

CHOREOGRAPHING GRIEF OR THE CHOREOPOLITICS OF JOY

A REFLECTIVE REVIEW OF *CION: A REQUIEM OF RAVEL'S BOLERO*

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Abstract

This reflection, provoked by André Lepecki's notions of *choreopolicing* and *choreopolitics*, explores the potential of contemporary dance to propose new forms of political movement, focusing on the performance *Cion: Requiem of Ravel's Bolero* choreographed by Gregory Maqoma and performed by the South African Vuyani Dance Company. This dance piece was performed together with the Soweto Gospel Choir and a talented beat-box artist, serving as a historical communal body that guides the audience through different moments of South African history, from colonialism and evangelization processes to apartheid and the struggle for liberation. The piece underscores the significance of corporeal expression in historical contexts. Bodies that have been consistently repressed and voices that have been muted find their strength in a sometimes delirious musical commentary on the power of rhythm and communality in carving out new spaces of possibility.

Keywords: contemporary dance, South-Africa, history, counter-history, trauma, memory

1. INTRODUCTION

It starts in darkness, the portentous space of the stage populated by crosses. A boiling sensation of nervousness, tangible in the sense of the audience's expectations and their careful movements in their seats. Then a sound, the rhythmic tapping of feet, begins sketching out a familiar melody: *Tam ta ta tam ta ta tam*. The role of drums is transferred to these tapping feet, while the trumpets and strings are replaced by the voices of the Soweto Gospel Choir standing defiantly at the back of the stage. *Tam ta ta tam ta ta tam*. This rhythm sets the stage for the entrance of Gregory Maqoma, the lead dancer representing the literary character of Toloki, the professional mourner.

Cion: A requiem of Ravel's Bolero is a performance created by the Vuyani Dance Theater, founded in South Africa in 1999 by the dancer and choreographer Gregory Maqoma after his return to South Africa prior to finishing his formal dance education in the Netherlands. The theater was founded based on the realization that his struggle as a dancer, choreographer, and artist had to be fought in South Africa, in and for that context. During a TED Talk held in Johannesburg in 2016, he made

the following statement: “My dance is my calling. My dance is a dance of a man who grew up with smoke coming from the burning tires in the streets, from teargas against protesters, from the coal to protect us from the cold”, asking, “How can I allow the younger generations to learn about our painful history?” (TEDx Talks, 2016, 00:06:14-00:07:05)

2. CONSIDERATIONS ON MOVEMENT AS POLITICS

In his essay *Choreopolice and Choreopolitics: Or the Task of the Dancer*, the dancer and theoretician André Lepecki highlights the political importance of dance and movement. He opens his essay with a reflection on Hannah Arendt’s profound statement from her *Introduction into Politics*: “(...) we have arrived in a situation where we do not know – at least not yet – how to move politically” (Lepecki, 2013, p. 13). This excerpt acknowledges the vital importance of Arendt’s intellectual work in questioning and denouncing totalitarian and genocidal politics.

Lepecki highlights Arendt’s understanding of what it means to *move politically* and the essence of what is *political*. In this text, Arendt highlights that the *political* is not intrinsic to human beings; on the contrary, she notes that the individual is *apolitical* only becoming a political subject through their relationship with *the other*. The *polis* represents the inter-relations, communication, and the establishment of agreements among parties. Her statement that “politics arises in what lies *between men* and is established as relationships” (Arendt & Kohn, 2007, p. 95) underscores that politics are never the sole task of the individual; rather, all politics emerge out of the need to live in community, and thus there is no togetherness or otherness without politics. A sole individual does not create a society, but a community of individuals. This raises intriguing questions about the connection between the body – both the individual and communal body – and the search for the political in connection with the arts and with dance in particular.

In the same text, Arendt states that the meaning (or sense) of politics is freedom. Lepecki stresses the importance of having a *sense*, with movement inscribed in this concept in the notion of direction. He writes, “to address freedom as both orientation and meaning of the political, to see it constitutively tied to the figure of the dancer (...)” (Lepecki, 2013, p. 15). This perspective raises several relevant questions: What is the role of the dancer in exploring the possibility of political movement? What would it mean for a dancer, or a group of dancers, to move politically? Can dance serve as a means to articulate a corporeal political vocabulary to explore the corporalities of control and freedom?

