

Speaking with Nelisiwe Xaba: Re-dancing a Body, Re-imagining a Continent

The body is like a continent. It can be mapped, explored and aesthetically visualized in fixed forms, shapes and movements. The African continent is like the female black body. It has been choreographed, theorized and stereotyped. Both continent and body have been rendered simultaneously ‘invisible’ or ‘hypervisible’ by the western colonizing gaze; both have been objectified in dominant discourses by embodying and representing the mystery of darkness, as in Freud’s recycling of Henry Morton Stanley’s definition of Africa in his own representation of women’s sexuality as a “dark continent” for psychoanalysis. Black feminist theorists – together with historians, literary critics, sociologists, legal scholars and cultural critics – have written extensively on the historical narrative constructed around black women’s sexuality. The binary opposition that has characterized black and white female sexuality is condensed by the art historian, Lorraine O’Grady, in the following statement: “White is what woman is; not-white (and the stereotypes non-white gathers in) is what she had better not be”.¹ The black body’s sexuality is embedded in darkness, in the concealing, distorted vision of an essentialized ‘dark body-continent’. The re-imagining of Freud’s metaphor is the starting point for my research into the connection between the female *dancing* body and the African continent, in the course of which I encountered the work of Nelisiwe Xaba.

¹ Lorraine O’Grady, “Olympia’s Maid: Reclaiming Black Female Subjectivity”, in Amelia Jones, ed., *The Feminist and Visual Culture Reader* (London: Routledge, 2003), 174-186.

Xaba is a contemporary South African artist whose dancing narrates the political, racial and sexual movement through which South African female bodies have been choreographed since colonial times. Speaking with her about her theatre-dance, I seek to understand her personal act of re-imagining South Africa, the piece of the “Dark Continent” disguised today by the more positive image of the “Rainbow Nation”.

Born in Soweto, Xaba studied at the Johannesburg Dance Foundation. In 1996 she received a grant for the Ballet Rambert in London where her diasporic experience of moving from South Africa to Britain and thence to other continents, began. The same year, she went on to work in what she calls an “American slavery tour” with the Soweto Street Beat Dance Company. A year later she joined the Pact Dance Company, turned freelance and started working with well known choreographers like South African Robyn Orlin, one of South Africa’s most controversial and provocative choreographers and performance artists.² She also encountered visual art by collaborating with Rodney Place (*Couch Dancing*, 1998) and experienced contemporary drama with the French actress and director Sophie Loucachevsky in a work of confusion and sex change (*The Homosexual or the Difficulty of Expression*, 2003). In 2008, Xaba collaborated with Haitian dancer and choreographer Ketty Noël to create a duet titled *Correspondances* – a satirical look

² On Robin Orlin’s work see <<http://www.robynorlin.com/index.htm>>, 12 July 2011.

into the politics of women to women relationships. Theatre, dance and visual art are completed by poetry in Xaba's cooperation with Lesego Rampolokeng in *Bantu Ghosts* (2009), a spoken word performance conceived as a tribute to the South African hero Steve Bantu Biko.

Since 1998, Nelisiwe Xaba has launched a solo career as dancer and choreographer of her own pieces: *Dazed And Confused*, *Talent Search For New Rainbow Nation Dance Co.*, *No String Attached 1&2*, *Be My Wife*, *Plasticization*, and her productions inspired by Sarah Baartman, the "Hottentot Venus": *They Look at Me and That's All They Think* and *Sarkozy says NoN to the Venus*. Her most recent piece, *Black!..White?* (2009), incorporates costume animation, music and dance, interrogating the politics of black and white (directed by Toni Morkel, and produced by the choreographic centre CDC in Toulouse France). Xaba is currently working on *Uncles and Angels*, the working title of her next solo project: a commentary on virginity testing for women and girls globally. The piece uses video projection technology to create multiple live recorded and pre-recorded images exploring traditional dance forms.³

Xaba's body language both as choreographer and as dancer have been enriched by her collaborations with other artists and performers and her own, individual work as she engages with constantly changing forms, objects, images and topics. Her experimental theatre-dance is imaginative, provocative and political: her skin color and sexuality are the main weapons for her challenging works. From slavery to apartheid, from colonial to contemporary times, the black female body has been associated with negative stereotypes produced in order to establish racial and sexual difference and maintain white male supremacy. Xaba re-dances some of these fixed images, articulated on the South African body.

