

## Transcript of *In Conversation* with Latanya Tigner and Colette Eloi (Part 1 of 2)

*In Dance* Fall 2021

*In Conversation* theme music: Calming mid-tempo new wave meditation music that you may hear in a massage therapy clinic

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[Theme music plays, then fades out slightly to play in the background of the introduction]

**Andréa Spearman:** Dancers' Group is experimenting with new ways to unify, strengthen, and amplify voices in the Bay Area. We're excited to share a variety of ideas and stories.

[Theme music fades back in, then gradually fades out entirely as Andréa begins to speak]

**Andréa:** Welcome back to *In Conversation* with Andréa Spearman—that's me!—and today, we are speaking to Latanya Tigner and Colette Eloi.

Latanya Tigner performs professionally with Dimensions Dance Theater, lectures at UC Berkeley, and is certified in Akimbo-level Talawa Technique™. She currently serves as Co-Artistic Director of the [San Francisco Ethnic Dance Festival](#), is also a founding member of the Oakland Anti-Racism Organizing Committee, and is the curatorial director of [Dancing Cy\(i\)phers](#), an annual symposium that connects the coded languages of African-rooted dance through ongoing research.

And Colette Eloi is a sought-after guest lecturer and dance facilitator in African diaspora dance. She has established herself as a cultural worker and an award-winning dancer, commissioned choreographer, and director of [EL WAH Movement](#). She is a master instructor of Haitian dance technique and context which grounds her research interests, which are the pre-colonial archives of African-rooted dance culture. Ms. Eloi is also one of the creators of the online dance conference series entitled Back to the Root: The Healing and Spiritual Power of the Spine and the Pelvis in African Diaspora Dance.

Thank you so much for joining us today ladies!

**Latanya Tigner:** Thank you for having us! It's wonderful to be here.

**Colette Eloi:** Yes, thank you so much.

**Andréa:** So to dive into our first question, I'm going to ask Latanya first and then Colette can jump in as well. Tell the people—you have so much experience at this point in your lives, how were you first introduced to dance?

**Latanya:** My first introduction to dance that I can remember, like really remember, would be me watching [Soul Train](#) at the house and just loving that Saturday morning when I got to see

how we were moving and mimicking. And also, my parents were older so they were past that [*laughs*] and so it was *Soul Train* for me. It was *Soul Train* and then listening to the music in that. That was my introduction to community and how we moved, how we moved. That was my introduction to dance.

**Andréa:** Nice. And you, Colette?

**Colette:** For me, I would say music was always on in the house and I was a little dancing baby, but I think the thing that got me like, “Okay, dance is my thing” was at seven, I would make choreography shows in the garage and invite people to watch and get candy from the ice cream truck to serve the audience afterwards. My aunt would tell me that story all the time, so I think that’s when I was like, “This is my thing.” [*Latanya laughs*]

**Andréa:** I love that. You were already doing full productions [*Colette laughs*]. And with so much experience now—from seeing dance as a child to moving and grooving and starting to learn about your body in space—what are some of the important things that you’ve learned through your career studying and making dance?

**Latanya:** For me, to be true to yourself, true to your vision. You know, really understanding and honoring who you are in that—whatever that is, whoever you are—really speaking to that. And understanding that your voice is valid in your making and it deserves to be out there in the world. It took me a while to understand who I am, like I’m still figuring that out. And it was through the tutelage of Deborah Vaughan that I actually first of all understood that this could be a career. I could actually do this as a career that feeds me. You know, you tell someone you’re a dancer and you always get “Can you do the splits?” What are you talking about? Stop it. [*Colette and Andréa laugh*] You know craziness, so it was through her tutelage and like literally following her path from Contra Costa College to San Francisco State. I met her at Contra Costa College. And seeing how dance shaped her life and the lives of those that she’s touched, this could be a livelihood for me and not just for making money or anything like that or for recognition, but to feed my soul, so this really feeds my spirit [*Andréa: Yes.*]. And to have something that could feed your spirit *and* be a career has been a blessing that I understand not many have the opportunity to engage in.

