance, the Creole language and everyday practices, which 'remain as traces' of a collective memory, in Duriveau and Terrine's words (2015: 261). Mobilization by cultural activists, artists, intellectuals and urban youth has resulted in the rejuvenation of traditional cultures, and their integration into school curricula. For their part, Duriveau and Terrine consulted what they term the 'oral archive' of elders, interviewing them and preciously preserving their memories in publications, sound and video recordings, and digitally. As Terrine writes in his poem 'Lire la parole' [Reading Speech], knowledge is 'composted' in 'les couches de l'oralité' [layers of orality] (2025: 69). The transmission of practices to the next generation is assured by workshops on resistance practices of togetherness and self-sufficiency. These efforts are often driven by grassroots groups, since the French Caribbean's cultural infrastructure is far less funded than in mainland France (Bérard and Chalaye, 2010).

This interest in lasotè is by no means nostalgic. Collective memory is mobilized not to establish a genealogy or to trace an origin, but to promote social and ecological relations in the present. Archives or repertoires can become both the bearers, and producers of vital knowledge. In 2008 the Lasotè charity was established by Annick Jobénot.[7] Whereas previously roles were assigned along gender lines – men perfor-

7 Association lasotê https://lasotemartinique.com/produit/2/lasote.

med the labour while women cooked and delivered water and rum – the revived format sees women participate both manually, and musically (see Figure 1). Nor is the revival ethno-nativist. Derrida insists, 'As much as and more than a thinking of the past, before such a thing, the archive should *call into question* the coming of the future.' (1996: 33-4) He continues, describing the archive as 'a promise of a responsibility for tomorrow.' (*ibid*.: 36) Just as in the past lasotè convened members of different *sosiété*, today it welcomes people of all different backgrounds, especially migrants from neighbouring Haiti, currently in a state of catastrophic governmental collapse. Lasotè today is future-oriented. Resisting reductionist discourses of source, origin or authenticity, lasotè and other traditional practices can be embraced as what creolization specialist Ananya Jahanara Kabir calls 'creolization as cultural change' (2020: 136).

The increasing awareness of the harmful effects of many supposedly progressive agricultural methods, most notably the use of the pesticide Chlordecone, is resulting in increased interest in more sustainable practices (Ferdinand, 2024). Other alternative spaces have appeared in Martinique, for instance Providence in Morne Rouge, occupied since 1982 (Chivallon, 2004). Ferdinand writes, 'Far from picture-postcard landscapes, the Creole words *lyannaj* [solidarity], *lanati* [nature] and *dékolonizé* [decolonize] proclaim the desire for a land of dignity to emerge.' (2024: 12) Taking part in environmental consciousness-raising by upholding a holistic vision of a sustainable future, practices like lasotè can counter the onward march of individualism and human exceptionalism. *Détournement*, or subversion, was one of the strategies deployed by the 1960s French artist-activist movement the Situationist International. During the May 1968 mass anti-government protests across France they declared, 'Under the paving stones, the beach'. Subverting their slogan, Ferdinand proclaims, 'Under the plantation, the earth.' (*ibid*.) Lasotè becomes a contact zone where farming, performance and music become functions of each other, mirroring ecology itself. The reconnection in Martinique with practices such as lasotè enables the island to 'dig deep' beneath the sedimented layers of the colonial plantation and neo-colonial agro-capitalism, reconnecting with transformative worldviews that resist exploitation both of fellow humans, and of the non-human world.

Lasotè's explicit allyship between anticolonial resistance and ecological practices of land stewardship becomes a model with which to examine the potential solidarity between humans and with the non-human world, in other Caribbean performances.

Gwoka: The 'Soul' of Guadeloupe

The mere fact that there are several spellings – gwoka, gwo'ka –indicates the institutionalized archive's failure to value and record this performance practice.

Gwoka originates in Guadeloupe, an archipelago of seven islands which, like Martinique, are a French *département*. Dating back further than lasotè, gwoka emerged on plantations in the seventeenth century (Laumuno 2012). In fact, the plantocracy is implicit in the name gwoka, which derives from *gros quart* (large quart), referring to huge barrels found on plantations. *Gwo ka* subsequently meant 'big drum' and the art increased in popularity after the Second Abolition, when drumming was no longer restricted.