In my approach to Xaba's work, the 're-' prefix serves as a kind of prop for my analysis. When applied to her performative act of re-dancing a body and re-imagining a continent, it suggests her endeavour to express 'other' meanings, to re-narrate and oppose resistance to the dominant discourses produced on the black female body and experienced by various groups of black women at different historical moments. What emerges is a very personal choreographic language, aimed at deconstructing the categories that have framed the African female 'body-continent' – and others – into an essentialist and eurocentric perspective. In a global vision, Xaba re-dances themes of racial stereotyping, gender opposites and cultural perceptions that may be shared by different races and nationalities. In a more local vision, the act of re-dancing stereotypes is understood as the act of elaborating a new image for the South African female and black identities. Through the act of dancing, she challenges and 'defers' the audience's gaze, whether black or white, European or African, directing it towards other visions and re-visions. The exploration of other physical, aesthetic and technological possibilities are part of her signature style.⁴ As she re-dances labels and categories, she questions herself on what it means to produce a contemporary African dance piece for/on white stages in European festivals, displaying the power of her silent language: "What is

³ Information from Xaba's website, <<http://www.nelisiwexaba.co.za/>>, 30 July 2010, integrated with the artists' personal communication (13 July 2011).

⁴ Usually, there is an impressive and effective use of technology and multimedia art in her performances. Nelisiwe also re-dances her femininity with an original, aesthetic use of high heels on stage.

‘contemporary African’? Does the color of my skin make my work ‘contemporary African’?”

Re-dancing The Venus



Fig. 1: Nelisiwe Xaba, *They Look at Me and That's All They Think*, 25 July 2010, photograph, Castello di Monte Sant'Angelo (IT), © Annalisa Piccirillo;

[Click here to view video](#), ©Dance Umbrella 2011.



⁵ Evelyn M. Hammonds, “Toward a Genealogy of Black Female Sexuality: The Problematic of Silence”, in M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, eds., *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures* (New York and London: Routledge, 1997), 172.

⁶ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 94.

⁷ Ibid.

Nelisiwe Xaba has produced two solos inspired by Sarah Baartman, the South African black woman better known, during her life, as the Hottentot Venus. In the nineteenth century, this young woman was cruelly exhibited and objectified by scientific experts and by the European colonial gaze because of her “unusual physiognomy” and particularly her genitalia and buttocks. In Europe, the alterity of all black females was constructed and ‘choreographed’ on the iconography of this ‘other’ body:

The “primitive” genitalia of these women were defined by European commentators as the sign of their “primitive” sexual appetites. Thus, the black female became the antithesis of European sexual mores and beauty and was relegated to the lowest position on the scale of human development. The image of the black female constructed in this period reflected everything the white female was not ... ⁵

Stereotypes based on racial and sexual difference are made in order to control and regulate the behavior of those rendered ‘other’. When she re-dances Sarah Baartman, Xaba resists the concept of fixity described by Homi Bhabha as the ideological construction of otherness during colonial times: “Fixity, as the sign of cultural/historical racial difference in the discourse of colonialism, is a paradoxical mode of representation; it connotes rigidity and an unchanging order as well as disorder, degeneracy and demonic repetition”.⁶ Xaba’s body translates Sarah Baartman’s story into an autobiographic vision of the black African woman’s body today, caught in between invisibility and hypervisibility, perfection and imperfection. By re-dancing the objectified sexual image of the female black body, she interrogates the voyeurism of colonial confrontations with ‘the exotic’, staging the ambivalence of the stereotype made of “power and desire”, “presence and absence” and exposing the erotic obsession that lies at the heart of colonialism.⁷