**Andréa:** Nice. So Deborah Vaughan has definitely been one of the ones to dispel that struggling artist myth.

**Latanya:** Yes, definitely.

**Colette:** Yes.

**Andréa:** She’s a living legend. If y’all don’t know who that is, [Google her](#).

**Colette:** That’s right. [*Latanya laughs*]

**Andréa:** Deborah Vaughan and [Dimensions Dance Theater](#) [Latanya: Yes.]. Do it now! [*laughs*]

**Latanya:** Yes, she has raised generations. She comes from a legacy, of course, of [Ms. Ruth Beckford](#), so she has raised generations of dancers here in the Bay Area.

**Colette:** Yes.

**Andréa:** Exactly. And Colette, for you, you've spent a brilliant amount of time studying and making dance. What are some of the most important things that you've learned?

**Colette:** One of the things that I learned that just really makes me understand the profundity of *life* and our ancestors is what I found through African diaspora dance. Because I love dance, I love the way you can catch energy with dance, but when I first started formally taking Haitian, and then I took some Cuban, and then I took some Brazilian, I started seeing these connections, like "Oh! They all have similar deities. Oh, they all consider ancestors." And then I was like, "Look at what our ancestors did through dance!" They archived our culture, our history. They tried to say that we didn't have culture. They tried to say that we didn't have a history. And inside of the dance, all of that exists. So when that really hit me and I understood that, I just thought, "Wow, this is amazing, this is what dance has brought me to." And then, dance kind of took me around the world. I had no idea that that's what I was going to focus on. I went to Cal for computer science, you know [*laughs*], and then ended up being a dancer, and it's so rich what is inside of dance and what it can transmit beyond the verbal.

**Latanya:** Yes, yes.

**Andréa:** Say that again, "It transmits beyond the verbal."

**Latanya:** It's a lot. I mean studying and making dance, for me, it's the studying part that would be the actual being present and studying and getting information beyond movement, beyond taking class. Finding the history, the origins—as much of that information that you can get while being in the presence of the teacher, while being in the embodiment aspect of it. Like getting the information and then moving through the embodiment of that in the moment.

Follow up and study with different people. I know some people get kind of cliquish and clannish if I may say—that's no disrespect because people find their teacher that they want to study with—but I think it's also important to study with different people. Just to be a student of different people who have different perspectives, not necessarily different information, but the movement style is different and just makes you a more versatile mover.

And being genuine and honest and respectful of the form—whatever you're studying—and then making sure that if you're able to move into a teaching space or even a creative space within that form, that you then share that information that you've been taught—the history and all that—that that gets passed down and passed along. And if you're in a creative space, just let people know from what you're drawing your information. I've been in conversations with people who said they want to teach, then they just throw out this word "fusion." Fusion what? You know, what is this fusion? And then if you can't tell me from what you're drawing from or even if you have an understanding for what you're drawing from, then to me, it's like you're being disrespectful and you just want to get out there and do your thing without giving credit to whatever you're considering fusion. Because it's coming from somewhere, you know.

That's what comes to mind right now. I know there are other things... Go ahead, Ms. Colette. *[laughs]*

**Colette:** I agree with so much of what you said. And like, the idea of what is African dance? Like you just go everywhere and see it in class catalogs for school and you know, Africa is a *continent*. And then our conception of dance, here growing up in the US, we think of dance entertainment and things like that. But you can't really talk about African dance as African dance by country. And even if you think of African dance by country, you're thinking of countries in terms of the way western Europeans cut up Africa [Latanya: Right.]. They have their lineage based on their community, tribal, ethnic group dances. So when we're talking about that, that's a misnomer—you can't really say "African" dance. It's Guinea dance [Latanya: Right.]. And you could even get particular, like we just learned Wolosodon<sup>1</sup>—that group of people's dance and they apparently don't want you to do their dance without permission. We learned recently that they will take your clothes off [Andréa: Oh!] So this is what we're learning is the *vastness* of what is considered African dance and then that vastness is also in the diaspora even though these dances carried into the diaspora, even in the diaspora like Haiti, my blood home, they have so many different types of Yanvalous and mayis [Latanya: Right.], so that's one thing I've learned.