Gwoka involves drummers, dancers, singers, respondents and a crowd, interacting in ways that can be traced to the African Gulf of Guinea and the kingdom of Kongo (Bourgine and Lichen, 1995). Gwoka is a creolized form, which can sometimes include *cha cha* – maracas made from gourds filled with dried seeds – and the conch, both of which are indigenous to the Americas. Moreover, lyrics are always in Creole. During the all-night *swaré léwòz* (*soirée*: evening) the crowd, which assembles in outdoor locations at the end of the week, forms a circle, or *lawonn*, around the dancers and drummers. Each dancer pays respect to the drum by bowing with an extended right hand (Berrian, 2022: 125). The solo *chantè* (*chanteur*: song leader), also known as the *kontè* (*conteur*: storyteller) or *lavwè*, opens the proceedings by singing couplets, to which the *rèpondè* (*répondeur*: chorus) responds by singing and clapping. The crowd is also welcome to join in this call-and-response. The *tanbouyé* then strike up, playing a minimum of two *gwo ka* (hand-held drums) (Camal, 2012: 169). The two single-headed *boula* drums contribute the low-pitched sound which underpins the performance. The solo single-headed *makè* drum makes higher-pitched percussive sounds, in coordination with the *dansè* (dancer). The relationship between the various drummers, *chantè*, *rèpondè*, *dansè* and crowd is one of close complicity, since performance is improvised.

Whilst musicians and dancers must synchronize in real time, they follow seven elementary rhythms, each said to bear a social signification or theme reflected in the lyrics (Bourgine and Lichen, 1995):

1. ***lèwoz*** – the term's meaning remains uncertain – refers both to the whole gwoka evening and to the opening, marked by religious ceremonies, arranged to an incantatory rhythm.

2. ***oumblak***: a quick dance of fertility and love.
kaladja: also a fertility dance, but slower than the *toumblak*. Its melancholy evokes disappointment in love, or death.

3. ***graj*** (also present in lasotè): a slow dance, which represents the grinding of manioc, or coffee.

4. ***woulé*** (*rouler*: to roll): a kind of waltz danced with a scarf, related to the cultivation of manioc (Berrian 2022: 124).

5. ***mendé***: a carnival dance added to gwoka after Abolition, which expresses collectivity.

6. ***pagyanbel***: gestures used by labourers on sugarcane plantations, choreographed into dance movements which express joyful escape and freedom.

Whilst the precise significations of these rhythms are now lost and remain conjectural, the knowledge they store constitutes one of Guadeloupe's only relatively stable archives of collective memory. Rozan Monza describes gwoka as 'the bedrock, the granite, out of which the people of Guadeloupe are formed.' (in Sitchet 2019: 5)

For Patrick Solvet, an educator from Rèpriz, a Guadeloupian cultural centre established to preserve traditional popular cultures, 'gwoka is much more than just music; it is also a whole way of life, a whole way of being.' (Afeto.: 3) Moreover, thanks to its longevity it is described as a 'symbol of Guadeloupean history and experience [...] the intangible remnant of a host of historical, cultural, and political forces, making it a powerful model for unravelling dynamics of imperialism and inequality' (Berrian, 2022: 140). Whereas much work has been undertaken to rehistoricize gwoka's role in anticolonial struggles, its ecological dimensions remain to be explored.

I have already described the ecological interconnectedness enabled by drumming. Drums are part vegetal – the wooden chamber – and part animal – the drum skin of stretched goat hide. Guadeloupian carnival specialist Christian Cécile describes drums as 'organological', recounting how drummers speak of their instruments with profound respect, 'as if they were animate beings, living things, beings endowed with a spirit.' (Cécile, 2010: 36) A gwoka song quoted by Cécile opens with this couplet:

> ***Adan son a tanbou la*** **(*Dans le son du tambour*: 'In the sound of the drum')**
>
> ***Ni lespri a kabrit la*** **(*Il y a l'esprit du cabri*: 'There's the spirit of the goat') (ibid.: 39)**

'There is a tendency among drummers, singers and dancers to believe that their music is composed of a certain number of non-human elements', writes Cécile (*ibid*.: 39). The drum becomes a conduit for the earthly and planetary forces beyond the human individual and, for some, for the spirits of ancestors, whose struggle to overcome oppression offers strength to participants. During funeral wakes, explains Cécile, gwoka drummers intermittently pause, relaying to the *rèpondè* who, while clapping their hands, orally reproduce drum-like sounds called *boulagyel*: 'houm boko boko, houm boko boko' (*ibid*.: 36). In Cécile's words, 'in this rhythmical configuration the singer becomes a drum-human.' (*ibid*.) Drums constitute an interface between the human and non-human, vegetal and animal worlds, posing as a strategy for addressing the nature-culture fracture.

