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Performing while Black: Disrupting Gender and Sexuality from Trinidad to Norway

The Artivism of Thomas Prestø

Born on October 4, 1983 in Lørenskog Norway, Thomas Isak Michael Ajamu Adamdoba Talawa Prestø is the son of what he calls “the first generation of mixed heritage Norwegians.”¹ He grew up among twenty two thousand inhabitants in Nittedal, where the only other black person who lived in the area was his own mother. His black body was hyper visible in this valley region known as the hub for neo-Nazi groups from Denmark, Norway, and Sweden. Members of these groups subjected Prestø to various forms of torture. As he expounds: “I was burnt by Neo Nazis, held down and beaten regularly from the age of 7 to 12. They were grown men and teens. They raped me with beer bottles. Some of those who tortured me later killed a black teen, Benjamin Hermansen, for walking out at night on Hitler’s birthday.”² As he talked to me, Prestø was pointing to areas of his body where he had severely been tortured. His arms and back were burned with cigarettes and his belly with hot oil. To protect him from further bullying and hate crimes, his grandfather brought him to Barcelona to live with him. He was Prestø’s first Caribbean dance teacher. Prestø expounds the rigorous mental and physical healing his grandfather put him through, a complex architectural venture similar to “an anatomical approach” to the Caribbean dancing body.³ He “rebuilt” his body through rigorous educational, spiritual, artistic, and cultural contents rooted in the African Diaspora: “Calypso and Haitian dance and cooking were amongst his tools. He healed me through culture. I felt and discovered the need to dance through that healing process and still use dance to affirm my existence, or life itself I might say, both for myself and for others.” These experiences shaped Prestø’s politics of arts when he founded the Pan African dance company *Tabanka African & Caribbean Peoples*

Dance Ensemble in Norway on August 2, 1997.⁴ At the beginning, the curriculum focused primarily on popular dances that appeal to the black youth in order to attract and recruit them. The company promoted what Prestø calls “a sustainable black identity within a social constructionism perspective,” which converged both Caribbean and African movement aesthetics⁵ to tell the stories of blacks in Norway. Prestø was initiated to various spiritual and ritual spaces⁶ and developed the *Talawa technique*,⁷ a codified technique inspired by the Africanist learning he received from his grandfather and other teachers.⁸

In this interview, Prestø presents in what way his artistic productions disrupt (traditional, phallogentric, imperialist) Nordic society and offer challenging aesthetics and representations of gender and sexuality for performing brown and black artists. Through his principles on “Caribfuturism,” Prestø presents how his body of work informs Black Diaspora studies in terms of art and culture. This discussion sheds lights on issues of minority identities, body-memory, body-politics, and political and cultural agency relating to black performances and cultures in Norway. Thomas Prestø articulates an exploration of corporealities within what he calls “the uniqueness of the Afropean, the Afro-Scandinavian and the poly-Diasporan.” Through Prestø’s “artivism,” pan-African artistic spaces aim to challenge hegemonic norms and assumptions on blackness such as the hegemony of what he calls “Black America,” the presumption for instance that African-Americans own the only story of slavery. He explains how this erases other iteration Blacks do in the Americas, just as it makes invisible the African or the Afropean, which for Prestø empirically permits to validate or frame that erasure as relevant. In this critical conversation, Prestø unapologetically presents the struggles and the forms of negotiations marginalized bodies that are put on stage and on screen face in Norway. This interview also curates an understanding of how Afro-Diasporic performances can be crucial forms of

knowledge for spaces such as Africa and the Caribbean – with regards to gender and sexuality. This multi-Diasporic *tête-à-tête* also provides insights on the prejudiced mechanisms of representation and segmentation of cultures visible in Norway. The following segments were gathered during his dance fellowship in Dakar Senegal in 2018, my scholar appointment in Norway in 2019, and follow up discussions in spring 2021.

GMF: Do you consider yourself part of a Diaspora? If so, which one and how does it shape the way you define yourself?

TP: I consider myself part of multiple Diasporas. I have coined the term Poly-Diasporic to among other things explain the corporeality of bodies like mine who contain multiple Diasporas that are simultaneously activated. Carrying understandings of polycentrism and polyrhythm this term points to the lack of need for harmony or negation of difference and the ability to “co-play” and or interchange in import. I consider myself an African Diasporan in the West. A Caribbean Diasporan in Scandinavia, an Ewe, Fon, Yoruba, Luba diasporan generationally Diasporic displaced. I have multiple complex Diasporic identities that are always active in my identity and in my work. They are my ancestors’ constant influence and presence.

GMF: What is blackness in Norway?

TP: Blackness is still being constructed in Norway. We do not have a history of the “one drop rule.” Blackness is in many ways more segmented. Most black/African people are African refugees, not descendants of the Trans-Atlantic forced migration. Therefore, labeling is different here than in Canada or the United States, and the discourse, juvenile at best. Those who would statistically be categorized as mixed (“child of one immigrant”),⁹ often resist being called black.

Norway is at the top of whiteness. The Scandinavian appearance and culture are celebrated and coveted all over the world. Our economy (which is oil based) allows for the illusion that we are somehow better here, more moral. It's the "good" middle class trope that makes Norway particularly blind to racism and its own prejudice. Here, the double heritage children are predominantly a result of white women with absent black male fathers. This causes different identity markers, with white mothers who often want to claim the children but are not comfortable with them being "just black." As a result, whiteness centers itself. On top of that, being mixed white is considered better by society. The common term here is "mulatt."

GMF: Through time, did you observe any improvement to this praxis?

