

Embodying Otherness: Nelisiwe Xaba's *Fremde Tänze*

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Abstract

'Outside', in the foyer of the Künstlerhaus Mousonturm, where the audience is informally gathered and awaiting the show, Nelisiwe Xaba makes her appearance. Solemnly marching to the notes of *Aida*, the South African dancer, in a blond wig, wears, collar-like around her neck, a large circular tray upon which small desserts have been placed in the form of black human figures. The caricature mimed by this body-installation is fervid, with reference to the Cake walk: a dance organized and conducted by the slave servants to mock the mannerism of their aristocratic masters. The 'foreignness' of the piece is already set up, as well as Xaba's intention of playing on and challenging European audience expectation and modes of vision. With a firm gaze, she 'looks back', and invites the audience to join her into the theatre venue...

Keywords: choreographic resistance, mimicry and mockery, Nelisiwe Xaba.

FIGURE 1

Nelisiwe Xaba, *Fremde Tänze*, live performance, 2015, courtesy of the artist



In what follows I would like to discuss the “performance remains” (Schneider 2011) from the dance piece recently choreographed by Nelisiwe Xaba at the Afropean Mimicry & Mockery festival in Frankfurt¹. My aim is to present *Fremde Tänze*, in English “Foreign Dance”, under the theoretical framework of postcolonial and gender-sensitive critique. My brief analysis takes the position formulated by contemporary dance theorists, who rely on the assumption that choreography is a “theorization of embodiment” (Foster 1996: 396-97), a site of both embodied movement and of reflection about movement. Therefore, dance pieces constitute privileged sites for interpreting the ways discursive, symbolic and political issues are disclosed in the corporeal dimension; they open the possibility to probing ways in which the movement of the postcolonial body in space informs the choreography of a new “critical consciousness”: a critical space for re-thinking/re-choreographing not only Eurocentric politics of identity, reduced to the binary of Self and Other, but also postcolonial theoretical discourses about the body (Martin 1998: 1).

As dance scholar André Lepecki declares, “the choreographic”, embedded and experienced in a postcolonial context, serves as a resistant and metamorphic device enabling dancers and audiences alike to explore “new forms of agency and empowerment through otherwise unthinkable corporealities” (Lepecki 2004: n.p.). The resonance of the other-wise/other-ness quality, constitutive of dance itself, acquires even more relevance here to demonstrate “concrete possibilities for embodying otherwise – since a dancer’s labour is nothing else than to *embody*, *disembody* and *re-embody*, thus refiguring corporeality and proposing improbable subjectivities” (Lepecki 2012: 15). Against this backdrop, I wish to investigate the extent to which, in *Fremde Tänze*, the practice of embodying ‘otherness’ is politically staged, and choreographically conveyed, by

¹ *Fremde Tänze*: performed and choreographed by Nelisiwe Xaba, produced as part of the Julius-Hans-Spiegel-Zentrum/Theater Freiburg mobile research unit on “exoticism in dance” (curators Anna Wagner and Eike Wittrock); supported by TANZFONDS ERBE (German Cultural Foundation) and by the Goethe Institute; costumes by F. Jacobsen; animation by F. Koenig, L. Pater, T.J. Donaldson. Performed on November 26, 2016, Künstlerhaus Mousonturm, Frankfurt.

the transformative inventiveness of Nelisiwe Xaba's corporeality. I will briefly observe the ways in which, by deploying the disruptive potential of mimicry and mockery, Xaba's dance strategically embodies a politics of exoticism, in order to dis-embody other possible images for the 'Afropean' – transversally African and European – corporealities to re-embody and move in.

