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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
RIVERSIDE

Decolonial Moves:
Re-Membering Black Women in South African Contemporary Dance

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Critical Dance Studies

by

Rainy Consuelo Demerson

June 2020

Dissertation Committee:

Dr. Anthea Kraut, Chairperson

Dr. Anthonia Kalu

Dr. Imani Kai Johnson

Dr. Jacqueline Shea Murphy

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2020

The Dissertation of Rainy Consuelo Demerson is approved:

Committee Chairperson

University of California, Riverside

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Dedication

In preparation for my defense, I submitted this dissertation to my committee on May 6th as my Facebook feed swelled with images of women in red. This dissertation is dedicated to the thousands of missing and murdered Indigenous women in the United States of America. May they find peace as ancestors. May this document remind us to fight for the rights of Indigenous womxn to live in safety and in power.

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Decolonial Moves:
Re-Membering Black Women in South African Contemporary Dance

by

Rainy Consuelo Demerson

Doctor of Philosophy, Graduate Program in Critical Dance Studies
University of California, Riverside, June 2020
Dr. Anthea Kraut, Chairperson

This dissertation examines the choreographic techniques of Black women alongside the steps and missteps of scholars and activists in the #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall movements in South Africa. I present contemporary dance as a site of decolonization by composing a kaleidoscopic vision of dance as a process of becoming in entangled time/space, where movement is both a political and kinesthetic manifestation of African philosophies of feminism and interdependence. This interdisciplinary project includes ethnography, performance analysis, and embodied research based on three trips to South Africa between 2017 and 2019. Analysis of performances and interviews in Makhanda, Los Angeles, and New York City accompany that of embodied research in the form of workshops and performances in Tshwane. By relating student protests to choreographies by Dada Masilo and Mamela Nyamza, I argue that Black women use unique choreographic and performative techniques to challenge the pervasive colonial discourse about their bodies and manifest a sense of the world beyond colonialism.

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Introduction

In July 2017 I made my first trip to South Africa with a vague idea of my research project. After having studied contemporary dance in Senegal, Cuba, and Brazil, I was curious about what approaches South Africans were using, and as an educator I was intrigued by the invitation to present at a conference on decolonizing dance pedagogy at the University of Cape Town. As I waited for the plane to take off, I remember reading a news story about the recent spate of rapes and femicides plaguing the country. Women and girls were being abused and murdered by their friends and relatives, then left in fields, garbage cans, and by the side of the road. I started to second-guess my decision to travel alone for a month knowing no one there would notice if I disappeared. With a combination of trepidation and naïve optimism, I settled in for my twenty-one hour journey. Makhanda, formerly known as Grahamstown, is nestled in a valley that closely resembles my hometown in California. Whereas in my neighborhood of East San José most people only had fences if they had dogs and we kept our door unlocked for years despite the rather frequent gang violence, in Makhanda every single house was hidden behind a huge fence - usually concrete laced with barbed wire. In the afternoons I would walk a half-hour from my rental cottage through the suburban landscape to attend the National Arts Festival. The neighborhood was calm and quiet with manicured lawns sometimes visited by friendly monkeys. Everyone arrived and left in their own sparsely populated cars. They didn't have to interact with strangers on public transportation. I wondered what they were so afraid of. When I reached the main road called Beaufort

Street, it became clear that democracy had failed to reconcile apartheid geography. On one side of the road White people owned and occupied comfortable homes that Black women cleaned. On the other side Black people worked for other people's shops, and the only markets of their own were set up each morning on dirty curbsides. It reminded me of my father's stories of Houston Texas in the 1960's, where growing up "on the wrong side of the tracks" was a literal description of Jim Crow's devastating space-hold.

The annual festival turned a sleepy town into a bustling center of national and international talent. Walking another fifteen minutes down the road I'd arrive at the festival grounds, which were virtually the whole town. In addition to university theatres and exhibition halls, recreation centers, restaurants, and churches were all temporarily usurped for the forty-three-year-old National Arts Festival. That year it hosted over 700 performances in eleven days. I went to every dance concert with a Black choreographer and many more. Like the headlines, performances in all disciplines were infused with confusion and rage over the attacks on women and girls. Their ghosts were everywhere, following me as I walked alone through Makhanda, heavy with the weight of sorrows conveyed on stage.

From this festival, the focus of my research began to sharpen. I wanted to understand the precarious role of women in post-apartheid South Africa and how dance artists are responding to gender-based violence. Questions about ethics and aesthetics began to emerge. As a researcher, how might I tend to their fears? Where do I place the rage? What can dance tell us about how Black women are moving through the seemingly unending assaults on their humanity? The last question became central to my research as

it expanded to include questions around the broader threats to Indigenous lives and life-ways. The second thread of research germinated in my next visit to South Africa, when it became clear that the conflict between Indigenous South African and imposed European epistemologies was an important issue for contemporary South African artists.

I returned to the National Arts Festival the following year. In 2018, the country's daily discourse raged with sometimes-violent debates about if and how to return land to Indigenous families that was currently "owned" largely by Afrikaners (South Africans of Dutch ancestry). Like dust, the 'land question' seemed to be floating in the air all around us. On July 6, 2018, I went to see a performance collective called Brother Moves On play at the Guy Butler Theater. The theatre is in a large complex, colloquially referred to as "The Monument." Its full name is the 1820 Settler's Monument and it sits atop a steep hill. It opened in 1974 to honor the British settlers of 1820 and their "contributions" to the country. The Monument, like many monuments in South Africa, is currently undergoing a name change to honor the values of the current constitution and reflect the practices that go on inside.¹ I can't recall any of the band's songs, but like a meme replaying in my mind, I keep going back to one moment. Singer Siyabonga Mthembu began the set with a direct address to the audience: "The argument about land is confusing because owning land is a European idea – a White concept. We don't own the land. We are responsible to it. But I don't need papers to know...." He raised his knee and stomped down on the ground several times confirming: "This thing be speaking to me."²

¹ "Grahamstown Foundation," Grahamstown Foundation, accessed April 14, 2020,

² Siyabonga Mthembu, "Afropoets" (The Brother Moves On, Guy Butler Theatre, July 6, 2018).

While I cannot pretend that song and dance do the same work as land redistribution, I am interested in how Mthembu knocking on the door of the ancestors can remind us to take seriously the ways that knowledge and power are embodied.

The confusion between what the senses know and what colonial logic dictates is at the heart of why I study dance to understand South Africa's decolonial project. Though I do not wish to rehearse the *negritude* ideology that "reason is Greek and emotion is African,"³ I invest in the body for how it reasons and reckons with the chaos of post-colonial identity. In this dissertation I examine South Africa's decolonial movements on and off stage. By relating explicitly decolonial student protests raging from 2015 through 2017 to implicitly decolonial moves of dance artists such as Dada Masilo and Mamela Nyamza, I argue that Black women use unique choreographic and performative techniques to challenge the pervasive colonial discourse about their bodies and manifest a sense of the world beyond colonialism. My approach to the study of contemporary dance in South Africa is deeply entrenched in the past. This is not to suggest that dance artists are not innovative, but that an understanding of how and why contemporary dance is created requires an engagement with ancestors and ghosts. The events and performances I analyze in this dissertation all occurred between 2015 and 2019 but it is impossible to fully appreciate their relevance without some knowledge of the events and performances occurring 500 years prior.

³ Irving Leonard Markovitz, *Leopold Sedar Senghor and the Politics of Negritude* (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1970).

Historical Overview

The region now known as the country of South Africa is home to at least nine Indigenous nations including the Zulu, Xhosa, Bapedi, South Ndebele, Basotho, Venda, Tsongo, Swazi, Khoe-Khoe, San, and BaTswana. This is one reason Black is an incomplete descriptor for Indigenous South Africans. In the sixteenth century, European ships, mainly Dutch and English, began to stop in the Western Cape to replenish supplies on their way to trade in South-East Asia. In 1652 the Dutch East India Company established a settlement to ensure their best prices would be gained and to monopolize the trade route. What began as fair and welcome trade quickly turned to exploitation as the company demanded more goods in their exchanges and allowed some of its workers to establish homes on Khoe-San grazing land. Indigenous people mounted an armed opposition alliance but were ultimately unable to overrun the Dutch fortress. In his journal, company leader Jan Van Riebeeck wrote,

They spoke for a long time about our taking every day for our own use more of the land which had belonged to them from all ages...They also asked whether, if they were to come to Holland, they would be permitted to act in a similar manner....They insisted so much on this point that we told them they had now lost that land in war, and therefore could not expect to get it back.⁴

Clearly the colonial ideology did not consider Indigenous rights or reasons worthy of their attention. From the start, Dutch invaders did not acknowledge South African humanity much less sovereignty. Their settlements grew quickly and overtime they

⁴ Kevin Shillington, *History of Africa*, 3rd edition (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire : New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

would re-brand their Dutch-African identity creating the Afrikaner culture and Afrikaans language.

Land-owning Afrikaner farmers are known as Boers. During the colonial era they would import so many enslaved laborers from Mozambique, Madagascar, and Indonesia that they were outnumbered by the end of the eighteenth century.⁵ Meanwhile thousands of Khoen and San people were dying of Dutch-imported small pox. Survivors gradually began to work for the Boers in order to survive. The project of enslaving orphaned children was so lucrative that Boers would lead raids on Khoen, San, and Xhosa villages to replenish their labor force with children. During the nineteenth century the socio-economically segregated class of Afrikaans-speaking Khoen-San, formerly enslaved, and mixed-race people became known collectively as ‘Cape Coloured.’⁶ As Afrikaners moved into Xhosa territory some would marry into Xhosa families as well. Thus the modern-day diversity of the city of Cape Town and the Coloured population itself were forged through centuries of invasion, displacement and exploitation.

After the Dutch established settlements, the second paradigmatic shift in South African colonial history arrived on a ship from England. The British occupied the Western Cape in 1795, bringing linguistic dominance with their administration. According to historian Martin Meredith, in 1806,

The prosperity of the Colony depended heavily on the labour of foreign slaves imported from other enclaves in Africa and from Asia. Almost every European family of standing in the western Cape owned

⁵ Shillington, 221.

⁶ Shillington, 223.

slaves. Cape Town's population of 16,000 included some 10,000 slaves.⁷

Although the British had abolished their participation in the slave trade by 1807, and enacted further legislation to prohibit Africans crossing the Cape in 1809, they managed to use labor loopholes to make the Khoe work as serfs - ironically bound to their own land without any real rights or profits. Meredith explains that in 1828 Cape officials passed Ordinance 50, making Khoe-San (termed Hottentots at the time) and other people of color legally equal to Whites, "and removing legal restrictions on their movements. In 1834, slavery in the Cape was abolished, in common with the rest of the empire, and some 38,000 slaves were set free, though they were still required to serve four more years of bondage as 'apprentices'. A new court system was installed using English instead of Dutch as the only official language."⁸ The Boers were particularly resentful of this ruling, which they saw as both an infringement on their own settlement and an affront to their values.

Of course the changing attitudes on slavery amongst the British did not engender an egalitarian approach to their interactions with Africans. It only meant that the terms of oppression would shift chaotically between British and Boer hands. Meredith writes, "Many colonists found the idea that Khoikhoi and slaves could be placed on an equal footing with white Christians repugnant, 'contrary to the laws of God and the natural

⁷ Martin Meredith, *Diamonds, Gold, and War: The British, the Boers, and the Making of South Africa* (New York, NY: PublicAffairs, 2008), 1.

⁸ Meredith, 4.

distinction of race and religion.”⁹ Already steeped in White-supremacist values, the Boers moved east where they were met with armed resistance by the Zulu and Ndebele nations. Again, the combination of high-capacity weaponry and exploitative administrative policies debilitated African people. As the British began to annex the Transvaal province in the northeast, the Boers opposed first through petitions and demonstrations then with arms in December 1880, starting the first Anglo-Boer War. In the end the Boers suffered few casualties and re-established independence in the Transvaal and Orange Free State provinces.

Alongside war and enslavement, the dispossession of land and the introduction of wage labor have been fundamental colonial strategies impacting cultural survival worldwide.¹⁰ In 1899 a Hut Tax in what is now Botswana established a system where formerly self-sustaining Indigenous cattle ranchers would have to leave their communities to enter a wage labor system in order to afford a tax placed on home ownership. According to cultural geographer David Massey, the tax further enriched the colonial authorities and mine-owners while establishing a colonialist function for the tribal leaders who would profit by taking a percentage of what any Indigenous laborer earned from going to work in the British-run gold mines.¹¹ This system of displacement, taxation without representation, and imposed economic structures whereby currency replaced capital with real use-value such as cattle or grain, dramatically shifted

⁹ Meredith, 4.

¹⁰ Adria L. Imada, “Hawaiians on Tour: Hula Circuits through the American Empire,” *American Quarterly* 56, no. 1 (2004): 111–49, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40068217>.

¹¹ David Massey, “A Case of Colonial Collaboration: The Hut Tax and Migrant Labour,” *Botswana Notes and Records* 10 (1978): 95–98, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40979541>.

Indigenous lives. In short, it proposed a notion of freedom associated with access to money over the freedom to hunt and harvest according to the needs of one's community. By demarcating how and where Africans would work, colonial capitalism also inscribed patterns of sociality that would inevitably rupture family and community life – those sites of ritual and artistic gathering where identity is established through song and dance. This severing of Africans from their Indigenous practices would continue into the twentieth century.

The Second Anglo-Boer war was the larger and more pivotal. In 1890, South Africa was the biggest producer of gold in the world. This meant that foreigners were climbing over themselves to gain a foothold in the trade. Paul Kruger, president of the Transvaal/South African Republic, was at odds with Cecil Rhodes, premier of the Cape Colony, who wanted to make the southern region of the continent one country under British rule. In October 1899, war was declared between Great Britain and the Boers of the Transvaal and the Orange Free State. It is estimated that 22,000 British, 34,000 Boer, and 15,000 Indigenous people lost their lives in this war over Indigenous land.¹²

Indigenous participation in the war was controversial and took place over several years of shifting policies. J.C. Smuts– state attorney in the South African republic of 1898, made a statement that points to how the fear of losing stolen resources fueled a discourse of abjection that established the rules of war, which would later foment as Apartheid policies:

¹² “The South African War 1899-1902 | South African History Online,” accessed April 16, 2020, <https://www.sahistory.org.za/article/south-african-war-1899-1902>.

The peculiar position of the small white community in the midst of the very large and rapidly increasing coloured races and the danger which in consequence threatens this small white community and with it civilization itself in South Africa, have led to the creation of a special code of morality as between the white and coloured races which forbids inter breeding, and of a special tacit understanding which forbids the white races to appeal for assistance to the coloured races in their natural disputes. This understanding is essential to the continued existence of the white community as the ruling class in South Africa, for otherwise the coloured races must become the arbiters in disputes between the whites and in the long run the predominating political factor or 'casting vote' in South Africa. That this would soon cause South Africa to relapse into barbarism must be evident to everybody; and hence the interests of self-preservation no less than the cause of civilization in South Africa demands imperatively that blacks shall not be called in or mixed up with quarrels between the whites. This tacit understanding...[is] the cardinal principle in South African politics.¹³

Despite being in the midst of a war between two European powers, the term White is already being used as a catch-all to differentiate the British and Dutch from the Indigenous. The repetition of 'small' aims to conjure sympathy for the oppressive class as if by being outnumbered, even in Africa, they are the under-dogs. Racial segregation is described as a collaborative moral imperative that is mutually beneficial even as it clearly intends to rob non-Whites of the civil and human rights that could threaten White power in the region. Civilization is inscribed as a possession of the White race perpetually threatened by Black barbarism and a supposedly natural inclination towards conflict. Interestingly, despite this insistence on the intrinsic necessity of racial separation, White soldiers depended on Blacks for their survival in the second Anglo-Boer War.

¹³ Meredith, *Diamonds, Gold, and War*, 18.

From the start, the British depended on Indigenous and Coloured people for transport-riding, construction, portering, horse supervision and veterinary care, scouting and gathering intelligence.¹⁴ After witnessing Black scouts led by Colonel Aubrey Woolls-Sampson capture 300 guerilla fighters, Boers began to realize their underestimation and took to executing anyone suspected of aiding the British. By 1900 it became clear that Black casualties were costing the armies dearly. Though both sides had legally barred Africans from carrying arms, both sides eventually enlisted them in battle. “In December it was agreed that any black scouts who already possessed rifles when they entered army employment should not be disarmed.”¹⁵ The Second Anglo-Boer War, also known as the “War of Dispossession” by Indigenous people, has been recently renamed the South African War to acknowledge all of the non-Anglo and non-Boer participants who helped forge its national trajectory. At the time, injury among Blacks who fought was followed by insult when the British army did not ensure their civil rights. As Meredith documents,

Black hopes that British rule would lead to improved political rights and status were swiftly shattered. When British troops arrived on the Witwatersrand in 1900, crowds of black workers jubilantly burned their passes, assuming they would not be needed under an enlightened British administration; but pass laws were enforced with even greater vigour...Among the black elite there was profound shock that, under the terms of the Treaty of Vereeniging, Britain had agreed to postpone consideration of black political rights until after the introduction of self-government – effectively handing over the decision to white voters.¹⁶

¹⁴ Meredith, 22.

¹⁵ Meredith, 22.

¹⁶ Meredith, 496.

In an inconceivable betrayal, Blacks were neither afforded rights of citizenship nor acknowledged as participants in the war for many decades. This exploitation would sew the seeds for future disenfranchisement, but not before the British enacted an unforeseen final assault to ensure their power.

Concentration camps were imposed on Boer and Black soldiers and civilians. According to social scientist Elizabeth Van Heyningen the camps were established in the latter months of 1900 as part of the British ‘scorched earth’ policy of burning Boer farms, killing soldiers and imprisoning Boer women and children.¹⁷ Without belittling the tragic conditions for Boers in concentration camps, it is important to understand that conditions were even worse in the poorly managed and poorly documented Black camps. Over a hundred thousand White and Black people were imprisoned in these camps, though White camps were markedly more well-maintained and thus had much higher survival rates. Tens of thousands died, with estimates ranging from 28 to 48,000.¹⁸ According to Tokkie Pretorius, director of the Anglo-Boer War Museum, “There were about two times the number of women and children who died during the war than men actually on the battlefield. There were about seven White women who died in these camps. There were about 24,000 Black women who died in these camps, but it was a mutual experience.”¹⁹

¹⁷ Elizabeth Van Heyningen, “A Tool for Modernisation? The Boer Concentration Camps of the South African War, 1900–1902,” *South African Journal of Science* 106, no. 5/6 (May 20, 2010): 10 pages, <https://doi.org/10.4102/sajs.v106i5/6.242>.

¹⁸ “Concentration Camps in the South African War? Here Are the Real Facts by Fransjohan Pretorius, (The Conversation), February 18, 2019 | South African History Online,” accessed April 16, 2020, <https://www.sahistory.org.za/archive/concentration-camps-south-african-war-here-are-real-facts-fransjohan-pretorius-conversation>.

¹⁹ SABC Digital News, *Knowing Anglo-Boer War as South African War* (Mangaung Bloomfontein South Africa, 2015), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gONNcUNRwyA>.

Despite the obvious inequities, even revisionist historicizing amplifies Boer loss and erases Black life. The experience was perhaps shared, but not mutual.

While the British army ran the Afrikaner camps, Black families had to pay for their own maintenance. According to Chris McGreal's report:

Black farm workers swept off the veld [farm] were told they would be given food only when they reported for work with the army. They were paid one shilling a day. Each month one pound - two-thirds of their wages - was deducted towards the cost of feeding their families in the camps. Black men were paying for their wives and children to be imprisoned. If black workers escaped, they were treated as deserters.²⁰

Even during the most gruesome acts of war, an alliance based on the construct of Whiteness gave Afrikaners a benefit over Blacks. This privilege born from physically and emotionally destroying Black families only intensified with time as Afrikaners established an ongoing discourse of victimization at the hands of the British who stole their right to occupy South Africa. This propaganda campaign included decades of erasing Black history in the camps in order to firmly establish Afrikaners as South Africa's martyrs.

After the war, the British maintained political power and were able to focus on exploiting Black land and labor. In 1910, the Union of South Africa was formed essentially as a British colony, eight years after the Treaty of Vereeniging established peace between Anglos and Boers.²¹ The so-called union deliberately ignored the majority Indigenous population and increasingly passed laws to disenfranchise them. The union

²⁰ Chris McGreal, "Black Victims in a White Man's War," *The Observer*, October 10, 1999, sec. Global, <https://www.theguardian.com/theobserver/1999/oct/10/focus.news>.

²¹ Peter Henshaw, "The 'Key to South Africa' in the 1890s: Delagoa Bay and the Origins of the South African War," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 24, no. 3 (1998): 527-43.

would in fact begin to solidify a White supremacist ideology as laws were continuously enacted to delimit movement along racial lines and to engender fear of the other. As early as 1899,

...the Transvaal Volksraad had prohibited Africans from walking on the sidewalks of streets. Africans were excluded from trade and from all skilled work; nor could they own land individually. The vast bulk of the African population 'squatted' on white-owned land working as sharecroppers or labour tenants in exchange for a place to live.²²

In 1912, the South African National Congress (ANC) was born to unite and empower Indigenous peoples and within a year they were met with the most severe administrative threat to their livelihood. The Native Lands Act forbade the sale and purchase of land between people of different races. It established reserves for Indigenous people called Bantustans, based on the notion of a Bantu race, inferior to the White race. Like Native American reservations, these land plots were largely infertile. Indigenous were only allowed to leave if given permission to work for Whites through a series of pass laws. According to David Massey's 1978 labor study:

An explicit long range goal of separate development is to make all black workers in South Africa "foreign" migrant workers with homes in their respective tribal "homelands." The impoverished condition of the designated homelands and their small size (they comprise less than thirteen percent of the land area of South Africa) insures that their citizens will have to continue to seek employment in white South Africa in large numbers.²³

²² Meredith, *Diamonds, Gold, and War*, 497.

²³ David Massey, "Class Struggle and Migrant Labor in South African Gold Mines," *Canadian Journal of African Studies / Revue Canadienne Des Études Africaines* 17, no. 3 (1983): 439.

Land and labor policies worked together to ensure Indigenous people and their cultural practices would effectively hold no power in the formation of the country under British rule. Each new policy was an attack on ancient epistemologies, a hindrance to innovation, and a threat to the health and sanity of Indigenous people. These policies of separation were crystalized in 1948, when the National Party officially established the Apartheid regime.

Having lost what they term the “Frontier Wars,” many members of the Afrikaaner population still view the battles with a pained nostalgia and as evidence of their oppressed status in South African society despite disproportionately high land ownership and standard of living.²⁴ The reality that Blacks and Boers were both imprisoned in concentration camps could have led to an alliance based on shared victimization but as reported by McGreal, “Nearly 28,000 Afrikaners succumbed to starvation, disease and exposure in the camps as the British army razed thousands of farm houses to deny the Boer commandos support in the bush. The immense suffering they [the British] caused helped drive the [Afrikaner] National Party to victory in 1948 and provided a justification for apartheid.”²⁵

Apartheid means apartness in Afrikaans. In policy it merely established a place for each race. In practice it was the cruel and violent dispossession of culture, political power and land from Black people. In his autobiography, Nelson Mandela explains, “The often haphazard segregation of the past three hundred years was to be consolidated into a

²⁴ Gary Baines, “Lionising De La Rey: Afrikaner Identity Politics and Performative Nostalgia in Post-Apartheid South Africa,” *African Identities* 11, no. 3 (August 1, 2013): 249–59.

²⁵ McGreal, “Black Victims in a White Man’s War.”

monolithic system that was diabolical in its detail, inescapable in its reach, and overwhelming in its power.”²⁶ For over forty years, as the rest of Africa awakened to its anti-colonial independence, South Africa only became more deeply enshrouded in the nightmare of apartheid. It is important to know that every one of the brutal laws of apartheid was met with resistance in many forms: artistic, dialogic, legal, subtle, and/or violent. During the Civil Rights era, as the world watched African Americans fight some of the same battles against racial oppression and win, they watched South Africans fight and lose.

In 1960, the international Anti-Apartheid Movement (AAM) was organized in England. They coordinated with non-profit organizations, corporations and governments worldwide to make it clear to the apartheid regime that the world would not sit idly by while humanity was brutalized. AAM catalyzed similar networks worldwide, gradually bringing apartheid to a boiling point. Over thirty years, they raised international awareness to pressure the British and other governments to stop trade and cut off oil supplies and arms, effectively isolating the regime until apartheid was no longer financially viable.²⁷ Within the country, numerous leaders and everyday citizens actively and consistently risked their lives to end apartheid. Although Winnie and Nelson Mandela are now household names in many parts of the world, many other heroes come to mind for South Africans. The legacy of Steve Biko in particular plays an important role in present-day liberation struggles.

²⁶ Nelson Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom: The Autobiography of Nelson Mandela* (Boston: Back Bay Books, 1995), 111.

²⁷ “The British Anti-Apartheid Movement | South African History Online,” accessed April 16, 2020, <https://www.sahistory.org.za/article/british-anti-apartheid-movement>.

Biko is considered the father of the Black Consciousness movement, largely credited with forming the socio-cultural ideologies of the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa. Steve Biko was a medical student who co-founded and was the first president of the South African Students' Organization (SASO). Black Consciousness is an ideology supported by various individuals and grass-roots organizations. Inspired by African American liberation theorists like Frederick Douglass, Malcom X, Huey Newton, as well as Afro-Caribbeans like Toussaint L'Ouverture and Frantz Fanon, Biko used the term Black to highlight the intrinsic diasporic connections of oppressed members of the African diaspora *and* as a political consciousness that would include all those forbidden access to White wealth and social power in South Africa including those labeled Indian, Coloured, and Native by apartheid protocols. In the Introduction to *I Write What I Like*, a collection of selected writings by Biko, scholar/activists Malusi and Thoko Mpumlwana explain that the most significant themes in Biko's writing include problematizing ethnocentrism and racism, proposing the restoration of African culture and religions as foundational to national heritage, and Black solidarity to ensure economic empowerment for historically disadvantaged communities.²⁸ Black Consciousness ideology, then, goes beyond the demands to end apartheid and establishes mandates and practices for Black people to take up for themselves in order to heal and thrive after apartheid falls. Black Consciousness is a holistic decolonial praxis that centers Indigenous epistemologies in its approach to visualizing and activating social communication, spiritual and cultural expression, political power and human liberation.

²⁸ Steve Biko, *I Write What I Like*, 3rd ed. (Chicago, IL: University Of Chicago Press, 2002).

In contrast to the ANC's discourse around reconciliation and cooperation, Biko (like Winnie Mandela) was bold in his outspoken critique of apartheid and the need to rebuild South Africa around African values. On August 18, 1977, police arrested and tortured Steve Biko until his brain hemorrhaged. On September 11, 1977, he was transported naked to Pretoria Central Prison, where he died the next day alone on the floor of a cell. He was thirty years old. A few months before he died, he stated in an interview, "You are either alive and proud or you are dead... And your method of death can be a politicizing thing."²⁹ Black Consciousness gave Biko and many others their purpose in life. Biko's murder would be one of many political assassinations carried out to terrorize South Africans into submitting to the whims of apartheid, but that ultimately only fanned the flames of their rebellion.

The transition from the Union of South Africa's apartheid system administered by the Afrikaner-led National Party to the ANC party's democratic Republic of South Africa is often described as a non-violent transfer of power. Nelson Mandela did not personally use violence to secure his nomination to presidency but the decades of violence were absolutely catalytic in the country's transformation. Mandela's own prison term of twenty-seven years was not without violence either. The country's memory is stained with the blood of youth massacred while peacefully protesting and that of countless individuals simply carrying out daily tasks interrupted by racial violence. Many of those assaults never made it to the deeply censored headlines. They are archived in the stories, flesh, and bones of everyday people. The transition to democracy would more aptly be

²⁹ Biko, 152.

described as a terrorist campaign that incited a civil war with a very uneven distribution of arms.

Those stories, suppressed during apartheid, were resurrected during the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) Hearings that began in 1996. The commission created three committees attempting to appropriately manage the range of violations. The Human Rights Violation Committee investigated abuses that occurred between 1960 and 1994, directing victims to the Reparation and Rehabilitation Committee that was charged with restoring dignity and activating community healing. The last committee dealt with perpetrators. Those committing offenses between March 1, 1960 and December 6, 1993 could apply for amnesty and if granted, would be guaranteed freedom from prosecution for said offense.³⁰ According to their final report, “The Commission received statements from 21290 (twenty one thousand two hundred and ninety) people, of whom more than 19 050 (Nineteen thousand and fifty) were found to be victims of a gross violation of human rights. In addition, more than 2975 victims emerged from the amnesty process.”³¹ It’s important to note that the TRC process was not a judicial one. No perpetrator would be given a fine or jail time as a result of their testimony. As Theater scholar Catherine Cole notes, it was a performance.³² This nomenclature does not designate the testimony fiction or entertainment. Instead it reminds us that the ancient act of story-telling and witnessing were necessary to heal and to try to become a new nation.

³⁰ “TRC/Committees,” accessed April 28, 2020, <https://www.justice.gov.za/trc/trccom.html>.

³¹ “Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission,” TRC Final Report Volume 7 Part 5, 2002, <https://www.justice.gov.za/trc/report/index.htm>.

³² Catherine M. Cole, *Performing South Africa's Truth Commission: Stages of Transition* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009).

Over the next twenty-five years, South Africa experienced all of the predictable growing pains of a reformed country exacerbated by centuries of exploitation and new forms of corruption. By 2015, the debates over apartheid had transitioned into debates over an even older issue – colonization. As various political parties proposed plans to negotiate land claims with or without the cooperation of current settlers, college students rocked the nation to its core by demanding that decolonization begin with education. Artists participated on stages as well as in the student protests that all began with one small act. In April 2015, Chumami Maxwelle threw human feces at a statue of colonialist Cecil Rhodes that loomed over the University of Cape Town campus. This gesture sparked the #RhodesMustFall (#RMF) movement and inspired the #FeesMustFall (#FMF) movement through 2017, which demanded that universities not raise their fees because it would prevent the majority Black majority poor citizens of the country from attending at all. For several weeks off and on over several months, university campuses across the country shut down and had to reckon with how the living specter of colonialism was eating away at the ideals of Mandela’s ‘rainbow nation.’³³ As police responded with violence in the streets, artists responded with careful consideration of how they would re-form themselves through decolonial performance acts. In my analysis of the protests in relation to conferences, festivals, and performances over the past three years, I explain how performance can move the nation through the intricacies and intimacies of decolonizing the body.

³³ “How Race Relations in the ‘rainbow Nation’ Have Become Toxic,” December 18, 2018, sec. Africa, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-46071479>.

Apartheid robbed South Africa of an Indigenous-led independence movement. Unlike Senegalese contemporary dance artists, whose initial development was reinforced by President Senghor's *negritude* movement,³⁴ South African dancers had to work independently to figure out what contemporaneity would mean when their socio-political landscape seemed to be moving backwards. Middle-aged artists lived through the atrocities of state-sanctioned assaults on life and liberty. Dancers of the 'born-free' generation born post-apartheid know the stories of their parents and grandparents. Many are restless with the discontent of "dreams differed," seeing 80% of the country still living in landless poverty. While well-funded,³⁵ South African contemporary dance was not necessarily united by a nationalistic or Indigenous vision to convey something uniquely South African to the world. It was highly influenced by a long-standing relationship with European ballet and American modern dance. Since the 1970's, it has evolved into a genre as diverse as the country itself. As the nation grapples with questions about what it means to decolonize after the fall of apartheid, my examination of contemporary dance offers insight.

Theoretical Framework

In this dissertation I present contemporary dance as a site of decolonial moves by examining the choreographic techniques of Black women alongside the steps and missteps of scholars and activists working within and alongside the #RMF and #FMF

³⁴ Francesca Castaldi, *Choreographies of African Identities: Negritude, Dance, and the National Ballet of Senegal* (University of Illinois Press, 2006).

³⁵ Vincent Mantsoe, KonKoriti Post Performance Interview, July 4, 2017.

movements. This project is framed by the following questions: What does it mean to decolonize dance in South Africa? What do Black women's movements teach us about how to decolonize South Africa and beyond? To begin to answer these questions I have engaged global Indigenous and post-colonial theorists, interdisciplinary scholarship from the African diaspora as well as Dance, Gender, and Sexuality Studies. Viewed together, the theories I develop below compose a kaleidoscopic vision of South African contemporary dance as a process of becoming in entangled time/space, where movement is both a political and kinesthetic manifestation of African feminism and decolonization.

Throughout my career of embodied and academic research of Africana dance, I have come to know performance as a process of becoming. Through dance, spectacle and spectator co-create a human subject. Ethnographers such as Yvonne Daniel,³⁶ John C. McCall,³⁷ Helene Neveu Kringelbach,³⁸ Rebecca Gearheart,³⁹ and Louise Meintjes⁴⁰ have documented dance as a necessary component of African practices of self-formation in ritual and social dance contexts. Less attention has been paid to this process as it occurs in the concert dance space. I analyze the work through an Africanist performance lens by bringing this Indigenous notion of the function of performance into the realm of African contemporary dance, which is often viewed as a product of Westernization. Performing

³⁶ Yvonne Daniel, *Dancing Wisdom: Embodied Knowledge in Haitian Vodou, Cuban Yoruba, and Bahian Candomblé* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005).

³⁷ John C McCall, *Dancing Histories: Heuristic Ethnography with the Ohafia Igbo* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000).

³⁸ Hélène Neveu Kringelbach, *Dance Circles: Movement, Morality and Self-Fashioning in Urban Senegal* (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2013).

³⁹ Rebecca Gearhart, "Ngoma Memories: How Ritual Music and Dance Shaped the Northern Kenya Coast," *African Studies Review* 48, no. 3 (2005): 21–47.

⁴⁰ Louise Meintjes and T. J. Lemon, *Dust of the Zulu: Ngoma Aesthetics after Apartheid* (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2017).

African philosophy on the Western stage, dance artists begin to decolonize contemporary dance.

Conceiving of movement as both the mobilization of like-minded bodies and as the physical expression of creation, I seek to expand understandings of decolonization as an embodied practice. Displacement of bodies and constraints against movement are fundamental actions of colonial logic everywhere it exists. As Native Studies/Dance scholar Tria Blu Wakpa says, “The management of Native movement is central to settler colonialism.”⁴¹ Likewise, professor of Social Anthropology at the University of Cape Town, Francis Nyamnjoh explains that

The making of contemporary South Africa is the story, per excellence, of visible and invisible mobilities...Official and popular discourses are infused with a deep suspicion of those who move, particularly those moving to urban areas and between countries and continents. Freedom of movement, especially by people deemed to be less endowed economically, is perceived by those who consider themselves more economically gifted as potentially disastrous and thus needing to be contained at all costs and against all odds.⁴²

Because the restraint of movement was germane to both colonialism and apartheid, movement holds the potential to liberate Black bodies from colonial constraints. This can be seen in the protests that catapulted South Africa’s anti-apartheid movement into international news. The high-kneed jumps and singing of the *Toyi-Toyi* inspired by Zimbabwean liberation fighters is *the* quintessential image of how thousands of ordinary South Africans brought down apartheid. And yet, dance is not inherently liberating. As

⁴¹ Tria Blu Wakpa, “Dancing Around Race: Whiteness in Higher Education” (Anti-colonialism Break Out Session, University of Utah, January 19, 2020).

⁴² Francis B. Nyamnjoh, *#RhodesMustFall: Nibbling at Resilient Colonialism in South Africa* (Langaa RPCIG, 2016), 14.

Jane C. Desmond,⁴³ and Randy Martin⁴⁴ have shown, dance can reproduce the embodiments of oppression. Therefore I identify choreographic procedures and products that seem to explicitly engage decolonial techniques. In my analysis these are techniques that center Indigenous stories and worldviews that pre-date invasion as well as those that convey experiences of colonial torture, assimilation, appropriation and resilience. Rather than a stable definition or set of instructions for how to decolonize, my analysis has produced a notion of decolonization that is multi-faceted and multi-modal. Because of the centrality of land and its dispossession, community and forced isolation, decolonial moves look and behave differently in different places and times. In each case, decolonizing dance involves centering Indigenous philosophies and practices, confronting colonialism and its ongoing violence, and manifesting a world beyond it.

I anchor my review of Indigenous literature from the Americas and Africa in theories that address Indigenous approaches to the elements of dance: space, time, and energy. I have outlined how displacement is a pivotal characteristic of settler colonialism and its ability to reproduce colonial power relations long after the event of invasion. In Indigenous epistemologies, space can be understood as land, the space between, and a way of relating to the world through a relationship with one's own home. To theorize African women's command of the stage, I looked to Indigenous notions of inhabiting space. In my performance analysis I extend Wakpa's use of Mishauna Goeman's

⁴³ Jane C. Desmond, *Dancing Desires: Choreographing Sexualities On And Off The Stage* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2001).

⁴⁴ Randy Martin, *Critical Moves: Dance Studies in Theory and Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998).

(re)mapping concept to describe how Black dance artists create new relationships with the stage space through decolonial choreographic practices.

Non-linear time factors heavily in my study of global interdisciplinary Indigenous scholarship. Native Studies scholar Mark Rifkin argues that colonial notions of time place Indigenous epistemologies and practices in the past, surviving only as relics or primitive versions of the true American life, which is supposedly modern and more universally understood. This modern time becomes normative and all other concepts of time constitute a break that is abject. This worldview is reflected in the sharp distinctions funders and presenters place between traditional and modern dance that have been problematized by dance scholars such as Jacqueline Shea Murphy⁴⁵ and Ananya Chatterjea.⁴⁶ Indigenous communities have to translate their experiences into Western notions of time, which affect legal issues as well as aesthetic ones. Rifkin's notion of *Indigenous orientation* replaces the idea of tradition as unbroken continuity with the notion of continuity as the ongoing process of becoming, in relation to land and community, with orientations towards time that are perhaps more amorphous and layered. Dance, disappearing as it comes into being,⁴⁷ is the perfect example of non-linear time.

Dancing through Indigenous epistemologies offers a mode of understanding time as collectively constructed and circularly experienced. Senegalese poet Birago Diop's poem "Breaths" exemplifies how time and the natural world are circularly encompassed.

⁴⁵ Jacqueline Shea Murphy, *The People Have Never Stopped Dancing: Native American Modern Dance Histories* (Univ Of Minnesota Press, 2007).

⁴⁶ Ananya Chatterjea, "On the Value of Mistranslations and Contaminations: The Category of 'Contemporary Choreography' in Asian Dance," *Dance Research Journal* 45, no. 1 (April 20, 2013): 4–21.

⁴⁷ Peggy Phelan, "The Ontology of Performance: Representation Without Reproduction," in *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London: Routledge, 1993), 146–66.

The dead are not under the Earth:
They are in the Tree that trembles
They are in the Wood that groans
They are in the Water that flows
They are in the Water that lies still,
They are in the Hut,
They are in the Crowd:
The Dead are not dead.⁴⁸

Similarly, African-American scholar/dancer Kariamuwelsh's writings on African dance offer a philosophy of indestructible energy that exemplifies circular time. In *Zimbabwe Dance* she establishes the concept of *ancestorism* as a criterion of African dance. This assertion that one's ancestors play an active role in the realm of the living is a praxis found throughout the African continent and in various genres. This means that death is another form of coming into being. Dancing at funerals facilitates the transition. Dance as a mediator between life and death can happen in sacred and secular spaces. Welsh explains, "...all traditional dances are convertible as "agents" of the deities and ancestors, even if the intent of the dance was not for that purpose."⁴⁹ Therefore an invitation to ancestors in contemporary choreographic work can enfold tradition into the present and even the future, creating a circular understanding of time. Inviting ancestors into choreography disrupts linear time and asserts an African epistemology on the Western proscenium stage.

Contemporary dance is often figured as the genre of innovation and experimentation. Decolonial African contemporary dance recovers the past to re-imagine

⁴⁸ Sana Camara and R. H. Mitsch, "Birago Diop's Poetic Contribution to the Ideology of Negritude," *Research in African Literatures* 33, no. 4 (2002): 116.

⁴⁹ Kariamuwelsh-Asante, *Zimbabwe Dance: Rhythmic Forces, Ancestral Voices, and Aesthetic Analysis* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Pr, 2000), 13.

possibilities for Black bodies. Rifkin theorizes *subjunctivity* as what might, could, or should occur in Native life. As an aesthetic, the subjunctive state manifests futurity in performance by igniting the past. In creative experimentation, memory plays an important role not only as the jumping-off-point for the imagined space, but as a site to reclaim and reuse Indigenous epistemologies nearly destroyed by colonialism. Bringing memory into the future space is restorative and disrupts the Western forward projection of time.

To explain this post-colonial aesthetic of Indigenous space/time at work in African contemporary dance, I employ Cameroonian philosopher Achille Mbembe's notion of *entanglement*. As it sounds, the space/time of colonized subjects is one of ensnarled epistemologies both imposed and Indigenous. These differing and conflicting habits, worldviews and regulations circumscribe the lived experience that artists navigate. Thus an entangled aesthetic is one without resolution. Its vocabulary is not accurately described by terms such as fusion or hybrid. Through performance the subject is continually co-created with the audience rather than revealed.

Moving energy through post-colonial space/time asserts Indigenous survival and reproduction. Zimbabwean scholar Pascah Mungwini employs the term *epistemicide* to describe the process of genocidal colonization and forced assimilation whereby over centuries, Europeans attempted to kill whole philosophies and ways of living. My analysis roots out those surviving Indigenous epistemologies that have been under-theorized in studies of concert dance in Africa. Māori scholar Manulani Aluli Meyer's work informs how I understand Indigenous epistemologies around energy. In "Hawaiian

Hermeneutics and the Triangulation of Meaning: Gross, Subtle, Causal,” Meyer outlines seven tenets of Indigenous thought. Her explanation of spirituality as experiential knowing foregrounds embodiment as essential for spiritual knowledge. Land contextualizes and incites knowledge. Spirituality is connected to land and self, which are interrelated and interdependent. Land, spirit, and self come to be known through the senses and are not knowable through dogma or someone else’s experience. Because thoughts have intentions and manifest tangible consequences, thoughts are not separate entities from bodily experiences. Expanding these notions to dance making, I argue that dance made from an Indigenous paradigm is in relation to land and its influence on experiential, embodied, and spiritual knowledge expressed through circular time. As the ‘mother of African contemporary dance’ Germaine Acogny says, “African dance is dancing with the cosmos.”⁵⁰ My performance analyses therefore place concerts within the contexts of land, temporality and spirit.

In my initial review of the literature I intentionally avoided scholarship from the African diaspora in the Americas as it tends to focus on issues of displacement and retentions from West Africa not immediately relevant to a study of South Africa. However, as I examined the lives and works of dance artists more closely, I encountered another dimension of circular time/space. South African political theories and aesthetics have been influenced by oscillating interactions with African-America. As previously discussed, Black Consciousness theory is founded on diasporic philosophies and liberation strategies. In my examination of #RMF and #FMF activists I found that its

⁵⁰ Germaine Acogny, Pattie Mackenzie, and Billie Mahoney, *Dance on. Germaine Acogny*, electronic resource (Insight Media, 2008), <http://www.aspresolver.com/aspresolver.asp?DAIV;607259>.

present-day application in the decolonial movement is enhanced by Black feminist scholars like bell hooks. African American dance also plays an important role. Several of the artists I encountered had extensive ballet training but were first *inspired* to pursue dance after watching music videos of Michael Jackson performing in the 1980's.⁵¹ Mamela Nyamza was influenced by extensive training from the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre and Dada Masilo's work gestures towards the West African retentions in Black dance and social life that have circled back to Africa through Hip Hop. Locating these diasporic exchanges emphasizes the need for a dynamic theory of Black performance that accounts for initiation, rupture, repair and transcendence of form.

Drawing from global experiences of and theories on Indigenous and Africana movements and moves, I hope to expand notions of Indigeneity and Blackness to hold space for the decolonial potential of movement in post-colonial space/time. In this effort, I have found it productive to reflect temporal and geographic border fluidity as I aim for the greatest amount of utility and mobility in my own use of language. Since the 1970's many Indigenous South Africans have aligned themselves with the Black Consciousness movement. This, along with the international use of the term Black as a marker of African ancestry, diasporic cultural practices that survived slavery, and shared experiences of anti-Black racism, affirms Blackness as a socio-political orientation rather than an ethnicity. I use the term Indigenous when describing pre-colonial practices and perspectives that continue to help shape practices and perspectives of people racialized as Black. When available and appropriate, I refer to theories and practices of specific ethnic

⁵¹ Gregory Maqoma, "Identity, Diversity, and Modernity in an Urban Cultural Cocktail," *African Arts* 44, no. 4 (2011): 65–71, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41330743>.

groups. To respond appropriately to the ways that people name themselves, I refer to the artists I am focusing on as Black women.

Practitioners of contemporary dance in South Africa are diverse in gender. I am drawn to choreographers who identify as Black women in South Africa because of the particular tropes of Black womanhood in Western and African epistemologies. To inform this aspect of research, I draw from African theorists in gender and sexuality studies. Barbara Thompson's anthology *Black Womanhood: Images, Icons, and Ideologies of the African Body* shows how Western missionaries, colonialists and photographers have for centuries crafted spectacular exhibitionist imagery of African women, painting them as both ugly and hypersexual, thus available for sexual exploitation. African artists, however, have always created their own narratives of womanhood that figure the Black female body as a site of incredible power, knowledge, beauty, and resilience. Investment in these ways of knowing Black women's bodies directs my Africanist feminist approach to dance research.

Just as I push and pull at notions of Indigeneity and Blackness I have had to deconstruct my American concept of womanhood. Nigerian gender theorist Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí's *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses* demonstrates that gender is not a simple or universally understood notion. The pairing of biological sex and gender has not always been an African practice.⁵² Indigenous civilizations have their own notions of gender and sexuality that were intercepted during colonialism. Whereas performing gender is a relatively modern

⁵² Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí, *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

concept in the West, Africans have for centuries, theorized gender as performance by creating rituals for entering and enacting gender roles that were not completely assigned at birth. Oyěwùmí and others note that in many African languages including isiXhosa, personhood is not gendered.⁵³ Therefore, gender roles are accumulated over time and circumstance, and facilitated by ritual, not immediately ascribed by genitalia. Dance is central to most of these rites of passage and as I will demonstrate, dance still facilitates gender fluidity in Africana dance performance.

This dissertation highlights the generative power of Black women's performance rather than the objectifying gaze of Western spectatorship. Too much foreign historical discourse on Black South African women begins and ends with exploitation. The Western obsession with Black bodies and their mythologized sexuality is best evidenced in the famous case of Sarah Baartman. Dubbed the 'Hottentot Venus' to mock her so-called steatopygia, Baartman was displayed as a freak of nature for entertainment audiences and as a typical Khoe-San woman for social and biological science audiences from at least 1810-1815 in London and Paris. A mold of her genitalia remained on display in Paris for 180 years. As president, Nelson Mandela negotiated for eight years to have her remains returned to South Africa to be buried in 2002.⁵⁴ Baartman's story has been the subject of countless scholarly articles, books, documentaries and films as historians debate the degree to which she demonstrated agency. Years of research have sedimented her story and in effect oversimplified the complexities of Black women's

⁵³ Rithuli Orleyn, Personal Communication, July 11, 2018.

⁵⁴ Pamela Scully and Clifton Crais, "Race and Erasure: Sara Baartman and Hendrik Cesars in Cape Town and London," *Journal of British Studies* 47, no. 2 (2008): 301–23, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25482758>.

experiences in the country, such that carving space for the re-theorization of Black women in South Africa is as needed as ever. Black women using their own bodies to enact gestures and stories of their own making craft a counter-narrative to the exploited exhibited South African female body. Whereas Western European discourse in the Victorian-era defined women as innately inferior, irrational, and weak, at the moment of invasion, African women were active leaders in all segments of society. Whereas colonial powers saw non-Europeans as subhuman, and devised race as an essential unchanging mark of one's scale of humanity, many African peoples were involved in cultural practices based in fluid and dynamic notions of self and community.⁵⁵ Thus, in concert dance, creating gender-neutral choreography or performing stories and images of empowered women is not something European-American women started in the late 20th century as some dance historians would have us believe,⁵⁶ but may in fact be an expression of a much older African epistemology. Whereas gender was not initially a primary organizing principle in South African Indigenous communities, the post-colonial society has had to operate under the terms of White supremacist hetero-patriarchy in order to survive. Thus, gender is now a socializing factor in Africa and must be addressed in an examination of South African bodies. But rather than expressing pre-formed determinations of the body, South African choreographers theorize embodiment and form identities in motion. Though the movement vocabulary may be novel, tradition is present in the historic acknowledgement of Black women's imperative humanity.

⁵⁵ Andrea Cornwall, ed., *Readings in Gender in Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005).

⁵⁶ Susan Manning, "The Female Dancer and the Male Gaze: Feminist Critiques of Early Modern Dance," in *Meaning in Motion: New Cultural Studies of Dance*, ed. Jane C. Desmond (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 1997).

Methods

A place rich in diversity and complexity demands equally diverse and complex approaches to research. The various methods I use in this project are inspired by dance scholar Deidre Sklar, who writes, "...based on the premise that movement embodies cultural knowledge, I am advocating an approach that considers movement performance not just as visual spectacle but as kinesthetic, conceptual, and emotional experience that depends upon cultural learning. Since we all inevitably embody our own very particular cultural perspectives, we must do more than look at movement when we write about dance."⁵⁷ Writing about concert dance from this multi-angled approach, my project applies Africanist and feminist theorizing to ethnography, performance analysis, and embodied research.

My fieldwork is rooted in the praxis of critical feminist ethnography. Linda Tuhiwai Smith and Kamala Visweswaran point to the historical significance and use value of making transparent and analyzing the social positions of researchers and the subjects of their research. By tending to the myriad of ways that race, class, and gender shape how one does research and how one responds to a researcher, the 'data' collected is revealed to be non-neutral and potentially beneficial or damaging regardless of the intentions of researchers. Furthermore, these scholars explain that silence and misdirection may be tactics employed by research subjects for reasons of self-preservation or self-determination. I attend to the speech, silence, and discrepancies of

⁵⁷ Deidre Sklar, "Five Premises for a Culturally Sensitive Approach to Dance," in *Moving History/Dancing Cultures: A Dance History Reader*, ed. Ann Dils and Ann Cooper Albright (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan, 2013).

the participants in this research, rather than trying to present one conclusive narrative of identity formation. I include an analysis of power in some of the communities and institutions where contemporary dance takes place, a consideration of my own positionality as a researcher, and the Indigenous theorizing that facilitates paradigmatic guidance by the ‘objects’ of research.