TP: There is improvement. Realizing that privilege does not protect their sons (in particular) and their daughters, some of these mothers are now fighting for better terminologies. Blackness in Norway is in many ways still Africanness, although American influence is quickly changing that. What I mean is that African kids in Norway are adopting blackness through TV. They believe it gives them access to "coolness" and status. Sadly it is an empty form of blackness that is being appropriated, one using the image but not the deep cultural aspects. At the moment, blackness is a shell that needs filling.

GMF: Speaking of terminologies, how do "naming" and "claiming" play out personally in your form/s of blackness?

TP: My parents navigated Norwegian society in mixed bodies, which helped shape my identity and how I navigate differently than a lot of my contemporary mixed heritage peers. I personally do not use the term "mixed." I use the term "double or multiple heritage." I like to claim it all:

the Caribbean, America, (West) Africa, Yoruba, Ewe, Benne, Bakongo, Koromanti, and Norway. In Norway, there is still a thinking that if you are of mixed heritage, you are somehow divided, confused, or in conflict. I use the term “multiple heritage” to signify that there is no conflict, no confusion, only claiming. While living with my grandfather in Spain, I had to learn four new languages: Spanish, Catalan, English, and the unique words and meanings of the Trini twang! He told me that there would be power and identity there. He was right! I draw on the Trini language and on Jamaican Patois all the time. Ovahstanding as opposed to “understanding” – there is knowledge in the distinction! I describe myself as Caribbean or Trini. I call my appearance African. I believe it is important to claim Africa, much more so than blackness. Black to me is something that was created in order to relate to whiteness. I refuse to center whiteness; hence I am African. I also describe myself as “melaninrich” to describe skin. In Norway, people of color are spoken of as if asylum seekers, although many are guest workers or expert workers. They are however almost never granted this status. Norway is a white middle class country. Yes... You heard me...the country is. We have very little crime, almost no poverty. Healthcare and education are mostly free. However, wealth is amassed by privileges and oil we do not want to share. So we are quickly finding ways of making ourselves look charitable at the same time as devaluing all “outsiders” contributions.

GMF: In Norway, do political movements and actors use “the Black migrant” as an “other” against which the nation is defined?

TP: In Norway, the black and brown “other” is simultaneously somehow painted as chronically Muslim. I have literally been accused of “sneak islamitizing” or *snik jajaj* in Norwegian, an accusation the populist right (or “alt right”) uses in the media against any Muslim and or non-

Muslim brown person.... This accusation came only 5 minutes after having been winin to Machel Montano on stage with nothing but hot pants and glitter on.... I remember blinking very hard and wondering how blinded by prejudice some can be.

GMF: Why is it vital for you to recognize the importance of Black art and expression within your Norwegian context?

TP: To recognize art is to recognize a people. In period of wars, it is often the art of a people that is attacked very early on. War attacks national identity, unity and makes inconsistent – who – we are. Africana art is often negated, denied, and disenfranchised to do the same to our humanity. Black dance is a physical community. I understand polyrhythm as multiple rhythmic identities playing simultaneously. Even sometimes is multiple generations playing simultaneously. When I move to this, I embody generations and multiple people. I become a community onto myself; housed in the same vessel. As long as we have dance, we never truly move alone. Black dance IS a community. In the arts, Scandinavia is at less than 4% inclusive of minority groups. Population of immigrants in Norway is approximately 15-20% depending on the cities. Rural Norway is not multicultural by any means. Most black immigrants are refugees, which creates specific dynamics. The hat in hand, having to be grateful for sanctuary... however it quickly changes in the next generation and we Caribbean people are not grateful. We do not owe any gratefulness for the “tickets” given us to the West. So many of the human rights organizations are at the moment predominantly initiated by Diasporans from the Atlantic experience. In this war against humanity, by attending a Tabanka’s performance, I want people to be alive and to celebrate the responsibility of still taking breath, pumping blood and experiencing rhythm. In an Africana context of constant threat to life, this is a profound responsibility.

GMF: Within your work in *Tabanka*, have some of your dancers found themselves at odds with Norway's legal obligations towards migrants?

TP: Norway has “extreme vetting policies.” 20 African and 10 Asian countries were put on a “no go” list. If you have a Norwegian passport but are born in any of these countries, your passport changes to stating “birthplace unknown.” Just imagine what this does to visa applications and the administration of touring. It made it impossible for us to perform in America for a couple of years. The government claimed that one of my dancers had one job too many. This was legal work... He paid his taxes... They revoked the renewal of his green card. We are currently fighting for him. Lets hope he gets to return. He is currently in Paris waiting for legal responses. Though, I would like to mention that with the Norwegian passport we normally do not need visas to neither the USA nor Canada.

GMF: How do you relate to the Caribbean and Caribbean aesthetics in your body of work?

TP: I look at it as a template for mixing culture, heritage, and aesthetics. The way I see it, we are in many ways the future. What is slowly and painfully happening in many urban spaces of the world, we have already done. In Norway, I deal with a highly multicultural audience. Many non-Caribbean and non-African people of color come to see us perform because we reflect something other than the white normative narratives that are normally staged. Drawing on Caribbean aesthetics allows me to accommodate them without compromising my own identity. This is a “Diasporic Spidering,” a multidirectional process by which people of African descent define their lives. It is a lifelong ontological gathering of information by going out into the world and

coming back to the self.¹⁰ It has increased my appreciation for Caribbean culture and how futuristic it actually is in the lay of the world.

GMF: In your artistic work, how do you define/conceive the body?

