

*The Postcolonial Matri-archive:
Re-Dancing Memories, Disseminating Choreographies*

The dancing Body-Installation of Nelisiwe Xaba

This paper is a stratification of thoughts, voices and bodies that emerge from an imagined matri-archive; conceived as a privileged source of methodological analysis, a re-figured space of creative deposition where female agency appears. My attempt is to refigure the archive chime with other postcolonial interventions, bringing to bear on ‘archive’ an interrogation similar to that which concepts like ‘canon’ or ‘orientalism’ have undergone in the theoretical framework of Cultural and Postcolonial Studies.¹ Positioning myself at the crossroads of Dance Studies and deconstruction, I imagine to consult and to investigate a space of hospitality where women are the ‘archons’: they “commence” and “command” their body writing; they innervate the “conservation” and the “destruction” of body knowledge;² they re-act against the dominant “laws” transmitted by the Western patriarchal system of dance composition;³ they use their body-scape as a site of contested memory; they affect the dissemination of traditional choreo-graphic gestures and re-inscribe the contemporary scene with new embedded body languages.

My inquiry around the archive relies on a gender-critical perspective so as to be able to investigate the ‘turn’ and the ‘return’ to a choreographic memory, in order to exploit the emergence of female spaces of critical-creative belonging, where unfixed and fluid forms of agency can be engendered, and where nomadic politics of body affirmation are to be materialized. While dance keeps struggling to come to terms with its own ephemerality,⁴ I am interested in the “remains” – as defined by Rebecca Schneider – or the “detritus” – in Mathew Reason’s notion – of a cultural dance event inside the

¹ See C. Hamilton, at. all, eds by, *Refiguring the Archive*, Dordrecht/Boston/London, Kluwer Academic Publisher, 2002.

² J. Derrida, *Archive Fever. A Freudian Impression*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1996.

³ See M. Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge and Discourse on Language*, New York, Panyheon, 1972; Christie Adair, *Women and Dance, Sylphs and Sirens*, New York, New York University Press, 1992.

⁴ See among the many: S. Franco, M. Nordera, *Ricordanze. Memoria in movimento e coreografie della storia*, Torino, UTET Università, 2010.

corporality of the dancer, and within the perception of the audience. In this respect, I try to investigate ‘whether’ and ‘how’ the choreographic language of a specific subjectivity – ‘choreographed’, controlled, mapped, sexualized, racialized, orientalist etc. by colonial discourses – survives, migrates and disseminates, from an ‘original’ environment to another hybrid space and temporality.

Against the backdrop of these interests, here I consult the memories released by the body-archive of Nelisiwe Xaba a contemporary South African artist who – on the edges of performance art and of dance, in between the use of in-visible and hyper-visible masks and corporeal stratifications – exploits the transformative power of her female body. In her solo pieces, she investigates the experimental and sarcastic use of costumes, props and scenography; before the audience she alters her matter-figure-identity and dis-covers herself becoming a ‘body-installation’. In her choreographic technique-poetics, Xaba negotiates and overexposes, assembles and disseminates, different body memories, with the purpose of challenging – re.archiving – the Eurocentric sexual and racial stereotypes layered on, and embodied by, the female body – and not only on the African female body. I will briefly draw my attention to Xaba’s solos devoted to the figure of Saartjie Baartman – the young South African woman better known as the so-called ‘Hottentot Venus’. For this project, comprehensive of two solos and a new site-specific work created for the South African Pavilion at the Venice Biennale 2013, Xaba designs her body-installation: a long white skirt turns into a screen animated by ironic video projections (*They Look at Me and That’s All They Think*, 2008); while the manipulation of a black leather bustier transmutes her physicality into a ‘beast’ who counter-dances on the contemporary postcolonial stage/cage (*Sarkozy says NON to the Venus*, 2009).

