

Transnationalism and Contemporary African Dance: Faustin Linyekula

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TRANSNATIONALISM AND CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN DANCE

“Transnationalism involves a loosening of boundaries, a deterritorialization of the nation-state, and higher degrees of interconnectedness among cultures and peoples across the globe. As people make transnational voyages and live lives of flexible citizenship in two or more cultures, they adhere to a new type of nationalism that creates an exclusionist discourse and builds ‘the Other’ as conservative defenders of cruder territorial loyalties. This rhetoric disturbs the social fabric as traditionalists and transnationalists create ‘imagined communities’ defined in particular ways.” (Duncan/Juncker 2004: 8)

In the age of globalization contemporary identities emerge from diverse corporeal sensations and cross-cultural inscriptions, which increasingly build ‘imagined communities’ beyond national confines. Discourse on contemporary African dance may serve as a lens through which dancers and choreographers from the African continent explore a transnational politics of belonging that transcends earlier discourses of post-independence African nationalisms of the 1950s and 60s. The question of contemporary African dance is a much debated one among dancers and choreographers on the African continent since the mid-1990s (cf. Sanou 2008; Douglas 2006; Tiérou 2001), which presents a choreographic quest that creates new epistemologies of creativity and freedom between tradition and (post)modernity.

Alphonse Tiérou’s *Si sa danse bouge, l’Afrique bougera* (2001) gives an example to illustrate this argument, as he outlines a new transnational politics of dance that considers contemporary dance as an ‘imagined community’ outside

(neo)colonial discourse and racist representation. “Lorsque la danse paraît le masque tombe, dit un proverbe africain” (Tiérou 2001: 161), he states in the concluding chapter to his book which outlines the challenging politics of an emerging African contemporary dance form. As it turns out, Tiérou’s query into the meaning of African contemporary dance propagates nothing less than the upcoming therapeutic against the persistent inferiority complex of the colonized.

As was first outlined by Frantz Fanon in his *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967) and is meanwhile well known, colonialism suppressed the many facets of African cultural expression. Languages, religions, philosophical views, and dance were misrepresented by colonial discourse and its pejorative misconceptions denied African identity on equal terms. Yet, Tiérou’s analysis goes beyond the lamentation over an irrevocable loss as he demonstrates how to overcome this depressing state of affairs in a self-confident appropriation of Western choreographic models. While the colonialist negation of African humanity and culture persists in the current debates on dance – which more often than not reiterate stereotypical views on African dance as being tribal, primitive, sensual, and exotic (Tiérou 2001: 14) – he suggests that a knowledge of choreographic practice will provide a base for further theoretical investigation as well as documentation of African dance forms in a global setting (id. 2001: 46).

Western misnomers for African dance forms have long since falsified its complex philosophical conceptualization, he argues, which is neither animalistic-mimetic nor exclusively ritualistic, but rather outlines a highly sophisticated mode of being-in-the-world (Tiérou 2001: 33-34). One of his examples of this complexity is taken from Wèon (Ivory-Coast) culture and refers to its many name-giving dances which demonstrate how deeply embedded they are in the complex philosophies of griot (story-telling) culture. In that sense, dance originates identity and embodies so much more than language could ever express. As Tiérou comments:

“La danse africaine est un moyen d’expression, mais un moyen d’expression plus fort que le geste, plus éloquent que le langage, plus riche que l’écriture. Elle va au-delà du mime. D’ailleurs il existe une différence irréductible entre le mime et la danse. Le geste du danseur est projectif, il induit une expérience non réductible à la parole. Celui du mime est descriptif. Le mime est comme le mot ou le concept. Il se compose d’une réalité déjà existante ou résume un fait. La danse dépasse ce qui est pour suggérer un possible, un imaginaire [...].” (Id. 2001: 33-34)

African contemporary dance thus appears to zoom in on the pre-representational qualities of dance as to emphasize the dancer’s agency over his or her objectifi-

cation by the colonialist gaze. Hence, Tiérou encourages a fresh perspective which derives from an embodied understanding of African traditional dance forms and their oral histories, yet combines these with contemporary European dance training and technique in a strategic appropriation as to defend African culture in a competing struggle over global legitimacy and copyright.¹

After all, there is no turning back to innocent origins anymore, neither for the contemporary African choreographer, nor his or her Western audience. While there is no outside to the traditional dancing circle, colonialism's alienating gaze enforces a separation that irrevocably divides the dancer from the dance. Likewise, dances presented within the Western proscenium arch frame their performers as visual objects and/or artifacts, once that these traditional dance forms are presented on the world stage.