The most beautiful thing I've learned from studying is that our ancestors are amazing because as Black people, our history, our epistemologies were under attack and they tried to erase that. It's inside of our dance. So much of our history, so much of our cosmology, so much of how we see the world, and how we see ourselves as humans in

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<sup>1</sup> Note from Colette: We learned from Djeneba Sako that the dance Wolosodon from Mali, was danced as a form of survival when women were captured in tribal wars. Danced to entice them to be child bearers over a more terrible fate. Now a very popular dance done in many dance studios and West African dance circuits taught to Americans and Europeans as the "slave dance" it takes on a different meaning for Africans in the diaspora. Sako explained that among the Malian tribal group where the dance originated because of this delicate history, in protest against someone mindlessly appropriating this dance, they will uncloth you, if you are at one of their events in Mali, doing this dance without the proper sanctioning, given the hardship they endured in association to that dance. This is what I mean when I say these stories are vast. They are complex, delicate and full of history and emotion. All types.

the world is inside of our dance and our ancestors put that there. So there's this kind of great respect that I've come to have from studying. And then that movement is an expression of your soul and the ancestors. And it's even like science in motion. That's also something I've learned and enjoy so much—really just dancing and moving your body in space and catching rhythm, catching vibration, enacting vibration, making your vibration meet someone else's. Especially with this time of corona, I really see the importance of proximity and miss it so much and see how important that is to these dances that I love so much and all dance, really. That's my sum answer to that course.

**Latanya:** Can I add to that? [Andréa: Yeah.] In terms of what Ms. Colette said about our culture and our history and our cosmologies being passed along in our oral tradition of dance is that also when you do those, then you make connections. You also see how we connect to others through our movement. And especially, like Ms. Colette also said, through breaking down or getting really specific about which dance belongs to which people—not just countries of origin—but groups of people and ethnic groups and how those can be very similar to another group of people that are in close proximity with them because the cultures are similar in ways, and so then be able to recognize those things and the similarities through the dance.

And for me, in addition to what I said before and what Ms. Colette said, you learn a deeper respect for humanity and you see the humanity in others through their dance. A *complete* humanity. And making that connection, like you said, proximity in learning is key but also proximity in when you're dancing with somebody. You feel like humanity, you see the humanity in the movement, in the culture which is held. If you're out there in the world and you're moving and taking classes, you can feel someone's humanity or you recognize it in other cultures too! You see *who they are* in their dance—the dance that they propel forward—you see who all those people are in the community, what they hold sacred and value is present in the dance.

[Theme music fades back in, then gradually fades out entirely as Andréa begins to speak]

**Andréa:** So what I'm hearing is that more historical education is needed in movement technique classes.

**Colette:** Yes, and it's where you go for that history. There's a scholar-historian of Haiti named [Bayyinah Bello](#) and she talks about *our* stories as opposed to *his* stories. So this is what I've done, what I've watched Latanya do, and folks from Dimensions, and Michelle Martin was one of the first women in this area, and Ruth Beckford was the first to go straight to Haiti to study the dances. And then you go and study with those folks because you can go try to study these through schools or, you know, some folks feel like they takin' African diaspora dance because they take Zumba. And I'm not talking bad about Zumba because the people from Zumba from Oakland, they are some incredible

dancers. But you have that history that you're going to track. You have to track it through the people. It's about identity.<sup>2</sup>

**Latanya:** And that part too, as Ms. Colette said, is traveling to those places and embodying that movement in its faithful origin, its geographical origin space. If you can get into that, there's nothing like it. There's nothing like doing a dance *in the place, with the people!* You know, because it's a different vibration. Something else is going on. You get touched in a different way and then you tap in, in a different way, and you come away washed over and reformed and reshaped and with a different understanding that you can hopefully take forward into whatever you do. It's different. Again, like eating the food, talking and speaking the language. That was one of the things we tried to do in *Back to the Root*. It's having these people in these places—in these origin spaces, the geographic origin spaces of the dance—speaking the language [Colette: Yes.]. Not the colonized language, but the language of the dance. And not centering whiteness in this space. Really centering us and the form and the dance is so important to that—that holistic thing that happens when you're in that space, in those spaces.