Here, the postcolonial matri-archive, also becomes a performing site of post-apartheid restoration for the collective memory of black women, whose voices, bodies and movements have often been marginalized the most by colonialism and apartheid and excluded from dominant accounts of history. Baartman’s story is one of the scopic obsession with racial identity: her journey across the ocean, intended to satisfy the curiosity of Europeans, served to enforce mental barriers and the technologies of modern scientific, ethnographic and anthropological discourses. Initially a living ‘document’ attesting the sexual lasciviousness attributed to black women, she is now an icon of postcoloniality and the

regeneration of a post-apartheid national cultural identity. In the postcolonial matri-archive inclusive space, Baartman's corporeality – her spectre, her “unburied body” – has become a focal point of reference for contemporary female black artists.⁵ The augmenting matrix of artistic experiences, which take the shape of poetical *revenants*,⁶ give her agency back and perform re-signified corporeal graphics – an example is provided by the dancing memories liberated by Nelisiwe Xaba.

Re-dancing The Venus

Born in Soweto, Nelisiwe Xaba studied at the Johannesburg Dance Foundation. In 1996 she received a grant for the *Ballet Rambert* in London where her diasporic experience of moving from South Africa to Britain and thence to other continents, began. The same year, she went on to work with the *Soweto Street Beat Dance Company*. A year later she joined the *Pact Dance Company*, turned freelance and started working with well-known choreographers like South African Robyn Orlin, one of South Africa's most controversial and provocative choreographers and performance artists. She also encountered visual art by collaborating with Rodney Place (*Couch Dancing*, 1998) and experienced contemporary drama with the French actress and director Sophie Loucachevsky in a work of confusion and sex change (*The Homosexual or the Difficulty of Expression*, 2003). In 2008, Xaba collaborated with Haitian dancer and choreographer Ketty Noël to create a duet titled *Correspondances* – a satirical look into the politics of women to women relationships. Theatre, dance and visual art are completed by poetry in Xaba's cooperation with Lesego Rampolokeng in *Bantu Ghosts* (2009), a spoken word performance conceived as a tribute to the South African hero Steve Bantu Biko.

Since 1998, Nelisiwe Xaba has launched a solo career as dancer and choreographer; in her pieces she incorporates costume animation, music and dance; she makes extensive use of video projection technology to create multiple live recorded and pre-recorded images.⁷ Her experimental theatre-dance is imaginative, provocative and political: her skin colour and sexuality are the main weapons for her

⁵ See D. Willis, ed. by, *Black Venus – 2010, They Called Her “Hottentot”*, Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 2010; in this collection of essays aimed at deconstructing the ‘Hottentot Venus’ figure, Zine Magubane also argues that “although most studies that discuss Baartman are scrupulous in their use of words like ‘invented’, ‘constructed’, ‘ideological’, in their practice they valorise the very ground of biological essentialism they purport to deconstruct.” – “Which Bodies Matter? Feminism, Post-structuralism, Race, and the Curious Theoretical Odyssey of the ‘Hottentot Venus’”, in D. Willis, p. 48.

⁶ J. Derrida, *The Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, New York, Routledge, 1994.

⁷ *Plasticization* (2007); *Black!..White?* (2009), *Uncles and Angels* (2013).

challenging works. From slavery to apartheid, from colonial to contemporary times, the black female body has been associated with negative stereotypes produced in order to establish racial and sexual difference and maintain white male supremacy. Xaba re-dances and re-archives some of these fixed images, articulated on the South African body and more specifically on the body memory of the ‘Hottentot Venus’.