Ecological sensibilities are apparent in Gwoka's lyrics, too. The main character of one song is the supernatural *ladyablès* (*la diablesse*: 'she-devil'), prevalent in the Caribbean, who hides in forests and seduces men. Her long dress conceals her hooves which, depending on the myth's variant, belong to a donkey, cow, goat or horse. Whilst problematically demonizing women's sexuality and also perhaps legitimately warning of the potential risks of venturing into the woods at night, this mythological hybrid, which merges human and non-human, points to the multispecies interconnectedness which no doubt inspired Césaire.[8]

As with lasotè, during the post-war period of assimilation, gwoka was only practised by a handful of elderly folk in poor rural settings. It must also be noted that traditional customs and cultures were often marginalized precisely owing to the desire of certain communities in the Americas to forget the traumatic past of enslavement around which shame, and what Glissant calls 'painful negation', were felt. Amnesia in the Caribbean has been willed both by dominant colonial authorities, and by victims of atrocity. During the 1960s gwoka was revived, not coincidentally during separatist uprisings. Jerome Camal's *Creolized Aurality: Guadeloupean Gwoka and Postcolonial Politics* recounts how gwoka and other rural practices were co-opted by independence groups in the 1970s in the name of 'Guadeloupean national specificity' (2019: 87). Separatist unrest was sparked by the fact that services, entitlements and workers' rights were inferior to those in mainland France; by the unaffordable cost of living caused by the fact that France flooded its overseas territories with its own goods; and by soaring unemployment provoked by the collapse of the Caribbean sugar industry, which could not compete with cheap beat grown in Asia, and by the

8 One example among many is provided in his play *A Tempest*, where Ariel describes how a palm tree 'spring[s] into the sky like a fountain ending in nonchalant, squid-like elegance' (2001: 16).

subsequent closure of almost all sugar and rum factories. Protests against the French treatment of its overseas *départements*, which peaked in Guadeloupe in spring 1967 with riots in which the French army killed 87 protesters, were bolstered by a concerted campaign of cultural reappropriation: gwoka music was recorded and archived, and its rhythms were studied. Guadeloupians not only contested the repression of gwoka, but actively deployed it on picket lines.

Gwoka is described in a dedicated documentary as Guadeloupe's 'soul' (Bourgine and Lichen, 1995). Communities of players can be seen performing in streets, and are frequently hosted at cultural venues. Gwoka has even been granted status as UNESCO intangible cultural heritage, although the irony is not lost: the very state that for centuries failed to recognize its value, now proudly grandstands it as part of French culture (Laumano, 2012). Moreover, critics argue that for gwoka to be legitimized its spiritual dimensions have been 'evacuated' by the secular République (Sitchet, 2019: 10). *Laïcité* – secularism – is a condition for French national belonging, but is blind to the pass it gives Catholicism, and to its religious and racial discrimination.

As Peggy Phelan's *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* theorizes, live performance is ontologically ephemeral (1996). A recording or other reproduction of a performance is not the performance itself (*ibid*.: 146). Ephemerality becomes part of performance's fragility, since performance literally disappears when it ends; and its strength.[9] Gwoka's official admission into the archive of French, and world culture has not sanitized its contribution to Guadeloupian collective memory. Monza, also a member of Rèpriz, specifies the spiritual succour provided by gwoka: 'Personally, gwoka has given me strength; it has given me things I can't explain.' (in Sitchet, 2019: 10) Gwoka archives the collective memory of opposition to atrocities committed against enslaved people during colonialism; of the strength and survival of ancestors; and of possibilities for healing via connection with the natural environment.

Bèlè: 'A Way to Inhabit the World'

Whereas lasotè is from the west of Martinique, bèlè originates in Sainte-Marie and Basse-Pointe in the northeast. And whilst gwoka dates to the early decades of enslavement, bèlè was first performed on plantations in the nineteenth century (Gerstin, 1998: 124-5). As with many cultures that have survived colonialism's projects of devaluation and extermination – the 'dislocation of the continuum', 'discontinuity' or 'nonhistory' of which Glissant writes – there is no documentation of bèlè's origins,

9 For an account of *gwoka modèn* (modern gwoka) see Berrian (2022).

which remain speculative (Maddox-Wingfield, 2021: 183). Indicating the asymmetry of archival approaches towards cultural practices from the metropolitan centre on the one hand, and those from the colonies on the other, it is revealing that the precise origins and dissemination of the quadrille, from which bèlè derives, are well documented (Vanistendael, 2018; Jahanara Kabir, 2020).