African contemporary dance thus seeks to remedy earlier post independence efforts of the 1950s and 60s which established national ballet companies in veneration of traditional dance forms, but were often stifled by a static notion of cultural heritage. Although process and exploration are considered key elements of traditional African dance in its community context, such development was denied in the name of national treasure building. Ironically, many national ballets on the African continent thus featured dance as a form of auto-chauvinism by adhering to Western models of art objectification and the cultural museum (Tiérou 2001: 44-45). This raises the pressing issue then of how to define contemporary African dance without adhering to Western hegemonic models of representation. Is it possible?

Postcolonial theory seeks to redress this double-bind by arguing that colonial hegemony may be undermined from within its own framing. Homi K. Bhabha's critical concept of colonial mimicry thus introduces an emancipating trajectory by which an appropriation of Western contemporary dance forms by African dancers and choreographers should not be regarded as a form of neo-colonialism, but rather decolonization. In fact, as the following example of Faustin Linyekula's *Dinozord: The Dialogue series III* suggests, the dancing body emerges as an enunciative presence from which a transnational dance politics may be developed.

1 Such strategic efforts appear increasingly important as to acknowledge, preserve and further develop dance forms that are constituted by improvisation and repetition rather than writing/notation (cf. Foster 2009).

FAUSTIN LINYEKULA: *DINOZORD: THE DIALOGUE SERIES III (2006)*

“Il y a longtemps que je voulais trouver une façon de raconter le Congo ...”

(Linyekula 2007: 2)

Faustin Linyekula's *Dinozord: The dialogue series III* interrogates the possibility of accounting for the traumatized history of the Congo after colonization, dictatorship and the ongoing civil war, when there is hardly a sense of nation anymore, but instead the haunting notion of a state of ruins. The performance begins with a pre-performance installation of photographs and documentary film-clips, as well as interviews, taken from Faustin's home village Kisangani.² While audience members slowly assemble in front of the stage doors, one may not yet be aware of it, but already one has entered a transnational performance-space which aligns Kisangani and the local venue (which in my case was part of the Utrecht Springdance festival 2006). Faustin is dancing among our midst, wearing white-face make-up, black jeans and a white shirt. His ongoing movements between the Kisangani photographs and the audience members mediate between the documentary footage from Kisangani and the international festival world. On the floor then, one discovers pictures from an African village as bits and pieces from the monitored interviews on the screens are audible. A little undecided whether deciphering Dutch subtitles will be easier than discerning the French accents I hear, I move closer to the monitors and actually now see some of the Kisangani villagers narrating their stories as I pass along. When I finally move on into the actual theatre space, I have already become a momentary inhabitant or visitor to the world of Kisangani, as I listened to the villagers' stories and encountered traces of their private lives.

This pre-performance set-up suggests a spatial concept that has recently been described under the rubric of contemporary cosmopolitan performance. According to Paul Rae (2006), audiences in such a globalized theatrical setting must find ways to communicate across cultural affiliation and national divides as to allow for an “experience of theatrical spatiality that expresses the intertwined experiences of place and identity in an age of complex connectivity” (Rae 2006: 10-11). With regard to Linyekula's multi-media installation as an example of this, we may thus assert Rae's observation that cosmopolitan performance aes-

2 For the following performance analysis also compare DVD *The Dialogue Series III: Dinozord* (Linyekula 2007).

thetics introduce a shift of theatrical spatiality bordering on the transnational in the sense that they

“[...] provide the context within which the individual can find an experience of spatiality that reconciles the fact of interconnectedness to the inconceivable extensivity of those connections, and an experience of sociality that recognizes the stranger without compromising the disinterest upon which their identity as stranger must, at some level, be maintained. An experience, that is, approaching the cosmopolitan.” (Rae 2006: 20)

As Faustin dances between us, he thus allows for a shared moment of recognition, where although we may have never been to Kisangani we feel invited to join in conversation with his community that he mediates for us rather than the other way round. In a way then, this set-up includes us almost as a dancing member as we move in-between their chosen stories and images. Even though we are geographically separated by ever so many miles, the installation makes us aware of their presence and agency as performers in their own right.