TP: I use an Africanist perspective inherited from our ancestors. The body, in this perspective, nurtures the foundation of our potential as divine and earthly beings. It provides output and input of energy, life force and purpose in the universe. Through that body, experiences are processed and its ability to generate and tune with the energy of the universe allows us to embody knowledge and to communicate with multiple planes of existence. The body is what makes sense of all that we are and allows us to interpret, interact, communicate and make sense of that communication. The body, mediated through perceptions about belonging, ethnicity and color, is a central theme in our thinking regarding identity today. In *Tabanka*, we lead a close dialogue with our ancestors' moveable architecture, our perception of reality, our senses and ourselves. The black body in motion is tainted by strong contrasts of associations: primitive, urban, animalistic, sensual, forbidden, dangerous, liberal, conservative, political, humorous, free and enslaved. I have a fearless approach as I seek to challenge the black body's artistic potential. Its many associations, myths and taboos give it a unique ability to create temporal displacements and embody memory-technology in narrative layers. The embodiment of ancestors and the history of our bodies in the world – as a kinaesthetic archive, allows us to create multiple layered narratives in the same time/space.

GMF: How does this tangibly interplay in the context of *Tabanka* and your Norwegian community?

TP: I consider dance as an act of giving, of sharing, of sending forth life/spirit force¹¹ through the various vibrations of the body (voice, emotion, kinetic energy). As part of the African concept called Nommo, as we dance, we embody knowledge for the community and the audience.¹² I draw from recurring characters like Oya, Elegua, and Shango. I work through the ancestors. I could not be, and would not be, without any of them. I feel their loss, their gift, their hope, and their despair. I create as an extension of this community. We also work closely with the community, what they feed back to our art (their concerns, challenge, hopes, dreams, history, legacy, heritage, future, and present). They are given voice as the originators, the owners of the narrative, the witnesses, the testifiers, and the archives. Together we create meaning.

GMF: You mentioned a strong African retention in Caribbean cultures. Could you discuss how these retentions suffer global circuits and politics?

TP: In the Caribbean, although dances and rhythm-cultures of Africa have relatively withstood the pressures of slavery, they are rapidly being eradicated, changed, simplified, and commercialized. Nowadays, the tourist gaze has proven to be a force almost more disruptive than slavery itself, which might to some seem like an unreasonable comparison. The tourist and/or commercialism disrupt our aesthetics in a pace that slavery never managed. That is something for us to be cognizant and wary about. Our culture is quickly losing its uniqueness where many islands are adopting a “One Size Fit All Paradise Island Image” often modeled on Jamaica.

GMF: Could you illustrate this point?

TP: I am particularly thinking of the “Rent a dread/rastaman” ready to provide sex, marijuana and other services to the tourist seeking for an “authentic” experience. Similar to Jamaica, Haiti

has also built entire small communities to enable tourists to have an “authentic” place to go. These communities are by and large created for tourist especially. Hotel experiences modeled on Hedonism; the Jamaican hotel franchise; Europeans and Americans return home saying “Jah mun” and wearing “rasta” colored t-shirts with Bob Marley and ganja leaves, regardless of where in the Caribbean they went... Like Africa being flattened to become one country rather than a continent, the same is being done to the Caribbean. We were flattened into the image of the Negro; this process is still ongoing. We are in many ways one people, at the same time we are unique, and we are in no way the image they want us to be. All too many of us fake the image in order to please and to make money. We must find ways to economically liberate ourselves.

GMF: How does this unravel in Afro-Diasporic dance?

TP: Our dance is often colored by what contemporary African dance pioneer Zab Maboungou¹³ terms “Passport Dancing” to describe a physical, sexual, economical situation (and domination), in which the black body serves as merchandise for reviving, as well as consolidating hegemony, and therefore ownership on creative capability.¹⁴ In the same fashion, in the stylized folk forms, we see a similar process that infects our forms, imposing lines, shifting how we use weight and alignment, etc. Most disruptive, I believe, is the fact that this causes younger generation of dancers to dance mono-centered rather than poly-centered. Misappropriation, expropriation and abuse of privilege and power also come into play here. Whenever a European/white body masters just a fraction of an Africanist movement, they are celebrated, their videos go viral, and their abilities and talent received unwarranted attention. When an African/black body does the same, it is told to be “born with it,” claiming it is no great achievement.

GMF: What do you think of this double standard?

TP: To me, it feels weird being told that one is born superior, as if it is a bad thing or as if it takes something away from me. Africanist dance requires motor intelligence, skills, coordination, intelligence, discipline, and a deep understanding of both rhythm and how the forces play on the physical body. If someone means I am born with all this, – great! Before, I used to fall into the same trap. When I was told I was “born with it,” I started protesting: “no no, its work, its technical.” Now I say: “yes I am, and techniques for mastering these natural abilities have been passed down in my family for generations. It’s both ability and technique. It is quite impossible to catch up really. But no worries there are loads of fun and easier versions of our dances that anyone can join.” I claim it. I refuse to play a game in which I am forced to make myself less, so that some Johnny can stop by and can feel good about themselves. That has to stop! Mastering Africanist form takes more than a lifetime; that is why we work with continuation, not rupture.

GMF: What about black bodies mastering European dances?