This project includes fieldwork completed during three trips to South Africa from June 21st to July 21st 2017, from June 21st through July 15th 2018, and from March 31st through April 6th 2019. Analysis of performances and interviews in Makhanda, Los Angeles, and New York City accompany that of embodied research in the form of movement classes and a performance in Tshwane. Although the bulk of this project would be categorized as performance analysis rather than ethnography, fieldwork is a significant aspect of this project because it allows me to attend to what is said and done before, after, and outside of the official events. As Dr. Anthonia Kalu taught me, in African traditions the festival is not just the procession in the street. It is the preparation beforehand, the conversations on the sidelines, and everything that happens as a result. My analysis would have been impossible without the long walks through Makhanda, the conversations about Black art at The Bag Factory gallery in Johannesburg, the frustrated whispers in the hallway between presentations at the University of Cape Town, or the echoes of kwaito music booming from distant township parties that provided a soundtrack to my jetlagged twilight hours.

In addition to viewing choreographic works in their home territory, being in South Africa allowed me to interview artists and scholars directly. In the summer of 2017, I

conducted IRB-approved interviews with contemporary dance-maker Vincent Mantsoe, Professor Angelika Schroeder, the Artistic Director of Cape Town Ballet, Debbie Turner, and dance student Danny Jones with her mother Glenda Jones, director of Afrika Ablaze Dance Company. In this first set of interviews I asked general questions about their work and about how gender and race affect contemporary dance communities in South Africa. In 2018, I interviewed Sbondalisa Ndaba, Mamela Nyamza, and Neliswa Rushualuang about their artistic lives and the works I had the privilege to view. From the interviews I learned about the artists' intentions and creative processes that are not directly visible in performance. The critical feminist research paradigm helped me see that as much as I am responsible for creating this project, I must leave room for it to be guided by the wisdom and needs of those who I am researching. Borrowing a technique from dance ethnographer Juanita Suarez, I shared my interviews and findings with participants and sought their guidance throughout.⁵⁸ These exchanges grounded my research in lived experiences and expanded my knowledge with their suggestions for further research.

My fieldwork analysis also included decolonial gatherings such as the biannual Confluences conference at the University of Cape Town, and the Decolonial Aesthetics Creative Lab held at Rhodes University. The UCT dance department has held a strong influence on the development of concert dance in Cape Town and the country at large, with its beginnings as a Whites-only school of ballet through its transformation into a multidisciplinary, multi-ethnic, multi-abled program offering undergraduate and graduate

⁵⁸ Juanita Suarez, "Spectres of the Dark: The Dance-Making Manifesto of Latina/Chicana Choreographies," in *Fields in Motion: Ethnography in the Worlds of Dance*, ed. Dena Davida (Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2011).

degrees. In July 2017, I participated in paper presentations, dance classes, and panel discussions on the topic of “Deciphering Decolonisation in Dance Pedagogy in the 21st century.” Likewise, the Decolonial Aesthetics Creative Lab, in which I participated, was an interdisciplinary gathering of artists interested in theorizing and creatively enacting decoloniality through the arts.

Decolonial Aesthetics is a theory developed by Argentine semiotician Walter D. Mignolo. In his essay “Decolonial Aesthetics: Colonial Wounds/Decolonial Healings,” he unpacks the culture and history of the term aesthetics, its movement from Greece to Germany and its mobilization in Western cultural domination. He writes, “Decolonial aesthetics is an option that delivers a radical critique to modern, postmodern, and altermodern aesthetics and, simultaneously, contributes to making visible decolonial subjectivities...”⁵⁹ I read resonance in Mignolo’s work and the performances I attended where dance-makers critique performance canons and hidden expectations, while offering alternate options for making meaning through artistry. I analyze these gatherings in conversation with live performance to recognize the history and trajectory of contemporary dance as a decolonial praxis in South Africa.

Performance analysis is a method used in Dance Studies in part to examine what moving bodies illuminate about the negotiation of political power. After viewing over twenty choreographies during the National Arts Festivals in 2017 and 2018, and another thirty at the Dance Umbrella Africa Festival in 2019, I’ve chosen to focus on the works I

⁵⁹ Walter D. Mignolo, “Decolonial Aesthetics: Colonial Wounds/Decolonial Healings – Social Text,” accessed July 18, 2018, https://socialtextjournal.org/periscope_article/decolonial-aesthetics-colonial-woundsdecolonial-healings/.

feel most clearly renegotiate political power by critiquing colonial subjugation and offering a decolonial alternative by reconfiguring aesthetics.

As pioneering dance ethnographer Katherine Dunham exemplified, participating in dance brings the researcher a step closer to being an ‘insider’ in the community studied, which not only builds trust but offers knowledge and insight not gained through observation alone.⁶⁰ Embodied research is a methodology used by several dance scholars, such as Melissa Blanco-Borelli, whose childhood hip rotations inspired the theory of hip(g)nosis in her archival research in Cuba. Dancer/ethnographer Dena Davida’s anthology *Fields in Motion* exemplifies the dancer-as-researcher and researcher-as-dancer methodology, demonstrating that dancer-researchers benefit from having a heightened sense of kinesthetic awareness and empathy that can be utilized while viewing dance.⁶¹ Foster’s work on kinesthetic empathy supports the findings of neuroscientists who claim that “mirror neurons” help us feel what others’ feel when looking at them, but her work complicates this with the socio-cultural elucidation that we can also use that trait selectively when conditioned to do so.⁶² We don’t empathize with all bodies equally. In my use of embodiment as research, I offer a diversely disciplined mind/body. My over twenty years of practicing social, ritual, and concert dance forms from the United States, Europe, and the African diaspora have taught me to use movement as a tool of intercultural inquiry and communication. This takes place in the

⁶⁰ Katherine Dunham, *Island Possessed* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1969), <https://www.press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/I/bo3615198.html>.

⁶¹ Dena Davida, ed., *Fields in Motion: Ethnography in the Worlds of Dance* (Waterloo, Ont.: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2011).

⁶² Susan Leigh Foster, *Choreographing Empathy: Kinesthesia in Performance* (Routledge, 2010).

form of participant-observation in Dada Masilo's master class in Los Angeles, and as a teacher and performer at the Dance Umbrella Africa festival in 2019.

While the analytic lens of Dance Studies has historically been largely Western, these moments and the academic investigations they inspired facilitate my development of an Africanist lens from which to view contemporary concert dance. I enter this research from three distinct vantage points and take on three distinct methodologies as a dancer, choreographer, and researcher. In a sense, each of these roles and strategies involve examining and demonstrating, experimenting and creating, and observing and responding. From these overlapping practices, I hope this dissertation will be read as an observational, embodied, and reflective act of creativity.

Positionalities: Where I Stand and How I Move

First Position: American

On a Spring day in 1994 I arrived at Sheppard Middle School in San Jose, California carrying a palm-sized South African flag. Nelson Mandela had just been elected President of the same country that shackled him as a political prisoner for twenty-seven years. This unimaginable moment was made possible by millions of small actions and thousands of mortal sacrifices. My family had attended anti-apartheid rallies in the 1980's and 1990's and I remember being a very small child listening to the very big talk of then-presidential candidate Jesse Jackson who would continue to address what he

called apartheid in the United States even until Nelson Mandela's death in 2013.⁶³ These snapshots of memory do not fully account for my interest in South African dance but they may have laid a foundation my connection to a place far away but somehow familiar.

Many parallels have been drawn between the United States and South Africa. Though separated by thousands of miles, America and South Africa share a history of suppressing movement via colonialism and racial segregation in the 20th century; but the similarities do not end there. On June 20th 2018, the day before I took my second trip, President Trump attempted to quiet the raging protests⁶⁴ from inside and outside the government to his 'zero tolerance' policy on immigration that tore babies from their mothers' breasts and placed them in cages inside detention centers all over the country.⁶⁵ At the same time, South Africa was dealing with a decade of violent attacks on immigrants, no doubt the xenophobic result of centuries of mismanaged resources, racialization, and isolation. Despite our tendency to claim the moral high ground after apartheid, geographer Joseph Nevins compares these American assaults on mobility to those of apartheid, stating that

⁶³ Rebecca Shabad, "'Apartheid Remains' in US, Jackson Says," Text, TheHill, December 8, 2013, <https://thehill.com/blogs/blog-briefing-room/news/192415-apartheid-remains-in-us-rev-jackson-says-in-mandela-reflection>.

⁶⁴ Alexandra Yoon-Hendricks and Zoe Greenberg, "Protests Across U.S. Call for End to Migrant Family Separations," *The New York Times*, June 30, 2018, sec. U.S., <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/30/us/politics/trump-protests-family-separation.html>.

⁶⁵ "Affording Congress an Opportunity to Address Family Separation," The White House, accessed April 30, 2020, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/affording-congress-opportunity-address-family-separation/>.

... there is little question that immigration enforcement in wealthy countries such as the United States or those of the European Union functions in an apartheid-like manner. Given that they regulate mobility and residence based on, among other factors, geographic origins — one of the foundations of supposed racial distinctions — they inevitably limit the rights and protections afforded to migrants because of an essentialized characteristic over which the migrants have no control. In doing so, state agents (re)produce sociogeographic, nation-state based distinctions between “us” and “them,” “here” and “there,” drawing upon and exacerbating global socioeconomic inequalities.⁶⁶

Again and still, the state regulation of movement intrinsically characterizes the two settler-colonial nations and their ongoing battles with racial identity marked in place and time. Black women are doubly aware of the encroachment of colonial ideology in our lived reality. In both countries, around the same time, Black women were playing leading roles in removing colonial monuments. In North Carolina and Virginia to name a few, their acts were met by violence from everyday citizens and from police.⁶⁷

South Africa is known worldwide for having high rates of violence against women and other forms of gender based violence, but less common knowledge is that the likelihood of being raped in the U.S. is about the same. Around one in five women will be sexually assaulted in her lifetime.⁶⁸ The major difference is that Americans do not openly condone assault whereas there are pockets of South African male youth who

⁶⁶ Joseph Nevins, “Policing Mobility: Maintaining Global Apartheid from South Africa to the United States,” in *Beyond Walls and Cages: Prisons, Borders, and Global Crisis*, ed. Jenna M. Loyd, Matt Mitchelson, and Andrew Burrige (Athens, UNITED STATES: University of Georgia Press, 2012), <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ucr/detail.action?docID=1222485>.

⁶⁷ Tyler Stiem, “Statue Wars: What Should We Do with Troublesome Monuments?,” *The Guardian*, September 26, 2018, sec. Cities, <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2018/sep/26/statue-wars-what-should-we-do-with-troublesome-monuments>.

⁶⁸ CDC, “Sexual Assault Awareness,” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, April 13, 2020, <http://www.cdc.gov/injury/features/sexualviolence/>.

openly admit to committing rape.⁶⁹ Nonetheless, massive protests against gender-based violence have made responding to the issue unavoidable as I discuss in Chapter Two. Queer citizens in both countries are at an even greater risk. In 2011, a comprehensive study of sexual violence against gay lesbian and bisexual Americans found that “approximately 11–17% of women and 2–3% of men in the United States experience sexual assault during their lifetimes...the prevalence of estimates of LSA [lifetime sexual assault] reported are approximately 15.6–85.0% for lesbian and bisexual (LB) women and 11.8–54.0% for gay and bisexual (GB) men.”⁷⁰ Over the last five years I recall several instances where the murders of transgender women stained headlines in the U.S. and South Africa during the same week. We are linked not only by historic events but by our present-day atrocities as well. The looming threat of violence for queer Black women informs and inspires my research into their performative techniques for self-preservation and identity formation.

Learning about contemporary dance in South Africa has revealed several other similar paradigms. In both countries, Black artists are expected to choose between ‘ethnic’ or abstract aesthetics. Black artists are expected to represent a racialized experience on stage. Women are underrepresented and under-supported as choreographers, and there is a lack of funding overall. Thus, similar histories of race and gender oppression have present-day repercussions in the contemporary dance field.

⁶⁹ “Survey: 1 in 4 South African Men Admit to Rape,” msnbc.com, June 28, 2013, http://www.nbcnews.com/id/31456652/ns/world_news-africa/t/survey-south-african-men-admit-rape/.

⁷⁰ Emily F. Rothman, Deineria Exner, and Allyson L. Baughman, “The Prevalence of Sexual Assault Against People Who Identify as Gay, Lesbian, or Bisexual in the United States: A Systematic Review,” *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse* 12, no. 2 (April 1, 2011): 59, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1524838010390707>.

I am everyday aware of my privileges as an American. Being a low-income American means still being wealthier than most people in the world. I have also taken full advantage of the paradoxical privilege of debt. Student loans have allowed me to earn a B.A. in World Arts and Cultures, an M.A. in Dance Education, and an M.F.A. in Dance before entering the doctoral program in Critical Dance Studies at UCR. I now have \$300,000 worth of student loan debt and about \$10,000 in credit card debt. This is not something to be proud of but has allowed me to see the world. I have studied dance in Asia, Europe, Africa and the Caribbean. I have always held down multiple jobs to do so, but having a U.S. passport and not having to pay directly for school is a privilege that many of the artists I study were not afforded. Exposure to a diversity of dance at the international level offered me a deep appreciation for the sacrifices of dancers in many of the places I traveled where employment is scarce and dance is rarely respected as a professional pursuit, especially for women.⁷¹

Second Position: In-Between

As I have seen in my own family, bodies carry history and provoke incendiary politics. The dream of racial harmony is for me very literally about embodiment. My mother is White and in 1976 she had to decide between having a husband or having a father. She was disowned for loving my father, who is Black. Even through the 1980's my parents had to overcome social stigma and direct threats as an interracial couple. I didn't see them hold hands in public until I was in my late-twenties. As an interracial

⁷¹ Sarah Andrieu, "Artistes En Mouvement: Styles de Vie de Chorégraphes Burkinabè," *Cahiers d'ethnomusicologie* 25 (2012): 55–74, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23621607>.

woman, finding my place between ‘them’ and ‘us’ has been intrinsic to my being and my work. I am naturally drawn to liminal spaces. I’m at home with neither and both. I can’t theorize in Black and White. I always look for the messiness - those moments of ‘slippage’⁷² where colonial logic proves its insufficiency.

Part of the privilege of being bi-racial is being so-called ethnically-ambiguous. While the term perhaps inaccurately assumes others’ ethnicities are easily and accurately read, it is also the case that I am often mistaken for a member of a different ethnic group or that people really aren’t sure where to place me. I have been asked, “What are you?” more times than I can count and usually at the initial introduction as though identifying my race is a pre-requisite to conversation. This chameleon-like status affords me access to those things that people say only when they are with one of their own. I experienced this several times in South Africa, sometimes in disquieting ways. There, like here, I am considered either Black or White or neither depending on who is naming me. Under the terms of apartheid, I would also not be considered ‘Coloured,’ but like comedian Trevor Noah, I would have been ‘born a crime,’⁷³ simply inconceivable. To add to the confusion, I was raised in an environment where Mexican, Filipino and Vietnamese-American cultures were predominant in my friendships and communities. I was recently programmed on the ‘Black Choreographers’ portion of a dance festival, which made me laugh. Somehow I just find it amusing whenever I’m categorized as *only* Black. But then...I’ve never seen an interracial choreographers festival. Some people will read this as

⁷² “About Us | Duke SLIPPAGE,” accessed April 23, 2020, <https://slippage.duke.edu/about>.

⁷³ Trevor Noah, *Born a Crime: Stories from a South African Childhood* (Spiegel & Grau, 2019).

the work of a Black woman and that's great. I know that my interest in Africa is personal, intellectual, and kinesthetic. It's part of me and it isn't.

Third Position: Dancer

My embodied research started at the age of three when I began to train in ballet. By age ten I was also learning jazz and tap. Luckily my public high school had an incredible dance program where Kellye Dodd sparked my eternal love for modern dance and choreography. I chose UCLA for undergraduate studies because they offered Afro-Cuban, West-African, Cambodian, and Indian dance forms alongside European ballet and American post-modern dance. From there I narrowed by practice to global contemporary/experimental concert dance and social and ritual forms from Cuba and Brazil. In 2009 I had the pleasure of training in African contemporary dance at *L'ecole des Sables* in Toubab Dialaw, Senegal. For seven weeks I danced, ate, slept, sweat, and communed with students from thirty-four different countries, representing five continents. Then I revisited Senegal to choreograph and perform the following year. It was at *L'ecole* that I became determined to learn everything I could about contemporary dance on the continent.

As a dance ethnographer, I am an artist and a scholar and during most instances of this research I wore only a scholar's cap, but my background as a dancer most assuredly colored the lens through which I approached and analyzed movement. Considering myself a contemporary dancer like those I research means we are alike, and yet I am neither a member of the South African dance community, nor a professional dancer. I am

a citizen of what Benedict Anderson would term an ‘imagined community’ of contemporary dancers.⁷⁴ Living thousands of miles away from the artists I research, I am drawn to how their work can speak to distinctly local concerns, and utilize both unique and internationally common movement vocabularies of contemporary dance techniques. Performing in the Dance Umbrella festival, albeit as an invited international guest, allowed me to be a part of an historic moment in the nation’s history and brought me much closer to my interlocutors than I had been otherwise.

Fourth Position: Cis-Gender (mostly) Heterosexual Woman

Recognizing the social construct of gender, I have always identified as a woman and relished in exploding any expectations or limitations that construct places on me. As a child I wanted to be a ballerina *and* I wanted big muscles like my dad. Perhaps more than any others, this identifier has informed my positionality as a researcher. When I walk around alone in South Africa, people are concerned for *my* safety, not their own. I have long-since been habituated to the precautions of being femme. I walk quickly without headphones, gripping my keys between my knuckles like every city-girl. Being a concert dancer in America means I have spent years of my life primarily in the company of cis-gender women and queer men. I live in a dance culture that is somehow both female-dominant in number and yet deeply patriarchal in hierarchy, as women are given

⁷⁴ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Revised edition (London New York: Verso, 2016).

fewer choreographic and administrative leadership opportunities and lower wages.⁷⁵ My interest in focusing on women dance-makers is in part fueled by global experiences seeing male dance artists garner more attention and support than their female counterparts.

Some of the gender dynamics of American contemporary dance are mirrored in South Africa, but because of dance's deep roots in rituals for all, Africans do not generally see dancing as a women's activity or use the professional pursuit of dance to assume a dancer's sexuality. What's more, just as Black feminists in the United States have outlined their intersectional oppression distinctly from that of White feminists, African feminists have theorized and activated unique approaches to destroying patriarchy. My reading of feminism in the work of these dance artists is based on feminist theories developed by African people.

Behind the scenes, American contemporary dance has largely been a safe-space for non-normative sexualities. Onstage, however, hetero-normativity is still reinforced in training and choreography in many contemporary dance settings.⁷⁶ I benefit from hetero-privilege and have always seen my romantic fantasies reflected on stage. I address sexuality in this project not only because it showed up in the work but because any study of the embodied human experience is incomplete without addressing sexuality. My research draws from ethnographies of queer and transgender African communities written

⁷⁵ Luke Jennings, "Sexism in Dance: Where Are All the Female Choreographers?," *The Guardian*, April 28, 2013, sec. Stage, <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2013/apr/28/women-choreographers-glass-ceiling>.

⁷⁶ Desmond, *Dancing Desires*.

by Graeme Reid,⁷⁷ Andrew Tucker,⁷⁸ and Amanda Lock Swarr.⁷⁹ Just as African feminism proposes distinct understandings of gender and the illusion of sex-based hierarchy, African queer theorists have provided a framework to approach the work of artists such as Mamela Nyamza and Dada Masilo who bend gender roles and break from hetero-normativity. My work contributes to the Africanist discourse battling homophobia by privileging the African notions of gender and sexuality explored in Chapters Three and Four.

Fifth Position: The Go-Between

As a researcher, I am often offering a blurred reflection of someone else's experience. Just as interviewees self-censor, I translate fieldwork into field notes and then again into academic writing. I paint pictures, offer metaphors, and edit out that which I feel does not serve the agenda of this document. There is a sort of *ginga* at play as I shift from memory to documentation, from first thought to edited copy and back again, trying to formulate the most precise and illuminating version of my thoughts. I do not claim to speak for anyone, but it is my hope that my voice can amplify the voices of my interlocutors, to disseminate something of their artistic offerings, and to shift my readers' consciousness about Black female bodies and their ways of knowing.

⁷⁷ Graeme Reid, *How to Be a Real Gay: Gay Identities in Small-Town South Africa* (Scottsville, South Africa: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2013).

⁷⁸ Andrew Tucker, *Queer Visibilities: Space, Identity and Interaction in Cape Town*, 1 edition (Chichester, U.K. ; Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009).

⁷⁹ Amanda Lock Swarr, *Sex in Transition: Remaking Gender & Race in South Africa* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012).

Chapter Outline

This dissertation unfolds in four chapters that weave between the academic, performance, and social spaces that demonstrate the site-specific nature of interrelated decolonial moves. It is often at the events that are named decolonial that the most obvious missteps occur; whereas precision and depth arises from the nuanced and abstracted gestures of performance. In Chapter One: Dancing Decoloniality and Decolonizing Dance in South Africa, I examine various actions taking place between 2015 and 2017. First I analyze the 2015 #RhodesMustFall and 2016 #FeesMustFall student movements in terms of their performativity and moments where intersectionality failed. I then examine the traces of three performance interventions created around the protests, suggesting that ‘the movement’ and the movements it inspired embody a framework for decoloniality that involves removing, replacing, and transforming colonial structures and practices. Part II reflects on the steps and missteps of the 2017 Decolonizing Dance Pedagogy conference I participated in at the University of Cape Town. I draw from the work of Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang to argue that the conference at times demobilized decoloniality by sidestepping Indigeneity. In Part III I reflect on my participation in the Decolonial AestheSis Creative Lab held at Rhodes University in 2018, which illuminated how Indigenous philosophies of interdependence can underpin a decolonizing arts practice.

In Chapter Two: Re-membering and (Re)mapping: Mamela Nyamza and Black Female Performance, I analyze two of Nyamza’s performances in relation to South African epistemologies and the role of bodily exhibition in African women’s history. I argue that her performances of *Hatched* and *Black Privilege* re-member Other modes of

personhood in response to the violent subjugation of queer Black women. I further present this act of memory as an example of the African methodology for coming into being that I call subject-formation. To do so I utilize notions of Indigenous storytelling put forth by María Regina Firmino-Castillo, Harold Scheub, and Benedict Carton. In my analysis of *Hatched* I apply Felicia Ekejiuba's notion of hearth-hold to explain the structure and significance of African households present in the work. I suggest that Kariam Welshe-Asante's concept of ancestorism and Gerald Vizenor's notion of survivance explain how Nyamza pulls together her past and future to defy the threat of Black lesbian death. I expand Susan Foster's use of re-membering to suggest that Nyamza's piece *Black Privilege* re-members a conflicted inheritance of African women's opulence and objectification. Carving a space for both is the embodiment of what Mishuana Goeman calls (re)mapping. Nyamza decolonizes the stage by (re)mapping the trajectory of Black women's bodies on display. Her choreographic and performative strategies induce an active form of witnessing that contributes to her ongoing process of becoming.

Chapter Three: Dada the Signifyin' Dancer is an Africanist reading of *Dada Masilo's Giselle* as I saw it performed in Makhanda, New York, and Los Angeles. I first present the context of the original *Giselle* in conversation with the development of race, gender, and sex ideologies in Europe's romantic era. Then I explain how ballet has been historically situated in South Africa as tool of White supremacy and Black assimilation. I analyze *Dada Masilo's Giselle* to relay how this work inverts the colonial underpinnings of South African ballet and asserts a gender-fluid African feminism. I include reflections

on my own embodied experience of taking a master class with Masilo where we embodied the distinctions and intersections of tradition and contemporaneity South African contemporary dance. Masilo decolonizes *Giselle* using techniques such as signifyin(g), comedic resistance, code-switching, and critically re-appropriating Tswana movement and Africanist aesthetics to convey a distinctly South African feminism.

Chapter Four: Transformation and Paralysis at Dance Umbrella Africa surveys the 2019 festival as a site of movements towards and away from decoloniality. The festival centered Indigeneity in contemporary dance by featuring the entangled aesthetics and concerns of post-colonial contemporary dance artists, but its decolonial potential was cut short by the colonialist ambitions of the South African State Theatre. To demonstrate this, I explore the Indigenous philosophy of ubuntu at play in workshops and the amplification of female and queer-identified artists in performance as reflective of the festival's Black lesbian leadership by Mamela Nyamza. The South African State Theatre's abrupt dismissal of Nyamza back-stepped on her decolonial vision. Inadvertently, it also set the stage for dance activists to mobilize on the heels of the #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall movements. Read together, these chapters portray a fragmented and fertile dance scene forming itself through and beyond its colonial past. My limited immersion has revealed the significance of movement and immobility to the intimate international project of decolonization.

Chapter One

Dancing Decoloniality and Decolonizing Dance in South Africa

In 1986, Kenyan novelist and theorist Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o published his seminal text *Decolonizing the Mind*. The book describes his own efforts to reclaim his practice as a writer outside of Western traditions, which takes him from novelist to playwright. African traditions have long held performance in high regard – as high as Europeans hold the written word. His autobiographical accounts suggest that embodiment is central to African epistemology and decoloniality. When he made the shift from writing in English to Gikuyu, he also switched from writing novels to writing plays. These plays were in fact community-based musicals where music and dance were necessary components of traditional Indigenous storytelling praxis.⁸⁰ Inspired by his work, I use the term decolonial rather than anticolonial to emphasize the slow internal undoing of colonial paradigms on the mind/body of colonized people. More specifically, I look for how this process is embodied and performed.

In this chapter I unpack some of the protests, performances, and gatherings that sought to decolonize South African institutions and practices between 2015 and 2017. By addressing where they converge and diverge I hope to shed light on the role of embodiment in decolonial struggles. Part I introduces the 2015 #RhodesMustFall and 2016 #FeesMustFall student movements that operated in concert with nationwide calls for land redistribution. First I explore some of the significant steps and missteps of this decolonial student movement. Then I analyze the traces of three performance

⁸⁰ Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (Oxford: James Currey Ltd / Heinemann, 1986).

interventions created by members and allies of these student movements. I suggest that ‘the movement’ and the movements it inspired embody a framework for decoloniality that involves removing, replacing, and transforming colonial structures and practices. Part II reflects on the steps and missteps of the 2017 Decolonizing Dance Pedagogy conference at the University of Cape Town as an intellectual, creative, embodied, and political space. I argue that by sidestepping Indigeneity, the conference demobilized decoloniality. Part III describes my participation in the Decolonial AestheSis Creative Lab held at Rhodes University in 2018 and how the philosophy of *ubuntu* became a decolonial paradigm for artistic practice. In each context, theories and practices of decolonization have unique manifestations. Attending to these differences, I lay a foundation for the understanding of how dance can be a decolonial praxis, which I will demonstrate explicitly through performance analysis in the chapters that follow.

Part I: Remove, Replace, Transform

Remove

Every day since 1934 students of the University of Cape Town (UCT) had to walk past a statue of Cecil Rhodes that was larger than life. Rhodes gave a hefty endowment to the school and created a scholarship to Oxford University that would live on over a hundred years after he died in 1902. Rhodes came to South Africa as a young man determined to build a telegraph line from “the Cape to Cairo.”⁸¹ His wealth was gained

⁸¹ Nyamnjoh, *#RhodesMustFall*.

on the backs of exploited laborers working in the diamond mines for the De Beers Consolidated Mining Company he co-founded. As Prime Minister of the Cape Colony, he gained infamy by inciting terrorist massacres to facilitate land grabs and for exposing his hatred in statements like, “I prefer land to niggers.”⁸² In addition, “Rhodes was an early architect of the Natives Land Act of 1913, which would limit the areas of the country that Indigenous Africans were allowed to own, to less than 10%.”⁸³ In his book *#RhodesMustFall: Nibbling at Resilient Colonialism in South Africa*, professor of Social Anthropology Francis Nyamnjoh explains that Cecil Rhodes was not exceptional in his ideology or practices. “In joining the scramble for Africa, Rhodes was merely dancing the dance prevalent in his time, which was to use the ideal of racial supremacy as justification for the aggressive pursuit of material wealth and national glory with ruthless and reckless abandon, and with callous disregard for the humanity of perceived lesser others.”⁸⁴ Nyamnjoh’s use of dance suggests that Rhodes performed a set of prescribed moves common to a technique of colonial domination.

In contrast, UCT students improvised and choreographed innovative moves to remove the specter of colonialism in courageous defiance of the status quo. During and after these protests, UCT students and allies used performance to highlight colonialism as a dominant ideology still affecting their lived experience. Examined together, the protests

⁸² Paul Maylam, *The Cult of Rhodes - Remembering an Imperialist in Africa* (Claremont, South Africa: David Philip Publishers, 2005), 19.

⁸³ William Beinart and Peter Delius, “The Historical Context and Legacy of the Natives Land Act of 1913,” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 40, no. 4 (2014): 667–88.

⁸⁴ Nyamnjoh, *#RhodesMustFall*, 37.

and performances demonstrate that by removing, replacing, and transforming bodies in motion, young artist/activists are rebuilding their nation after the fall of apartheid.

On March 9, 2015, Political Science student Chumani Maxwele performed an act of rebellion by throwing human feces at the statue of Cecil Rhodes. The bucket of feces was readily available from the nearby Khayelitsha township that borders the wealthy suburbs of Cape Town. In Khayelitsha residents were living without plumbing and the insufficient government solution was to provide excrement buckets for residents to place on the street corner for weekly pickups. In his 2019 dissertation, Columbia Law professor Kayum Ahmed explains that Maxwele in fact produced this act as a performance. He explains that Maxwele chose the date to coincide with the *Infecting the City* annual public art event. “Recognizing that he could face serious legal and disciplinary consequences for his actions, Maxwele used the annual public art event as a cover for his protest. His protest was therefore deliberately masked as a performance to avoid disciplinary action; it was a performance of a performance.”⁸⁵ Though the art event may have safeguarded his act as mere performance in front of authorities, for students, it was a rallying cry to take action against the symbolic and enacted forms of colonial domination that affected their lived experiences on campus. According to Douglas Foster writing for *The Atlantic*:

Student leaders had complained for years about testing and admission standards that translated into just over 23% of the student body being black South African when black South Africans constitute nearly 80 percent of the country’s population. Even worse was the proportion of

⁸⁵ Abdul Kayum Ahmed, “The Rise of Fallism: #RhodesMustFall and the Movement to Decolonize the University” (Columbia University, 2019), 2, <https://doi.org/10.7916/d8-n7n3-e372>.

black South African professors - only five out of 223 in 2013 according to university figures.⁸⁶

Maxwele's action catalyzed an already brewing movement which became known on the social media platforms Facebook and Twitter as #RhodesMustFall. Over the days that followed his performance, students occupied the Bremner administration building and rename it Azania House (Azania was a pre-colonial name for the southern region of the continent and is being considered for an official renaming of the country) and created an annexed protest related to the lack of affordable student housing. On March 12, around a thousand students gathered at Jameson Plaza to discuss symbolic and enacted racism on campus. They created the official #RMF Facebook page and were followed by activists, journalists, and scholars worldwide for over a year. In the New Yorker magazine, Rosa Lyster reported that "Altogether, more than five hundred students have been arrested, and there are reports of serious injuries, including of women being dragged by their hair into police vans. The use of pepper spray, rubber bullets, and stun grenades is now routine."⁸⁷ After solidarity protests throughout the country and even at Oxford University in England, the statue of Cecil Rhodes was removed on April 9th 2015. As the cement-filled body of Cecil Rhodes was pulled down, Black students replaced him on the platform, embodying a righteous defiance and symbolically taking over, or rather taking back, their place as the progenitors of South African history.

⁸⁶ Douglas Foster, "After Rhodes Fell: The New Movement to Africanize South Africa," accessed March 12, 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/04/after-rhodes-fell-south-africa-statue/391457/>.

⁸⁷ Rosa Lyster, "The Student Protests Roiling South Africa," The New Yorker, accessed March 12, 2020, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/the-student-protests-roiling-south-africa>.

Momentum from the #RMF movement was reignited in September 2016, when South Africa's minister of higher education proposed that universities set their own fee increases in 2017 to mediate funding challenges nationwide. The next day, students at several universities responded with large-scale protests. Police retaliated with rubber bullets, stun grenades, and tear gas.⁸⁸ These students also utilized Facebook and Twitter and it became known as the #FeesMustFall movement. Occupation was also a tactic used by the #FeesMustFall movement as they placed their bodies into student quads as well as administrative buildings against police orders. One of the most salient features of #FMF is that it incorporated UCT staff who had already been organizing sister movements with the staff of the University of Witwatersrand in Johannesburg to demand that these institutions hire locally and stop outsourcing its labor force while South Africa struggled through an unemployment crisis. By relating labor, education, security and national history, these movements did not only draw attention to the Rhodes statue and the cost of education. They also called for decolonization of the university through a variety of changes which included hiring more Black faculty and staff, admitting more Black students, and drastically revising curriculum to reflect the diversity of the country and the values and contributions of its Black citizens.⁸⁹

Despite shared grievances, protesters were not of one mind/body. Like those bodies on the front lines, the movement and its message were sometimes fractured. Several individuals and student groups participating in the organizing and direct action

⁸⁸ *Stun Grenades and Rubber Bullets Fired on UCT Student Protesters*, accessed February 6, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i8RE9ZKTHGM>.

⁸⁹ *Stun Grenades and Rubber Bullets Fired on UCT Student Protesters*, accessed February 6, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i8RE9ZKTHGM>.

accused the movement of propagating hetero-patriarchy. Several men including Maxwele himself were even accused of sexual assault during the protests. A response to these issues posted by the #FeesMustFall twitter account representing students at The University of Witwatersrand was broken into several messages to abide by the 140 character limit. Their posts became a visual of fracturing of ideas and spaces that mirrored the disruptions within this revolutionary narrative:

#FEESMUSTFALL@WitsFMF: However, we will never tolerate a situation in which these disruptions are allowed to happen at the expense of queer and feminist bodies. ...

wherein their bodies are only utilized for the purposes of protecting heterosexual black men on the firing line.

The revolution for a decolonized South Africa where free decolonized quality education is a reality for every Black child is one that...

feminist and queer bodies have maintained will be intersectional or it will not be a revolution at all. However, this afternoon, feminist and queer bodies were assaulted, strangled, kicked and beaten by these black men in the service of ...

the black revolutionary project.

The exclusion, abuse, assault & endangering of Black Feminist, Queer, Trans & Disabled bodies by hetero black men will no longer be tolerated.

All identities of Blackness will be included in this revolution or it will be bullshit!⁹⁰

The use of the word bodies over and over points to the mortal significance of embodied presence, action and theorization by, for, and about those whose bodies are most vulnerable by hetero-patriarchal White supremacy. It points to the fact that it is precisely through the vehicle of the body that hateful ideologies are made manifest and made deadly even within the Black movement. Though it is tempting to draw a line from the violence inflicted by colonial agents to that mimicked by Black men, this would not fully

⁹⁰ “#FEESMUSTFALL on Twitter: ‘All Identities of Blackness Will Be Included in This Revolution or It Will Be Bullshit!’ / Twitter,” Twitter, accessed February 6, 2020, <https://twitter.com/witsfmf/status/717083623413964801>.

account for the systemic and global reign of terror women, children, and men suffer at the hands of sexual predators, the vast majority of whom are men. Though I cannot sufficiently address all of the roots of violence in South Africa, here it is enough to say that this situation highlights yet another place that Black women and members of the LGBTQI community are unsafe even amongst their decolonial collaborators. Though the demonstrations were flawed, the persistence of women and transgender individuals created space for necessary growth within the movement that had been largely characterized by race and class.

Though still controversial, both #RMF and #FMF movements were largely successful. The statue was removed and fees did not increase. More importantly, decolonial efforts within and outside the university are ongoing. “Inside Higher Education” reported in 2017 that, “some 49 percent of academics in South Africa are white, compared with the 35 percent who are black, while another 10 percent are of Indian descent, says a new demographic profile of the country’s 25 universities.”⁹¹ These numbers represent a trend towards diversity that has been developing since at least 2005, but also suggest some influence by the #RMF and #FMF movements. UCT created a Deputy Vice Chancellor of Transformation post in 2017 to hold the university accountable to its agreement with students, which included several points under the following headings:

1. Clemency and Executive Accountability
2. Institutional Reconciliation and Transformation Commission/Shackville TRC

⁹¹ “Black Faculty Members Will Soon Outnumber White Professors at South Africa’s Universities,” accessed March 5, 2020, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2017/11/10/black-faculty-members-will-soon-outnumber-white-professors-south-africas>.

3. A Coherent Policy on Funding Higher Education and Advocacy for Free Decolonised Education
4. Financial Exclusions and Fee-Blocks
5. Completion of the 2016 Academic Year
6. The Use of Private Security and Police in Managing Protests⁹²

The results of these agreements are still developing, but it is certainly noteworthy that student uprisings forced the university to confront and respond to its colonial legacy and commit to a decolonial future. What's more, the movement that began as a transformation of a university extended to transformations in art and society at large. In the next section, I look at three movement interventions that sought to embody the rallying cry of the Fall.

South Africa's 'Rainbow Generation' was born after the fall of apartheid. In theory they represent the manifestation of their parents' sacrifices for non-racial society.⁹³ In actuality this generation of young adults is largely frustrated at the failure of the new democracy to impart real change for the eighty percent of the country living in dire poverty and still experiencing racial discrimination alongside the corruption of some Black government officials.⁹⁴ This frustration is paired with an empowered assertiveness born from the resistance efforts of prior generations. I am interested in the ways that these protests inspired responses focused on aesthetic/kinesthetic evocations of change. I read these performances as protests but also as methodologies that enact the changes they seek. As young people are demanding a new vision for their country, I look at three

⁹² Loretta Feris, "Transformation Report - 2018" (University of Cape Town, 2018).

⁹³ Max Fisher, "Read the Most Important Speech Nelson Mandela Ever Gave," *Washington Post*, accessed March 10, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2013/12/05/read-the-most-important-speech-nelson-mandela-ever-gave/>.

⁹⁴ "Why South Africa's Born-Free Generation Is Not Happy," *BBC News*, October 26, 2015, sec. Africa, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-34570761>.

performances in Cape Town that coincide with the #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall movements: two interventions that took place on the University of Cape Town (UCT) campus, and one performance in the Alexander Theater. These performances embody the decolonial strategy of replacing and transforming colonial practices.

Replace

After the statue of Cecil Rhodes statue was removed, artist/activists moved on to the work of replacing oppressive policies and presentations with intersectional ones. On March 9th 2016, members of the student group Trans Collective interrupted the opening of a student art exhibit at the Center for African Studies (CAS) jointly organized by the center and the #RMF movement to honor the activists through photography. Trans Collective arrived naked and semi-nude with red paint smeared across their bodies.⁹⁵ They walked through the crowd that was listening to the opening remarks outside on the steps, to enter the gallery and smear paint on the exhibits. Outside, HeJin Kim, speaking on behalf of the Trans Collective, accused the movement of intentionally ignoring and pushing out feminists and non-gender conforming activists. They smeared paint from their bodies onto the photographs and occupied the exhibit.

Feeling they'd been displaced by the movement, the Trans Collective replaced their own bodies as living art in the exhibit and choreographed the movement of others as their prone positions on the floor challenged visitors to walk over them. In doing so, their own living bodies replaced the art objects meant to memorialize the #RMF movement as

⁹⁵ "UCT: The Trans Collective," Astraea Lesbian Foundation For Justice, accessed February 4, 2020, <https://www.astraeafoundation.org/stories/uct-trans-collective/>.

a completed action. Lying still, they acted as scriptive things. Robin Bernstein writes, “...scriptive things leap out within a field, address an individual, and demand to be reckoned with.”⁹⁶ Rather than passive bodies enacting the objectification they experienced maneuvering through a patriarchal society, these artist/activists made their bodies into art objects that would direct the movement of others. Their performance, in effect, replaced the planned exhibition with living people demanding that their gaze be met. Their intervention not only replaced a passive viewing activity with one that re-choreographed the participation of spectators; like the Twitter post, it also emphasized the precarity of transgender life by insisting that attention be paid to their embodiment. Without their performative intervention and its centering of the body, the photographs in the exhibit could be viewed as the official record of events. Occupying the space but not moving, The Trans Collective confronted the audience by defying their historic and ongoing erasure from the activist archives. By exposing their own bodies as archives of gender-based terrorism, this intervention demanded that the Fall movements recognize and revolutionize their practices towards the transgender individuals that compose their membership.

Transform

In his dissertation on the movement, Dr. Ahmed contends that in the #RMF’s mission statement, decolonization was understood as the antithesis of “transformation”—

⁹⁶ Robin Bernstein, “Dances with Things: Material Culture and the Performance of Race,” *Social Text* 27, no. 4 (2009): 73.

a term often associated with South Africa's transition from apartheid to democracy.⁹⁷

Whereas the national discourse signaled the move from apartheid to democracy that did not truly hold apartheid agents accountable, here I use transformation to signify how the rainbow generation enacted change in the personal, political, and performative post-apartheid landscapes. Student artist/activists engaged gender-based exploitation of the past to transform their relationships to it.

In a video posted by the UCT: Rhodes Must Fall Facebook page on March 25th, 2016, six unnamed students casually ascend the steps of the UCT library, donning black paint on their brown skin, and white fabric covering their pelvises and the three women's chests. They use their student ID cards to electronically access the turnstile and make their way up the stairs through the whole gamut of stares from passers by. They arrive at the Sarah Baartman sculpture created by Willie Bester and surround it. Facing outward and standing in stillness, the performers first seem to hail their audience with a silent presence. Then they move slowly through individualized gestures. Next, one male performer stalks around the women, glaring at them and then poking and prodding them as Baartman's captor Hendrik Cesars had invited audiences to do two hundred years prior.⁹⁸ Another student appears with silver chains and rests them on the feet of the intrusive performer. He begins to interact with them almost as if he is struggling against them, pushing and yanking them from a crouched position. He places them on the other dancers who all maneuver around them. The video ends abruptly.

⁹⁷ Ahmed, "The Rise of Fallism," 13.

⁹⁸ Scully and Crais, "Race and Erasure."

Did the students studying in the library applaud at the end? Did they hiss and boo? Did they just continue with their studies? It is impossible for me to know from the video, but responses on the facebook post were largely positive. Many viewers used words like “profound” and “powerful.” Some expressed how they related to the sculpture and the performance with statements such as, “I grew up being mocked by my fellow students throughout primary and high school as my body was too African.”⁹⁹ They did vary, however, with one viewer exclaiming, “I don’t get it” and another, “You guys need to get over the past...seriously.”¹⁰⁰ The performers’ interaction with the sculpture is indeed an interaction with the past. Only, rather than getting over it, the artist/activists transform their relationship to the past.

The caption for the video reads, “Saartjie Baartman was a Khoikhoi woman who was exhibited as an attraction in European freak shows during the 19th century. A statue of her stands in UCT library as a reminder to white people of their history - and reminder to blacks of the history that was written for them.”¹⁰¹ By dancing alongside it, their bodies incite a way of looking at the present that is irreconcilable with forgetting but not contained by history. If the fixedness of the sculpture places racist and sexist objectification safely in the past, dancing with Baartman mobilizes national memory as a force to be reckoned with in the now. Moving as Baartman and her audience, these dance artists convert themselves from victims of exploitation into choreographers of destiny.

⁹⁹ “Saartjie Baartman Performance Art Today in UCT... - UCT: Rhodes Must Fall,” accessed June 5, 2017, <https://www.facebook.com/RhodesMustFall/videos/1559324747676351/>.

¹⁰⁰ “Saartjie Baartman Performance Art Today in UCT... - UCT: Rhodes Must Fall.”

¹⁰¹ “Saartjie Baartman Performance Art Today in UCT... - UCT: Rhodes Must Fall.”

Performance can embody historic images, moments, and traditions in order to transform their power. I was initially drawn to this research by a performance that has no public recording online: #BalletMustFall. Ballet carries a particular weight on the continent and specifically in South Africa. As seen in the CNN story, “Kenyan Ballet Dancer Walks out of Nairobi Slum and on to the World Stage,”¹⁰² ballet is often narrated as a source of civilization and frankly, salvation for African dancers. Cecil Rhodes thought of South Africans as child-like and following the practices of the Christian missionaries before him, he sought to civilize the population through forced assimilation. This included institutionalized practices that repressed Indigenous cultural expressions and buttressed European ones. As the country integrated, South Africans were still encouraged to pursue European, especially British arts such as opera and classical music. In dance, this means that practicing ballet can be a form of “Whitening up,” or moving up the social ladder by exceling in European practices,¹⁰³ yet the infrastructure of the field still leaves Black bodies less desirable in ballet companies and on stage.

If as Performance Studies scholar Diana Taylor remarks, “Performances act as vital acts of transfer, transmitting social knowledge, memory, and a sense of identity through reiterated, or what Richard Schechner has called, “twice behaved behavior,”¹⁰⁴ then what does ballet do for Black South Africans? What forms of individual or collective identity does its reiteration mobilize? As a performative parallel to the

¹⁰² “Saartjie Baartman Performance Art Today in UCT... - UCT: Rhodes Must Fall.”

¹⁰³ Nyamnjoh, #RhodesMustFall, 60.

¹⁰⁴ Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*, Second Printing edition (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2003), 2.

decolonial Fall movements that sought to transform universities by incorporating Indigenous people and epistemologies, I believe the #BalletMustFall sought to transform the elitist and racist practices of South African ballet companies and to facilitate the social mobility of Black dancers through ballet.

The publicity for #BalletMustFall acted as a form of protest as it spoke to the reiteration of oppressive practices in ballet and the need to move boldly away from them. Dance scholar Susan Foster describes the symbolic action and physical intervention of large-scale demonstrations as “Choreographies of Protest.” She writes, “The process of creating political interference calls forth a perceptive and responsive physicality that, everywhere along the way, deciphers the social and then choreographs an imagined alternative.”¹⁰⁵ This interplay between deciphering and imagining is key to understanding the ways that colonization imposed a certain code of ethics, practices, and foreclosed futurity that decolonization must imagine beyond.

The performance titled #BalletMustFall utilized several interesting promotional tactics to decipher the social world of ballet and imagine an alternative. First of all, the title replicates the format of the social protest movements utilizing #___Must Fall on Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook to spread their message. Second, White creative director, Jared Musiker, posted a manifesto to correspond with the performance at the Alexander Theatre during the Cape Town Fringe Festival that speaks to the complex of intertwining histories and conflicting agendas. It reads in part:

¹⁰⁵ Susan Leigh Foster, “Choreographies of Protest,” *Theatre Journal* 55, no. 3 (October 17, 2003): 412, <https://doi.org/10.1353/tj.2003.0111>.

This is a house of the revolution, so leave your white tendencies at the door & see dance as never before. Whilst other forms of art have sculptures to tear down & vandalise, we have to be quiet whilst our elderly audiences cough and splutter, lucky if half even make it to act 2. ...And we are just left with so many questions: Were they born like that? Do they even eat? Do they have real friends? Back home, funding goes to classical Ballet, the dance of imperial Europe. Let's face it, we just don't have the body type for lily white tutus. Oh, and pointe shoes, they don't come in brown, so even Misty Copeland probably has to dye all her shoes to match her skin tone. This is a taste of our rather ridiculous predicament as young dancers. We've degraded ourselves one too many times for some random commercial casting director who couldn't even care & we definitely don't want to "Giselle" again. So we invite all to join our cause and laugh at the comedy that is the life of the Athletes-of-God. We refuse to be silent anymore. We want justice & reform. Viva la Revolution.¹⁰⁶

Far from the serious and demanding tone of the manifestos and speeches associated with the #RMF and #FMF movements, the #BMF manifesto is assertive but also quite playful, interspersing demands, jokes and struggles. It critiques the racialized aesthetic of ballet as well as commenting on the frustration the authors feel at having to conform to the arbitrary demands of unscrupulous directors. Ultimately the manifesto demands revolutionary transformation within the field of ballet to redress longstanding inequities.

The advertisements for the Alexander Theatre performance of #BMF transformed a visual repertoire that questions the role of ballet in South Africa's past and future. In five images posted to their website photos of Jared Musiker and dancer Asisipho Malunga have been superimposed into famous paintings by Edgar Degas. In one, Malunga stands proudly in the center of *Foyer de la Danse* painted in the Paris Opera House of 1872. She wears a black leotard and a white tutu reaches past her ankles. On it, there is a blurry black square that resembles a chalkboard. "I'm a BLACK Ballerina!"

¹⁰⁶ "'#BalletMustFall' at Alexander Upstairs," *Alexander Bar, Café & Theatre*, accessed June 11, 2017, <https://alexanderbar.co.za/show/balletmustfall/>.

The sign shouts, and emphasizes the word Black, less to describe what is obvious from the photo, and more to challenge us to reconcile the word Black next to ballerina. The dancer has a cool expression as she stretches her sternum upward, her long neck sprouting high above her feet balancing on pale pink satin pointe shoes. She stands in ballet's fourth position – her left leg crossed over her right, causing her lower body to twist slightly away from the viewer and emphasize her left hip and rear. We see her from below, so as she looks down at us, her eyes are almost closed. Her arms are not in fourth position. Rather, they pose, outstretched at her sides, as her delicate left hand seems to grace the barre behind her. This central dancer is framed by ten to twelve White female dancers of the original painting in pink ballet skirts, tights, and slippers. Five of them seem to be looking at her, as do the two White men in the room. One sits with a violin in front of a music stand while the other stands next to him holding a long wooden stick and raising his left hand as if to command attention, say “stop,” or conduct the music. The image of the Black ballerina is at least an inch taller than those around her. If this were to a life-sized scale, she'd probably stand at least a foot taller than them. But in the time and place the image situates her, she would have not been invited into that room. By filling the previously empty space surrounded by Europeans, Malunga performs an occupation that, like the occupations at UCT, demands that onlookers gaze at Black bodies in White-dominated spaces. These advertisements suggest that ballet itself need not be performed in service of coloniality and that it can even be a decolonizing experience. Unlike the student occupations, however, this image seems to desire a space for Black dancers to perform White aesthetic values.

Whereas #RMF students wanted to replace Eurocentric curricula with Afrocentric ones, #BalletMustFall seems to demand replacing European bodies with African ones, maintaining the repertoire but transforming the institutional practices. As Malunga explains in a 2016 interview with Elelwani Netshifhire of Thaze Media, “When we say ‘ballet must fall,’ it’s not like we want it to fall. It’s just us holding up a mirror to say, ‘listen this is what you’re doing.’ It’s not as necessarily boycotting you as willing to say, ‘maybe change a little bit – be more inclusive.’”¹⁰⁷ #BalletMustFall calls for a transformation within the field of ballet that involves changing methods of casting as well as intention and interpersonal relationships. In its manifesto, its title, and its associated imagery, it seeks to mobilize Black South Africans into unwelcoming and unsupportive spaces. Like an occupation, Musiker and Malunga enter and move on their own terms.

