Chapter Two

Being African

When I hear people talking of African dance or Africans, I don’t understand what they’re talking about. Which Africa are they talking about?

(Augusto Cuvilas, artistic director of Projecto Cuvilas, Mozambique)\(^1\)

Contemporary performing artists often create art in order to overturn assumed notions of what is an acceptable version of identity. Their work serves to unsettle taken for granted social norms. This is true for Maqoma. The previous chapter introduced him in this vein in relation to South African society and the climate of performing arts in that context. This chapter examines what it is about his work that places him in the position of social commentator. The focus here is specifically on the ambiguity and complexity of identity, in particular African identity. What this chapter reveals is how difficult it is to define this slippery term, and more importantly the tensions that emerge when contradictory versions of its meaning clash.

This is clearly illustrated in the example of the World Summit for Sustainable Development (WSSD) opening ceremony held in Johannesburg in 2000. In this example we see the tensions between different representations of Africa on the public stage. Conflicts arise between institutions of official culture and those working outside of these establishments. These are issues about what it means to be African and about who decides. Maqoma and his work pose a challenge to these official representations. The reason Maqoma is seen as a threat is because his work cannot be neatly packaged. The question then is what is acceptably African and what kind of African identity Maqoma creates while at the same time working against the norm.

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\(^1\) Talk at the 7th Jomba! Contemporary Dance Conference, *African Contemporary dance? Questioning issues of a performance aesthetic for a developing and independent continent* (September 2004)
The opening ceremony of the World Summit for Sustainable Development

The WSSD was hosted in Johannesburg in 2000. The contrast between the opening ceremony of this event and Maqoma’s choreography illustrates the friction between different representations of Africa. The choreography that the organising events company chose for this national celebration presented an idealised image, and one that fits into Mbeki’s ‘African Renaissance’ and South Africa as the cradle of humankind. The final product showcased a history of the earth, which according to the choreographer was created to match the themes of the summit. The show opened with impressive circles of about 60 drummers positioned at different levels of the three-dimensional multi-tiered map of Africa that was the 17 metre-high set. They were surrounded by smatterings of dry grass and a watering hole at centre stage. Opera and jazz singer Sibongile Khumalo, in a glittering blue ball-gown, sang a tribute to water after two dancers performed a duet portraying wind. There was an Indian flame dance, a mass choir singing harmonies about the earth, and a violin solo against a backdrop of images of destruction projected onto the surface of a white globe eight metres in diameter. The intended climax came with rows of joyful children in jeans and brightly coloured t-shirts holding hands and singing songs of hope for a brighter tomorrow. Seirlis described this as:

*We are the World* kitsch; Michael Jackson meets the UN.

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2 Personal communication, Johannesburg, 18 July 2003
3 Personal communication, Johannesburg, 23 November 2005
Maqoma described this as:

an attempt at fusion, but done in a way that is so planned that it doesn’t symbolise South Africa. It’s what our Nationalist government has created, that people never come together, and we perpetuate it.

In many ways the decision of the WSSD committee was bourgeois. It chose a cultural representation that would not be threatening. It was the epitomy of kitsch; a safe, idyllic picture of a fake multiculturalism. Kundera (1984, 248) describes kitsch as an “aesthetic ideal” where “shit is denied and everyone acts as though it did not exist”. He explains:

kitsch causes two tears to flow in quick succession. The first tear says: how nice to see children running on the grass! The second tear says: how nice to be moved, together with all mankind, by children running on the grass! (ibid: 251)

The approach that Maqoma resists is the sentimentality of this second tear. In contrast to the attempt at presenting a harmonious Africa rising out of a conflicted past, the 1999 choreography that Maqoma submitted was a lot more layered in its style and meaning. This work is a mix of black popular dance forms such as pantsula, and contemporary European movements performed to kwai̇to5 music. The theme of this choreography is youth culture in which the dancers explore issues of safety and abuse, and the boundaries of self-expression. In one scene of the original version, four dancers cram themselves into one glamorous ball gown that was originally worn by the single female performer. Maqoma explains, “she felt she owned it but it’s too big”. Through this he is asking:

do you have to keep what you have on your own, or is what you have enough to feed the whole world?7.

Maqoma’s choreography was excluded from this ceremony. He was told that this was because the events company that organised it thought his work was “not African enough”. What is not African about it and who decides? At the Jomba! conference in Durban held in 20048, this was included on a general level as one of the key questions to

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4 Personal communication, Johannesburg, 20 August 2004
5 *Kwaito* is a hybrid form of popular South African music, blending American hip-hop with European house, disco, and raga sounds. It also mixes township slang called *tsotsitaal* and other South African languages (Stephens 2000: 256)
6 The company for which this work was created have asked for it to remain unnamed. During the interviews that I conducted around this issue many practitioners had asked to remain anonymous.
7 Personal communication, Johannesburg, 16 July 2003
8 Jomba!, the brainchild of choreographer and teacher Lliane Loots, is an annual dance festival held in Durban. The conference was added for the first time in 2004 so that dance practitioners from around Africa
be addressed. In her introduction to the session entitled *Defining a contemporary African dance aesthetic – can it be done?*, prominent journalist Adrienne Sichel stated:

I’m pretty sure that every choreographer sitting at this table – at some time or another – has been told that their work is not African or African enough and that’s part of the cultural conundrum that creative and performing artists in Africa face.