TP: The reverse is not true. Black bodies mastering Europeanist dance form are not celebrated the same way. In order to receive attention then, one has to be truly exceptional. Misty Copeland is one rare example of this. I say rare, not because there are not many black bodies that have mastered it, but rare in relation to the amount of white bodies going viral after just a couple of months of dance classes. I point out this imbalance, but without hostility to the white body. I want equality. I know white bodies that have dedicated themselves to mastering one or more forms of Africanist movements. These, I also celebrate. They approach the styles with respect and a deep understanding of the effort that it requires. A Caribbean body has multiple shades. I

claim everything, including my whiteness and maleness. One must. It's the only way to be accountable. White bodies must be accountable for how black bodies are treated by it. So must black bodies be accountable for how it treats itself and its peers. Using the term "bodies" in this way feels objectifying. I hope it is received how it is intentioned.

GMF: What's your take on the "meaning-making" of the body, its memory, and repetitions?

TP: I believe that in Caribbean dance it is musicians and dancers who house and protect libraries of codified knowledge. We are the experiential librarians (educators, debaters, creators) who are used in order to reference ancient knowledge for contemporary use. We are embodied archives, griots, and the history of our people are written and rewritten through our movements.¹⁵

Audiences learn from observation, witnessing, modeling, and through call and response active participation. What we learn through dance is silent embodied knowledge; it goes beyond being informed by text and written information. Silent embodied knowledge assists us, as Caribbean people, to know something without it being expressed verbally. Scholar Thomas DeFrantz calls this "corporeal orature." We translate this knowledge into contemporary issues and mix the movement of the old and now in order to change the dialect, but not the method. The method of our Caribbean traditions is a finely tuned technology that needs no help from us other than that we claim it and use it as intended (for survival, for health and for healing). Caribbean performances make use of stage and civic space; they juxtapose textual and embodied actions. They orchestrate various media such as dance, spoken word, gesture, music, and narrative, so that audiences and participants may see and experience the production of identities and political uses, live in process. It is life affirming choreography based on black corporeality.

GMF: *Tabanka* is artistically and commercially successful in Norway. Being anchored in African and Caribbean artistic aesthetics, how do you explain this success within Norway's power structures?

TP: *Tabanka* used *Norway Got Talent* as a strategy to build audiences and get presence to the black bodies throughout the nation. Few to no black establishments have been able to use such a commercial platform as a means to enter prestigious artistic stages like the *National Opera House*. We've used these media strategies in order to bypass the closed doors of such privileged systems. I also disrupt these structures by drawing openly on traditions in my contemporary Africanist aesthetic. You are supposed to be either commercial or artistic. Most black forms are categorized in the commercial field. This, I believe is because the black body has been for consumption for so long; all expression that come from it are looked at in the same way. I do not fuse my dance with something recognizably and dominantly Europeanist, I do not add "exotic" elements for excitement, I do not stage performances of "traditional other" that feed simply into stereotypes. I choreograph a corporeality that is recognizably "black" by blacks. *Tabanka* has entered several prestigious stages here in Norway, and challenges norms, privilege, structures, hegemony and "innovation." No one had really reflected on even whiteness in the field before we entered it. We have had great success, but we have predominantly had to self-fund.

GMF: Was it new to the domain of dance, in Norway, to have black bodies *publically* put into question issues of white privilege?

TP: I am not under the illusion that my success equals progress for our field, yet my hope is to create, pass on and preserve as much for the next generation as possible. I am trying to create

multigenerational privilege. It is the only way to make the field more equal. Young black mothers should be able to put their children into African and Caribbean dance class, and consider it at least as much of an investment as putting a European child in Ballet class can be. I would even claim more: Africanist dance is not unhealthy for the body. It has multiple applications; more than I feel ballet has because Africanist forms saturate entire societies.

GMF: I am curious to know how your approach is received inside communities and audiences unfamiliar to or uncomfortable with black bodies or black cultures.

TP: Harsh reactions to my work are consumed by racism. Racism toward the African body is most often naturalistic. It is directed at the black bodies' natural (or perceived) qualities, where everything that you are seems inborn. These racists perceive the black body as being naturally inclined to musicality, musical prowess, and athleticism – just as rape, violence or deviance. I challenge these perceptions through conceptualizing the Africanist bodily movements as conversational rather than improvisational. There is thought and intelligence in a dancing black body. Where some denote the brilliance of a “freestyler,” any true Africanist dancer would just call it... a dancer.¹⁶ *Norway Got Talent* wanted us to have the girls in what we in the Caribbean call “batty riders” (hotpants that only cover half the buttocks) but I can't be consumed nor concerned by the white gaze.

GMF: How did you respond to their request?

TP: By refusing. We changed the choreography. We used a lot of humor. The men took off their singlets at the beginning of the choreography to Shaggy's “Mr. Boombastic.” It was our direct comment to the network for trying to objectify the women in the company.

GMF: Did some perceive this as moving from an objectification of women to an objectification of men?

TP: One could say that we objectified the men instead, but we viewed it as a combination of open and hidden resistance, which is the Caribbean form in and of itself. Originally we were going to have tricolored (red, yellow, green) short "school skirts," but after this pressure, I decided to make long pique skirts (bomba skirts) that covered up the women even more. So I chose to create something that was visually stunning for the camera as a direct comment to the network that we know what makes us look good, what works, and that there were many ways to make the choreography exiting, other than undressing our women. Interestingly enough all the ones advocating undressing the black women in the company were young white women in their twenties. They tried to stop the changes by saying we could not use the song. It was *Tusty* by Roy Cape and Blaxx. I contacted the artists directly and got a letter granting us permission and right to use the song. Eight years later, this choreography is still selling and is one of our highest grossing choreographies on the commercial side. Resistance always pays off in the long run!

GMF: Through your dance ensemble, how do you challenge these media representations of brown/black bodies?