Though monuments and institutions script behavior, individual and collective movement can be unruly. The three interventions cited above do more than reflect tumultuous times. These performances make visible the ways that history is archived, reiterated, and challenged by the body. Imagining alternate futures, the Trans Collective intervention, the library occupation, and the #BalletMustFall performance all drew upon embodied notions of race and gender as departure points for social mobility. By bringing their raced and gendered bodies into scriptive spaces, their subversive choreographies removed Eurocentric hetero-patriarchal control, replaced it with Afro-feminist aesthetics, and transformed their respective venues into pathways for liberation.

¹⁰⁷ Elelwani Netshifhire, *Thase: #BalletMustFall!*, n.d., <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vr-Ur6xDPj4>.

“Bodies and forms are never complete; they are open-ended malleable vessels to be appropriated by consciousness in its multiplicity.”¹⁰⁸

Part II: Decolonizing Dance

In the aftermath of passionate and sometimes violent student protests, the UCT Dance Department held *Confluences 9: Deciphering decolonization in Dance Pedagogy in the 21st century*. In my analysis of its keynote lecture, I will demonstrate that unlike the student protests, *Confluences 9* used decolonization as a metaphor for diversity but did not center Indigenous people or their needs in theory or practice. In doing so, the transformative potential of the conference was subsumed by its adherence to notions of legibility and respectability that cater to White sensibilities and investments in White supremacy. Nonetheless, the non-White panelists in particular offered important insight into the multifaceted ways that artists can and do decolonize their histories, their bodies, and their performances.

Confluences

The department has held its bi-annual *Confluences* conference since 1997. Its first iteration, subtitled *Cross-Cultural Fusions in Music and Dance*, co-convened with the 15th Symposium on Ethnomusicology. In 2019, as an American glancing through the table of contents from those proceedings, I was struck by how non-African the topics are. The program includes two different analyses of Indian-British artist Shobana Jeyasingh’s choreography, one essay on ballet in South Africa, and several presentations on American

¹⁰⁸ Nyamnjoh, *#RhodesMustFall*, 22.

modern dance, including one by Susan Leigh Foster. From July 11 – 14, 2017, I attended *Confluences 9: Deciphering decolonization in Dance Pedagogy in the 21st century*. Its title suggests the notion that decolonization in this century requires unique methodologies and perhaps theoretical frameworks from past or future decolonizing efforts. Though the conference included performances, the title also suggests that transmission between bodies is central to how to undertake the project of decolonization in dance. The event was not simply an impulse of the then Department of Dance, now Centre for Theatre Dance and Performance Studies. It was also a response to the widespread demonstrations calling for decolonization both on the campus and throughout the country. Yet I witnessed no mention of the student movement in print or presentation. I could not say if this was due to intentional abdication of a difficult and controversial subject or simply the conference organizers' assumption that everyone applying already knew enough about the scenario as it was very present in local media coverage.

Dancing Around Decoloniality

Both #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall utilized pre-planned and on-the-spot choreographic tactics to draw students from their classes and into the hallways, quads, and streets. Despite the widespread nature of the demonstrations, I found no evidence that the Dance Department had participated in any official capacity. According to one student, Dannielle-Marie Jones, “most students were just frustrated that they had to miss ballet

class,”¹⁰⁹ and the faculty had only created the conference to give the appearance of solidarity when, in fact, they did their best to continue with classes, in effect not showing support for the demands of the movement. In a country marred by decades of protests, often ending in tragic violence, it is no wonder some would hesitate to address a social concern by marching through the streets and in some cases causing massive property damage. In a country still suffering from police violence, it is no surprise that someone would not want to engage in any ‘disruption of the peace,’ particularly when perhaps the livelihoods of faculty members and students could be at risk. And yet, even during the conference, the silence around the protests was deafening. Not one presenter mentioned the events directly.

Decoloniality without Indigeneity

The conference on decolonizing dance was largely organized by and overwhelmingly featured the perspectives of non-Indigenous dance makers. Over the four-day conference, I attended paper presentations, technique classes, lectures, panel discussions and performances. The event’s primary organizer was a retired UCT dance professor Sharon Friedman. Friedman is White and is the editor and a contributor to the book *Post-Apartheid Dance*, amongst other publications. She is listed as the organizer or co-organizer of Confluences 1999, 2001, 2011, 2013, 2015, and 2017.¹¹⁰ Though her role was ‘behind the scenes’ it was evident that despite retiring, Friedman held the rings of the

¹⁰⁹ Danielle-Marie Jones, UCT Confluences Discussion, July 12, 2017.

¹¹⁰ “Confluences | Centre for Theatre, Dance & Performance Studies,” accessed February 8, 2019, <http://www.ctdps.uct.ac.za/CTDPS/Confluences>.

conference: sending out the official emails, curating who would be invited to present, and often guiding conversational flow with the heavy-handed approach of someone who has been a teacher of youth most of her life. Sometimes the affective response to this suppression of diverse agency by the over-assertion of White agency could only be registered in the subtle glances of discomfort between myself and other non-White participants.

Though foregrounded in the conference theme, decolonization was sometimes sidelined by the haunting racial dynamics of Cape Town. Micro-aggressions and macro-organizing strategies undermined the potential for meaningful interactions and strategizing towards a decolonial vision of dance and dance pedagogy. For example, in several instances, White participants cut short the questions and comments of Black participants or dismissed difficult topics by changing the subject. My subjective observation of this phenomenon was confirmed by other Black participants who noticed a tension in the room, which we discussed outside of the official presentation spaces. In several instances I found myself commiserating with Black attendees from South Africa and Namibia as we constituted that second space of the conference Black academics are familiar with. It's the space away from the White participants where you can say what you really feel and trust that you will be heard, understood and uninterrupted. These secondary spaces become necessary when the population is diverse but the leadership is not decolonized. Decoloniality is often subsumed under the banner of diversity and can be usurped to serve a variety of other interests. As Tuck and Yang point out:

At a conference on educational research, it is not uncommon to hear speakers refer, almost casually, to the need to “decolonize our schools,” or use “decolonizing methods,” or “decolonize student thinking.” Yet, we have observed a startling number of these discussions make no mention of Indigenous peoples, our/their struggles for the recognition of our/their sovereignty, or the contributions of Indigenous intellectuals and activists to theories and frameworks of decolonization.¹¹¹

At *Confluences 9*, the substitution of decolonization for artistic diversity foreclosed any possibility of real engagement with the vital issue of how to center Indigenous epistemologies in dance. Indigeneity itself was displaced by the lack of Indigenous speakers, philosophies, dances, histories, and perspectives on dance.

Talking Out of Turn

In addition to having a person of English descent directing a conference on decolonization, the conference mistook an opportunity to center Indigeneity by scheduling the keynote address, “Learning to Speak in My Mother Tongue,” to be delivered by Lliane Loots, a White South African. To be fair, Loots is an accomplished scholar, choreographer, and director of *Jomba!*, a major dance festival in Durban. She is a professor at the University of Kwazulu-Natal, and is earning a doctoral degree. She has created untold opportunities for Indigenous dancers and is well-qualified to address most dance conferences as a keynote presenter. Loots’s lecture was praiseworthy on many levels: she provided a succinct yet pointed synopsis of pivotal shifts in South African concert dance, she addressed the diversity of South African dance forms, and even the

¹¹¹ Eve Tuck and Wayne Yang, “Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor | Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society,” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1, no. 1 (September 8, 2012): 2, <https://jps.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/des/article/view/18630>.

misperception that Indigenous folks cannot do concert dance. However, in a country that is 80% Indigenous, and when Indigenous presence is sorely lacking in dance in academia, especially in leadership roles, it was questionable to have a non-Indigenous person lead the trajectory of the conference on decolonizing dance pedagogy. This keynote address did not portray an Indigenous vision for decolonization in dance or otherwise. Instead, it used decolonization as a metaphor for fusion, innovation, and integration within Western paradigms. Examining the missteps in this lecture reveals the ways that colonialism reproduces itself by overvaluing White perspectives that overstep and silence Black ones.

Throughout “Learning to Speak in My Mother Tongue,” Loots cited Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s book *Decolonizing the Mind* without interrogating her own subjectivity as a settler on stolen land.¹¹² Thiong’o’s writings can certainly be used and activated by anyone, but their usage here begs the question: Does decolonization look/feel/act the same for all people making the effort, or do individuals with distinct histories need distinct tactics? Thiong’o situates the decolonial project within the Self when he places the mind as the object of decolonization. He does this, however, as an Indigenous Kenyan writing for Indigenous Kenyans. In discussing South African dance education, other than Thiong’o, Loots cited only European and Indian scholars and dance artists who fused Western techniques with unnamed Indigenous ones. Ethnic diversity and fused dance forms can result from settler colonialism,¹¹³ forced and coerced migration due to

¹¹² Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (Oxford: James Currey Ltd / Heinemann, 1986).

¹¹³ Yvonne Daniel, *Caribbean and Atlantic Diaspora Dance: Igniting Citizenship* (University of Illinois Press, 2011).

exploitative labor practices,¹¹⁴ and neo-liberal policies of economic globalization,¹¹⁵ so they do not inherently demonstrate decoloniality. When diversity stands in for decoloniality, questions of how and why the community is diverse and who benefits from that diversity are sidestepped. Loots's status and statements raised questions about how colonialism can scaffold our understandings of nationality, race, gender, and tradition.

As a White South African working with traditional and contemporary Indigenous dance practitioners, Loots oscillates between insider and outsider status in ways that can create both alliances and blindspots. As an anti-racist activist and dance director of Black bodies, Loots holds a powerful and challenging position. She is inside the dance community in a broad sense but outside of traditional Indigenous dance practices, inside a South African university advocating for the affirmation of Indigenous dance but outside of the communities she advocates for. She explained:

This internal/externality is a position of personal and theoretical multiplicity that belies any attempt to reduce identity to the simplicity of race, class and gender only. Thus whiteness, for example, while not a homogenous identity position in and of itself, is often not synonymous with 'African-ness'. Too often 'whiteness' is associated with colonial power or the 'oppressor' such that 'black and white' become an all-encompassing, and rather reductionist, binary. This binary opposition often has the effect of silencing the complex contemporary ways in which, for example, a large percentage of the middle class consumer class in South Africa, are now black.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁴ Jane C. Desmond, "Embodying Difference: Issues in Dance and Cultural Studies," in *Meaning in Motion: New Cultural Studies of Dance* (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 1997).

¹¹⁵ Anusha Kedhar, "Flexibility and Its Bodily Limits: Transnational South Asian Dancers in an Age of Neoliberalism," *Dance Research Journal* 46, no. 1 (April 2014): 23–40.

¹¹⁶ Lliane Loots, "Learning to Speak in My Mother Tongue" (Deciphering Decolonisation in Dance Pedagogy in the 21st Century, University of Cape Town, South Africa, July 12, 2017), 5.

Surely a black/white binary is a common but inaccurate paradigm to understand race, and oppressor/oppressed binaries are both hyper-determinate and insufficient. Yet, as long as the majority of those enacting oppression are White and those being inflicted by it are not, the binary will hold weight. Loots's comment about the Black middle class implied that because some Blacks have escaped dire poverty, the work of decolonization and racial justice is complete or working itself out through capitalism. It is also contradicted by UCT dance professor Maxell Xolani Rani's Facebook post announcing "There is no black middle class in South Africa. There is poverty masked with graduation gowns and debt."¹¹⁷ This statement surmises the problem of masking decoloniality with diversity that is only allowed to exist and *attempt* to flourish within a paradigm that White supremacist capitalism created to extend itself. (I should also note that although Rani did teach an Afro-Modern dance class, he was not a speaker at the conference.) Although no one can deny Loots's South African citizenship or even her commitment to African dance, there is a reason Whiteness is not synonymous with Africanness and one's place of birth is equally an insufficient marker for one's epistemology, culture, or political orientation. Perhaps an example rooted in dance would have better made her point, or perhaps her point was merely to confirm her rightful place within African culture, citizenship, and aesthetics. She went on to critique Indigenous reclamation of culture:

I feel that there is also a need in 2017 not to fall into the trap of imagining that all cultural and traditional practices (that wa Thiong'o advocated returning to) are somehow pure, valuable and just. Simply put, for example, as a woman living on the African continent, I am mindful of the many ways in which various African patriarchies silence, harm and render

¹¹⁷ "There Is No Black Middle Class in South Africa.... - Maxwell Xolani Rani," accessed April 19, 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/maxwell.rani/posts/10157539589667448>.

women and the girl-child unheard. The continent still abounds with girl-child abductions, arranged and force marriages, female circumcision, gender divisions of labour; the list goes on. As a feminist, I cannot sanction returning to localised and traditional cultural practices and ways of being that, for example, harm and silence myself and my continent's sisters."¹¹⁸

Although I completely agree with Loots, this statement, at this particular conference, makes me wonder why Loots felt the need to critique Indigenous practices, particularly those outside of dance, in language that seemed to warn listeners to avoid them. Certainly there are various African practices that harm girls and women. There are also various traditional European and global practices that harm girls and women. That some South Africans have held steadfast to these practices evidences the crux of the colonial conundrum. You naturally hold on tighter when something is being ripped away from you. Whereas the need to support and defend women is always of paramount concern, the placement and presence of these statements by Loots emphasized the White privilege which renders her immune to cultural criticism as her Whiteness can persist unmarked. She can speak as an individual while calling out the actions of "traditional" people. This status could have perhaps been put to better use working on the micro and macro-aggressions of Whites in dance. Instead it was yet another White person telling Black people what to do with their culture and that is an extension of colonialism. This demonstrates how settler logic can invade the discourse and action of decolonization.

Tuck and Wayne Yang warn against this misuse of decolonization as it is not only ineffective, it demobilizes radical potential with a smokescreen of assimilation:

¹¹⁸ Loots, "Learning to Speak in My Mother Tongue," 11.

When metaphor invades decolonization, it kills the very possibility of decolonization; it recenters whiteness, it resettles theory, it extends innocence to the settler, it entertains a settler future. Decolonize (a verb) and decolonization (a noun) cannot easily be grafted onto pre-existing discourses/frameworks, even if they are critical, even if they are anti-racist, even if they are justice frameworks. The easy absorption, adoption, and transposing of decolonization is yet another form of settler appropriation.¹¹⁹

Loots displaced decoloniality, replacing it with acts of diversity and even creativity. In doing so she re-centered Whiteness by obscuring Indigeneity. She cited the work of several (mostly White) American modern and post-modern dance artists: Martha Graham, José Limón, Doris Humphrey, Judson Dance Theatre, Grand Union, David Gordon, Trisha Brown, and Alvin Ailey, to exemplify their artistic innovation as evidence of decolonization. She asserted, "...what I am struck by is the idea that each one of these practitioners was, in their own way, decolonizing an accepted dance history that they had inherited and which they felt – IN THEIR BODIES – was no longer viable to tell the stories that they wanted to dance."¹²⁰ That these artists innovated within the field of modern dance is not enough to claim that they decolonized dance or dance history. Martha Graham, for example, hired Black, White and Asian dancers during America's era of legally enforced segregation; however, she used notions of primitivism to source imagined Indigenous philosophy and embodiment, a fetishized knowledge of Greek culture, appropriations of Indian movement vocabulary, and a sanitized notion of

¹¹⁹ Tuck and Yang, "Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor | Decolonization," 3.

¹²⁰ Loots, "Learning to Speak in My Mother Tongue," 12.

Protestantism that *invisibilized*¹²¹ their role in the Native American genocide to create something she scribed American.¹²² Though vastly influential and often anti-racist, these artists were not necessarily doing decolonial work, certainly not solely by virtue of fusing or innovating movement vocabularies. By appropriating decolonization to reiterate a canonical history, Loots further erased Indigeneity in American dance and substituted decoloniality with diversity. As she continued, further blind spots due to her positionality were revealed.

Sitting in the cold theater listening to Loots travel space and time to address the immediate local concerns, I anxiously awaited the explanation of her title, “Learning to Speak My Mother Tongue.” When her mother tongue turned out to be dance, she conveniently obfuscated a deeper conversation on how her race, ethnic background, privilege or positionality affect her dance making. She stated, “I am reminded – as dancer, choreographer and dance teacher – that English is my second language. Every time I step in the studio, I willingly and joyfully return to my mother tongue – the body.”¹²³ Though many dancers, including myself, might claim to feel most comfortable communicating through the body, it is Loots’s disregard for the deeply intimate and historically violent power of both language and embodiment that *invisibilized* Indigenous epistemologies and created an expectation that the listener read a universal dancer body through a White cis-gender female body. To simply claim that dance is her first language

¹²¹ Brenda Dixon Gottschild, *The Black Dancing Body: A Geography from Coon to Cool* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

¹²² Shea Murphy, *The People Have Never Stopped Dancing*.

¹²³ Loots, “Learning to Speak in My Mother Tongue,” 14.

suggested that we who identify as dancers are all doing the same work in the same way, when in fact, even twenty years after the toppling of apartheid, colonial epistemology is still enacted and felt by South African dance artists. It affects where one is raised, what forms of dance exist and are nurtured there, and the aesthetic biases of dance artists and presenters.

The body and its movement are in need of colonization. If body language is so significant, surely the conference could have addressed the bodily enactments of the protesters, the bodily harm done by police officers, and the lack of Black bodies and Black bodily knowledge within their own program. If our bodies speak, surely they speak different languages that both shape and reflect our uniquely cultured lives. I would argue that although decolonizing dance *must* be a shared effort across ethnic, gender, and class divisions, it must also be a process individuated by circumstance and experience. One's mother tongue in particular affects one's ability to master the English required to apply for the growing number of opportunities requiring artist to write about their work or for example, to apply to the UCT dance program.

As demonstrated at *Confluences 9*, movement and language can work together to combat or maintain colonialism. Comparing Loots's approach to the concept of mother tongue to Sifiso Kweyama's comments during a panel presentation is illuminating. Kweyama, himself an accomplished performer, educator, and artistic director of Jazzart Dance Company, sat with four other accomplished dance artists to address to the question, "How has the artistic director in South Africa responded to calls for decolonialism?" The fact that in a country with eleven official languages, every

Confluences 9 presentation was in English speaks to the resilience of coloniality in the academy and in the field of dance. Kweyama's first remarks were to explain that he considered addressing us in isiZulu, but declined, for fear of leaving anyone out.

I think last week when I was sitting down and writing I realized...the struggle I was having in writing, the struggle was because I'm writing this in English not in my own language. And so UCT is colonizing me because I have to think in a foreign language. I have to think twice. I have to think in Zulu then I have to think in English...no it doesn't make sense...If I speak my language only six people here will understand...I thought of protesting it and just doing everything in isiZulu but then I thought no, let me respect my crowd and my panel and everyone who is here and speak the language they expect, which is not my language. Because according to me the only thing that has not been colonized is my skin. *Everything else is gone.*¹²⁴

Couched in the politics of respectability and legibility, Kweyama's comments speak precisely to the concerns of the student protest movements and to the issues that an African with White privilege will not experience. In the same text that Loots cites, Thiong'o explains that colonization *weaponized* language and dropped a culture bomb.¹²⁵ Language as a weapon does more than establish a shared paradigm for communication. It forcefully silences or amplifies worldviews, knowledge, and dreams. In the post-colony, language is a means of suppression, an instigator of violent assimilation, and an on-going reproduction of colonial power.

Kweyama's comment explains the suffering he experiences being unable to communicate freely and the extra labor he had to perform in order to present at the conference. It also brings attention to the fact that although UCT is no longer segregated,

¹²⁴ Sifiso Kweyama, "How Has the Artistic Director in South Africa Responded to Calls for Decolonialism?" (University of Cape Town, South Africa, July 14, 2017).

¹²⁵ Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind*.

it is still largely populated by White students and faculty, and colonial language dominates despite the widespread use of Indigenous languages across the country. As South African filmmaker and professor Bhekizizwe Peterson once said, “South Africa is a crazy crazy place. They used to say to get a job you needed to be bilingual but bilingual meant English and Afrikaans.”¹²⁶ Likewise, to get a job in dance, one used to have to demonstrate proficiency in ballet. European verbal and body languages are expected as the base of knowledge for employment. This absurdity of this oppression is echoed in Kweyama’s statement, “it doesn’t make sense.”

Language distinguishes worldviews.¹²⁷ Kweyama alludes to the fact that some things get lost in translation. Not everything he wants to say can be said in English. So not only are the exact concepts Kweyama wished to convey lost in translation, but the preceding worldviews that created them were erased too. His desire to ‘respect’ his listening audience is surely an acknowledgement of the simple fact that most of the participants (of various ethnicities and nationalities) do not speak isiZulu, but it also raises the question: where is the respect for Indigenous language and lifeways in this conference? Could he not speak in isiZulu with a translator so that at least some would grasp his true meaning while others could witness the tonal and bodily language shift of one settling into his own language, and appreciate that which could be translated into the foreign one? How is it that the foreign still defines the ‘respectable?’ The conference organizers did not appear to ask these questions or create a space for them to be

¹²⁶ Bhekizizwe Peterson, “Untitled” (Decolonial Aesthetics Creative Lab, Rhodes University, Makhanda, July 10, 2018).

¹²⁷ Thiong’o, *Decolonising the Mind*.

addressed. If the conference and keynote had truly presented the notion of mother tongue as a topic of discussion or an organizing principle to center Indigeneity, then we could have begun to address decolonization. Disguised as diversity and uninterrogated, learning to speak a mother tongue remained a privilege of the settler.

Whereas Western ideologies intercepted the decolonial intentions of the keynote address, Western aesthetics dominated the performances hosted by the conference. Performances presented both on campus and at the Baxter Theatre reflected how the past has a hold on the trajectory of dance at UCT. With the exception of the ethnicity of some of the dancers, these performances were largely replaceable with their Western counterparts. Music and movement vocabulary from European ballet and American modern and post-modern dance dominated the stage, as did the choreographic strategies such as neutral facial expressions, non-individuated unison, male-female partnering, accumulation, and abstract content (movement for its own sake). This is likely due to the simple fact that concert dance in the country is deeply influenced by the West, even despite the cultural ban of the 1980's.¹²⁸ But it is also due to the organizational body neglecting the radical notion that undoing colonialism might mean to center the colonized, even in favor of propelling an image of diversity and inclusivity (often used to prove a population is cosmopolitan, modern, and equally safe and just for all despite realities on the ground). Unlike #BalletMustFall, none of the choreographies implicated or questioned coloniality.

¹²⁸ John Pepper, *Art and the End of Apartheid* (Minneapolis: Univ Of Minnesota Press, 2009).

At *Confluences 9* coloniality showed up in what was said and left unsaid.

Programming did not center Indigenous presenters or their epistemologies nor did it grapple with the most pressing issues of land, curriculum, pedagogy and aesthetics that could truly destabilize White supremacist ideology and hetero-patriarchy. In many ways the conference demonstrated that the displacement of colonial mentality and structures is complicated and deeply unresolved. In its best efforts, decolonizing is painful, experimental, experiential and unsettling. It moves with the weight of history on its back.

Part III: Embodying a Decolonial AestheSis

From July 8th through 14th, 2018, I participated in a Decolonial Aesthesis Creative Lab hosted by the Art department of Rhodes University in Makhanda (formerly Grahamstown). The title and theme of the event comes from Argentine semiotician Walter Mignolo's text, "Decolonial AestheSis: Colonial Wounds/Decolonial Healings," which we were all asked to read alongside several others before applying with an artistic response. In this essay, Mignolo unpacks the culture and history of the term aesthetics, its movement from Greece to Germany and its mobilization in Western cultural domination. He writes,

Modern aestheTics have played a key role in configuring a canon, a normativity that enabled the disdain and the rejection of other forms of aesthetic practices, or, more precisely, other forms of aesthesis, of sensing and perceiving. Decolonial aesthesis is an option that delivers a radical critique to modern, postmodern, and altermodern aestheTics and, simultaneously, contributes to making visible decolonial subjectivities...¹²⁹

¹²⁹ Mignolo, "Decolonial AestheSis: Colonial Wounds/Decolonial Healings – Social Text."

By creating a system of beauty that acknowledges coloniality and actively challenges it, decolonial aesthetics attempts to radicalize post-colonial subjectivity through experiences of art. The aim of the lab was to think and create beyond the colonial mentality. In short, we endeavored to collectively begin to decolonize our own artistic practices. Through experimentation and failure I found creativity and embodiment to be necessary methodologies for enacting decolonial theory.

Located in the Eastern Cape, Rhodes University is one of the primary venues for the annual National Arts Festival. It represents the tight link between colonialism and academia not only in its name and statues, but also by virtue of its establishment on sites of infamous colonial battles. The university does not have a Dance Department but dance courses are hosted by the Theatre Department and several of its students were in attendance at the creative lab. This gathering was organized by an interracial couple: Sharlene Khan, a visual artist of Indian descent, and Fouad Asfour, a writer and editor of Palestinian and German heritage. Khan was born and raised in South Africa, Asfour in Germany, and at the time both were professors at Rhodes University. The weeklong workshop cost a modest fee of R200 (around \$14 USD) and provided meals throughout the day which participants and presenters ate together. The faculty consisted of Jon Alpert, a European-American documentary filmmaker, Laura Andel, an Argentine composer/musician based in New York for several decades, Vibha Galhotra, an Indian visual artist, Bhekizizwe Peterson, a South African Literature and Theatre Scholar and Screenwriter, as well as Asfour and Khan. For six days we dialogued and experimented

with notions of decoloniality drawing from our various positions, personal histories, and artistic training. On the seventh day we visited an elephant sanctuary. Although this gathering was similar to the one at UCT in that it also included lengthy lectures and presentations of artistic work in an academic setting, it felt remarkably different from Confluences. Through participatory engagement, the Decolonial Aesthetics Creative Lab attempted to enact a decolonial praxis for radical art-making that could lunge us collectively toward manifesting decolonial aesthetics in our ongoing artistic practices. Although it fell short of its anti-hierarchical ideals, participant-led activities often invited rigorous artistic and dialogic confrontations with the intimacies of decolonial work. This work exemplified the internal transformations necessary to engage with others in the collective creation of a world beyond colonialism.

On the first day of the lab, Sharlene Khan took a piece of chalk to write on the wall of the gallery space in which we sat, “NO HIERARCHIES.” I instinctively started to question if it were possible for any project within a university to be truly without hierarchy. In my opinion, the establishment of facilitators as experts through their lengthy artist talks was already deeply hierarchical. The structure told me that the facilitators are more experienced than the other participants, or at least have a type of experience recognized and valorized by the organizers. They would establish how day-to-day activities would transpire. Nothing was decided collectively by the group. Like Confluences 9, this gathering was not premised on Indigenous leadership. Foreign facilitators did, however, offer a critical distance, which invited us to re-think habitual ways of perceiving and acting. The brilliant and talented collective was committed to the

task of *figuring out* what decolonial aesthetics *might* look and feel like by engaging in a variety of interdisciplinary group activities. One such activity that was premised on Indigenous philosophy was led by Vibha Galhotra.

Ubuntu

Walking through the Cape Town airport, Galhotra had become intrigued by the term *ubuntu* that she'd seen on various signs and advertisements. Her curiosity only grew when she asked around to get at its meaning and received many differing responses. At the Lab, one participant, Philiswa Lila, explained that the term is from a Zulu phrase, "*Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*," which is often translated to mean: I am because we are.¹³⁰ Galhotra facilitated an exercise that required that we work in partners. One person would be blindfolded and the other would be the eyes for the pair. We were to walk through the town and ask people we encounter how they define *ubuntu*.

Walking through Makhanda's downtown, surrounded by White suburbs, encircled by Black townships, the ongoing structures of coloniality are visceral. During our lab the town itself was undergoing a decolonizing name change. For centuries, it carried the name Grahamstown after the British Colonel John Graham who led the War of Dispossession (formerly known as the Frontier Wars). The name change had been suggested twenty years ago when the Truth and Reconciliation Commission proposed the return to Indigenous place-names as a form of symbolic reparations. This town (also known by several other Indigenous names) officially took the name of a Xhosa prophet

¹³⁰ "The Question: What Does Ubuntu Really Mean? | Global | The Guardian," accessed August 24, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/2006/sep/29/features11.g2>.

who “was also a military man who fought against colonialism in battles that include one where he led an attack against the British garrison at Grahamstown in 1819.”¹³¹ It sits in a valley surrounded by townships. You can traverse the bulk of the valley and never encounter these economically impoverished neighborhoods, save the occasional mysterious echo of Kwaito music bumping from a distant house party in the wee hours of the night. In the immediate area of Rhodes University, most of the people you will see are students, faculty, or staff of the school itself. Then there are the White suburban inhabitants and their Black employees. During festival time, in addition to the festival-goers coming from all over the country and some international guests, there are also young children who will offer a dance for a donation or a meal. Thus, to walk around Rhodes in the amount of time given (around thirty minutes) is to interact with a specific and limited population of the city. In some instances, we merely bumped into one another. Four of the resulting conversations stuck with me as they point to the various and fraught dimensions of living *ubuntu* philosophy.

Having spent his early childhood in Palestine and coming of age in Germany, Fouad spoke of *ubuntu* as necessarily reciprocal. He explained that when his family moved to Germany, his mom would always make food for his friends that came over to his house, but when he went to their homes, his friends’ mothers would always be cleaning, but would rarely offer so much as a glass of water. The Palestinian community was always practicing *ubuntu* – mutual reciprocal care and generosity, whereas those in

¹³¹ “Grahamstown to Be Renamed Makhanda after Xhosa Warrior,” News24, June 29, 2018, <https://www.news24.com/SouthAfrica/News/grahamstown-to-be-renamed-makhanda-after-xhosa-warrior-20180629>.

his German town were content to just let you come in and not expect anything more to be given or received, but would be happy to receive whatever was gifted to them. This, he said, was not *ubuntu*.

Carol is a White South African undergraduate at Rhodes. Her parents moved to South Africa from The Netherlands. She was standing near Fouad so our conversation was more of an add-on to his. She described *ubuntu* as being neighborly. She did not necessarily place it within the context of a particular culture.

When I was in the role of guide, I walked my partner Philiswa to a group of Lab participants and others that appeared to be Rhodes students that were seated under a tree in the quad. We listened to a young Black woman say “*ubuntu* has its limits.” She explained that *ubuntu* cannot mean just endlessly giving to the point of leaving yourself depleted. That her response focused on what *ubuntu* is *not* leads me to a supposition that perhaps *ubuntu* has been appropriated to exploit a cultural practice of generosity in a way that can further imbalance a country trying to find itself post-apartheid. Several participants commented with a tone of satire because *ubuntu* had been mobilized as a slogan during the building of democracy almost to the point of cliché. It reminds me of when victim of police brutality, Rodney King asked the American public, “Can’t we all just get along?” It was a tragic and deeply vital plea that, in the context of ongoing anti-Black violence, became comedic in its impotence.

When Philiswa asked me what I thought of *ubuntu*, I wasn’t sure what I could say other than to echo what had already been said. After spending several hours a day sitting through lectures, I was committed to *moving* as much as possible in our group

interactions. Blindfolded, I reached out for her hands and then gingerly pulled her in for a hug. By this point, a couple days in to the lab, I already admired Philiswa for her physical beauty and sense of style. I was a bit intimidated by her slightly guarded energy but I deeply wanted to connect with participants, especially after having been alone in Makhanda for two weeks prior to the lab. As we embraced I felt the warmth of her chest enrobed in a thick sweater, and pressed a bit harder until I could feel her heartbeat. I was very grateful to sense her ease into me as I moved towards her, which I took as a sign of consent and reciprocity. For me, *ubuntu* was this moment of exchange where the effort and response were perhaps equal even if individuated.

In my analysis, *ubuntu* is a praxis that is difficult to translate but is widely experienced and practiced. It is a manner of exchanging energy based in compassion, generosity and interdependence. Through energetic and dialogic exchanges it became clear that *ubuntu* manifests in multiple forms. At its foundation is the understanding that there is no such thing as an individual. Interdependence necessitates humility, sharing, risk taking, and gratitude offering. I would argue that these are necessary components of decolonial work as well. Galhotra's *ubuntu* activity established a compassionate and just framework from which other experiences could be analyzed.

Donkeys in Makhanda

Working from the paradigm of *ubuntu* requires communication and collaboration. My second group project within the lab demonstrates failure on both fronts. For the second half of the lab, participants were tasked with creating an interdisciplinary work of

art, under five minutes in duration that would relate to decolonial praxis through the theme of “Donkeys in Makhanda.” We set out on what would be a wild ride through diverse methodologies, intergenerational traumas, conflicting artistic visions, and an amorphous and as-yet-not-fully-defined commitment to liberation. The group I was assigned to work with consisted of a young Black MC and photographer named Phokeng Tshepo Setai, a middle-aged coloured dance artist and administrator named Beverly Barry, Sandile Ngidi a forty-something Black poet and translator, Zen Marie a visual artist and professor of Indian descent, a nineteen year-old White street musician named Ron Murdoch-Oates, and Buhle Ayavela a Black undergraduate visual art student and dancer. Though initially very excited by the diversity of talent and approaches that unfolded within the group, I confess our collaboration was trying to say the least. After sitting through hours of lectures in what was supposed to be an experiential lab, I was eager to start interactively making work. I suggested a movement improvisation to Beverley that required two of us to push another two participants in a painless manner while the other two resisted, and we tried to travel through space. Admittedly it may have seemed unnecessarily confrontational but at the moment there were no other ideas in play. Beverley responded with a series of questions as to why we would do such an activity. I explained that we would need to do it in order to see what would arise and the doing would help us to understand and navigate its relevance or not. Eventually we tried it but it went nowhere. This was the basic dynamic within our group – one person would suggest an idea, another would shoot it down before we got to try it. This was in part due to the fact that none of us were particularly inspired by the theme that was assigned to us

and would've preferred to generate our own. Ultimately what set us in motion was a socio-political conflict indeed revolving around a donkey.

Ron and Phokeng had decided to walk through the town shooting video of any donkeys they might see. Although it's a small urban college-town, the donkeys of Makhanda often walk in from the slightly more rural areas on the outskirts. They may be seen with or without human companions and are generally well-liked by residents. One particular donkey spotted across the street from the Arts building where we held our sessions was injured. He had a wound on his leg that appeared to need tending to but was not inhibiting his movement. Our American facilitator Jon, true to form as a documentary filmmaker, arrived on the scene and began to shoot. A conflict arose when Ron decided to call the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA) to see if anyone could attend to the donkey. This seemingly benign and benevolent act, when initiated by a White male in a small town with a living history of apartheid, did not go over smoothly. Several of my group mates worried that the SPCA might seek to prosecute the donkey's owner or otherwise cause trouble in the area if they came. They explained that many of the donkeys are well cared for by local farmers and don't need outside assistance or regulation. Ron listened to their issues and maintained that he only wished to try to get a salve for the donkey's wound. We seemed to de-escalate the situation pretty quickly but the donkey drama would only continue.

By the next day, I was hearing rumors that Jon and Ron had done something unethical involving the donkey footage but at least half of our group including myself, weren't there and weren't aware of what had happened. Phokeng had also been involved

and was quite uneasy about the situation as he described it. Zen was already incensed by Jon's lecture wherein he described his approach to journalistic filmmaking which was basically to push his way in to any situation whether invited or not, and to make sure he was charming and honest, but to film and share as much of a situation as possible without regard to what it may trigger. For example, during his presentation we had watched a man die on an operating table at an underfunded Brooklyn hospital in the 1970's. The film sought to bring attention to the terrible neglect of the borough and its patients but for some, the filming techniques crossed the line of decency. As for our own footage, though we knew it would be controversial, we ultimately decided to watch it within our group to determine how to move forward.

Apparently Ron, Jon, and Phokeng had met a local man near one of the donkeys. The man seemed excited to be on camera and after just a few moments Jon asked the man to get on the donkey. The man was joking and jostling his body around. Jon said something akin to, "yea why don't you dance?" and the man proceeded to dance on the donkey. First rocking his hips back and forth with one arm in the air like a cowboy on a horse, then rhythmically jiggling his shoulders while looking at the camera and smiling. The man was a consenting adult and had nothing in particular to gain or lose by participating in the actions he did, but we all agreed that the situation felt exploitative of both man and donkey. There are an infinite number of possible permutations of activities between a man, a donkey and a group of strangers with a camera. Certainly the video camera provokes action rather than posing still, but it is difficult to ascertain how much of this man's actions were driven by a playful desire to be seen and how much was driven

by a re-enactment of behavior expected to be performed in front of the White man behind the camera. That everyone watching the footage felt ill-at-ease can be attributed to our own knowledge of the historical relationship between dance performance and racial formation, between institutional coercion and the illusion of free will. I couldn't help but to be reminded of the 'Hottentot Venus'¹³², 'Klikko'¹³³ and the 'tribal villages'¹³⁴ still on display in South Africa and other nations where dance seems to render otherness as abject spectacle. Though we decided not to show the video footage, the experience informed our artistic experiments as we sought to create an interdisciplinary performance that would not replicate or center colonial mentality.

Together we wrote a free-association poem that Phokeng turned into a lovely spoken-word piece. Everyone contributed to a movement phrase where we shifted from imitating a donkey's walk and performing various gestures of refusal to participate. We had completed our creation and were rehearsing it with enthusiasm. Finally a sense of relief and communion had been built after several lengthy discussions about what we did *not* want to do. By the next morning however, Beverley and Zen were arguing again. This time Beverley dropped out of our group citing Zen's behavior before breakfast as patriarchal and toxic. Apparently during an artistic dispute, he'd raised his voice and communicated in an aggressive manner before the rest of us arrived at 9am. Zen apologized sincerely to her and to the group. We asked her several times to rejoin but

¹³² Scully and Crais, "Race and Erasure."

¹³³ Q.N. Parsons, "Frantz or Klikko, The Wild Dancing Bushman: A Case Study in Khoisan Stereotyping," *Botswana Notes and Records* 20 (1989): 71–76, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40979811>.

¹³⁴ "Zulu & African Tribal Villages," accessed March 22, 2019, [/country/au/en/articles/entry/cultural-villages-0-enu](http://country/au/en/articles/entry/cultural-villages-0-enu).

she'd had enough. As our elder and a member of the staff of the event, it was both heartbreaking and embarrassing to lose her. It was also frustrating. The whole process had been fraught with tension, wasted efforts and conflicts. I kept thinking: Why couldn't she just cooperate with us once we'd finally created something we were all happy with? We ended up reconstructing the piece without her but just before it was our turn to present it to the rest of the lab participants, Phokeng abruptly pulled us aside to state that if Beverley wouldn't join us, he wouldn't perform. He wanted to stand in solidarity with her and support her in her time of suffering. Unfortunately by doing so, he abandoned us. By that point it made no sense to present while missing two group members and we had to convey to the collective that we were unable to share what we'd worked on.

Although we'd been reminded that the goal was to engage in a collective decolonial process, not to create a final product, not sharing our work felt incredibly disheartening, depressing, and selfish. For me, the presentation was about sharing energy and creativity with the larger group. I felt like I'd shown up at a potluck with no food. I watched the other groups present and comment on the fun they'd had. I wondered if there was something about my presence as a non-South African that threw off our dynamic. I went home and cried a while before returning to the final closing circle – and crying some more. After having spent three weeks alone in that town, being an outsider to a group effort was the last thing I wanted to feel. I felt expressly aware of the sense of union that an artistic collaboration can forge, and the lack of that union I felt that night. Whether or not we created something aesthetically pleasing or technically impressive was of little concern. I just wanted us to work together. Luckily I was surrounded by caring

and humble people who took care to check in on me, and understood why I was upset. I, in turn, did my best to listen wholeheartedly and tried to facilitate negotiations that would bring us to agreement without conceding our values.

Despite the conflicts, micro-aggressions, and disappointment, something very productive had occurred. Indeed *because* of those difficult interactions we were forced to confront the inherited behaviors we wished to renounce and distill what was really important to our practice and presentations as artists. Though we had all come to the lab with similar intentions, our interactions were already gendered, racialized, classed, and informed by personal experiences. There was no way to work towards a decolonial aestheSis without addressing those issues together. The process was messy. We could not accomplish our goals within the pre-determined time frame. We could not hear each other without seeing color and gender. With a focus on process over product, we were able to make space for the confusion and disagreement that eventually led to the most creativity. We refused to produce a completed product that would tidily wrap up the endeavor. The collective, improvisational, and interactive aspects of the Decolonial Aesthetics Creative Lab were demonstratively more effective means for understanding what decoloniality within the arts might look and feel like. The multiple and repeated failures demonstrated our inexperience with *doing* anything in a decolonial manner despite any proficiencies in decolonial theory. This supports the notion that any ideology must be enacted to be effective or even tested. When *ubuntu* is centered as a philosophy of egalitarian exchange, the possibilities to imagine a world beyond the post-colonial and to create artwork that is not replicating colonial narratives start to emerge.

Dancing with Decoloniality

Walking through the virtual, verbal, and embodied spaces of decolonial action, I attend to the multifarious nature of attacking that which is omnipresent yet intangible. The #RhodesMustFall movement led to the removal of a monument to colonialism which was only a symbol for the traumas it continues to produce in educational institutions. #FeesMustFall demonstrations made it clear that ending apartheid without attending to the colonial structures it upheld left the majority of its citizens unable to afford to participate in land ownership, home ownership or higher education. These grievances were manifested through marches, songs, and chants. Performance, however, offered alternate realities for South Africans to envision and embody themselves beyond the grip of colonialism. As the decolonial wave spread from campus to community and back to campus, university-led gatherings invited participants to question and imagine how arts institutions can be transformed from colonial to decolonial tools of formation.

Watching calls for decolonization unfurl, recoil, and be re-imagined, it becomes evident that the work has only just begun. Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni is a professor in the Department of Leadership and Transformation at the University of South Africa. In an interview for Kujenga Amani of the Social Science Research Council, he states that

...colonial global matrices of power are not resting to allow decolonization to take place. This system always devises methods of reinvention, by appropriating the antisystemic forces pushing them back, into itself, so that it gives the system a new lease of life. The problem of the decolonization of the 1960s was that we wanted to be part of the (European) game...The decolonization of the twenty-first century is to

question the rules of the game, not to be part of it... We need to change the structure itself.¹³⁵

Transformation is endemic not only to the new democracy, but to the old structures that threaten it. As the structures of colonialism shift their shapes, so too must we mold our bodies and re-craft our practices to become more effective in our counter-attacks. In this chapter, decolonizing took shape in the form of student activists refusing to participate in colonialist education, student artists refusing to support protests when participants did not respect their humanity, and choreographers experimenting with how they might transform the structures imposed upon them to dance decoloniality. Dance has been used as a site for the projection of colonialist fears and fantasies.¹³⁶ And yet, for even longer it has been so much more. If there is any body prepared for the strength, flexibility, and creativity needed to choreograph a new world, I believe it is that of an African woman. Her archived trauma *and* resilience can provide the blueprints for decolonial moves.

¹³⁵ Duncan Omanga, "Decolonization, Decoloniality, and the Future of African Studies: A Conversation with Dr. Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni," *Kujenga Amani* (blog), January 30, 2020, <https://kujenga-amani.ssrc.org/2020/01/30/decolonization-decoloniality-and-the-future-of-african-studies-a-conversation-with-dr-sabelo-ndlovu-gatsheni/>.

¹³⁶ Eric Lott, "Love and Theft: The Racial Unconscious of Blackface Minstrelsy," *Representations*, no. 39 (1992): 23–50, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2928593>.

“They said when we see an old woman stop in her dance to point again and again in the same direction we can be sure that somewhere there something happened long ago which touched the roots of her life.”¹³⁷

Chapter Two

Re-membering and (Re)mapping: Mamela Nyamza and Black Female Performance

Mamela Nyamza is an outspoken amaXhosa artist who continually revisits South African history to piece together her story before audiences around the globe. Nyamza was born in 1976 in the Gugulethu township of Cape Town. Starting in 1984, she trained in ballet at the Zama Dance School and went on to earn her National Diploma in ballet from Pretoria Dance Technikon (now under Tshwane University of Technology) in 1997. At that time students were placed in either an African dance or ballet track and since she had ballet experience she was placed in the ballet track and would watch the African dance classes through a crack in the door, longing to dance with them.¹³⁸ She was able to move through multiple genres when she received a scholarship to study for one year at the Alvin Ailey Dance Theater in 1998. Upon returning to South Africa, she joined the Pretoria State Theatre (now known as the South African State Theatre). Since 2006, she has been an independent choreographer, performing and teaching internationally as well as at home. In 2011, she won the prestigious Standard Bank Young Artist Award, and in 2018, she was the first dance artist to be named Artist of the Year by the National Arts Festival of South Africa. In addition to international critical acclaim, her work has been examined by South African performance scholars such as Alude Mahali, Jay Pather, and

¹³⁷ Chinua Achebe, *Girls at War and Other Stories*, 1st ed. (England: Heineman, 1972), 14.

¹³⁸ Mamela Nyamza, Interview at NAF, July 7, 2018.

Stevell Van Wyk. In this chapter I use South African Indigeneity as an analytic lens to read the significance of Nyamza's work in the context of race and gender-based violence. I combine Africanist performance analysis with feminist ethnographic fieldwork, including insights from the artist gathered from an informal conversation and a post-show discussion at the National Arts Festival in Makhanda in July 2018, and from an interview in Tshwane in April, 2019.

Although she often makes use of European and American movement vocabulary and technique, Mamela Nyamza's work also demonstrates African philosophies and carries particular significance to Black audiences given the unique roles dance and bodily exhibition have played for Africans in the pre and post-colonial time/space. Although I cannot include all of the work in her repertoire, I pay particular attention to works that demonstrate contemporary Africanist approaches to dance making and suggest an Africanist approach to dance viewing. Focusing specifically on two of Nyamza's works, *Hatched* and *Black Privilege*, I argue that her performances re-member Other modes of personhood in response to the violent subjugation of Black queer women. I also argue that this act of memory is an example of an African methodology for coming into being that I call subject-formation. In Part I I provide a brief overview of present-day gender and sexuality issues in South Africa to provide the setting for Mamela Nyamza's openly gay repertoire. In Part II I examine some of the literature on her performances in order to establish her approach to queer African storytelling. In Part III I describe how her choreography and performance of *Hatched* uses Indigenous world making techniques. I expand on notions of Indigenous storytelling put forth by María Regina Firmino-Castillo,

Harold Scheub, and Benedict Carton. I apply Felicia I. Ekejiuba's notion of hearth-hold as a way to understand the structure and significance of African households in performance. I view Nyamza's work as an example of survival and resilience that Gerald Vizenor terms survivance, and suggest that Kariam Welshe-Asante's concept of ancestorism is at play in these performances. All of these strategies allow Nyamza to re-member Black South African womanhood using aesthetics that embody Achille Mbembe's notion of post-colonial entanglement. In Part IV I demonstrate how *Black Privilege* re-members an inheritance of African women's opulence *and* objectification, while (re)mapping Black performance beyond capitalist exploitation. Finally, I argue that Nyamza's choreographic and performance strategies induce an active form of witnessing that contributes to her own process of becoming.

Part I: Dancing Between the Rainbow Lines

In 1996, South Africa's Constitutional Court approved its new constitution, which included the following articles in its ninth item on the Bill of Rights:

3. The state may not unfairly discriminate directly or indirectly against anyone on one or more grounds, including race, gender, sex, pregnancy, marital status, ethnic or social origin, colour, sexual orientation, age, disability, religion, conscience, belief, culture, language and birth.
4. No person may unfairly discriminate directly or indirectly against anyone on one or more grounds in terms of subsection (3). National legislation must be enacted to prevent or prohibit unfair discrimination.¹³⁹

¹³⁹ "Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996 - Chapter 2: Bill of Rights | South African Government," accessed September 17, 2019, <https://www.gov.za/documents/constitution/chapter-2-bill-rights>.

With this bill, neither the state nor any individual could legally discriminate against a person because of their gender, sex, or sexual orientation. To put this into global perspective, just two years prior, the United States had issued the Department of Defense Directive 1304.26, better known as the “Don’t Ask Don’t Tell” policy prohibiting military members to openly express their sexuality.¹⁴⁰ This policy fell short of actually criminalizing discrimination and sent an unspoken message that one was safer in silence. Over twenty years since the induction of its peace-promoting constitution, South Africa is experiencing a sharp spike in both violence against women and violence against gender non-conforming individuals and those thought to be homosexual or bisexual. South Africa was the first African nation to legalize same-sex marriage and yet social mores mark the distance between public opinion and government progression. It might even be possible that the egalitarian laws triggered a violent backlash. As journalist Lydia Smith writes,

Significantly, still, brutal violence against gay women stands in stark contradiction to the country’s progressive 1996 constitution. As the first in the world to outlaw discrimination based on sexual orientation – South Africa was the first country in Africa to recognise same-sex marriage – the post-apartheid constitution hailed a new era of tolerance and equality.¹⁴¹

Though necessary and significant, legal progress may belie the perspectives of average South Africans. Weekly headlines recount the rape and battery of women at the hands of their romantic partners, gender non-conforming individuals beaten by their neighbors,

¹⁴⁰ “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell,” in *Wikipedia*, September 17, 2019,

https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Don%27t_ask,_don%27t_tell&oldid=916103926.

¹⁴¹ Lydia Smith, “Corrective Rape: The Homophobic Fallout of Post-Apartheid South Africa,” May 21, 2015, sec. Women, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/womens-life/11608361/Corrective-rape-The-homophobic-fallout-of-post-apartheid-South-Africa.html>.

and those thought to be homosexual being raped so that they will behave ‘appropriately’ for their biological sex. In many instances, women are dismembered. Describing just one of the brutal attacks, UK news source *The Telegraph* reports that, “In 2011, Noxolo Nogwaza’s body was found in a drainage ditch in the Kwa Thema township near Johannesburg...Her eyes were pulled from their sockets; her brain was split open; and her teeth were scattered around her body.”¹⁴² When I say that Mamela Nyamza’s choreography is an attempt to re-member, I also reference the effort to literally keep one’s body parts in tact in the face of gender-based violence.

Dance Studies scholar Susan Foster writes of how “muscle memory is cultural memory and how cultural memory is muscular”¹⁴³ in explaining how Senegalese choreographer Germaine Acogny and African-American choreographer Diane McIntyre re-member Africa through choreography. The act of remembering a culture that was vanquished is a matter of re-membering, or becoming intimate and creative with one’s physical body as an individual being, in relation with the world, as a member of a displaced culture. Likewise, to re-member in this context can be an intimate act of feelings one’s self to be safe and whole despite widespread gender-based violence and cultural repression. In order to appreciate the significance of Mamela Nyamza’s work, it is necessary to understand the context in which she re-members herself under threat of dismemberment as a Black lesbian dance artist.