For its third edition, the Afropean Mimicry & Mockery festival gathered together in Frankfurt African and European dancers, artists and choreographers who represented the African diaspora in several ways and forms (Mousonturm 2017). The festival is conceived as a platform for debate devoted to the political and artistic issues that animate performance practitioners of both continents; thus, as also epitomized in the title, the event strives to generate an 'Afropean' creative space of inter-action. Headed by Congolese director Dieudonné Diangouna, together with Matthias Pees (general director of the Mousonturm) and curators Martin Baasch and Elisa Liepsch, the project "Afropean Mimicry & Mockery in Theatre, Performance & Visual Arts" aims to investigate the extent to which the practices of mimicry and mockery are still related to each other and continue to affect African-European artistic languages. As declared in their statement:

Mimicry and mockery run like a common thread through the centuries of African-European encounters. Appropriation and segregation, demonization and exaggeration, affirmation and over-affirmation all have a long tradition in both Europe and Africa. From the "cake walks" in which slaves ridiculed colonial powers, to the "black facing" of minstrel shows, from Jim Knopf to recent Disney movies, from Black Power, hip hop and hoodoo to Afropolitanism, Afropeanism and Afrofuturism. Mimicry and mockery are closely related and continue to this day to exert their influence on cultural and artistic forms of expression and discourse on European-African encounters. (Mousonturm 2014)

During the ten-day festival, black knowledge invades the white German institution; the audience can experience the kind of counter-hegemonic interventions contemporary 'Afropean' artists employ when invited to perform on the so-called postcolonial stage – a stage where dynamics of "syncretic theatre" and "intercultural performance", for instance, display acts of resistance against colonial power relations as a primary means of theatrical

communication (Gilbert 1996; Balme 1999; Schechner 2002). With a specific round table devoted to the politics and aesthetics of “Staging the Postcolonial”, and featuring theatre-dance pieces, performance walks, music concerts and art exhibitions, the festival raises questions that re-negotiate the flashpoints of contemporary theatrical actions:

What attributes and images of both continents do artists find interesting today? What kind of aesthetics, art forms and methodology do they feel obliged to use? What is the current status of artistic and political debate at the beginning of the 21st century, in an age that claims to be de-colonial, colour-blind, diasporic and transcultural? (Mousonturm 2014)

The 2016 edition offered a specific focus on black female artists whose contributions deal with “being Women, being Black, being the Other”. It is in this space of institutional and cultural ‘alterity’ that Nelisiwe Xaba gave a fearless example of otherness in her “Foreign Dance”.

Born in Soweto in 1972, Xaba studied at the Johannesburg Dance Foundation, at the Rambert School in London and joined the Pact Dance Company, before turning freelance and working with well-known choreographers and art practitioners². Since 1998, Nelisiwe Xaba has had a solo career as dancer and choreographer. On the edges of dance, visual installation and experimental motion graphics, in her solo pieces she becomes ‘the Other’, altering her corporeality through the ironic use of costume animation, music and props. In her political and provocative choreographic work, Xaba faces and overexposes, assembles and dismantles memories and images stratified on, and embodied by, the female body – not only African – with the purpose of undermining the Eurocentric and phallogentric, sexual and racial stereotypes layered on it³.

² Among the many, Xaba collaborated with the visual artist 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.

³ *Plasticization* (2007); *Black!..White?* (2009); *Uncles and Angels* (2013). For a discussion-interview on the works Xaba devoted to the figure of the “Hottentot

1. Archival research on exoticism

Fremde Tänze originates from the residency conducted by Xaba at the Julius Hans Spiegel Center⁴. Founded and curated by dance programmer Anna Wagner and dance historian and dramaturge Eike Wittrock, the Center is a choreographic and academic research space located in Freiburg and dedicated to the Berlin dancer Julius Hans Spiegel who, in the 1920s, made a name for himself across Europe with his 'exotic dance', but whose story disappeared from historical records. During the '20s German choreographers, as well as other European Modern Dance creators – including prominent figures like Mary Wigman and Rudolf Laban – took inspiration from extra-European cultures in order to assimilate new bodily techniques and movement images initiating, as a result, the circulation of exotic dances and visions on western and European stages (Gehm *et al.* 2007).

As for this residency project, the political and cultural aim of the artistic directors was to re-discover forgotten aspects of 'exoticism', so central to its legacy in Modern Dance history, while at the same time framing it in a postcolonial critical perspective. From January to April 2014, in Freiburg, amidst the Black Forest in Southern Germany, Nelisiwe Xaba and other choreographers, from Algeria, Indonesia, The Netherlands and Austria used archival material on the pioneers of German Modern Dance in order to research the different facets of exoticism and its relationship with dance heritage. Across their corporeal differences, histories and poetics, these artists re-embodied and re-wrote the controversial use of the European 'exotic', inventing a more contemporary way of 'looking at' and 'dancing' it. The Johannesburg choreographer chose to look at the European image of the 'African dance': in her 'foreign dance' she reversed the perspective and exoticized the Black Forest.

