Conclusion

Ever since I discovered the pleasures of making the perfect cocktail to fit the mood, the time and the place, whether for my friends or as a professional bartender, I have been on a mission to tempt people away from the tried and tested onto a more adventurous level of drinking promiscuity.

(Reed 2000: 6)

What [Maqoma] calls himself is a cocktail of African dance mixed with ballet and contemporary dance. At the end, there are no distinctions. It’s like a fruit cocktail: at the end when you drink it, you appreciate the taste.

(David April, personal communication, 2 March 2004)

Maqoma’s work is a sexy and potent blend that engages with the contradictions of freedom in layered narratives, multi-media collaborations, and experiments with the expressive possibilities of the human body. His work is a dynamic, intriguing, often humorous and challenging comment on how South Africans make sense of their reality. Most of all, there are no clear answers, only questions and possibilities – a testimony to the spirit of a true dialogic democracy. In his challenge to institutions of official culture, he taunts (in Sichel 2004: 10):

“Let’s flaunt it! . . . Look what you want to throw away”

His choreography resonates because of the conversation that it has with its context. It raises questions about what it means to live in a democratic South Africa and what the role of a performing artist is in creating a new society.

On a broad level, Maqoma’s work speaks to the relationship between art and society. This thesis has addressed this through a number of themes. An examination of Maqoma and his work in post-apartheid South Africa has raised questions about identity, authenticity, what it means to be ‘African’, creative process, and signification with a focus on the body. The central thread that runs through these themes is the way in which art has the potential to be provocative and make statements in ways that are not always possible through other media. This is an essential component of a democracy that is still
forming, provided it is committed to the ideals of freedom and the responsibility that is coupled with that.

This is not a simple issue in South Africa. As this thesis has shown, there are elements of the old regime in the new. This has ideological and practical ramifications. The new order is based both on claims to an idyllic pre-colonial past and a fundamental materialism in the present. Mbeki’s ‘African Renaissance’ is one way in which the idea of a harmonious Africa becomes an essentialised representation of this continent. This is within a context of the state’s dependence on a multicultural view that is in many ways the ‘tribalism’ of the apartheid government re-packaged. The danger of this is that it overlooks the real issues of diversity and therefore restricts those who refuse the compartments created by a superficial approach to culture. As Erlmann (1999: 237) explains:

postapartheid South Africa seems to be characterized by a strange Janus-faced mood, by a symbiosis between constitutionalism and nationalism, rainbow-pluralism and Africanism. In short, its present is both a future that has not quite arrived and a past that has not quite died.

For performing artists the effects of this are felt most potently. This is related to the role that art plays in society, and the attitudes towards it by the state. In appeals to the fixed and safe notions of culture, decision-makers have the power to reject those who do not fit the picture. This shows the contradictions in the new order. Artists have the freedom to make whatever they wish, because it is a democratic society, but if they do not create a particular image they will be ignored, patronized, and excluded from official representations of the country. Maqoma’s exclusion from the WSSD opening ceremony is a case in point. Because his work does not fit the mould of “happy clappy rainbowism” that van Graan describes, and is a challenge to the status quo, he is not seen as “African enough”.

This raises the question of authenticity. Choreographers in Africa such as Maqoma take issue with their governments’ obsessive need to define a particular and purportedly fitting image of this continent. In their work and approaches to it, these choreographers speak against the limits created by narrow definitions of what is acceptable as an African
representation. They express their frustration with having to continually justify in what ways they are being true to their countries. Most often they refuse to engage with this question because of how it limits what they do. It is made more complex by the question of tradition, which they are also forced to face, because their work is often a blend of themes and movements from their ‘traditional’ backgrounds and exchanges with Europe, America and one another. What their work reveals is the way in which the modern is implicated in the traditional, and vice versa. In other words, they transcend the boundaries of what is seen to be an acceptable representation of Africa in ways that question the limits that these boundaries create.

The issue of wealth-creation that is the focus of the new regime compounds this problem of who is allowed to represent the nation, and who is excluded. On a practical level, South Africa’s post-1994 capitalism is still underpinned by policies that emphasise the profitability of its industries. This a complex issue in the arts industry. Anything that is not seen to make money is not valued. This places radical performing artists, such as Maqoma, in a difficult position. In order survive, they rely on commercial work that does not necessarily fulfill their role as artists, and on funding that places them in the position of beggar according to the government’s view of the artist. This forces them into a range of possible responses: moving away, exchanging and collaborating with other choreographers, or staying and finding a niche.

Maqoma has chosen to remain in South Africa, but draws on his experiences of collaboration and exchange to find ways of dealing with the contradictions in this society. He has been both rebel and jester in his work, but most of all he sees himself as a watchdog. What this means is that he is performing the oppositional function that is the role of civil society. In this way, the artist is part of a civil society that contributes to the dialogue that is essential to the creation of a new democracy. In November 2003, for example, when he was formulating ideas for Virtually Blond, the questions of freedom and its limits were at the forefront of his mind. He explained to me that South Africa is full of contradictions. He described his memory of Mandela’s “freedom wave”, set against a backdrop of a nine-month-old baby being raped. In his words, “it is in this
idiom that we lay down the red carpet for the outside and live the shit and rubbish for our own people”. With these strange juxtapositions in mind of a forced status quo and harsh reality Maqoma asked, “Is it really a democracy and a new South Africa”? He made it clear that what grieves him most is the brutal absurdity that at least under apartheid the perpetrators could be identified.