TP: We have been featured on several mini documentaries, popular talent shows contestants, intermission showcase, guest performers, and background dancers. We use our presence to re-contextualize how our bodies and artistic forms are viewed. We also digitally enter people's living rooms to become a more integrated part of their lives, rather than a one-time experience. Through various media, we enter people's homes with bodily representations that challenge the

canon. We de-familiarize the Norwegian black body and force a re-examination of Norwegianness.

GMF: What is your opinion on brown/black bodies performing gender and sexuality in Norwegian media?

TP: Norway considers itself to be the land of equality and it is true that statistically we are among the best in the world when it comes to gender equality. At the same time, when one accounts for ethnicity, this no longer rings as true. Black women are mostly found in the media scope in very extremely problematic casting. They are predominantly cast as prostitutes or exotic elements. Men are equally cast as either dick swinging gigolos, exotic lovers, or thugs. Last year, Pearl (a principle dancer in *Tabanka*) was cast in an advertisement for *Lotto millionaire*. To much acclaim, she danced in a soul train like segment. This was the first time a black woman was portrayed as a *Lotto millionaire*. She was also (as far as I am aware) the first expression of black female joy in Norwegian advertisements. Media upholds racist stereotypes in Norway. It portrays Norwegians as inherently good and immigrants as submissive, dumb, and funny. So while Norway has come far in how gender is represented in the media, to which they provide quite exhaustive guidelines, they are in no way close to having any such guidelines when it comes to ethnicity, which is highly problematic. Ethnicity then negates the progress Norway has had on gender issues. Intersectionality is a fairly new concept here; it just barely made it out of the lecture room.

GMF: In which contexts is the term “intersectionality” used and who brings it forth?

TP: It is appropriated and used by white feminist, who silence and marginalize black women – without even having enough dialogue with black women to know they are doing it. The Norwegian attitude towards blacks is still very much “the white man’s burden.” There’s still this feeling that one has the ability, permission, and right to speak on behalf of... After all, to be Norwegian is to be inherently good... Don’t get me wrong, my Norwegian privilege, mixed with my Caribbean overconfidence and bravado, is the very formula on which my success is built. I own it, but that does not mean I am blind to it. It must be yielded with caution, otherwise it will do damage instead of good.

GMF: How do you challenge representations of gender and race through the *Talawa Technique*?

TP: Issues of gender and sexuality are integrated in my work. It is important to diversify blackness and black identity. We were killed into the image of the “negro.” I believe that by narrowing our image, a multitude of us are literally still being killed. Through dance, I seek to make complete – to make human. Part of this is accepting multitude, diversity, identities, difference and similarity: “I am human, nothing human can be alien to me.” *Talawa* is grounded in natural traditional Africana movements such as: trembling, shaking, vibrating, waving, undulating, bouncing, twisting, swinging, communication, spirituality, “carving,” and pulsating. Through African and Caribbean body language, expression and aesthetics, my students relate to space, time, energy, attitude, intention, spirit, gesture, and emotion to develop and explore their inner nature and their relationship to the world and to other people.¹⁷ I am mindful of studies in African anatomy, which moves away from Western views of the body (for instance, buttocks possess a five directional muscle). We aim to shift the gaze. We approach gender from an

African and Caribbean spiritual viewpoint (non-Christian). This disrupts and de-familiarizes gender. It allows us to present it embodied, anew, and re-examined. I've been asked why *Tabanka's* male dancers are often shirtless, the concern being that white women might find them arousing. Caribbean and African men, in Caribbean and African spaces, embrace sensuality – mostly.

GMF: “Mostly”?

TP: We must desexualize touch, diversify blackness, include queerness as okay, and also reclaim our natural representations. Calypso, Rumba, Bèlè, Kumina, Mento, Pique, Congo, Bomba, Salsa, Samba, Soukous, Zouk, Gwoka, and Soca... Our traditional dances are sensual! In all these styles, the male dancer is sensual with active hips and chest. Looking at Funk in *Soul train's* clips and Earl “Snakehips” Turner jazz representation, the hips are active. Only in the modern appropriated and over “ghetto-exemplified” fiction, we find representations of black males with locked hips and bodies made less sensual and just violent. There are also multiple examples of men in Africa holding hands during conversation and this being okay and not signifying sexuality at all. However, when moving to Europe, these same men would never hold hands because it would be viewed as homosexual. The Europeanist sexualization of touch and sexualization of the black body are combined into a very unhealthy symbiosis. Similarly, the objectification and over-sexualization of the black female shape and body movement also create a similar problem.

GMF: How do you mend this issue in *Tabanka*?

TP: By reclaiming male sensuality rather than automatically making it sexual. I believe that this

is one of many steps to counteract toxic masculinity. Some people think that the sensual male body must be portraying gayness. For me, also making these expressions available to the heterosexual male body is important. I believe that freeing the queer body is also done through freeing the hetero body. They are caught in the same confined prison and therefore often forced to eat each other. We must create space. Diversify blackness. Spread out. Make balance. Celebrate our feminine and feline (also masculine) qualities. Allow Oshun, Yemaya, Oya to enter our bodies. They belong there and are central to our growth. A male body that rejects its feminine energies is not fertile; it is even a danger to its own offspring. The Orisha genesis stories teach us how 16 male Orishas could not create on earth without help from Oshun. The feminine energy is necessary; it is in all things. It is not a scale or opposites. It is balance. A male is made stronger, not weaker by acknowledging the feminine.

GMF: How do you answer to what could be perceived as provocative (Caribbean) embodiment in dance form/style?