Monsieur Cuvier investigates
between my legs, coking, prodding,
sure of his hypothesis.
I half expect him to pull silk
scarves from inside me, paper poppies, then a rabbit!
He complains
at my scent and does not think
I comprehend [...]
– Elizabeth Alexander

In the nineteenth century, Sarah or Saartjie Baartman was cruelly exhibited and objectified by scientific experts and by the European colonial gaze because of her ‘unusual physiognomy’ and particularly her genitalia and buttocks. In Europe, the alterity of all black females was constructed and ‘choreographed’ on the iconography of this ‘other’ body:

The “primitive” genitalia of these women were defined by European commentators as the sign of their “primitive” sexual appetites. Thus, the black female became the antithesis of European sexual mores and beauty and was relegated to the lowest position on the scale of human development. The image of the black female constructed in this period reflected everything the white female was not.⁸

Stereotypes based on racial and sexual difference are made in order to control and regulate the behaviour of those rendered ‘other’. When she re-dances Sarah Baartman, Xaba resists the concept of fixity described by Homi Bhabha as the ideological construction of otherness during colonial times: “Fixity, as the sign of cultural/historical racial difference in the discourse of colonialism, is a paradoxical mode of representation; it connotes rigidity and an unchanging order as well as disorder, degeneracy and demonic repetition”.⁹ Xaba’s body translates Sarah Baartman’s story into an autobiographic vision of the black African woman’s body today, caught between invisibility and hypervisibility, perfection and imperfection. By re-dancing the objectified sexual image of the black female body, she interrogates the voyeurism of colonial confrontations with ‘the exotic’, staging the ambivalence of the stereotype made

⁸ E. M. Hammonds, “Toward a Genealogy of Black Female Sexuality: The Problematic of Silence”, in M. J. Alexander and C. T. Mohanty, eds., *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures*, New York and London, Routledge, 1997, p. 172.

⁹ H. K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, London and New York, Routledge, 1994, p. 94.

of “power and desire”, “presence and absence”, and exposing the erotic obsession that lies at the heart of colonialism.¹⁰

In my approach to Xaba’s work, the ‘re-’ prefix serves as a kind of prop for my analysis. When applied to her performative act of re-dancing a memory, it suggests her endeavour to express ‘other’ meanings, to re-archive and oppose resistance to the dominant discourses produced and stored on/into the black female body, and experienced by various groups of black women at different historical moments. What emerges is a very personal choreographic language, aimed at deconstructing the categories that have framed the African female ‘body-continent’ into an essentialist and Eurocentric perspective. In a global vision, Xaba re-dances themes of racial stereotyping, gender opposites and cultural perceptions that may be shared by different races and nationalities. In a more local vision, the act of re-dancing stereotypes is understood as the act of elaborating a new image for the South African blackness. Through the act of re-dancing, she challenges and ‘defers’ the audience’s gaze, whether black or white, European or African, directing it towards other visions and re-visions; and, on the performing act of “re-vision”, the feminist voice of Adrienne Rich comes up from the matri-archive: “Re-vision – the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction – is for woman more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival.”¹¹

The Venus is a combination of two of her solos: *They Look at Me and That is All They Think*, explicitly points out how ‘looking at’ may be perceived as a form of ‘possessing’ and foregrounds issues of control – of “power/knowledge” –¹² over the display of the body. Xaba performs in a large crinoline skirt, designed by Carlo Gibson from the Strange Love fashion label; the work centres on this exaggerated garment, at one point it is transformed into a screen on which satirical animations are projected. The costume becomes integral to her body’s expression, the extension of her skin, another strata of her body-surface. She plays and acts a series of tasks to do with the objects at her disposal or moved in a parody of the dance style to which they refer.¹³ Choreographing a ‘body-installation’ she assumes different shapes on the stage, she continually changes in appearance transmogrifying her

¹⁰ *Ibidem*.

¹¹ A. Rich, *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose 1966-1978*.

¹² M. Foucault, “The eye of power”, in C. Gordon, ed. by, *Power/Knowledge, selected interview and other writings, 1972-1977*, Brighton, Harvester Press, 1980.

