

Africanist choreography as cultural citizenship
Thomas ‘Talawa’ Prestø’s philosophy of Africana dance

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Abstract

This essay addresses how Africanist choreography operates as a practice of cultural citizenship, focussing on the work of Thomas ‘Talawa’ Prestø as a leading figure in shaping the cultural sphere for choreography based on African and diaspora forms in Norway and internationally. Whereas cultural policy discourse tends to value Africanist choreography as a tool for social inclusion, this essay seeks to foreground the philosophical basis of Prestø’s work – with a focus on his piece *I: Object* (2018) and its enactment of ideas of Africana philosophy, heritage and polycentrism. However, rather than focussing exclusively on performance analysis, the essay also emphasises the political importance of the professional work that choreographers like Prestø undertake aside from choreographing – analysing the ways in which he has created a new discursive context for his own practice and the challenge to Eurocentric norms of reception this work enacts.

In the introductory chapter of *Black Performance Theory* (BPT), Thomas F. DeFrantz and Anita Gonzalez explore how the thinking about ‘black identity and representation’ alters from one historical period to another within and between performance tropes (DeFrantz and Gonzalez 2014, p.1). The authors consider the theorisation of ‘Africanist aesthetics’ by art historian, Robert Farris Thompson (1974) as one of the milestones in the formulation of this scholarly field. Thompson identified a number of traits which encapsulated the ‘philosophies of beauty and ethics’ in West African dance, which could also be found in African American culture. With this concept of Africanist aesthetics, the authors suggest, emerged ‘the possibility to theorise black performance in terms of its own ontologies’ (DeFrantz and Gonzalez 2014, p. 4). This category has expanded since Thompson theorised it and as other researchers continue to identify similarities between African and diaspora dances¹.

¹ African and diaspora dances and dance practices include social, ceremonial and ritual dances from Africa and countries wherever people of African descent live. Internationally known social forms from Africa and the African and diaspora dances and dance practices include social, ceremonial and ritual dances from Africa and

Additionally, several have used this aesthetic category as the starting point for theoretical, ethnographic, historical, and philosophical analysis². My interest is in the philosophical basis of choreography with Africanist aesthetics – particularly here, Thomas ‘Talawa’ Prestø’s philosophy of Africana dance.

In this chapter my focus is on choreography produced for the stage in the northern hemisphere. My proposition is that we view choreography as a practice of cultural citizenship³. I argue that this approach offers a way of engaging with the philosophical context of Africanist choreography. Secondly, I discuss the work of Thomas ‘Talawa’ Prestø from this vantage point. Prestø – who is of Trinidadian, Norwegian and African American heritage – started Tabanka dance ensemble in Norway in 1997. He registered it in 2007 when he decided to make it a full-time professional outfit. I write about Prestø due to his strategic involvement in shaping the cultural sphere for choreography that is based on African and diaspora forms in Norway and internationally. Additionally of interest is his choreographic approach which is informed by Africana philosophy. My main focus in this essay is his piece *I: Object* (2018).

countries wherever people of African descent live. Internationally known social forms from Africa and the diaspora are Sabar, dance hall and hip-hop – as feature in commercial and theatrical dance projects around the world. There are dance techniques created by drawing from these forms of dance such as the Acogny technique created by the Senegalese modern dance pioneer Germaine Acogny and L’Antech created by the Jamaican choreographer and scholar L’Anoinette Stines. The aesthetic features shared by these various dances and techniques are called Africanist aesthetics.

² A number of dance scholars (Welsh-Asante 1994, Gottschild 1998, DeFrantz 2002, Osumare, 2007) have used Africanist aesthetics as the starting point for theoretical, ethnographic, historical, philosophical analysis. Features commonly quoted by the aforementioned scholars are the presence of flexed feet, bent knee, flexible spine, polyrhythmic and polycentric movement, high-low effect, the aesthetic of the cool, call and response. Choreographers draw on these forms and aesthetics in different ways guided by their philosophical and artistic interests.