Venus", *They Look at Me and That's All They Say* (2008) and *Sarkozy says Non to the Venus* (2009), see Piccirillo 2011: 67-77.

⁴ Nacera Belaza (Algeria), Eko Supriyanto (Indonesia), and Florentina Holzinger & Vincent Riebeek (Netherlands and Austria), also took part at the residency at the Julius Hans Spiegel Center (Theatre Freiburg, January-February 2014). See the interview to the curators and the artists involved in Spiegel Centre 2017.

On the evening dedicated to *Fremde Tänze*, a historical introduction is provided by a German ‘expert lecturer’; this role is played by Anna Wagner, who wears a leopard-skin shirt and adopts a deliberately academic stance⁵. The expert welcomes the audience and presents the choreographic result of Xaba’s residency project. Xaba’s archive research draws attention to Sent M’ahesa, a woman performer and exponent of exotic tendencies in German Modern Dance, who has been marginalized and excluded from dance chronicles⁶. Archive images of M’ahesa’s repertoire are projected onto a screen, while the expert instructs the audience:

For today’s historical introduction I would like to draw your attention to a female performer from the beginning of the 20th century that has been more or less forgotten by dance history and who – through her marginalized and suppressed position – redirects the focus to forgotten aspects of dance history itself and the political mechanisms of exclusion that are at work in archives and genealogies of dance. Sent M’ahesa is a prominent exponent of the exoticist tendencies of German Modern Dance and was at her time widely recognized as a pioneer of that genre alongside choreographers such as Rudolf von Laban und Mary Wigman.

Exoticism is a crucial pillar of German Modern Dance. It was a motor for several liberations in dance: movement style, narration, performer-audience-relationship and costume. [...] Sent M’ahesa is a prime example of the exoticist imagination of the early German Modern Dance, of its application of folklore and ritual into dance performance, [...]. M’ahesa’s most famous creations were simple dances in abstract modern costumes that were intended – and perceived – as Egyptian. (Wagner and Wittrock 2016: n.p.)

In his study devoted to modernistic representation in German Modern body culture, Professor Karl Toepfer examines the work of M’ahesa and describes how the dancer, whose real name was Elsa von Carlberg (1893-1970), originally from Latvia, achieved fame in Germany for her exceptionally dramatic dances dominated

⁵ For the version presented at the *Dance Umbrella Festival 2015* (London), Eike Wittrock played the role of the ‘expert’ and performed the historical introduction in English, intentionally speaking with a strong German accent.

⁶ Compared to other celebrated exponents of German Modern Dance, M’ahesa received very limited attention, and her artistic work only appears as a footnote in the history of dance (Toepfer 1997).

by motifs from ancient Egyptian iconography. In 1907, she went to Berlin to study Egyptology, but “she became so enchanted with ancient Egyptian art and artifacts that she decided to pursue her interest through dance rather than scholarship” (Toepfer 1997: 175). It is not documented whether M’ahesa ever visited the cultures she appropriated, and it is assumed that many of her images and postures likely came from an imaginary perception she encountered in Germany. In her solos, such as the famous *Old Egyptian Dances* (1910), she intentionally constructed her ‘foreign’ choreographies upon a personal and partial interpretation: “She did not reconstruct ancient Egyptian dances [or] create an elaborate ‘illusion’ of Egyptian culture [...] she consciously strove to present an image of the body that was out of context” (Toepfer 1997: 176).

The condition experienced by M’ahesa of being ‘out of context’, and ‘foreign’ for the mainstream historical dance memory is what triggers Nelisiwe Xaba’s archival exercise. As the exoticist representation of the Egyptian foreignness/otherness staged by Sent M’ahesa incorporated Orientalist visions in Edward Said’s terms, and depicted the ambivalent relation of a modern European subject to non-western art, it should be kept in mind that, representing the Other “through the fantasy of spatial and temporal distance” (Wagner and Wittrock 2016: n.p.), the dancer expressed new imaginary encounters and subjective configurations, constructing a sense of hybrid identity that was transcultural and decontextualized. In *Fremde Tänze*, Xaba offers her gaze to the choreographic memory of this forgotten female artist to ‘archive’, on the contemporary stage, the gestures of a counter-memory that is both a homage to, and a reversal of the exotic images articulated and embodied by the German Modern artist from the ’20s.