This shows that the idea that being African is something set and easily definable is problematic. As Congolese choreographer Faustin Linyekula poetically expresses:

‘Africa’ or ‘identity’ is not a fixed point. It’s not even a territory. It’s like walking on sliding sand, it’s always slipping. Who you are, is like faith or love. No wonder every now and then, even lovers repeat “I love you”. Because sometimes you just don’t know.9

This also points to the uncertainty that is a symptom of postmodernity and that these choreographers deal with as a fundamental premise when they create work that challenges the status quo.

**What kind of ‘African’?**

The representation of Africa at the WSSD is an example of an invented “authentic primitive” (Errington 2005: 223) that harks back to the Eurocentric master narratives of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These pictures of Africa made it possible for the political and educated elite of Europe and America to imagine and discursively invent ‘authentic primitives’, who produced ‘authentic primitive art’ (idem.)

The WSSD ceremony is a case of Africans doing the inventing themselves. The notion of progress, a master narrative of the colonial era, was adopted by the producers of this event and presented as an illustration of the rebirth of Africa. It was also about the birth of the world through Africa – so that Africa becomes the source of the Eurocentric master narratives. As with Mbeki’s idea of the African Renaissance that has informed the images could talk with one another about their work and the issues that they face in creating it. This was a groundbreaking event in the dance community in South Africa, and Africa more broadly. It is not usual for dance practitioners in this context to engage in dialogue about their work to this extent due to the limits of time and money

of an Africa emerging out of destruction into harmony and peace. This reinscribes colonial dichotomies of the ‘other’ as savage, emotion, sensuality - the kind of “difference and strangeness” that Thomas (1994: 172) refers to in his discussion of colonial ideas about “exoticism”10.

The topic of the African Renaissance and the debates surrounding it are beyond the scope of this thesis, but the illustrations of how official institutions of power co-opt this concept contrast with the images presented by many artists when they have the luxury of working independently. The issue at hand is how these artists are seen in society. How their work is understood and where they are positioned. The question that this contrast raises is one of authenticity. Contemporary choreographers in Africa challenge the idea that only one kind of essentialised version of Africa is the correct and real one. As Sichel stated

choreographies, performances and debates … transform views and perceptions about Africa, dispelling the myths that this continent is one homogenous country.11

Although there are still many who believe that African dance is about grass skirts and bare breasts, there are those who undercut these traditionalist values and create unconventional choreography. Attempting to define this as African becomes a layered and often futile process. Is it African because it is created by an African? Is it not African because it has elements of European influence? And who gets to say what is or is not African. These are the questions that Duchamp raised also with his ready-mades and scandalous urinal (cf Tomkins and the editors of Time-Life Books 1966). He asked: is a urinal art because an artist has made or modified it? Or because it is shown as an object in an art gallery? This shows the potential of art to provoke, to sabotage, to unsettle – and to question the very processes of cultural production and validation. The following examples illustrate the complexity, and often redundancy, of these kinds of questions.

10 The adoption of this view of Africa is also much more essentialised than colonial discourse – it distills elements of complex and multi-layered dynamics into a single view. In contrast to this limited approach, Thomas (1994: 171) describes the culture of colonialism “not … as a singular enduring discourse, but rather as a series of projects that incorporate representations, narratives and practical efforts”

11 In proceedings of the 7th Jomba! Contemporary Dance Conference, African Contemporary dance? Questioning issues of a performance aesthetic for a developing and independent continent (2004: 24)
One example of such work is a collaboration between Maqoma and Linyekula at Tanswochen in Vienna in 2000 (cf. Maqoma 2002). Maqoma explains how the organisers bombarded him and Linyekula with press-cuttings on war and AIDS while they were creating their work. He believes that the decision to select them for this project was a political one based on expectations of what Africans should do on stage. Maqoma describes how at the end of the performance they stood on the stage for one hour without moving. In his view, the audience response was to ask:

Is Africa really in that much pain and struggling to free itself from that pain and those experiences?

However, the choreographers did not aim to express anything to do with this pain and struggle. Maqoma expressed his frustration with these stereotypes by asking:

Why can’t we see beyond CNN reports, beyond what we know of Africa? Get into the intentions of the choreography.12

Linyekula’s view of being African is enlightening. When he was born, the DRC was still the Republic of Zaire. He has experienced the ravages of war on society and geography. In his words:

What I inherited – was first of all, a pile of ruins! No-one ever taught me to survive in ruins, but that’s all I was given and I have to try and find ways of surviving with that – it’s a pile of ruins – it’s three million dead over five years. That’s my legacy.13

As a result, his approach to questions about what is or is not African is cynical and pragmatic:

I don’t care about Africa because Africa – at least my portion of Africa – the one that I experience in my flesh, doesn’t care about me.14

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12 Talk at Afroconnexions conference on 18 August 2004
13 In proceedings of the 7th Jomba! Contemporary Dance Conference, African Contemporary dance? Questioning issues of a performance aesthetic for a developing and independent continent (2004: 31)
14 idem.
In this context, he creates work that is a form of resistance through art. He is working against giving up, and in order to survive. His choreography is about survival:

My blood is really blazing as if in flames, and my history is in ruins. What does it mean to create under such circumstances? … Whatever I do today, for me, it is simply like trying to stay alive… I’ll just try to remember my name – because that’s what my dance is all about today. It’s an attempt to remember my name – because I have the feeling that I must have lost it somewhere… Resistance under such circumstances is a form of creation – is some form of art.15

Questions about whether or not Linyekula’s work is African reduce the potency of contemporary choreography in Africa to a detached conceptual debate that has no bearing on the experiences of the artists themselves. It is a luxury to ask such questions for those who do not have to deal with the reality of living in parts of Africa affected by war, poverty, economic decline and political instability. As Linyekula states:

that’s the kind of question you ask when you’ve eaten.16

He calls his work an “aesthetics of survival”, in which he is attempting to create something tangible out of a context of destruction. He uses improvisation both in movement and approach to choreograph work that speaks for him. As he explains:

I need to pay my rent and I only have this pile of ruins as raw material so I go through it – I scavenge. I might find a French poem or come across a ritual, performed by my grandmother when I was a kid… Improvisation at this point is not an aesthetic gimmick but is the only tool I have. It’s a way of living.17

This negation of questions about what is African is reinforced by Augusto Cuvilas, a choreographer from Mozambique. In his view:

When I’m creating a piece, I’m not trying to say that I’m African. I know I’m African.18

15 idem.
16 ibid: 32
17 idem.
18 ibid: 41
In his work *Um solo para cinco*, he used naked female dancers. It was controversial because it was seen as a bastardization of ‘traditional’ rituals, even though it won an award at the *Danse Afrique Danse* festival in Paris. There is hypocrisy in this kind of response. As Maqoma asks:

> Why should such a work not find comfort on our stages? Why should the choreographer be attacked for doing exactly what our traditionalists demand: preserving our traditions? Why should it be viewed differently when it is on stage?\(^{19}\)

This shows how the idea of a stereotypical Africa finds comfort only when it is not subverted or represented outside of the expected boundaries of official culture. As Malian choreographer Kettly Noël expresses:

> in the past, we had Africans presented in public exhibitions almost like animals. Today we are perpetuating that by trying to fit into the image that is portrayed of us.\(^{20}\)

Cuvilas was not attempting to reinscribe the image of the savage African, but his work was interpreted within the rhetoric of exoticism that it seems Africa (and contemporary African dancers) are doomed to embody. Noël challenges this view in her statements that:

> We are exotic and I have nothing against being exotic. I like being exotic as well. But how can we also work in such a way that we don’t perpetuate that kind of image?\(^{21}\)

This illustrates the perceptions that contemporary African choreographers are up against, and is further reinforced by the experiences of Nigerian choreographer and artistic director, Adedayo Liadi. His company, Ijodee, faced enormous pressure to perform traditional dance on stage when he began working in the early 1990s. When Liadi returned to Nigeria from Europe, local audiences said, “He’s crazy! You know he’s a French man now!”\(^{22}\). These choreographers are therefore not only working against views of Africa from the outside, but are living in contexts where Western definitions of Africa as exotic ‘other’ are reinforced within Africa’s borders.

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19 ibid: 29
20 ibid: 39
21 idem.
22 ibid: 34
What these examples reveal is that attempting to define what is African is a complex and often self-defeating process. The whole notion of an authentic African identity is spurious. In certain ways, questions about this issue become a distraction away from what it means to create art, or what the role of the artist in society may be. At the same time, many of the abovementioned choreographers expressed their deep interest in speaking about African identity with other Africans. One of the key issues that arises is that of tradition and its relationship to the contemporary, specifically in the realm of dance.

The question of ‘tradition’

Claims to tradition can lead to acts of containment. In the case of the WSSD what is seen as a harmonious pre-colonial past is reclaimed as an ideal for the present. Whatever innovations occur outside of the limits of these ideals are seen as a bastardization of what it means to be African. However, the meaning of ‘tradition’ has a long history of debate and reveals how this term is not fixed. Hobsbawm (1992: 1), for instance, explains how “‘Traditions’ which appear or claim to be old are often quite recent in origin and sometimes invented”. Contemporary choreographers in Africa have long been aware of the complexity of this term for their art. Not only do they face being told that they are ‘not African enough’ if they play with traditional forms, or work outside of its imagined boundaries, but they also seek to create work that incorporates the traditions within which they have been taught or raised.

Gore (1994: 59) defines “traditional” dance as “local forms which are said to belong to the cultural fabric of the people in question”. There are complexities with this. To which “people” does this refer? This view masks issues of power that may be at stake in deciding to whom traditions may belong. Culture as a concept is about exchange, appropriation, and co-option. How, then, does a form “belong”? This implies a kind of ownership, which defies the notion of culture and tradition as fluid and malleable resources. What is interesting is the way that ideas of traditional practice and contemporary dance meet in the present African context.