³ Citizenship has been used as a method of analysis for performance in Africa and the Caribbean also. Yair Hashachar (2018) has written about cultural citizenship as a drive behind the organisation of African Pan-African festivals in the late 1960s in Africa as part of post-independence celebrations. Additionally Yvonne Daniel (2011) writes on citizenship and popular dance in the Caribbean and wider diaspora.

Cultural citizenship and performance philosophy

To think of choreography as a practice of cultural citizenship is to focus on its power as a representational or 'symbolic form': with 'dialogic' propensities which generate language, as people invested in the practice engage in deciphering its meanings in a 'shared cultural space' (Hall 1997, p.10). As Judith Hamera reminds us:

Aesthetics are inherently social. The formal properties and presumptions intrinsic to the production and consumption of art are communicative currency developed by and circulating between artists, audiences and critics, binding them together in interpretive communities serving as bases for exchange in public and private conversations that constitute art's relational, political and affective lives (Hamera 2007, p.3).

However, the 'communicative currency' of a choreographic practice can be limited and constrained within institutional settings, which is why dance practitioners exercise their cultural rights as including the 'power to name, construct meaning' and 'to throw into question established codes and to rework frameworks of common understanding' (Stevenson 2003, p.4). Citizenship is performative (Hildebrandt and Peters 2019, p.5). An artist has to act as a citizen of the artistic community in order to have any impact on its artistic discourse. Cultural rights are extended when dance practitioners create performances (as their works are discursive), but also when they make statements about their artistic visions, and carry out activities which generate public and institutional interest in their work.

With globalisation, culture is increasingly organised in 'diverse networks' which supersede national boundaries (Stevenson 2003, p.17). Theatrical dance is one such network. It is linked and partly sustained by educational establishments, archives, venues and the media, and

national and global circuits of dissemination where people of all cultural and racial background seek representation. If no meaningful exchange is instigated, then a representational practice is not effective in that institutional space (Hall 1997, p.10). The exercise and extension of cultural rights is pertinent within institutional settings, since an artist's success or failure at representing him or herself on their own terms has cultural, political and economic consequences.

This idea of choreography as a practice of cultural citizenship foregrounds the role of theatrical dance in the public sphere. It is a view that tests the possibilities of performance philosophy because it suggests a way of generating dance histories that focus on how dance practices come into being in the public sphere. According to Laura Cull, performance philosophy offers the opportunity to interrogate 'what it is *to philosophize* and *to perform* beyond disciplinary boundaries and beyond the dominant narrative of their histories' (Cull 2014, p.33). Choreography as cultural citizenship makes the interaction between dance practitioners, institutions and audiences in the creation of meaning, and in struggles over meaning in choreography, a significant part of our theatrical dance narratives. It decentres Euro-American dance histories as a measure of artistic evaluation and opens up the possibility of exploring philosophies of performance through the politics of representation.

My professional experience, working within organisations which support the professional practice of black dancers, has shown me that histories of theatrical dance which document the ideas, theories or praxis of practitioners of Africanist choreography can hardly be generated where no institutional support or recognition is given to the importance of that knowledge (Adewole 2004, p. 14). The struggle over meaning is real. Even cultural policies, which are

formulated to construct a professional context for dance, can erase the meanings that practitioners propose for their work – whether intentionally or not (Adewole 2017, p.135-136). Africanist choreography, as indicated by the definitions above, is a very broad category. Some choreographers and dance practitioners prefer terminology that is more specific to their artistic vision. However, the vantage point proposed here posits this site of struggle as a route to dialogue and meaningful exchange with the choreographer or dance practitioner's vision and how they articulate their practices both verbally and physically.

Africanist choreography and philosophies of continuity

Choreographers who describe their work as drawing from African and diaspora forms of dance position their aesthetics as central to the systems of representation that constitute their choreography. This differs from an approach to dance making where Africanist aesthetics are drawn upon choreographically, but their cultural origins are made invisible (Gottschild 1998, p.48). Certain choreographers – such as Zab Maboungou and Alphonse Tierou, who consider the articulation of their philosophy of practice to be part of their choreographic labour – are aware that the aesthetics of their choreography (which are associated with social, ceremonial or ritual practices) might be considered as 'other' in performance contexts that have been shaped by dominant Euro-American discourses. They do not make choreography in order to fit into Western discourses of art, but to address existential questions which no doubt mean that they will also engage with Euro-American aesthetics. Paulo Freire's concept of 'praxis' appropriately describes their rebuttal of colonial discourses and their production of knowledge through dance-making, guided by the requirements of the cultural or artistic problem at hand (Freire 2005, p.73-79).