Xaba’s first Italian performance of her Hottentot Venus took place in July 2010, during the IVth edition of the Teatro Civile Festival organized by the Legambiente organization, in the suggestive setting of the Castle of Monte Sant’ Angelo, in the province of Foggia (22-25 July). Entitled *The Venus*, it combined two of her solos: *They Look at Me and That is All They Think* and *Sarkozy says NoN to the Venus*, originally commissioned by the Musée du Quai Branly in 2009. *Sarkozy says Non...* is a more overtly political work: the piece is a comment on European immigration laws and

policies, which have become increasingly anti-African. The title refers to the Sarkozy government's policy to give black immigrants 6000 euros to leave France.⁸

During the Festival, I asked the dancer a few questions about her work.

AP: *Nelisiwe, I would like to know why you chose dancing? When did you realize how powerful your body language is and when did you perceive the double aim of your dance: to produce entertainment but above all to produce a work about interrogation, political criticism and gender politics?*

NX: I started dancing during the political uprisings in the late 80s, this is when formal schooling in Soweto was interrupted, when the youth were rioting, throwing stones and fighting for liberation. So when I started dancing it was to find something constructive, something where I could spend my energy positively. At that time young people were stimulated to destroy government structures and white business, as a way of agitating politicians. And some of that was to our detriment. Some of it went against us because we were also destroying infrastructure that was vital to our everyday existence. So I had to find something intimate, elegant, something less aggressive. This does not negate the importance of the struggle or any form of protest, I chose to do it differently, in fact today's youth doesn't really do anything, they just follow the "elders"; so any form of protest is good be it through dancing or rioting.

So dance was a way of getting out of the streets, and a way to focus and invest in a vague future. At that time I was not thinking "I need to tell a story"; at that time I wasn't thinking "I need to address issues of feminism, I need to address racial issues." Politics was such a part of my everyday life that I wanted to dance, I wanted to be free. It was around the time of *Fame*, the American TV series, we wanted to dance badly.

At a very young age I was conscious about these issues, feminism, racism and religion. For me having been born in Soweto forced one to be political, it wasn't something I had to learn, it wasn't something outside of me. I never intended to make art out of this, or gain recognition by doing it or to make a career out of it. Also I didn't create my work immediately when I finished training, or when I left the dance school. I approached everything in a classical or 'traditional' sense, in a way. You learn to dance, you become a dancer and interpret with your body what the choreographer wants you to say; then after that hopefully you can say what you want to say and how you want to say it.

AP: *What has been crucial? When did you understand that yours was more than a classical way of producing dance.*

NX: I think my interest in other art forms has been crucial. If I had looked at dance strictly, I wouldn't have been able to do what I do. You know some people don't think I am doing dance, but I don't worry about them, I'm concerned with what I

⁸ For images and further information, see "Xaba brings solo shows to the Market", at <http://www.artlink.co.za/news_article.htm?contentID=23411>, 12 July 2011.

want to say and how I want to say it. For me it is important how the message gets across to the audience. Sometimes I find dance can be limiting in how I want to get a message across. That's why I use dance combined with other art forms, like video installations, costumes and props, which give me the chance to be more direct.

Also if you work with the body on stage, if you put a body on a platform, in most cases, especially in the dance world, it is sexual and political, definitely. It differs according to what kind of body one puts on a platform, a naked female body, or a naked male body on stage, or if you put black or white on stage: it's always different to the viewer.