TP: I am finding it hard to find any Caribbean dance that is provocative to me, but few that would not be provocative to some (laughs). Some consider a basic wine provocative – I do not. A harmless male wine in Barbados or Trinidad could be life threatening in Jamaica due to homophobia. The Caribbean body is one that is forged in resistance, both open and hidden. We see this pattern in our language, in our cooking, in our music, and in our dancing. The Caribbean dancing body is a body dancing resistance. Resistance is always a provocation. It is either a reminder that something is off, or a continued resistance to what is off. Black bodies expressing freedom is provocative. Caribbean bodies displaying hybridity is provocative. Displaying *African-ness* is provocative.

GMF: ... to whom? And... what about embodiment of hybridity as a form of freedom?

TP: To the Europeanist gaze, or for whiteness, black bodies displaying freedom are provocative. To the Afrocentrist, African romantic, or purist, the Caribbean body displaying hybridity is provocative. To the “blacks,” the Europeanist (and in some cases, the African), Caribbean bodies displaying African-ness could be provocative. I find it hard to find a Caribbean form which would not be considered provocative to at least one gaze, but most often multiple. Hybridity is freedom. The Caribbean body is amphibious or hybrid. In Afrofuturism it is simply made African. That’s why I felt the need for Caribfuturism. We are more than Africans “interrupted” or “corrupted.” We must claim our hybridity and embrace its multiple possibilities. Our experience can never be *unhad*. It is there. It forged us and gave us tools that can benefit the world. We must unify the family, but not by forgetting or rejecting who we are. We are a family that accepts and respects difference.

GMF: How do you define *performance* in a Caribbean context? And how do you offer to represent it on stage?

TP: Performance to me is expressive and embodied events that create archives on the bodies of the audience and the performers. It creates meaning, disseminates knowledge for/from and to the community. I draw from ancient and mythological/spiritual embodiment of gender, such as the Orishas, and Africanist understandings of gender. In ritual, female divinities can enter a male body and male divinities can enter female bodies. The bodies will respond accordingly and without judgment. Traditionally, our bodies were (and are still) perceived as embodying both male and female energies/attributes. Europeanist thinking of having feminine and masculine as

opposites rather than complimentary and integrated leads to hyper-masculinity, toxicity and disempowered femininity. This is a colonial retention, or at the very least not made less powerful by the patriarchal experience of slavery and colonialism. We therefore perform, embody, and disseminate information on ancient knowledge-modern use on stage and through dance. This is paramount for freedom. Our liberation can only come by “Sankofa,” going back to fetch it – but without nostalgia or romanticism, through sober realness and by claiming everything. When we then perform gender in *Tabanka*, we create meaning as well as a physical and metaphysical discourse. We disseminate knowledge to the community and we reaffirm or transform identity. Caribbean dance is body politic!

GMF: How do you read the performance of sex/sexuality, such as daggering, in Caribbean dance and the media?

TP: Daggering is provocative to me. Flinging women on the floor to jump on them from above, climbing wall or jumping on top of speakers. This is an act of violence, not of play or health. It is a ridiculous practice. It causes injuries, hospitalizes multitudes. Sexual play, sensuality and celebrating fertility have always been part of our practices in the Caribbean but in ways that support life (even maybe encourage sexual union). I shamelessly reclaim this. Treating the black body as if it is not fertile is a continued genocide I absolutely refuse to take part in! Daggering the way it is done now encourages violence, misogyny, imbalance, dominance rather than union. It is a corruption of our culture. In Norway, the media loves to portray daggering. It feeds the stereotype of the hypersexual, primitive and always lustful black body – one that victimizes (male) and one that welcomes being violated (female). What is scary is how our spiritual practices are being twisted. Kumina funeral rites and other dances of healing are referenced in

daggering and mixed with movements and rhythms that come from preparation for war. Movements and rhythms with specific codifications are being mixed in ways that are “Frankenstein-like” at best. It is clear in how it is being performed. Fertility and violence are now being mixed. Powers of destruction are directed at powers of creation and healing. No wonder daggering leads to so many hospitalized and injuries that are ridiculous at best, like the “broken penises” we read about from Jamaican media. I am not a Christian nor am I a prude. But I am initiated in the spiritual tradition of our people. Morality aside, what I am seeing is blasphemy and *very* worrying – from health, cultural, and spiritual points of view.

GMF: What’s your take on scholars who conceptualize these performances as expressions of freedom?

TP: It is true that most times, wining in the Caribbean expresses freedom or joy rather than just sex. Wining is calling-on the BaKongo cosmogram, bringing it into our bodies, addressing freedom and ownership of your own body. It can implicate sensuality and sometimes even sex. BaKongo cosmogram is a cycle of life and a way to organize the cosmos based on the cosmology of the Bakongo people. It has survived in the Caribbean and many of our ring dances and rituals are based on this (as are the Ring Shouts of America). Wining is a way to invoke the cosmogram and wake the life force within our bodies. This is also why wining on both old and young bodies is fine (deep culturally) because all stages of the lifecycle are part of the circle. The wine is spiritual. It invokes the seasons, fertility, invites change, advocacy, agency. The wine is liberating, important and central. It is interestingly what the Caribbean is known for, even more than Africa is. The word itself is Caribbean but has long since become an almost universally understood term on both sides of the Atlantic. It is reflected in various music genres and

languages. It is a shame that as Caribbean dance travels globally (such as Dancehall), the hip is dying and the wine is turned into simple hyper masculine “stabs.” I believe in owning your own body, in reclaiming your own sexuality, which I do not find provocative. The emptying out of these forms provokes me. Sonja Dumas has written wonderfully about the wine and “the hip as a weapon.” I do believe that there was and, to some extent, there is still a reclaiming and an agency especially for the female in Dancehall. Although I feel and also hear from my female contemporaries that this was more so in the time of Patra, Lady Saw, Lady G... *Dancehall Queen* deals with this... This was before video light was only about filming up ladies skirts and flinging dem about as ragdolls. It is possible to have more than one though at a time. Dancehall is many things. It has unhealthy elements, and it has very real healing and autonomy for the black body. We must be critical and separate the salt from the sugar.