¹⁴² Smith.

¹⁴³ Foster, Susan Leigh, “Muscle/Memories: How Germaine Acogny and Diane McIntyre Put Their Feet Down,” in *Rhythms of the Afro-Atlantic World: Rituals and Remembrances*, ed. Mamadou Diouf and Ifeoma Kiddoe Nwankwo (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 131, <http://lib.myilibrary.com/detail.asp?ID=294476>.

Gender and sexuality-based violence in South Africa is occurring at an alarming rate. In a country of about 58 million people, “39,633 rapes and 6,253 sexual assaults were reported in the country in 2017 alone;”¹⁴⁴ but rapes often go unreported. Women of diverse sexual orientations and transgender women are twice burdened in an atmosphere of misogyny intensified by homophobia. Reporting for the *New York Times*, Clare Carter writes,

Last year, Funeka Soldaat, a founder of Free Gender, a black lesbian activist group in the Khayelitsha township outside Cape Town, described to me an atmosphere of pervasive fear: “It’s as if you are sitting like a time bomb. You don’t know when it’s going to explode. You are just waiting for it to be your turn. And you won’t get any support from the community, as the community thinks homosexuality is un-African. Homophobia is going to take time to go away, if it ever does.”¹⁴⁵

Despite its liberal constitution, South Africa is tasked with proving to its citizens that diverse sexualities are not imported aberrations and that women are not objects to receive male aggression. As I write this, the African National Congress (ANC) has just declared this horrific scenario a state of emergency as thirty women were reported murdered in August 2019 alone. Parliament Member Nkhensani Bilankulu stated, “As the ANC we call for a state of emergency to be declared on gender-based violence and femicide. Men who murder women and children must get nothing less than a life sentence. Cases of

¹⁴⁴ “South Africa: Gender-Based Violence and Femicide Offenders Must Face Justice,” accessed September 17, 2019, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/09/south-africa-gender-based-violence-and-femicide-offenders-must-face-justice/>.

¹⁴⁵ Clare Carter, July 27, and 2013, “The Brutality of ‘Corrective Rape,’” accessed September 17, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2013/07/26/opinion/26corrective-rape.html>.

gender-based violence and femicide must be fast-tracked.”¹⁴⁶ Widespread and widely recognized violence against women and gay people makes it clear that the very presence of Black lesbian bodies threatens male domination. In this setting it would be easy to understand why any queer person would choose to mask their identity. One can see why rapes go unreported. It’s not hard to imagine why a gender-non-conforming individual would choose to perform the gender assigned to their sex. Mamela Nyamza puts on no such performance. For at least ten years, Nyamza has tackled the issues that threaten her life and turned them into her livelihood.

In 2007, Nyamza choreographed *Kutheni (Why)*. On her website, Nyamza describes this work as a fearful but necessary entry into a series of works that would address homophobic violence. “One of her first works to attract significant attention [Kutheni] relates the horrifying corrective rape and murder of lesbians, Sizakele and Salome in Soweto on the 7th July 2007.”¹⁴⁷ Nyamza explains how artistic creation is both a risk and a healing process: “I read their stories and other stories were coming up about lesbians who were killed, so that inspired me. I needed to talk about that in my work. I was scared to talk about that in my work.”¹⁴⁸ Nyamza’s fears are justified. Michael Morris stated in Huffpost UK that, “Four out of ten LGBTI South Africans know of someone who was murdered for being – or suspected of being – part of the LGBTI community...” Gerbrandt van Heerden, an analyst for the South African Institute of Race

¹⁴⁶ “ANC MP Declares Attacks on Women a ‘State of Emergency,’” *The South African* (blog), September 3, 2019, <https://www.thesouthafrican.com/news/anc-mp-declares-attacks-women-state-of-emergency/>.

¹⁴⁷ Mamela Nyamza, “Mamela Nyamza - KUTHENI,” accessed July 15, 2019, <http://mamelanyamza.com/creations/kutheni.html>.

¹⁴⁸ Nyamza.

Relations reported in 2017 that, “Black LGBTI people are twice as likely as white LGBTI people to know of someone [who has been] murdered on these grounds – which partially explains why only half of black respondents are completely open about their sexuality.”¹⁴⁹ The work Nyamza makes places her at risk of physical harm, but perhaps to not make the work is to ensure another form of damage – the psychological and spiritual damage of closeting one’s identity or losing one’s artistic vision. The need to confront the threat and the ability to physicalize the fear and move through it is part of what makes her work so strong. In an environment of destruction, the creative act is a form of life.

Part II: Past and Future Ancestors

In much of her work, Nyamza remembers ancestors to reconstruct their histories and give them a place in her contemporary reality. This is an act of re-membering Black women in a context where Black citizens are encouraged to move on and forget,¹⁵⁰ and where lesbians are mutilated in instances of ‘corrective rape’ and other forms of violence. Though the aesthetics and movement vocabularies of her works vary widely, reflecting her diverse training, Nyamza’s choreography can also be characterized by its fragmented use of space and time. Native Studies scholar Mark Rifkin offers the notion of *temporal orientations* as a way of understanding Indigenous philosophies of time. He writes, “Conceptualizing time as not only plural but sensuous, as an expression of affective

¹⁴⁹ Michael Morris, “Costs of Coming Out Can Be High for SA’s LGBT Community, Says IRR,” HuffPost UK, December 5, 2017, https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/michael-morris/costs-of-coming-out-can-be-high-for-sa-s-lgbt-community-says-irr_a_23294615/.

¹⁵⁰ Laura Shortridge, “Apartheid Is Not Something You Just Get Over,” News24, February 24, 2016, <https://www.news24.com/Columnists/Laura-Shortridge/apartheid-is-not-something-you-just-get-over-20160224>.

orientations, directs attention toward the need to consider how quotidian forms and feelings of continuity emerge as part of, in Cordova's terms, the work of 'maintaining stability' amid ongoing processes of transformation and change."¹⁵¹ This idea of maintaining stability while undergoing change relates to re-membering and I would argue is being demonstrated through choreographic choices in Nyamza's work. Quotidian sensations of the passing and repeating of time factor strongly in Nyamza's approach to dancing history. Everyday objects such as books and clotheslines are paired with everyday actions like smoking cigarettes or taking out the trash. These images place the dancer in particular and relatable moments that are then transformed by the tragedy of death or the miracle of survival. Choreographically shaping disparate events in a non-linear arrangement suggests that a unique understanding of time is needed to convey the stories of queer Black South Africans.

Indigenous philosophies of circular space-time facilitate Nyamza's approach to dealing with pastness. 1976 marks the year of the pivotal Soweto Uprising, considered to be a turning point in South Africa's anti-apartheid movement. Thousands of students protested the Bantu Education Act, which sought to change the official language in Black schools from English to Afrikaans. Police murdered hundreds of youth in broad daylight and only one photograph was illegally published, allowing the world to see the evidence. Performance Studies scholar Alude Mahali suggests that Nyamza's choreographic response, *19-Born-76-Rebels* (2013), blurs the boundaries of both physical and metaphorical space and temporality as the performers oscillate between time frames and

¹⁵¹ Mark Rifkin, "Indigenous Orientations," in *Beyond Settler Time: Temporal Sovereignty and Indigenous Self-Determination* (Durham ; London: Duke University Press Books, 2017), 39.

characters and involve the audience in the action.¹⁵² This collective authorship and non-linear temporality is reflective of Indigenous storytelling practices that rely on group participation and an embodied philosophy of time that is closer to a collage than a line. Similarly, *Isingqala* (2011) calls on past events to clarify their relevance to the present. This work is about the rape and murder of Nyamza's mother. *Isingqala* is an isiXhosa word for sorrow and Mahali reads the piece as an expression of the country's mourning as well as that particular sorrow felt by Black women in South Africa whose bodies have been repeatedly violated throughout changing regimes. Here time seems to be circular as the same brutality is repeated in each new context despite the seemingly positive progression of the political landscape. The power of witnessing the violence in Nyamza's family history is not its shocking rarity but its shocking commonality. Black audience members of different generations can relate to the stories of mis-education, displacement, and even her mother's rape and murder. By sharing the intimate details of her own life through fragmented expressions, Nyamza uses performance to convey how her own inter-generational trauma is intrinsically linked to that of her country. The non-narrative methods Nyamza employs to share the experiences of her life allow audience members to feel the reflection of her own. With this approach, she can tell the history of the nation in the form of a memoir.

Like traditional storytellers, contemporary choreographers routinely draw from personal and ancestral experiences, invoking traditions in novel ways to comment on

¹⁵² Alude Mahali, "'After Images' Impressions of the 'after' by South African Performance-Choreographer Mamela Nyamza," in *African Theatre 14: Contemporary Women*, ed. Martin Banham, James Gibbs, and Femi Osofisan (Woodbridge, Suffolk: James Currey, 2015).

current situations. In *The World and the Word: Tales and Observations from the Xhosa Oral Tradition*, Nongenile Masithathu Zenani and Harold Scheub assert that South African

storytellers have always been innovative, and they have always been imitative. This need not be seen as a contradiction... The genius of the storyteller is to be discovered in her ability to work within the tradition, the imitative part of her art, as she simultaneously gives her audiences new insights into ancient images by using them to give form to their contemporary world, the innovative part of her performances.¹⁵³

Likewise, by storytelling through movement, Nyamza embeds the past into the present and demonstrates imitative and innovative techniques by using original and traditional movement vocabularies. Autobiography functions as the site of convergence for the individual, the community, and the cosmos in reclaiming and reshaping time.

In her article “Dancing the Pluriverse: Indigenous Performance as Ontological Praxis,” dance scholar María Regina Firmino-Castillo asserts that stories perform worlds into being and can revive ontologies through enactment. Both Rifkin and Native American contemporary dance scholar/practitioner Tria Blu Wakpa describe storytelling as a process of becoming not unlike Castillo’s theory of performing worlds into being. Stories here are not relics or legacies, but coordinates in time and space that facilitate participants’ understanding and placement in the world, and ability to envision futures. The future is not externally determined but a responsibility of creativity.

These acts of creative re-membling can be seen to continue an Indigenous practice of calling on the ancestors. Kariamuwelsh-Asante establishes the concept of

¹⁵³ Nongenile Masithathu Zenani and Harold Scheub, *The World and the Word: Tales and Observations from the Xhosa Oral Tradition* (Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), 3.

ancestorism, or the assertion that one's ancestors play an active role in the activities of the living, as a criterion of African dance. Ancestorism is a praxis found throughout the African continent and seen in various genres of the diaspora. Welsh-Asante explains that a dance need not be performed in a sacred context to invoke ancestorism. She writes, "...all traditional dances are convertible as 'agents' of the deities and ancestors, even if the intent of the dance was not for that purpose."¹⁵⁴ Therefore an invitation to ancestors in contemporary concert dance can also pull the past into the present and even the future, creating a circular understanding of time. Inviting ancestors into choreography disrupts linear time and the notion that a choreographer is the authority of the experience. Nyamza's approach calls on the collective experience of her countrymen and her audience to perform a new narrative for Black women.

She even summons victims of hate crimes to guide performance. In 2012, Nyamza collaborated with UK-based theater artist and scholar of Danish-Nigerian descent, Dr. Mojisola Adebayo to create *I Stand Corrected*. The piece addresses the instances of South African men raping women and transsexuals under the guise of trying to "correct" their sexuality or perceived gender dysmorphia. The piece premiered at the Soweto Theatre and then was performed again by Nyamza and Adebayo at the Oval House in London for three weeks where it was nominated for six Off End Theatre awards.¹⁵⁵ In this piece Nyamza plays the character of Zodwa, a girl who has been raped,

¹⁵⁴ Mamela Nyamza, 17 Mar Interview - Dance Umbrella Africa, March 17, 2019, https://iono.fm/e/666500?fbclid=IwAR2VeJgamG5EHPaw9YjBilZA_6ogBiBV7TudJ91S3xdzqUgfw6iHpC2nuQ.

¹⁵⁵ "Mamela Nyamza," in *Wikipedia*, May 24, 2019, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Mamela_Nyamza&oldid=898559551.

murdered and dumped into a garbage can. Rather than the show ending in her tragedy, Zodwa's story starts with her death and continues as she comes back to life to figure out what happened to her. This reverse chronologic takes Zodwa from victim to heroine and literally gives voice to the voiceless character. Given the dismemberment that murdered girls and women often endure and the ways that such violence can tear at the psychological fibers of a community, artistic work that presents narratives of retribution and resilience performs a healing act of re-membering for South Africans.

To *become* healthy, whole, and healed, it is necessary for Black women such as Nyamza to reflect on their ancestors' impact on their lives. Therefore, it is not surprising that this contemporary artist speaks frequently of her own and her ancestors' pasts in the process of creating new work. Ancestorism takes particular significance when considering how many young South Africans become ancestors before their natural time as victims of racist, homophobic, or misogynist violence. In Nyamza's work, ancestorism works not only to honor the dead but to perform them into being so that they might be not only remembered, but remain impactful on the living. Thus, ancestorism as a choreographic device pulls the past into the future and demonstrates the potency of the after-life for queer African artists in particular.

It is in this climate of omnipresent violent misogyny that Mamele Nyamza, an openly gay and unapologetically Black woman, became the first dance artist to win the festival's prestigious honor of Artist of the Year in 2018. Nyamza presented a total of four distinct works ranging in topics from Indigenous land rights, to mediatized pressure to be beautiful, to her experiences as a Black lesbian mother. She sold out theaters, as she

often has in her decades-long career, but despite her success, this performance was a sort of swan song for the forty-two year-old artist. After presenting her work around the world and appearing in numerous interviews, research journals, and even a televised dance competition, Nyamza still struggled to find financial stability or consistent moral support in the precarious world of contemporary dance. Nyamza announced that after touring *Black Privilege* in Europe, she would continue to choreograph, but would no longer perform. I was honored to be able to see what may have been her last South African performance at the National Arts Festival in 2018.

Arts festivals have had a particular significance in South Africa due to their need to either be funded by or evade apartheid's dictates. In "Gate-Crashing Prejudices and Perceptions: The Enduring Legacy of Arts and Dance Festivals in Post-Apartheid South Africa," renowned South African dance writer Adrienne Sichel traces the significance of dance festivals in counteracting efforts of the National Party (1948-1994) who sought to segregate dance institutions and audiences, and intentionally give ballet a superior status over Indigenous and all other dance forms.¹⁵⁶ With many dancers of color leaving South Africa to seek professional opportunities, festivals such as the National Arts Festival (NAF), Dance Umbrella and Jomba! served the important role of inviting artists back home to perform and teach, while also creating subversive artistic communities. During and after the official end of apartheid, these dance festivals brought dancers of all backgrounds together and humanized them in the eyes of one another.

¹⁵⁶ "ANC MP Declares Attacks on Women a 'State of Emergency,'" *The South African* (blog), September 3, 2019, <https://www.thesouthafrican.com/news/anc-mp-declares-attacks-women-state-of-emergency/>.

Theater scholar Daniel Larlham reports from the 2007 festival website that “The National Arts festival began in 1974 as a celebration of the nation’s British heritage and English-language culture and over the last three decades has grown into the largest annual arts festival on the African continent, now professing ‘to reflect the richness of South Africa’s cultural tapestry.’”¹⁵⁷ During the crisis period of apartheid, international producers and organizations broke the international boycott to support the democratic aims of the festival, and European festivals created special platforms to showcase South African dance artists abroad. Over time, the National Arts Festival’s commissions moved from highlighting White classical ballet productions towards showcasing contemporary artists of color tackling social issues.

Although National Arts Festival performances are integrated and often diverse, the stakes for performing and attending performances are very different. The festival includes several opportunities for people to participate at no cost such as outdoor children’s productions or even local musicians and dancers busking in the streets, but most of the events require a ticket purchase. Though largely considered accessible, the cost is certainly prohibitive to many local residents. I also noticed that most out-of-town performers who were commissioned or self-produced could only afford to stay the nights of their own productions. The atmosphere in the audiences is therefore that of a shifting collective with some people staying for the full eleven days, others only three or four. Everyone I spoke to mentioned the low attendance during the 2017 and 2018 festivals in

¹⁵⁷ Daniel Larlham, “Transforming Geographies and Reconfigured Spaces: South Africa’s National Arts Festival,” *TDR: The Drama Review* 51, no. 3 (September 18, 2007): 182–88.

comparison with festivals a few years prior. I believe the festival was feeling the economic downturn of the nation.

Those who did attend brought their personal and political histories with them. Attendees familiar with the stages of village life and the participatory nature of African theater had to perform the spectatorship of the Western proscenium - though the unspoken rule of sitting quietly and expressing interest only by applauding at the end was not always followed. Those who came with the expectation of performance as escapism or entertainment were also often out of place. On two occasions, I witnessed White audience members leave abruptly during controversial performances by Black artists, causing the makeshift bleachers to creak and wobble distractingly. At least five people left during a performance of Zimkitha Kumbaca's *Confessions of a Blacklisted Woman: She Bellows*, a theater piece that boldly interrogates rape culture and its implications for Black South African women. Yet no one left during Rob Van Vuuren's sold-out one-man performance of *Dangled*, where he portrays a man who descends into madness and rapes his neighbor. I had attended this dark comedy on the recommendation of a mutual friend, but seeing it between the news stories of actual raped women and the performances of women living in actual fear, the work made me a bit sick to my stomach. It also firmed my resolution to attend to Black women's work – to hold space for them to speak and to truly listen.

During the 2018 NAF, I had the opportunity to watch four works by Mamela Nyamza: *Hatched*, *i-Dolls*, *Phuma-Langa*, and *Black Privilege*. Here I look closely at the two solos, *Hatched* and *Black Privilege*, to uncover Nyamza's choreographic and

performative tactics that utilize Indigenous philosophies. Through autobiographical and abstract storytelling, Nyamza re-members queer Black feminist identities and (re)maps the stage as a site of decolonial subject-formation.

Part III: Breaking to Become Whole

Because of the severe degradation of epistemologies and the intentional separation of ethno-cultural groups during the TransAtlantic slave trade, cultural memory (and cultural forgetting) is centered in the literature on African diasporic arts. Scholars such as Christina Rosa, Kariamuwelsh-Asanta, Tommy DeFrantz, Brenda Dixon Gottschild, Robert Farris Thompson and Yvonne Daniel have established a rich body of research tracing the African legacy in arts of the Americas. But remembering in the post-colony is as important as in the diaspora, so intense was the severing of Indigenous people from their lifeways. Kwame Appiah's *In My Father's House* and Pascah Mungwini's "African Modernities and the Critical Reappropriation of Indigenous Knowledges: Towards a Polycentric Global Epistemology" are both powerful reminders of how much effort it can take to find and maintain Indigenous philosophies and practices in contemporary Africa. This is particularly true in former double-settler-colonies such as South Africa. *Hatched* recalls contemporary South African social and political dance forms and places them in fertile friction with the European ballet of Nyamza's formative years. It also recalls *Hatch*, a work she created ten years prior, where she performs a sort

of rebirth representing her divorce from her ex-husband and from a life she deemed incompatible with being an artist.¹⁵⁸

Performing *Hatched* as the Artist of the Year at NAF is significant for Nyamza, who has been outspoken in her desire to be as appreciated by audiences at home as she is in Europe.¹⁵⁹ Revisiting yet transforming her original choreography, Nyamza is able to make visible her own metamorphosis and process of becoming before our eyes. Visual symbols of domestic labor and femininity are abundant in *Hatched* and help tell the story of a woman who has broken free from the life she was *supposed* to lead. I read *Hatched* as the creation of a pivotal counter-discourse to that of the hetero-patriarchal capitalist logic, introduced and enforced via colonialism and apartheid, which creates gendered sex roles that subordinate women and erase queer agency. This paradigm renders non-normative sexualities as Western while severing African families through means such as transnational slavery and displaced wage labor. By performing her story as a queer artist and mother through entangled movement motifs, *Hatched* re-members queer African identity, motherhood and professional dance life as aspects of one empowered body. In *Hatched*, Nyamza uses domestic imagery to question hetero-normative patriarchy, balletic symbols to subvert sexist divisions of labor, and puts an African face on queer motherhood. I analyze her work through the lens of Indigenous philosophies such as hearthhold, survivance, and ancestorism to convey her post-colonial aesthetic and its role in subject-formation.

¹⁵⁸ Nyamza, Interview at NAF.

¹⁵⁹ Mamele Nyamza, The Jet Set Breakfast Interview, March 17, 2019, https://iono.fm/e/666500?fbclid=IwAR2VeJgamG5EHPaw9YjBilZA_6ogBiBV7TudJ91S3xdzqUgfw6iHpC2nuQ.

A Woman. A Place. A Home.

Nyamza sits upstage left in a pool of light next to a large aluminum basin. She has her back to us and is wearing only pointe shoes and a romantic-era white tulle tutu with a large burlap apron over it, which is covered in clothespins. She mindfully takes clothespins from the floor and attaches them to her skirts as the audience enters the theater. Downstage left her son Amkele Mandla is creating a charcoal drawing facing an easel, his back to the audience. I'm struck by the cold of the room, not only because I am uncomfortable, but because I sympathize with Nyamza's bare torso and wish she had on a coat and scarf like her son. A clothesline has been strung across the back of the stage and Nyamza places women's clothing of various styles on the line affixing the items with her limitless clothespins. A tank top, a skirt, a sundress - all of the clothes are red. I wonder if the red signifies blood – the inevitable bleeding in most women's lives – the menstruation, childbirth, abuse....

The duration of the laundry enactment section feels quite long. I sense the monotony of domestic life, of women's underappreciated labor being repeated one generation after the next – an inheritance. Intermittently, Nyamza performs a series of *bouffés en élève* (quick tight steps on the toe-tips) across the stage in pale pink pointe shoes that contrast her chocolate brown legs and feet. Although her tutu and pointe shoes reference the feminine ideals of ballet, here they also seem to reveal how gender roles can be burdensome and labored, rather than beneficial or natural. Pointe shoes were designed to create the illusion of levity in the romantic era European ballets of the 1800's, where

women often portrayed fairies or other diminutive mythological flying creatures. Susan

Foster explains:

Although promulgated through the skills of individual dancers such as Marie Taglioni and Fanny Ellser, the sudden emergence of dancing on pointe can be traced to no single choreographer. Its widespread use by female soloists of midcentury constructed a radically new vision of both feminine and masculine roles in which female dancers embodied an illusive fragility and male dancers supported, admired, and yearned for them. The choreography for these gendered roles made manifest a version of the Rousseauian social contract with its division of duties between masculine public and feminine private spheres.¹⁶⁰

In Foster's assessment, the introduction of pointe shoes reflected the socio-political philosophy of the pan-European culture that developed ballet. This epistemology rendered the embodiment of lithe domesticity for women so it makes sense that Nyamza pairs pointe work with domestic work. Nyamza's bourrés, however, emphasize weight. As she carries the load of clothing on her back and then head, with the thick burlap skirt holding about a hundred clothes pins, I wonder how much these items weigh her down as her strong feet press into the ground to elevate her. This dual action embodies the tension between lithe ballerina and over-burdened homemaker.

Feminist scholars and activists have described the homemaking expectations designated to women in Western modernity as a subtle form of oppression.¹⁶¹ In the post-show discussion, Nyamza explained how her work speaks to the ways that patriarchy renders women's labor invisible. "Women are always working back and forth so even though I'm talking about these cultures I'm also talking about women – how hard-

¹⁶⁰ Susan Leigh Foster, "Choreographies of Gender," *Signs* 24, no. 1 (1998): 11.

¹⁶¹ Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York, NY: Dell, 1963).

working we are and also not appreciated.”¹⁶² Her movement description – back and forth – is physicalized in the piece as she walks back and forth between the wash basin and the clothes line, allowing us to sense just how long this one part of the laundry chore really takes. Globally, domestic work is usually unpaid if done for one’s own family. Professional dance is also underpaid – especially when performed by women.¹⁶³ What’s more, in a domestic role, Nyamza invokes the all-too-familiar role of the nanny. In South Africa, generations of Black women survived apartheid’s economic repression by caring for White families’ homes and nursing White babies. By inviting us to sit with the banality of her domestic labor in a tulle skirt on a prestigious stage, Nyamza calls into question the dominant value system established by European patriarchal capitalism that domesticated women’s labor. Domestic work – made to appear natural – often goes unseen and underappreciated. Placing it onstage forces the audience to sit with the vision of a domesticated woman; but rather than wearing the highly recognizable uniforms of a South African domestic laborer, Nyamza combines her tasks with the costuming of ballet. This is a genre whose aesthetics seek to render effort invisible through the illusion of grace, *aplomb*, and *ballon*, and whose policies often literally undervalue women’s labor.¹⁶⁴ By combining images of domestic labor with those of ballet, Nyamza ruptures the effeminate fairytale of the ballerina and the wife. Smashing together domestic work and ballet creates an opportunity for her to create a non-normative subject.

¹⁶² Mamela Nyamza, Post-Show Discussion, June 28, 2018.

¹⁶³ Norene Pupo and Ann Duffy, “Unpaid Work, Capital and Coercion,” *Work Organization, Labour & Globalisation* 6, no. 1 (2012): 27–47.

¹⁶⁴ Jennings, “Sexism in Dance.”

Tulle and Trouble

Although this is a work of contemporary dance, the allusions to ballet play a particular and significant role on this national stage. Ballet has long been characterized and chastised as a disciplining force, especially for women's bodies.¹⁶⁵ The South African state explicitly mobilized ballet to proliferate White supremacist ideology by creating 'civilized' European retreats in 'savage' nations.¹⁶⁶ With the NAF audience, Nyamza discussed her own experiences with ballet as a form of oppression:

I think growing up and also having studied ballet – I come from the classics - so it was actually something I needed to talk about. Because also as a Black woman, my body wasn't really accepted so I decided to do something that was actually going to work for me as an African woman. So that is why I kind of pasted those cultures together: the Western culture, the African culture, the traditional music, the classical music... now there's rap music, so now there's all these different musical genres... I was playing with how in traditional culture we are expected to do these chores – because I came out from marriage so that was also talking about marriage which is also a white dress but it's also a western thing you know? And also pointe shoes are very umm...they're like tools of oppression. I'm talking about oppression right? These classics I'm talking about... it's a tool that oppressed me as a Black woman because they did not accept me. So right now I use it to talk about that this is something that colonized my body...¹⁶⁷

I cite her at length to attend to the connections Nyamza herself makes in the flow of one element of the piece to the next. It is clear that both South African traditions of heterosexual marriage (already inflected by colonial ideologies as expressed in the comment about the white dress) with its domestic expectations, and European ballet, with

¹⁶⁵ Jennifer Fisher, "Tulle as Tool: Embracing the Conflict of the Ballerina as Powerhouse," *Dance Research Journal* 39, no. 1 (2007): 2–24, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20444681>.

¹⁶⁶ Sharon Friedman, *Post-Apartheid Dance: Many Bodies Many Voices Many Stories*, Reprint edition (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015).

¹⁶⁷ Nyamza, Post-Show Discussion.

its exclusive body types and hetero-romantic character portrayals, had detrimental effects on her mind/body. As a same-sex loving African, the constraint is even more severe as there are no classical ballet narratives telling queer stories. She not only describes the experience as oppressive, but states that ballet *colonized* her body. Here is the essence of why we can still speak of colonialism in the post-colony. Even after the event of colonialism, the cultural practices and values of the colonizer tend to far exceed political policies. They are made visible through quotidian and performative bodily expressions.

Nyamza grew up dancing in a variety of contexts, learning formally and informally. She speaks to the power of dance to constrain or to liberate when she contrasts ballet with Indigenous forms and their respective philosophies calling in a sense of knowledge and ownership from the audience. As she stated in the post-show discussion, "...at the end of the day we are free people when we dance we just go all out – as opposed to ballet where it has to be [stiff pose] women on pointe – women on their toes."¹⁶⁸ Although the pairing of Indigenous dances with freedom in Western scholarship can be problematic as it tends to suppose a lack of technical training or forethought, here I surmise that Nyamza is referring to a sense of actually *being* free to dance one's own dance – a practice once tightly regulated if not all-out prohibited by colonial and apartheid administrations. To say, "we go all out," signifies a total incorporation of mind, body and spirit that allows the practitioner to dance without the energetic inhibition or cognitive hesitation a young dancer like Nyamza may have felt in ballet studios and

¹⁶⁸ Nyamza.

dance history courses where her lived experience was neither reflected nor validated. In an interview for online magazine Brand South Africa, she explains

Growing up as part of a large family in Gugulethu, Cape Town in the 1980s “did not give me a choice but to love dancing...There was music and sound, all day long, and even in the streets the noise became the music ... I used my body as the instrument to react to all forms of sound, whether it be playing, crying, or watching all sorts of things that one can imagine happened in Gugulethu in the '80s.¹⁶⁹

The words, “Gugulethu in the ‘80’s” likely conjures some very specific memories for her South African audience. On March 3rd, 1986, young activists Mandla Simon Mxinwa, Zanisile Zenith Mjobo, Zola Alfred Swelani, Godfrey Jabulani Miya, Christopher Piet, Themba Mlifi and Zabonke John Konile were all murdered by police in Gugulethu township. The memorial monument to ‘the Gugulethu Seven’ was unveiled on Human Rights Day in March 2000, and is comprised of seven larger-than-life slabs of concrete with the shapes of seven young men cut out from the center so that their full-body shadows are cast onto the ground. Notably, each hollow figure is in motion. With arms waving overhead suggesting indirect pathways and asymmetrical leg patterns with unevenly distributed weight, the men appear as much like children playing as they do like revolutionaries storming the streets. It is precisely the type of juxtaposition Nyamza’s comment evokes. Gugulethu, like most ghettos of the world, are places of great violence and massively overlooked talent and potential.

¹⁶⁹ “Mamela Nyamza: The Body as Instrument,” *Brand South Africa* (blog), May 4, 2011, <https://www.brandsouthafrica.com/south-africa-fast-facts/arts-facts/mamela-nyamza>.

Gugulethu is famous for another reason. In 2002, Kristin Pichaske created the documentary film *Gugulethu Ballet*. The film starts with the narration, “In 1992, a White South African ballet dancer ventured into a township and started teaching lessons in an empty schoolroom. Within a few years, hundreds of township kids took up ballet. Some were just looking for something to do.”¹⁷⁰ The hour-long film has been seen around the world and many of its participants have gone on to professional careers in dance. It also inspired several foreign dancers such as former American Ballet Theater soloist Kristine Elliott to travel to Gugulethu to teach ballet through the Dance For All program and then set up her own organization, Gugulethu Ballet Project, which provides an exchange program for exceptionally talented dancers in the United States and South Africa. Highlighting the inarguable benefits of youth arts programming in townships, the film skirts around the potentially problematic racial dynamics of the program, overlooking striking comments from participants like Mbulelo Ndabeni who says,

You know, on those days like a White person was like law...was like something comes from court, yeah. So if you saw a white person maybe you thought that your dreams will come true, so that's what I thought... In the township when involved with the Whites, they [other township residents] will respect you.¹⁷¹

More than just something to do, or a place to learn ballet, some children looked to the ballet project as a portal to social power they had only seen wielded by Whites. That this social power is paired with European theatrical dance even in the 1990's suggests not only the positive ramifications of racially integrated dance education programs, but also

¹⁷⁰ Kristin Pichaske, *Gugulethu Ballet*, electronic resource (Filmmakers Library, 2002), <http://www.aspresolver.com/aspresolver.asp?DAIV;1664043>.

¹⁷¹ Pichaske.

the potential for embodying self-hate in the process of assimilating White culture without assuming its social power. Perhaps it is this dichotomy that appears so potently in *Hatched*. In a place where everyone is dancing, only one dance gets recognized as the ticket out of poverty. Gugulethu means pride or treasure in isiXhosa.¹⁷² Pointe shoes on a woman from Gugulethu who is refusing to perform ballet in them may be a form of expressing pride in being an amaXhosa woman who has learned ballet and will use it to her own ends, not to merely imitate or enhance White culture or values.

Nyamza describes how she brings contradictions of dancing and learning to dance together in *Hatched*.

I think as a woman I've allowed my body to express myself the way it wants to be not the way I was taught. I come from 'structures.' I come from 'France' and I've actually deleted all those structures. I just want to do what I'm expressing. I'm not interested in any structures anymore. I think the structures confused me because my history of dance and ballet spoke about people I never knew I could not relate and that really made me feel odd in class and that oddness made me to do something about it as an artist because I was really the Other in everything...It was 1994 – times of transformation in South Africa. You needed to get into the institution to study dance. I needed to get that paper because I needed to prove to myself that I could get that national diploma. I had to prove myself and I did and then after that I was like: away with the structures; but I use the classics but I still take ballet because I feel like it's good for my body as a dancer...but I go to class now to do what I want to do...sometimes when somebody shows something on somebody else the memory comes back to me – even I feel like crying now because the memory is so painful.¹⁷³

¹⁷² “Gugulethu Ballet Project | Building Pride Though Dance,” Gugulethu Ballet Project | Building Pride though Dance, accessed October 17, 2019, <http://www.gugulethuballetproject.org>.

¹⁷³ “Gugulethu Ballet Project | Building Pride Though Dance,” Gugulethu Ballet Project | Building Pride though Dance, accessed October 17, 2019, <http://www.gugulethuballetproject.org>.

Other than the brief bourrés, there is no ballet movement vocabulary in this piece and it certainly does not follow the narrative style of a classical ballet with characters relaying linear plotlines. Hetero-normative stories, rigid body-shape requirements, and outdated and misplaced cultural mores are the ballet structures Nyamza gets rid of in her choreography. Yet elements of posture and line still seem to inform her movement. It is clear from her statement that for Nyamza, ballet is still taught and maintained with colonial intentions of regulating women's bodies, elevating European aesthetics over Indigenous ones, and using them to establish gate-keeping institutions in which Black bodies are required to train in the form they will often not be allowed to succeed in professionally. And yet, Nyamza admits she still practices ballet and has found a way to use the form to subvert its institutions. To read her approach as decolonial does not mean that there are only Indigenous elements contributing to the choreography. On the contrary, here the symbols of ballet are displayed like a bad tattoo – a painful but irrevocable mark of one's past that nonetheless becomes an intrinsic part of one's story.

Thus the national politics of ballet and of apartheid become ensnarled with personal memories and the embodied reverberations of this and other dances learned. Remembering here is not reiteration or mere recall but a method of personal transformation. By crashing one genre into another, one lifestyle against another, Nyamza revisits painful memories of confinement, to unravel and liberate herself on stage. By dancing en pointe, attaching and tearing down her laundry, Nyamza establishes Victorian ideals of femininity and hetero-normativity as restrictive elements in her process of becoming. But

as one critic wrote, “This is her life. And it’s her art. Intertwined and inextricable.”¹⁷⁴

Instead of simply rejecting those elements of her past that seem to contradict the life of a big city dance artist, and international representative, she incorporates them into her future. She re-members the many parts of herself in her own creation. This is enriched by the presence of her son.

Hearth-hold

Nyamza’s *Hatched* gives choreographic shape to the concept of a “hearth-hold,” which makes way for an African reading of the family onstage. In “Down to Fundamentals: Women-Centered Hearth-holds in Rural West Africa,” Felicia I. Ekejiuba sources her upbringing in rural Nigeria as well as her graduate research to propose the consideration of hearth-holds rather than households as the primary socio-economic units of rural West Africa. She explains that

...hearth-holds are an extension of the mother-child bond...The unit is demographically made up of a woman and all her dependents whose food security she is either fully or partially responsible for... The male spouse can be either a full member of the hearth-hold, but in most cases he oscillates between several hearth-holds, that of his wives, mother and mistress...the hearth-hold is primarily a unit of consumption and also a unit of production.”¹⁷⁵

She characterizes hearth-holds as woman-centered spaces of reciprocal exchanges where men and women are expected to contribute and to benefit. As relayed in our interview

¹⁷⁴ Sarah Roberson, “Hatched: A Rich Tapestry,” Critter, June 29, 2018, <http://thecritter.co.za/hatched-mamela-nyamza/>.

¹⁷⁵ Felicia I. Ekejiuba, “Down to Fundamentals: Women-Centered Hearth-Holds in Rural West Africa,” in *Readings in Gender in Africa*, ed. Andrea Cornwall (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 43.

and in the post-show discussion, Nyamza is now raising her son without a father but with another mother. This is in one sense radical, but extending Ekejiuba's theory from the west to the south, it is in another sense traditional – a form of *hearthhold* wherein two women raise a son and the biological father might oscillate in and out as needed or desired.

In *Hatched*, Nyamza and her son perform a hearth-hold in contradistinction to the Western household. She performs a scene of domestic life with her son from her previous marriage to a man. The laundry labor she performs references the domestic life she attempted to maintain while performing a heterosexual female role in 'real' life. It's possible that this onstage performance more closely represents Nyamza's desires and strengths than her performance as a heterosexual wife did. Intermittently she calls out to her son. With his headphones on, sometimes he responds to her, sometimes he doesn't. When he does, she beckons him over to help her with the laundry and he complies politely. They carry on a conversation in isiXhosa, which I cannot understand, but the relaxed limbs and soft voices make it appear improvised. They look at one another or their work with little regard for the direction their voices travel. It is an unspectacular performance of domestic life. She is laboring but not suffering. They gather clothes-pins speaking just loudly enough to hear one another and when the task is finished, he returns to his sketching. I imagine him in his bedroom while she toils in the backyard.

The presence of Nyamza's son is particularly relevant if we examine the role of family in modern dance history, and the role of child-rearing in Black and White South African communities. In *Hatched*, Amkele Mandla animates the Indigenous

epistemology that values an interactive and interdependent family as a vital aspect of one's identity. His performance both complements and interrupts Nyamza's, demonstrating that Nyamza is not the solipsistic artist of the Western imaginary. In performing with her son, Nyamza makes visible the attainability of family to dance artists. Because of the physical demands on the body, contemporary dance artists often have children later in life or not at all. Family life is rarely the subject of contemporary dance performances. In fact, non-conformity to hetero-normative expectations of marriage and child-rearing seems to be a characteristic of a modern/contemporary dancers lifestyle and fits in perfectly with the notion of a solo genius artist. Describing a typical depiction of a modern dance choreographer, Susan Foster writes,

In order to illuminate what is entailed by the choreographic process, I begin with the example of the lone female choreographer at work in the dance studio. This example traces its origin to the modern dance tradition in the United States, a tradition whose feminist underpinnings have been well documented. This initiative, undertaken by white, bourgeois women at the turn of the century, constructed a new expressive practice focused at the site of the individual dancing body. These artists sought to overhaul body and soul in order to liberate individual creative impulses from the stranglehold of societal norms and aesthetic values.¹⁷⁶

In Foster's vision, a lone feminist genius explores innovations at her privileged leisure. She works against prevailing social mores to create a new (White) feminist genre. Pioneering modern dance artists such as Martha Graham are part of Nyamza's lineage and my own so this image is a familiar one. That is in part why the image of Nyamza

¹⁷⁶ Foster, "Choreographies of Gender," 6.

performing with her son is so poignant. The non-normative sex and family lives of early modern dance artists are an important and well-known part of dance history,¹⁷⁷ and I suspect part of what draws certain aspiring dancers to become part of that legacy. Yet, these aspects of their lives are rarely portrayed on the stage. Mandla, in performance with Nyamza, brings to the surface the values often embedded in the field but hidden from audiences. This dichotomy is particularly felt by women dancers who are more likely to bear the brunt of child-rearing duties and less likely to be paid well. By performing with her son, Nyamza embraces both the cosmopolitan artist and traditional mother tropes to create her own vision of queer African feminism. She fuses her personal and professional life, as much as her personal and political stance.

In this particular geo-political context, I suggest that the performance of family speaks to Black women by acknowledging their unseen labor as mothers and caregivers. It furthermore insists that feminism and homosexuality are not foreign, but African. Asking an adult about their children is a common conversation starter in Africa and its diaspora. For example, when Rametsi Letebele, Health and Safety manager and chauffeur for the Dance Umbrella festival, picked me up from the airport, within minutes of our journey he asked if I had kids. When I said no and explained that I loved kids but didn't want my own, he persisted in asking why, and enthusiastically expressing his disbelief that I could go on throughout life without having any. I gently explained that although I understood how emphatically he felt about child rearing, in the future he might not want

¹⁷⁷ Henrietta Bannerman, "Martha Graham's House of the Pelvic Truth: The Figuration of Sexual Identities and Female Empowerment," *Dance Research Journal* 42, no. 1 (2010): 30–45, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23266985>.

to carry on the way he did with me because some women who want children can't have them and it can be painful to discuss. His energy seized up and he apologized profusely. I laughed and assured him that wasn't *my* case, but one never knows. I bring this example to light because I've had this same conversation numerous times – more often with men – in Africa, Brazil, and Cuba. I imagine women of Nyamza's generation –the same as my own – experience a similar social pressure or at least expectation to have children. Although this social pressure is not unique to the African diaspora, the high value placed on family within the African diaspora may hold a particular relevance to understanding this choreography.

In “The Family in Modern South Africa: Insights from Recent Research,” sociologists Radhamany Sooryamoorthy and Mzwandile Makhoba review contemporary research on family size and structure across South Africa. They offer the following:

Ziehl (2001), making use of the 1996 census, examined the size of households that existed in the country and showed the trends in the size of the family across racial groups. The smaller size of families, i.e., four members or less, was more predominant among the whites than among Black Africans. As against this, larger families of five members or more were more common among Black Africans.¹⁷⁸

This study supports the notion that Black families tend to have slightly more children than their White counterparts in the same country. This is true in rural and urban settings, though across all races, families tend to have fewer children in urban settings. This is even true despite the fact that the apartheid regime forced families to move to the rural Bantustans or set up townships closer to town, while men were forced to migrate or

¹⁷⁸ R. Sooryamoorthy and Mzwandile Makhoba, “The Family in Modern South Africa: Insights from Recent Research,” *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* 47, no. 3 (2016): 313.

commute back and forth from their work in mines or factories, making it difficult to parent. This is still the labor dynamic for many South Africans, which suggests that for Black South Africans, despite the harsh living conditions of apartheid and the ongoing problem of high unemployment, raising a family is still strongly valued. Staying close to extended family members is equally important. In a ten-year study, Amoateng and Heaton found Black Africans and Coloureds live in larger households than Indians and Whites.

One way to explain this dynamic nature of the family among the Black/Coloured population is that, despite numerous changes such as rapid urbanization, these populations still value their sense of communality. As Siqwana-Ndulo (1998) observed, African marriages are based on the principle of collectivity and interdependence. The notion of the family from a Western point of view refers to the conjugal pair who maintain a household with their offspring and adopted children. This can be contrasted with the African/Black family which includes a wider circle i.e., extended family (Siqwana-Ndulo, 1998).¹⁷⁹

As Sooryamoorthy and Makhoba explain, having children and engaging with an extended family relates to Indigenous epistemologies that hold interdependence and collectivity in high regard. This echoes Ekejiuba's notion of hearth-hold. Hence, creating work with her son engages a shared sense of collectivity with a Black South African audience community and their values. Family also takes on particular importance to communities under systemic and pervasive threat. Black and queer South Africans have had to fight to live for hundreds of years. To procreate is to insist not only on one's own resilience, but also on the right to further one's lineage.

¹⁷⁹ Sooryamoorthy and Makhoba, 313–14.

Survivance

In its portrayal of queer feminist family life, Nyamza's performances of *Hatched* can be said to perform the decolonial Indigenous strategy of *survivance* through queer motherhood. In *Decolonial Methodologies*, Linda Tuhiwai Smith writes that

Non-Indigenous research has been intent on documenting the demise and cultural assimilation of Indigenous peoples. Instead it is possible to celebrate survival, or what Gerald Vizenor has called 'survivance' – survival and resistance. Survivance accentuates the degree to which Indigenous peoples and communities have retained cultural and spiritual values and authenticity in resisting colonialism.¹⁸⁰

Valuing family-building is not only a cultural tradition, but a survival skill. Imperialism, colonialism, and the slave trade stole lives and threatened entire cosmologies. Survivance is how colonized people exist.

Procreation in the post-colony is valued not only as a natural human drive, but as resistance to attempted genocide. An Indigenous reading of family does not mean one that only looks at the pre-colonial practices, but one that considers Indigenous people's responses to colonialism and in this case apartheid. As Sooryamoorthy and Makhoba's study shows, "It is clear that in the study of the family in South Africa one cannot detach the colonial and apartheid past that the society has inherited. The past continues to exert its influence on the family, and is manifest in several forms."¹⁸¹ Despite ongoing threats to Black lesbian life, Nyamza and Mandla performing together asserts her *survivance* as a

¹⁸⁰ Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies - Research And Indigenous Peoples*, 5th Printing edition (Zed Books, 2002), 146.

¹⁸¹ Sooryamoorthy and Makhoba, "The Family in Modern South Africa," 318.

Black lesbian mother, and his as a member of the 'Born Free' generation, knowing only the democratic South Africa.

When towards the end of the piece, Mandla raps that he doesn't care if kids make fun of him for having two moms, the Nyamza family is both affirming the lived experiences of queer families, and at the same time rebutting homophobic attitudes. In the post-show discussion he explained, "...all those songs are basically all my songs and most of my topics are based on what I've been through like a usual influence is my mom and how I've grown up different from other kids because of my mom's sexuality - I grew up different from other kids and music is my therapy and my escape route." That music is ameliorative for him signals to the audience that despite the liberal constitution, being raised by two mothers in a homophobic setting can still be a struggle. Sooryamoorthy and Makhoba explain, "A landmark judgment of the Supreme Court of Appeals in 2004 ruled that the common law prohibiting same-gender marriages was unconstitutional. Since then, the same-gendered family is no more an exception in South Africa, giving rise to new conceptions of the family and their acceptance in society."¹⁸² Although constitutional and perceptual changes across the country are absolutely significant and noteworthy, since South African lesbians and gender nonconforming individuals are still at risk for discrimination and violence, affirming life, livelihood, and procreativity as a Black lesbian is a radical act of survivance that brings queer pride back home to Africa. This self-determined nature of the work is best exemplified in the next portion of the choreography.

¹⁸² Sooryamoorthy and Makhoba, 318.

“Not to Die but to Be Reborn...”¹⁸³

In the middle of the clothesline between the red clothes, Nyamza hangs one end of a piece of red silk, several feet long. She begins to spin slowly so that it wraps around her body like cotton candy on a stick. She repeats this rotation over several minutes allowing the fabric to suggest the shape of her body – more narrow at the ends and wider at the center. This repeated enveloping eventually becomes a cocoon enclosing her in safety but rendering her immobile and inert. Once wrapped, only her face and toes can be seen. Her facial expression is stoic as she retreats into a state of pure potential. A cocoon represents both an end and a beginning with neither prioritized over the other. There is no butterfly without the life and death of the caterpillar. By placing herself inside a cocoon of her own making, Nyamza performs a self-fashioning whereby only she can re-member all the parts of her self.

Becoming one’s self through the act of dance is exemplified in many genres on the continent. Though often researched in traditional settings, I argue this performance does the same work of using movement in the presence of witnesses to investigate various aspects of one’s self and piece them together. Though the concert dance setting does not encourage the traditional notions of participation, as spectators, we do offer our money, time, and attention. What’s more, we hold the space with our energy, witnessing the metamorphosis, thereby confirming its reality. Considering the ways that staged spectacle historically branded essentializing mythologies onto Black female bodies during the colonial and trans-Atlantic slave eras, to behold a Black women in the process

¹⁸³ Jimi Hendrix, *1983...A Merman I Should Turn to Be* (New York, NY: Reprise Records, 1968).

of making herself is to see her rewrite the colonial mythology that rendered Black women objects.

She begins to unwind. Reversing her tight steps, her arms bound to her sides, she goes back to where she came from to start her next journey. This movement embodies Indigenous circular time/space as a method of subject-formation. Rather than iterate a linear narrative that starts at one location and moves logically to the next, Nyamza continually makes use of memory to transform present and future versions of herself. As the piece continues, Nyamza uses circular time to remember her ancestral claim to dance as self-formation.

Re-membering the Mother

Moving down the clothesline, Nyamza replaces her cocoon cloth with a stylish red trench coat. She takes a seat on the floor downstage left and pulls out a cigarette. In English, she asks the audience for a match. The switch from isiXhosa to English is a common one. In a country with eleven official languages, urban Indigenous South Africans will generally use English as the lingua franca. This signals that the question can be answered by almost anyone present as English is so widely spoken. After a few moments of hesitation someone offers her a lighter. But she doesn't want a lighter, only a match. She asks again, "doesn't anyone have a match?" and finally an audience member produces one. Nyamza had not verbally addressed the audience prior to this moment and her gaze often evaded us. Speaking to us around thirty minutes into the piece not only "breaks the fourth wall" but implicates us in the work by inviting us to participate in its

trajectory. During the performance it was unclear why Nyamza chose to sit and smoke – again denying us the pleasure of virtuosic dance phrases in favor of a quotidian moment of quiet near-stillness. This minute or two stands in juxtaposition to the scene just prior where Nyamza performed a relatively simple movement of wrapping herself in cloth, but the phrase created a statuesque image that rendered her quite stately. Seated on the floor, casually smoking a cigarette, the goddess/cocoon image is replaced by an ordinary woman taking a rest on stage, the pedestrian nature of the moment referring back to the domestic chores at the opening of the piece. In the post-show discussion she explains, “It’s all about memory...so my mother is also very connected too. She’s also someone I feel like I’m talking to as well in this piece. My mother used to smoke a cigarette with a match so in that moment I’m talking to my mom.”¹⁸⁴ Again, family and memory surface as foundational elements to the piece but are not elements of a linear narrative. Moving back and forth physically and symbolically, the work progresses in a sort of spiral, conflating and confusing time, space, and images of womanhood.

Snarled Beauty

By pairing ballet with colonial patriarchy, fusing queerness with motherhood, and juxtaposing dance/music idioms, Nyamza embodies an entangled South African existence as fractured wholeness. *Entanglement* is Cameroonian theorist Achille Mbembe’s conceptualization of non-linear time as it relates to subject-formation in layered post-colonial spaces. He writes, “As an age, the post-colony encloses multiple *durées* made up

¹⁸⁴ Nyamza, Post-Show Discussion.

of discontinuities, reversals, inertias, and swings that overlay one another, interpenetrate one another, and envelope one another: an *entanglement*.”¹⁸⁵ For Mbembe, the concept of the post-colony is not simply a matter of the state after independence. Nor is it a matter of a specific place since the countries that now constitute the *idea* of Africa were crafted by Europeans in Europe long before they were taken up as Indigenous national liberation projects. The post-colony is that time/space in which the individual is co-constituted by European and African interactive movement and subjugation of time, place, and personhood after the colonial encounter. It is exemplified by Winnie Mandela’s statement, “I am the product of the masses of my country. I am the product of my enemy.”¹⁸⁶ Through entanglement, we can understand the multifarious nature of post-colonial identities and what I refer to as entangled aesthetics.