AP: You trained first at the Johannesburg Dance Foundation in South Africa and then at the Rambert School in Great Britain. So with your body language you lived the migratory experience with a diasporic displacement from one continent to another, from one audience to another. How did this artistic and personal diaspora change your body and the perception of your 'continent', or cultural identity? In your performances on the Hottentot Venus, for example, the reference to the experience of displacement is given by the use of objects such as a passport, a suitcase, a paper boat and an airplane. Is the ironic use of these objects a way to negotiate your personal journey?

NX: My work is a journey, and it's influenced by immigration, by traveling and being a foreigner, or seeking for greener pastures. Most migration is for economic reasons and not solely based on climate. Immigrants in most cases have no choice, they cannot afford everything they want, and they cannot buy whatever they want, but in most cases they want to get out of poverty to find a better life somewhere. When you arrive somewhere you are not always welcomed and you are always the 'other'. These issues are getting worse. Humanity's a strange thing. Those are the things we haven't managed to find solutions for. Tolerance and humanity – we haven't managed to find the balance.

In my first trip, when I actually left South Africa, I was going to America; I was younger, about 21, young in the sense that I had never left the country, never been exposed to a different culture and I had never lived alone, or had to sort out my life on my own, without my mother. I left South Africa with a dance group, so we left for America, but soon when we arrived it was clear for me that it was some kind of slave trade, because we were taken as young people who have never been outside Soweto to America without a return ticket. I suppose at that time the embassies were not so strict, but still it's not secure for the dancers. You don't leave without a return ticket because maybe you won't be able to return, and you didn't have a contract or a salary. But before you leave, just like Sarah Baartman, you're promised that you'll make money and everything's going to be fantastic when you arrive. But after a month it was clear that actually the intention of the producers of the show was just to bring a group of young dancers and musicians to hopefully make money, without any structures being put in place.

If it's clear that as a dancer you can be a stageaire, an apprentice, you need to be told it's just for your experience and not be promised the world. If you're promised

the world then it's different, it's professional, and you're working so that you can have some kind of remuneration. If that is not met then somewhere there's abuse.

When I arrived in the United States it was a cultural shock. Also to understand that now you're a foreigner, to imagine suddenly that you're an immigrant, at that age when you're supposed just to be a professional and working. I left the company, after less than two months, to explore life on my own. And when you're alone that's when you really get to be an immigrant, that's when you have to find a job, that's when you have to try and make a living in a foreign place, and that is never easy. You become a slave automatically, you don't have rights, you don't exist, and trying to exist when you don't exist is a strange feeling.

My trip in the United States was at an age when you search for identity, but it is also strange to search for identity in a foreign place! At that time I was researching, mostly around religion, going to different churches and different religions. I guess to try and find where I fitted. Also being exposed to the black community, in America, was part of this search for identity. I don't think you ever find identity, because for a minute you can think I can identify with this and then another day you think I can't be associated with that. It's funny, when I was young I was vigorously looking for this, and to think about it now when I am soon to be forty, it is like I still don't know what my identity is!

Sometimes my trips are so short. Those ones I hate because you don't get a sense of the people, the real people, not the artists. Artists are not real people, we find ways of dealing with each other everywhere in the world. But if you have to deal with normal people in the streets, for me that's cultural exchange. And for me that's the best one. There are people that leave their country and try to find the same community in another country. For me it was the contrary, I never want to be with South Africans where I am, it's like I might as well be at home and stay at home!

At the same time I suppose if you are an immigrant then maybe that's necessary, even more so today. Immigration in Europe is the favorite topic: politicians can't say anything without mentioning immigrants, as though immigrants are the problem to the world, but I don't think so. Especially looking at colonization: Europeans were the first ones to go everywhere and to live everywhere, and now that other people are coming to their countries it's a problem. It's a contradiction and it's created a complex.