During the *swarè bèlè* (*soirée bèlè*: 'bèlè evening') – an open-air public participatory event lasting until the small hours – the crowd forms a circle around the musicians and dancers. As with gwoka, bèlè begins when the solo *chantè* starts chanting. And as with gwoka, lyrics are often allusive – one might say fugitive – when translated into French, according to Terrine, evading immediate comprehension and losing their essence, (Terrine, 2025: 58). The *rèpondè* respond to the *chantè*, after which the single *tanbouyé* and solo *ti-bwa* percussionist join in (the drums are the same as those used for lasotè). Like lasotè's *tanbouyé*, the *bèlè tanbouyé* is astride the drum. The *ti-bwa* sits behind the *tanbouyé*, tapping its shell with the hardwood drumsticks and generating an energy that prompts the dancers to begin. Four pairs enter the ring, while other musicians and dancers wait to take their turn later in the evening (Gerstin, 1998: 125).

Bèlè is habitually said to be based on the French aristocratic dance, the quadrille. It would be wrong at best, offensive at worst, to assume bèlè is the quadrille's poor relation. First, there is evidence that colonial performance genres were coopted by enslaved people specifically to camouflage their own cultural practices or to conceal their African or indigenous Caribbean religious liturgies, banned under the new Christian hegemony, explaining the centrality of masquerade to Caribbean traditions, for instance carnival.[10] Second, bèlè adapted the quadrille in such a way as to create a new performance form. Creolity specialist Ananya Jahanara Kabir uses the term 'choreogenesis' to describe 'cultural products that must be assessed for their newness rather than for their retention or preservation of those elements' (2020: 136). She insists that in the Atlantic and Indian Oceans, colonized people purposefully deviated from the quadrille:

> **the quadrille was not merely reproduced in these colonial settings: it was transformed in keeping with the cultural material of African-heritage population groups that circulated alongside that of their European counterparts. The motives behind such transformations were multiple: survival, mimicry, resistance, self-fashioning, self-assertion. But underlying them was an *innovative adaptability* which is a fundamental characteristic of creolized cultures. (2020: 136, original italics)**

10 Terrine's poem 'Morne Macroix. Pour Féfé Marolany, Bèlè I' describes how the dance 'feigns', and 'hides' secret 'pagan Eucharists (2022: 62-63).

Far more than a derivative of a European dance, bèlè is a repository of creolized beliefs, expression, resistance and subversion.

All the rage in Europe from the eighteenth century, in the nineteenth century the quadrille was exported across the world by colonials, indigenous populations subsequently appropriating and transforming it. In the European quadrille, four female/male couples stand facing the centre, each in one corner of a square (explaining the name quadrille), and take turns to perform the intricate dance. In bèlè, four pairs enter the dance space, briefly forming a circle before one *kwadril* (two pairs) steps aside, leaving the other *kwadril* to dance. The dancing *kwadril* of two couples of *kavalyè* (*cavalier*: male partner) and *damn* (*dame*: female partner) forms a square, each dancer accompanying their partner before changing position in a pre-set pattern of suites, until the two *kavalyè* have danced in each corner (Gerstin 1998: 127). This *kwadril* exits, and the second *kwadril* repeats these four positions. The bèlè repertoire includes *bidjin bele* (*beguine*), *gran*, *bele marin* and other dances, each distinguished by singular rhythms, songs and steps (*ibid.*). Choreography involves collaboration both with one's partner, and the *kwadril*.

Significantly, in Creole the quadrille is named either *kwadril* or *won* (*rond*: round). With the 'innovative adaptability' of which Jahanara Kabir writes, the first bèlè performers broke the formal square, replacing it with the circle, around which dancers and other participants gather. The circle is central to African belief systems such as Kongo, where the physical and spiritual worlds are arranged in a cosmogram (*ibid.*: 185). Whether or not bèlè constitutes a physical enactment of this cosmology, the circle harnesses the assembled crowd's enthusiasm and encloses the ground, forming a concentrated space. Dancers perform barefoot, stroking and striking the ground and thereby maximizing their contact with its force fields. The bèlè *won* replaces a restricted square geometry with African ancestral traditions, and with the powers of the cosmos. The mere fact that bèlè begins by replacing the square of the European dance with a circle, indicates its origins in rebellious subversion rather than in submissive imitation.