¹³ To see some scenes: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6VDFIbCwK_k.

corporeality in curious and grotesque forms. Indeed, what is evident is Xaba's intention to crack the virtuosity of the ideal classical dancing body; the ironic movements, which escape from any regulation, style or law, drive the audience to confront the perfect and trained dancing body with its opposite: the grotesque body. Thinking upon a similar subversive strategy, Mary Russo refers to Michail Bakhtin's theory in order to investigate the transformative power, always in becoming, of a corporeality: "The grotesque body is the open, protruding, extended, secreting body, the body of becoming, process, and change. The grotesque body is opposed to the classical body, which is monumental, static, closed and sleek, [...]; the grotesque body is connected to the rest of the world."¹⁴

Nelisiwe Xaba keeps on recalling Sarah Baartman's spectre in *Sarkozy says NoN to the Venus*, originally commissioned by the Musée du Quai Branly in 2009. It is a more overtly political work: the piece is a comment on European immigration laws and policies, which have become increasingly anti-African. The title refers to the Sarkozy government's policy to give immigrants 6000 euros to leave France. Here Xaba performs into a well-defined space, a sort of in-visible cage that reminds the audience of the captivity experienced by Baartman when she was exhibited naked in a cage between England and France. The mimicry of traditional Zulu dance patterns, the mocking exposition of what the audience would like to see with her body, establish the "reverse ethnography" apparatus, according to which the cage becomes a blank screen onto which audiences project their fantasies of 'who' and 'what' she is.¹⁵ As she assumes the stereotypical role of the domesticated savage, many audience members feel entitled to assume the role of colonizer, only to find themselves uncomfortable with the implications of the game.¹⁶

In the echo of the postcolonial filmmaker and Vietnamese scholar Trinh T. Minh-ha,¹⁷ in this matri-archival exercise, I do not intend to "speak about" Xaba's memories, but "speaking nearby" her, in so doing I asked the dancer a few questions about *The Venus*:

¹⁴ M. Russo, *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess, and Modernity*, New York, Routledge, 1995, p. 8.

¹⁵ M. De Chiara, *Oltre la gabbia, ordine coloniale e arte di confine*, Roma, Meltemi, 2005, p. 52.

¹⁶ Referring to the *savage* dance, in this historical matri-archive, emerges the subversive corporality of Josephine Baker, whose performative memory has been consulted and depicted, for example, as a "body-museum" by Terri Francis: "She is a body-museum in that her dance is an assemblage of exotic dances, emphasizing her conceptual influence rather than contradicting it. As a star, she was not only famous but she functioned as a figure of recognition. She was a cultural institution, a museum that represented cultural structures of the black Diaspora community" (T. Francis, "Sighting the 'Real' Josephine Baker, Methods Issues of Black Star Studies" in D. Willis, *Black Venus – 2010*, cit., p. 208).

Too see Xaba's performance: <http://vimeo.com/64708024>.

¹⁷ T. T. Minh-ha *Reassamblage*, film-doc, 1982.

AP: *Nelisiwe, could you introduce your provocative performances (“They Look at Me and That is All They Think” – “Sarkozy says NoN to the Venus”) by referring to the costumes and accessories you use to stage the visibility and hyper-visibility of your dancing body-installation?*

NX: Yes, the two pieces, are opposites and complementary at the same time. When I create a piece, I probably have one idea that I want to explore, or maybe I look at a subject and want to explore that subject. In this case it was clear that I wanted to do Sarah Baartman, but not telling only her story, but using my history as a performer who always has to go out and perform in foreign places. So, the first thing was that I wanted to play with an object. Carlo Gibson is the designer who made the skirt. I approached him and said I wanted him to make me a skirt that we can open and then it becomes a screen. I already knew I wanted to project something around the politics of hair. ... So Carlo made the skirt and only when the skirt was finished we started to make the piece. When he arrived with the skirt we were both, like: “Wow, we’ve created a monster, what we are going to do with it?!!” It had so many possibilities. I started to ask myself how I’d manage with the skirt. How tell the skirt what to do? Actually what became interesting for me was how my body has to manage with this object. That’s always my interest: how my body has to manage with the objects, with the props; and then in that process my body finds a new language.