He makes it his purpose to expose the problems of the present, and put this on stage as a challenge to the denialism that causes the ramifications of abuses of power to remain invisible. His work is a threat both in content and in style. It is in contrast to the kitsch sentimentality of the safe images on the public stage. Maqoma’s work is a hybrid that resists the notion of purity and disrupts the idea of a neat new nation. He is against purism, against the idea of an authentic African image, and against the mask of the easy resolution of problems that still exist. Maqoma challenges the status quo by questioning sexuality, gender, class, race, tradition, rather than attempting to offer answers. He nurtures the discomfort that a lack of resolution creates. That is because it is in the moments of conflict that dialogue is possible, and it is more of this that he believes South Africa needs. Maqoma is therefore transgressive - he comments on boundaries by subverting them. This theme is explained well by Stallybrass and White (1986: 200) who state:

> For Foucault transgression is the interrogation of boundaries, “a realm, no doubt, where what is in question is the limit rather than the identity of a culture”. But cultural identity is inseparable from its limits, it is always a boundary phenomenon and its order is always constructed around the figures of its territorial edge.

The thesis elaborates this point by showing that the potential for transgression has particular potency in dance because of the way in which the body speaks (the body being the dancer’s primary medium). In its ability to signify and communicate, the body both carries and creates meaning. Maqoma uses its potential to play with ideas about sexuality and race, for example, as a way of commenting on power and its abuses. In *Virtually Blond*, for instance he is questioning the role of men in society and the broader issues of the construction of gender. Through costume, movement and gesture, the body is in conversation with its context. Because contemporary dance is polyvalent, the body
becomes disruptive: its signs are not fixed and stable. There is no singularity to the way in which an idea is represented – there are many possible interpretations.

This polyvalency is another layer of Maqoma’s challenge to the reinscription of Africa as Other that dooms it to a picture of itself as frozen in time. He uses experimentation in his work, as do many contemporary choreographers, to break the model set by the idea that Africa does not have claims to its own cosmopolitanism. Erlmann (1999: 235) describes South Africa since the early 1990s as characterised by a “precarious equipoise of Western-style constitutionalism and African ethnic exceptionalism”. Maqoma is working against the limits that this narrow view of Africa creates. He is continuing the tradition of performing arts in its role as social criticism and reflection, and at the same time addressing new agents of power. There is therefore a continuity of creativity in articulation with a shift in power relations. This highlights the connection between democratic forms and forms of performance. It raises the question of whether it is ever possible to consider democracy without the dialogue created by various forms of contemporary art such as dance. In this sense, artistic performance is an integral element to the dialogue required in a free society not only in South Africa but in all societies seeking to maintain a balance between unity of direction and plurality of opinion.

Art therefore has the potential to disrupt and provoke. Contemporary dance achieves this through statements that are made using the body. However, it is all very well for the body to speak, but who is listening, and what do they make of what is being said? The audience for contemporary dance in South Africa is very limited. It is mostly comprised of a small group of committed journalists and photographers, friends of the choreographer, and those within the contemporary dance community. The audience for ballet and contemporary dance are not the same. Ballet is seen as the carrier of ‘high’ culture, a marker of one’s refinement, and is pleasing to a middle class audience that requires an escapist crowd-pleaser (even though there are ballets that are provocative and challenging, and contemporary dance that is not).
Stallybrass and White (1986: 199) explain this in terms of the problem with the culture of the bourgeoisie:

the very blandness and transparency of bourgeois reason is in fact nothing other than the critical negation of a social ‘colourfulness’, of a heterogeneous diversity of specific contents, upon which it is, nonetheless, completely dependent.

This is the question of what is seen as the bastion of culture. As long as contemporary dance provides light entertainment, it is acceptable to the new elite. When it goes against this, it still does not necessarily have an audience that is willing or able to judge it as good or bad. Although this is a tricky question, there is a place for the development of a discerning audience that can become a part of the dialogue that art has the potential to create. This remains one of the challenges for contemporary dance, and is certainly a topic for further research.

The case of Maqoma and South Africa points to the importance of research on dance for questions about culture and society, modernity and the nation, the body and its context. It is in many ways an obvious route into the examination of the relationship between aesthetics and politics, and that transgression in the one sphere implies the same in the other. The social and aesthetic criteria that are used to ascribe value to dance point to broader questions about the role of art in society, and the political implications of this (cf Dils and Albright 2001: 94). As Jameson (1981: 20) expresses, “nothing . . . is not social and historical – indeed . . . everything is ‘in the last analysis’ political”.

The anthropology of dance used to be about notating movements in space. This discipline has grown into a crucial area for the analysis of culture. As Kaeppler (1967), Royce (1977) and Hanna (1987) revealed in their seminal studies, dance is a nexus for the analysis of social relationships and belief systems. This thesis has shown the relevance of dance to an examination of key issues in a postcolonial setting where what is still problematic is the idea of identity, the creation of boundaries and their limits, and the question of freedom. It is a beginning, I hope, of many more studies which take as their central subject dance itself, and places this at the core of an analysis of wider questions about the self, society and human interaction.