At one point, the audience is privy to hearing the Hip-Hop music Mandla is listening to in his headphones. Nyamza looks at him with a loving but slightly lost expression on her face. She nods her head – accenting on inappropriate beats. Her off-beat appreciation for his generation is demonstrated in this moment. In the next, a Miriam Makeba song is heard. Nyamza continues to mouth the words to Makeba’s song while her son’s music is played. She bops her head to the hip-hop but is singing the jazz song. Two rhythms, two worlds, two time signatures, two eras merge in her body. After the performance she shared with the audience, “I’m the other generation. I don’t understand

¹⁸⁵ Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 87.

¹⁸⁶ “Winnie Mandela in Six Quotes,” April 3, 2018, sec. Africa, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-43627974>.

the rap. It's something of their generation."¹⁸⁷ This tangling of space and time resembles dissonance rather than fusion and yet the conflation is egalitarian. I read the discord in these space-times as a performance methodology which pieces together seemingly conflicting aspects of Nyamza's life to show that queer African identity is not monolithic and post-colonial identity is more about making peace with the ruptures than trying to smooth over them.

Still seated on her rear end, knees bent and feet on the floor, Nyamza performs the rhythmic stomps and high kicks of ngoma. In her analysis of the popular Ngoma dance/music form, Louise Meintjes explains how this unisex dance form evolved into a male performance competition as British authorities enforced their gendered labor ideals onto South Africans, demanding male wage laborers to work in the cities, enriching White companies and sleeping most months of the year in dormitories, while women worked at home in rural areas. "Mining and other industrial concerns depended on droves of migrant laborers from rural southern Africa..."¹⁸⁸ Ngoma is usually performed by a line of women or men in identical regalia. The barefoot dancers stomp out unison rhythms, which are punctuated by a soloist's high, straight-legged kicks that emphasize the downward slice of the leg after its flung into the air. A soloist might also forcefully drop onto his/her seat or dramatically drop and roll backwards into the team.

Alone, Nyamza starts to step out a beat. Her pointe shoes - the ultimate symbol of weightlessness, femininity, Europe, and elite status - are now banging against the ground

¹⁸⁷ Nyamza, Post-Show Discussion.

¹⁸⁸ Meintjes and Lemon, *Dust of the Zulu*, 3.

forming soft rhythmic patters. Breaking ballet's cardinal rule of keeping one's feet quiet against the floor, Nyamza uses the hard-toed shoes to stomp the ground, making her rhythms even more delightfully tangible than in bare feet. Her long leg kicks high in the air and thrusts back down into the floor. The pairing of forms appears intentionally inelegant. It is almost comical yet somehow also sad because from a seated position, Nyamza cannot possibly fulfill the technical demands of either movement vocabulary. She therefore executes a fractured phrase, a *discontinuity* between the two genres rather than a fusion of them. It is as if she wishes to say that her dance training at home and at school did not integrate despite the rainbow nation agenda for a non-racial society. Nyamza then removes her pointe shoes. Although quite banal for the dancer, this is an intimate and discreet act rarely performed on stage, certainly never within a classical ballet. I can almost feel the audience breathe a sigh of relief when her feet are set free. She stands.

In her red coat, burlap and tulle skirt and bare feet and chest, Nyamza then performs a solo *Toyi-Toyi* starting with her back to the audience. *Toyi-Toyi* refers to the high-kneed rhythmic runs that accompanied anti-apartheid songs and dances in mass protests through the 1980's and 1990's. It is said to have been originated by the Zimbabwe People's Revolutionary Army, but is now synonymous with South African liberation movements. "Even though South Africa has 11 official languages, *toyi-toyi* could be considered the 12th, since it's nearly as old as the country itself and everyone

knows it, including the government,” said one resident of Orange Farm.¹⁸⁹ Combining radical joy and a strong unified effort, Toyi-Toyi was feared by the apartheid administration. Famed musician and activist Hugh Masekela once said, “because you can’t beat these people physically, you can scare the shit out of them with the songs.”¹⁹⁰ Dances of Black citizens dancing in unison, unfazed by police threats or actual violence, were indeed intimidating to White authorities. But Toyi-Toyi also served its own purpose amongst non-White practitioners. It embodied unity through shared purpose and created a visceral sense of victory that was as infectious as it was effective. As one participant put it, “Toyi-toyi can be a fight to the right for life, or the jubilant dance of celebration. Those that march may not have money and they may not have guns, but this is as powerful a weapon as any.”¹⁹¹ Danced and sung by thousands at a time, Toyi-Toyi is emblematic of South Africa’s ubuntu philosophy where united we dance or divided we fall. So what does it mean to Toyi-Toyi alone, onstage, post-apartheid?

Nyamza swivels back and forth, coyly looking at us looking at her. Her head angles downward with her eyes looking up as she smiles like a schoolgirl pranking a close friend. Frolicking on stage kicking, stomping and raising her knees, Nyamza performs a beautiful mess of iconography. Nyamza’s Toyi-Toyi says: I will keep fighting. I will keep reminding you that I am not to be crossed. I may appear to be alone but I am standing with the unseen. The Toyi-Toyi steps in this context of contemporary

¹⁸⁹ “Toyi-Toyi Cape Town | Black South African Dance,” accessed August 27, 2019, http://www.capetownmagazine.com/whats-the-deal-with/toyi-toyi/125_22_17384.

¹⁹⁰ “Ehtnomusicology Explained: Toyi-Toyi,” Youtube, accessed August 27, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XPuQBqNhH1M>.

¹⁹¹ “Toyi-Toyi Cape Town | Black South African Dance.”

concert dance recall the thousands who have marched for justice in the streets and they claim their rightful place on the South African stage as contemporary Indigenous stakeholders in communal self-formation. Marching alone, she signals an allegiance to those people and temporalities not physically present – the ancestors and the living. Bringing this protest dance to the concert stage, she marks this terrain as a site of Indigenous knowledge and of ongoing colonial contestation. With flat feet, high knees, and alternating hops, Nyamza dances these steps into the official story of South Africa, re-membering the disparate histories that led to her own creation.

Hatched paints a distinctly entangled aesthetic that challenges the expectations placed on Black artists to represent either one tradition or another. Weaving through diverse histories, Nyamza reconfigures the stage space for the Black woman who does not fit neatly into any one category of identity. Calling on her ancestors, she forges a new path. Sewing contemporary dance, ballet, ngoma, and toyi-toyi together to tell one story, Nyamza presents a patchwork of identities that include and surpass notions of tradition or modernity in dance and its affiliated spiritual and political agendas.

Hatched is both a reflection of the past and a self-examination demonstrating a longing to connect to roots while reaching out in several directions at once. It relies on the symbolism of the imagery she provides as much as her movement. The pointe shoes are not there to tell a story through the language of ballet but to remind the audience of the significance and insignificance of ballet in her life. The burlap alludes to the confines of Nyamza's domestic life, the clothespins muting her artistic and political pursuits, and most of all her sexual identity. By making use of recognizable symbols, Nyamza subverts

their common usage and repurposes them to create a multi-faceted, whole, self. Remembering her ancestors' epistemologies of spectrumed sexuality, extended families, and empowered dancing, Nyamza embodies and emboldens queer African femininity.

Part IV: Black Privilege in the Black Box

A figure dipped in gold enters perched on a scaled pedestal. She wears a short tower of gold rings around her half-mohawk of dreadlocks, and gold bangles and coins adorn her groin and ankles. Her head is tilted upward and to the right, her eyes lowered left towards us. She is rolled in like a queen perched on a ten-foot scaffolding ladder by dramaturge Sello Pesa, who's wearing a medieval British cap, black judge's gown and Zulu blanket wrapped around his shoulders. He draws her around the black and white checkered floor tile as she looks down on us, eventually smirking with a slight disdain. Her beauty is stunning.

Mamela Nyamza performed *Black Privilege* for the first time in 2018 at the National Arts Festival. It has since toured European countries including Germany and Switzerland. The title of the piece plays on the term White privilege, used both in the United States and South Africa to indicate an attitude, mannerisms and/or actions that result from being raised with inherited wealth on stolen land, and in a country that assumes your worldviews, practices, power, intellect and physiognomy to be correct if not superior. It begs the question: What is Black Privilege?

In *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*, historian and literary scholar Saidiya Hartman asserts that, "...the performance

of blackness is inseparable from the brute force that brands, rapes, and tears open the flesh in the racial inscription of the body.”¹⁹² In South Africa, racial inscription also dismembers. It designates one’s body as rapeable, disposable, negligible. I would argue, though, that just as Black performance is haunted by a racist gaze, it is enriched by Indigenous wisdom, resilience, and creativity. It is precisely this entangled mess of contradictions that *Black Privilege* articulates so eloquently. I believe Nyamza wanted to show how the privilege of performing is undermined by the ghosts of Black female performance. In her performance, Nyamza re-members the socio-political power of her ancestors through spectacular non-spectacle. Her pained body uses anti-capitalist gestures to (re)map the stage as a site for Black liberation from the White gaze.

In this project, I refer to Indigenous South Africans as Black people, continuing the legacy of the Black Consciousness movement. Black Consciousness as a Pan-African ideology re-members all those torn away in the diaspora. As the Black Consciousness movement drew from African-American uprisings during the Civil Rights Era and their languages of identification, it is fitting to consider African-American theories of race that can expand this reading of *Black Privilege*. Hartman writes:

It is important to remember that blackness is defined here in terms of social relationality rather than identity; thus blackness incorporates subjects normatively defined as black, the relations among blacks, whites, and others, and the practices that produce racial difference. Blackness marks a social relationship of dominance and abjection and potentially one of redress and emancipation; it is a contested figure at the very center of social struggle.¹⁹³

¹⁹² Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 58.

¹⁹³ Saidiya Hartman, 57.

It is precisely this contested figure of abjection and emancipation as blackness that I wish to engage when considering the multifaceted imagery conveyed in *Black Privilege*. Taken as a set of contested relations, blackness is not an essence or a DNA profile, but a way of being in the world that accounts for the effects of the ancient past and the infinite potential of futurity through processes of self-formation. *Black privilege* is at once a commentary on the ways that so many Black South Africans are denied the privilege of humanity in their own country and the ways that despite the poverty, political corruption, misogyny and homophobia nurtured by centuries of White hetero-patriarchal rule, it is *still* a privilege to be Black. Nyamza's performance of *Black Privilege* at the National Arts Festival in particular speaks to a need for Black South Africans like herself to remember and acknowledge Blackness as a complex set of relations in a country that sometimes eschews dialogue on race and gender in favor of promoting the ideals of the 'rainbow nation,' rather than addressing the realities of social inequity that live on through the 21st century. To be "young, gifted and Black" still does not guarantee any measure of socio-economic success or security in the majority Black, majority impoverished nation, but that does not mean it is without value.

A Kwaito song – the sound of urban Black youth - breaks the silence. Nyamza starts to nod her head only on intermittent electronic beats. Slowly her tempo increases, matching every beat but now accenting downward. As her pedestal traverses a circular pattern over and over, Nyamza maintains her composure, legs not crossed but tightly closed, ankle-to-ankle with her heels lifted off the ground as if she's wearing high-heels, but her feet are bare. She is almost mocking Western femininity's icons like Queen

Elizabeth or Jacqueline Kennedy – women whose class and race imbues them with a power that must be expressed through a certain posture and subdued energy - and yet you completely believe this is how Nyamza must sit. Her spine is erect and her arms are placed delicately on her lap. The reach of her long neck is interrupted by a tiara that looks like a tiny top hat but is made of a series of gold rings. Pesa brings her a spear and a set of gold scales, icons of war and justice. Slowly she lifts the scales up with a fistful hand and for a moment, Lady Justice, Winnie Mandela, and the Bronze of Benin are one.

I suggest that through these symbolic shapes and objects, Nyamza's pedestaled performance re-members Black South African women's socio-political power. By placing herself physically above the audience, we are viscerally underneath her gaze. Holding both African and a European tools for survival and social organization, she wields a particular power that invites a bit of chaos. It is possible to view the spear as an Indigenous weapon used to fight so much injustice, the scales then being a symbol of hypocrisy – the justice that only applied to White South Africans. It is also possible that by holding one in each hand, she means to imply that African women will win the war against them and eventually tip the scales. In *Black Privilege* a man protects a woman but it is clear that she is in command.

Though Sello Pesa is part of this performance, the work is largely a solo in that Nyamza is presenting over ninety percent of the movement and Pesa is primarily acting as a bodyguard. It can be difficult to remark on anything beyond the personal as a solo performer, but in allowing us to see her, alone and nearly nude, Nyamza marks the space where others are not, but others have been and could be. The increasing frequency of solo

performance in contemporary dance is perhaps the reckoning of capitalist alienation, which has all but completely undermined the possibility of the large well-funded contemporary dance companies of the mid-twentieth century, but it may also be the requisite route towards re-appropriating a communal experience. Performance Studies scholar André Lepecki demonstrates that the solo performer can still cite those not physically present. After all, “The reader-dancer might be alone in his chamber; but thanks to the choreographic book, he is always read to invoke and dance with those who are not quite there, those who have already moved on.”¹⁹⁴ Sitting in a semi-circle, with long stretches of stillness, the audience is made aware of itself, staring at this spectacular non-spectacle of a woman poised in some moments, crumpled in others. In the still and spacious room, we place ourselves as an integral component to this performance. *Black Privilege*, in title and in form, speaks to a history of Black female opulence as much as oppression.

Pesa takes Nyamza on a tour of the stage space before stopping in the center. In silence we sit with her looking down at us. Her back is strong and she places a minimal amount of weight into her left arm and the left side of her pelvis as she sits with legs folded to the right. For a few minutes her only movement is a shift of gaze from one audience member to the next. A Black South African woman on a pedestal, exposing her breasts and rear end to a paying audience conjures memories of Sarah Baartman who was exhibited as a freak of nature and as a typification of Khoi-San ethnicity by William Dunlop and Hendrik Cesars in the early twentieth century. I believe this allusion is

¹⁹⁴ André Lepecki, *Exhausting Dance: Performance and the Politics of Movement* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 33.

intentional but the work does much more than represent one famous woman. What if, in her solitude, Nyamza is also citing an Indigenous practice? In isiXhosa, *ninjani* asks, “How are you?” in a plural form, but it can also be used to address an individual because a person is always surrounded by *izihlwele*, the multitudes, or the ancestors.¹⁹⁵ Thus, “How are you?” can ask, “How are your people? How is your universe?” I suggest that as Nyamza dances alone, she dances with her ancestors and her audiences, her former teachers, and her future students. Time and space converge, expand, and contract even as she sits still. The significance of her performance can be read in the interstices of the history of Black women as exploited spectacles *and* Black women claiming space on their own terms. To understand this solo body, one must situate Nyamza’s performance alongside Baartman’s and alongside all the women who dance in ritual, the female *Ngoma* competitors, and the famous Toyi-toyi protests of Winnie Mandela. In this more complete context, the female body on display can interact with a history of exploitation without being imprisoned by it.

Rather than try to perform a world without Black women’s objectification, *Black Privilege* makes it hyper-visible. Nyamza makes herself a gold spectacle to behold in stillness and small repeated movements. As we gaze upon Nyamza’s uncovered breasts flattened from breastfeeding, and her firm stomach and legs sculpted from a lifetime of athletic dance training, there is no question that her Black body, on display as it is, creates life, soldiers life, and beautifies life. Her body is art in stillness and in motion, and

¹⁹⁵ Orleyn, Personal Communication.

through performance, she enacts a sort of self-formation. On African women's use of body-based art, Art historian Barbara Thompson writes,

One of the most common ways for African women and men to express ideologies of womanhood historically has been through the inscription of meaning into and upon objects that metaphorically stand in for the female body. For women, however, their own bodies have served as the primary means for self-expression and self-representation, whether through clothing, personal adornment, coiffure, or body scarification and painting...For those who lost the power of self-expression and empowerment during the colonial era, art has become a means of regaining the choice to imagine and represent themselves and others on their own terms.¹⁹⁶

Contemporary artistic acts of bodily exhibition as empowerment, then, are not new acts. They are revisions of ancient praxis *and* the creative reimagining of entangled cultures. Imaging and representing one's self through bodily displays and enactments are techniques of self-formation. When Nyamza uses her own body to enact images and gestures of her own making, she crafts a counter-narrative to the exploited exhibited South African female body. She does so by suggesting power through subtle yet potent poses and movements. As such, Nyamza re-members the privilege and burden of Black womanhood as a spectacular non-spectacle.

The Kwaito song ends and Nyamza returns her props to her assistant. By remote control, he electrifies her pedestal. It begins to vibrate and without moving, her jiggling flesh contradicts the stoic statue imagery we've witnessed so far. Holding each position for a couple of minutes, she shifts from sitting upright with legs together, to crouched on one knee, to hands and knees, to sitting on the right leg with her right arm propping her

¹⁹⁶ Barbara Thompson, ed., *Black Womanhood: Images, Icons, and Ideologies of the African Body* (Hanover, N.H: University of Washington Press, 2008), 44.

up, then sitting with legs dangling off the pedestal and her back softly slouching.

To See and Be Seen

Black Privilege manages to embrace and criticize the notion of spectacle. In her ethnographic analysis of Egungun masquerades in Yorubaland, West Africa, Margaret Drewal explains John MacAloon's four characteristics of spectacle wherein "(1) visual sensory and symbolic codes are primary; (2) the event is grand and monumental in stature; (3) it engenders excitement in the audience through the heightened dynamism of the performance, and (4) spectacle institutionalizes separate roles for the audience and the performers and thereby establishes distance from them."¹⁹⁷ She distinguishes egungun improvisatory performances as matching all criteria except that they are participatory. With gold body paint and iconic props, *Black Privilege* does make use of symbolic codes, it could be said to induce excitement albeit subdued, it is monumental in that it is a performance of high stature and she is on a pedestal, and it does rely on the separation of audience and performer. In my analysis, however, I wish to suggest that what is spectacular is the proudly exhibitionist quality of the choreography juxtaposed with its symbolic references to exploitative exhibitionism. This work eschews neo-liberal aesthetic demands¹⁹⁸ for visible virtuosity¹⁹⁹ by hinting at an inheritance of embodied suffering without replicating it for dramatic effect.

¹⁹⁷ Margaret Thompson Drewal, "Improvisation as Participatory Performance," in *Taken by Surprise: A Dance Improvisation Reader*, ed. Ann Cooper Albright and David Gere (Wesleyan University Press, 2003).

¹⁹⁸ Anusha Kedhar, "Flexibility and Its Bodily Limits: Transnational South Asian Dancers in an Age of Neoliberalism," *Dance Research Journal* 46, no. 1 (April 2014): 23–40.

Nyamza makes use of Western theatrical techniques but does not subscribe to Western aesthetic-political demands for her Black body to perform as an acrobatic and rhythmic virtuoso. Though minimalist choreography with long stretches of total stillness has been gaining currency in European contemporary dance over the last ten years, Nyamza's posturing cannot merely be read as the appropriation of European aesthetic trends or the expression of universal ones. Gesturing towards and away from European contemporary dance trends, Nyamza's work demands its place in the entangled South African repertoire and historic relations between White contemporary dance audiences and Black performers.²⁰⁰

Her audience is the most ethnically diverse one I observe at the festival and we sit with a multitude of reactions. Some audience members may even find themselves thinking, "How dare she? How dare this Black woman sit above me, taking my time and my money? How dare she do so little and demand so much?" A seasoned artist, Nyamza is aware of the discomfort her work often evokes. In fact, in our 2019 interview, Nyamza relayed a story about how one White audience member at *Isingqala* did in fact confront her, filled with rage that she did not 'dance.' This same woman came to a performance three years later and apologized for not having understood the work previously and expressing herself so vehemently.²⁰¹ It is almost as if a Black body in stillness threatens an immeasurable potential. The lack of movement can trigger a racist imagination to run

¹⁹⁹ Ariel Osterweis, "The Muse of Virtuosity: Desmond Richardson, Race, and Choreographic Falsetto," *Dance Research Journal* 45, no. 03 (December 2013): 53–74.

²⁰⁰ Gavin Krastin, "Thoughts on Contemporary Dance's (Disappearing?) Spectatorship: In Conversation with the National Arts Festival Director, Ismail Mohamed," *South African Dance Journal* 2, no. 1 (2013): 117–25.

²⁰¹ Nyamza, The Jet Set Breakfast Interview.

wild. The lack of movement can encourage an open mind to slow down, look deeper, and perhaps appreciate what it is to witness a Black woman at rest. To simply sit ... to sense and reflect... to see and be seen... Is this not the privilege Black women have never been afforded? Daring to displease, Nyamza invites her audience to feel the passage of time, favoring a spectacular stillness that vibrates... just so....

This hour long piece requires a certain level of patience from its audience. It is not a passive reception of the work that Nyamza evokes, but rather a disquieted engagement and curiosity. Program notes read, “*Black Privilege* is informed by the notion and experience of rejection/decline of the Other by the mainstream gate-keeping institutions. Themes of patronage, patronisation and hypocrisy will run through the piece, depicting the intention to provide opportunity, but with a misuse or abuse of current adversity.”⁷ Dancing back to all those who had rejected her performance proposals, perhaps Nyamza’s minimalistic movement score can be read as an anti-capitalist gesture – a choreographic refusal to produce. Lepecki asserts that performance art that veers toward non-doing works against modern capitalism’s obsession with progress, whereas much of contemporary choreography exhausts itself by performing too much. Lepecki writes, “Choreography, as technology and expression of modernity’s being-toward-movement, participates fully of this exhausting psychological, affective, and energetic project of modern subjectivation...”²⁰² Nyamza’s oeuvre certainly includes highly athletic choreographies, but the subtle and repetitive shapes and movements that comprise the bulk of *Black Privilege*, alongside its program notes, do suggest that the artist wishes to

²⁰² Lepecki, *Exhausting Dance*, 33.

rebel against the spectator's desire to be entertained by virtuosity. Sitting between performance art and contemporary dance, perhaps this is not an exhausting project but a generative one.

Performing her own choreography, she is only separated from the means of production insofar as she refuses to move or is denied production support. Moving just a little in her debut performance as Artist of the Year, she makes evident a tension between production, exploitation and consumption inherent to performance. If we read this performance as that of an alienated laborer refusing to contribute to capitalist exploitation, we must also acknowledge the conditions of labor for African women over the past four centuries as uniquely alienated – nearly disembodied - by the extremity of exploitation.

Eventually she starts to switch from active to passive postures, sometimes allowing her back to slouch and legs to fall easily. Whereas during the first section of the piece she sat with her back fully erect and legs strongly poised, in this section she begins to soften her tonus and even lie horizontally. Once on her back, Pesa allows her crown to fall into his hands and she places her hands on her ears. She murmurs softly, sounding like a wounded animal. Up until now we've only heard the vibration of her platform and the jingle of her coins. Her assistant has become her body guard, looking out beyond and right at us with his hands behind his back, legs spread, head held high. A White couple start to exit, and he rather loudly points them in the right direction to exit without becoming the backdrop of her piece. Eventually her shape shifting quickens. She doesn't

move fast, but the intervals between poses become shorter. After an agonizingly long time, she stops the vibrator and sits slumped, holding her knees and breathing audibly.

It is this history of suffering in the body that we watch move in and out of Nyamza despite her royal position and posture. Hartman writes,

Redressing the pained body encompasses operating in and against the demands of the system, negotiating the disciplinary harnessing of the body, and counterinvesting in the body as a site of possibility. In this instance, pain must be recognized in its historicity and as the articulation of a social condition of brutal constraint, extreme need, and constant violence; in other words, it is the perpetual condition of ravishment.²⁰³

There is a subtle agony in Nyamza's display. It is one that recalls Hartman's 'perpetual condition of ravishment.' It is as though being on the pedestal is at once the evidence of her royal stature and the artist's auction block. The vibrating pedestal imbuing her stillness with perpetual motion echoes both a slave master's electric prod, and a soothing massage chair. In either case, the drone of involuntary motion seems to exhaust her, but she poses and poses on. High upon her pedestal, Nyamza's body is haunted by Hartman's 'pained body,' her labor already inscribed with the ghosts of violent exploitation. I would argue that twenty-five years into democracy, with Sarah Baartman's gravesite still being vandalized, it is still impossible to view this particular work, which draws heavily on exhibitionism, outside of the history of Black bodies on display for White consumption, destruction, or exploitation. In one sense, she is a Baartman-like figure, and yet with her body both the medium and object of art, in this funded and heavily publicized performance event, the Artist of the Year does little to titillate audience members who might be seeking to exoticize or essentialize her. Instead, she leaves space between

²⁰³ Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 51.

moments of expression, allowing the audience to become more and more self-aware, more and more a part of the performance as we glare at her towering above us. In doing less, she allows us to see more. As audience members, we watch with a physical passivity but in the activity of our gaze we play a role that is both historic and in transformation. In this co-construction of her being, we are forced to redress this historically pained Black female body and the painful demands placed on the professional dancer by witnessing the laborious construction of a new vision for Black womanhood.

Old Terrain, New Map

Eventually she lowers herself from the platform, stopping midway as if the journey is strenuous. Suddenly, she begins to remove her bangles, tossing them outward aggressively, nearly hitting spectators in the front row, then gingerly, trying to hit specific boxes in the checkered floor. She falls suddenly to her knees then descends to lay prone on her back. Like a slug, she slithers across the stage without bending her knees or elbows, in what I imagine is a surprisingly difficult task. A loud voice exclaims, “Let’s go!” and I wonder who’s left their cell phone on. The young White female voice carries on, “in 400 meters, continue straight.” The GPS sound score seems to guide Nyamza, only...as she circles the checkered stage, struggling, struggling along, it becomes clear that these directions don’t suit this space and won’t get her anywhere.

To analyze this phrase I invoke Tria Blue Wakpa’s use of (re)mapping. Wakpa applies Mishuana Goeman’s writing concept to performance analysis to describe how Native American artists Rulan Tangen and Anne Pesata create new narratives and

relationships with land that counter the colonial order of space, time, and energy.

Describing *Basket Weaving Dance*, Wakpa writes:

I propose that, as exemplified by the basket weaving piece, Tangen and Pesata “(re)map” dominant narratives by centering a Native woman in the present whose Indigenous identity is interconnected to her female ancestors, a continuation that challenges settler colonial narratives of Native disappearance. This Indigenous contemporary dance work, like the practice of Native basket weaving, draws on past Indigenous practices, performs an individual artist’s contributions in the present, and imagines new futurities based upon the interrelationship of the individual and community, past and present.²⁰⁴

Though South Africa does not utilize the same narrative of disappearance, many Indigenous philosophies and practices have been lost and are still under threat with the growing urban generations. Like Tangen and Pesata, Nyamza creates a metaphorical map – a set of instructions to guide the viewer to see Blackness as a set of relations and to feel the connection between the display of Black women’s bodies before, during, and after colonialism and apartheid.

The GPS sound score juxtaposed with Nyamza’s restrained body suggests that either her Black womanhood disables her mobility and/or that she will nonetheless travel the road less followed, even if it is filled with trepidation and struggle. Her gold body rubs against the floor and grinds against the now jumbled directions of the navigation system. As she writhes beneath us, we might see a woman lost. We might see a woman forging her own path. We might see one of the many South African women being found

²⁰⁴ Tria Blu Wakpa, “Culture Creators and Interconnected Individualism: Rulan Tangen and Anne Pesata’s *Basket Weaving Dance*,” *Dance Research Journal* 48, no. 1 (May 10, 2016): 110, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/617354>.

alongside dirt roads after having been raped and murdered.²⁰⁵ Confused though we are, we might see Nyamza's face, looking out at us with the same regal deportment, the same stalwart conviction she had on the pedestal. We might see Blackness itself as a navigation system – offering ancestral wisdom or inscribing racialized roadblocks. We might see a Black woman who remembers her way home. Nyamza is still slithering when Pesa proclaims, “You can go. It's over. Yeah you can go!” After a few rounds of cajoling, we start to exit, watching her as she is watching us. “Go home.” As the audience exits the space in silence and awkward giggles, Nyamza's eyes boldly confront us. It is as if the audience is now performing – suddenly very aware of how we are walking through the space under her gaze. Should I look back at her or forward towards the door? Is it rude to smile and break the intensity of the moment or is it insulting to stare back? As she lies on the floor, her gaze almost daring me to abandon the impulse to help her up, I walk away.

Becoming Together

In both *Hatched* and *Black Privilege*, Mamela Nyamza invites audiences and ancestors to configure time, space, and energy with her, co-constructing her being. By extending time through prolonged stillness and minimalist gestures, the stimulus to the viewer's eyes is reduced and the awareness of one's own heartbeat, posture, and attention span is increased. As one critic writes, “Leveraging the utopic with the traumatic, Nyamza summons the past in a radical present. The result conjures a temporal whiplash

²⁰⁵ “SA Man Killed and Burned Ex-Girlfriend,” May 2, 2018, sec. Africa, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-43979207>.

that extends beyond the theatre doors.”²⁰⁶ By jumbling time frames, viewers can sense how performance creates its own dimension of time where the past and future can seem more tangible than the present. Though *Hatched* seats the audience in front of a proscenium, she breaks the imaginary boundary that divides us by using direct stares, coy glances, and rigorous smiles in addition to outright dialogue. *Black Privilege* seats us around the action on three walls and encourages a certain discomfort in the up-close near-nudity and the feeling of being insignificant underneath her figure which literally towers above us on a platform. In both pieces, she directs the energetic flow of her performance but also engages the audience. By acknowledging our presence, and allowing us to see ourselves across the room, we become aware of our complicity, our consumption, and our power to evaluate her choices. In these respects, Nyamza’s contemporary concert dance performances suggest elements of African philosophy that are usually documented in ritual and social dance contexts. I would like to propose a southern African philosophical lens to understand how identity formation is co-constructed with the audience in Nyamza’s work.

Ubuntu is a Bantu word from the Zulu phrase “Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu,” which is often translated to mean: I am because we are.²⁰⁷ In the United States, it is expressed in neo-traditional African dance communities as a reminder that one is not alone in life’s journey and perhaps to suggest inter-diasporic connections through Black dance. In South Africa it is a praxis that is difficult to translate but is widely practiced. It

²⁰⁶ Jamison Edgar, “In Performance: Mamela Nyamza, *Black Privilege* (The Present Is Not Enough),” *Contemporary Performance* (blog), July 5, 2019, <https://contemporaryperformance.com/2019/07/05/in-performance-mamela-nyamza-black-privilege-the-present-is-not-enough/>.

²⁰⁷ “The Question: What Does Ubuntu Really Mean? | Global | The Guardian.”

is a manner of exchanging energy based in compassion, generosity and interdependence. Ubuntu is a paradigm for understanding how Mamela Nyamza choreographs and performs her work to direct interdependent energetic exchanges amongst participants: presenters, choreographers, performers, and audiences. Precisely who is present precisely where affects what is being created and how. This is always true of performance but is particularly evident in works such as these, which engage national events, their memory, and their erasure.

As Welsh-Asante explains, “A dance does not “mean” anything; it provokes meaning, which is an important distinction to make.”²⁰⁸ By provoking meaning, *Hatched* and *Black Privilege* exemplify dance as a creative act, rather than a representative one. Their gestures only contain meaning when read in context and with knowledge. Although we sit silently, viewers of *Hatched* and *Black Privilege* are implicated in the meaning of the work as it is being created from one moment to the next. Veering away from virtuosity, she moves us towards curiosity – an actively engaged stance to witness, to hold space for, and to contribute to the ways that she asserts herself in our shared experience.

Unapologetically carving her way through the politics and pressures of the contemporary dance world, Mamela Nyamza re-members the strength and wisdom of her Black female ancestors and places them on a pedestal. But she breaks from their mold, sculpting and shaking herself into her own vision, shedding layers of colonial restraint as she falls. Memory and imagination, dismemberment and self-formation, tradition and

²⁰⁸ Welsh-Asante, *Zimbabwe Dance*, 118.

innovation all have their role to play in Nyamza's story. Through her choreographic choices and the energetic exchange of performance, I was able to witness time oscillate. From one moment to the next, her shifting shape made visible the history and the future. In her stillness, a memory of violence was present. Yet her movements were often possessed by contentment. She does not leave the audience with a sense of resolution. We are not led to think that dancing has made her feel good. Rather, by engaging with trauma, exposing a pained body, folding and unfolding time, Nyamza pulls us in to support a moment of transmutation. To witness her process of becoming challenges the audience to see wholeness in the fractured psyche of a woman, a community, and a country.

Chapter Three Dada the Signifyin(g) Dancer

Barefoot and bare chested, arms precision-punching through the air, legs slicing and stomping in time...this is not your grandmother's *Giselle*. In 2017 Dada Masilo created her fourth contemporary revision of a centuries-old ballet. As when she presented an all-male swan cast in her 2010 *Swan Lake*, Masilo claims she is not setting out to make a political statement through her work, though critics and scholars interpret it as blatantly challenging race and gender conventions in ballet. In an interview with Rhodes University's CueTube Media, Masilo said, "I never really go for the political route when making work but it always seems to find itself there."²⁰⁹ Masilo's resistance to this framing of her work may be an expression of her commitment to making artistically strong work that can be appreciated for its creativity and virtuosity, not only read through a lens of controversy. Nonetheless, the work does feature a Black cast of diverse body types, a male Queen Myrtha, male and female wilis, and a *Giselle* that doesn't forgive. In my view, it is precisely in the rigorously thoughtful and deeply passionate artistry that the transformative potential lays. Her radical approaches to the work deny its producers, performers, and viewers the opportunity to reiterate ballet's colonial intentions in South Africa. I examine *Dada Masilo's Giselle* not simply for how it differs from the versions of *Giselle* performed by classical ballet companies, but for the ways it embodies African and feminist philosophies and engenders a decolonial aesthetic that is at once local and

²⁰⁹ "Dada Masilo's *Giselle* - YouTube," July 3, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BeNGUq_i9eo&t=101s.

global. This approach severs the illusory binary between tradition and modernity that renders contemporary Indigenous performance mere duplication of a bygone era.

By centering African and diasporic practices within globally informed contemporary dance choreography, *Dada Masilo's Giselle* embodies a post-colonial Indigenous identity formed by local and global circulations. To understand the nuances of her choreographic approach, I will first introduce the artist and her background. Then I provide a brief overview of the role of the ballet *Giselle* in its context of origin and some of the ways it has proliferated over time. I pay particular attention to the work in relation to the development of race, gender and sex ideologies in Europe during its romantic era. Next I explain how ballet has been historically situated in South Africa as tool of White supremacy and eventually Black assimilation. I analyze *Dada Masilo's Giselle* as it was performed in Makhanda, New York, and Los Angeles to relay how this work inverts the colonial underpinnings of South African ballet and asserts a gender-fluid African feminism. Lastly I include reflections on my own embodied experience of taking a master class with Masilo. Moving through her choreography, I come to understand the distinctions and intersections of tradition and contemporaneity South African dance. These engagements with her process and work lead me to draw from African and diasporic scholarship to evidence Africanist theories in practice. This approach to Dance Studies expands notions of Blackness to examine how pre-colonial methods of creation become post-colonial methods of resistance. Though ballet was once used as a tool of colonization in South Africa, I argue that Masilo's dramaturgical and choreographic choices decolonize *Giselle* through a process of Indigenizing the ballet. I view this work

as Indigenous not because it preserves an Indigenous tradition but because of how it transforms local and global practices through a post-colonial Indigenous epistemology that embraces global Black feminist and queer identities in service of decolonization. Her methods include the performance of South African sociality including signifyin(g), comedic resistance, and code-switching, a critical re-appropriation of Tswana movement vocabulary, and Africanist aesthetics and feminism.

Who is Dada Masilo?

Dada Masilo was born in 1986 in the Johannesburg township of Soweto. She started dancing there in her youth, performing ‘street dance’ with a group of friends, inspired by Michael Jackson.²¹⁰ The group was invited to perform at the Dance Factory studio where, at age eleven, Masilo was taken under the tutelage of Suzette Le Sueur who taught her ballet and modern dance. She started teaching at the Dance Factory at age nineteen and also trained at Jazzart Dance Theatre, one of the oldest concert dance institutions in the country. In 2002, she trained at Braamfontein's National School for the Arts and she was also invited to teach and train in Belgium at the Performing Arts Research and Training Studios (P.A.R.T.S.) in 2005 and 2006.²¹¹ Masilo’s choreography has been well-received by audiences and critics abroad and at home. In 2006, Masilo received South Africa’s Gauteng Arts and Culture Award for the Most Promising Female

²¹⁰ Diana Vernon, “Dada Masilo, South Africa’s Star Choreographer,” accessed December 19, 2019, <https://theculturetrip.com/africa/south-africa/articles/dada-masilo-south-africas-star-choreographer/>.

²¹¹ “Dada Masilo: Swan Lake Artists,” accessed December 19, 2019, https://fac.umass.edu/Online/default.asp?BOParam::WScontent::loadArticle::permalink=SwanLakeArtists&BOParam::WScontent::loadArticle::context_id=.

Dancer in a Contemporary Style, and in 2008 she was the Standard Bank Young Artist of the Year.²¹² She currently resides in Johannesburg, and her company, based out of Dance Factory, tours frequently. Transforming ballets is not new for Masilo. She choreographed *Romeo and Juliet* in 2008, *Carmen* in 2009, and *Swan Lake* in 2010. In 2017 she debuted *Giselle*. As she told the *New York Times*, “I started tackling the classics, because the narratives are so good, and the characters so great...”²¹³ It is clear from viewing the work that Masilo’s interests lie in the characters and plots, which she uses as a framework from which to generate plot twists and characterizations that reflect a much more current and cosmopolitan aesthetic experience than a traditional ballet can offer.

When attempting to communicate with Dada Masilo, I found her to be an elusive character. I reached out to her via Facebook in 2017 to schedule an interview. She responded to my friend request but not my messages. On June 30th, 2017, I waited outside of the Rhodes University Theatre to congratulate her on her performance in *Makhanda*. I’d hoped to have a conversation with her but she quickly directed me back to Facebook and walked away. As a dance artist myself, I understand that she is always busy and rarely compensated fairly, so I take her need for privacy and rest seriously. Performing and touring are as emotionally exhausting as they are physically. I was able to catch up with her a bit after her New York City performance and Los Angeles class. Without having had extended conversation with Masilo, I will rely on her interviews with

²¹² Steven Van Wyk, “Ballet Blanc to Ballet Black: Performing Whiteness in Post-Apartheid South African Dance,” in *Post-Apartheid Dance: Many Bodies Many Voices Many Stories*, ed. Sharon Friedman (Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012).

²¹³ Roslyn Sulcas, “Dada Masilo Turns Tchaikovsky on His Head in ‘Swan Lake,’” *The New York Times*, February 1, 2016, sec. Arts, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/02/arts/dance/dada-masilo-turnstchaikovsky-on-his-head-in-swan-lake.html>.

news outlets. I also employ other critical methodologies such as feminist ethnography, performance analysis, and embodied research. To fully appreciate *Dada Masilo's Giselle*, one must consider the history of the ballet to which it refers.

Who is Giselle?

Giselle is a ballet that has come to epitomize the romantic era of nineteenth century Western Europe. According to dance historian Debra Hickenlooper Sowell,

...the term [romantic] continues to be used today by cultural historians to refer to a body of works in early nineteenth-century Europe that exalted the expression of personal feelings and emotion over reason, found inspiration in the exotic or the fantastic, explored both sentimental and passionate love (often unrequited), supported nationalist agendas, promoted the Promethean myth and the Byronic hero, idealized the notion of the eternal feminine, and found inspiration in nature.²¹⁴

In line with these ideals, *Giselle* portrays unrequited love that draws the title character to madness, metaphysical realms and beings, and representations of idealized and demonized femininity. *Giselle* is a pan-European creation. According to scholar and former ballerina Geraldine Morris, "Its libretto has roots in Germanic culture, but comes from heterogeneous sources."²¹⁵ During the romantic era, Western European artists returned to nature for inspiration, seeking refuge from the burgeoning

²¹⁴ Debra Hickenlooper Sowell, "Romantic Landscapes for Dance: Ballet Narratives and Edmund Burke's Theory of the Sublime," *Dance Chronicle* 34, no. 2 (May 1, 2011): 183.

²¹⁵ Geraldine Morris, "Giselle and the Gothic: Contesting the Romantic Idealisation of the Woman," in *Rethinking Dance History: Issues and Methodologies*, ed. Lorraine Nicholas (London, United Kingdom: Routledge, 2017), 238.

industrialization.²¹⁶ German poet Heinrich Heine wrote a poem called “De l’Allemagne,” inspired by a Slavic legend about wilis - vampiric entities born of the pain of betrayed women. French librettists Jules-Henri Vernoy de Saint - Georges and Théophile Gautier created plot and prose that took inspiration from Heine’s poem and Victor Hugo’s “Fantômes,” which begins, “Alas! I have seen young women die!”²¹⁷ They dreamed up a story where a girl is betrayed by her forbidden lover, dies of a broken heart, but with her undying love, is able to save him from the vengeful wilis. In doing so, she saves herself from becoming one.²¹⁸ From there, French ballet artists Jean Coralli and Jules Perrot created the choreography with original music by Adolphe Adam. The choreography seen now most likely resembles the revisions made by Marius Petipa in 1884, 1887, 1899, and 1903.²¹⁹ To understand the scope of reiteration, Maria Torija of Ohio’s Ballet Met has performed *Giselle* 112 times, so it is probably safe to say that the production has been performed tens of thousands of times since its 1841 premier in Paris.²²⁰

While some historians point to *Giselle* as an example of how romantic era ballets centered on female protagonists and therefore inspired the development of dramatically and physically demanding roles for women in ballet, *Giselle* is also an example of ballet

²¹⁶ Digital Media webmaster@vam.ac.uk Victoria and Albert Museum, “Romantic Ballet,” November 14, 2012, <http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/r/romantic-ballet/>.

²¹⁷ “Poème Fantômes - Victor Hugo,” accessed June 11, 2018, <http://www.poesie-francaise.fr/victor-hugo/poeme-fantomes.php>.

²¹⁸ Betsy Schwarm, “Giselle | Ballet by Adam,” Encyclopedia Britannica, accessed November 7, 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Giselle>.

²¹⁹ “Giselle,” *The Marius Petipa Society* (blog), May 3, 2016, <https://petipasociety.com/giselle/>.

²²⁰ BalletMet, “5 Things You Might Not Know about ‘Giselle,’” *BalletMet* (blog), February 13, 2018, <https://www.balletmet.org/blog-5-things-might-not-know-giselle/>.

narratives centering women's stories only to see them sacrifice their lives when they become meaningless without the love of a man. Giselle goes mad and kills herself after being publicly betrayed by her love, Albrecht. Any modern day feminist, while acknowledging the severity of heartbreak, would also have to acknowledge the stupidity of the notion that this betrayal should cause one to lose one's sanity and very life, and that this suicide mission should be what we take our daughters to see decade after decade. Yet considering a performance of *Giselle* in context might illuminate another layer of complexity. Morris explains how in eighteenth and nineteenth century Europe, a woman's romantic relationships were public information subject to public condemnation:

At the time, unmarried women were regarded with suspicion and those who were jilted often incurred the contempt of the community. Grotesque and redundant, for whom even the devil found no use, the Victorian old maid was thought of as some sort of omen, a witch in disguise and frequently allied with the fallen woman.²²¹

During her time, a woman like Giselle would have experienced severe judgment for carrying on a romantic liaison with an engaged man despite her ignorance of his deception. This would have been worse if we consider the fact that according to Morris, they may have been permitted to have sex as fiancés.

The jump to the jilted bride as a fallen woman is not a great step to make particularly because there was 'a long-held belief that sex with a fiancé was acceptable, since the couple were to be married anyway' (Frost 1995: 99)...If betrothed couples had consummated their relationship, it would have had repercussions for the women, particularly if the marriage did not happen.²²²

²²¹ Morris, "Giselle and the Gothic: Contesting the Romantic Idealisation of the Woman," 244.

²²² Morris, 244.

Morris explains that Giselle's romance and sexuality are only acceptable within the precarious scope of the marriage institution, and that the repercussions of any breach of their marriage contract would fall more heavily on the woman. It is certainly possible that in its day, Giselle could be seen to have exerted agency over her body and her romance in the face of institutionalized patriarchy, which left her few and poor choices. For contemporary audiences, however, Giselle's suicide and subsequent sacrifice to save the lover who dismissed her are not likely to be regarded as empowering actions.

Dada Masilo's Giselle, however, has audiences cheering for the heroine - not for her selflessness but for her self-determination. In her version of the story, Giselle is abandoned by her community but embraced by the wilis who physically support her as she exacts revenge on her formerly beloved Albrecht. Although she does die of her broken heart, in the ancestral realm she becomes more powerful than in life. In a *Yorkshire Times* article titled "Hell Hath No Fury Like Dada Masilo," critic Phil Hopkins writes,

Traditionally Giselle follows the fortunes of a peasant girl who dies of a broken heart after discovering that her lover is betrothed to another. The Wilis... summon Giselle from her grave and target her lover, Albrecht, for termination, but Giselle's love frees him from their grasp. However, Dada was having none of that, preferring to accentuate the rejuvenated, 'female' strength of Giselle once she has entered the spirit world. The protagonist becomes the persecutor and revenge the goal... This was a powerful, electrifying production.²²³

In my assessment, what makes the performance so electric is the combination of strong, precise, brilliantly executed movement within an empowering narrative. Beneath a photo

²²³ Phil Hopkins, "Hell Hath No Fury Like Dada Masilo!," *Yorkshire Times*, accessed December 19, 2019, <https://yorkshiretimes.co.uk/article/Hell-Hath-No-Fury-Like-Dada-Masilo>.

of Myrtha towering above Aubrecht who is on his knees deeply arching backwards, Johannesburg critic Robyn Sassen writes,

If you've ever questioned the true value of the arts in this world, you need to see *Dada Masilo's Giselle*. Summarily, and without hesitation it will strip you of any doubt. You might emerge crying from the experience and emotionally shattered, but you will be sure that what you just experienced was unadulterated magic and relentlessly transformative.²²⁴

By transforming Giselle from a frail victim of unconditional love to a powerful African ancestor, Masilo creates a heroine that is both familiar and fantastical. It's important to note that *Dada Masilo's Giselle* is not ballet. Aside from the narrative foundation, which contrasts most contemporary dance works that are non-narrative, the movement vocabulary of her production is not that of romantic, classical, neo-classical, or contemporary ballet genres. Masilo sources footwork of the South African Tswana dances, Western modern/contemporary dance vocabulary, vernacular gestures and her own movement inventions to tell a story that is familiar to many audience members and legible to new ones. The contemporary Africanist feminist revisions facilitate an entirely new experience for the work, one that affirms Blackness, gender fluidity, and women's strength.

Blackness in the *Ballet Blanc*

In "Ballet Blanc to Ballet Black: Performing Whiteness in Post-Apartheid South African Dance," Steven Van Wyk introduces a critique of Whiteness as an aesthetic

²²⁴ Robyn Sassen, "Giselle Choreographed by Dada Masilo," My View by Robyn Sassen, June 25, 2017, <https://robynsassenmyview.com/2017/06/25/quintessential-giselle-in-masilos-hands/>.

which assumes that a Euro-centric artistic perspective is both preferred and universally understood. He explains,

Under British colonial rule, South Africa inherited ballet, as well as western European ideas of the body that came with it. Ballet is implicated in the “civilizing process” of colonial culture, providing one model that could be employed in attempts to control, regulate and outlaw the overtly erotic and disorderly “native” dances. Freed from colonial rule, one would assume that the Afrikaner National Party government would abandon ballet – a cultural product brought to South Africa by the British, from whom the Afrikaners had long sought independence. Quite to the contrary, ballet prospered like never before under the Afrikaner government, which supported the art form with extensive state funding.²²⁵

The Dutch and British were political and economic enemies in the colonial era.²²⁶ After the Dutch rebranded themselves Afrikaners, their apartheid system forged a White brotherhood between the culturally distinct people of Dutch and British decent. Whiteness therefore became something that could transcend differences in language, religion, and cultural practice by subsuming them under the illusion of superiority guaranteed through skin color. For South African arts, this meant that anything European was preferred to anything not and that expressions of Indigenous culture, when allowed, should buttress notions of the “savage African” and the “civilized European.”

What, then, can we make of the Black ballerina? Dance artists of African decent have played various important roles in the history of ballet as scholars such as Brenda Dixon Gottschild,²²⁷ Clare Croft,²²⁸ and Sharon Friedman²²⁹ have evidenced in the United

²²⁵ Van Wyk, “Ballet Blanc to Ballet Black: Performing Whiteness in Post-Apartheid South African Dance,” 39.

²²⁶ Baines, “Lionising De La Rey.”

²²⁷ Brenda Dixon Gottschild, *Joan Myers Brown & the Audacious Hope of the Black Ballerina: A Biohistory of American Performance* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

States and South Africa – two countries with similar and related racial histories. The depth of this history is beyond the scope of this chapter, but I do wish to highlight some important examples that help to convey what makes *Dada Masilo's Giselle* uniquely powerful.

In the 21st century, ethnic diversity in ballet is still rare and controversial. Careers are particularly precarious for dancers with skin of a darker hue. The pairing of Black dancers and ballet is not entirely new, though it is still quite rare both in South Africa and the United States. Speaking openly about race and ballet, (very light-skinned) Misty Copeland made international headlines in 2015 when she became the first Black principle ballerina with American Ballet Theater. In 1969, before Copeland was born, a former principle with the New York City ballet, Arthur Miller, formed the Dance Theatre of Harlem (DTH) to develop and promote Black ballet dancers. Dance scholar Carrie Gaiser writes that at the time, “The litany of bodily excesses and deficiencies lay at the ready to exclude the black body from miscegenating with the white body or corps de ballet: critics rhetorically constructed and essentialized the black dancer as possessing a too-stocky bone structure, protruding buttocks, and feet that were too flat and too large.”²³⁰ Because of the misconception that Black bodies *cannot* perform ballet and the long-held notion that they *should* not perform ballet, talented Black ballet dancers are often guided into careers in contemporary dance which is often (mis)understood to be more accepting of

²²⁸ Clare Croft, *Dancers as Diplomats: American Choreography in Cultural Exchange*, 1 edition (Oxford: American Choreography in Cultural Exchange)

²²⁹ Friedman, *Post-Apartheid Dance*.

²³⁰ Carrie Gaiser, “Caught Dancing: Hybridity, Stability, and Subversion in Dance Theatre of Harlem’s Creole ‘Giselle,’” *Theatre Journal* 58, no. 2 (2006): 272, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25069823>.

various body types and ethnicities. *Dada Masilo's Giselle* is a work of contemporary dance but it directly alludes to the original ballet. The racial implications of a Black South African woman remaking a famous *ballet blanc* when the ballet field is *still* heavily dominated by White male choreographers are worth examining.