In this compelling essay, Lepecki presents two enlightening concepts that are particularly insightful for the analysis of dance, choreography, or the body in general: *choreopolicing* and *choreopolitics*. *Choreopolicing* is understood as the choreographed movements imposed by policing entities - such as border walls, checkpoints, traffic regulations, police forces, surveillance cameras, and others – on individual and social bodies. Space is politicized by restriction or permission of movement. There are contractual social agreements and implicit rules that organize, economize, and manage social movement. Bodies, in their sociality, are choreographed by institutions, whether conceptual or tangible. As Lepecki points out, “choreopoliced

movement can thus be defined as any movement incapable of breaking the endless reproduction of an imposed circulation of consensual subjectivity, where to be is to fit a pre-choreographed pattern of circulation, corporeality, and belonging” (2013, p. 20).

The other concept, *choreopolitics* - as defined by Lepecki - represents those attempts to disrupt these regulated movements and carve out spaces of freedom. It is understood as the resources and proposals aimed at counteracting choreopolicing, allowing for broader perspectives to emerge regarding possibilities of space, movement, agency, self-determination, and political action. Choreopolitics are the sketches of political movements towards freedom and liberation from oppression.

Lepecki’s analysis primarily focuses on contemporary societies of control, understanding the need to challenge the current culture of surveillance and regulation in so-called democratic liberal societies. Nonetheless, this conceptual framework can be used to examine historical movements of repression and body management. In this essay, I reflect upon the historicity of body control – the historical choreopolicing of bodies – as enacted or artistically portrayed in a choreography by the Vuyani Dance Theater. A key question is addressed: How does Gregory Maqoma, as a choreographer, and the Vuyani Dance Theater, as a collective, explore the historically choreopoliced body in South Africa, a country that has experienced multiple totalitarian regimes. Arendt describes totalitarian regimes as “(those) in which the totality of human life is claimed to be so totally politicized that under them there is no longer any freedom whatsoever” (Arendt & Kohn, 2013, p. 95). Arendt penned these words in the aftermath of the Second World War and the nuclear devastation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Arendt herself had to flee from her country of birth, Germany, to escape the genocidal Nazi regime. South Africa has faced the totalitarianism of Dutch and British colonialism, the slave trade, Christian missionary crusades, more recently, the Apartheid regime. What can a collective of artists do to engage with, participate in, and challenge these layers of historical violence entrenched in the social and individual body? Can contemporary dance to be a space in which centuries of choreopoliced movements and policed corporality can be explored? Is it possible for artistic spaces to incubate the means to break free from these forms of totalitarianism? Is there a language of political movement that can be inspired by contemporary dance or, in turn, can contemporary dance learn from political movements to further develop a corporeal vocabulary of liberation? Or, as the theoretician Saidiya Hartman questions when confronted with the archival registry of two women who were enslaved and displaced from Africa to the Americas, “(...) how does one rewrite the chronicle of a death foretold and anticipated, as a collective biography of dead subjects, as a counter-history of the human, as the practice of freedom? (2008, p. 3)

3. CION AND THE WRITINGS OF ZAKES MDA

The performance *Cion: A Requiem of Ravel’s Bolero* is a celebratory lament. Set in a graveyard, a group of dancers together with four musicians – including a beatboxer – and the Soweto Gospel Choir perform the story of Toloki, which serves as an allegory of South African history. Toloki, a professional mourner who swings between stoicism and carelessness, is the main character of two novels written by Zakes Mda

entitled *Ways of Dying* (1997) and *Cion* (2018). Both books follow Toloki's life, first in South Africa and then on his journey to the United States. In *Ways of Dying*, the novel focuses on the aftermath and tragic continuations of apartheid in South Africa. In *Cion*, Mda reflects on the history of slavery and the transatlantic connection of grief and diaspora between Africa and America. By bringing this narrative to the stage, the Vuyani Dance Theatre and Soweto Gospel Choir convey themes of mourning, death, and funerals, coupled with resistance, joy, and togetherness as essential political tropes in South African history.