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

NX: In South Africa now politically Sarah Baartman has become a symbol for woman’s liberation, even though she was not a feminist, she was a normal person, but this is what she represents. What is interesting is the perspective and the context: Sarah’s body, or in general the South African black female body, in South Africa it’s not exotic. Probably for South Africans my body is exotic. It is a funny thing, my body in a South African context is exotic because I am not big... no, not exotic: exotic is attractive, can be attractive, but in South Africa my body’s not exotic and it’s not attractive either. ...I try to interrogate imperfection in the dance context. ...When I did “They look at me...” especially the video part, it was to challenge the stereotypes of beauty, the Eurocentric standards of beauty, that you’re beautiful only when you have Eurocentric features, that is: you have to have a long hair, long nose, or you have to be light in complexion, etc. This is problematic, especially in the black community because this is how the black mind also starts to look at you, how we start to look at ourselves.... So, for me the problem ... it’s how Africans then view themselves, or how we look at ourselves, and how that becomes a standard of how we see black beauty. In my works I try to question this view... My work is based around feminism but I am not crying or thinking that I can’t survive because I am a woman, and I’m not saying that being a woman is difficult, though it can be very hard sometimes. I don’t live my life thinking life is difficult because I am a woman! There are stereotypes everywhere. What I try to do with my work is to interrupt stereotypes imagined on the female body, and not only on the African female body.¹⁸

¹⁸ A. Piccirillo, “Speaking with Nelisiwe Xaba. Re-dancing a Body, Re-imagining a Continent”, *Anglistica Journal*, 15, 1 (2011), http://www.anglistica.unior.it/sites/anglistica/files/09_Piccirillo_2%5B1%5D.pdf

The renowned postcolonial scholar Stuart Hall states that: “In the ritual exchange of stereotypes around the body between race, gender and sexuality, racism had deployed its most violent and destructive fantasies. This could not be undone by simply reversing the terms, whereby in a single move ‘black’ became ‘beautiful’ – a strategy of positive imagery, which was briefly tried but proved inadequate. Instead of subverting a system of representation, reversal leaves it intact.”¹⁹ What he claims is, therefore, not just to vary the stereotype, but also to deconstruct it from within: entering the terrain of a dangerous, unguaranteed politics of representation. Nelisiwe Xaba’s body-surface – what Franz Fanon called “the epidermal schema” –²⁰ emerges as a mark and a ground of resistance from which alternative counter-memories and counter-dances can be engendered. When she re-dances *The Venus*, Xaba consults and re-signifies the corporeal schema embedded on Sarah Baartman’s physicality to elaborate new patterns of corporeal assemblages – new practices of epidermalisation. Becoming a dancing body-installation, she begins to constitute new subjectivities, new positions of enunciation and identification to be registered in the postcolonial matri-archive *a-venir*. Taking her body as a grotesque ‘canvas’, as an animated ‘screen’, or as an overexposed ‘frame’, she re-writes Baartman story in a new choreography/auto-biography:

From this practice of re-signification – this new politics of the black signifier – has flowed [...] the astonishing formal diversity, of much recent black art work. [...] Often, this process consists of the artist taking his or her own body as the ‘canvas’, light-sensitive ‘frame’ or ‘screen’, so that the work of translation and re-appropriation is literally a kind of ‘re-writing of the self on the body’, a re-epidermalisation, an auto-graphy.²¹

Disseminating Choreographies

I rely on the methodological concept of “dissemination”, offered by the French-Algerian philosopher Jacques Derrida, to explain how choreography – behind and beyond its differences, historical traditions or multiple styles – can be defined as a system of signs and memories which is always already ‘differed’ and ‘dislocated’ in time and space.²² I unfold the deconstructionist trope in order to discuss the

¹⁹ S. Hall, *Black Diaspora Artists in Britain: Three ‘Moments’ in Post-war History*, <http://www.nagc.bb/SiteAssets/SHALLARTICLE.pdf>.

²⁰ F. Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, New York, Grove Press, 1967.