Gaiser outlines how the term *ballet blanc* refers to the costumes and scenery of a series of ballets from the romantic era. The predominance of white is generally understood to stem from the era's fascination with purity, but Gaiser argues that the aesthetic discourse was created alongside and in concert with racial discourse. She writes,

From the start, whiteness as a potent combination of spirituality, sexuality, and death had been coded into the aesthetic conventions of the Romantic ballet...The wilis of *Giselle* are a prime example of how death, sensuality, and spirituality in the Romantic ballet functioned as synonyms for whiteness; their race was literally written into the libretto of the ballet from the start.²³¹

Embedded within the narrative are notions about skin color, body shape and character.

Embedded within the ballet industry are notions about skin color, body shape, and ability.

The DTH performance of *Giselle* cast Black dancers and changed the setting to 1841

New Orleans, but utilized the traditional choreography. This work proved that

assumptions about Black people's inability to dance ballet were false. *Dada Masilo's*

Giselle uses a Black South African cast of diverse body types and movement

vocabularies, some of which draw upon balletic foundations. Her work speaks to the

utility of ballet in a decolonial experience. Unlike the DTH production, *Dada Masilo's*

²³¹ Gaiser, 271.

Giselle does not name a particular setting within the performance, but the actual setting of its debut is worth examining in order to appreciate its radical potential.

Decolonizing through Ballet

Although the original *Giselle* facilitated imperialist fantasies, in effect culturally colonizing dance artists and audiences, throughout this chapter I suggest that *Dada Masilo's Giselle* decolonizes through ballet by transforming oppressive narratives and techniques into empowering ones. In *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous People*, Maori activist and scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith writes,

Coming to know the past has been part of the critical pedagogy of decolonization. To hold alternative histories is to hold alternative knowledges. The pedagogical implication of this access to alternative knowledges is that they can form the basis of alternative ways of doing things. Transforming our colonized views of our own history (as written by the West), however, requires us to revisit, site by site, our history under Western eyes.²³²

Revising *Giselle* creates an alternative way to understand its history. *Giselle* is a European story and was introduced to South Africa as part of a colonial agenda. It might seem far-fetched to imply that its performance could yield any type of redemption for Indigenous people. Although ballet does not represent an Indigenous tradition, it is now part of South African history therefore subject to various forms of local representation and revision. As I will show below, rather than replicating the ballet from a colonized perspective that would accept its stories and aesthetics unchallenged, Masilo revisits and transforms it, scene by scene, through casting and choreographic choices. The resulting

²³² Anton Krueger, "Revolutionary Trends at the National Arts Festival 2017 (an Overview)," *South African Theatre Journal* 31, no. 2–3 (September 2, 2018): 203, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10137548.2017.1407025>.

performance addresses the colonial legacy of race and gender dynamics transforming them from the inside out. This suggests a recognition of ballet's troubled past and its radical potential.

Van Wyk explains how the context of racial segregation informs the significance of fantasy worlds created on South African stages. "Where ballet took place was also important in terms of its socio-historical meanings in South Africa. Built by the state in 1971, the whites-only Nico Malan Theatre (now Artscape) became a "symbol of cultural apartheid" (Van Heerden 2008:38).²³³ As a cultural space, the theatre was not only a site of apartheid, it was a tool enabling its white supremacist agenda. "There seems to have been a harmonious fit between the apartheid government and ballet, since the traditional centrality of the white body in ballet could be exploited to exclude non-white bodies from the stages and seats of certain theatres, reinforcing the notion of the white dancing body as the ideal – supporting the white supremacist agenda of the apartheid government."²³⁴ Just as promoting Whiteness and White supremacy was accomplished through casting idealized forms, segregating, and touring, decentering Whiteness from the ballet started with the casting of Black company members, developed into the creation of touring Black ballet companies and through the work of Dada Masilo (and Mamela Nyamza) and is extending now into the transformation of the ballets themselves.

In 2017, *Dada Masilo's Giselle* debuted at the Rhodes University Theatre in Makhandla (formerly known as Grahamstown), in the Eastern Cape province of South

²³³ Van Wyk, "Ballet Blanc to Ballet Black: Performing Whiteness in Post-Apartheid South African Dance," 39.

²³⁴ Van Wyk, 39.

Africa. Despite the successful student protests at the University of Cape Town the year prior, this university still carries the name of the infamous colonist Cecil Rhodes, and his larger than life statue still appears to be ‘holding court’ just a block away from the theatre. Rhodes University drama professor Anton Krueger explains that the production at Rhodes University Theatre was particularly charged as the festival’s theme was Disruption, in response to the prior year’s student protests. #RhodesMustFall called for the decolonization of South Africa’s university education, and #FeesMustFall protested a proposed tuition increase that would have a disproportionately strong negative effect on students of color. Rather than despondence, Krueger explains that the protests largely seemed to engender a contagious feeling of hope:

It felt as though there was a buoyant mood, particularly among enthusiastic young black theatre-makers. I met many who were upbeat, saying that this was a great time to be making theatre in this country, that there were issues that mattered, that there were things that needed to be addressed. There was an expectant energy in the air, an eagerness to fight for a just cause, ready to right wrongs and do battle against racism, inequality and gender violence.²³⁵

As an audience member, I felt this energy of radical potential from performers, and it was certainly evidenced in their work. Viewing performance as creative act rather than a representative one insinuates a radical potential akin to protest. As Masilo described in her CueTube interview during for the 2017 National Arts Festival, “In the world that we’re living in now there’s so much disruption. There’s so much chaos happening and I think that the *Giselle* I made kind of fits very well into what is happening in the

²³⁵ Anton Krueger, “Revolutionary Trends at the National Arts Festival 2017 (an Overview),” *South African Theatre Journal* 31, no. 2–3 (September 2, 2018): 203, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10137548.2017.1407025>.

world.”²³⁶ *Dada Masilo’s Giselle*, like the original, portrays scenes of romantic love and heartbreak that are perhaps universal. However, Masilo’s version takes a unique approach, which reflects a particularly African feminist stance that resonates particularly strongly in the environment in which it was first presented.

As I detail later, Masilo’s Giselle character is a woman of her own mind and body. Her final act is to save herself not her man. This was particularly resonant in light of the numerous acts of violence against women being reported regularly across the nation.²³⁷ In Krueger’s review of *Dada Masilo’s Giselle*, he also notes that the Rhodes campus itself was the site of recent protests against the rape culture that normalizes the subjugation of women.²³⁸ In 2017, this atmosphere of both misogyny and resistance to it permeated the campus and its theater. As Krueger writes,

Dada Masilo's new ballet responded directly to the other major student protests held last year, the uprisings against what has come to be called 'Rape Culture.' In Masilo's reworking of *Giselle*, the eponymous heroine, played by Masilo herself, does not forgive her seducer, as she does in the original. Here Albrecht is the only white body on stage, the prince who embodies white privilege...Masilo's piece is not about reconciliation, it does not hope for a harmonious, syncretic rainbow nation like so many plays of the 1990s; but rather, as Masilo said in an interview...her production is about 'betrayal and revenge'.²³⁹

Just as Coralli and Jules Perrot’s Giselle character was a feminine archetype of the romantic era, Masilo’s Giselle can be seen to represent an ideal South African woman in

²³⁶ “Dada Masilo’s Giselle - YouTube.”

²³⁷ “South Africa.”

²³⁸ The Rhodes Must Fall Movement, *Rhodes Must Fall: The Struggle to Decolonise the Racist Heart of Empire* (London, UK: Zed Books, 2018).

²³⁹ Krueger, “Revolutionary Trends at the National Arts Festival 2017 (an Overview).”

the “Fall” era when young South Africans are tearing down patriarchy, racism, heteronormativity and colonial hegemony. By speaking to the history and vocabulary of ballet through the technique of contemporary and Tswana dance and philosophy, Masilo’s embodied protest emphasizes the creative act. Masilo not only decenters Whiteness but uses new vocabulary to speak from and to Indigenous South Africans, thus decolonizing the ballet. Whereas Van Wyk’s arguments relay the relationship between Masilo’s work and Whiteness, I place her work in conversation with Blackness through contemporary Africanist movement analysis to reveal how this work acts as decolonial form of creative resistance. *Dada Masilo’s Giselle* talks back in a distinctly African accent.

Signifyin(g)

Dada Masilo’s Giselle enacts an African-American linguistic technique.

Signifyin(g) means taking a word or phrase and using it with its original meaning and/or a new one, depending on the speaker or the listener. It amplifies meaning by reflecting an African-American perspective of English. In *Talkin and Testifyin: The Language of Black America*, Geneva Smitherman establishes eight characteristics of signifyin(g)

1. indirection, circumlocution
2. metaphorical-imagistic
3. humorous, ironic
4. rhythmic fluency and sound
5. teachy but not preachy
6. directed at a person or persons usually present in the situational context
7. punning, play on words
8. introduction of the semantically or logically unexpected²⁴⁰

²⁴⁰ Geneva Smitherman, *Talkin and Testifyin: The Language of Black America*, Waynebook 51 (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1986), 121.

The link between African-American speech and South African dance may not be an obvious one. I suggest there are two possibilities for the connection. First, is the notion of survivals. Scholars such as Joseph E. Holloway²⁴¹ and Robert Farris Thompson²⁴² have documented countless examples of these African aesthetic principles and cultural practices that survived the transatlantic slave trade and subsequent cultural repression. These forms of knowledge, philosophy and practice are passed on generationally as well as evolve interculturally in their new contexts. Likewise, South Africa has received and remixed African-American aesthetics and cultural products since as early as the 1940s.²⁴³ Black expressive culture is fluid and dynamic by nature and necessity.²⁴⁴ That is why in *Dada Masilo's Giselle* it is possible to use an African-American cultural lens to understand the signifyin(g) mechanism at work in her dramaturgy even when specific movements may trace their origins in South Africa, Europe and the United States.

Following Smitherman's criteria, In *Dada Masilo's Giselle*, the queen Myrtha character acts as a metaphor for a traditional healer and all the characters are transformed in a humorous manner – developing Africanist versions of the traditional choreography and poking fun at its classism. In addition to the music, which dramatically remixes the original compositions or in some scenes abandons them entirely, the movement vocabulary and vocalizations are percussive and poetic. The overall message of the work

²⁴¹ Joseph Holloway, ed., *Africanisms in American Culture*, Second edition (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005).

²⁴² Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art Philosophy* (New York: Random House, 1983).

²⁴³ Veit Erlmann, *African Stars: Studies in Black South African Performance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

²⁴⁴ Kariamu Welsh-Asante, *African Dance: An Artistic, Historical, and Philosophical Inquiry* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1996).

suggests taking men's vulnerability and women's strength seriously, but it does so through entertainment not dogma. Dancers sometimes seem to speak directly to the audience, making use of code-switching and double entendre, and the plot twists are decidedly unexpected.

In *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African American Literary Tradition*, Henry Louis Gates Jr. applies Smitherman's verbal theory to literature. The application of his African-American literary theory to South African dance theory is appropriate considering how both literature and dance create and convey meaning through communication within the context of institutional polarization of Black and White cultures. Despite spatial segregation and differences in cultural traditions, European and African epistemologies have been enmeshed for centuries and in fact rely on one another to exist as maneuverable ideologies within the construct of race. Gates expresses the intimately intertwined relationship between Blackness and Whiteness:

We see here the most subtle and perhaps the most profound trace of an extended engagement between two separate and distinct yet profoundly – even inextricably – related orders of meaning dependent precisely as much for their confrontation on relations of identity, manifested in the signifier, as on their relations of difference, manifested at the level of the signified. We bear witness here to a protracted argument over the nature of the sign as the difference that blackness makes within the larger political culture and its historical unconscious.”²⁴⁵

As parallel, embodied universes, African and European cultures relate through contrast, conflict, co-creation and collaboration in movement. In *Giselle*, the difference Blackness

²⁴⁵ Henry Louis Gates, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*, Reprint edition (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1989), 66.

makes is a series of choices that relate back to both pre- and post-colonial Africanist practices and aesthetics as they speak to the Whiteness and patriarchy of ballet.

Extending Gates' theory, I demonstrate how dance and choreography can also signify. He explains that, "Free of the white person's gaze, black people created their own unique vernacular structures and relished in the double play that these forms bore to white forms. Repetition and revision are fundamental to black artistic forms, from painting and sculpture to music and language use."²⁴⁶ The repetition of the *Giselle* narrative structure is obvious, but the changes can be understood not only as moving from classical to contemporary dance or from a cast of White dancers to a Black one. *Dada Masilo's Giselle* talks back to the tradition with a knowing wit, signifyin(g) on it – nudging the viewer to revisit the tradition with an African feminist lens. As Gates explains in literature, "Black writers, like critics of black literature, learn to write by reading literature, especially the canonical texts of the Western tradition. Consequently, black texts resemble other, Western texts...But black formal repetition always repeats with a difference..."²⁴⁷ Having been raised in both the politically dominant Western paradigm through which apartheid forced and enforced Western culture, the cultural practices Indigenous to South Africa, and the ballet canon, *Dada Masilo's Giselle* also repeats with a difference by making specific dramaturgical and choreographic choices from an African feminist perspective that resonate with Black audiences.

²⁴⁶ Gates, 19.

²⁴⁷ Gates, 17.

Dada Masilo's Giselle demonstrates two types of signifyin(g) identified by Gates: tropological and unmotivated. Gates defines tropological revision as “the manner in which a specific trope is repeated, with differences, between two or more texts.”²⁴⁸ Reading the ballet itself as a suite of tropes, Masilo starts from *Giselle's* original narrative, but revises it to make the performance relevant to a contemporary South African audience. This is not done to bash ballet. It should be understood that Masilo is trained in and enjoys ballet. She appropriates the narrative and re-choreographs it to speak through it as a Black South African woman. Gates would describe this as Unmotivated Signifyin(g), which he suggests is “not the absence of a profound intention but the absence of a negative critique.” He describes this as “pastiche over parody,”²⁴⁹ where the goal is to remix the original, not defile it. As demonstrated through the criteria established by Gates and Smitherman, *Dada Masilo's Giselle* signifies on *Giselle*, allowing it to participate in the transnational Africanist practice that imbibes and transforms colonial language, both written and embodied. In what follows, I detail how this work goes on to decolonize the ballet by foregrounding South African, West African and African-American philosophies and practices of cultural embodiment.

²⁴⁸ Gates, 19.

²⁴⁹ Gates, 21.

Indigenizing

The Merriam-Webster dictionary states that to Indigenize is “to cause to have Indigenous characteristics or personnel,”²⁵⁰ whereas Oxford’s Lexico.com explains it as to “Bring (something) under the control, dominance, or influence of the people native to an area.”²⁵¹ *Dada Masilo’s Giselle* gives Indigenous characteristics to the ballet in order to bring it under the control and influence of native South Africans. Smith includes indigenizing as one of twenty-five Indigenous projects being undertaken by scholars and activists. She describes indigenizing as “centering in consciousness of the landscapes, images, languages, themes, metaphors and stories of the indigenous world...”²⁵² Masilo’s transformation of *Giselle*’s setting, music, language, technique and plot do exactly that. It is not merely the casting of Indigenous people that Indigenize the ballet. By employing Africanist sociality and aesthetics, traditional Tswana dance, diasporic rhythms, and an African feminist narrative, Masilo Indigenizes *Giselle*.

Dada Masilo’s Giselle begins to transform the ballet immediately by creating a fictional setting that reflects a South African metropolis. Sowell explains that “A commonly accepted characteristic of European Romanticism in literature and the visual arts is a spiritualized view of nature that found inspiration in landscape.”²⁵³ In ballet this perspective is usually represented in elaborate life-like painted cycloramas of natural settings. For example, when Cape Town City Ballet performed *Giselle* in 2012, their

²⁵⁰ “Definition of INDIGENIZE,” accessed November 12, 2019, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/indigenize>.

²⁵¹ “Indigenize | Definition of Indigenize by Lexico,” Lexico Dictionaries | English, accessed November 12, 2019, <https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/indigenize>.

²⁵² Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies - Research And Indigenous Peoples*, 147.

²⁵³ Sowell, “Romantic Landscapes for Dance,” 183.

colorful cyclorama portrayed tall trees on a large field surrounding a castle. It is painted to scale so that the dancers appear to be in a European village.²⁵⁴ In contrast, Masilo's production opens with William Kentridge's beautiful black and white illustration. It's a scene of a lagoon surrounded by oil wells and other signs of industrial life and waste - a setting that is at once archaic and modern. Oil-wells and ballet are hardly symbols of the twenty-first century, yet by fusing pond reeds with iron towers, the viewer is immediately confronted with the types of conflation that characterize South Africa as a post-colonial, post-apartheid, highly developed, and deeply impoverished country. The landscape is not a realistic or idealistic pre-colonial Europe or South Africa. It is a near-impressionistic rendering of a post-colonial aesthetic that will diffuse the production.

In its first moments, *Dada Masilo's Giselle* presents a scene that is both ancient and ongoing. Already on stage, several dancers are bending low or on the ground laboring. This cast of 'peasants' pantomimes the hard labor of harvesting food and cleaning floors by hand. The movement is not stylized as with ballet. Instead, dancers emulate exactly the gestures and movement qualities of pulling produce and scrubbing and sweeping floors - one even has a broom. The all-Black cast is dressed in khaki colored skirts and pants with the classic white peasant blouses. The women and men work equally hard and the jobs are not divided by gender. Their backs are low and their steps are heavy. They seem exhausted and burdened. As I sit in theaters in Makhanda, New York and Los Angeles, I can't help but notice the spectacle of Black bodies toiling on stage in the context of Black bodies toiling on plantations and mansions. Each city

²⁵⁴ "Giselle: En Pointe - YouTube," accessed December 21, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2UHA3HWHX3w>.

built by Black and Brown labor, each city built on the bones of Black and Brown bodies, one generation after another. Masilo Indigenizes *Giselle* by speaking to and through the local - taking a centuries-old European ballet narrative and creating original choreography that resonates with a Black South African experience.

The characters in *Dada Masilo's Giselle* demonstrate a form of agency that combats South Africa's colonial and apartheid efforts to pacify and demobilize African culture. In the first scene, to see Black bodies laboring on stage and not hiding the effort invites audiences to confront the hidden labor of Black bodies in South Africa and globally, on stage, backstage, and offstage. It also subtly suggests the parallels between European peasants (the original characters) and colonized Africans (the image created by the current dancers). A South African cast and audience are experienced with the perils of classism and racism, and this initial scene is haunted by both, without making an outright statement about either. As the scene continues, dancers subtly refuse to be disciplined.

African Sociality: Comedic Refusal

Dada Masilo's Giselle enacts various forms of cultural behavior including comedic refusal and code-switching. The way they enact these subtle and overt words and gestures helps to create a unique landscape from which to perform what I term South African sociality. I use the term comedic refusal to describe those moments where someone refutes authority in a playful or humorous manner – even if there may be deadly risks involved. As one example, the 2003 documentary *Amandla! A Revolution in Four Part Harmony* highlights how activists would sing parodic renderings of popular tunes to

impart a revolutionary message, or write blatantly violent lyrics, knowing their oppressors never bothered to learn their languages, all the while laughing at their ignorance when the song came on the radio.²⁵⁵ I witnessed another example at the 2019 Dance Umbrella Africa festival, during a performance of *We Are Still Marching* by South Africa's first contemporary fusion company, Moving Into Dance Mophatong.²⁵⁶ At the start of the piece, an dancer playing an apartheid-era police officer shouted at the audience to separate themselves by race. Some audience members began to move into new seats; some, like myself, sat awkwardly looking to see what others would do, wondering if this would trigger some subtle form of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder amongst locals. The most common reaction, however, was to laugh as if this command was the most ridiculous thing they had ever heard - as if they would never even *consider* complying. In *Dada Masilo's Giselle*, I understand the brief moment where peasant characters refuse to obey as more than just a bit of frivolous comedy. In this acutely crafted production, I read this refusal as a nod to Black rebellion.

Playing Giselle with her bald head, dynamic facial expressions and gestures performed so quickly that they seem near impossible, Dada Masilo is easily identifiable. As Giselle and her working class counterparts toil across the downstage space, two dreadlocked performers enter from upstage left. Princess Bathilde is performed by Liyabuya Gongo. Gongo and her male assistant are both dressed in knee-length, sleeveless, blue velvet coats that are open down the front. Underneath it Gongo wears a

²⁵⁵ Desireé Markgraaff and Lee Hirsch, *Amandla! A Revolution in Four Part Harmony* (Santa Monica, Calif: Artisan Home Entertainment, 2003).

²⁵⁶ "Moving into Dance Celebrates 40 Years," Artslink, accessed December 24, 2019, http://www.artlink.co.za/news_article.htm?contentID=44206.

blue velvet corset with gold trim that starts outside her breasts and narrows down towards her midline, accentuating her hour-glass frame. Below it she dons a full white skirt and blue velvet pumps. Her assistant wears a white top with billowing arms and pants that shape his legs to mid-calf. Their costumes identify their high status but do not guarantee their power. Expecting official acknowledgement from the peasants, they stand and wait as the scene is noisy with chatter. Then an officer of the royal court enters, and the dancers, busily engaged with each other, ignore his call to attention. He hails them again. They continue to keep to themselves until he yells at them to “shut up!” shaking two fists in the air.

This scene differs from other versions of the ballet by asserting the will of the people through comedic refusal. *Giselle*, like most other ballets, reinforces class divisions even as it attempts to eschew them with stories of lovers rejecting class barriers. Sure, the story might portray two lovers who cross class barriers to follow their hearts, but usually that leads to death. In the ballet, dancers would immediately bow and perhaps even cower when faced with royalty. Here, the dancers seem utterly uninterested in the presence of the princess and her court. After ignoring them completely, the peasantry responds reluctantly, more so to stop the nuisance of the screaming officer than out of any real deference. This utter disregard for the authority they do not recognize strongly resembles the speech and actions of anti-apartheid activists in their risky, relentless, and often artistic and comical refusals to cooperate with pass laws, schools’ changes in language requirements, or any other arbitrary regulations of apartheid. I’m not claiming that this scene was about apartheid, but rather that laughing at authority is a South African

technique that I have witnessed on several occasions. Whereas this moment Indigenizes the ballet by embodying an African sociality, the next scene exemplifies Africanist aesthetics.

Africanist Aesthetics

After the royalty departs, Masilo and her dancers execute an ensemble phrase in unison punctuated by robust chants, building speed and energy with each section. Their dancing exhibits a great degree of tonus, reminiscent of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater performing Horton Technique, where the body composes clean lines and exhibits strength. Sustained pulls through space are followed by rapid-fire footwork, chased by a full-body vibration, then a mid-tempo slice of the arm pushing the torso off-center. Like a free jazz improvisation, there is no set tempo or rhythmic structure that everything hinges on, nor is there a clear body center. Instead, there is an unseen guiding principle that keeps everyone together despite the high contrasts in the movement's timing and quality from one moment to the next. In an interview with CueTube Media, Masilo explained her approach to constructing a new aesthetic for *Giselle*: "I wanted to make a ballet that was not...pretty. Giselle is very pretty and I wanted to sort of get away from that." I would argue that *Dada Masilo's Giselle* is *gorgeous*, but agree that it's not 'pretty.' Pretty is a term often used to describe an infantile beauty or the kind of femininity that is reserved for waif White women.²⁵⁷ Masilo's choreography creates beauty by sourcing global contemporary dance techniques and local verbal and embodied vernacular. She continues,

²⁵⁷ Imani Kai Johnson, "From Blues Women to B-Girls: Performing Badass Femininity," *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 24, no. 1 (January 2, 2014).

“[I wanted to] sort of bring it back home, bring it back to South Africa... give it that edge, put it into that context.”²⁵⁸ Unlike the DTH *Giselle*, which used scenography, music, and costume to create a nineteenth century Louisiana on stage, *Dada Masilo’s Giselle* simplifies costume and scenery and amplifies the emotion and political potency of the story with Africanist aesthetics from home and abroad. Her use of African aesthetics is particularly evident throughout ensemble phrases of the peasants, who represent the most populous sect of society.

During these scenes I witnessed several examples of Africanist aesthetics as identified by dance scholar Brenda Dixon Gottschild, building on the work of music/art scholar Robert Ferris Thompson. She explains:

The Africanist aesthetic embraces difference and dissonance, rather than erasing or resolving it. Contrariety is expressed in African dilemma stories that pose a question rather than offer a solution; in music or vocal work that sounds cacophonous or grating to the untrained ear; and in dance that seems unsophisticated to eyes trained in a different aesthetic.²⁵⁹

Contrariety works on many levels in these phrases. There is the cacophony of sounds amongst the dancers themselves as they speak over one another and against the musical score by Philip Miller, who combines European stringed instruments and melodies with African percussion and voice. There is a contrariety in the movement itself, which alludes to ballet without repeating it and folds in Tswana and contemporary dance movements. But whereas Gottschild’s use of contrariety accounts for contradistinctions within a single aesthetic and fusion usually describes the blending of two or more aesthetics, here

²⁵⁸ “Dada Masilo’s Giselle - YouTube.”

²⁵⁹ Brenda Dixon Gottschild, “Stripping the Emperor: The Africanist Presence in American Concert Dance,” in *Moving History/Dancing Cultures: A Dance History Reader*, ed. Ann Dils and Ann Cooper Albright (Middletown, Conn: Wesleyan, 2001), 333.

fusion does not aptly describe the result of Masilo's various uses of contrariety. I would like to employ Cameroonian philosopher Achille Mbembe's *entanglement* to better describe the messy histories that lead to the necessity of these various movement languages cohabitating in the post-colonial body.

Entanglement is Mbembe's concept of post-colonial subjecthood that acknowledges inherent and ongoing conflict and co-construction by colonial and indigenous forces. In *On the Post-Colony*, Mbembe explains the post-colony as a space and time "of presents, pasts, and futures that retain the depths of other presents, pasts, and futures, each age bearing, altering, and maintaining the previous ones."²⁶⁰ This extended engagement between distinct orders produces a state of interdependence predicated upon the conflict between them. This very conflict is present in *Dada Masilo's Giselle* through the embrace of Black South African culture within a European dance form that was promoted in South Africa's colonial agenda. An example of entangled aesthetics can be seen in the various moments of the first act where Albrecht lifts Giselle off the ground and into his arms. This is a common way to demonstrate heterosexual romance in ballets, with the female dancer firmly holding a picture perfect position and the male dancer using his back and arm strength to lift her like a statue. In this production, the types of lifts employed are closer to those from the contact improvisation genre wherein the person being lifted will soften their muscles and may be still or moving while keeping the bulk of their weight very close to the lifter. Masilo references both genres but creates her

²⁶⁰ Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, 16.

own interpretation of them once they are fused and interspersed with Africanist aesthetics.

The entangled aesthetic is created in part through African traditions of embracing difference that have been evidenced in practices such as incorporating neighboring languages and religious beliefs.²⁶¹ In *Dada Masilo's Giselle*, entanglement is demonstrated most clearly in the ensemble phrases. In addition to the difference between one movement and the next, the difference between European and African aesthetics is shown and amplified within the choreography. Gottschild writes, "All traditions use contrast in the arts, but Africanist high-affect juxtaposition is heightened beyond the contrast that is within the range of acceptable standards in the European academic canon."²⁶² Masilo utilizes high-affect juxtaposition, polycentrism, and ephibism to make *Giselle* African.

In *Dada Masilo's Giselle*, there is no privileged body part or center. As Gottschild explains polycentrism, "From the Africanist standpoint, movement may emanate from any part of the body, and two or more centers may operate simultaneously."²⁶³ Any part of the body can direct any type of motion at any moment and usually at least two are working independently at once. Polycentrism demands superior skill and a high level of energy. Most of Masilo's choreography is executed with a driving speed it and carries dancers through high, medium and low levels of space, requiring deep knee bends, floor

²⁶¹ Thompson, *Black Womanhood*.

²⁶² Gottschild, "Stripping the Emperor: The Africanist Presence in American Concert Dance," 334.

²⁶³ Gottschild, 333.

rolls and leaps to be performed with as much clarity as force. The result is that dancers beam through space with the freedom and ease of young children.

“Named after the ancient Greek word for youth, ephebism encompasses attributes such as power, vitality, flexibility, drive, and attack. Attack implies speed, sharpness, and force. Intensity is also a characteristic of ephebism, but it is a kinesthetic intensity that recognizes feeling as sensation rather than emotion.”²⁶⁴ Unlike an incredibly difficult *petite allegro* that would attempt to hide the challenge with an emphasis on lifting away from the pull of gravity, the speed and attack needed to accomplish Masilo’s phrases are quite grounded energetically, and dancers’ varying facial expressions do not hide the effort nor the *individuation* she elicits from them.

The speed does not disturb the precision, yet every dancer is not meant to look exactly alike. The unison is just slightly individuated by personal style and vocalizations. According to dance scholar Jonathan David Jackson (now Cleis Abeni), individuation characterizes “the work of the individual dancer as she or he moves to establish a unique identity according to her or his own physical capabilities, personal style, and capacity for invention.”²⁶⁵ Despite the uniqueness of each dancer’s form and style, the large gestures and loud militaristic utterances in unison phrases create a unified and domineering presence. Individuation occurs *within* the unison choreography and demonstrates a fondness for diversity that is further exemplified through language.

²⁶⁴ Gottschild, 334.

²⁶⁵ Jonathan David Jackson, “Improvisation in African-American Vernacular Dancing,” *Dance Research Journal* 33, no. 2 (Winter 2001): 45.

African Sociality: Code-Switching

The cast of *Giselle* reflects South African sociality in their use of verbal and embodied code-switching. In linguistics, code-switching means to alternate between two or more languages within a conversation. The ensemble phrase begins with various dancers shouting in Indigenous languages (likely Tswana, Xhosa, and/or Zulu). In the ensemble phrase that occurs just after the first entrance of the princess, multi and non-lingual vocalizations cue the group to enter a movement together. Almost every action seems to be followed by a counter action: arms floating up into relaxed hands precedes a swift and direct circling of the hips, into chaotic twitches of the lower legs. The dancers move seamlessly from standing to prone positions inviting the viewer to forget how difficult it really is to make these transitions. But as they continue, they dance themselves to exhaustion and end by expressing their fatigue: wiping their brows, sighing, and leaning over to rub their aching backs. The strain concealed in classical ballet is revealed through this choreography, allowing the viewer to remember that the metaphysical characters enacting the story are just people. This particular group of people is verbally and physically multilingual. Bouncing between one movement or verbal language and another, the dancers perform membership in both local and international communities.

Code-switching reflects interethnic and geographic diversity in South Africa, where many citizens belong simultaneously to multiple cultural groups. The easy switching from one language to another is frequently heard in South African cities in a country with eleven official languages including English, which gives them access to speakers from many more countries than England. In a study on code-switching (CS) in

South African townships, S. Slabbert and R. Finlayson identify various trends in code-switching in modern urban populations. They write,

Because of their ethnic diversity, the townships spawned an increasing and urgent desire for people to demonstrate both their independence and interdependence. At the same time township dwellers attempted to circumvent the restrictive laws and practices of apartheid... CS at all levels became a means by which both individuals and groups expressed and identified themselves as being capable of breaking down and transcending the institutionalized ethnic barriers of apartheid. More specifically, patterns of the urban language play a vitally important role in establishing not only the urban or township identity of the individual, but also the identity of the many sub-groups that can be found within these communities.²⁶⁶

This excerpt demonstrates that code-switching is not only relevant for navigating between dominant and oppressed social groups but also characterizes simultaneous multi-cultural memberships amongst South African citizens based on ethnicity and/or rural/urban designations. These affiliations can suggest political alliances, facilitate social mobility, and create practices of inclusion and exclusion. Code-switching is the result of a post-colonial entangled society whereby the system of apartheid that mandated social division inadvertently birthed transgressive forms of intercultural communication.

Code-switching in *Dada Masilo's Giselle* signifies the multiplicity inherent to the cast and their agency in determining when to speak to which audience. The switch to English is a moment where the dialogue can be understood by all who speak English, a second language for most South Africans; but it should not be misconstrued to be the more important text of the phrase. More accurately, I think it represents a rupture between the moments of 'dancing for ourselves' and 'dancing for you,' the international

²⁶⁶ S. Slabbert and R. Finlayson, "Code-Switching in South African Townships," in *Language in South Africa*, ed. Rajend Mesthrie (Cambridge, UNITED KINGDOM: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 237.

audience. By 2017, Masilo had already built a following across Europe and the United States and probably foresaw the diversity of audiences she would encounter once the work had been performed in the National Arts Festival in Makhanda. In South Africa, she could have had all of the dialogue spoken in Xhosa (popular in Makhanda) or Tswana (her mother tongue). In the United States, she could have chosen to have the cast perform all of the text in English as they all speak English. Instead she chose to employ code-switching. Though a result of colonialism and globalization, code-switching is also an example of how Masilo Indigenizes *Giselle*. Skillful code-switching facilitates movement between diverse and increasingly integrated South African spaces. “As interlingual and interracial contact has grown and polarisations have become blurred, studies increasingly have recognized that CS in the urban/township context is extensive, complex, irrevocable and as such part of the fiber of South African society.”²⁶⁷ The need to bounce between us or them and us *and* them is a survival skill mastered by South Africans through spoken language but also through the arts and through quotidian interactions.

The dancing in *Dada Masilo’s Giselle* is also an example of code-switching that demonstrates multi-cultural membership and fluency. The contemporary dance movement vocabulary in the first ensemble phrase demonstrates Africanist aesthetics and movement vocabulary that pre-date, include, and transcend the genre. In doing so, the choreography points to how contemporary dance is in some ways predicated upon Africanist aesthetics and yet in other ways it works to position itself against in the following ways: Contemporary dance discourse proposes singularity of the choreographic

²⁶⁷ Slabbert and Finlayson, 254.

genius and tends to promulgate ballet aesthetics in movement even as it defines itself in opposition to ballet philosophically. The complexity of this discourse is danced. At one point, the dancers perform a series of turns similar to a ballet pirouette in that they balance on one leg and turn on a single axis without traveling in space. Here, though, the dancers barely lift the bottom heel off of the ground as the opposite foot hovers near the knee. They switch direction – clockwise and counterclockwise – several times before pushing the pelvis off center to the left, forcing the arms to shoot up, leaving the hands to flop downward. After teasing that very brief moment of suspension, they squeeze hands together at chest height before tossing them down and behind the body as the head and left foot reaches back. This is followed by a phrase which alternates between low grounded running steps towards the four corners of the stage and fast, tightly punching arm gestures. Suddenly they arrive in recognizably ballet vocabulary with the legs and arms in fourth position, but with the rear end peering back away from the trajectory of the chest as the head darts left to right like a squirrel's. This is perhaps an embodied comedic refusal as well. The position expresses a familiarity with the technique of ballet, but a refusal to be confined by it. In the span of a few seconds dancers visit aesthetics of ballet, modern, and contemporary dance, but do so with an ephibist African style of attack.

After embodying various switch-backs, the dancers again switch to speaking. The phrase ends with one dancer expressing what most dancers have probably thought during one difficult performance or another: "They don't pay us enough for this!" This English phrase is comic relief in an otherwise intense physical landscape. This comedic complaint registers on multiple levels. First, it is clear that the dancers themselves are working very

hard. Their movement is fast, strong and complex. Second, the characters that the dancers play are supposed to be of the working class so acknowledging how hard that labor would have been in the nineteenth century allows us to relate to the characters' struggle through the dancers' struggle. Lastly, that these dancers are all Black South Africans hits on a nerve that remembers past struggle and witnesses the ongoing struggles of the largely impoverished Black working class. The switch from Indigenous languages to English also signals a complex form of identification. The dancers speak to one another and to the audience in multiple languages of the body and multiple verbal languages.

In performances in three cities across two countries I saw code-switching establish moments of intimacy amongst speakers of South African languages and communality amongst transnational speakers of English, amongst lovers of ballet, Tswana, and contemporary dance. This verbal and embodied code-switching confronts the divisiveness of apartheid with a 'yes, and' that echoes Gottschild's notions of contrariety and Mbembe's entanglement. Dance scholar Diedre Sklar writes, "All movement must be considered as an embodiment of cultural knowledge, a kinesthetic equivalent, that is not quite equivalent, to using the local language."²⁶⁸ In this work, the ways that both physical and verbal languages are employed amplify South Africa's diversity rather than flatten or absorb it. This level of complexity is also tackled through Masilo's embrace of gender fluidity and locally resonant feminist dramaturgy.

²⁶⁸ Sklar, "Five Premises for a Culturally Sensitive Approach to Dance."

African Feminism: Giselle's Embodied Agency

In her *New York Times* review, Gia Kourlas writes, “Ms. Masilo’s Giselle is a feminist.”²⁶⁹ I would say that she is an African feminist. African feminism is enacted and embodied.²⁷⁰ Born and raised in Nigeria, Amina Mama is Chair of Gender Studies and the Director of the African Gender Institute at the University of Cape Town. In an interview about feminism in Africa for the journal *Agenda*, she states, “Feminism remains a positive and movement-based term, with which I am happy to be identified. It signals a refusal of oppression, and a commitment to struggling for women’s liberation from all forms of oppression – internal, external, psychological and emotional, socio-economic, political and philosophical.”²⁷¹ The interview does not clarify whether Mama meant movement as physical enactment or political organizing but I think it can mean both. Her rich description validates the importance of what is seen, felt, and manifested through a holistic feminist theory. Expressing a similar sentiment, Nigerian-American feminist theorist Obiola Nnaemeka explains African feminism as more easily experienced than theorized. She offers this anecdote:

...a colleague asked me to provide a framework for African feminism as articulated by African feminists. My off-the-cuff response was: ‘the majority of African women are not hung up on “articulating their feminism”; they just do it.’ In my view, it is what they do and how they do it that provide the framework; the ‘framework is not carried to the theater of action as a definitional tool. The dynamism of the theater of action with

²⁶⁹ Gia Kourlas, “Review: A Reimagined ‘Giselle,’ With South African Roots,” *The New York Times*, April 4, 2018, sec. Arts, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/04/arts/review-dada-masilo-giselle-joyce-theater.html>.

²⁷⁰ Cheryl R. Rodriguez, Dzodzi Tsikata, and Akosua Adomako Ampofo, eds., *Transatlantic Feminisms: Women and Gender Studies in Africa and the Diaspora* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2015).

²⁷¹ Elaine Salo, “Talking about Feminism in Africa,” *Agenda* 16, no. 50 (January 1, 2001): 58–63.

its shifting patterns makes the feminist spirit/engagement effervescent and exciting but also intractable and difficult to name.²⁷²

Interestingly, like Mama's use of 'movement,' Nnaemeka uses 'theater of action' to describe the performance of everyday life, but it can certainly apply to the 'theater of action' known as concert dance. Through dynamic and diverse steps and symbols, Masilo enacts a particular feminism that operates in relation to African philosophies of embodiment wherein dance, music and theater create and re-create social identities. This is a particularly significant lens from which to analyze the moving bodies of women and those with non-normative gender or sexual identities that have been oppressed through bodily means. In Masilo's words, "It was really for me about empowering women. Giving them a voice."²⁷³ Through narrative structure and choreographic choice, *Dada Masilo's Giselle* enacts an African feminism inclusive of sexual agency and gender fluidity.

Masilo's *Giselle* uses her body to experience pleasure and to establish boundaries. In Act One, following the peasants' ensemble phrase described above, Masilo's love, Albrecht, walks across the stage and a group of women flirt with him. With delicious grins, they stretch their arms towards him, tilting their heads back and letting their jaws fall open with frivolity as he stumbles back and away from them. They laugh and flick their skirts. *Giselle* enters and she and Albrecht face one another while all the dancers perform a series of chassés forward and back leading with the pelvis. Dancers offstage

²⁷² Obioma Nnaemeka, "Mapping African Feminisms," in *Readings in Gender in Africa*, ed. Andrea Cornwall (Indiana University Press, 2005), 32.

²⁷³ *Les Dessous d'un Geste : Le Flirt Du Ballet "Giselle", Par Dada Masilo*, accessed January 10, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-QxBZtDz0xM>.

even join in the teasing sounds bordering on sexual harassment. Here Masilo makes it clear that Albrecht is ‘a catch,’ someone to be considered desirable, but also that women *have* sexual desire, and agency with that desire. This is not something promoted in nineteenth century ballets and is a dramaturgical revision that reflects an African feminism. In one reoccurring phrase Masilo and dancers dash their hands and hips left to right several times before rolling the head and hips in a percussive circle like hands ticking on a clock. The arm muscles are tight as they hold on tightly to their skirts that ride up over the knee as they circle. In a 2018 interview with the French news site France Culture, she explains this gesture she named ‘the flirt’: “I think that what that movement says about Giselle is that she’s not entirely innocent. You know I mean I think that she’s curious...she’s started noticing men you know so she’s trying to find herself as a woman...um and I guess trying to find herself sexually as well.”²⁷⁴ By naming the dance ‘the flirt’ and assigning the pelvis-led movements to Giselle, Masilo proposes a character whose sexuality and sexual curiosity are components of her love and devotion but also aspects of her strength as a person. In that way, this Giselle breaks severely from the classical Giselle, whose desire leads to her downfall and whose devotion can only be expressed after death.

In the next scene, Masilo’s use of various forms of undress conveys a richly complex notion of Black women’s bodies that oscillates between dangerous vulnerability and fierce agency. Albrecht, his admirers, and Giselle exit and Giselle re-enters with her blouse half-open. Khaya Ndlovu, playing Giselle’s mother Berthe, approaches her with a

²⁷⁴ *Les Dessous d’un Geste*.

short hand-held stick broom. She uses it to slowly push Giselle down to her knees. She removes Giselle's shirt and swipes the broom down each breast telling her that they must not grow any more. She reprimands her for running wild and lets her know her destiny is sealed with the man of her mother's choosing, Hilarion. She warns, "I won't run after you. I've chosen someone." This scene is perhaps the most foreign to my American eyes. First off, the stick swiping looked painful, but also, in Western contemporary dance a bare female chest is usually employed to make a critique on Western culture's simultaneous discomfort and obsessive hyper-sexualization of female breasts often via a critique of print and video media. More rarely, women are topless or nude alongside topless or nude men in an attempt to make a gender-neutral work that celebrates the unfettered human form. This is particularly evident when a group of dancers perform in large ensembles such as in Bill T. Jones' *Continuous Replay*, where dancers seem to move as one collective body despite obvious varieties in their body shapes. In *Giselle*, I sense a different intention is at work.

Here Berthe's actions communicate an experience that is unfortunately universal – misogyny is often taught mother to daughter. Black feminist scholar Patricia Hill Collins outlines this phenomena as a 'matrix of domination' to explain coercion and violence against women at the hands of other women as an example of "interlocking systems of oppression where oppressor/oppressed positions shift."²⁷⁵ Giselle's sexuality and love life are controlled by her mother, while the men in the story are free to love whom they wish (within the guidelines of their class but with fewer repercussions than

²⁷⁵ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 1 edition (New York: Routledge, 2008).

women). Nonetheless, Giselle seems to heed Nnaemeka's warning that "...African women (as daughters) must rethink the hierarchies and 'privileges' that subtend the perpetration and perpetuation of woman-on-woman violence as daughters grow up to become wives and widows."²⁷⁶ Despite the threatening guidance of her mother, Giselle willfully defies her mother's plan and pursues her own desires.

Although Masilo's bare chest facilitates a scene of matriarchal domination, it also singles her out as the only character willing to defy social mores (and concert dance conventions) in a rebellious act of self-determination. Masilo is the only character who bares her breast in this production but this choice is somewhat of a signature of hers. Describing Masilo's *Death and the Maidens* (2013), which deals with misogyny in organized religion, South African performance scholar Loren Kruger writes, "...Masilo here drew less on the suffering Ophelia she created in *The Bitter End of Rosemary* than on a long-standing tradition of African political protest, which has seen women across the continent strip to shame their antagonists in public."²⁷⁷ One famous example of this was during the Nigerian Women's War of 1929, where women bore their breasts during a protest against an unjust British tax in order to shame the oppressor. Repeatedly, Masilo uses a bare chest to conjure a history of embodied defiance.

Masilo's bare chest is not received the same by every audience. In an informal conversation outside the Decolonizing Dance Pedagogy conference, Debbie Turner of Cape Dance and Lliane Loots of Jomba! Dance Festival and the University of KwaZulu-

²⁷⁶ Obioma Nnaemeka, "Mapping African Feminisms," in *Readings in Gender in Africa*, ed. Andrea Cornwall (Indiana University Press, 2005), 37.

²⁷⁷ Loren Kruger, review of *Dancing All Over Johannesburg, South Africa: Twenty-fourth Annual Dance Umbrella*, by venues, *Theatre Journal* 65, no. 1 (2013): 98.

Natal mentioned that when they watched Masilo perform topless in Europe they felt that audiences exoticized her in ways that didn't happen in Africa.²⁷⁸ Looking at African anticolonial and anti-corporate rebellions from the 1920's through 1960's, Susan Z. Andrade observes that "All of these rebellions had in common the spectacular use of the female body and female reproductive sexuality in order to shock, and especially to shame the onlookers into granting the women their rights as women within a largely gender - segregated world."²⁷⁹ Even if shock may be the response to the bare chest, it is a choice made by the artist for her own means. Writing on Senegal's controversial African Renaissance Monument and the 2009 proposed Anti-Nudity bill in Nigeria, African Gender scholar Ayo Coly argues that

The colonial discourse of clothing worked in tandem with the sexual grammar of the colonial encounter and the inscription of sexual deviance on the black female body to single out the African female body in unique ways that subsequently offered it for grab as a rhetorical element of colonial discourses about Africa. The colonial rhetorical deployment of the African female body to signify Africa led to a postcolonial African angst over the female body and subsequently sealed the fate for the African female body as a rhetorical element of African postcolonial discourses.²⁸⁰

Colonial rhetoric defined foreign land and foreign women as essentially the same conquest of empire.²⁸¹ *Dada Masilo's Giselle* counters this rhetoric of African land and

²⁷⁸ Lliane Loots and Debbie Turner, Personal Communication with the Author, July 1, 2017.

²⁷⁹ Susan Z. Andrade, "Rioting Women and Writing Women: Gender, Class, and the Public Sphere in Africa," in *Africa After Gender?*, ed. Catherine M. Cole, Takyiwaa Manuh, and Stephan F. Miescher (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2007), 92.

²⁸⁰ Ayo A. Coly, "Un/Clothing African Womanhood: Colonial Statements and Postcolonial Discourses of the African Female Body," *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 33, no. 1 (January 2, 2015): 13, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02589001.2015.1021209>.

²⁸¹ Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

African women as one obtainable disposable entity with the flesh and blood, sweat and soul of dance. In the scene with Giselle and her mother, Masilo's breasts are not exposed for audience pleasure, but to situate the character as she would be "back home." In rural South African communities where Indigenous traditions are more widely and openly practiced, it is more common for girls and young women to not cover their breasts even in the company of men. Being bare-breasted here indicates both that Giselle is back at her mother's house and under her mother's domain. Dancing bare breasted, Masilo transforms a love-sick Giselle into a proud Tswana woman with all of the conflicting complexities of this entangled repertoire. The choreography here demonstrates a decolonizing embodied philosophy that problematizes the sexualization of women's breasts and the occupation of Black women's bodies. Like the Nigerian women who bore their breasts, when Masilo bears hers, there is an encounter between pre-colonial comfort and post-colonial shame. As a viewer I am confronted with my own timidity about her bare breasts, but I am also seeing and feeling her conditional comfort and confidence, and I am enticed to empathize. There is a moment of liminal space that can only be understood as the entangled space/time of post-coloniality where both of these ideologies exist in one body.

When Giselle's mother Berthe exits, Hilarian, played by Tshepo Zasekhaya, arrives. He gives Giselle a flower and she quickly covers her breasts and smacks the flower away. She screams and smacks him each time he approaches her, filled with rage and having no intention of succumbing to her mother's wishes. He runs off and a pas de deux begins when her true love Albrecht (played in New York and Los Angeles by Xola

Willie) enters. With her shirt back on but not fully buttoned, she grabs his outer upper arms and he swings her body in a circle as she extends one leg and bends the other. She lands and he spins her around twice one way then once the other until they face one another and press their palms together overhead. With a foot and a half between them, they bend their knees and grind their hips towards each other without making contact. Eventually they share a passionate and joyous kiss. He leaves and she falls asleep with a huge grin of satisfaction. Clearly, Masilo's Giselle knows what she wants. Unlike the traditional ballet staging, Masilo really smacks Hilarion and really kisses Albrecht. This allows audience members unfamiliar with dance's abstractions and balletic pantomime to still understand the story and connect with its characters. The depth of emotion is not repressed in favor of more 'lady-like' behavior, nor to conform to any genre's technique. Giselle pursues her sexual and romantic desires despite her mother's warning and Hilarion's attempts to court her. Her self-determined passion thrives in the conflict rather than being subsumed by it. Both choreographer and character exhibit various forms of agency by expressing desire and repulsion, obedience and rebellion, creating a dynamic space for feminist movement.

African Feminism: Queen Myrtha as Sangoma

In *Dada Masilo's Giselle*, Queen Myrtha is an African feminist hero. As if appearing in Giselle's dream, in the next scene the wilis enter in blood red velvet corsets and two-tiered red velvet and tulle tutus. Their movements are unpredictable without a recognizable rhythmic structure, but they dance precisely in unison. Myrtha Queen of the

Wilis, is played by a Black man named Llewellyn Mnguni. His long blonde braids whip around his head mirroring the action of the blonde cow-tail whip he carries. This, combined with his red costume, and the fact that Myrtha resides over the undead, parallels the queen with the Yorubá orixá Oyá. But in the South African context, the gender fluidity, cow-tail whip, or *itshoba*, and red dress are all symbols of a *sangoma*, as confirmed by the program notes. Sangoma is a Zulu term used inter-ethnically now to describe all sorts of traditional healers in South Africa. I infer that the choice to cast a male as Myrtha is more than a play on the word queen, which alludes to drag queens: men who perform caricatures of women.

Myrtha as sangoma may reflect South African spiritual epistemology of gender.