I would argue that attending to the artistic vision of the choreographer of Africanist choreography, as opposed to focusing on its hybridity or liminality, provides a richer understanding of the work. ‘Double consciousness’ – a term used to describe the incorporation of codes which place the artistic practice both ‘within and outside of the dominant culture’ (Barson 2010, p.10) – is considered a defining feature of black artistic practices. It can be misleading, however, to posit obvious juxtapositions of Africanist and European techniques in Africanist choreography as the key to understanding the choreographic work. As a representational practice, choreography can draw on a range of sources, but its meaning is not located in the separation of its parts so much as in what they come together to indicate. In many choreographic works, ‘double consciousness’ is contextualised within what I describe as discourses or ‘philosophies of continuity’. Continuity of cultural legacy is an important trope in African and diaspora cultural production (Nettleford 1994, p.xv). Pan-Africanism, Afrofuturism, the worldviews proposed by specific cultural practices, as well as postulations and questions arising from personal or lived experience, have the power to forge artistic visions through which the choreography should be viewed. Artistic vision assembles multiple sources in pursuit of cultural continuity, across historical time and geographical borders, between performance contexts and indeed discursive formations.

The African-American choreographer, Alvin Ailey, for example, wanted to insert his work into American modernism whilst honouring his ‘ancestral legacy’ (DeFrantz 2004, p.21). The gamut of dance techniques that he drew on for *Revelations* (1960) – ‘Jazz dancing, balletic positions, Graham, Horton, Humphrey, Brazilian stance, West African musicality and complex rhythmic meter and a fundamental African American musicality’ – achieved coherence through an artistic vision forged through a commitment to ‘cultural memory,’

which situated him amongst the black modernists of the 1950s (DeFrantz 2004, p.25). Likewise, Diane McIntyre – a choreographer whose work spans the concert stage and musical theatre – is described as working a ‘blues aesthetic,’ which ‘speaks of affirmation in the face of adversity’ (Goler 2002, p.207). The blues aesthetic manifests in her explorations of the relationship between music and dance in jazz. Her vocabulary is eclectic, merging ‘modern dance movement, African American social dance forms, African dance steps and everyday gestures,’ with music styles ranging from ‘classic and avant-garde jazz’ to ‘hymns and rhythm and blues’ (Goler 2002, p.209). The features of ‘double consciousness’ that appear in the work of the aforementioned choreographers creates overlaps with theatrical genres from the Euro-American tradition of theatrical dance, but does not make their work derivative (as is sometimes claimed).

The critical analysis of artistic work, which is a significant aspect of cultural production, would benefit from an engagement with a choreographer’s wider professional practice and the ‘interpretive communities’ it fosters. A critic is not required to *like* a choreographer’s work. However, the critic should aim to be situated in the same conversation as the choreographer; otherwise, the risk is that reviews are merely an uninformed expression of (often Eurocentric) tastes – as we shall see in an example I touch on later.

The rest of this chapter focuses on Thomas ‘Talawa’ Prestø, the founder and lead choreographer of the Tabanka African and Caribbean Peoples’ Dance Ensemble, Norway. However, rather than doing a conventional piece of performance analysis, I want to focus

mainly on how his philosophy of dance is enacted in and by the activities he organised around the production of *I: Object* in 2018⁴.

The cultural citizenship of Thomas ‘Talawa’ Prestø

Prestø entered the consciousness of the Norwegian general public in 2010, when he made the strategic decision to enter his company – Tabanka dance ensemble – into *Norway’s Got Talent*. The company were runners-up; however, Prestø is now known internationally as the creator of the Talawa dance technique. The Talawa technique is one of the few codified techniques that coordinates the movement qualities and sensibilities of Africa and the Caribbean into technical configurations. It is a meta-technique, in that it maps multiple dance forms. Training enables the dancer to find entry points into dancing in traditional performance practices, in commercial dance and as an artistic representational form, Prestø describes technique as ‘a validating institution’ which ‘releases privilege’ (Prestø 2019, p.16). He points out that a dancer who has twenty years of training in African dance diaspora forms is considered less of an expert than a dancer who has a three-year certificate from a dance academy, which acts as proof of training in a dance technique. The development of the Talawa technique has enabled Prestø to train and work with a community of dedicated dancers who are able to perform to standards set by both commercial and artistic programmes.