The celebrated South African writer Zakes Mda started his artistic career in the theatre scene during the most violent and repressive phase of the Apartheid regime. The 1980s were characterized by continuous detentions, police brutality, political imprisonment, massacres, and general violent repression in response to protests and civil demands. His plays served as acts of rebellion against the political status quo. Mda was one of the artists who helped solidify the country's robust community of black artists, and claimed that the end of Apartheid granted him the freedom to tell stories beyond the scope of immediate political messaging. The political and historical importance of his literary work is essential in order to understand Maqoma's decision to use his novels as inspiration for his choreographic work: "Mda emphasizes the haunting presence of the violent past of Apartheid and slavery and suggests that in mourning the past, memory might lead in unexpected, uncomfortable directions rather than restoring a whole identity or healing the scars of the past" (Goyal, 2011, p. 147).

Born and raised in Apartheid South Africa, Maqoma grew up near a workers' hostel in Johannesburg's internationally known SOWETO (the syllabic abbreviation for Southwestern Townships). The townships in South Africa were designed as part of a racial urbanization and segregation plan for the black communities, also referred to as "African communities". It is easy to understand that Maqoma's chances to become a professional dancer and choreographer were very slim. During an interview, he describes how his family, particularly his father, pressured him to study medicine. However, before entering medicine school, Maqoma happened upon a pamphlet announcing a search for young dancers. After going to the audition and being selected, his mother supported him by keeping his rehearsals secret under the condition that he would not neglect his medical career. Maqoma soon became part of an important dance production in the country, and a national newspaper – the same publication read regularly by his father – reported his participation. Contrary to Maqoma's expectations, his father, upon reading the news article, stood up and hugged his son, astounded by the fact that his son had indeed become a professional dancer, something that seemed like an impossible achievement. As Maqoma himself stated, "(...) as artists, we are inspired by the chaos that lies behind our skin" (TEDx Talks, 2016, 00:10:24-00:10:56).

As noted before, the Vuyani Dance Theater was founded by Maqoma in 1999, just five years after the election of Nelson Mandela. When speaking about the company's foundation, Maqoma notes that it is "(...) a space for stories to be developed. A space to transform our disadvantages into advantages, re-imagining our pain through beautifully crafted choreographies that do not spoke of the demise" (TEDx Talks, 2016, 00:04:20-00:05:10). This perspective prompts inquiry into the role of political

defiance (i.e., political movement in Arendt's terms) in the context of contemporary dance in post-Apartheid South Africa. This is a particularly relevant question when analyzing the work of the Vuyani Dance Theater. As Lepecki (2013) states, "I venture that the particular political subject that transforms spaces of circulation into spaces of freedom has a specific name: the dancer" (p. 20).

4. THE AFFECT OF THE AUDIENCE

In early 2022, I was fortunate to attend this performance at the Joburg Theater in Johannesburg. As a foreigner, one of the most touching aspects of cultural life in South Africa was the active participation of the audience. In theatres, concert halls, and even conferences, the audience does not simply reserve their applause for the end of a show or event. Instead, powerful or relevant moments during a show are immediately affirmed by the audience but may also be questioned or dismissed. The public amply understands performative presentations in post-apartheid South Africa as political statements. It appears evident that due to the legacy of Apartheid, wherein performative arts were heavily censored, policed, and regulated, the political weight of the theatre, the stage, and the microphone have not been forgotten. Gregory Maqoma has mentioned that South African audiences differ markedly from their Western or European counterparts, noting that Europeans are used to consuming a performance, while South Africans engage through participating in, challenging, and acknowledging the performance. I dare to say that *Cion: A Requiem of Ravel's Bolero*, when performed on a South African stage, functions as an ancestral story, a history, and a communal act. The choreography becomes a form of storytelling in which the audience plays an active role with their clapping, affirming shouts, singing, and dancing. As Mda (1997) notes, "(...) no individual owns any story. The community is the owner of the story, and it can tell it the way it deems fit" (p. 12).