23 cf Hobsbawm and Ranger’s (1992) definitive collection of articles on this topic
The case of Ntombi Gasa and her development project in KwaMchi is illustrative of the difficulties faced by many contemporary African choreographers. Gasa describes her meeting with the chiefs to try and get her dance outreach project passed. She wanted to work with the children 9-10 years old in the area. One of the old men had seen her dancing with the children and told her that it was very interesting but that it was bad luck for her to lift her legs up and jump over the boys. Her reply was, “Baba24, you see we are trying new things. Because we are young people we are learning from other nations.” At the end of the meeting she explained her disappointment at not getting the kind of support she had hoped for, for example, the use of buildings, and help with building a hall or a floor. She continued to work with the children, even though contemporary dance was out of place for the elders in that context.25

Some choreographers feel that the basis for their contemporary choreography is their traditional dance. For example, Gilbert Douglas, artistic director of Tumbuka in Zimbabwe said that “the root of our identity as Africans has always been in our tradition, whether we believe in it or not”26. For Adedayo Liadi, the whole notion of African contemporary dance is based on an idea of ‘tradition’. In his words: “contemporary African dance can be defined as re-structuring our indigenous African dance and bringing it into a contemporary framework through research”27. What is of concern to these choreographers is how they grapple with their position in African society. They question how they can create work that is acceptable to their societies, that challenges these societies and that reworks their histories and legacies.

Bringing the influence of European dance into African dance is seen as a threat for many. For example, when Liadi returned to Nigeria after being in Europe, people told him “he has changed his mentality and now he is trying to do something about white people’s

24 Baba is Zulu for father
26 ibid: 37
27 ibid: 38
culture”\textsuperscript{28}. When he began to use elements of the dance styles he had learned in Europe to comment on issues in his own context, then his audiences began to accept his work (idem). So, this is about perceived challenges to what is thought of as traditional. It is also about these challenges coming from Europe. It is about the threat of something non-African tainting what is seen to belong to Africans. Yet, the work that these choreographers create is not, in Liadi’s words, “imitating Western culture”\textsuperscript{29}.

For Maqoma, it is his Xhosa tradition that has both informed his work and been the focus of his challenge to society. This comes out in the issue of sexuality. There are many illustrations of comments on sexuality in Maqoma’s work. \textit{Miss Thandi}, as described in chapter one, for example, is a work about Raymond Matinyana, a drag queen and cultural ambassador from Port Alfred (Maqoma’s place of birth) who, before his death in 2001 made his mark through his artistic performances in Holland. Dressed in drag, he would sing popular South African songs to a Dutch audience as a statement of his belonging to his country of birth\textsuperscript{30}. Maqoma’s choreography in this work is also an autobiography where he becomes Miss Thandi both as a tribute to Matinyana and a personal expression of his homosexuality. He once told me that it was through this work that he first felt free to wear make-up and dresses and not feel afraid of what people would say. This was especially true when he performed \textit{Miss Thandi} at his hometown in Port Alfred\textsuperscript{31}.

The themes of gender and sexuality have direct bearing in challenging the notion of what is acceptably African - in other words, an imagined ideal of traditional values that underpin the notion of what is allowed. For Maqoma, a reference to his homosexuality is outside of the framework of what he was taught growing up in a Xhosa household. He is saying, though, that this is an important element of what it means to be African.

\textsuperscript{28} idem.  
\textsuperscript{29} idem.  
\textsuperscript{30} Gregory Maqoma, personal communication, Johannesburg, 20 September 2004  
\textsuperscript{31} Personal communication, Johannesburg, 20 September 2004
In his words:

Men in dresses, in high heels, wigs and makeup, dealing with themes of abused gender equality and brazen sexuality. Do these actions make choreographers who are dealing with these issues any less African in their cultures and value systems?32

Maqoma’s work is at the same time intensely personal and highly critical of social norms and conventions, particularly what he sees as traditional African society – part of his heritage.

**Authenticity and the African aesthetic**

What is clear so far is that any discussion of an African aesthetic in dance must include a discussion of who is ascribing values and to what. Asante (2001) asserts that there is a set of basic universal African aesthetics for dance. These include: that it is “polyrhythmic” and “holistic” rather than “postural” in relation to motion (ibid: 144), it is “visually stimulating and exciting” (idem), its form is “curvilinear” (ibid: 146), it has a “textured” “dimensionality” (ibid: 147), there is an experience of spirituality and a connection to emotion through the use of memory (ibid: 149), and it creates a sense of intensification through repetition (ibid: 150). From another perspective, in dance history, African dance is most often described in terms of its ritual or social function. What this does is represent such dances as “non- or un-aesthetic” (Begho in Gore 1994: 60). In this light Asante’s view is an empowered response on behalf of an aesthetic for African dance. Both views, however, exclude the hybrid forms of dance found in the work of contemporary African choreographers today. It boxes them into a notion of what should be African. The whole project of attempting to define a universality in dance, in Africa and the diaspora, is problematic – it flattens the texture that difference allows and reinforces Africa as Other.

Contemporary dance does not have the luxury (or limits) of clearly codified values found in ballet, for example. There are strict rules in terms of body shape, for instance. Thomas (2003: 162-164) cites a debate in December 2000 in the *San Fransisco Chronicle* where a

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young girl was refused entry to a leading, in part publicly funded ballet school because she had the wrong body shape. While Banes (1998: 4) asserts that it is important to avoid “essentialist characteristics of genre representations and conventions”, this example reveals that certain conventions still do exist in particular dance forms like ballet. For contemporary African dance, however, codes and norms are up for debate. This is one of its most important features. In ballet, what is valued is the ability to perform to a particular model. In contemporary dance, the model is being recreated all the time. The same is true for American and German modern dance of the early twentieth century. Modern dance broke the boundaries of ballet by bringing male and female roles onto an equal footing; focusing on solo dance; blending the role of choreographer with that of dancer and manager; and using dance as an expression of the self (Manning and Benson 2001: 219). As Reynolds and McCormick (2003: 340) state, modern dance was based on an “outspoken advocacy of social reform and equality”.