Prestø’s choreographic practice is one that tests out ideas of citizenship. Artistic citizenship is generally defined in terms of projects in which professional artists create opportunities for non-artists or disenfranchised groups to participate in art-making as a means of gaining a

⁴ This article focuses on only aspects of Prestø’s philosophy of dance and only aspects of the choreography of *I: Object*. I was a feedbacker for *I: Object*.

sense of empowerment (Hildebrandt and Peters 2019, p.8). However, whilst not negating the importance of such projects, this is not Prestø's focus. His project is to fight for an inclusive artistic discourse of dance and to open up this system of representation to accept the thinking of people of diverse cultural backgrounds. To be absent from artistic discourse is to be excluded from a public sphere where debates about beauty, ethics, invention and histories and belonging are taking place. Prestø acts as an advocate for ethnic minority groups in Norway, in terms of how they are represented online and in the media. He initiates discussions about art, identity, visibility and agency, by posting clips of dance, articles and images. He has 72,000 followers on social media – some of which could be described as being part of his 'communities of practice' (Wenger 1999, p.72). These include academics, other dance practitioners and artists who are equally interested in Africanist aesthetics and artistic practices. In 2019, Prestø undertook a Master's degree in Choreography in 2019 at the Oslo National Academy of the Arts: one of the few black people in Norway to gain this qualification in the history of the establishment. In studying for this qualification after having already established an international career, Prestø was aiming to deepen his understanding of the cultural politics of contemporary dance and gain further access to this field. The transnational audience interested in Prestø's work was almost invisible to the contemporary dance scene in Norway when he embarked on postgraduate work.

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1. File name: Adewole_women

Photo credit: Tale Hendnes/Tabanka Dance Ensemble and DansensHus, Norway

Caption: Thomas Prestø, *I: Object* (2018)

Generating discourse for *I: Object* (2018)

I: Object was a production by Tabanka Dance Ensemble which had a run at the Danses Hus, an important contemporary dance venue in Oslo, from the 1st to the 4th of November, 2018.

The title of the piece is a double statement referring to the objectification and agency of the black subject. In terms of themes – it spanned topics ranging from the transatlantic slave trade to Black Lives Matter and the #me-too movement against sexual harassment. Performed to recorded music and recorded spoken word, the messages and themes of the production are direct and assessible. Due to the movement vocabulary of the production however, Prestø decided to invest a considerable amount of time and personal finance in generating an appropriate discourse for the reception of his work. At the time of the production, according to Prestø, there was very little discourse about choreography based on African and diasporic forms in dance in Norway. Performances featuring Africanist aesthetics tended to be categorised as ‘urban dance’ or were targeted at children. There was no mainstream training centre or higher education course on choreography with Africanist aesthetics, although it could be researched under the category of ‘folk dance’. This meant that Tabanka dance ensemble, and other companies who performed African and Caribbean dance, did not feature in the discourses which analysed performances in terms of choreography, aesthetics, meaning or creativity.

The activities Prestø organised to generate a discourse around *I:Object* were geared to disrupt complacent viewing of the production. The audience were offered a different set of concepts than those of the ‘urban’ or ‘folk’ through which to encounter African diaspora dance. For example, Prestø actively sought to produce this new discourse by organising pre- and post-show talks with Professor Brenda Dixon Gottschild – a notable African-American dance scholar. These events created a forum for different publics interested in his work to meet, including those who were interested in his technique classes or in online conversations (who would not normally visit the Danses Hus or belong to the conventional contemporary dance audience). He also published an edition of *HÅRSÅR*, his company’s occasional magazine,

containing articles about the experiences of black Norwegians, interviews with eminent choreographers such as Zab Maboungou and texts on Tabanka dance ensemble's artistic mission and approach. He also engaged members of his communities of practice in discussions about his work, which resulted in online conversations and review writing.

