

# CHOREO POLITICS

**Brendan Fernandes &  
nibia pastrana santiago**



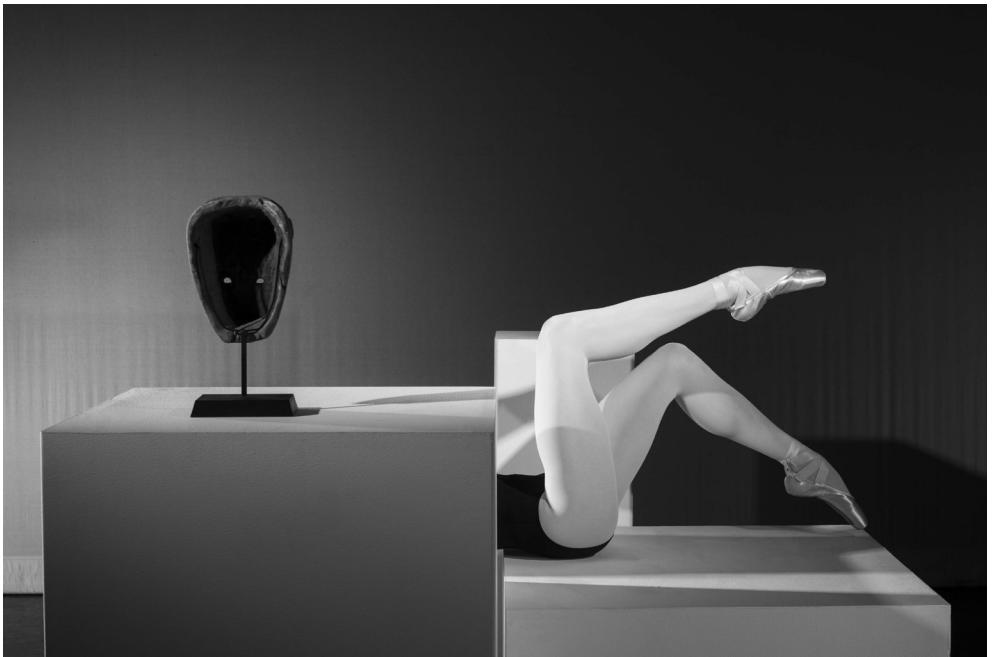
MASS MoCA

**“...on our way to freedom, we must first of all tackle that which blocks, directs, diverts, and (pre)conditions our movements...”<sup>1</sup>**

—André Lepecki

Choreopolitics is a term coined by performance studies scholar André Lepecki that addresses opposition to policed conformity, whether it be on the streets or in the dance studio. This physical technique requires inventive and experimental movement whose sole purpose is to exercise freedom. Choreography can then be understood as choreopolitical when it strives towards liberation from exclusion, domination, and violence. Artists Brendan Fernandes and nibia pastrana santiago use this methodology in their works to confront histories of colonialism and capitalist ideals of productivity. Ultimately, both artists point to the potential for resistance through dance.

Both Fernandes and pastrana santiago possess a fraught history with ballet, as well as an embodied knowledge of its physical and psychological demands. The style’s reinforcement of an “ideal” body—typically slender, long-legged, and light-skinned<sup>2</sup>—was, and continues to be, a phenomenon that the artists, along with many other Black and Brown dancers, struggled with during their formal training. Neither Fernandes nor pastrana santiago fully felt that their bodies were accepted within the ballet community. As a result, they began making work to address these inequities.



Brendan Fernandes, *As One IX*, 2017. Digital print. 34 × 48 inches. Private collection



nibia pastrana santiago, *Baliza*, 2019. HD video, color, sound, 9:58 min. Courtesy of the artist

Moreover, the endless refinement, discipline, and surveillance by oneself and others that characterize ballet training have driven the artists to explore more radical modes of movement that invert the style's demands for spectacle, grace, and the illusion of ease. Through a balance of classical technique and experimental choreography, Fernandes examines the dichotomies between pleasure and pain, action and stasis, defiance and submission—all underlying components of ballet. pastrana santiago, on the other hand, deploys slowness, laziness, and boredom as a means of critiquing labor practices and training structures in ballet and the dance field more broadly.

Both utilize dance in their artistic practices to combat marginalization, examine colonial histories, and (re)claim power. In his *As One* photographs (2017), Fernandes creates duets between African masks and professional dancers from the famed American Ballet Theatre to illuminate white supremacy within the European traditions of ballet and the

museum. Both systems “have greatly shaped our image of what counts as culture,”<sup>3</sup> explains the artist. By bringing these ceremonial masks into close proximity with ballet, Fernandes not only opposes their fetishization and exoticization but also places their cultural significance on equal footing.

In pastrana santiago's video *Baliza* (2019),<sup>4</sup> a slow pas de deux between the artist and a banner reading “your island here”<sup>5</sup> works

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1 André Lepecki, “Choreopolice and Choreopolitics: or, the task of the dancer,” *TDR* 57, no. 4 (Winter 2013): 18–19, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24584841>.

2 In the mid-twentieth century, George Balanchine, who co-founded the New York City Ballet and was known as the father of American ballet, shifted this “ideal” body type from the long-waisted, short-legged look of classical Russian ballerinas to the reverse—long-legged with a proportionately short torso.

3 Brendan Fernandes, “As One,” *Brendan Fernandes*, 2015, <http://www.brendanfernandes.ca/as-one-1>.

4 A pas de deux in classical ballet is a dance for two performers, traditionally a male and a female.



Brendan Fernandes, *Free Fall, for Camera*, 2019. Single-channel video projection, stereo sound, 13:47 min.  
 Courtesy of the artist and Monique Meloche Gallery, Chicago

to contest the colonial idea of possession. Here, she uses language coupled with movement to reference the significant role tourism plays on many islands, including her home of Puerto Rico—now overrun with development projects.