Yet, once inside the theatre my assigned seat places me again within the imperial gaze of the Western proscenium frame. When Faustin enters from the wings, he thus introduces himself more formally, as he demonstrates a keen awareness of the convention by finding his stage-managing position behind yet another wooden frame on stage. He refers to himself subtly as “a multi-dimensional songster”, who “sings everything, religious songs, traditional songs, Congolese” (Linyekula 2007) as to tease his audience into the world of disbelief. The stage set-up is quite simple: a multi-media desk, operated by Faustin from behind a wooden picture frame, a laptop and digital-beamer for projections onto a white canvas at the back wall of the stage, a chest, a microphone and a typewriter – minimal props for the five performers (Serge Kakudji, Dinozord, Papy Ebotani, Djodjo Kazadi, Papi Mbwiti) who have now also appeared on the left side of the stage to engage with. As was already mentioned, there are frames within frames in this set up and one already senses that there will be no full picture presented as to grasp the meaning of this playful deconstruction of the proscenium’s imperial gaze.

As sound-operator Faustin continues to set the mood and atmosphere of the choreography; he introduces the members of his company by name and profession – a counter-tenor, an actor and two dancers – who will from now on join him on his return to the village of Kisangani. Finally, so Faustin tells us, he wants to give a funeral for Kabako, his long-lost friend, who died from plague twelve years ago. Originally commissioned for the 2006 Salzburg Mozart festival, the choreography evolved from the solemn sounds of the Catholic high mass

requiem which we now hear being introduced from off-stage. Simultaneously, I hear frantic typing which performs an underlying score to Mozart's organ, ominously connected to the presence of the type-writer on stage. Linyekula's performance uses motifs from the Mozart requiem, such as the *Day of Wrath* and *Final Judgement*, as yet another unsettling frame through which we, the international audience, become attendants to this curious mass service. Although we are most probably a rather unholly congregation, we are nonetheless cleverly summoned in our role as international witnesses, and after all in the vicinity of the International Court of Justice in Den Hague.

The Mozart requiem is divided into fourteen movements, which the choreography basically takes as its point of departure for the performance which becomes more and more of a contemporary passion play. Dramaturgically this structure presents different stations of suffering, abstract images from Congolese history, commemorated in front of an international public. The performance further evolves as a complex mix of diverse cultural signifiers, which Faustin guides us through by controlling the sound board and digital projections from behind his picture frame. There is much information to absorb over the next hour: abstract contemporary dance vocabulary, electronic sounds, images from a prison in Kinshasa, excerpts of Mobutu in French which taken together present the hybrid nature of contemporary African culture between tradition and modernity.

The performers' face-masks and body paint thus appear as abstractions from African traditional rituals though likely misleading as we name them according to Western misconceptions, and as in fact we may learn from the interview Faustin gave to Irene Filiberti in 2007. Here, he explains that the numbers on the performers' backs simply emerged from adolescent memories of happy soccer games and have nothing to do with Western desire for exoticism. In this respect, the prevalent colors of black, white and red are as open to interpretation as they would be in any other abstract contemporary performance, especially if we take up Tiérou's comment that African dance is in fact no more mimetic than European contemporary forms. The color symbolism can hence represent death, innocence, and blood, but it may also be perceived as an affect that adds to the overwhelming sense of trauma that the performance presents.

It seems no accident then that the conscious choice of loin-cloths plays to the same stereotypical audience expectation. And yet, no performance could be further removed from the Western misconception of 'tribal' dance. There is no mistaking this for a traditional burial rite, even though some of the movement vocabulary is derived from there as the performers rotate their pelvis ever so subtly moving around the chest of hidden documents. The traditional dancing-circle as

a continuum between the living, the dead and the yet to be born is irrevocably broken in today's Congolese society and therefore demands new vocabularies and names as Faustin's comment suggests:

“My dance will be an attempt to remember my name. I must have lost it somewhere along the dark alleys of Memory. I've been wandering ever since [...] Thus I was born in a land called Zaire, the most caring hand I could ever find under the sunlight. I grew up believing this, until ... 1997, lines from a conversation with History Zaire was but a lie invented by Mobutu, a dead exiled land. Perhaps my name is Kabila; perhaps I'm a bastard son of King Leopold II and the Independent State of Congo. I'm a kid soldier scavenging through a heap of lies, raped virgins and cholera. Democratic Republic of Congo was my real name, rectified my fathers [...] My glorious legacy [...] Where is the truth? Is there a stone or owl or river or sorcerer out there to teach [...]? One possible answer: land of exile or native land, perhaps everywhere is but exile; perhaps my only true country is my body. I'll thus survive like a song that's never been written.” (Linyekula 2008: n.p.)