Toepfer underlines the spectacular show-techniques adopted by M’ahesa: “Her dances always functioned in relation to intricate, highly decorative costumes of her own design, so that it appeared as if she chose movements for their effect upon her costume” (Toepfer 1997: 176). Performing little miniatures, each lasting only a few minutes, and crossing distant places and times – from Indian to Bedouin, from Siamese to Javarese cultures – in one evening M’ahesa switched genres of music and inscribed on the stage several body gestures derived from her love of Egyptian art,

“which was the complete distillation of it” (Toepfer 1997: 179). In a similar performative approach, Xaba adopts a perspective that exoticizes the German Black Forest; her body-work makes evident systems of ‘othering’, particularly the construction of the black female figure as an exotic curiosity, or as an ethnographic specimen. The choreographer juxtaposes short exoticist dance pieces to video-projections of cartoons or popular advertisements; in each miniature, she transforms her body image and movement appropriating old popular songs from German, Asian and other geographical backgrounds, intentionally masking racist references with resounding innocence⁷.

2. Choreographing mimicry and mockery

The multiple forms in which, from slavery to apartheid, from colonial to contemporary times, black bodies have *in*-corporated politics of historic subjection and racial exclusion have been extensively observed and analysed. Afro-Caribbean scholar and activist Alrick Cambridge famously asserts that “the black body [...] bears the mark of exclusion upon the skin [...], it is [...] a political and cultural body upon the surface of which are already imprinted multiple historic subjections” (Cambridge 1992: 110). As evidence of difference and deviance, distorted bodily images have been constructed on the black “corporal schema” (Fanon 1952); even more, in order to establish racial and sexual stereotypes, and enforce mythical white ideals, western racialized knowledge has also conceived the female black body as an over-sexualized ‘Other’ to be observed, scrutinized, and ambivalently desired (Gilman 1985). Black female bodies “have been chained, sold, transported, paraded, flayed, pried open, discarded and possessed”, Carole Boyce Davies writes in her essay “Female/Black/Bodies Carnivalized”, and then asks: “So, how does one reclaim that female body now in the context of recent history?” (Davies 2010:

⁷ The audience is provided with a programme reproducing the conventional printed leaflet outlining the parts of the event scheduled to take place and the music featured; the evening is so announced: 1) *Historical introduction* by Anna B. Wagner; 2) *Advertisement*; 3) *Interlude*; 5) *Living picture (tableau vivant)*.

194)⁸. Xaba seems to reply fervently to Davies. In her experimental dance – imaginative, sarcastic and political – her skin colour and exotic physicality become the main weapons for dis-embodying and re-embodying some of these fixed images articulated on black corporeality. The postcolonial and deconstructive dimension of Xaba's practice relies on the fact that it embodies a repertoire of images – a series of pointedly exaggerated, at times caricatural, cultural mis-interpretations – of anthropological and ethnographic exoticism, which display familiar western/European interpretative codes, while, at the same time, ironically deconstructing them, thus destabilizing audiences.

As a result, the deconstructive exercise Xaba here activates consists in choreographically exploiting the subversive potential of mimicry and mockery. This subversive potential is a point Homi Bhabha reiterates in his seminal essay on colonial mimicry: as much as the desire for mimicry is a means of control, the ambivalent colonial demand for a difference that is “almost the same but not white” also provides natives with a space in which it is possible to challenge the colonial authority (Bhabha 1994: 128). This is what Bhabha means by the mask of mimicry or “spectacular resistance”: “the insignia of authority becomes a mask, a mockery [...] to the extent to which discourse is a form of defensive warfare, mimicry marks those moments of civil disobedience within the discipline of civility: signs of spectacular resistance” (Bhabha 1994: 172).