In other ways, bèlè explodes the quadrille's confines. Taking inspiration from military parades, where four mounted horsemen execute square formations, the quadrille comprises precise drills. Adopting ballet movements like the *jeté*, *chassé*, *croisé* or *plié* the quadrille is classically graceful. Women in ball gowns and long gloves, hair pinned in a bun and toes pointed, would offer their hand to their tail-coated male partners. Bèlè transforms this formal configuration with African footwork and bo-

dily movement incorporating squats, leaps, turns and spins.[11] These moves are often referred to in French as 'bamboula', a word denoting a drum used by enslaved people descended from the African Bantu population, but used more generically to refer to dance considered African in style (Jahanara Kabir, 2020: 141). Whereas the quadrille requires dancers to adopt an upright, neat, poised stance, bèlè dancers spread their legs wide, shifting weight from side to side. Rising on the balls of their feet to an upwards position of suspension, they fall suddenly onto one heel. Unlike the pointed toes of the quadrille, their feet extend backwards. Walking on their knees in a move called *zabap*, tilting their bodies towards their partners, or backwards in limbo-like positions, they refuse the vertical posture of mastery characteristic of the colonial subject. Swaying their hips in time to the drummer's rhythms, they dissolve the quadrille dancer's column-like verticality. The women lift, flutter, swish and swirl their skirts, likened by Terrine to cancan petticoats, in a flamboyant mutiny of colour, further shattering the quadrille's constrictions (Terrine, 2022: 64. See Figure 3). Overt sexuality, to which I return, substitutes the quadrille's stiff courtship. The crowd, who greet each other, drink together, chat and laugh as children chase each other, adds conviviality and atmosphere.

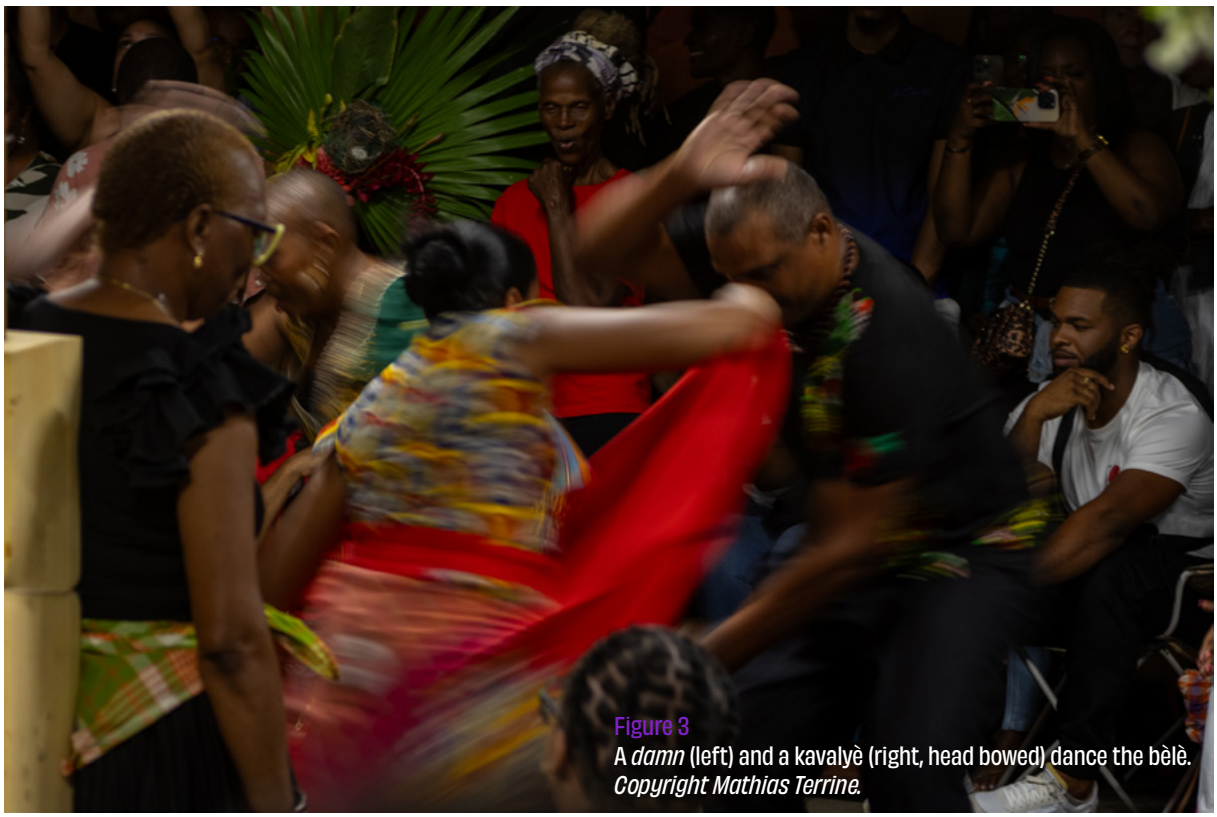


Figure 3
A *damn* (left) and a kavalyè (right, head bowed) dance the bèlè.
Copyright Mathias Terrine.