AP: *Nelisiwe, could you introduce your provocative performances ("They Look at Me and That is All They Think" – "Sarkozy says NoN to the Venus") by referring to the costumes and accessories you use to stage the 'visibility' and 'hypervisibility' of your dancing body? For example in the first piece your skirt becomes a cinema screen, inflated air becomes body shapes; and in both you exploit colors: the first piece is very white and the second one very black. Could you talk about the use of costumes as contemporary art installations?*

NX: Yes, the two pieces, like the two colors, are opposites and complementary at the same time. When I create a piece I probably have one idea that I want to

explore, or maybe I look at a subject and want to explore that subject. In this case it was clear that I wanted to do Sarah Baartman, but not telling only her story, but using my history as a performer who always has to go out and perform in foreign places. So, the first thing was that I wanted to play with an object. Carlo Gibson is the designer who made the skirt. I approached him and said I wanted him to make me a skirt that we can open and then it becomes a screen. I already knew I wanted to project something around the politics of hair. At first I wanted to do a movie of myself, but then I thought it would get too personal and cost too much. Lucas Potter was the animator and he volunteered to make animation for me from what I told him I wanted to do. So Carlo made the skirt and only when the skirt was finished we started to make the piece. I decided to work with Carlo also as an outside eye, in the sense of directing. He's not a director, but he has a funny eye, he has a strange eye (his company is called "Strange Love"). I like his taste. So we made the piece; when he arrived with the skirt we were both, like: "Wow, we've created a monster, what we are going to do with it?!!" It had so many possibilities. I started to ask myself how I'd manage with the skirt. How tell the skirt what to do? Actually what became interesting for me was how my body has to manage with this object. That's always my interest: how my body has to manage with the objects, with the props; and then in that process my body finds a new language.

AP: By re-dancing Sarah's sexual image you re-write on stage the exotic perspective of a 'different' body, and at the same time you explore the society's notion of beauty, poking fun at modern standard of a perfect – and sometimes artificial – female body. Although the 'perfect' body is still present on contemporary European stages, how did you try to dissimulate this perfection with your (im-)perfect body language?

NX: In South Africa now politically Sarah Baartman has become a symbol for woman's liberation, even though she was not a feminist, she was a normal person, but this is what she represents. What is interesting is the perspective and the context: Sarah's body, or in general the South African black female body, in South Africa it's not exotic. Probably for South Africans *my* body is exotic. It is a funny thing, my body in a South African context is exotic because I am not big... no, not exotic: exotic is attractive, can be attractive, but in South Africa my body's not exotic and it's not attractive either. Men want women with full breasts and bottoms, full-bodied... I'm too petite in a South African context. I try to interrogate this imperfection also in the dance context. For example even for the classical forms my body is not perfect: I never look at my body as perfect.

When I did "They look at me...", especially the video part, it was to challenge the stereotypes of beauty, the Eurocentric standards of beauty, that you're beautiful only when you have Eurocentric features, that is: you have to have a long hair, long nose, or you have to be light in complexion, etc. This is problematic, especially in the black community because this is how the black mind also starts to look at you, how we start to look at ourselves, how we start to think: to be beautiful you have to

be light-skinned, you have to have long hair. So, for me the problem is not how the Westerners view me or us, it's how we Africans then view themselves, or how we look at ourselves, and how that becomes a standard of how we see black beauty. In my works I try to question this view.