The invisibility of black bodies in artistic dance discourses in Norway was one of the key issues addressed in the public talks. How dance forms are represented in scholarship has a significant impact on the dance profession for those who practice them. As Monica J. Casper and Lisa Jean Moore attest, there are 'social and economic consequences of visibility and invisibility (of bodies) as they relate to the privileges and benefits of citizenship' (2009, p.10). For her part, Brenda Dixon Gottschild's pre-show talk addressed how the treatment of 'the dancing black body' constitutes a 'measure of culture' that reveals what is valued and repressed in a given society. Elsewhere, Dixon Gottschild has analysed how some Euro-American dance criticism has described African-derived forms as 'primitive', and made but scant acknowledgement of the fact that jazz and postmodern dance in America are influenced by African diaspora forms (1998, p.48-51). Prestø then invited two Norwegian choreographers, Belinda Braza and Knut Aril Flatner, to respond to Dixon Gottschild's lecture⁵. On the whole, jazz in Norway is not recognised as having African diaspora roots or Africanist aesthetics. Both these choreographers produce work that is influenced by dance forms and aesthetics from the African diaspora; however, it is not contextualised as such in the academic curriculum. The pre-show talk and the panel sought to initiate a conversation about the need to re-vision the art dance histories in Norway to include bodies of colour, histories of cultural exchange, appropriation and misappropriation.

⁵ Belinda Braza trained as a jazz dancer and transitioned to hip-hop. She is a house choreographer for a major venue called Det Norske Teater, whilst Knut Aril Flatner is one of the two members of the company Subjazz, and one of four main jazz teachers at the Oslo National Academy of the Arts.

The choreography of *I: Object* (2018): heritage, polycentricism and ‘revitalizing the exhausted body’

Prestø describes his choreography as ‘Africana dance’, because his investigation of African and diaspora forms follows the aims of Africana philosophy. According to Lewis R. Gordon, Africana philosophy is a trans-discipline, which encompasses African, African American, and Afro-Caribbean philosophy, and gathers together reflections of thinkers across disciplinary boundaries about the position of the black human being in the world. On the whole, these reflections are gathered to address questions of ‘how Africana people should be studied’ and to challenge ‘Eurocentric approaches to human studies’ (Gordon 2016, p.86). For Prestø, contemporary theatrical dance is about creating choreographic conventions which enable the transmission of critical ideas and values which he has identified within African and diaspora forms, and which remain relevant to black communities transnationally. His productions draw on aspects of Western dance theatre, but he does not consider Western aesthetics or dance technique as symbolic of modernity. Prestø’s contemporary dance expression is created from a dialogue with tradition, rather than a rupture from it. This temporal dialogue is one of the philosophical ideas he investigates choreographically. As he writes in *HÅRSÅR*:

Heritage is a result of the dynamic interaction between past experiences, the future and the present. This understanding of the term implies the collective nature of heritage as something common shared by a group of people. This forms a basis for connection and a common space of urgency and imagination (Prestø 2018, p. 7).

In the spirit of exercising cultural citizenship, Prestø actively promoted the emergence of ‘interpretive communities’: inviting members of his communities of practice to discuss choreographic ideas he was exploring during the rehearsal process.

I was credited as ‘advisor’ for the production, but my role would be better described as ‘feedbacker’. I watched clips of rehearsals and discussed with Prestø what I was seeing and sensing. This provided Prestø with a space to reflect on his work. In discussions with Prestø, we agreed his approach to staging *I: Object* could be described as ‘polycentric’. There was a bobbinet upstage that dancers would perform both behind and in front of, and in many sections of the work there was usually more than one scenario taking place at any point in time – one behind the bobbinet, another up stage, and another centre or down stage. Polycentricism can refer to many different phenomena, but the compositional structure it references here is an African cosmology where the unborn, the living and the dead are considered as co-existing and interacting (Akinyela 2005, p.241). In *I: Object*, the structure proved to be an innovative and effective means of commentary on the psychic and the social. It enabled Prestø to juxtapose scenes to depict different dimensions at once: the physical alongside the spiritual world, different historical eras side by side, and different events taking place in the same historical moment but in different places. The structure of the piece was also designed to prompt audiences to critically reflect on their own practice of spectatorship. For example, Prestø told me that he hoped audience members – whenever they were forced to choose which scene to watch – would consider why they had decided to pay attention to one thing and ignore another. A particularly powerful instance of this occurs in the choreography when the audience is laughing along with a group of female dancers who are dancing in a circle, possibly in a market place, bantering and gesticulating as if joking with one another.