During the performance, the dancers assemble in front of graveyards with crosses prominently displayed, forming organic shapes that evoke a sense of community and wearing costumes inspired by traditional mourning clothes. In his book *Singularities. Dance in the Age of Performance*, Lepecki (2016, p. 143) refers to Walter Benjamin's concept of the *dialectical image*:

A dialectical image is a critical constellation, a theoretical-aesthetic montage linking apparently unrelated or unfamiliar elements that, once set into relation to one another, express a given historical and political situation through 'an image that emerges suddenly, in a flash' (Benjamin, 2003, p. 473), and that precipitate a 'profane illumination' (Benjamin, 1978, p. 179).

Maqoma's choreography presents numerous dialectical images, many moments that capture cross-sections of history to then continue, diffuse, or merge them with other moments in other historical periods. This can be found in the example of the missionary brigades and their imposition of Christianity, which are then referred to by the movement of the dancers' bodies or through the subjugation of bodies as the instauration of hierarchical power structures. At one moment in the performance, a makeshift wooden platform is placed in the middle of the stage from which the main character – Toloki, interpreted by the lead dancer Gregory

Maqoma – assumes the dual roles of a priest and a political leader. With this image, the boundaries between histories, power, and insurgency become blurred. In this instance, religion is framed as both a space of subjugation and a space for the communal search for liberty, referring to the Zion African Religion – African interpretations of Christianity – prevalent in South Africa, particularly in rural areas.

5. CONCLUSION

Cion: A Requiem of Ravel's Bolero is also a choreography of pain, exemplified in the way the dancers – at a certain point – whip the floor with large off-white pieces of fabric. This repetitive action, performed in unison, allows us to reflect on the punishment endured by the black community worldwide, specifically in South Africa, since the onset of Dutch colonialism and the establishment of the slave trade in the 16th century. It evokes memories of the Cape of Good Hope and its importance in the commercial route that facilitated extractivist and genocidal structures. As an audience, the act of whipping summons images of various forms of punishment: the whipping used in self-laceration practices encouraged by the politics of guilt within the Christian religion, or the police brutality against civilians during acts of protest. This powerful scene is accompanied by the voices of the Soweto Gospel Choir. The rhythm, the communal strength, and the power of the voices create a sense of agency, suggesting a reclamation of action to construct instead of destroy. This moment raises a profound question: How can the movements of control be re-enacted and then re-appropriated in a way that serves as a claim for freedom?

The missionary structures, the cross, the crucifixion of the body, the release of agony, the joy of community, the strength of the lament, the strength of weakness, the power of the voice, the openness of the arms, the rhythm of poetry, the revelation of movement, and the cry – the perpetual cry of the singers. The rhythmic complexities of collective breathing; the reiteration of a time, a space, or a note; collective breathing on a repetitive note, erupting into a song for freedom. The miners, the clothing, the symbol of coal: the earthly fabrics of the costumes recall the miners' attire and the quilt depicted by Mda Zakes in the novel *Cion*. There is history in clothes; the white attire of the Soweto Choir alludes to the clothes worn by priests and worshippers of the Zion African Religion. The position of the preacher also represents the confabulation and crashing of history as it is lived: repressed, forgotten, remembered, and scattered in illogical but sentient forms.

Through the commonality of pain and the collective movements of subjugation, the choreographic moments of the Vuyani Dance Company remind me of the images portrayed in the iconic photography book *House of Bondage* by Ernest Cole, published in 1967 as a document of the atrocities committed by the Apartheid state. The performance questions and highlights the performativity and the political space of the funeral. The space of mourning is a contested territory in the contexts of colonialism, Apartheid, and racism. The missing people erased by the violence of white supremacy, such as those thrown into boats and taken across the Atlantic, as well as those incarcerated, tortured, and vanished by the police forces during Apartheid.