**Colette:** Dancing in the hot!

**Latanya:** Ooh, in the hot, yes!

**Colette:** Something about dancing in the hot, like doing Yanvalou in the hot after you've been eating all this gorgeous food in Haiti, you've been walking and moving and you go to hit that Yanvalou, you feel your whole naked spine, right in here on each vertebrae, like you hear the music, you hear those mommies singing and then those drums hit, like 11 drums. Oh! It hits you. [Andréa: Oh, wow.] Like you no longer are moving, it is all moving you and that's the magic in it. That's the power of it is that Africa is the same thing, Cuba is the same thing, Puerto Rico the same thing, New Orleans second line—you just walkin' down... you think you just going to continue to walk and then all the sudden, you just dancing! You know, it takes you.

**Latanya:** It takes *you!* And you get swept up and then four hours later, you can't find your car. [Colette laughs]

**Colette:** Okay! Okay!

**Latanya:** Like where did I park again? Oh my god, I gotta get back cross town.

**Colette:** The sun is comin' up and you like, "Whoa! That much time went by..." [Andréa and Latanya laugh].

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<sup>2</sup> Note from Colette: We can track our stolen identities through the dances, to the Bantu Kongo, Yoruba, Ewe, Fulani, Bambara, Mandigue, Dogon, Sudanese, Egyptians, etc. along with First Nations people and Europeans, through the dance. These groups tell a very different story of Black People than the one given in typical history books. Histories I was not taught in school and had to find on my own.

**Latanya:** Yeah, yeah, that durational thing but because you're elevated and exalted to that level of vibration that's connecting, everybody is swept up in it and like you said, time is not a thing. Time is not a thing.

**Colette:** And that's the joy of the study, like you said. What was important about the studying is that you start to understand, you begin to see too—like I mentioned before, I was throwing flowers for Latanya—she don't ever stop studying. And our teachers never stop studying and that's what's very important about these styles and it's also a gift. You find it to be a gift to study, you be like, "Thank god my knees still work, my back still work, my arms still work because there's going to be a new treat I'm going to learn about myself physically, mentally, spiritually, about my culture..." You know, it's really a gift to study, it's been a *great* gift—I'm almost in tears—it has been a great gift in my life to be able to study these dances. I really feel that.

**Andréa:** I am joyed to hear that. I'm overjoyed to hear the passion and excitement for growth and learning opportunities. And Latanya, the word you used was "reshaping" and do you think that there is space in academia to reshape what it means to learn ethnic dances as part of the core curriculum, as part of redesigning people's own learning discourse as they go into these spaces?

**Latanya:** Yeah, definitely there's space and if they say there isn't, we just carve it out. There's always space for paradigm shifts because we've been locked into this system, into this understanding of how things should be and how people should learn, or the hierarchy of what's important. Whose culture is important? There are major shifts happening out there in the world, there are some shifts happening in dance studies and dance curriculum. There's room. There's room because more and more people are like "Uh, no." And being validating and uplifting all cultural forms because everything has a technique, everything has a standard. You learn, you acquire knowledge in different forms, in different ways.

Most dance forms are not taught in a studio space and you're going across the floor. That's not how it's taught, you know. You are taught, you are taken under the wing of somebody, you learn in everyday ritual practice, everyday community. You learn at, again, community rituals, home, family rituals. That's when you learn in these spaces and then you elevate. Or in certain cultures, in continental African cultures and maybe other places, some people are born into these roles. You're born into a family of dancers, you're born into a griot family. You're born and it's understood that you're going to be trained in this manner as the keeper of this tradition, but you know when you see a baby, the baby ain't been in class. [Colette: That's right. Yes.] With everything you're doing because the baby is watching you and the baby is in these cultural practices [Colette: Yes.]. So the fact that the pandemic pushed dance back outside is beautiful, the pandemic put dance back out into its environment. Even though I was like, "I'm not going out there"—but I did eventually and it was great—just because it was a pandemic and I

wanted to continue to take class very cautiously and make sure I'm not dancing on too uneven...