²¹ S. Hall, “The After-life of Frantz Fanon: Why Fanon? Why Now? Why Black Skin, White Masks?”, in A. Read, ed by, *The Fact of Blackness: Frantz Fanon and Visual Representation*, ICA-Institute of Contemporary Arts and International Visual Arts, London, 1996, p. 27.

²² J. Derrida, *Dissemination*, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1981.

plurivocal drives or energies of the choreographic languages that disseminate themselves, let their meanings/memories proliferate, and keep as many possibilities open as it is possible to imagine.

In terms of choreographic composition, Xaba's body-archive seems to dislocate the multiple memory, traditions and styles, she has absorbed in her training, collaborations and experiences around South Africa, Europe and United States. The performance languages of some traditional African or South African dance forms – Zulu dance, Reed dance, Gumboot and Mapantsula – are continually renegotiated in the codified techniques of western ballet, contemporary dance or burlesque; what comes out is not the 'harmonic' fusion of different cultures and traditions, but the ghostly and uncanny composition of "incalculable choreographies" – disseminated in their memories and meanings.²³ Through the creative exploration of other physical, aesthetic, technological and material possibilities, she liberates her incorporated memory traces in a new and unstable system of signs on the contemporary stage. Possibly, she rejects any categorization of her work and any label that could fix her language – although her choreo-*graphy* carries the signature of her personal way of being African and being contemporary.

Re.inscribing; re.envisioning; re.figuring; re.framing; re.incorporating – the act of going back to take up again, is a technical and poetical strategy used by Xaba to escape mainly from the context of black vitality and fusion virtuosity: she refuses to display her corporality as powerful, energetic and eclectic as usually are expected to be contemporary South African dancers and performers. Instead of vigorous leaps, pirouettes and rolls – or indeed, 'pleasing' dance language of any kind – the audience is engaged by slow movements and "minoritarian" sequences of actions that continually interrogate the 'dance-as-movement' assumed ontology.²⁴ The compositional strategy of choreographing "still acts" recalls the dance's exhaustion argued by André Lepecki when he opens up an ontological critique on contemporary experimental dance "being-toward-movement".²⁵ Xaba's investigation of (im-)mobility and non-kinetic elements on the stage is intrinsic to her corporeal desire to move – move away from

²³ J. Derrida, C. McDonald, "Choreographies', An Interview with Jacques Derrida", *Diacritics*, Vol. 12, n. 2 (1982).

²⁴ See G. Deleuze, F. Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, London, Athlone Press, 1987.

²⁵ A. Lepecki, *Exhausting Dance, Performance and Politics of Movement*, London-New York, Routledge, 2005.

categories, labels and stereotypes that she uncannily repeats, differentiate and disseminates in her choreographies. Talking about her inclusion/exclusion in the ‘Contemporary African’ dance industry, in those words she expresses her doubts:

Yes, I belong – whether I want to or not – in the ‘Contemporary African’ industry. But at the same time, when I see what is contained in this market I don’t want to belong to it, I want to run away. I try to re-imagine this market but it’s a big fight. Sometimes we had to be in this African contemporary box together with other African choreographers; I find it an insult to be put in a box with other people... It sounds arrogant, but I take it as an insult. I go to these festivals and I come back home thinking: “Why am I in this, why do I belong to this?”

In the subversive will to re-archive her identitarian positionality, I see the innervated ability of Xaba’s creations to deconstruct the patri-archival orders and principles which have commanded and transmitted distorted images and movements on the black female corporeality – what she releases in our memory is the continuous dissemination of choreographic traces which lead us towards new critical, political and poetical practice of re.archiving blackness. And my I(-eye) consulting this matri-archive and confronting this otherness – “It is me, I, with the other, the other within me, it’s one gender going into the other, one language going through the other” –²⁶ can only recognize the interconnectedness of ‘our’ embodied histories without erasing the importance of difference; I can only state the urgency that alternative visions require alternative archives.

²⁶ H. Cixous, “Difficult Joys”, *The Body and the Text*, New York, St. Martin’s Press 1990, p. 14.