The work of choreographers in Africa is informed by the same concerns with the limits that boundaries create. In a postcolonial setting, it is not surprising that certain African choreographers would want to create new work that crosses boundaries and mixes forms. It is in this way that new identities are imagined and the rigid lines of what has come before are broken and reworked into new images. This is the nature of contemporary dance which “causes categories such as self/other … and personal/political to become more fluid” (Dils and Albright 2001: 375). Within the possibilities that are created by this kind of choreographic approach, there is a fine line between an engagement with social issues and allowing them to become a burden so that the intended message loses its potency. Maqoma chooses to address his social context by exploring new modes of expression in dance. As in the example of Virtually Blond below, he encourages his dancers to use the steps that he creates to find new ways of moving. At the base of this lie the social issues that inform his conceptual framing of his work.

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33 It is very difficult to draw discrete boundaries around different forms of dance. Debates on generic boundaries of dance forms are beyond the scope of this thesis. See Dils and Albright (2001) and Reynolds and McCormick (2003) for further discussion.
What underpins the exclusion of artists like Maqoma from official representations of South Africa as part of the African continent, as in the case of the WSSD? The primary debate here is between the universal and the particular. As Mbembe (2001: 9-10) explains, social theory has used the idea of universality to construct its understanding of the world, but it is a view that is not applicable outside of a modern western context. This idea of modernity is tied to western rationalism, which is based in part on the notion of an individual’s freedom from the “sway of traditions” (ibid: 10). In this conception, tradition is linked with a static ahistoricity, and anything that is not western is traditional (idem.). Therefore Africa, for instance, becomes a primitive ‘other’ doomed to being stuck in its past and is simultaneously denied a depth of history (ibid: 11). Change and innovation are associated with the idea of a civilised west, while a frozen notion of tradition is pinned to Africa. Fabian (2002) addresses the problems of these dichotomies in his challenges to anthropology and its creation of the ‘other’. He emphasizes the way in which the rise of the natural sciences in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries created two timelines: one for the West, which could progress forward, and one for the Other who is denied its own history (ibid: 147).

This tension between the universal and the particular is then also a tension between the modern and the traditional, civilization and culture, innovation and being frozen in time. When a choreographer is working within the confines of the latter in each case, he/she is expected to perform in a way that represents ‘their culture’. As Seirlis explains, “They are doomed to embody their particular context”34. When a choreographer, like Maqoma, is creating work that challenges these dichotomies, he is working against the cultural purism and defensiveness of an establishment that is threatened by such questioning. While those in power are attempting the rightful reclamation of their nation, they often achieve this through acts of sanitization and containment.

This relates to the question of what was African during the colonial period. Ranger (1992: 212) explains how traditions were invented both by Europeans for Africans and by Africans for themselves as a way of providing models for behaviour and communication.

34 Personal communication, Johannesburg, 20 January 2006
This carries through in the inventions of a so-called essence of an untouched Africa in representations today. In the same way as the “invented traditions of African societies” under colonialism “distorted the past but became in themselves realities” (idem), these myths today of an authentic Africa mask the diversity and malleability of African identity.

This is complicated by the notion that African = Black. In the context of dance, then, black bodies on stage are expected to do certain things. American choreographer Alvin Ailey, for example, was expected to create dances on “Negro themes” because he was seen as a Negro dancer (DeFrantz 2004: 26). It was Ailey’s aim to provide employment for black dancers in New York in the 1960s and create a base from which they could perform (idem). According to DeFrantz (ibid: 27), the black body has been seen as “naturally exciting” since the birth of minstrelsy. Ailey’s work “offered voracious (white) audiences a feast of physically elegant (black) bodies” (ibid: 35). Although Ailey was creating work for black dancers, he did not want to be limited by these notions of blackness. In his words,

We talk too much of black art when we should be talking about art, just art… Black composers must be free to write rondos and fugues, not only protest songs (in DeFrantz 2004: 86).

This view is reinforced by Bill T. Jones, who states that “A black dance is a dance that a person who is black happens to make” (in Gottschild 2003: 12).

What, then, is counted as an authentic African representation and who decides? For Coplan (2003), the idea of an authentic Africa emerged in the early 1990s. This stereotype took hold when exchange between South Africa and the rest of Africa opened up, particularly in the music industry. South Africa could appeal to an invented authenticity by discovering and foregrounding its African heritage when it became fashionable to do so. In a similar way, the anthropology of art turned the arts of the “colonized” into “artifacts of the primitive” (Errington 2005: 225-226). These then became the ‘real’ representations of these so-called bounded cultures. This idea was reinforced through the cooption of such images in the work of modern artists such as
Picasso, for example (cf Rubin 1984: 241). Whatever was seen as original and untainted became the authentic artifacts of so-called African cultures.