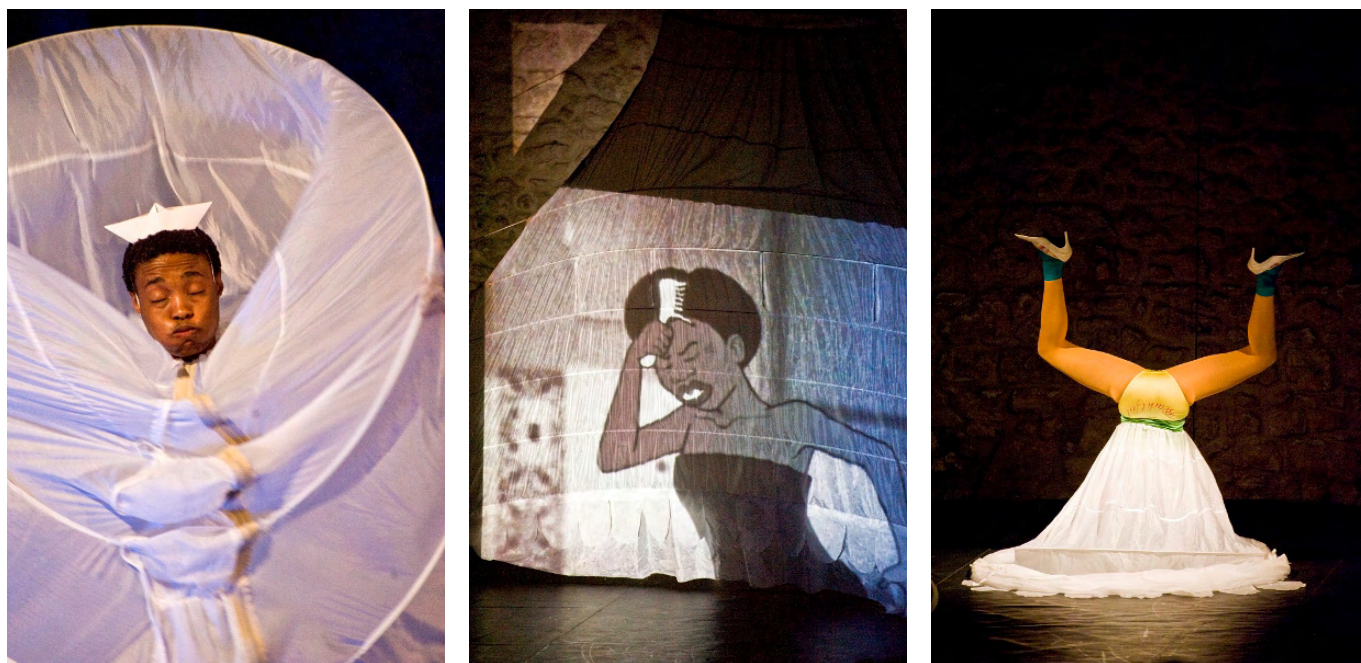


Fig. 2, 3 and 4: Nelisiwe Xaba, *They Look at Me and That's All They Think*, 25 July 2010, photographs, Castello di Monte Sant'Angelo (IT), © Michele Tumaiuoli.

AP: *I find a certain relation between the diasporic experience lived by you and the figure from which you took inspiration – Sarah Baartman. Both of you are a 'body-continent' displaced and displayed abroad. The difference, an important one, consists in the fact that you decide how much to expose of your body in your choreography, you have the choice to dance and to resist with your body language; on the contrary, she had no choice. Is Sarah Baartman's story that of all women, not just Africans, who have no choice even in contemporary society?*

NX: I'm on a journey. I don't think I have arrived in how I want to say something, in how I want to choreograph. I never think choreographically, in a strange way.

There are a lot of Eastern European women who have to leave their countries for greener pastures as always and their body is what they have and their body gets exploited. Moralists can always say prostitutes have a choice. Yes and no. The female body still doesn't have a choice. I mean we have individual choices, but in a global context you don't have a choice. We don't have the choice of how we want to see our bodies. If you look at commercials: anything they sell has to have a naked body, *anything*. So like that, we don't have a choice, and it goes back to what I said about black people starting to think that in order to be beautiful you have to have European features; and in the perspective of the female body this is

how young women also start to think, this is how they have to represent themselves... it's there all the time now. This gets even more complicated these days. There was a time when fashion was not so rapid and you still had the choice to decide what style you wanted to follow; these days there is no choice, now everything is the same, all the shops sell the same thing, so you don't have a choice of how you want to present yourself. The men also start to think what is beautiful or what is not for us. In the past there wasn't so much emphasis, you were covered, you were fully dressed, so the body was not so exposed and there were not so many issues of how slim you had to be. It's our need also to be part of society and it's not an easy thing because you have to stick to the rules that society has built. It's controversial or contradictory because there is a part of us that wants to be part of this new movement. It's always contradictory: we could say we don't want men to gaze at us, but sometimes it's pleasant!