The unrealized possibilities of the past, as captured in the movements of the dancers and their craft, evokes the strength of past and future resistances in the

act of lament, an active demonstration of grief and joy. This is palpably felt in an emotionally charged moment in the middle of the performance when the dancers form a half-circle, creating a space for Musa Motha, a dancer who lost his left leg to cancer, to take the spotlight. His entrance is a testament to a glorious defiance of the narratives of subjection. Despite his physical loss, the dancer pirouettes to the sound of the voices of the Soweto Choir.

Mda refers to the pull of the ancestors choreographed by Maqoma. Violent deaths, Mda suggests, continue to haunt until they have been adequately mourned. In this way, death seems to generate itself endlessly, as "(...) funerals acquire a life of their own, and give birth to other funerals" (Goyal, 2011, p. 160). Toloki, a character from both of Mda's novels and the protagonist of *Cion: A Requiem of Bolero's Ravel*, when told that he had already mourned for the person in question at another funeral conducted in another town, answers, "It will be my pleasure to mourn for him a second time." (Mda, 1997, p. 22) So much can be read in this short sentence: it is a note on the repetitive character of mourning, in the plural singularity of death, the sequential and potential vacuum inscribed in every moan. Crying serves as an act of memory, for in every sorrow, there is the story of a life, and it allows others to mirror that story and allows the whole community to take part. Toloki's comment alludes to both the banality of mourning but also mourning's function as an act of remembrance. A professional mourner such as himself sobs for his dead client and for the pain of the living community. In the following sentence in *Ways of Dying*, the character understands lament as an actual communication to those mourned: "As long as there are funerals, I'll survive" (Mda, 1997, p. 53). Thus, Toloki becomes both a historical and fictional character, one that inhabits the pages of a novel but also roams around the streets of Pretoria. As portrayed in the novel above, Toloki engages with the city in an almost spectral way: a ghost that suddenly demands to be looked at; a ghost that gets angry and smells and vomits.

Funerals are and continue to serve as potent symbols of resistance in South Africa. The harshest decades of the Apartheid regime, in the late 70s and 80s, were marked by massacres, such as that which took place in 1976, where 600 protesters were killed in violent clashes with security forces during an uprising in Soweto, a tragedy in which the young activist leader Steve Biko was killed in police custody. These decades were distinguished by the violent repression of protest, imprisonment, torture, repression, and segregation. The Townships uprising between 1984 and 1986 occurred when the South African government declared a state of emergency to control the riots, resulting in the killing of more than 1,600 people. In these harrowing times, funerals transformed into essential moments of the revolt against oppression, opportunities for political leaders to grab the microphone and speak out against the injustices they faced. As such, funerals could be viewed as moments of communion, unity, and grief.

The performance unfolds in the rhythmic pace of Ravel's Bolero, which undergoes a contemporary, defiant reinterpretation: the escalating rhythm, the movement of feet, the overarching crescendo, the fusion of the classical with the urban, the iconic with the false. Voices, the drumming sound of bodies, the beating of chests, the whipping of the floor, and the tapping of the feet all represent the orchestrated movements of sound present in the performance. Rather than a

simple evocation of ghostly themes, the work reflects the corporality of rape, the persistence of pain, the un-sutured fracture: not the repressed, but the violently alive. Lepecki's (2013) insights resonate within this context: "To seize the event and to transform it through this seizing; to plan and then to restart the plan into endless, unforeseeable yet-to-comes – in the dancer's activation of freedom within the choreographic plan of composition, the political comes into the world as an enduring movement of obstinate joy." (Lepecki, 2013, p. 26)

In *Cion: A Requiem of Ravel's Bolero*, the storyteller becomes the dancer, while the dancer's movements convey history. These unexpected movements represent fluid connections between corporeal memory, the ancestral pull, the ontogenetic fragments that traverse colonialism to Apartheid; slavery to revolt; mourning to joy. All these are blended into a juicy, non-linear, non-resolutive choreography of pain and resistance.

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