By staging spectacular acts of parody, mockery and irony, Xaba exploits the corporeal potential structurally embodied in postcolonial mimicry so as to produce unexpected opportunities for active resistance and disruption before the audience. In each choreographic section, Xaba refigures her body shape and form, using the many possible evolutions of a bivouac. The malleable structure becomes a screen, a vessel, or a long skirt – the imaginative extension of her transforming corporeality. In one specific dance-miniature, the fabric of the bivouac screens off the whole body, making visible only her face – here

⁸ Here, Davies paraphrases Baby Suggs in *Beloved* by Toni Morrison and as herself clarifies: “Toni Morrison has one of her characters, Baby Suggs, make this point in the sermon in ‘The Clearing’ in *Beloved* (1987), when she dramatically challenges people who had left slavery behind to relearn how to love the various part of their bodies” (Davies 2010: 197).

overexposed as 'savage'. To the foreign words of a Vietnamese song, Xaba performs 'strange' facial expressions, grotesque eye movements and ferocious gazes. The mimicry is hence recognizable: enclosed in a frame-cage, she embodies and simulates the docility of the black 'beast' as it was displayed, for instance, in the colonial 'human zoos' or in the 'freak shows' of the colonial era, to satisfy the exotic curiosity of European visitors (see Thomson 1996; Blanchard 2008)⁹. Xaba's mode of using parody, her way to represent mock-subjection, seems to recall the performative acts of "simulated obedience" that Graham Huggan observes in the postcolonial literary context: "This mode belongs to the register of parody", the scholar notes, the traces of which "can be found in performative acts of simulated obedience, as colonial subjects bow in mock-deference to their metropolitan 'master', tacitly resisting subordination by appearing to embrace it" (Huggan 2008: 133).

FIGURE 2

Nelisiwe Xaba, *Fremde Tänze*, live performance, 2015, courtesy of the artist



⁹ Beginning with the early nineteenth-century, from London to New York, from Warsaw to Milan, from Moscow to Tokyo, the phenomena of 'human zoos', or 'anthropo-zoological' exhibitions, became a key symbol of colonial era. 'Exotic' individuals were placed alongside wild beasts and presented behind bars or in enclosures; through the 'spectacularization' of the Other, the West invented the 'savage', exhibited the 'peoples of the world', whilst in many cases preparing for or contributing to their colonization. (Blanchard *et al.* 2008).

3. Dancing/Gazing the exotic body from an-'other' angle

Before the gaze of the audience, Xaba's black skin absorbs the racist mark of bestiality, deformed physiognomy and monstrosity implicit in the show, thus revealing the enduring colonial ability to "essentialise, control and possess with the gaze" while turning the black female body into a dehumanized object of observation (Pietarse 1992: 94). Even so, Xaba reacts to this: through the agency of her displacing gaze, which returns and interrogates that of the audience, she creates what artist Carrie Mae Weems has called "a space in which black women are looking back"¹⁰. Xaba makes an interesting use of vision from different angles, where the dynamics of 'looking' are, indeed, reversed as the viewer becomes the viewed. The theoretical assumption made by Bhabha seems to resonate again in relation to Xaba's choreographic gesture: "The look of surveillance returns as the displacing gaze of the disciplined, where the observer becomes the observed and 'partial' representation rearticulates the whole notion of identity and alienates it from essence" (Bhabha 1994: 127). The gaze disclosed by the dancer on stage causes the audience's identity to vacillate: the colonial relation of power is destabilized when the inverted politics of power ineluctably reiterates on the stages of postcolonial theatre. Xaba makes the most of the subversive and displacing potentiality of the gaze; or, in her own words: "I've accepted the fact that I am (seen as) a queen of exoticism and the exotic. My body is political. But what I'm interested in, is the gaze and its angle. The angle that you view or gaze from is the point that it becomes political" (Xaba 2015).

The visual realm keeps being questioned in her performance work. At some point, the costume turns into a screen, and a very well-known advertisement is projected: it is the colonial commercial cartoon of the "Sarotti" German chocolate brand depicting the cheerful Sarotti-Moor or Mohr. This character, created in 1918 for the 50-year anniversary of the company, embodied the typical racist stereotype of the 'servile Negroes'¹¹. The image of the Sarotti-Mohr,

¹⁰ Statement by Carrie Mae Weems from "Talking Art with Carrie Mae Weems", quot. in hooks 1995: 85.