11 Personal observations of a *swarè bèlè* in Fort-de-France, December 2024.

Whilst the quadrille conforms to strictly choreographed movements, improvisation is key to bèlè. Julian Gerstin's detailed study highlights how the *kavalyè*, *damn* and musicians each develop their own personal style (1998: 134). Maddox-Wingfield, who has also observed bèlè closely, describes the dancers' flirtatious glances, inviting smiles or indignant glares, their facial expressions forming part of their playful choreography (2018: 302). Since there is no script indicating when the *kavalyè* rotate to the next corner or when one *kwadril* replaces another, dancers and musicians must combine their training and skill with intense reciprocal attentiveness to subtle cues, rather like in jazz (Gerstin, 1998: 137).

Performance can constitute, in Taylor's words, a system for storing knowledge, which can then be disseminated in 'acts of transmission' (2003: xviii). Schneider suggests that the performer's body can represent a 'host to a collective memory', storing social knowledge, replayed during performance (2001: 103). The corporeality of bèlè transmits both the painful history of enslavement and the creative, vigorous ways in which ancestors resisted the dehumanization of their bodies. Danced on plantations during enslavement, bèlè would have provided release after back-breaking work in the fields (Maddox-Wingfield, 2021: 186). Colonialism expressed itself literally via the mechanized movement of enslaved people's bodies: sugarcane-cutting or manioc-grating; the contorted posture of exhausted backs and wearied limbs; the enduring of physical punishments. As with gwoka's *pagyanbel* rhythm, this abuse, perpetrated at the level of the subjugated body, is sublimated into defiant dance. Examining modifications to the quadrille effected in bèlè enables access to a collective memory of subversion and struggle. Wriggling out of slavery's straitjacket, bèlè bursts from the quadrille's confines. Stored deep within bèlè's DNA is also an alternative way of relating to the non-human world, a quality I seek to resuscitate.

Jean-Marc Terrine, poet and specialist in traditional Martinican cultures, argues that bèlè is far more than a cultural genre: it is a 'new humanity', a 'way to inhabit the world' (2025: 59). Terrine claims that bèlè, which can alternatively be spelt *bèl lè*, derives etymologically from *bel air* ('pretty tune'), alluding to the quadrille's musical accompaniment. He argues, however, that this origin story devalues bèlè by associating it solely with the quadrille (*ibid.*). Bèlè is not just a dance set to a pretty tune. Terrine proposes that *bèl lè* might also refer to *bons-lieux* ('good places'), and that bèlè's foundational moment was the maroons' escape from plantations to 'good places' in mountain forests (*ibid.*: 63). He describes the essential relationship that maroons had with the land, whose yield of wild yams enabled them to survive in adverse terrains, without having to return to the plantations (*ibid.*). Far beyond a mere performance practice, *bèl lè* denotes a space in which to invent a way of life.

For Terrine the *swarè bèlè* becomes a politicized, historicized, ecologized 'good place to live and resist.' (*ibid*.: 60)

There are numerous ways in which bèlè can be considered ecological. First, like gwoka's, bèlè's rhythmical music and motion can enable transcendental experiences. And like gwoka's, bèlè's spiritual dimensions have been victim to the secular Republic, since the prioritization of rationalism over religious beliefs or practices has resulted in scepticism, or the denial of bèlè's spiritualism. Maddox emphasizes the 'numinous experience, emotional transcendence, and ancestor veneration' intrinsic to bèlè (2012: 176). Just as African cosmologies are evident in Afro-Atlantic religions like Haitian vodou, Cuban Santeria or Brazilian candomblé, they are present in bèlè (*ibid*.: 178). In fact, some experts suggest that Africans deported to the Caribbean adopted the quadrille precisely to camouflage their forms of reverence behind acceptable European court dancing (Daniel, 2009: 150). The ecstatic states of possession occasioned by bèlè are not necessarily associated with theistic religion, and Maddox-Wingfield maintains that many diasporic Afrodescendant traditions synergize the sacred-secular dualism. But there is no denying that possession, trance and transcendence are experienced by *swarè bèlè* participants. Ecological performance specialist Carl Lavery (2025) argues that emphasis on the elemental qualities of the body's rhythms and breath – its terrestrially-immersed forms of intensified and interacting sensations, energies and atmospheres – can decentre the individual's consciousness and locate performance-makers and audiences in relation to each other and their surroundings, as elements in our ecology. The incantatory rhythms produced by drumming, chanting and movement in bèlè, as in gwoka, hold this ecological potential.