According to Graeme Reid's ethnography of homosexuality in small towns,

The sangoma, operating under the moral guidance of the ancestors, is quintessentially African and an indisputable part of African culture. If many sangomas are gay (and it appears to be the second most popular form of work for gays, second only to hairstyling) they have a strong ideological value in discussions about homosexuality and African culture.²⁸²

The high population of gay sangomas is probably due neither to mere coincidence nor to the fact that freelance work doesn't require the employee to be potentially subjected to a homophobic employer. Several studies suggest that there are global Indigenous beliefs that queer and transgender people exist in a liminal space of gender that is a manifestation of their liminality between the mortal and the divine, the living and the ancestors. Some believe that a queer sexual identity can be a gift that facilitates spiritual

²⁸² Reid, *How to Be a Real Gay*, 28.

border crossing as well. Sandra Slater's work on Indigenous North America asserts that "two-spirit individuals often performed important functions in battle as handlers of the bodies of dead warriors."²⁸³ Ruth Morgan and Graeme Reid's ethnography of lesbian sangomas found that many explain their sexuality as the desire of the male ancestor that lives through them.²⁸⁴ The sangoma therefore mediates between the living and the ancestors, and sometimes embodies this liminality through gender identity. Casting Myrtha as a sangoma Indigenizes the story and opens a space for gender fluid expressivity in a uniquely South African way.

Rather than emasculating the men, the wilis' choreography expresses a gender-neutral force that promises to avenge wronged lovers. Nnaemeka explains that "Power-sharing complementarity, accommodation, compromise, negotiation, and inclusiveness form the foundation of African feminism."²⁸⁵ This African feminism embraces male persons into the feminine element that the wilis represent, as both male and female dancers perform the wili roles. Masilo's wilis perform a femininity that counters the colonial prescription performed in the traditional ballet, which rendered Myrtha abject and yet still conveyed the paradigm of balletic femininity predicated upon Whiteness and a slim graceful physique.²⁸⁶ In fact, in dance scholar Rebecca Chaleff's reading of

²⁸³ Sandra Slater and Fay A. Yarbrough, *Gender and Sexuality in Indigenous North America, 1400-1850* (Columbia, MD University of South Carolina Press, 2011), 7.

²⁸⁴ Ruth Morgan and Graeme Reid, "'I've Got Two Men and One Woman': Ancestors, Sexuality and Identity among Same-sex Identified Women Traditional Healers in South Africa," *Culture, Health & Sexuality* 5, no. 5 (January 1, 2003): 375–91, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369105011000064146>.

²⁸⁵ Nnaemeka, "Mapping African Feminisms," 34.

²⁸⁶ Rebecca Chaleff, "Dance of the Undead: The Wilis' Imperial Legacy," in *Futures of Dance Studies: Studies in Dance History*, ed. Susan Manning, Janice Ross, and Rebecca Schneider (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2020).

Giselle, only the wilis express sexual desire, which is interpreted through the fact that they constantly dance in the afterlife and their love of dance is considered to be linked to ‘excessive’ sexual desire within its context. She writes, “Women like the Wilis who expressed excessive pleasure in sexual activity, and whose anachronistic setting facilitates a cross-temporal stretch between periods of precapitalism and capitalism, were thus perceived as dangerous to both the sanctity of female domesticity and the means of production that such civility facilitated.”²⁸⁷ In the ballet the wilis represent fallen women and their behavior is seen as abject. They are the villains.

In *Dada Masilo’s Giselle*, the wilis signify on the African concept of ancestors who are dynamic beings engaged with the everyday events of the living. As ancestors, wilis are the spirits of common women who express their sexual desires openly, comically, and from a place of power. Their post-life sexuality and ferocity are celebrated, not feared. Far beyond the subtlety of the waltz, these women snap their fingers overhead, swivel their hips, swipe their groins and shiver in daydreams. Africana scholars such as Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí, Zora Neale Hurston, Yvonne Daniel, Hélène Neveu Kringelbach, and P. Sterling Stuckey have all observed that African traditions honor the necessity and sacred nature of sexuality when operating outside the confines of Christian or Muslim ethos originally imbibed via colonial violence. African feminist dance is therefore a site of sexual expressivity without taboo.

As queen of the wilis, Myrtha embodies the ideal ancestral power. According to Morris, in the ballet, “The reeds part and Myrtha, the wili queen, emerges. Gliding across

²⁸⁷ Chaleff, 424.

the stage, she appears illusory and her extensive jumps, so light, soundless and airborne, convey her spectral identity.”²⁸⁸ The choreography for Masilo’s Myrtha is decidedly opposite. Mnguni is breathtaking. His slow, stealthy struts across the stage make the air thicken. Masilo’s Myrtha relates to the earth element not the air. Mnguni moves more like a panther than a ghost. Acknowledging the dancer’s mass through the grounded approach to each step makes his magic all the more tangible. Queen Myrtha is flesh and blood. Rather than a mythical being you must suspend reality to imagine, she looks like she could be your neighbor who has trained extensively to mediate the metaphysical. By giving literal weight and kinetic agency to the feminine principle in *Giselle*, Masilo enacts African feminism and contemporizes via tradition.

Whereas in the tightly codified ballet, the wilis’ choreography marks their alterity from the rest of society, choreography for Masilo’s wilis demonstrates a similar dynamism to the other characters. Chaleff writes that

unlike the soft and dewy sylphs that preceded them, the Wilis are dangerously cryptic and unforgiving in their strength and stature. The Wilis thus perform a duality of womanhood that encompasses danger as well as vulnerability. Whereas other sylphs soften their arms and wrists to appear light and waif-like, the Wilis’ dances incorporate jagged gestures, deeper pliés, and repetitions that usher a trance-inducing command of the stage.²⁸⁹

This description could also suit Masilo’s wilis, though the strength and danger of these dancers is portrayed much more directly through Masilo’s choreography. In a romantic ballet, the dancer cannot stray too far from the embodied ideals that characterize the

²⁸⁸ Morris, “*Giselle and the Gothic: Contesting the Romantic Idealisation of the Woman*,” 240.

²⁸⁹ Chaleff, “*Dance of the Undead: The Wilis’ Imperial Legacy*,” 423.

form. Chaleff notes that within the romantic ballet, “the dancer was required to perform the role of the exotic other while simultaneously embodying the mastery of the European technique that facilitated her control over a foreign form.”²⁹⁰ Variations in ballet vocabulary are generally subtle to maintain a particular aesthetic even whilst signaling exotic and/or abject characterizations.

In *Dada Masilo’s Giselle* the use of contemporary dance vocabulary established within the canon and by Masilo herself offers an opportunity for the wilis to embody a forcefulness that is particularly empowering for viewers enmeshed in the screams for gender justice throughout the world. In an August 2019 interview with the United Kingdom’s Dance Consortium organization, Masilo’s description of the traditional wili vocabulary contradicts Chaleff’s:

For the entrance of the wilis I wanted movement vocabulary that was strong and sharp, staccato and angry because the wilis are angry...because in the classical ballet they come on gracefully on pointe, and I wanted something that was gonna contrast that and I wanted them to be able to claim the space and to be strong and powerful.²⁹¹

When compared to other characters of the romantic ballet, the wilis may appear angular and strong-willed, but when compared to dancers within other genres, their movements still land squarely within the framework of ballet and its gender roles. Masilo’s wilis enact a vision of metaphysicality from an African contemporary dance paradigm.

With *Giselle* in the downstage left corner facing the eight wilis positioned upstage right, the wilis move in unison as if a mirror reflection of one another. The right foot

²⁹⁰ Chaleff, 418.

²⁹¹ *Dada Masilo | Giselle | Signature Moves: Entrance of the Wilis*, accessed December 31, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j0q1PUNquH4>.

comes to touch the left knee in a parallel passé as both arms swipe downward from left to right, the wrists flexing to point the fingertips downward. This two-second hover is the only suspension of time. Over the next eleven seconds, they repeat the side-swoosh of the arms seven times in parallel plié, the head darting back and forth as if connected to the wrists by a string. The shoulders lift both arms up along the legs then fall back down. Immediately the right arm taps the left shoulder then slides to the right as if honoring the holy spirit before the whole body is transposed into a ninja stance – body turned to the side 90 degrees, both knees bent and parallel, the right elbow pulling back, the left arm forward and both hands in fists. Instead of punching as the stance seems to foreshadow, the dancers jump their feet together, resuming their original facing and bring a flat right hand to the head then back alongside the body before crossing the chest once more then scooping swiftly into a single grounded pirouette spinning on a bent left leg with the right big toe at the left knee. The left arm is relaxed alongside the body, the right arm drives the turn. With incredible speed and direct flow of motion, the wilis distinguish themselves as vengeful wielders of supernatural energy. Yet because all of the choreography in this production is dynamic, quick, and strong, the separation between the wilis and humanity is perhaps less terminal than in the ballet. Led by a sangoma, a mediator between the living and the dead, the wilis represent another world that is feared for its power but not its maleficence. Here it is possible to read the anger and retribution of the wilis not as something solely under the domain of otherworldly entities or ‘fallen women’ but as a righteousness that wills justice through the manifestation of ancestral spiritual energy that is danced.

In her analysis of the ballet, Morris points to the waltzing of the wilis as evidence of their degenerate nature for audiences of the time, citing that “Contemporary articles on the social waltz discuss at length female sexuality and the effect of waltzing on the ‘frail’ female body (Wilson 2009). Performing the waltz created a ‘sense of vertigo and euphoria...mak[ing] the dance inappropriately “exciting” for women.’ (Wilson 2009: 132)”²⁹² In the ballet, women’s sexuality that is unrestrained by patriarchy leads to their death, moral decline, insanity or witchcraft. In *Dada Masilo’s Giselle*, male and female dancers perform as wilis using heavy gliding steps, firm arm positions and quick jabbing motions, but no waltz. Her wilis relate to a tradition of community affirmation and ungendered force. Through movement and dramaturgy, the wilis convey an African feminism that is both traditional and innovative.

Critical Reappropriation

In “African Modernities and the Critical Reappropriation of Indigenous Knowledges: Towards a Polycentric Global Epistemology,” Pascah Mungwini explains that “Critical reappropriation entails engaging in a systematic process of sifting from the past those practical, theoretical and normative frameworks and ideas that can provide solutions to the challenges of the present.”²⁹³ Mungwini asserts that while every African tradition cannot and need not be maintained or revived, dismissing traditional African epistemologies and practices as irrelevant to the contemporary world would be as

²⁹² Morris, “Giselle and the Gothic: Contesting the Romantic Idealisation of the Woman,” 240.

²⁹³ Pascah Mungwini, “African Modernities and the Critical Reappropriation of Indigenous Knowledges: Towards a Polycentric Global Epistemology,” *International Journal of African Renaissance Studies - Multi-, Inter- and Transdisciplinarity* 8, no. 1 (June 1, 2013): 87.

detrimental as trying to revive traditions uncritically. Critical reappropriation is how he describes a process of activating African epistemological and methodological wisdom for rural and urban Africans today. The battle scene in *Dada Masilo's Giselle* includes a critical reappropriation of Tswana and Zulu movements and aesthetics.

Breaking from the somber mood of the wilis' dance, in the next scene, Giselle and the village dancers form a large loud group with a jazzy score based around Brazilian samba rhythms. Princess Bathilde and her fiancé, Albrecht, share a duet punctuated with the grounded rhythmic footwork of Tswana dances. We should not mistake these characteristics as natural or commonplace because of Masilo's nationality. After her Los Angeles class in April of 2018, she explained to me that she had to go back home to learn her dances for this choreography, "and it was hard!"²⁹⁴ Masilo grew up in a big city and is of a generation where knowing one's dance lineage is not necessarily expected. I witnessed several neo-traditional performances of Tswana choreographies at the National Arts Festival in 2017 and 2018. In this scene, I recognized the flat-footed, forward-bending posture and the characteristic unison stomping in patterns of six, using the full foot, heel, or metatarsal as a percussive instrument.

Next, a group of men dance the high kicks and grounded stomps of the ngoma, a Zulu war dance performed in battle preparation and in neo-traditional competitions. Normally this is performed in a line, but here the dancers are more scattered as they enter the circle, thus fusing western and southern African aesthetics. Ngoma is characterized by high kicks that swoop down – an opposite accent from the grand battement of ballet.

²⁹⁴ Dada Masilo, Personal Communication at Masterclass, April 13, 2019.

After ngoma, everyone begins dancing together and Bathilde notices Giselle's masterful movements. She subtly invites her to a playful dance-off. Masilo's 'flirt' movement returns, followed by a grounded parallel non-locomotor triplet step into a body roll. Bathilde indulges in a slow développé – extending one leg into the air until the foot curves into a point towards the floor. She switches her hips and tosses her head back. The interaction between the two women is far more auto-erotic than homo-erotic, each movement seeming to fulfill the dancers' own desires and expressing their own praise with smiles and jaw drops.

Dance scholars such as Adanna Kai Jones and H el ene Neveu Kringelbach have remarked on the auto-erotic but not necessarily sexual space of women's pelvic choreographies in soca²⁹⁵ and sabar²⁹⁶ dance events respectively. I'm reminded of Jamaican and Barbadian women I've seen wine their hips while watching their own pelvises circle and tick to the point of satisfaction. All the while the competitors are surrounded by onlookers who enjoy watching just as much as doing. Like the verbal code-switching described above, the critical reappropriation of African and European movements here allows the choreographer and dancers to find the best and most appropriate way to express what is needed for the scene, entangling the various pasts and presents of South African dance.

²⁹⁵ Adanna Kai Jones, "Take a Wine and Roll 'IT'!: Breaking Through the Circumscriptive Politics of the Trini/Caribbean Dancing Body" (Ph.D., United States -- California, University of California, Riverside, 2016), <https://search.proquest.com/docview/1796864072/abstract/30329F48B0624423PQ/1>.

²⁹⁶ Kringelbach, *Dance Circles*.

Circuits of Africana Performance

This production also borrows from African-American aesthetics developed from West Africans enslaved in the United States. Two Africanist traditions are amplified in this scene: battling and shouting. The battle scene incorporates a West African tradition of competitive dancing within a participatory circle that proliferated in the diaspora. Although solos are a common way to distinguish a soloist or principle dancer from the corps du ballet and give dancers a moment to demonstrate superior skill, the tight semi-circular formation of the crowd as well as their verbal and physical engagement most closely resembles Hip-Hop cyphers and their West African predecessors like the Yorubá ceremonies of Nigeria and Benin or the Sabar displays of Senegal. In contrast, most traditional South African dances are done in lines with dancers singing and playing their hands and feet in unison, sometimes with a soloist coming forward to perform, and sometimes as a competition. Africana historian P. Sterling Stuckey describes Ring Shout as the way that dancing together in a circle created a common ground for West Africans of diverse ethnic backgrounds enslaved in the Americas to touch the sacred through rhythm:

Just as they crossed actual boundaries in being brought to America, enough were able to make an imaginative retreat to the ancestral home to discover, in the Ring Shout, the ground of cultural oneness. This dance was known to most slaves, whose people had mainly come from sections of Africa in which, as the Circle Dance, it was associated with ancestral ceremonies.²⁹⁷

²⁹⁷ P. Sterling Stuckey, "Christian Conversion and the Challenge of Dance," in *Dancing Many Drums: Excavations in African American Dance*, ed. Thomas DeFrantz, Studies in Dance History (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2002), 44.

Though there is no one circle dance across the West African diaspora, dancing in a circle is a common legacy, as scholars like Yvonne Daniel have demonstrated.²⁹⁸ Oftentimes the participatory circle facilitates and supports the solos and duets that take place within it. Inside the circle, one's performance is often competitive. The competition creates a playful game of one-up-man-ship that does not necessitate a winner, but instead establishes an ever-increasing set of aesthetic criteria that the next dancer can hope to surpass.

In a secular space battling can still create an amplifying dynamic that resembles trance. As dance scholars Sally Banes and John Szwed note in their research on African American social dance and music, the vernacular and the sacred often meet in the circle:

Also known as the Ring Shout when done in a group form, this was not a strictly vocal performance, but a religious dance with chants. It involved a rhythmic walk or shuffle in a circle, tapping the heels, swaying, and clapping as one advanced. In several accounts, observers noted that the shouters moved increasingly faster working themselves into a trance.²⁹⁹

Because of the significance of spirituality in traditional and diasporic circle dances, *how* one performs is as if not more important than *what* one performs – even when battling. In other scenes Giselle's choreography is full of technical virtuosity, but in this moment she wins the crowd and the queen over more so with style than impressive technical challenges. Her phrases are brief and not at the high speed of other scenes. The goal is to experience and evoke something sublime.

²⁹⁸ Yvonne Daniel, *Dancing Wisdom: Embodied Knowledge in Haitian Vodou, Cuban Yoruba, and Bahian Candomble* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005).

²⁹⁹ Sally Banes and John F. Szwed, "From 'Messin' Around' to 'Funky Western Civilization': The Rise and Fall of Dance Instruction Songs," in *Dancing Many Drums: Excavations in African American Dance*, ed. Thomas DeFrantz, Studies in Dance History (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2002), 193–94.

Giselle plays a rhythm with her feet, sweeps her arms from front to back, dips back and snaps. The princess regally and humbly offers Giselle the necklace off her chest, a prize for being the best dancer. Though technical mastery is highly prized in African aesthetics, “It don’t mean a thing if it ain’t got that swing.”³⁰⁰ When considering the vernacular dance idiom displayed in this scene, individual style is highly valued. As Jackson explains, “Key to this field is the dancer’s negotiation of her or his style according to the aesthetics that inform the dancing. These aesthetics are always interrelating superstructural fundamentals (or the common principles of all black vernacular dancing) and ritualized adaptations (or actions that reflect the aesthetics of specific black communities).”³⁰¹ Each dancer aims to prove herself more unique and creative than the other within the ritual of the battle. This is established through the mastery of rhythmic footwork interlocking with the rhythms in the music, sharing one’s self openly through facial expressions, and playing with dynamic shifts in tempo and quality of movement while being mindful of the energetic responses from the crowd.

Pioneering Africanist anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston suggests a theory of African American dancing that may illuminate how style informs aesthetic prowess here. In “Characteristics of Negro Expression” she writes, “Negro dancing is dynamic suggestion. No matter how violent it may appear to the beholder, every posture gives the impression that the dancer will do much more.”³⁰² Hurston explains how the dancer’s

³⁰⁰ Ivie Anderson, *It Don’t Mean a Thing (If It Ain’t Got That Swing)* (Brunswick Records, 1931).

³⁰¹ Jackson, “Improvisation in African-American Vernacular Dancing,” 45.

³⁰² Zora Neale Hurston, *Hurston: Folklore, Memoirs, and Other Writings* (London, UK: Penguin Books, 1995), 835.

most powerful performance is the ability to catch the viewer's attention by suggesting what *might* be about to occur. The description she offers closely resembles that of the wilis and of the dancers in the battle scene.

For example, the performer flexes one knee sharply, assumes a ferocious face mask, thrusts the upper part of the body forward with clenched fists, elbows taut as in hard running or gasping a thrusting blade. That is all. But the spectator himself adds the picture of ferocious assault, hears the drums and finds himself keeping time with the music and tensing himself for the struggle. It is compelling insinuation. That is the very reason the spectator is held so rapt. He is participating in the performance himself – carrying out the suggestions of the performer.³⁰³

The ability to contain and redirect powerful energy through various parts of the body hints at the unseen. To express ferocity beneath a cool surface that renders the impossible easy designates the winner of the battle in West African aesthetics.

To battle within a participatory circle establishes both one's own artistry and proficiency within a technique, but also one's inclusion and interdependence within a community. A competitive circle dance can be secular, sacred, or both. This space allows for a particular type of competition that builds social status rather than tangible capital. Hip Hop dance scholar Imani Kai Johnson writes, "On an individual level, battles allow breakers to compete for the honor of being the best at that moment. Collectively, they also function as a space for competing cultural meanings as expressed through dance."³⁰⁴ In Masilo's cypher, dancers interweave movement vocabularies with all of their various cultural meanings to impress both peasantry and royalty, and to establish themselves as

³⁰³ Hurston, 835.

³⁰⁴ Imani Kai Johnson, "B-Boying and Battling in a Global Context: The Discursive Life of Difference in Hip Hop Dance," *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics*, no. 31 (2011): 173.

valuable. Even though we might traditionally assume the princess holds more social power and perhaps would not and should not compete alongside peasants, continuing the African tradition, one must prove one's value and earn one's status by dancing well. Rebecca Gearhart's "Ngoma Memories: How Ritual Music and Dance Shaped the Northern Kenya Coast" demonstrates how Swahili communities in Kenya utilize music/dance events to move up social ladders as excellence in performance is demonstrative of good character and sociality. Through music/dance competitions, marginalized coastal communities become members of the Swahili culture and gain social status.³⁰⁵ Likewise, here both the princess and the peasant must dance their way into membership and status in the community. The community likewise responds actively, commenting verbally and physically amongst one another. They wave their hands into the circle, whisper, shout, stomp the floor, hold their breath, lift their chests and... *dip* their torsos into deep backbends in kinesthetic empathy with the soloist.³⁰⁶

As Hurston suggests, in African epistemologies, the spectator actively participates in the spectacle and the two are interdependent actors in the co-creation of performance.³⁰⁷ Masilo fuses the solo and the male/female pas de deux tradition, creating a competition between two women using African performance structures. The dancers supporting the soloists do not stand in a ballet first or a post-modern "neutral" position. They kneel, hop, cover their mouths, point, and shout. Their eyes are wide open watching

³⁰⁵ Gearhart, "Ngoma Memories."

³⁰⁶ Susan Leigh Foster, *Choreographing Empathy: Kinesthesia in Performance* (Taylor & Francis, 2010).

³⁰⁷ Drewal, "Improvisation as Participatory Performance."

and critiquing every move as it dashes before them. The interactions between dancers on stage in the battle scene reflect the Africanist tradition of Shouting.

Zora Neale Hurston was one of the first to describe this phenomenon in African American churches. In 1931 she wrote, “There can be little doubt that shouting is a survival of the African “possession” of the gods... Shouting is a community thing. It thrives in concert.”³⁰⁸ Shouting is sometimes just what it sounds like but can also refer to other forms of lively responses that catalyze the events that follow it. Hurston explains:

There are two main types of shouters: (1) Silent; (2) Vocal. There is a sort of intermediary type where one stage is silent and the other vocal. The silent type take with violent retching and twitching motions...The vocal type is more frequent. There are all gradations from quiet weeping while seated, to the unrestrained screaming while leaping pews and running up and down the aisle.³⁰⁹

While Hurston is describing an African-American church, it is important to note that similar practices exist in secular spaces throughout the African diaspora. Audience participation within Western-style theatrical productions is not uncommon in South Africa. As the German dancers I befriended at the Dance Umbrella Africa festival noted, German audiences show their appreciation by sitting absolutely still and silent during a performance and then applauding profusely at the end. South African audiences will show what they are feeling throughout. By choreographing shouting into a battle scene, Masilo recirculates West African aesthetic traditions for the South Africanized story.

To end the battle, several other moments of African sociality are performed. Princess Bathilde gives her sparkling necklace to Giselle because clearly she is the better

³⁰⁸ Hurston, *Hurston: Folklore, Memoirs, and Other Writings*, 851.

³⁰⁹ Hurston, 852.

dancer within Africanist criteria. Everyone exits happily except for Giselle's mom, who is lingering behind, drunk. Perhaps as another form of mocking the monarchy, she looks around and seeing no one present, considers trying on the queen's shoes that she had removed to dance more fully and then forgotten. They prove to be too small and she just carries them off instead, singing and dancing to herself as audiences giggle. When Berthe takes Bathilde's shoes home, working class audience members can relate. Just because the shoes don't fit doesn't mean you leave them there; these shoes can be sold, given away or repurposed! In fact, repurposing is an aesthetic theme in the work. By incorporating Tswana and Zulu moves, battling, and shouting, Masilo repurposes African aesthetics in this Africanist contemporary revision of the classic tale.

African Feminism: Revisiting Our Stories

In Act Two, *Dada Masilo's Giselle* shows that heartbreak knows no gender and demonstrates her agency as part of a long line of strong African women. The scene opens with a danced duel between Albrecht and Hilarion. Then the villagers dance in unison. Princess Bathilde enters and performs a cocky solo that peaks with one of few ballet gestures – she lifts her right leg, pointing her foot in its blue suede pump, then fans it open as the peasants that have gathered cheer with awe. Albrecht enters and dances with her right in front of Giselle. Everyone is shocked as the two lovers gaze at one another happily. Giselle is bewildered then humiliated. As if to put salt in her wound, once the happy couple leaves, Giselle's comrades degrade her, stripping her of all her clothes except a pair of nude briefs. She drops to her knees. Albrecht comes back and tries to

offer her a symbolic flower. She ignores him until he leaves. Traditionally when Giselle descends into madness, it is marked by her loosening her hair and letting it hang long. Masilo performs with a bald head, and when she is heartbroken, it is much more visceral than symbolic. She thrashes about the stage in utter agony, dancing alone to the point of exhaustion. Frantic and broken, she dies.

In South Africa, ritual and social dance practices are heavily featured in funerals, which are open to the general public. In *Dada Masilo's Giselle*, the choreography presents a solemn scene closer to European funerary traditions. A procession enters, led by a priest and recorded music makes it sound as if a church choir is present. Giselle's mother is grief-stricken, covering her head in a black scarf, her bones appear so heavy she is barely able to walk, but she adds a seemingly improvisational polyrhythmic layer of sung and wailed vocalizations to the track. She crosses her chest with four thuds of her right hand. The gesture is more penitence than praise, as I imagine she might now regret having scorned her daughter so harshly in Act One. The dancer is truly crying and the whole scene is reminiscent of too many Black funerals. As an American having watched the wailing mothers of Black youth stolen by gang and police violence, and women killed at the hands of their lovers, the imagery is stark. Though I cannot speak to Masilo's intention, as an audience member, this too was signifyin(g): the repetition of Black death in systems of White supremacy and femicide under patriarchy. To me this moment is a real tragedy, not a fairytale.

After her death, the wilis are poised to defend Giselle. Hilarion walks in to lay flowers at Giselle's grave but the wilis will have none of this. His lack of care for her

wishes renders him culpable in her death. Striking huge leather whips, they scare him off for good. Myrtha enters gracefully, with proud elastic steps. He dances in silence then the funerary music plays again, layered with strong female multi-vocals. The program identifies the music as “Hamba Nhliziyo Yami,” a traditional funeral hymn. It offers a translation into English: “Go to heaven my heart, for there is no peace on this earth.”³¹⁰ The wilis enter and join Myrtha and now most of the cast is playing these supernatural figures, including two men. The costuming remains the same for all: a red velvet top with plunging neckline and deep red tulle tutus stopping at the knee. Giselle, too, is now a wili, having died of a broken heart.

Casting men and women as wilis makes suffering and revenge universal. In a promotional video for the Romaeuropa Festival, Masilo explains her casting: “...in my version of *Giselle* the wilis are male and female. I wanted to break down the stereotype that women are the only ones that get heartbroken. It’s not true. Men also get heartbroken.”³¹¹ Gender neutral choreography is quite common in contemporary dance, though diverting from gender and sexuality norms is almost never undertaken in ballet. Notable exceptions include works by all-male companies like Le Ballet Trockadero de Monte Carlo from New York. Here, though, the company’s performance reads less like drag and more like the incorporation of biological male and female dancers into a shared human experience. The dresses are signifying the wilis but signifyin(g) the potential for a new vision for men and women on stage.

³¹⁰ Dada Masilo, “Dada Masilo’s Reimagined Classics | The Joyce Theater,” accessed June 12, 2018, <https://joyce.org/dada-masilos-reimagined-classics>.

³¹¹ “REF17 Giselle by Dada Masilo - YouTube,” accessed November 19, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kYKeyXGfBrs>.

Masilo creates a vision of strong women and vulnerable men. Giselle re-enters wearing a small red sculpture of a tiny crown on her shaved head. With parallel legs she and the other wilis chassé forward with their bodies angled to the downstage right corner. Moving as one, their arms swipe upwards along the sides of their bodies then slam downward just barely avoiding contact with their legs. The right arm guides the head in a circle that seems less about relaxing and more about gathering energy. With bent knees they dart forward, their flat feet sliding along the floor, their arms bent at the elbow and alternating punches. Physical markers of gender are almost indistinguishable in this ensemble of wilis in skirts. Contrary to patriarchal stereotypes, this production proposes that men too suffer the devastation of heartbreak and women can enjoy the redemption of vengeance.

Although African women were deeply violated by colonialism and apartheid, they have always been vital to the struggle for liberation. As Africanist anthropologist Niara Sudarkasa explains, pre-colonial African women were “conspicuous in high places” as queens, princesses, and chiefs wielding substantial socio-political and economic power.³¹² To this day, nearly half of South Africa’s parliament is comprised of women³¹³ (compared to less than 25% in the United States congress). African feminism is not a duplication or extension of Western feminism. It is the pre-cursor to it. I read this performance as gendered but gender as a non-hierarchical and fluid experience. In “Women and the Social Construction of Gender in African Development,” Anthonia

³¹² Niara Sudarkasa, “The ‘Status of Women’ in Indigenous African Societies,” in *Readings in Gender in Africa*, ed. Andrea Cornwall (Bloomington : Oxford: James Currey, 2011).

³¹³ “South Africa: Gender and Elections,” *Gender Links* (blog), accessed December 3, 2019, <https://genderlinks.org.za/what-we-do/governance/advocacy/south-africa-gender-and-elections/>.

Kalu uses African orature, alongside African and African-American literature, to exemplify the feminine principle as complementary to the masculine in African epistemologies, especially Igbo. Masilo makes choices in casting that allow for the audience to revel in a feminine victory without disposing of the male dancers, to acknowledge the mother's role in perpetuating misogyny, and to fall under the spell of the enchanting male Queen Mythra.

As the story continues, Giselle continues to establish herself as an African feminist even as an ancestor. In the aforementioned interview, Masilo explains, "I wanted to do a version that's much stronger, more visceral. I wanted to do it because of the wilis...I want them to be vicious. I want them to be dangerous, to be powerful, to be strong."³¹⁴ When Albrecht tries repeatedly to beg Giselle for forgiveness, a trio of wilis tries to force him away striking their whips all around him. Giselle walks out and an abstraction of broken glass is projected onto the scrim. Three wilis encircle Albrecht and force him to dance until he collapses. Giselle returns and uses her whip to strike at him repeatedly and viciously. Myrtha shakes his hips and grand jetés as Giselle kisses him slowly then...simply walks away from his body, which has collapsed to the floor. Myrtha raises his *itshoba* and Giselle her whip. In victory they exit opposite sides of the stage. Wilis cross the stage walking slowly with taught fists crossed behind their heads. Just before leaving our view, they break their arms free and walk casually. Giselle re-enters following them and repeating the gesture, only she stops at the body of Albrecht, places a foot on his chest, then walks over him like so much trash. With her head and chest

³¹⁴ "REF17 Giselle by Dada Masilo - YouTube."

proudly protruding, poof! - a plume of white dust escapes her fist she saunters off as the lights fade to black.

In the traditional ballet, Giselle forgives and therefore saves Albrecht. Masilo is not so understanding. Albrecht is not a sympathetic character and it is easy to empathize with the glowing Masilo. Watching her and the wilis whip Albrecht I was on the edge of my seat worrying they'd actually strike him. I confess that when Albrecht's character was performed by a white dancer at the National Arts Festival in Makhanda, Giselle's victory felt even sweeter. When she denies him forgiveness there is a collective sense of justice that is almost visceral from the audience. As we began to leave the theater in New York, an older White man next to me said to his partner, "I guess I won't mess with them!" This simple but profound change in the plot shifts the subtext from 'love conquers all' to 'hell hath no fury like a woman scorned,' or more aptly, 'strike a woman and you strike a rock.'³¹⁵ At a moment when violence against women is on the news and on the minds of seemingly every woman in South Africa, the image of Giselle victorious over the man who violated her is a sort of social balm and catalyst for change at once. I would like to offer a reading of this moment that relates back to what distinguishes African feminism.

I propose that Giselle's independence and acts of justice demonstrate a contemporary version of South African storytelling traditions that teach women's liberation. There are several documented examples of Xhosa oral histories that teach respect for girl children and women in the face of misogyny. Storytellers perform their

³¹⁵ Jude Clark, Shula Mafokoane, and Talent Ntombi Nyathi, "'Rocking the Rock': A Conversation on the Slogan 'Wathinta Abafazi, Wathint' Imbokodo!'", *Intergenerational Feminisms and the Implications for Womxn's Leadership*, *Agenda* 33, no. 1 (January 2, 2019): 67–73.

stories, embodying variations through gesture, volume, cadence and language choice. Therefore, although it is insufficient to analyze solely the text of a story, it is a way to start to understand how Masilo's feminism may be linked to a long tradition of African feminism.

In *The World and the Word: Tales and Observations from the Xhosa Oral Tradition*, Nongenile Masithathu Zenani performs a story titled "A Poor Girl Marries a King." The girl becomes a woman and has a girl child of her own. The mother passes away and her father neglects and disrespects her. The mother's spirit returns and empowers the child to have the food and bath she needs and goes on to live a good life. "...she became an important person. It was as if that mother who was no longer present had risen."³¹⁶ In another tale, "The Man Who Beat His Wife," a girl begins to steal things and her father beats her. Her mother intervenes telling him that's enough. He gets angry and beats the mother over the head very badly. He kicks her out and wants to keep her dowry. Her parents support her claim that he mistreated her and therefore doesn't deserve the dowry. Her friends seek revenge. "Now he too had a head wound... The women beat him then, and the husband fled. He even left his garments behind; he was running naked."³¹⁷ In each of these stories, women band together to uplift one another in acts of justice, just like Masilo's Giselle, who along with her wilis, accepts no mistreatment without retribution.

³¹⁶ Nongenile Masithathu Zenani and Harold Scheub, *The World and the Word: Tales and Observations from the Xhosa Oral Tradition* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), 334.

³¹⁷ Zenani and Scheub, 367.

Although Masilo is not AmaXhosa, I bring in this story as a tool from which to analyze her choreography from a South African paradigm wherein, epistemologically speaking, women are always already strong leaders. From this ideology comes the phrase *Wathint' Abafazi, Wathint' Imbokodo*, or When you strike a woman, you strike a rock (the longer version of the phrase ending “and it crushes you and you die”). This phrase evolved into an iconic slogan in the 1956 Women’s March that was organized as a response to the government mandate that non-White women be required to carry passbooks (as previously only men had to) in order to enter urban areas.³¹⁸ The pass laws were hated not only because of their irrationality and dehumanizing nature. Police and government officials could and did use them to summarily arrest people who were then subject to any vile and violent whims of the officers holding them captive. It was the extension of the law to female citizens that catalyzed a major push-back against apartheid’s encroachments. “This was a significant turning point in the struggle against unjust apartheid laws. Though the march was against the restrictive pass laws, it led to significant changes towards the emancipation of women.”³¹⁹ It is not only in stories or ballets that South African women are resolute, but in action in every day warfare against misogyny. Understood in context, the revenge of the wilis, and the refusal of Masilo’s Giselle to simply forgive Albrecht, are right in line with South African epistemology. As demonstrated here, feminism is neither new nor Western. Although *Dada Masilo’s*

³¹⁸ Jude Clark, Shula Mafokoane, and Talent Ntombi Nyathi, “‘Rocking the Rock’: A Conversation on the Slogan ‘Wathinta Abafazi, Wathint’ Imbokodo!’”, *Intergenerational Feminisms and the Implications for Womxn’s Leadership*,” *Agenda* 33, no. 1 (2019): 67–73.

³¹⁹ “SAHA - South African History Archive - You Strike the Women, You Strike the Rock!,” accessed November 26, 2019, http://www.saha.org.za/women/national_womens_day.htm.

Giselle is contemporary, it relates to a long line of power held by African women. Reading the dance in the context of South African women's movements suggests the radical potential of both viewing and doing the work.

Although the written word will always fall short of embodied expression, I have attempted to bridge the two modalities, foregrounding movement as a type of knowledge and a method of learning. In the case of *Giselle*, a textual narrative came alive over two hundred years ago and has been re-embodied through hundreds of different variations since. *Dada Masilo's Giselle* decontextualized the pan-European creation only to re-contextualize it as a contemporary post-colonial South African tale. Harnessing global Black philosophies and practices while Indigenizing the narrative with words and movement that resonate with South African values and experiences, she presents a decolonial African feminist *Giselle*.

The Entangled Aesthetics of Dada Masilo's Pedagogy

Like her choreography, Masilo's pedagogical choices merge traditions and expand through innovation. On April 14,th 2018, I had the opportunity to attend a master class offered by Masilo and company at the Wallis Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts in Beverly Hills, California. I attended not only because I am a dancer always looking for ways to experience movement, but also as a researcher curious to know how Masilo approaches the teaching of her repertoire to new and foreign students, and what relationship it has to what I saw on stage. At the foundation of this entire project is a commitment to the sanctity of embodiment and a firm belief that although movement can

parallel language, it is its own communication system and internal experience that stimulates an entirely different part of the brain and encompasses unique motivations and consequences. So far I have described Masilo's choreography and her company's performance using several linguistic concepts, but as dance ethnographer Diedre Sklar explains, movement is its own form of knowledge that cannot be subsumed by any other form of knowledge:

Although one must resort to words to understand the symbolic meaning of movement, talking cannot reveal what is known through the media of movement. The cultural knowledge that is embodied in movement can only be known via movement. This is why I am uncomfortable with the currently popular semiotic metaphor which treats everything as "texts" to be "read." The metaphor is certainly useful, but it overvalues the visual while ignoring the kinesthetic.³²⁰

Although this knowledge can only be known through movement, I will attempt to prioritize physical sensation and support it with descriptions of visual information that assisted my absorption and comprehension of Masilo's class. Implicating myself and my history in this work is not to say that I can speak for Masilo or her audience as a whole, but rather to use the body as a site and source of meaning in line with the ethos of feminist ethnography, which has pioneered auto-ethnography as a viable and vital methodology.

I first became aware of Masilo's visit to California when I caught up with her after her performance at the Joyce Theater in New York City. I complimented her performance and coyly reminded her that we'd briefly met at the National Arts Festival in

³²⁰ Sklar, "Five Premises for a Culturally Sensitive Approach to Dance," 31.

South Africa. I was bewildered when I heard that she would be bringing *Giselle* to Los Angeles the next week since I had booked a trip to New York just to see the performance in the United States and hadn't seen it advertised elsewhere. As someone who actively seeks out dance performances, particularly by foreign artists, I was unimpressed by the Wallis Annenberg's marketing efforts. Nonetheless, I was happy to see the piece a third time and even more excited once I saw that there would be a master class component to the LA production.

Driving through Beverly Hills is always a surreal experience. The houses are really mansions and the palm trees hovering over manicured lawns belie the growing poverty and homelessness plaguing the greater Los Angeles region. The Wallis Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts "has produced and presented more than 275 dance, theater, opera, classical music, cinema and family programs since its doors opened in October 2013."³²¹ Their 2020 roster of dance artists includes local favorites such as Heidi Duckler Dance, Lula Washington Dance Theatre, and Contra-Tiempo. After making my way through the maze-like complex I was surprised to find that the stage where class would be held was filled with company members and teenage dancers. I was grateful for the presence of the company members both because having more knowledgeable dancers to demonstrate makes it easier to learn and because being closer to my age, I might feel less out of place.

After expressing gratitude to the theater staff and to all of us who had come to the class, Masilo began the 'warm-up' exercises. We started by laying on the floor and she

³²¹ The Wallis, "The Wallis | About Us," The Wallis, accessed December 3, 2019, <https://www.thewallis.org/>.

proceeded to rather swiftly demonstrate and instruct a sequence of movement I recognize as coming from the modern dance application of Bartenieff Fundamentals. German-born Irmgard Bartenieff developed this sequence in the early twentieth century after working alongside movement analysis pioneer Rudolf von Laban. “As a physical therapist, she applied Laban’s theories and the principles of human development to her work with polio patients as well as dancers, originating a physical reeducation method that develops movement efficiency and expressiveness. The work came to be known as Bartenieff Fundamentals.^{sm,322} Somatic modalities began to enter modern/contemporary dance classes as early as the 1920’s,³²³ with many dance artists now earning certifications in Laban Movement Analysis, Awareness Through Movement, Alexander Technique, Body-Mind Centering, or Bartenieff Fundamentals.

Seeing Masilo laying on her back, forming herself into an ‘X’ shape, I was instantly relieved to know we would at least start slow and gentle before entering the high powered phrase work I presumed we’d try on later. The patterns of movement and somatic approach to learning dance were very familiar to me, having encountered them frequently as an undergraduate student at the University of California, Los Angeles and in countless classes from independent artist/instructors in New York. Usually, this type of floor-work is executed slowly with the objective of decreasing stimulus and increasing awareness in the practitioner.³²⁴ Masilo demonstrated how we were to coil ourselves into

³²² “Irmgard Bartenieff – LABAN/Bartenieff Institute of Movement Studies,” accessed December 3, 2019, <https://labaninstitute.org/about/irmgard-bartenieff/>.

³²³ Sally Banes, *Terpsichore in Sneakers: Post-Modern Dance* (Middletown, Conn. : Scranton, Pa: Wesleyan, 1987).

³²⁴ Moshé Feldenkrais, *The Elusive Obvious* (Cupertino, CA: Meta Publications, 1981).

a fetal position, returning to the 'X' before repeating this action on the other side. From there we craned our heads and tried to watch and partially emulate her as she pushed one set of toes forward and then the other, folding her upper body over the lower, allowing her fingertips to guide her spine back down to the floor one vertebrae at a time, only to then pike her legs over her shoulder girdle, roll back down to the tailbone and suddenly, magically end up standing on her feet in time with the music bouncing from her boombox. Masilo's approach to this time-tested system was fresh and a bit intimidating. Her movements were serpentine: an infinite collection of folds and extensions that could attack at any moment. I retreated to my breath. I knew that if my intention was to simply move as quickly and precisely as her I would grow tense and possibly injure my already beleaguered back. Visualizing breath moving into my lungs and expanding to fill every surface of my interior, I surrendered to flow. With this technique I was able to execute the movement safely, correctly, and *almost* on time. I wondered why she chose to move so quickly as it seemed counterintuitive, but I also deeply admired that she was able to do so without appearing tense or rushed. Her dancers likewise entered each motion with clarity and grace.

I have experienced an almost identical movement phrase in several states as well as in The Netherlands and Germany, and it has always been taught either at a very slow tempo or with no rhythmic organization other than the dancer's own sensation, and usually in silence. Again drawing from Gottschild, I view Masilo's approach to this vocabulary as an example of ephebism. Although it would be a terrible oversimplification to say that African dance is fast, Masilo's approach resonates with the Africanist aesthetic

that values musicality and a visible energetic force that can ‘float like a butterfly’ or ‘sting like a bee’ but is never inconsequential. Though the fundamental movement retained its grace, its attack was almost percussive, and anyone who has played a hand drum knows that a beautiful sound is achieved not by banging the drum with force, but by dropping the weight of the hand onto the surface of the drum and allowing it to rebound, floating upward away from the reverberation. Repeating Bartenieff Fundamentals ‘with a difference’ signifies. It presents an Africanist approach to a German-American movement system that better prepares the dancer for the movement to follow.

The rest of the standing non-locomotor movement phrases held a similar quality. Familiar actions such as dropping the head to lead the spine into a deep forward bend followed by knee bends and leg extension, tendus in parallel and turned-out leg positions, and other familiar exercises were inflected with this Africanist accent that drove the movement from a place of introspection to a vibrant expression of energy being directed through space with purpose. Traveling movement phrases were likewise comprised of movement that I recognized from the post-modern dance idiom: deeply bending the right knee to swipe the left leg around and behind, led by the toes, while tossing the left arm over one’s head to compose a temporary diagonal line in space, then balancing on the left metatarsal to direct the torso around the central axis in a clockwise direction; handstands that float rather than stick, and leaps that glide only to crumple delicately into a body ball rolling along the marley floor. These familiar moves became slightly foreign when I approached them with the goal of mimicking Masilo’s movement style. Whereas post-

modern instruction had taught me to maintain an energetic equilibrium – democratizing the movement so that no one gesture purported to be more dynamic than another, here we could ride the energetic waves of the music or our own whims to punctuate each transition. The individuation I observed on stage was modeled in the pedagogical approach. As each of Masilo’s company members executed the movement correctly but uniquely, it was evident that we students could bring ourselves and our movement histories into each phrase as well.

In the final segment of class, the movement selections switched from indie electro-pop with R&B rhythm sections to a song that was surely recorded in the 1980’s. Something about the electronic keyboards gave it away and I had to ask one of the dancers who was singing along who the artist was. I was told it was indeed a very popular South African artist in the 1980’s. For this next segment our spatial formation changed from lines of five traveling horizontally across the floor to a single file line moving diagonally from the upstage left corner across to downstage right. Instead of learning a sequence of five to eight connected movements, we were instructed to follow her lead and copy each movement as it arose, usually with one movement being repeated all the way across the floor until a new one was introduced. This is where the movement registered another type of familiarity. Our knees remained bent for this segment of class. My body felt more attuned to the invisible pull of gravity and I let it hold me lower in space, no longer pulling up away from it in my spine, but letting my lumbar region sweep back as if I were about to sit. This posture indicated to me that we would be performing a traditional African dance.

First we walked in unison, lifting the lower leg a few inches of the ground then stepping flatly with the whole foot silently. This action set our tempo and created a baseline to riff off of. Our torsos would fall and rise with the sagittal swinging of our arms. With our posteriors reaching behind our heels, the body's center became a stout anchor for the limbs to move along or across, often with the head adding a third rhythm, bobbing up and down faster than the arms or legs. These polyrhythms and this half seated posture embody Africanist aesthetics. Interestingly, Masilo's class did not fuse the European/American aesthetics with the African but taught them separately, even though her choreography was much more blended. Perhaps, she is only recently developing a pedagogical technique that employs both, or perhaps she only includes the Africanist gestures when teaching abroad to students who might not have ritual or social dance practices that provide opportunities for study. In either case, this segment of the class ushered in a visceral energetic shift. It appeared to me that dancers were looking at one another more often and when they did they were seeing more smiles. Although the dancing was physically heavier, the mood was lighter. Dancing all together as one body – *unicorps* - I felt a sense of connection with the others that I hadn't quite felt before. What's more, the simple repetition of complex movements allowed me to focus more on sensation than memorization. Some credit must also be given to the music; something about its vintage quality rendered it comical and therefore fun to dance to. Sweating and smiling through dance, we were all connected by a willingness to experiment, a drive to perfect and a surrender to flow. Jumping continents in each segment of class, I felt the

logic of Masilo's repertoire: master each movement language on its own terms then choreograph a multi-lingual conversation.

Performing segments of the choreography as a student in Masilo's class allowed me to feel something of the methodology behind the work and its effect on me. In several instances I had to release my previously held approaches to the movement in order to understand how she was imparting new philosophies into old shapes. Dancing European, American, and South African phrases all in one class equalized them as sensations that could flow in and out of the body with ease if enough care and rigorous attention to detail were given. Confidence is always required to execute movement well, and when a dancer transforms a tradition with knowledge and confidence, a sense of ownership is created. It is not necessarily the ownership of one who wishes to hoard something of another's but rather a feeling of commonality that does not displace individuality. Contemporary dance Masilo's way is full of reverence for the distinctiveness of the traditions it signifies on. The way she attacks it with South African style transforms histories of oppression into futures of infinite potential. This is the work of decolonizing dance: to see one's history from outside of the colonial lens, and to dance into a future of one's own making.

Chapter Four

Transformation and Paralysis at Dance Umbrella Africa

During my first two visits to South Africa, I was often frustrated by “the fourth wall” that seemed to keep me from engaging with dance artists. As an audience member and scholar, it was difficult to feel like I could do anything more than observe and absorb what was happening in front of me. In previous travels, engaging in dance as a practitioner had been the kinesthetic/energetic link with dancing communities that led to a deep sense of intimacy. Oftentimes the more intensely physical the dancing, the greater the bond as our sweaty bodies, heaving lungs, and endorphin-filled psyches united us in a victory over fatigue and complacency. Thankfully in April 2019, I entered an intimate exchange with South African artists at the Dance Umbrella Africa Festival, where I participated as an audience member, performer, student, and teacher. In Chapter One I examine how artists, activists, and scholars shaped and responded to the #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall student movements calling for the decolonization of South African universities. Chapters Two and Three demonstrate how Mamela Nyamza and Dada Masilo create a decolonial aesthetic in contemporary dance. In this chapter I frame the Dance Umbrella Africa festival as a site of movements towards and away from decoloniality. Whereas the conflicts addressed in previous chapters were amongst somewhat independent actors, here the trajectory of the state is called into question. I argue that the decolonial potential of the festival was cut short by the colonialist ambitions of the South African State Theatre. The festival centered Indigeneity in contemporary dance by featuring the entangled aesthetics and concerns of

post-colonial contemporary dance artists. To demonstrate this, I explore the Indigenous philosophy of ubuntu at play in workshops and the amplification of female and queer-identified artists in performance as reflective of the festival's Black lesbian leadership by Mamela Nyamza. In contrast, the South African State Theatre's dismissal of Nyamza reveals how the theatre back-stepped on the decolonial vision for dance that the festival had begun to offer. Ironically, by doing so they inadvertently set the stage for dance activists to mobilize on the heels of the #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall movements.

Dance Umbrella

The Dance Umbrella festival was founded in 1989 by Philip Stein, Marilyn Poole and Adrienne Sichel. Stein owned a production company. Poole and Sichel are arts journalists. The first festival held at the University of Witwatersrand was a platform for new talent and was not curated.³²⁵ Although he retired in 2003, Stein's contribution was immeasurable because he secured hundreds of thousands of dollars in twenty-one years of sponsorship from First National Bank. At a time when the bulk of state funding went to ballet companies and artistic communities were cut off from international exchanges because of apartheid boycotts, Dance Umbrella created a racially integrated space for contemporary dance to operate outside of the state. Over its thirty year history, the festival included choreography and performance by esteemed South African and international artists Andréy Ouamba, Musa Hlatshwayo, Robyn Orlin, Dada Masilo, Boyzie Cekwana, Sylvia Glasser, Akram Khan, Sello Pesa, Salia Ni Seydou, Faustin

³²⁵ Roslyn Sulcas, "Stretching Dance Past Boundaries in South Africa," *The New York Times*, April 2, 2006, sec. Arts, <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/04/02/arts/02iht-umbrella.html>.

Linyekula, Lliane Loots, Nelisiwe Xaba, Mamela Nyamza, Gregory Maqoma, Jay Pather, and Vincent Mantsoe, to name only a few. Dance Umbrella ultimately made its home in the vibrant city of Johannesburg, where it became the largest contemporary dance festival in South Africa.³²⁶

Georgina Thomson and her non-profit organization Dance Forum took over in 1998. At a ceremony at the French Embassy in Pretoria (now Tshwane), French Ambassador H.E. Christophe Farnaud awarded Thomson with the Officer of the Order of the Arts & Literature award stating, “Georgina Thomson is one of the most well-known and highly respected South African arts administrators in this country and abroad.”³²⁷ In March of 2018, it was Thomson who broke the news that the festival would have to close its doors after its thirtieth anniversary production due to lack of funding.³²⁸ Within months, I came to find out that the festival had been rescued by the South African State Theatre (SAST) and would be renamed the Dance Umbrella Africa festival by its new Deputy Artistic Director, Mamela Nyamza, who would also serve as the curator for the festival. According to the theatre’s Artistic Director, playwright Aubrey Sekhabi, SAST had been planning to create a dance program and the dismantling of the Dance Umbrella festival provided the perfect opportunity to merge it with an existing structure,

³²⁶ “Dance Umbrella All Set for New and Exciting Season,” SowetanLIVE, accessed March 24, 2020, <https://www.sowetanlive.co.za/entertainment/2011-01-13-dance-umbrella-all-set-for-new-and-exciting-season/>.