¹¹ As Africanist Michael D. Harris points out: "Wealthy 18th century Europeans had been especially interested in the services of African children, to the point

was “the most visible black figure in German Popular culture”, and it still belongs to this day to one of the most famous personages of German advertising history, marking an integral part of the discourse of exoticism in the country (Pieterse 1992)¹². Imaging blacks as connected to chocolate suggests fantasies of ‘consuming’ the Other: and Xaba increases the mocking reference to cannibalism and consumerism, when she more specifically stages gestures of “strategic exoticism” in the following scenes.

FIGURE 3

Nelisiwe Xaba, *Fremde Tänze*, live performance, 2015, courtesy of the artist



where possessing them became a fashion” (Harris 2010: 167). As also observed by Elizabeth O’Leary, “[b]ought and sold at inns and coffeehouses, boys and girls were trained as house servants and groomed as domestic pets”; what is more, in the realm of western representations, “the portrayal of black servants in American art was built on British traditions of representing slaves as docile attendants, figures who functioned primarily to elevate the importance of white subjects” (O’Leary 1996: 18 and 34).

¹² Only in 2004 did the company, as a response to the persistent accusations of racism, change the tray-carrying moor into a gold-skinned ‘mage’ (see US Slave 2014).

In his study on postcolonial literary strategies, Graham Huggan observes that postcolonial writers and thinkers have in very different ways recognized their own complicity with exoticist aesthetics, while choosing to manipulate conventions to their own political ends, and, hence, with the goal to posit alternative epistemologies and strategies of cultural representation. In Huggan's words this is theorized as "strategic exoticism":

the means by which postcolonial writers/thinkers, working from within exoticist codes of representation, either manage to subvert those codes ('inhabiting them to criticize them', Spivak 1990), or succeed in redeploying them for the purpose of uncovering differential relations of power. (Huggan 2001: 32)

This strategy is definitely materialized and performed in the last choreographic miniatures of "Foreign Dance", where the African exotic female body 'strategically' emerges as a fiercely seductive, ultimately self-consuming object of desire.

Both in dance and society, the exoticized/eroticized condition of black women is rooted in a history that can be traced back to the 19th century: from the representation of Saartjie Baartman, exoticized for her 'deformed genitalia' at the beginning of the 19th century, to the eroticization of African-American dancer and actress Josephine Baker, famously named "the Bronze Venus", in early 20th-century France (Willis 2010)¹³. Re-embodying the Otherness of these bodily memories, Xaba dances and exposes her exotic-erotic physicality to the audience, choosing to work 'from within' while seeking to challenge the dominant systems of women's representation.

The punk sound of German singer Nina Hager and the club music *Afrikanisher Tanz*, by South African Dj Ganyani, accompany

¹³ More than a century after Baartman's death, the sexual tension and fantasy surrounding the primitivized black woman pervaded France and reappeared, as strong as ever, evoked by Baker's appearance on stage in Paris: "It is as if Baker might have buttocks like Baartman's or as if African women are possessed of archetypal wombs blessed with primeval fertility" (Burt 1998:74). The image and the story of Baartman and the more enduring legends of the "Hottentot Venus" have become crucial elements in black feminist contestations of the common perceptions and misconceptions of black female sexuality. The volume *Black Venus 2010: They Called Her "Hottentot"*, edited by Deborah Willis (2010), for example, is devoted to contemporary historical and artistic reclamations of the *Venus* which re-situate the politics of black feminist resistance.

Xaba's mockery of mixed patterns of burlesque, dance music, samba and African reggae. She releases movements of self-aware parodies of the male European fantasies transferred onto black female corporeality; she exposes the absurd mimicry of western standards of beauty and glamour often assimilated by black women. The carnivalesque choreography illuminates, to some extent, aspects of the "female grotesque" as theorized by Mary Russo: the political and transformative body becomes on the stage a site of insurgency, she replicates and simultaneously transgresses cultural and societal norms, interrupting the dominant discourses circulating on female physicality (Russo 1986).