**Andréa:** Concrete.

**Latanya:** Yeah, concrete and stuff like that. I do support when I can and so I was glad that people went back out and found spaces and then you see the dances like Haitian dancing and Brazilian and all of these other forms and the different continental African dance classes happening in the park, outside, with the people. It's beautiful. And so those shifts—like the studio is no longer important, like I don't have to have "formal" classes in studio spaces.

**Colette:** And to add to that, I love your question about reshaping educational systems. This time that we're in is really a reset because we are all actively decolonizing *everything*. [Andréa: Yes.] And conversations that could not happen, didn't seem to happen, are happening. And people are realizing that the stories, the histories, the anthropological studies, they all need to be redone. There's a great book I'm reading right now called [Decolonizing Methodologies](#) [by [Linda Tuhiwai Smith](#)], and it talks a lot about Maori culture and things like that but before that, the author is really breaking down the way the field of anthropology is constructed around this ideology of the West. Not western culture, but this idea of the West and this history of "We know best, and what we're doing is we're teaching you to be better. Like us."—even though these were genocidal acts of imperialism that they were forcing on many groups. And then with that they brought this kind of educational system and those ideas are later throughout these groups and what they do is they breed self-hate into people of color with these ideas. They have these false histories about what happened, they erase histories, they appropriate histories, and so this has also hit the field of dance.

So yes, this is why we're doing Back to the Root, the series of Back to the Root—we just finished our 11th one. It's so that we can come back and look at these—our own cultural dances—from our own lens and from the lens as practitioners of these kinds of dances for 20+ years. We're coming in to look at them. It's not like we're throwing out what dance studies has done, but we're reframing it from our perspective and that's something that's being done now. Like Native American artists are doing that—they're going back into the anthropological archives and revisiting the way these dances were being looked at and now they're looking at it from their own lens. And then they're doing it one step further, which is what Dimensions does with the [Rites of Passage](#) program. They're now taking these rituals that these old, white men, who were not there for nice reasons, looked at and they're using their same information but to re-put together their own rituals, their own rites of passage, so they can lift up their children and their cultures. We are on the cutting edge of that. That's the next step in the game because God did not make one kind of flower with one smell and one color, and that's how we are as humans. That's what makes it gorgeous—a gorgeous bouquet.

[Theme music fades back in, then gradually fades out entirely as Andréa begins to speak]

**Andréa:** Absolutely, and speaking of the cutting edge and getting back to the root, please talk to our listeners and our audience about this awesome dance conference series that you all started called Back to the Root: The Healing and Spiritual Power of the Spine and Pelvis in African Diaspora Dance.

**Latanya:** Yay! I'm so excited [*Andréa laughs*]. I've been speaking for us. Ms. Colette, you go ahead and I'll jump on in there.

**Colette:** Back to the Root must mention Ebonie Barnett. She was like, "I want to bring together all of my teachers and the different African diaspora dance folks and make a conference." And then corona hit. And so we put it online and that actually allowed us to go international with it. So it's called Back to the Root: The Healing Power of the Spine and Pelvis in African Diaspora Dance. And we have had exceptional scholars and dance veterans like Yvonne Daniel was at the first opening one, [Thomas Talawa Prestø](#) who created the Talawa Technique™ and has a [Talawa company](#) out of the UK. In that first forum, we had Shawn Merriman from Oakland, CA and we just did all that we're talking about.