GMF: What’s your position on Caribbean dance performances as rituals?

TP: It is through performance that the Caribbean can be. I address these issues through reclaiming, claiming, and affirming. I believe dance is a ritual that we (Caribbean people) do to reaffirm our identity and ourselves. It gives us agency, purpose and autonomy. It is a site for both open and covert resistance, like a mask.

GMF: In fact, the mask relates to one of *Talawa’s* philosophical bases and techniques, which you conceptualize as “embracing the mask.”

TP: Yes! The mask describes the expression, mannerism and “performance” that were put on in front of “massa” especially while entertaining “massa.” It was often hidden or veiled to open resistance against the hegemony of “massas.” In the same fashion, the mask was present in

martial arts dances that emerged during the colonial period. There was a resistance hidden inside these seemingly harmless dances. There are many ways in which “the mask” hid resistance. I believe in not neglecting the mask, in reclaiming it, in continuing to use it in dance performances. The mask is not as necessary now as it was, but it is a practice uniquely honed. It is a major contributor to why our cultures have survived. It is there, the “in spite of,” in our humor, our writing, our speech, our spoken words, our rhythms and our dances. It is the molasses that sweetened the bitter taste of our existence. It is apparent in Caribbean celebration of the double and triple entendre.

GMF: What has been the most difficult artistic piece you created?

TP: *Pleasant Conversation* is a choreography which deals with the body language that we would like to display when faced with racism, but that we may not use because we will then be the angry immigrant, the scary black woman, or the aggressive victimizing black man. We therefore have to hold it in. One of the female members of our dance company was “mistaken” for a Nigerian sex worker on the bus home. A Norwegian man made advancements and when she refused, he started to kick her. Only when she cried out in perfect Norwegian did anyone step in. Another company member is half Gambian half Norwegian; she wore the Norwegian national dress for our independence day. Some found her dark skin to be offensive in that dress so they pulled out several of her braids. These were some of the episodes that led to *Pleasant Conversation*. The choreography is also demanding, as it is body language driven.

GMF: Going back to your comment on “resisting the white gaze,” what was your artistic positioning as you aimed to represent *Pleasant Conversation*?

TP: We choreographed from how we move amongst ourselves when not concerned with or adapting to the white gaze. We drew upon Oya, Shango, Ogun and so forth in order to build powerful beings; reclaiming sensuality, hips, anger, unity and resistance for all genders. The choreography was not aimed to make us popular. White Norwegian commented on how the piece felt so “angry” and provocative, like we were supposed to make a happy choreography about racism! Others commented on how it was a choreography that drew on the “American Experience;” believing racism is only an American problem. They were dictating and trying to reestablish hegemony. However, internationally, this choreography has been one of the best selling, celebrated, and most travelled. It was the beginning of us finding our own voice. It is now an obligatory curriculum for any new member and we are still creating work that builds on the foundation of this choreography. It is unapologetic and thoroughly researched, fusing the past, present and future. It is honest. It is also the choreography that has taught me the most about “the gaze.” Many Africans have cried when seeing it live, others have felt anger, hope and power. All however seem to feel it, in their bodies. For us, it does not only break the 4th wall but the skin. It “revitalizes the exhausted body,” a key concept in Caribbean dance and art. It acknowledges and accepts the struggle. It validates and reaffirms. It creates presence.

GMF: In what ways do you advocate for women?

TP: I grew up raised by seven women all living on the same street. My great grandmother was the major matriarch of the family. Even at that time, she kept her maiden name. She was one of Norway’s most famous artists. She is still to date the youngest to ever graduate from the Norway Arts Academy. My grandmother passed the name on to my mother and my mother passed it to me. Don’t tell anyone but I grew up convinced that females were and are the stronger “sex”! I

advocate for women in the sense that I try to build full and complete female character on stage: powerful in their own right, not borrowing power by being “like a man.” I draw heavily from Oya, the warrior goddess who is acknowledged as equal to Shango and the other male warrior gods, and on top of that she is a woman! I also advocate for women by listening and by stepping aside when my voice should not be the dominant one. I use my male privilege (where it applies) to spread out and open doors, and then neatly step aside. I do not build female characters without consulting females. I offer myself to Oya, Yemaya and Oshun. I offer myself to the women in my life. My body may serve as a vessel for them to work through. Having had authentic experience with divine horsemen, relinquishing the body to spirit, allowing myself to be similarly used as a vessel for female empowerment (or as a speaker) only feels natural.

GMF: What else do you advocate for?