Radically reimagining standards of progress, virtuosity, and success within dance practice and society at large, Fernandes and pastrana santiago also redefine labor through acts of slowness and stillness. Our capitalist society, within which these artists choreograph and perform, so often demands continuous action from its subjects in order to progress. Both artists subvert this expectation for energetic and impressive movements through their various acts of lingering and lazing.

Slower paces require unseen effort and mental energy for the dancers activating Fernandes' *Tumbler* sculptures (2019) and performing in his video *Free Fall, for Camera* (2019). Inspired by children's jacks, the *Tumblers* challenge the dancers who play

with them to generate movement through stillness or, as the artist considers it, "inaction." However, these minimalist forms are equally powerful without the presence of static bodies as they echo the rigid linearity of countless ballet positions.

*Free Fall, for Camera* is a response to the 2016 mass shooting at Pulse nightclub in Orlando, Florida, in which many of the victims were Latinx and LGBTQ+. In Fernandes' video, bodies continuously fall to the stage floor after being triggered by a sound cue reminiscent of a gunshot. The stillness after these startling descents resonates as the viewer waits in anticipation for the dancer(s) to stand back up. In this brief moment on the ground, the dancer must contemplate their recovery, an act that requires fortitude to continue on in the wake of this collapse. While dancers fall throughout the duration of the piece, each one returns to verticality and rejoins the group in what the artist intends as an act of collective solidarity.



In her video *NO MORE EFFORTS* (2020), pastrana santiago uses choreography rooted in slowness and laziness to encourage us to ask: Who can afford to do nothing? The artist begins the video by lying atop the crumbled remains of the historic Normandie Hotel® in Old San Juan, before performing a continuous string of improvised movements in a nearby athletic stadium. These actions reflect her training in an experimental movement style, also known as postmodern dance, which emerged in Puerto Rico at the end of the 1970s. Reminiscent of her *lazy dancer* manifesto (2013),<sup>7</sup> pastrana santiago deploys the somatic techniques of slowness and laziness in her uniquely humorous tone as a means of resisting productivity, effortlessness, and mobility. She considers how marginalized subjects like herself are typically exploited through physically demanding labor emphasizing constant motion, while the privileged elite and tourists who populate Puerto Rico are afforded time and space to slow down.

Fernandes and pastrana santiago rely on bodily movement—ranging from choreographed to improvised, dancery to pedestrian—to resist, heal, and even fail. Reimagining the dancing body's relationships to labor and power, the artists utilize performance as a form of resistance, as a tool for individual self-fashioning, and as a crucial response to trauma. Their choreopolitical movements offer an expanded language of dance and suggest unique possibilities for its future.

— McClain Groff, M.A., Williams College, 2022  
Williams College Graduate Program in the History of Art

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- 5 The artist is also seen swimming with a banner of a similar sentiment, reading “aquí había una isla” (here was an island).
  - 6 Abandoned and deteriorating, the Normandie serves as a reminder of the island's ongoing government-debt crisis and its prolonged recovery from numerous devastating hurricanes.
  - 7 In this text, the artist states, “The lazy dancer has no duty to dance.”



nibia pastrana santiago, *NO MORE EFFORTS*, 2020. Video, color, sound, 8:53 min. Commissioned by de Appel for *This may or may not be a true story or a lesson in resistance*. Video still by Juan C. Malavé. Courtesy of the artist

**Brendan Fernandes** (b. 1979, Nairobi, Kenya) is a graduate of the Whitney Independent Study Program (2007) and a recipient of a Robert Rauschenberg Fellowship (2014). In 2010, he was shortlisted for the Sobey Art Award, and is the recipient of a prestigious 2017 Canada Council New Chapters grant. Brendan is also the recipient of the Artadia Award (2019), a Smithsonian Artist Research Fellowship (2020), and a Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation grant (2019). His projects have been shown at the 2019 Whitney Biennial, New York; the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; The Museum of Modern Art, New York; The Getty Museum, Los Angeles; the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa; and Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal (MAC), among others. He is currently Assistant Professor at Northwestern University.

**nibia pastrana santiago** (b. 1987, Caguas, Puerto Rico) holds an MFA in Dance with a Minor in Latina/o Studies from the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, and a Postmasters in Performance and Scenography Studies from a.pass, Belgium. Currently, nibia is co-director at Beta-Local, a non-profit organization dedicated to supporting artists in Puerto Rico. During the last five years, she served as the Dance Program Academic Coordinator at Universidad del Sagrado Corazón, the first of its kind in Puerto Rico. Her works have been shown at de Appel, Amsterdam; the 2019 Whitney Biennial, New York; and Hidrante, San Juan. She is a 2020–2022 fellow of the Puerto Rican Arts Initiative, supported by The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, Northwestern University, and The University of Texas, Austin. Her first publication *Habitar lo imposible: Danza y Experimentación en Puerto Rico*, co-edited with dance scholar Susan Homar, will be published in 2022.

## Choreopolitics

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Curated by McClain Groff

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Cover: Brendan Fernandes, *Free Fall, for Camera*, 2019. Single-channel video projection, stereo sound, 13:47 min. Courtesy of the artist and Monique Meloche Gallery, Chicago

Image on this spread: nibia pastrana santiago, *Baliza*, 2019. HD video, color, sound, 9:58 min. Courtesy of the artist