³²⁷ “Georgina Thomson Honoured by French Government,” Artslink, accessed March 19, 2020, http://www.artlink.co.za/news_article.htm?contentID=42011.

³²⁸ “Ismail Mahomed - The 7th of March Shall Be Choreographed...,” accessed March 19, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/ismail.mahomed.9/posts/10219351247184735>.

providing it with a home to grow.³²⁹ In the aftermath of the #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall movements, hiring a Black lesbian director with an accomplished background as a dance artist seemed a responsible move to redress any lack of representation in the past leadership.

Dance Under the State Umbrella

In April 2019, the Dance Umbrella Africa festival was held for the first time at the SAST in Tshwane, Gauteng Province. Despite Black management, the theatre has not had a particularly decolonial aim. Many of its larger commissions are European and American productions. The South African State Theatre is actually a large complex housing five performance venues, a restaurant and bar, and many administrative offices. Hans Botha and Roelf Botha had it built in 1981 with the Afrikaans name Staatsteater, which was then changed to Spoornet State Theatre with sponsorship from the railway company.³³⁰ It received its current name in 1995. From its first production of *Aida*, the venue has predominantly presented European and American works and genres, from Shakespeare and *Swan Lake* to musicals such as *Fame* and *Mama Mia*.³³¹ It also hosts a wide array of local productions in music, drama, and dance.

³²⁹ Aubrey Sekhabi and Mamela Nyamza, Expresso Show LIVE at the State Theatre for Dance Umbrella Africa launch, interview by Tsholo Phiri, March 13, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ER9oD7s37VA>.

³³⁰ "Carthalia - Pretoria: South African State Theatre," accessed February 13, 2020, http://www.andreas-praefcke.de/carthalia/world/za_pretoria_statetheatre.htm.

³³¹ Sakhile Ndlazi, "Know Your City: State Theatre," PressReader, October 7, 2015, <https://www.pressreader.com/south-africa/pretoria-news/20151007/282707635885569>.

Placing Dance Umbrella Africa (DUA) under the banner of the state theatre presented unique challenges and opportunities to question the roles artists and government-funded institutions could play in decolonizing South African concert dance. *Mail & Guardian*'s simple point in fact reads ominous in hind-sight: "As such, DUA is now government property, entirely funded by the department of arts and culture."³³² As a government agency, the festival would potentially receive increasing and stable funding. It would also carry a responsibility for representing the nation whereas the early Dance Umbrella festivals were characterized by their willingness and in fact their need to operate outside of the apartheid state. Within this context, Mamela Nyamza's role was significant as it officially placed an outspoken Black lesbian as the face of *South African* contemporary dance.

Nyamza's leadership forecasted a shift in priorities to feature African artists with local concerns. This started with the festival's name change. As reported by the youth-focused independent news outlet *The Daily Vox*,

The festival's renamed to Dance Umbrella Africa to align with the new Pan-African artistic vision of the festival. Nyamza says it was the Theatre's Artistic Theatre Director who used the name during a meeting. "He referred to Dance Umbrella as Dance Umbrella Africa and the name was appropriate so we stuck to it," Nyamza said.³³³

According to Nyamza, Aubrey's mispronunciation provided an opportunity to rebrand the festival with an African focus rather than elevating itself by how many non-African

³³² Zaza Hlaleshwa, "Dance Umbrella Finds New Home," *The Mail & Guardian*, March 29, 2019, <https://mg.co.za/article/2019-03-29-00-dance-umbrella-finds-new-home/>.

³³³ Fatima Moosa, "Dance Umbrella Africa Festival Is Back!," *The Daily Vox*, March 6, 2019, <https://www.thedailyvox.co.za/dance-umbrella-africa-festival-is-back/>.

artists it could lure in.³³⁴ (I was also surprised the name hadn't caused problems earlier since there is a long-standing dance festival of the same name in England.) The name Dance Umbrella Africa gave the festival distinction while centering its ontology in Africa. Sekhabi told *Mail & Guardian*, "We want artists from the continent to have a home...and artists from all parts of the world to come and share with us their stories through dance; but importantly, [to] understand our stories from the continent."³³⁵ These comments suggest that despite the theatre's history of featuring foreign productions, dance would shelter Indigenous epistemes.

Not for Profit

Because the SAST absorbed the festival in its final hour, there was no time to secure full funding. Nonetheless, continuing the festival on its annual schedule was crucial to maintaining continuity in an already precarious field. In an interview with *Mail & Guardian*, Sekhabi describes a conversation with the theatre's Chief Executive, Dr. Sibongiseni Mkhize, where they decided to find a way to persevere with a shrunken budget. "We agreed that, even with our small budgets, it is important to retain a platform for dance, given that we needed to develop it at SAST."³³⁶ Applicants were told first that they would not be paid anything, then that they would be paid a portion of the proceeds from the box office. Applications for the new festival read, "SAST will provide free infrastructure and technical support to perform on a 30/70 percentage box office revenue

³³⁴ Sekhabi and Nyamza, Expresso Show LIVE at the State Theatre for Dance Umbrella Africa launch.

³³⁵ Hlaethwa, "Dance Umbrella Finds New Home."

³³⁶ Hlaethwa.

split. All artists in their diversity are welcome to submit proposals on their own inclusive cost. Let us all join hands in ensuring that Dance as an art genre is sustained for generations to come.”³³⁷ Being an American, I was accustomed to dance festivals with open calls not offering any payment to dance artists but instead expecting them to perform for ‘exposure’ and ‘experience.’ That the festival was hosted by the State Theatre, however, did raise questions as to why such a large institution would not be able to secure any funds for artist fees. As reported by Zaza Hlaethwa for *Mail & Guardian*, Nyamza and SAST were able to secure support from other organizations and volunteers to fortify the theatre’s production budget.³³⁸ I later learned that some artists were commissioned, some were given a percentage of the box office profits, and others like myself were given accommodation in lieu of payment. Though it may have caused some frustration, the insistence of Nyamza and the dance community to continue the festival despite inadequate funding speaks to its relevance for dance artists.

Decolonizing the Contemporary

As I have demonstrated throughout this dissertation, dance as a process of becoming has long been fundamental to the epistemologies of African people. Nyamza’s curation focused on what dance can become and who we can become as dancers. Having earned her own start at the State Theatre as a dancer and choreographer from 1997-2000, Nyamza wanted to ensure more young people had access to the opportunities she had as a

³³⁷ “Call for Dance Umbrella Africa Proposals,” Artslink, accessed March 17, 2020, http://www.artlink.co.za/news_article.htm?contentID=44535.

³³⁸ Hlaethwa, “Dance Umbrella Finds New Home.”

young artist. The festival would create space for both emerging and established artists for audiences with popular and experimental tastes. The 2019 festival took on a three-part theme to include the widest variety of dance genres and stages of experience possible.

Based on press releases, *Creative Feel* magazine reported:

#DUA2019 will embrace all genres of dance, from authentic South African dance pantsula to diverse classical, contemporary, and dance theatre. The focus will be on four thematic or conceptual categories of dance works: Figuring- The *perplexed*; Figure- The *particular*; Figured- The *proficient*; and Figurine-The *peculiar*. Mamela Nyamza, who is Deputy Artistic Director at SAST and Curator of DUA 2019[,] explains that the festival will let both dance artists and the audience to “*figure*”, whether they are still “*figuring*” – being perplexed by their journey; whether they are already “*figured*” – already established or proficient in their art; whether they are on course to “*figure*” the historically known; or whether they are already a “*figurine*” – the creatives labeled as trouble-makers, for their peculiar or uncomfortable work.³³⁹

Nyamza explicitly named several genres including pantsula, which distinctly represents township youth, to ensure that practitioners in these forms would feel welcome to apply. In my assessment, this theme of figuring did more than promote diversity. It created a space for becoming one’s self through dance and for actively and continually reshaping the field of dance. “Figuring the state of dance in South Africa” suggests that through the body (the figure) artists will question and transform themselves. It does not therefore prescribe or suggest an outcome. Rather, it leans in to the complexity and chaos with an optimistic view towards kinesthetic collective problem-solving. As Nyamza said in

³³⁹ “#DUA2019 Theme: Figuring State of Dance in Africa,” Artslink, accessed February 13, 2020, http://www.artlink.co.za/news_article.htm?contentID=44668.

multiple interviews, “We’re figuring it out.”³⁴⁰ This emphasis on process was clearly demonstrated in performances and workshops offered throughout the week.

Art Reflecting Life Reflecting Art

DUA performances afforded opportunities for dance artists and audiences to engage in collective healing. In one week I attended at least twenty-seven dance works as diverse in style as they were in theme. Eddie Ndu presented an pantsula piece with six men in dresses, Thamsanqa Tshabalala’s solo was an homage to the life of Black gay activist Simon Tseko Nkoli, and Nomcebisi Moyikwa performed a transdisciplinary response to Saidiya Hartman’s writing on being and Blackness.³⁴¹ Although many of the performances were striking, and several official artist talk-backs were scheduled, I will attend to one post-show discussion that occurred outside the official space of dialogue. This impromptu conversation inspired by an exchange between artists and audience exemplifies the significance of the shared experience of live performance. It offered me insight that the choreography itself could not. The discussion revealed that for Black women, decolonizing dance is an intimate act of healing intergenerational trauma.

Four was choreographed and performed by Nkemiseng Khenani, Lusanda Dayimani, Nomfundo Hlongwa, and Thandiwe Mqokeli. It presented an entangled aesthetic utilizing traditional Indigenous and modern dance movement vocabularies interchangeably to create a unique and intimate landscape. Program notes read, “This is a

³⁴⁰ Sekhabi and Nyamza, Expresso Show LIVE at the State Theatre for Dance Umbrella Africa launch.

³⁴¹ “Dance Umbrella Africa 2019 Programme” (South African State Theatre, March 2019).

collaborative work of four women from Cape Town, Eastern Cape, KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng exploring the power of women challenging their different dynamics, cultural background and upbringing.”³⁴² Each dancer performed independently from the others in a corner of the stage for several minutes before all of them rotated, each replacing the dancer to her right. Sections were interspersed with unison and the piece held a mood of introspection. It received an impassioned applause from the audience.

Four did not only reflect a lived experience, it also shifted consciousness and created a space for important conversations on gender-based violence. After the evening of performances, I walked up to the dancers who were sitting outside drinking plastic cup cocktails and chatting. Thandiwe shared with me that a man who’d been in the audience bought them all drinks to congratulate their performance and tell them how much it had moved him. He said the next time he sees a man being abusive to a woman he will stand up and speak out. They were all deeply touched that a total stranger - and a man at that - had been moved into consciousness by their work. Over the course of the conversation, the dancers discussed the abuses their mothers had suffered at the hands of their fathers. One dancer stated the predicament succinctly, “we were raised by traumatized women.”³⁴³ The dancers discussed how South African history had focused on male martyrs and left out the women who harbored the trauma of losing their sons, husbands, and fathers in apartheid battles. It was their mothers who had to harness the strength to keep the family psychologically and spiritually sound in the face of tragic loss and

³⁴² “Dance Umbrella Africa 2019 Programme.”

³⁴³ Nkemiseng Khena et al., Conversation with the Creators of *Four*, April 2, 2019.

seemingly unending violence in the so-called democratic transfer of power. “Our mothers went through hell and back. They survived apartheid and then ended up in abusive relationships.”³⁴⁴ They discussed how this often led their mothers to be hard on them - to harden themselves to just be able to get up in the morning and get to the work of mothering and the work that paid the bills. One of the dancers described how her father would come home and lock her in a room with her siblings so that they wouldn’t intervene when he went to beat their mother. Mothers had to harden themselves to survive their husbands and harden their children to make sure they would not loose them to the brutal machinations of apartheid and its afterlife. These four young women discussed how they hope to be able to soften enough to break the cycle of abuse with their children – if they choose to have any. They dreamed of being safe enough to be vulnerable.

Although I felt a bit like a voyeur in this profound and intimate conversation, I was deeply grateful to be present. At the same time, it was disheartening to hear Black women on the other side of the world describing the same phenomenon I’ve witnessed in the United States: the sacrifices of Black women in service of Black men’s rage. I wonder, had these four women not come together to create this dance, would these conversations have taken place; and would that man in the audience have taken a moment to reflect on patriarchal violence?

This performance-inspired dialogue was a step towards decolonizing. By addressing the past and the ways that it affects but does not control the future, these four

³⁴⁴ Khena et al.

dancers used movement to access the deeply personal ways that centuries of intergenerational trauma threatened to stunt their psychosocial growth. *Four* was not a portrayal of these traumas nor an escape from them. It was a way of moving beyond by going through. Their subsequent discussion was not about Whites or males. It was about what South African women can do with and for each other to heal and move forward from a place of interconnectivity. As one dancer explained, “We use art to heal ourselves.”³⁴⁵ Marches and protest movements call attention to social injustice and make demands on oppressive structures and individuals. In performance, the political project is to expose the process of becoming one’s self while wrestling with the intimate legacies of oppression. Through dance, the women of *Four* began to undo the intergenerational trauma of colonialism and apartheid.

Experiments in Creating and Becoming

The spirit of collaborative healing and problem-solving infused both performance and creative process at the festival. The workshop series at Dance Umbrella Africa privileged experimentation over mastery. Improvisation was both a dance technique and an organizational strategy. I had the pleasure of joining several dance classes held by artists from artists all over the world, such as Anna Konjetzky from Germany, Kettly Noël of Haiti, and Gaby Saranouffi from Madagascar. Reviewing my notes, I believe it was Kettly who told us that “We are going to try to reorganize our bodies. I know you

³⁴⁵ Khena et al.

already know your body but today say that you don't yet know.”³⁴⁶ This prompt characterized the workshop series as a whole as each session focused on improvisation and composition techniques – strategies dance artists use to explore and form themselves. Although a few of us came from outside the continent, most were African, and participants were encouraged to work within the festival's theme to figure out who they are and what they want to create as African artists. Recomposing ourselves from moment to moment, improvisation was employed as an artistic practice and a life skill.

Improvisation was required to figure out what to do when things did not go as planned. As could be expected from a large but underfunded festival in a new venue, Dance Umbrella Africa experienced a few organizational challenges. Mid-week, one of the teachers was unable to make it to class. I was in the studio warming up with a couple of other dancers when Mamela Nyamza looked over at me and said, “You wanted to teach right?” Before arriving at the festival I had offered to teach or volunteer in other ways as a form of gratitude and reciprocity towards those who offered their time to me in interviews. I hadn't received a teaching schedule so I hadn't planned anything. I was not at all prepared but I did not want to miss an opportunity to connect with festival participants so I said yes. I had a few moments before the students came in to jot down some notes and prepare the sound system. Although I've taught contemporary dance, Samba Reggae, Jazz and other dance techniques for many years, I had most recently been teaching mainly lecture courses, and those studio courses I did have were with total beginners so I was quite nervous. Luckily for me none of the festival performers showed

³⁴⁶ Kettly Noël, Conversation with the artist at Dance Umbrella Africa, April 3, 2019.

up! Instead there was a group of students in their early twenties who were studying at the state theatre's academy and they were eager to participate. With only a few minutes to prepare, I tried to figure it out as I went along.

Ubuntu: Seeing and Being Seen

Participating in the Dance Umbrella Africa festival gave me an opportunity to create diasporic, kinesthetic, and cultural exchanges that revealed some of the ways that tenuous decolonial moves are oscillating in South African concert dance. Teaching at DUA, I was able to experience ubuntu as a collaborative artistic process that engages individuality to compose a whole. Though traditionally referring to local concerns, the notion of ubuntu as “I am because we are” is fundamental to pan-Africanism as it aims to re-member the African diaspora torn apart by on-going colonial violence. Each member of the continent and the diaspora is inextricably connected not only by a shared history of colonial violence but by a common thread that is the epistemology of interrelation. In my analysis of the Decolonial Aesthetics Creative Lab at Rhodes University, I explained how ubuntu scaffolded our approach to interdisciplinary decolonial art-making. Here I see ubuntu as a pan-Africanist pedagogical theory to decolonize the teaching of dance. According to poet/journalist Sandile Ngidi, “Ubuntu draws on the sanctity and sustenance of individual creativity founded on mutual individual and collective principles of respect

and reciprocal coexistence.”³⁴⁷ At a dance festival thematically curated around notions of becoming, reciprocity would be fundamental to dance pedagogy as a decolonial move.

Attempting to make interpersonal and diasporic connections, my dance class was a combination of technique, improvisation, and interdisciplinary composition that centered students’ interests. To start, I had students meet in a circle and I asked each one to share their name and which discipline they were interested or experienced in. Several dreamed of being actors and talk-show hosts. Very few had any formal dance training but they were all very enthusiastic about learning. Always interested in building connections across the diaspora, I began to teach them some movements from the Afro-Brazilian music/dance form Samba Reggae. Though I am not Brazilian I was drawn to study Brazilian dances after being enchanted by the samba rhythm in college. I have continued intensive study and practice in part because of my affinity towards mixed-race dancers that looked like me – something I rarely see in the United States. I explained to the class that Samba Reggae had been developed during the late 1960’s as Pan African ideologies were spreading along with African independence movements (and quite strongly through Jamaican reggae music). As I demonstrated movement for them to follow in lines traveling across the floor, I reminded them that as a carnival dance, the gestures must be big and bold as if performing for thousands, even if they weren’t quite sure what they were doing yet. When I teach this movement to dancers who have primarily trained in ballet or modern dance, they quickly catch on to the shapes of the body and the coordination of the limbs, but the quality of the movement evades them. Here it was the

³⁴⁷ Sandile Ngidi, Personal Communication with the Author, April 7, 2020.

reverse: students would sometimes become tripped up by transitions or directions but I didn't have to teach them to step flat-footed onto bent knees or to let their weight drop through their legs and rebound off of the ground through their spines, causing a gentle arch and release motion. This grounded aesthetic so difficult to teach was already in practice with these young artists who had probably all seen if not participated in Ngoma and various social dance forms utilizing the same approach. After about thirty minutes I was eager to facilitate a creative exploration and step out of my leadership role. We gathered back into a circle and I instructed them on the next portion of our workshop where students would organize themselves into small groups based on their artistic interests: filmmaking, singing, dancing, or acting.

I instructed them to use the Samba Reggae dance steps as a base from which to build a new creation, making use of their skills and interests. At the end we would share back. One group decided to document the process using all of the smart phones we had amongst ourselves. They also acted as "hosts" introducing and interviewing members from each group. The students got to work immediately: exchanging ideas, perfecting their moves, creating rhythms and songs. I was awe-struck as I gingerly walked around them trying to observe without interrupting their processes. After twenty minutes or so we gathered in a circle and I gave them a sequential order in which to present. With confidence and passion, each group came forward singing and dancing their creations. We then morphed back into a circle and I cued them to dance in it if they wanted to.

In West African/diasporic dance traditions performing in a circle creates an inclusive and interactive space for artistic experimentation and collective self-formation.

Those of us holding the circle were clapping and singing the beautiful chorus created by the last group to perform. The moment was ecstatic. I rarely have a group of students so new to an exercise yet so comfortable and confident with experimentation. This comfort in themselves expressed itself through their beautiful singing voices, movement improvisations and video compositions, all executed with total concentration and passion.

Our movement ritual was a space to witness individual and collective self-formation. Once the momentum had dropped, I initiated applause. In response, one student made a hand gesture that was followed by several others. She brought her palms together and began to rub them vigorously, with the wrists turned so that the backs of the hands faced the ceiling and floor. This was done with the hands held underneath the eyes and the eyes looking directly at me. I returned the gesture, probably looking a bit confused. The student told me it means, “I see you,” and is a way of giving thanks. I was deeply touched. I couldn’t say if this gesture was common or not but I didn’t see it in any other context and it offered me the sense of connection I had so desperately wanted. That the students trusted me and went on the journey we co-created was deeply enriching. Dancing ubuntu, we saw each other as individuals and as an interdependent collective. In performances, dialogues and workshops, Dance Umbrella Africa centered Indigenous African principles of creative experimentation, interdependence and reciprocity, and self-formation through collective participation.

Back-stepping on Decolonial Potential

Although interdependence characterizes Indigenous arts praxis, the give and take requires vulnerability and reciprocal care. Like the Rhodes student who warned “ubuntu has its limits,”³⁴⁸ when I interviewed Mamela Nyamza during the festival she talked about how artists risk becoming drained as the work demands so much of one’s self. “Because we deal with the heart, our heart is out there...We do everything with *love* so we always end up feeling empty.”³⁴⁹ Nyamza’s comment points to the vital need for engaged support from the communities that decolonial artists live and work with. When the State Theatre rescued the festival they appeared to match the risk and care that Nyamza offered through her role as curator and director. Pivoting from Nyamza’s leadership, the South African State Theatre ultimately stepped back from the decolonizing moves within Dance Umbrella Africa.

Nyamza was an excellent candidate to perform a leadership role at the state theatre not only because of her experience as an artist, but because of her general and genuine love of the arts and understanding of their significance to the nation and the world. *The Daily Vox* quoted Mamela Nyamza as stating, “We need the arts for various things. They keep us conscious as a people and constantly remind us who we are and where we’re going. Every dance, theatre, musical and visual production that makes us engage fulfills the social cohesion mandate of our country.”³⁵⁰ Her statement implies that the arts operate as national memory and future trajectory. This places them at the center

³⁴⁸ Anonymous Student, Ubuntu Activity at Rhodes University, July 8, 2018.

³⁴⁹ Mamela Nyamza, Interview at Dance Umbrella Africa, March 31, 2019.

³⁵⁰ Moosa, “Dance Umbrella Africa Festival Is Back!”

of manifesting and transforming as individuals and as a society or nation. According to the South African Department of Arts and Culture, which created the 2012 social cohesion strategy she refers to,

The department defines social cohesion as the degree of social integration and inclusion in communities and society at large, and the extent to which mutual solidarity finds expression among individuals and communities. In terms of this definition, a community or society is cohesive to the extent that the inequalities, exclusions and disparities based on ethnicity, gender, class, nationality, age, disability or any other distinctions which engender divisions distrust and conflict are reduced and/or eliminated in a planned and sustained manner - this with community members and citizens as active participants, working together for the attainment of shared goals, designed and agreed upon to improve the living conditions for all.³⁵¹

Thus, according to the South African government's discourse, art is an aspect of culture that can create and improve social cohesion. The government-run theatre officially recognized the arts as vital to social cohesion, but ultimately their behavior would sever their connection to the decolonial moves initiated by Nyamza's dance community.

Whereas interdependence and innovation characterized the work of artists at Dance Umbrella Africa, the theatre's administration would prove itself to be more interested in maintaining an image of success than actually creating progress. On November 25, 2019, Mamela Nyamza was abruptly fired from the South African State Theatre. Nyamza publicly announced her dismissal a month later.

Confirmation of my dismissal:

I am forced to issue a very short statement because I have just seen that my dismissal from the South African State Theatre is on social media already. I want to confirm that I have been summarily dismissed by the South African State Theatre as its employee and from my post Deputy

³⁵¹ "Social Cohesion | Department Of Arts and Culture," accessed March 17, 2020, <http://www.dac.gov.za/taxonomy/term/380>.

Artistic Director as from the 25th November 2019. The matter is now sub-judice.³⁵²

After having been a part of the festival, visiting her eleventh floor corner office and having felt the enthusiasm of all the participants, I was shocked and dismayed by the news. SAST claims that it took such an extreme measure in response to Nyamza's statements five months prior at the popular Cape Town performance venue Artscape.

In July 2019, Artscape had invited Nyamza to present some of the performances from Dance Umbrella Africa to audiences on the other side of the country. At a press conference to launch the event, Nyamza delivered an emotional address expressing her dismay at the lack of advertising and low attendance for the event. In December that year she posted a recording of the oration to Facebook. Her post begins with a caption that explains how much she had to sacrifice to take on the directorship at SAST in Pretoria:

Been quiet respecting my son's process in the Bush!!!
Moved from CAPE TOWN to PRETORIA,
Moved my whole family to relocate,
Sacrificed my International performance gigs,
Now I'm jobless and I must pay lawyers and I only budgeted for my son's
Initiation process and they knew.
This is the speech I'm summarily dismissed for, the video I posted and
laptop issues that I am not aware of.
Listen/ Read below this is not for me it's for you too.

In what was supposed to be a formal and cordial statement of welcome to the audience and gratitude to the presenters, Nyamza spoke informally, directly, personally, and angrily. In the recording you can hear her voice waiver as if she may be on the brink of tears. The Cape Town-born artist has personal history at the site so her disappointment

³⁵² "Mamela Nyamza," accessed March 26, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/mamela.nyamza>.

upon seeing a near-empty house was no doubt inflected with her desire to be welcomed back home as she returned in a position of great responsibility and honor. Even though her personal history cannot be divorced from the work her official capacity, she makes clear that her frustration is not about a lack of attention towards herself:

[statement in Xhosa] [S]ometimes when you get really angry you just wanna say it in Xhosa because you can't believe that this is happening in Cape Town. Really...it's embarrassing...From outside in the foyer, what is displayed....it's embarrassing. I'm sorry to put it...I'm gonna say it is embarrassing....

She goes on to express her dismay that a festival presented by a Black artist promoting Black artists was not well promoted or attended. Whether this was a factor or not, Nyamza felt stigmatized by her race in this new position of authority. “No publicity...No press release...No marketing. Is it because this skin is a stigma? Am I a stigma for being here? Am I killing something? Am I killing barely for being here?”³⁵³ In closing her statement, she makes it clear she is aware her statements are controversial and not at all what is expected at the formal opening of a state-run festival. In recalling the “seize the megaphone” phrase, she evokes the eponymous theme of the 7th annual Vavasati International Women’s Festival that she co-curated in 2019. In an announcement on the festival’s title, *Inequality: Seizing the Megaphone!*, Nyamza explained her perspective that “The role of the arts in helping to shift destructive narratives is crucial for empowering women and changing our society for the better.”³⁵⁴ For Nyamza artistry and

353 “Mamela Nyamza.”

354 “State Theatre Presents 7th Vavasati Women Festival,” Artslink, accessed April 7, 2020, http://www.artlink.co.za/news_article.htm?contentID=45403.

activism are not separate acts and the neglect demonstrated by Artscape was kin to political betrayal.

I'm not a foreigner here. [voice waivers] This is home. I'm sorry if you're here to hear me talk, you're gonna hear me talk today cuz I don't have the opportunity to seize the megaphone here. I don't know if there's anyone from the board or council here. Please fix it. We are artists, we want to see change, we want to see transformation...Thank you Artscape for not promoting Dance Umbrella but we will go forward and move forward. You're not gonna stop us.³⁵⁵

Invoking transformation, Nyamza uses the state's own terminology to address how the post-apartheid government has not realized the dream of equality if artists are charged with social cohesion but not given the requisite financial or energetic support to do so.

Engaging the arts as holistic practices that encompass political, spiritual and social objectives, Nyamza engages an Indigenous approach to arts advocacy.³⁵⁶ Given her consistently overtly political choreography, it should not have been surprising that Nyamza would continue bridge art and politics as a deputy artistic director. In fact her opening statement of the DUA program starts, "There is a great wisdom saying that: 'The line between art and life should be kept as fluid, and perhaps indistinct as possible.'"³⁵⁷ Citing the influential European-American performance artist Allen Kaprow, Nyamza points to her intention to keep the arts dangerously intermingled with every other aspect of life. Nyamza's curation of the Dance Umbrella Africa festival was based in the

³⁵⁵ "Mamela Nyamza."

³⁵⁶ Vimbai Gukwe Chivaura, "African Indigenous Worldviews and Ancient Wisdom: A Conceptual Framework for Development in Southern Africa," in *Indigenous Peoples' Wisdom and Power: Affirming Our Knowledge through Narratives*, ed. Julian Kunnie and Nomalungelo I. Goduka, Vitality of Indigenous Religions (Aldershot, Hants, England ; Ashgate, 2006).

³⁵⁷ "Dance Umbrella Africa 2019 Programme."

Indigenous philosophy that dance is an individual and collective mode of becoming that necessitates entangling one's self in the socio-politics of the community. Firing Nyamza for delivering an address that blurred the lines between artists' lives and artistic products promulgates the colonial policy of separating arts, personhood and the state.

Although Nyamza's comments did not disparage the State Theatre, they were used as justification for her dismissal. On November 28th, *Sowetan Live* reported the following statement by CEO of SAST, Dr Sibongiseni Mkhize:

She was fired for the speech she made during the opening of Dance Umbrella Africa, a collaboration project between SAST and Artscape. She made remarks that were untrue about Artscape, including wanting to challenge their board and accusing them of not having done their job in regards to publicising and marketing the event. The statements were untrue.³⁵⁸

Though both parties agree the dismissal was a response to Nyamza's remarks at Artscape, Nyamza refutes the theatre's assertion that her dismissal followed governmental procedures. Furthermore she insists that the theatre is using the remarks as a scapegoat when in truth they are persecuting her for her outspoken critiques of all institutions that do not respect their artists. In its formal response published on 11/29/2019, "Statement on Ms Mamela Nyamza," SAST retorted:

The SAST wants to place on record that Ms Nyamza's dismissal had nothing to do with the accusations that she and her associates have been making. While the SAST recognises and respects her right to freedom of expression, it is important that the statements are factual and not emotional. Ms Nyamza was subjected to a disciplinary process in accordance with the SAST's Disciplinary Code and the Labour laws of the

³⁵⁸ "Arts Industry in Shock after the Dismissal of SA State Theatre Deputy Director Nyamza," SowetanLIVE, accessed March 24, 2020, <https://www.sowetanlive.co.za/entertainment/2019-11-28-arts-industry-in-shock-after-the-dismissal-of-sa-state-theatre-deputy-director-nyamza/>.

Republic of South Africa.³⁵⁹

It is not my place to judge who is behaving lawfully in this situation. I can simply observe that the virtual discourse only seemed to mount tensions between the two parties.

For at least two months, Nyamza was advised by her lawyers to make no further comments on the issue. Once she entered a phase in the deliberation process where she was able to speak, she did not stop. In a letter to her public posted to her Facebook page, she explains that the abrupt nature of the dismissal made it particularly troubling not only because of how it disturbed her personal life, but because of how it rendered her paralyzed, unable to support the artists she was contracted to organize.

This is where it all started without a warning and led to a dismissal on 25th November 2019. On Friday the 18th October 2019 I was handed a suspension letter and with a disciplinary hearing at the same time. I was told to pack up and leave the building, and my laptop was confiscated with immediate effect. I was instructed not to communicate with any of the staff members, and to appear for a disciplinary hearing the following Tuesday. This statement serves the simple purpose of notifying you of current circumstances, and alerting you of the fact that I have been removed from all the projects I was in the process of curating... I am seeking legal, psychological and spiritual counsel to help me process and deal with the stress of these quiet violences and professional intrusions in my role.³⁶⁰

Describing her treatment as violence and indicating psychological suffering, Nyamza points to the ways that state-sponsored rhetoric has embodied consequences. This virtual tearing asunder of Dance Umbrella Africa would have ramifications in the real world.

Without the specific vision of Mamela Nyamza at the helm, dance artists wondered what participation in the festival would mean and if it would continue at all. Famed

³⁵⁹ “Arts Industry in Shock after the Dismissal of SA State Theatre Deputy Director Nyamza.”

³⁶⁰ “Mamela Nyamza.”

dancer and long-time participant Gregory Maqoma expressed this well in his Facebook post:

Mamela Nyamza took the reigns of curating Dance Umbrella Africa at a time when all hope was lost. Together with South African State Theatre, a home for contemporary dance to breed life, signaled change and hope. The news of her dismissal from the State Theatre sends a strong signal that the long battle to have a dance curator in a state funded institutions is not yet a settled matter... South African State Theatre engage us in this, please make us understand, as custodians of that festival, we deserve at the least the respect to be informed properly because we're back to a drawing board and without Mamela we clearly have no leadership for the Dance Umbrella Africa Festival. What now?³⁶¹

In his statement, Maqoma suggests how Nyamza's position was uplifting in two ways. First, she would be a queer Black woman in a position of power, and second, she would be a dance artist overseeing a variety of disciplines and projects at the theatre. This meant that finally a dancer's perspective would be critical to the vision for the theatre as a whole. This is rare in most university, public, and private theaters worldwide. He calls the decision drastic and points to how it has left the artistic community in limbo. Lastly, he asks the theatre itself to directly engage the artistic community – not to just inform them of actions already taken without their contribution. The theatre did not respond to his invitation to engage with the dance community. Rather, it stepped further away from it by rebranding the festival away from Nyamza's influence.

On January 30, 2020, the South African State Theatre announced publicly that it had changed the name of the Dance Umbrella Africa festival to Kucheza Afrika

³⁶¹ "Gregory Vuyani Maqoma," accessed March 26, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/gregory.maqoma>.

Festival.³⁶²d The choice to change the festival's name was perhaps inevitable though it was problematic because Georgina Thompson had in fact passed the festival on to Mamela Nyamza's leadership, not the SAST. As a result, some programmed artists have chosen not to participate in the 2020 Kucheza Afrika festival. The theatre has yet to assign an official replacement for Nyamza. Following her dismissal, leadership would come from the dance community itself. After the 2019 Dance Umbrella Africa festival, Nyamza started a Facebook group titled Friends of Dance Umbrella Africa 2020. On January 23rd, Nyamza changed its name to The Stolen Dance Umbrella 2020. The group that was designed to have its 1,446 past and current festival participants and their communities maintain communication and inspiration continues on but with a beleaguered tone. During the 2019 DUA, dance artists used performance to draw attention to homophobia, patriarchy, racism, and gender-based violence. Under Black lesbian leadership these works were supported and encouraged. Workshops centered Indigenous identity and methodologies for coming into being. Removing Mamela Nyamza from state leadership for defending these artists sent the message that these decolonial moves are not supported by the state. Ironically, dropping Nyamza catalyzed artists of all disciplines to call the South African government to task, using the memory and momentum of the #Fall movements.

³⁶² "SAST Dance Festival Continues Under New Name," Artslink, accessed March 24, 2020, http://www.artlink.co.za/news_article.htm?contentID=45999.

#Next Steps

Mobilizing participants through social media like the #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall movements, the South African dance community has used Nyamza's dismissal as an opportunity to organize and demand that the government redress its artists. On January 20th 2020, eight administrators and two moderators including Nyamza started the #I'm4TheArts page on Facebook and Twitter. In this virtual space, 16,604 members have ongoing discussions about the theatre's decision and their dismay over the state of the arts in South Africa in general. Their "About" page includes the following statement:

On Martin Luther King Day 2020, South African opera and indigenous jazz doyenne Sibongile Mngoma stood up and said "no more!"...South Africa's artists have had enough. So here we are! We want South African Arts to thrive. Driven to the brink of starvation, our nation's soul robbed of our offerings, we mean business. If we have to take the Minister of Arts and Culture to court, or anyone else, then SO BE IT. It is up to us, the arts-oriented citizenry to bring corrupt administrators to account and ensure access to funding for all - and we mean artists...We ARE the creative solution...The people we want to bring to book will not play nice...Let's reconstruct and make Madiba proud.³⁶³

Reminiscent of the #BalletMustFall manifesto, #I'm4TheArts purports to build solidarity amongst artists victimized by the stakeholders in the very field they created. By starting the statement invoking Martin Luther King and ending it invoking Nelson Mandela (Madiba), they partner human rights leadership with arts leadership. Both King and Mandela acted outside of the law to achieve rights for all citizens in their respective nations and I'm4theArts suggests that they too will enact civil disobedience and/or legal

³⁶³ "CALL-TO-ACTION – I'm4theArts," accessed March 24, 2020, <http://iam4thearts.org.za/call-to-action/>.

action to support and defend artists and art itself. Post-apartheid, artists are still having to negotiate their worth outside mechanisms of the state. What does this say about the state of decolonizing projects reliant upon governmental support?

Oscillating between real and virtual spaces, South African artists have used Nyamza's firing as spring board to mobilize beyond colonial notions of arts patronage and nepotism imported from Western Europe. As Nyamza's saga ensued, members of the I'm4theArts Facebook group posted their solidarity and shared similar stories of rebuke from arts institutions. On February 18th, Nyamza was required by lawyers of the SAST director to publicly apologize to him. She posted on her Facebook page: "...I don't have the type of money that backs Aubrey. One can truly apologize and retract their statements when one is truly apologetic and feel they were wrong. I am being bullied to apologize and retract my statements. So Aubrey.....I'm sorry..."³⁶⁴

In response, one member, Mbulelo Ndabeni utilizes the title, #istandwithmamela to offer,

In the past artists such as Mama Miriam Makeba challenged Apartheid, some people went to jail for practicing their art, expressing their views publicly etc. against opposition, corruption and evil systems which are still in place today and we're the ones who know or should know how it feels to be under a foot pretend that we have new systems in place now. It's the same imperial system guarded, protected and perpetrated by us. Wath'intumfazi wathint' uYehova ubuqu!³⁶⁵

Again, national heroes and national history are invoked in this challenge to the state theatre. Miriam Makeba is perhaps the most famous South African songstress, made

³⁶⁴ Mamela Nyamza, "Mamela Nyamza - I Received a Letter fromAttorneys on Behalf....," accessed March 24, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/mamela.nyamza/posts/10156615802966277>.

³⁶⁵ "CALL-TO-ACTION – I'm4theArts."

infamous through her stalwart anti-apartheid activism. The last sentence is the Zulu proverb, “You strike a woman, you strike a rock,” which recalls the Indigenous epistemology brought to the forefront of apartheid-era pass laws and misogyny in general. By juxtaposing these iconic people and phrases, Ndabeni incites a history of grassroots solidarity work that can serve as an example in the movement to support Nyamza and other embattled artists. Perhaps what the SAST did not foresee was that the dismissal of one person would not dismiss the community that supported her. As UCT professor and I’m4TheArts member Maxwell Xolani Rani posted, “They will bully you but not us, meaning the revolution still goes on.”³⁶⁶ In the true spirit of ubuntu, the I’m4TheArts Facebook group exemplifies the necessity of mutual respect and care between the interdependent artists, producers, and audiences of South Africa. Like the original festival born under apartheid, the new generation of Dance Umbrella artists have had to figure out how to survive outside of state representation or support.

Organizing for artists is not just a virtual activity. I’m4theArts members have extended the virtual space back to the live, inciting public discourse and debate and executing performance interventions just as participants of the Fall movements did. On February 17, 2020, I’m4theArts staged an intervention outside the Department of Arts and Culture in Tshwane. Nyamza donned gold body paint and a gold dress. She held up a set of gold scales as she had in her piece *Black Privilege*, only this time she was also standing on top of a bright pink ballet leotard and tutu. The Market Theatre Foundation CEO and former Artistic Director of the National Arts Festival Ismail Mahomed posted

³⁶⁶ “CALL-TO-ACTION – I’m4theArts.”

his reaction, which reveals details of the photo difficult to see online and details of the meeting with the Department of Sports, Arts and Culture and difficult to know without his insider reporting. Mahomed's statement echoes Nyamza's proposal at Artscape that led to her termination. Both maintain that it is the artist's job is to expose injustice and forge more socially conscious societies:

Mamela Nyamza's public artwork at the Department of Sports, Arts & Culture yesterday probably said more for the arts than what was discussed in an almost two-hour live-streamed meeting between artists and arts bureaucrats... Mamela Nyamza's Lady Justice had no blindfold... South African cultural history is rich with moments where artists have borne witnesses to injustices and through their eyes - expressed in poetry, music, dance, film, storytelling and theatre - the arts have contributed to righting the wrongs of our society by keeping our eyes open too.

Like the Transcollective members who organized with #RhodesMustFall and insisted on critiquing transphobic and patriarchal practices, Mahomed does not spare his own organization from critique. His post suggests that Nyamza's performance art moves through and beyond the grips of apartheid, while the bureaucratic process remains stagnant.

This was the essential message that the emissaries for the IAm4TheArts group failed to deliver in the boardroom. Rather than raising the scales of justice as high as in Mamela's public artwork and talking about how the arts are vital to ensuring that South Africa's constitutional democracy is sustained they went in to the meeting with their backs almost broken by carrying the scales of injustices that they seemed to have been burdened with for the last 25 years.³⁶⁷

In his astute analysis, Mahomed challenges the government to match the creativity of its artists in order to overcome its obstacles. He implores them to publicly address their own

³⁶⁷ "CALL-TO-ACTION – I'm4theArts."

shortcomings with regards to ample and ongoing support for artists and to act in a manner that is courageous and just. He asserts that “The economy of the arts has become a noose around the necks of artists.”³⁶⁸ Alluding to violence, he describes unofficial but state-sponsored censorship as a form of violence against artists keeping them from speaking out about the lack of resources, publicity, and payment as Nyamza spoke about in her address at Artscape. As Mahomed and Nyamza reveal part of the decolonial project is to implement the Indigenous ideology of art as sociality, politics, education, and transformation. By engaging one another in cyber space, at the nation’s administrative capital, and on stage, South Africa’s artists superseded their roles as entertainers and took on the roles of educators and activists. This is art as holistic praxis, which has always been fundamental to Indigenous epistemologies. Working with and beyond the nation-state, art activists utilized the decomposing Dance Umbrella Africa as a turning point to mobilize an increasingly outraged artist class.

Artists in Isolation

The future of decolonial moves at the South African State Theatre is threatened from several directions. By March of 2020, the State Theatre was hastily re-organizing the festival whilst embroiled in another controversy altogether as two staff members were accused of stealing over twenty-four million rand (around \$1,331,000 USD). This outright theft that went on for months unnoticed further insulted the artists who had labored for the SAST with little to no pay, and no financial or structural stability. As the

³⁶⁸ “Ismail Mahomed - The 7th of March Shall Be Choreographed... On...”

case went to court, a novel corona virus was spreading across the world, ultimately earning the dreaded label pandemic. In a March 2020 video post, Mamela Nyamza is wearing pink lace “thong” panties over her face like a guerrilla warrior’s mask. She calls on her viewers to take up the battle for the arts. The post is captioned “Corruption, Patronage and Nepotism are social viruses against empowerment of the arts and artists. All theatres of the state must be quarantined and cleansed just like the corona virus. #im4thearts #artistslivesmatter #weexist #pestcontrol!!! #stopsexualharrasmentinthearts”³⁶⁹ Sharply contrasting calls to stay home and keep distant from others, Nyamza’s video proposes that this is not a time to pause or retract but a time to draw attention to interconnectivity - ubuntu. For Nyamza, the Covid-19 crisis is not separate from the movement to vindicate the arts and artists. It is now that artists are in their most precarious state, as productions are all cancelled, overdue artist fees go ignored with a new excuse, yet artists’ bills keep piling up. Her video insists on Indigenous epistemology by suturing performance to survivance, individual vindication to collective victory.

In a calm and even nurturing voice she says, “Hello everyone. To stay away from corruption, nepotism, and patronage in the arts, and to also prevent corona, please wear your underwear and tie it to the back to be safe during the march today.” According to her page, on March 15, 2020, artists all over the country marched or stood in protest at important sites to perform and demonstrate in favor of more funding and support for the

³⁶⁹ Mamela Nyamza, “Mamela Nyamza,” accessed March 24, 2020, https://www.facebook.com/mamela.nyamza/videos/vb.709051276/10156677334916277/?type=2&video_source=user_video_tab.

arts. With pink panties straddling her face and a pink tutu on her waste, Nyamza raised her right arm up holding a sign that read, “#I’m4theArts #ArtistsLivesMatter.”³⁷⁰ Connecting the #BlackLivesMatter movement to end racist police brutality in the United States to the movement to end corruption in South African arts industry, Nyamza demonstrated an international Blackness defined by the radical and artistic embodiment of interdependence. Just as the Dance Umbrella Africa festival engaged performance, education, and activism, the movements that have been formed in its wake manifest personal and social transformation through presence, witness, and movement. Ubuntu is revealed as an artistic and social methodology for Indigenous creativity and survival. With many aspects of daily life at a stand-still, the South African State Theatre has a chance to rethink if it will move towards or away from the decoloniality initiated by Dance Umbrella Africa.

³⁷⁰ “Mamela Nyamza.”

Conclusion **Every End is a Beginning**

Throughout this dissertation I have been concerned with South Africa's decolonial moves twenty-five years after its liberation from apartheid. At times I have staggered between the cultural/racial identifiers Indigenous and Black just as the country frequently renames its people and places. My use of Indigeneity points to global lifeways founded on the conscious connection to land and its living beings, whereas Blackness reminds us of the trespass of coloniality that, all across the world, made native people foreigners in their own homes. Blackness is also a clue to origin and the glue holding together the African diaspora through practices of resilience and resistance such as dance. Whilst each term is insufficient on its own, placing these identifiers in conversation with one another, they are revealed as constructs that can be co-opted in service of decolonial moves on the continent and in diaspora.

In Chapter One I examined steps and missteps in decolonizing arts and education institutions. The #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall student-led movements catalyzed a national conversation on decolonizing the country that included and transcended ongoing debates about land redistribution. I found that, like with land, decolonizing activism, education, and the arts must center Indigeneity in representation and methodology. Chapter Two analyzed how Mamela Nyamza's choreography *Hatched* remembers Black queer women in the face of historic and ongoing racist and gender-based violence by using Indigenous world making techniques such as storytelling, hearthold making, survivance and ancestor invocation. *Black Privilege* recalls African women's

opulence *and* objectification, performing this Blackness as a way to (re)map African women's place on the stage beyond colonialist exploitation. In Chapter Three *Dada Masilo's Giselle* demonstrated how Africana aesthetics can decolonize even ballet by infiltrating the narrative with a distinctly African feminism, and engaging non-normative sexualities and African sociality. After examining what happens onstage from my seat in the audience, Chapter Four went backstage, into the studio, just outside the bar, and into cyberspace to locate decolonial moves at the 2019 Dance Umbrella Africa festival. Again, Indigeneity as methodology was important to understand how the country's Black artists negotiate their identities in and outside of the state theatre. The ubuntu philosophy that 'I am because we are' manifested in collaborative diasporic pedagogy and a willingness for artists to support one another in challenging the state when it did not reciprocate the love and care of its artists.

In each chapter, the notion that dance is a technique for creating one's self in the witness of others is key to understanding the deeply internalized and necessarily collective process of decolonization. Through performance, Black South African dance artists continue this tradition of reformation bringing new meaning to the national motto of transformation. Though the South African state arguably transformed from an apartheid state to a capitalist state neglecting its most vulnerable citizens, transformation as an artistic practice still holds relevance for contemporary choreographers seeking to forge their identities in the post-colonial, post-apartheid space. With no particular end in sight, this cycle of undoing and becoming unravels linear time to expose a tangled mess of possibilities. It is my assertion that decolonizing South African contemporary dance

means centering interdependence as a strategy for innovation that builds on the efforts of Black consciousness, gender liberation and #Fall movements. By recognizing the equal vitality of seeing and being seen, doing and undoing, contemporary African dance performance is perhaps the consummate site to reveal the possibilities of decolonial world-making in all of its messy entanglements.

The Covid-19 pandemic is inciting conversations about the kind of world we want to return to or re-create. With stay-at-home orders extending indefinitely, dance artists are already experiencing a devastating lack of work that decreases or terminates income and severely impacts their ability to process the growing confusion, fear and grief. The inability to regenerate self in the live witness of others will undoubtedly have psycho-spiritual repercussions. Festivals already suffering from a lack of funding will either adapt or expire. It is possible that the forced separation from dance performance will be just the thing to draw audiences back to theatres once they open. For now, the National Arts Festival 2020 will be held online this summer, allowing me to enjoy many of the performances from home when I would not have been able to afford to otherwise. I look forward to seeing how dance will decipher decoloniality in the digital realm. Will queer Black women move to the center or the periphery of performance in cyber space?

I hope that the publication of my performance analyses featured in chapters Two and Three will contribute to the growing body of Dance Studies scholarship bridging the tradition and contemporaneity of African dance artists' lived experiences. I recently accepted a position as a Lecturer of Modern and African Diaspora Dance at the University of West Indies Cave Hill. The first question asked during the interview by

professor of African sagacity, Frederick Ochieng'-Odhiambo was, "What is African Dance and what is Modern dance and are they different?" This question was in fact one of the first I attempted to address in my reading list with Dr. Kraut and may continue to address for the rest of my life. As an educator, scholar and practitioner I require that the study of dance in Africa be guided by African epistemologies that take into account the pre-colonial past *and* the ways Africans move through and beyond the events of colonialism. I hope this project will exemplify how some core traditional African aesthetics are in fact the basis of modern dance: abstraction, gender fluidity, feminism, groundedness, and a tendency towards reform of self and structure based on a response to immediate circumstances. This understanding can help place Indigeneity back at the center of modernity rather than its perceived opposite.

I started my study of contemporary dance in South Africa with Black women as the inheritors of intersectional oppression and the nation's first people. In my next project I would like to examine the role of dance for the Coloured population, especially in the social dance realm of the mid-1900's. I was inspired by a visit to the National Archives in 2018 when a preliminary search for photos, videos, or periodicals using the search term 'dance' revealed only a collection of 1950's black and white photographs of couples and groups dancing and merry-making at Coloured balls, or costumed revelers parading through the streets during the new year's celebration that has been known as the Coon Carnival, the Cape Town Minstrel Carnival, or Kaapse Klopse. I would like to pursue research into how South Africa's Coloured population has been historically situated through dancing bodies. From Kaapse Klopse originating in the colonial era, to ballroom

and swing dancing of the post-war era, Coloured South Africans with mixed ethnic backgrounds represented distinctly urban and hybrid social dance communities. Through music and dance, they generated practices that both defied apartheid's divisions and benefited from light-skinned privilege. Several ethnomusicologists have studied the historic role of Coloured music, and sociologists have theorized the regulation of Coloured people in public spaces, but there is little analysis of the particular movements and what they can tell us about the fluid dynamics of race, gender, sexuality, and class in Coloured communities. As this dissertation demonstrates, dancing can mobilize politics while creating fluid forms of identity. Examining the cultural practices of a race that embodies liminal space can reveal what decolonial moves look like when the dancing bodies hold memories from both sides of the war and live in between them.

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