My work is based around feminism but I am not crying or thinking that I can't survive because I am a woman, and I'm not saying that being a woman is difficult, though it can be very hard sometimes. I don't live my life thinking life is difficult because I am a woman! There are stereotypes everywhere. What I try to do with my work is to interrupt stereotypes imagined on the female body, and not only on the African female body.

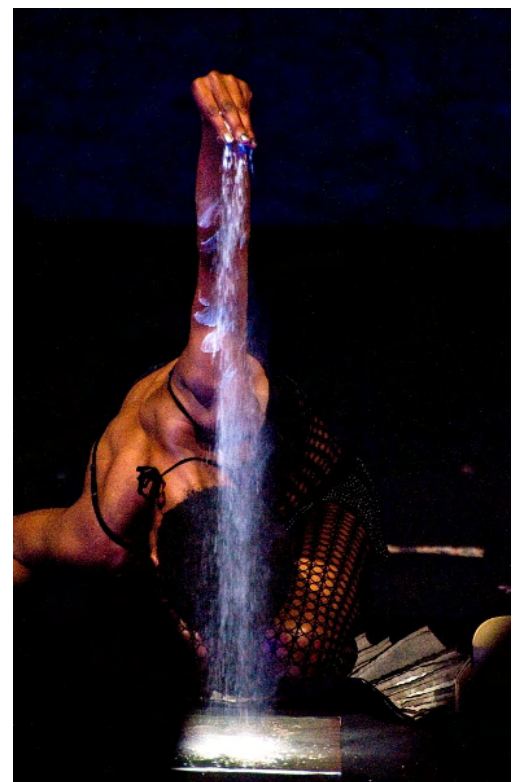
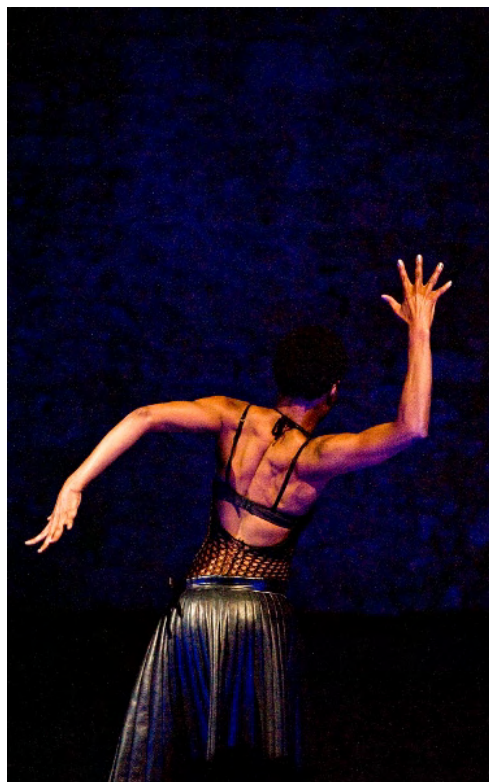


Fig. 5 and 6: Nelisiwe Xaba, *Sarkozy says NoN to the Venus*, 25 July 2010, photograph, Castello di Monte Sant'Angelo (IT), © Michele Tumaiuoli.

AP: You reject any categorization of your work and any label that could fix your style. Your interrogation on what makes you a “contemporary African dancer”, is interesting: is it your skin color? Is it your origin? Or is it just your body’s memory of contemporary and traditional styles? How do you negotiate this label? Does it block the liberty of your language, or are you challenging it by re-dancing your personal way of being African and of being contemporary?