Second, like gwoka's *toumblak* and *ialadja* rhythms, bèlè contains atavistic fertility rites. Bèlè has been linked to the Haitian vodou spirit Kouzen Zaka, who protects agriculture and farmworkers:

> **Much like the significance of Kouzen Zaka's lore in Haiti, bèlè has become a conduit through which Martinicans can express their spiritual devotion to the earth, land, and soil and memorialize their ancestors, who possessed special systems of knowledge of the natural landscape for their communities to prevail under incredibly harsh circumstances. (Maddox-Wingfield, 2021: 186)**

Elders often refer to bèlè as a *danse de la terre* ('dance of the earth') and whilst neither they, nor specialists to date specifically describe it as ecological, the engagement with the land is clear. Bèlè drumheads are always positioned facing the moon – the moon, as I have stated, is also important to lasotè farming – in order for the drummer

to channel the moon's energy via the drum, through their hands and into the ground, since some believe drums deliver these cosmic energies to the ancestors' spirits (Maddox-Wingfield, 2021: 187). The dancers rotate first anticlockwise then clockwise, synchronizing with the moon's orbit around the earth (*ibid.*). The simulated sexual movements, where partners thrust their bellies, thighs and pelvises and rotate their hips, are met with delight by the crowd, who applaud and encourage this suggestive interplay. In what Maddox-Wingfield calls 'ecstatic dance encounters', sensuality and ancestral spirituality interconnect (2018: 299). Bèlè's erotic expression summons and celebrates fecundity of the land, and human procreation. Explicitly sexual performance can be traced to African fertility practices dedicated to deities like the Yoruba *orisha* (god) Oshun, associated with sexuality, fertility and love. Eroticism is often prominent in Caribbean cultural practices, since celebrating the victory of life, joy and survival would have offered hope to enslaved plantation workers, whose life expectancy was appallingly low. *Danmyé* – the combat dance with which *swarè bèlè* often open – is also associated with fertility. In Latin-American cultures martial performances can symbolize the sacrifice of blood offered to Mother Earth, known for instance in Bolivian Quechua culture as Pachamama (Terrine, 2025: 61, 70). These fertility rites, considered by some specialists to unify many Caribbean dances, and the deference to the wider cosmos beyond our planet, can be considered ecological since they assume that the land's productivity does not depend exclusively on human agency and activity. These practices are founded on an animist belief that our non-human environment bears forces beyond our control.

Perhaps more than any other performance genre from the French Caribbean, in the postwar period bèlè was degraded into kitsch tourist entertainment. Glissant even describes how, in a humiliating development, bèlè seemed to emulate the racist genre of minstrelsy, where white performers blacked up and enacted overtly racist stereotypes of Black people (1989: 110-11). He described French Caribbean music of the period as 'folkloric (in the worst sense)' and 'worn out', since for him it no longer expressed a 'view of the world' (*ibid.*). Bèlè did continue to be practised by tiny numbers of maroon descendants, high in the hills (Terrine, 2025: 61).

As with lasotè and gwoka, by the latter decades of the twentieth century bèlè took part in a Caribbean quest for cultural self-retrieval. Led by young urban activists engaging with elders from the Sainte-Marie countryside, this campaign recovered practices that had been transmitted informally from bèlè 'masters' to pupils – mainly within families (Gerstin, 1998: 125). Since the 1990s, practitioners have been able to receive training at bèlè schools, and many have an advanced command of the repertoire. Attended by several hundred people, *swarè bèlè* are regularly organized

by town councils, recreational centres or by one of the coalition of bèlè associations across Martinique, the most prominent being Tanbou Bô Kannal, which also rehearses performances for carnival. Bèlè today is active, visible and respected, cutting across all ages and classes: practitioners range from school pupils to professionals like doctors or civil servants, as well as elders from modest rural backgrounds (Maddox-Wingfield, 2021: 180). The practice is far from solely recreational. Rehistoricized, bèlè's context of colonialism and the resilience gained from ancestors' survival, are evident during the *swarè*. Bèlè has also been overtly politicized, and like gwoka, is often mobilized during anti-government protests (Ferdinand 2024: 350). To use Jahanara Kabir's term, bèlè is a choreogenesis, whose origins and destinations far exceed the quadrille.