FIGURE 4

Nelisiwe Xaba, *Fremde Tänze*, live performance, 2015, courtesy of the artist



Mimicry here clearly also works as a gesture of feminist resistance. Deliberately mimicking male stereotypes of women constitutes, in reality, an act of agency from a woman; it is distinct from passively submitting to stereotypes as the woman/performer has the power to regain the right to construct her own other-identity. Xaba also provokes the female spectator – her unconscious submission to

male stereotypes – and seems to embrace the feminist claim that Luce Irigaray, among many, has extensively affirmed to avoid both the “becoming male”, and “radical separatist” feminist responses (Irigaray 1993).

The strategic re-enactment of the fetishization of black female corporeality eventually extends to the African continent, when Xaba stages images of exoticist tourism and cultural voyeurism – a voyeurism in which the western observer, like a consumer of pornography, becomes complicit. This time, the dancer sets her bivouac in an imaginary remote and primitive place, wears a ‘sexy’ dress made of tampons, and carefully focuses on the act of sewing. She sews tampons with steadfast dedication, making pieces of bracelets and other ornaments for her costume. The audience now acquires the curiosity-gaze of the tourist before the mimicry of an ‘original’ African native craftswoman. A white man in a Hawaiian shirt stands up in the auditorium and takes some pictures to immortalize, fix again, and satisfy his pleasure before the exotic otherness. The European invention of an ideal Africa is, thus, strategically reproduced by the South African dancer herself, as a means of mocking the self-perpetuating lucrative system of material exchange. As the exotic myth of an unchanging and uncontaminated Africa is farcically preserved in European museum collections of fake cultural relics, so Xaba's *tableau vivant* uncovers the hypocrisy of western anthropologist-tourist-explorers, whose pretentious ‘expert’ knowledge and appreciation of African art and performance fool no one but themselves. Against the essentialized perception of ‘African dance’, Xaba affirms the recognition of the diversity in these words:

Dance is about heritage, and we can only localize it [...] if you take Zulu dance, for instance, it is part of a certain culture and tradition, but it cannot represent South Africa. Today it is still problematic, when the perception of Africa is just this little small continent [...]. If someone knows one dance in Africa, then, [...] it is what Africa is about [...]; I mean, even if you take a country, you cannot just represent it with one dance, [...] because even within a country there is so much diversity. (Xaba 2013)

The laborious act of sewing closes this dance piece – lastly, when Xaba wipes the sweat from her forehead, she reminds us that “dance is actually

labor”¹⁴. The audience leaves the theatre with a mixture of feelings, impressions and questions. Is the mimicry subversive, or through the parodic repetition does it reinforce the power and the knowledge of the dominant culture over black people? “What is this ‘Black’?” (Hall 1992): the echo of Stuart Hall’s question resonates again today. As if following this reverberation, Hall – acutely aware of the inescapable historical and intellectual tensions at play in the essentialist perspective, and citing Spivak’s “strategic essentialism” – writes: “historically, nothing could have been done to intervene in the dominated field of mainstream popular culture, to try to win some space there, without the strategies through which those dimensions were condensed onto the signified ‘black’” (Hall 1992: 471). The strategic exoticism and the postcolonial otherness embodied, disembodied and re-embodied by Xaba through the subversive potential of mimicry is an option, and and seems to echo Huggan’s words when he states: “it is not necessarily a way out of the dilemma [...] the postcolonial exotic is, to some extent, a pathology of cultural representation under late capitalism” (Huggan 2001: 33).

FIGURE 5

Nelisiwe Xaba, *Fremde Tänze*, live performance, 2015, courtesy of the artist



¹⁴ During the closing festival of the Julius Hans Spiegel residency, Melissa Blanco Borrelli (Royal Holloway University, London) makes an interesting point about the implications of physical labour embedded in dance performance (see Spiegel Centre 2017).

By dancing/embodying otherness, Xaba does not intend to correct the colonial or neo-colonial contradictions embedded within the exoticist representation of black African corporeality. To the audience the task of assuming responsibility and accountability for her 'foreign dance'; to all, the request to perceive the existence – and the resistance – of an-other 'Afropean' cultural and corporeal difference, to be enacted far beyond the creative and political walls of the postcolonial stage.

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