This is currently played up in the South African tourist industry. Allen (2002, 2-3) examines the case of the Siyabonga Khumbulani Cultural Group’s performance of ‘traditional’ African dance for visitors to a craft market in Rosebank, a wealthy northern suburb in Johannesburg. She explains how both the performers and the audience together reproduce a stereotype of Africa as an idealised other. The dancers perform as imagined ‘authentic primitives’ for the tourists (both local and international) who pay for this escape from their own reality. At the same time, the kind of traditional dance that is being performed oversteps certain conventions of tradition. For example, young girls dance boy’s dances wearing skins and headdresses not usually worn by females. In this way tradition (which ironically breaks traditional rules) is frozen, in contrast to its dynamic nature (cf also MacCannell).

This calls to mind Griemas’s semiotic square as applied by Clifford (1993) in his discussion of the traffic of art objects. Clifford uses this grid to analyse the collection of non-Western objects and their classification as “art” or “artifact” and other collectables, for example “tourist art”, which has been valued less than so-called art objects (1993: 56-58). The square is based on four “semantic zones” on the vertical and horizontal axes: 1) authentic masterpieces, 2) authentic artifacts, 3) inauthentic masterpieces, 4) inauthentic artifacts (idem.). The core of this discussion is the way in which the value of an object changes depending on its movement along these axes. For instance, movement from ‘artifact’ to ‘masterpiece’ and ‘inauthentic’ to ‘authentic’ are most highly valued (idem.). What this reveals is that assigning value is context-dependent, historically contingent and contestable (ibid: 56). This discussion also raises the debate of the universal versus the particular. For example, something that is non-Western is most often “cultural art” and pertains to that specific culture. By contrast, the work of Picasso, for instance is defined as Western not “Spanish” (ibid: 58).
In non-anthropological dance studies before the 1980s, anything that was seen as “ethnic” was lumped together. Kealiinohomoku (1970: 25) describes how all dance defined as non-Western was grouped together within the framework of communal, ritual or social dance. There was no discussion of individual artistry, no names of dancers or choreographers, and no mention of innovation. This dance was not seen as art, in much the same way as Aboriginal art was relegated to the category of ‘primitive’ in the Morphy (1995) example mentioned in the previous chapter. As anthropologists of the postmodern era and cultural studies have shown, culture is not bounded. While it is a resource and is something to which people appeal in times of need – for belonging, identity, status – it is a story told, a line drawn that is as fluid and as malleable as the identities that it creates.35

As the “Engaging Modernities” exhibition illustrates, notions of identity and authenticity are culturally constructed. Through objects that mix materials and concepts from Africa and other parts of the globe, this exhibition shows how the modern and the traditional are open to a range of interpretations (cf Nettleton, A., J. Charlton and F. Rankin-Smith 2003). The modern and the traditional are also implicated one in the other. This is what purists of tradition and the modern deny. It also reveals the complex dynamics involved in the creation of African identities. In relation to colonialism and African modernity, Nettleton, Charlton and Rankin-Smith (ibid: 27) explain that “the brokers of the African imaginary have combined resistance to and acceptance of colonial processes in inventing its modernity”. Contemporary is fluid – it is in this realm that the notion of Africa is critiqued, played with, and turned upside down. At the same time, for choreographers like Maqoma and those discussed above, the question of what is African is not worth asking. The same is true for African contemporary choreographers at the 2006 Danse Afrique Dance Festival in Paris.

35 There is a long history of writing on approaches to culture, one of the most valuable being Ortner’s (1994) essay that traces the theory of culture in anthropology (cf. also Clifford & Marcus 1986, Alexander & Seideman 1990, Foucault 1994, Appiah 1997, Rodseth 1998, and Sahlins 1999). It can be argued that ‘culture’ is anthropology’s central concept, the meaning of which has been long debated (cf. Herskovits 1964). However, with the emergence of cultural studies (cf. Marcus, et al 1992) work on ‘culture’ no longer belongs to anthropology alone. Critical interdisciplinary research opens up spaces for debate outside of the assumed limits of anthropology that can also be grounded in detailed ethnographic study (cf. Stocking 1995)
Sichel (2006: 6) explains that:

for once no-one was questioning (out loud, that is) if there is such a thing as African contemporary dance. The participants from 17 African countries just got on with the business of performing, viewing, networking and debating.

If there is no certain African identity, and this notion is open to interpretation, then what is the process by which it often becomes set in stone? According to Coplan (1983), it is about ownership – who owns the means of production and how this affects artistic creation. This directly affects aesthetic value, and who judges what is good and what is bad. To what extent is this linked to processes of production, and to what extent is this about judgements of taste? Is it only a question of who has power, or is there also an element of the Romantic notion of art and life where “art brings us to the very same point that we are brought to by religion – to an experience saturated by meaning”, where “in aesthetic experience we perceive the fittingness of the world, and of our place within it” (Abbs 1989: 23)? In the South African context, notions of what is acceptably African affect judgments of what is good or bad art. At the same time, if an artwork is aesthetically strong, it can challenge a taken-for-granted notion of what kind of identity is allowed.