Celebrating the pelvis traditionally signifies the continuation of life, however, here this familiar movement enters into a strange dialogic combination with the solemn choir music. Instead of invoking a false nostalgia for an Zaire as an imaginary homeland, Faustin's personal memories evoke the political presence of Kisangani in a transnational setting. Hence, the performance is not only a funeral to Kabako, but becomes an accusation against the auto-chauvinism of African nationalist discourse and its horrors of dictatorship and civil war crimes in the face of human dignity.

Throughout the performance there is a chest on stage, full of documents, which becomes a pivotal object in this respect. At first, when the performers circle their hips very slowly around it, the wooden chest is used as a coffin, but later it resembles an archive of civil war atrocities, when the performers tear away at those letters like howling dogs. These papers are haunting though we never quite know what is written on them, for the dismay alone is enough for us to imagine the atrocities and unaccounted crimes against international law and human rights. In that sense, we are confronted with precisely that “non-signifying presence” Paul Rae defines as the surplus of insoluble difference within cosmopolitan performance.

As spectators we are actively summoned to listen to the testimony at hand, and as soon as Faustin consciously switches into English for some of the passages of the performance, one realizes the urgency of this performance to find the ears of international audiences worldwide. The mechanical sound of the typewriter over Mozart's requiem makes sense then, as we can read it as the somewhat

desolate attempt to keep track and document the pain that we feel expressed through the music and in the dancing bodies. So if I am indeed cast as a member of some kind of a transnational jury here, then this Mozart requiem is not only held for Kabako, Faustin's friend, but also a commemorative service to the unburied dead of the Congo.

Faustin Linyekula's pre-representational return to the body as an individual's protective shield of intimate knowledge and experience reverberates with Tiérou's dream that African contemporary dance will allow for an expression of freedom beyond national confines and racial stereotypes (Tiérou 2001: 162). African contemporary dance thus becomes the imaginary home for Faustin and his dancers at a point in Congolese history, when all other systems of representation and communal affiliation have failed. It seems ever more important therefore to realize that this emphasis on the experiential rather than representational mode of dance cuts right through Western politics of objectification as it articulates the artist's only strategy for survival. As Faustin's persisting questioning of all representational frames contests, dance is the only mode of potentially being free as each new movement allows for an agency on one's own terms:

"Is this Art? Is this Dance? Is this Contemporary African Dance? How will I know if this is art? Do you call Art one's attempt to resist the cycle of destruction by planting seeds of beauty/seeds of dreams in a hopeless context? What then when this resistance is written in one's body? The body as the last shield for freedom." (Linyekula 2008: n.p.)

DANCE: THE EMBODIED POLITICS OF TRANSNATIONALISM

Faustin Linyekula's example presents the transnational politics of dance from an experiential perspective that situates the dancing body at the originating moment of representational meaning and identity. In line with Tiérou's theoretical framing of an emerging African contemporary dance aesthetic in the beginning of this article, my analysis of *Dinozord: The Dialogue series III* attempts to show how this ethical shift towards the performer's agency is closely aligned with the complex conceptualization of traditional African dance forms, where there is no outside to the dance, but everyone participates. African contemporary dance thus appropriates Western theatrical forms as creative mimicry (cf. Bhabha 1994), whereby choreographers like Faustin Linyekula or Salia Sanou present a contemporary ritual of counter-memory (cf. Roach 1996) and hope. While this aesthetic choice confirms Western hegemony to some extent, it undermines preva-

lent discourse of inferiority/superiority as these choreographers combine African traditional dance forms with European contemporary idioms. In that sense they perform nothing less than the alternative to a postmodern cynicism of resignation to the status quo. African contemporary dance is hence characterized by a mixture of Mozart and Ndombolo which makes dance from the African continent visible on the world stage from Kinshasa, to Berlin and San Francisco. Less concerned with the rhetoric of post-independence nationalisms, African contemporary dance introduces a politics of transnational affiliation between dancers and their audiences worldwide. To summarize then, Faustin Linyekula's choreography establishes a sense of communal belonging beyond national confines and thereby creates the possibility for a deterritorialized transnational politics to emerge.

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