TP: I advocate for men. Black men. It is necessary – and no, I am not *mansplaining*. If non-toxic masculinity is not advocated for, young males will not be able to step out of it. I believe that focusing on males also frees women. As a male myself, being a good role model for other males, addressing toxicity, and being accountable, is one of the most helpful things I can do for women. It frees them from not having to deal with, or “save a brotha,” and also provides visible examples of non-toxic males, so that they can recognize them when they enter their lives. I also advocate for freedom of identity, for diversifying blackness. There are multitude ways to be black, woke etc. Showing multiple versions that are successful allows young black teens to see choice and frees them to define themselves. I advocate for a broader and better language. In Norway “Neger” was the default term for a person of African decent. Now we have multiple other terms. Eight years ago I introduced “melaninrik” directly translated as “melanin rich.” I

heard it on the news last month and there are many who are adopting the term, especially mothers who have mixed heritage kids. I also introduced the term “dobbel arv,” translated to “double heritage,” since the term “mixed” carries a negative connotation in Norwegian. Furthermore, I believe that one should claim it all. Therefore, one is blessed with double, not burdened nor confused by a mix... I also advocate for *Caribfuturism* and have started work on curating several manifests on what this entails.

GMF: Why is futurism important?

TP: We need a *Caribfuturism* that speaks uniquely to our futurism, since *Afrofuturism* (all too often) creates utopian African scenarios where we are either neglected or our experiences pretended away. Too long we have had a sense of foreshortened future. It affects decisions, lives, and yes, even art. If we were to make “great again” (society that is), we would have to go back a good 500 years almost. It is then important to remember that this is not true for ourselves.

Nicholas Brothers, Pearl Primus, Louise Benneth, Linton Kwesi Johnson, Mutabaruka, Marcus Garvey, Nanny, Edouard Glissant, my grandfather, my mother... Our living and dead ancestors have always been great although their circumstances have not always been. Art allows us to keep the greatness and ditch the shitty. I believe this to always have been true. So I create, for the past, for the present and because of the future.

¹ His mother, Monique Elena Prestø, is Norwegian and Trinidadian; his father, Raymond Rasch, is African American and Norwegian. He explains: “My grandfather, Harold Charles-Harris, was a dark-skinned Trinidadian. He grew up poor but was academically excellent and received several scholarships to study in Canada, Britain and Sweden. While studying medicine and surgery in Sweden, he met my Norwegian grandmother during a visit to Norway in 1958. They married in 1962 and had my mother in 1963. As a surgeon, whose mother was a practitioner of natural Caribbean medicine, my grandfather was

critical to western medicine. My African American grandfather was a marine stationed in Denmark where he met my Norwegian grandmother; they had my father in 1964. My parents grew up not knowing anyone else that was “mixed” until they found each other.”

² On January 26, 2001, members of the Boot Boys, a Neo-Nazi group, stabbed to death Benjamin Hermansen, a Norwegian-Ghanaian who was 16.

³ Thomas explains: “[My grandfather] brought home an electric rod and he would shock my muscles to answer my questions on which muscles moved them. I thus learned to isolate more specifically, and naturally ever since, when I stand in a dance class, I am very aware of how the teacher’s body is used and how the weight is specifically supported by bones and muscles.”

⁴ The original name of the dance company was *Dancers with Attitude*. The company name was changed in 2007.

⁵ Namely: the Bantu, Ewe, Igbo, Kikuo, Lingala, Mandinka, Masaai, Saangaan, Serre, Wolof, Xhosa, and Yoruba.

⁶ These spiritual/ritual spaces include: Candomblé, Ife, Kumina, Orisha, Santeria, Shango Baptism, and Vodun.

⁷ Thomas contends: “The Talawa Technique merges ancestral movements, a culturally contextualized vocabulary, as well as sensibilities to contemporary movements of the African Diaspora. It bridges the gap between “urban freestyling” and traditional dance (i.e. Sabar, African Cuban, Jamaican, Igbo, Serre, Wolof, and Xhosa). It is nourished by a fused-approach to movement for stage and art production, the ancestors, and their reincarnations in the future [...] through it, I developed vocal gestures in which hands can draw in, open dimensions, create illusion and animate our storytelling.”

⁸ Thomas’ body of work is influenced by: Judith Jamison; Pearl Primus; Camille A. Brown; Prince’s craftsmanship, his creation of platforms for women, his resistance to conformity, and his autonomy (for himself and others); Queendom, a black womanist performance group that uses song, theatre and satire to tell their own stories as black women in Scandinavia. The Mighty Sparrow and Paul Keen-Douglas, who allowed him to enter Caribbean humor and storytelling; Cliff Moustache for starting Nordic Black Theatre and creating a platform for black theatre hopefuls; “Miss Lou” for her Caribbean language and storytelling; old timers Nicholas Brothers, Gregory Hines, Bojangles, and Earl Snake Hips.

⁹ Mostly white and from Continental Africa and rarely white with Caribbean or African American origins (as Thomas Prestø’s parents).

¹⁰ Consult Nadine George-Graves (2012)

¹¹ Inspired by the concept of “nommo” (Ogotemeli, 1965)

¹² Consult Yvonne Daniel, *Dancing Wisdom* (2006)

¹³ Zab Maboungou is the artistic director of the company *Nyata Nyata* based in Canada.

¹⁴ “The passport dances are the result of this alienation; there are those who desperately need a passport and those who can and will deliver it. In between... There is a dance...” (Zab Maboungou, Facebook conversation with Thomas, 26 March 2018).

¹⁵ “Which are rooted in and references our philosophy, religion, spirituality, history, psychology, mathematics, physiology and aesthetics,” Thomas adds.

¹⁶ “An Africanist body does not improvise but dialogues with the music, space, participant/s, and surroundings. The “free and improvised” expression that is *so* loved is a result of a high speed multisensory, textured and layered call and response between the mover and all sensed elements in her surroundings,” Thomas adds.

¹⁷ Thomas adds: “I develop my students’ self-awareness and provide them with practical knowledge for safe and effective use of their body.”