The case of Mike van Graan’s play Green Man Flashing (2004), described in the previous chapter, illustrates these tensions. Van Graan and I were discussing the relationship between aesthetics and political commentary. I asked him about the importance for political comment of art being good. He responded by saying that someone once told him that the problem with Green Man Flashing was that it was too good. What he interpreted from this response was that

in the old days, under apartheid, it wasn’t important for theatre to be of good quality; the important thing was the message. Today, if something’s not good you can dismiss it. But [Green Man Flashing] is good, and is therefore difficult to dismiss

Therefore, in this case, the potency of the political comment is inherently tied to the quality of the artwork. Aesthetics, in this sense, is political. Green Man Flashing has not been invited overseas as have other more sanitised productions such as African Footprint.
and *Umoja* – two shows that reinforce the essentialised ideals described at the beginning of this chapter. Van Graan likens this to the paranoia about the fact that the suicide bombers in London were British born\(^{36}\). Londoners felt a sense of shame that the bombers belonged to their nation. The fact that one of their own would cause such destruction insulted their sense of belonging and national pride. In a similar way, van Graan believes that *Green Man Flashing* would be insulting to a purist view of South African identity - a view in which there is no place for criticism or discontent. The fact that his play has not been judged as appropriate for audiences outside of South Africa shows how potent is its political comment.

Aesthetic judgement therefore cannot stand apart from the politics that inform it. As Steiner (1989: 275) states, value ascription “is an ideological process, a reflection of power relations within a culture and society”. There may well be something special about aesthetic experience. It may bring us close to the “sense of the world” (Scruton 1989: 21), our bodily existence and our human nature. It is also, however, underpinned by a dynamic set of power relations that directly inform this experience. This is particularly true in the case of experiencing an artwork. What is interesting here is when aesthetic transgressions in art become political transgressions. In modern dance, for example, Isadora Duncan used the notion of the ‘natural woman’ as the basis for her work, which used the female body in new ways to critique the role of women in society (Thomas 2003: 166-167). In Maqoma’s case, he challenges social norms by creating works that are a threatening mix of elements. It is this hybridity that is transgressive.

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\(^{36}\) At the time of our discussion, in late 2005, London had been victim to a series of bombings, one of which was due to a suicide bombing in the underground
The threat of a ‘hybrid’

The fact that Maqoma’s work was excluded from the WSSD ceremony could be because it is a threat to those who control certain representations of the country to the world. This is no surprise. Inevitably, those in official positions of power attempt to silence artwork that is the most challenging or the least literal\(^{37}\). What is interesting about such cases is that they raise questions about the role of performing art as social and political commentary. What is Maqoma’s role in a new African democracy? What is it about his work that caused him to be excluded him from a performance that was presented as one of the official versions of what is acceptably African?

Maqoma purposefully causes discomfort in his audience as a way of posing questions. His structure is often unpredictable and his style is difficult to classify. It is through these tools that he challenges the essentialised official representations of South Africa’s new democracy and its role on the African continent. More than ten years after official freedom from apartheid there remain questions about what it means to be a society based on an ideology of equality. What is the nature of this democracy and who is free? Maqoma’s choreography is a threat because he refuses to create comfortable crowd-pleasers and give easy answers to these questions. Like certain other artists, he interrogates issues of identity, freedom and power in South Africa. Despite the limits imposed on them, it is the dancer, theatre practitioner, musician, choreographer, and oral poet who ask most forcefully what exactly it means to be free.

In reference to his 2004 work *Somehow Delightful*, Maqoma stated:

> a lot of people were saying in reference to our 10 years of democracy celebration there “are people like you who are brave enough to question the idea behind the balloons and the champagne” (in Sichel, 2004: 10).

In this work he teases the status quo through the ways in which he represents and collapses hierarchies and juxtaposes seemingly contradictory images. Together with filmmaker Palesa Letlaka-Nkosi and visual artist Clifford Charles he presents the

\(^{37}\) A parallel example can be found in Seirlis’s (2005) paper on stand-up comedy in South Africa
extremes of our society side-by-side: wealth and poverty, violence and safety, diversity and commonality. On stage is a man in his underwear stripped of prescribed identity markers intermittently shouting out “who cares!” and weaving through the scenes that are played out simultaneously around him. One scene is of a new elite figure – a black woman, in a red ball gown and diamond tiara, demanding her tea; another is of a gangster playing with his gun and then shooting himself in the head, collapsing, and standing only to shoot himself again; all against the backdrop of a film on scars from individuals’ wounds that they have had to endure through political violence or illness.

The work of Geertz (1995) is an exemplary parallel illustration of the role of cultural performance in exposing society’s incongruities. Geertz (ibid: 145-151) analyses a 1986 graduation ceremony in a madrasah (Islamic school) not far from Pare in Java, Indonesia. This event celebrated both the Muslim holiday, Idul Fitri, marking the end of the month of fasting, and the successful completion of an English course by the 15 students who had enrolled. In a context of tensions between tradition and modernity, and religion and secularism, the subversive performance astounded the audience, which was made up of family and friends from the community. In Geertz’s words it was “home-made postmodernism, designed to unsettle” (ibid: 146). It included white-faced boys miming a street-fight, a rock-song parody by young girls mimicking whores, and an unscheduled show by a man dressed as a student tearing out pages from a book and throwing them on the floor. It was far from a crowd-pleaser that left the audience tense and uneasy.