NX: It’s clear for me that I do contemporary work, or better, it’s clear that I don’t do folkloric or traditional work. I’m not interested in traditional forms. But I use them sometimes in my work. In *Sarkozy says Non to the Venus* I used a little bit of Zulu dance, but I used it not to praise it, but sarcastically. It is like an ironic exposition of what the audience would like to see with my body.

When you’re talking about a black body dancing, when journalists describe it they’ll always say “energy”, “eclectic”; so in some way it’s this need to see a new image every second. When you watch tv all the time – which is what the masses do, what they come home for – you get used to seeing a new image every second, every split second; that’s the reason why theatre is struggling, and this is a global issue. The audience wants to see something new... You must change, every split second you have to have something new to give. There’s no time to digest anything. People are just swallowing, but they don’t even know what they’re swallowing. While, when you do something slow you force someone to engage, that is why I play with slow and fast movements finding a balance between them every second. You should be careful also – we’re doing entertainment – that you don’t put people to sleep, that you’re not so slow that people are wondering what else to think about, that you still keep the audience alive.

Talking about industry, sometimes, yes, I belong – whether I want to or not – in the ‘Contemporary African’ industry. I belong in that market. But at the same time, when I see what is contained in this market I don’t want to belong to it, I want to run away. I try to re-imagine this market but it’s a big fight. In London, they made a special festival for African choreographers, but they didn’t invite us to show our work as individual choreographers, no, we had to be in this African contemporary box together with other African choreographers, like when I took part in the *African Crossroads* section of the last Dance Umbrella edition.⁹ I find it an insult to be put in a box with other people... It sounds arrogant, but I take it as an insult. I go to these festivals and I come back home thinking, why did I waste my time? I don’t come back thinking “I have to work, wow, there’s so much challenge, I’m inspired!” I come back home thinking “Why am I in this, why do I belong to this?”

⁹ Based in London, Dance Umbrella Festival is one of the world’s most exciting programmers of new dance. In 2009 a special section, *African Crossroads*, showcased works of dancers and choreographers from Africa. See <<http://www.danceumbrella.co.uk/page/3110/African+Crossroads>>, 30 July 2010.



Fig. 7: Nelisiwe Xaba, *Sarkozy says NoN to the Venus*, 25 July 2010, photograph, Castello di Monte Sant’Angelo (IT), © Michele Tumaiuoli.

AP: *For me, as part of the audience, it was strange to notice that you, together with Kettly Noël in “Correspondances”, were the only African female dancers in the special section / box, as you call it, of “African Crossroads”.*

NX: There are more male choreographers. Yes, it's a strange thing. Generally, in an African perspective when you get married that's the end of your career. Your husband tells you, you can't dance any more. And because you're married you have to stop. If I talk with my partner and we think this is maybe a thing to do or I want to stop, then it's understandable, but if my husband says no you can't do this any more then I find it an insult. Maybe that is why I'm not married! It's a funny thing. Going back to the idea of women being leaders, in Europe there's 90% probably of female dancers. The male dancers get more attention in a European situation, because there are few of them, sometimes only one in the class, so you're exotic, you get more attention from your teacher and you gain confidence. But in Africa that's not the reason. The reasons are different from in Europe. In Africa you're not allowed to dance as a woman, you can't have a profession using your body, it's immoral to use your body. So it is a question of possibilities.

AP: *During the next edition of Dance Umbrella Festival 2011 in London you will be re-dancing the Hottentot Venus, so you will once again invite the audience to face the historical figure of a body-continent, that of the South African Sarah Baartman. How do you think the audience will react to your personal re-imagination?*

NX: I cannot predict how the audience will receive or not receive me, in much the same way as I cannot dance the same way I danced yesterday. I hope they react, but how they react I wouldn't know, the reactions change depending on what the individual in the audience is feeling at the time, it's a personal thing. So there's no way I or any one else would know how they would feel or react until they feel it.