Archiving Performance, Performing the Archive

Derrida writes, 'The afterlife [*survivance*] no longer means death and the return of the spectre, but the surviving of an excess of life which resists annihilation.' (1996: 60) Bèlè has survived the brutal conditions of colonialism and French assimilationism's attrition of local practices not as a ghost of the past, but as an 'excess of life', inspiring Martinicans to imagine future collective identities. If, as anthropologist Christine Chivallon suggests, fragile memories intensify the fragility of local identities, then Martinique's archiving of its cultural heritage has strengthened collective memory, and a sense of local identity (2004: 402).

Archives are frames. And we only see what is inside the frame. Gwoka and bèlè are not ecological in the sense that they actively promote the transition to clean energy, or encourage recycling. While not couched in the language of environmentalism, the performance practices I examine here are ecological at an ontological level. Anthropocene and Empire have been mutually constitutive: the human species' negative environmental impact began on an industrial scale with the establishment of the plantocracy. Lasotè, gwoka and bèlè reject hierarchies in which people dominate each other, and ideologies that consider that individuals master their environment. Instead, these practices understand and respect the planetary relations of interdependence with the non-human world, with which we are inextricably enmeshed. They constitute primary sources of counter-history, rescued just in time from the oblivion threatened by colonialism and assimilationism. 'Unearthed', they invite us to imagine ways we might better live with each other, and our planet.

Herculean efforts have been made by elders, practitioners, activists, cultural specialists and scholars in the French Caribbean and abroad, to offer lasotè, gwoka and bèlè a rightful space in the cultural archive. But the archive is never complete, and in the Caribbean this reality is all the starker. The co-editors of *Caribbean Literature and the Environment* warn that any understanding of the pre-Columbian world is 'broken' (DeLoughrey et al, 2005: 20). A past untouched by colonialism is unretrievable. Admitting this impossibility, and the partiality of archives, is essential in order to drive our efforts for further inclusion. The ecological sensibilities of lasotè, gwoka and bèlè, for example, are only just regaining credibility.

As the archives of colonized, formerly colonized or marginalized people gradually fill, complex questions arise. How can archives incorporate cultures without recuperating them into the 'totalitarian philosophy of history' condemned by Glissant? Here, performance can play a part. Collective memory is embodied in movement, gestures, dance, rhythms and song which transmit it, as I have demonstrated. But this transmission exceeds the archive's ability definitively to document and contain it. This quality forms part of performance's fragility, and its strength. Owing to performance's intangibility, as Taylor and Schneider remind us, unwritten cultures which have historically been dominant in Africa and the Americas, have suffered particularly from invisibilization. But performance can generate knowledge that resists the fetishized materialities of the conventional archive: school curricula, academic publications such as this, or documentary films. The transience and absence left by the impossibility definitively to archive performance can be understood as an opening, rather than a void. Instead of congealing into grand narratives of the past, which could perpetuate exclusion through dogmatic prescription or restriction, performance's intangibility and spontaneity, the fact that it depends on participation and presence for its production and reproduction, can become a privileged site for potential. Taylor reminds us, 'As opposed to the supposedly stable objects in the archive, the actions that are the repertoire do not remain the same. The repertoire both keeps and transforms choreographies of meaning.' (Taylor, 2003: 20) Performance depends on liveness, spontaneity, improvisation and interaction, all of which can enable collective memory both to be activated, and reinvented, in a perpetual choreogenesis. Live performance also depends on collectivity and sociability between performers and with the audience, thereby holding the potential to disrupt possessive individualism as the material condition of modernity, with the possibilities for exchange, negotiation and community.

Lasotè, gwoka and bèlè elude definitive consecration. Their potential for resistance can thus be perpetually renewed. In Terrine's words, they have the potential to create

'micro-worlds', which refuse to reproduce colonial, neo-colonial, capitalist-extractivist or nationalist hegemonies.[12] In addition to constituting systems for conserving and transmitting memory and ancestry, these practices offer a *bèl lè* (Terrine, 2025: 66): openings for resistance, a space for 'inventing good places', for imagining new, juster futures for us, and our planet.•

12 Personal interview with Jean-Marc Terrine, 12 August 2025.

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