Maqoma’s artistic work threatens to overturn the neat surfaces of what is in reality the messy underbelly of what, in Gutmann’s (2002) terms, is a multivalent democracy. In his refusal to portray neatly framed pictures he becomes a threat to those who prefer soft and clean edges. Explaining this threat through the concept of hybridity reveals why Maqoma’s work is not always comfortable to watch or easy to pin down. Seirlis (1999) explains in her study of coloured identity in Rhodesia that the word hybrid comes from the Greek hubris, meaning transgression of the divine law. In this conception, it is profane, it disturbs, and it is unresolved. From a psychoanalytic perspective, this lack of resolution is dangerous (cf Chasseguet-Smirgel 1985). Seirlis (ibid: 350) describes how
in the riddle of the Sphinx in the tale of Oedipus, the Sphinx is a threat because it is unresolved. The monster disappears when the riddle is solved.

The reason why Oedipus is so important to discussion of threat is because of the questions that he asks: where do I come from, who am I and where am I going? He solves the riddle of the Sphinx but not who he is and what he has done - murdered his father and slept with his mother (Goldhill 2004: 297-298). Oedipus therefore becomes the ‘monster’. In the idea of the hybrid, the monstrous reveals what is not resolved. It is an indicator of the problems that still exist (ibid: 306). In the same way, Maqoma’s work points the contradictions in a national project based on an idea of purity, the unresolved sticking points in this ideology of democracy. He is transgressing the laws of a puritanical nationalism that is challenged by hybridity. In a parallel example, the surrealists used the idea of the hybrid to inform their refusal to prescribe a mode of expression. This, together with an embracing of the unexpected was the basis of their anti-bourgeois statements (Batchelor 1993: 50). This “shifting terrain” (Fer 1993: 172) in their approach is also applicable to the nature of Maqoma’s work. While Maqoma’s technique and structure are precise, he creates works that question rather than resolve, and unpick rather than re-stitch the many changing elements of identity.

There have been a number of historical changes in the meanings of the term ‘hybrid’. In the eighteenth-century context of slavery and colonization, there was a shift in the understanding of this concept specifically in terms of race and race theory. Vaughan (1991) shows how the application of Freud in colonial medicine essentialised the so-called ‘native’ as naturally mad; and how medical discourses authoritatively pronounced that racial mixing causes disease for the progeny of the mixed couple. The point here is that the hybrid is threatening – it is seen as sick. The same is true under apartheid when mixing becomes disruptive to a notion of discrete, ‘pure’ cultures.

Hybridity in early modernism was seen only in terms of ways in which the modern would incorporate the ‘other’ into its agenda (Papastergiadis, 2002: 167-168). In a colonial context there was a relationship of “cultural co-optation” where colonizers and the
colonized both remade themselves in relation to the other through processes of dominance and resistance on all sides (Nandy in ibid: 169). In this way culture is “in a state of constant creolization” (Lotman in ibid: 170). In post-colonial discourse hybridity is a nodal theoretical term and one of celebration (cf. Bhabha, 1994). Such an approach views forms as already mixed and underline that there is no such thing as a pure form. In Maqoma’s words:

A reflection of South Africa today is a cocktail – a fusion of all these identities, those ingredients in one pot. And when you start stirring you can’t separate one thing from another – they become something else. My body itself now is all these things.

Young (1995) outlines the problems with postcolonial views of the hybrid. Firstly, postcolonial theories can be as essentialising as the theories that they deconstruct. Secondly, multiculturalism can overlook the pluralism it aims to highlight. A multiculturalist perspective can result in the superficial compartmentalisation of seemingly discrete groupings rather than dealing with the points of overlap and the reality of mixing. In an attempt to deal safely with diversity, multiculturalism reinscribes the problems of categorisation that it is fighting against (cf. Kim 2005). Another point about this perspective is that it expects people to embody their difference. Individuals are expected to behave according to their so-called ‘traditions’ and ‘cultures’, as if these existed as separate and fixed bearings for behaviour.

What remains central to the discussion here is the idea that purity is an impossibility. Therefore, hybridity as a reaction against purism becomes a threat. Maqoma’s work allows us to question the notion of purity. Although in his works *Miss Thandi* and *Southern Comfort* (discussed above) he seems more resolved in his own identity and expression of his sexuality, he still questions the context within which certain kinds of sexuality become acceptable and when they are forced to remain hidden because they are seen as transgressive. Essentially, hybridity is about paradox. It is about holding together contradictory elements and unsettling the neat surfaces. As Papastergiadis (2002: 170) states, there is a “disturbing [and necessary] anxiety generated by cultural hybrids”.

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38 Personal communication, Johannesburg, 20 September 2004
Conclusion

It is clear that Maqoma’s work unsettles the picture-perfect ideal of official representations. As a result, he is subjected to acts of containment or exclusion, as in the case of the WSSD. This makes his work even more valuable for a discussion about the role of art in society. Because he questions what is taken for granted, and refuses to make dance that is comfortable, he is offering an important statement against the superficial transformation in a palliative multiculturalism. He is also questioning the label ‘African’, and as with a range of other African contemporary choreographers, is creating alternative avenues for dialogue about African identity.

In his work *Virtually Blond* (2003), for instance, he addresses what is exposed and what remains veiled. Through this theme, his intention was to reveal the wounds of society through the individual stories told by the dancers. What it illustrates is the power of an artwork to make statements about the contradictions in society, which are expressed with a level of potency that transcends the everyday. As with many of Maqoma’s works, it is a challenge to the official culture establishment and gives voice to those who have unspoken wounds. *Virtually Blond* is also an interesting example of his creative process. The following chapter discusses this in relation to the interplay between meaning, structure and context.