Suddenly upstage, behind the bobbinet, appears a man with a rope around his neck in a spotlight – a victim of a lynching. The women continue to banter and to dance.

INSERT IMAGE

2. File name: Adewole_lynching

Photo credit: Tale Hendnes/Tabanka Dance Ensemble and Dansens Hus, Norway

Caption: Thomas Prestø, *I:Object* (2018)

The performance style of *I:Object* is also informed by an Africana principle. ‘Revitalizing the exhausted body’ is a term coined by Prestø to describe his approach to directing the performance of the dancers to achieve an expression of ‘soul’: the unashamed display of emotion, be it pain, anger, happiness, or joy. The performer engages in energetic dancing, in combination with Caribbean grounding techniques, the performance of codes that exist in certain rituals, and a specific use of the body’s weight, until he or she passes through exhaustion and is re-energized. It produces an intense, visceral performance style. The sensory is political in Prestø’s view of art. In discussing the sensory, he also cites the French philosopher, Jacques Rancière’s description of art’s ‘ethical-political potential’. Rancière describes the arts as enabling a ‘redistribution of the sensible’ and having the ability to contest ‘the existing distribution of what can be seen and heard, and by whom’ (Prestø 2018, p.8). Prestø’s recourse to Rancière could be read as a means of providing an intercultural context for his work, and also as a way of framing the emotional expressivity of the production in political terms, in order to challenge ideas that overt expression takes place in the absence of thought.

After the run ended, the Dansens Hus issued a statement on its website about the online attention and debate provoked by *I:Object*. Most shows at the venue only get one review, they noted; but by the end of November 2018, *I:Object* had already received four, which

presented some radically different responses⁶. These included Diese Nunes' reply to Andrea Csaszi Rygh who, while comparing the production to the Marvel film *Black Panther* (2018), described it as traditional, boring and lacking in innovation (Rygh 2018). Nunes argued that Rygh had deliberately ignored the discourse around the production and her review was an uninformed expression of her tastes (Nunes 2018). Margrete Kvalien, writing for the online music magazine *Ballade.no*, also wondered why a production like *I:Object* was only appearing on Norway's main stage fifty years after Alvin Ailey's *Revelations* (1960). She described *I:Object* as her first experience of watching a production with Africanist dance aesthetics, outside of popular entertainment, which addressed political issues including 'institutional racism' in Norway. She considered the choreography well composed, the dancing as an expression of rhythmic and physical force, and the performance as continually switching between the articulations of deep pain and great entertainment. For her, the production was a dialogue between 'the stage and the (dance) hall' (Kvalien 2018). And finally, Tia Monique Uzor, a dance scholar of British-Caribbean heritage, who visited Norway to see the piece, situated it within the African diaspora tradition of using creative expression as a form of resistance and commemoration. For her, *I:Object* stood out for its technical excellence, the unapologetic expression of emotion, the investigation of women's grief and the framing of art as a conduit of healing (Uzor 2018).

In conclusion, then, I propose that Thomas Prestø's philosophy of dance is performed not only in his choreography, but also in how he engages with his professional context. It is informed by a reflection on the intersections of transnational histories of the African diaspora and Norwegian cultural politics. His Africana choreography performs his investigations into

⁶ My review of the show appeared after the forementioned date. See the reviews online here, <https://www.dansenshus.com/artikler/mage-lovord-til-tabanka>

black expressive cultures, and corporeality articulates performance concepts embedded in African and Caribbean forms. The philosophy of performance in the public sphere is tangible through the politics of representation which renders visible invisible histories of artistic ideas.

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