We went and revisited these dances. Like in my research at UC Riverside in the Critical Dance program, I was studying pre-colonial cosmologies and ontologies of African diasporic studies, so this concept of mind that Thomas brought in of: How did our ancestors manage to continue to preserve dances while enslaved, while doing back breaking work all day long? Yvonne Daniels came in a beautiful set of her long-lived research. Her book [Dancing Wisdom](#) is a cornerstone of African diaspora dance and she shared her wisdom. Latanya Tigner who is a living historical archive of dances and she has tracked the way Manjani is like the Roger Rabbit. And in these kinds of long-lived analyses, we're trying to find the commonalities in that. How come certain dances are reemerging?

So along the way we've had Ghana, we've had Mali, we've had Congo, we've had Haiti, we've had Ethiopia and we're just looking at the way the spine functions and the pelvis. We're looking at both physiological questions as well as spiritual questions. And most of all we are just coming together and this facilitates conversation on a multidisciplinary level. We're talking about everything from how we party together, to the way spinal dances—the flexion—actually is scientifically proven to help decrease depression. So that's what Back to the Root has been.

**Latanya:** Yes, yes. Thank you. Ooh! I'm just sitting up here moving my spine and my pelvis [*Colette laughs*]. Yes, and speaking about Ebonie, her inspiration was meeting Thomas. She went to an artist intensive in Senegal at École des Sables and she met Thomas and she went "Oh. My. God. I thought I knew something about my spine and about my pelvis." And Thomas Prestø, again, systematized Talawa Technique™ and he's actually

in Norway. Just her excitement around that and wanting to bring everything, bring us all together.

Just to add to what Ms. Colette said, we've had some phenomenal conversations post-class. Like the use of the spine... and you know some people say we're looking beyond the technique, although the technique is critical because the technique in being able to be in these positions for this kind of treacherous work on plantations and wherever, and then to still at night do your own dance—like still celebrate and move. So it's not just the function of being on the plantation, but the ability to still rejuvenate yourself to celebrate and to continue your own celebrations. The cosmologies that Ms. Colette talked about—the rituals in that, and then how that activates the physiology that enables us to continue to rejuvenate and sustain through long periods of activation. Like you said, how we party, the functions, the names of the parties, and the connections. And then how we interact and how we come into the function and what that looks like and then our *roles*. You know, gender roles within the function and then all of those things that come up and have surfaced across geographies. Trinidad, New Orleans bounce, hyphy [Andréa: Ayy!]  
—it's just been a phenomenal learning experience in the process of study. We would have never gotten this right here. We would not have got this in academia.

**Colette:** No! Oh no. Because they so stuck on the Black body as a political construct that holds all of this negativity and trauma that this neoliberalism, they talk about it in this way like, “You can *never escape this identity*.” You know, and part of it is because the way that you study in school, you repeat it and you live inside these same discourses and it's like you're trapped in the discourse! [Latanya: Right.] And you don't get to live past it. And that's why it's so important for dancers to write about dance. It's so important. Not dancers who took a class two times or for one quarter [Andréa *laughs*], or for even a few years. I'm talking about that is your life! [Latanya: Right.] And that is so important for those folks to write, to go and study, to talk. And for us over here who are closer to that kind of that type of academia, for us to go give *voice* to folks who maybe your first language is not English but you are the master professor in this genre. Because truth be told, if we don't do that, you will have somebody else who went someplace for a summer and now she's teaching at the university a whole dance style.

**Latanya:** And that's what's been going on and what needs to be flipped, or somebody who's been for a hot second and then goes and gets a PhD and now they get that tenure track teaching on *your* stuff, to *you*. So that's what you see a lot of now. I'm glad that folks like Ms. Colette and other folk who are out there are getting in these programs and disrupting and interrupting the normal ways that it has been done. There are folk across the country who are doing *amazing* research and amazing writing and they're like putting the African/Africana perspective out there in the world in some very fabulous ways.

[Theme music fades in, then fades out slightly to play in the background of Andréa's closing words]

**Andréa:** Thank you for joining us for Part 1 of this dynamic conversation. And please come back for Part 2 as we continue to discuss the Back to the Root symposium and the sharing of sacred cultural dances in public spaces.