

## Title: Saartjie Baartman, Nelisiwe Xaba, and me: The Politics of Looking at South African Bodies

### Abstract:

Dance Artist/Choreographer Nelisiwe Xaba's *They Look at Me and That Is All They Think* (2006) 'refers to the story of Sara[tjie] Baartman [...] the Hottentot Venus'" (Jomba 2006, p. 7) who was taken from her homeland South Africa, and exhibited in Europe in the nineteenth century. After Baartman died in 1815, her remains were displayed in a museum in Paris until 1982. Xaba parallels the story of Baartman to her own experience of performing in Europe as a black South African woman. This article considers how *They Look at Me and That Is All They Think* exposes the politics surrounding the act of looking at a particular racial and gendered body in both the historical and contemporary context, and how the concept and articulation of the 'superior' European subject was dependent on the classification of Baartman, and other black Africans, as exotic others. In my practice-based research project *How I Chased a Rainbow and Bruised My Knee* (2007), which was a choreographic response to Xaba's work, I theatricalise my identity as a white South African woman to make visible whiteness, its associated privilege, and how it is dependent on the representation of a particular type of blackness.

Keywords: Baartman, Xaba, Dance, Blackness, and Whiteness

### Saartjie Baartman, Nelisiwe Xaba, and me: The Politics of Looking at South African Bodies

I see her form. I watch her remove her glove with her teeth and hang it seductively on the ladder. She poses and I look. She slowly removes her bra and hangs it. It is very, very quiet and still in the theatre. I can sense everyone watching her, looking at her. Her breasts start to get bigger and bigger. Her bum starts to swell too. I watch as her form changes shape. A gurgle of giggles slowly fills the theatre. I recognise the silhouette of Saartjie Baartman. I wonder what everyone else is thinking when looking at her.<sup>i</sup>

Both dance studies and performance studies have appropriated Laura Mulvey's (1975) focus on the relationship between the spectator and film with her concept of the male gaze (see Dolan 1988; Brown 1994; Manning 1997; and Bennett 1998). For example, when studying the relationship in a classical ballet between the spectator and performer, the male gaze is constructed when the spectator (who is both assumed and constructed to be male) is invited to identify with the male

protagonist or lead dancer's desire for the female character. The spectators are constructed as male, as the erotic objectification of the male body in dance would allow a homoerotic viewing of the male body, and this is a threat to the dominant heterosexual patriarchal society. In addition, the male heterosexual spectator actively constructs the male ballet dancers as powerful and as active agents to ensure that no homoerotic spectatorship will occur. The female performer is objectified due to the costuming of the female body, the narrative, and the movement vocabulary. Through the connection between the spectator and the male protagonist, the spectator also objectifies the female performer.

The male ballet dancer does not acknowledge that he is being watched and constantly views the female ballet dancer as an object to be acquired within the narrative structure. This strengthens the identification process between the male dancer and the spectator. Here the male gaze constructs the female body as a cultural commodity to be consumed by the spectator as an object of desire. Although the spectator looks at the female ballet dancer, they cannot touch her. Constructed as 'other', the complete possession of the female ballet dancer as sexual object is constantly deferred and rendered inaccessible. Thus, the spectator derives pleasure from watching her as an erotic object; the female dancer is the 'bearer and object of male desire' (Brown 1994, p. 203). The female classical/romantic ballet dancer is denied an opportunity to protest against her objectification and is also further limited by her choreographed movements so as not to disrupt the 'safe fantasizing of the male voyeur' (Brown 1994, p. 203). What Laura Mulvey's concept of the male gaze offers is the potential application to study power-asymmetrical gender relationships which manifest in cultural practices such as dance. Mulvey's concept of 'to-be-looked-at-ness' emphasises the female status as an object that must be static and contained. Dance movement resists this static state and evades capture. Using Mulvey's concept as a starting point, South African choreographers, like Xaba, investigate the workings of these viewing relationships and how the female body in dance has the ability to resist objectification.

Nonetheless, dance is about watching the body. The spectator is required actively and subjectively to view the dancer's body in motion and in stillness, and it is these acts of movement and stillness of the dancer's body that challenge the passivity and object status of the dancing body. Laura Mulvey's concept of the male gaze does offer a method to study the relationship between the spectator and the performer, however, since the concept of the male gaze emerges from film studies, it has limitations and cannot be applied without thought and adjustment to all cultural practices. This is especially the case in South African dance studies as 'questions of race must be explicitly framed; without this, "gender and performance" as a subject reverts to a default (and thus unmarked) assertion of "whiteness"' (Bennett 1998, p. 268). The dancing body can highlight for the spectator the cultural constructions of gender, race and nationality, and South African dance makers are aware of the dancing body's ability to hence challenge cultural constructions and offer further possibilities for the body and its representations. Dance asks and requires the audience to look at the body, and there is a distinct difference between a film or photographic image of the body and a dancer on stage. Ramsay Burt (1995, p. 50) reminds us that the dancer is alive and is moving and the audience is aware of the dancer's presence and 'how spectators read dancers' presence is determined partly by visual cues. Some of these cues are given by the dancers, through the way they present themselves to the audience, and in the way they themselves focus their gaze' (Burt 1995, p. 50). The dancer knows that she or he is being looked at. Hence, Mulvey's male gaze theory has a 'number of limitations [...] is unable to address current postmodern practices such as parody' (Thomas 2003, p. 159) The concept of the gaze must not be figured as a 'monolithic one' (Thomas 1996, p. 81) but instead as a complex process where the act of looking and looking back between the viewer and the performer is oft-repeated. This is shaped by a variety of gendered, racial, national, and other discourses (see de Lauretis 1988), and like identity construction, is fluid and constantly evolving. It is necessary to be aware of how the gaze is gendered, racial, and/or colonial

and how this shapes the act of representation (see Yancy 2008; Dodds 2014; Moe 2015; and Bradley 2016).

This article explores how Nelisiwe Xaba in *They Look at Me and That Is All They Think* (2006) is conscious of the power operations at play in the act of looking by both the spectator and the dancer, and how this looking has a particular effect on the materialisation of identities. Xaba is aware of a dancing body's ability to challenge cultural constructions and offer further possibilities for representation. It is this enactment that Xaba studies in *They Look at Me and That Is All They Think*, and what I theatricalise in my practice-based research project *How I Chased a Rainbow and Bruised My Knee* (2007). Practice-based research, especially when utilising dance, enables the researcher to explore embodiment and deconstruct bodily experiences; ‘dance encapsulates embodied cognition’ (McKechnie and Stevens 2009, p. 84). This methodology is primarily concerned with how practice furthers research inquiry; it is in the making and critical reflection that the researcher is uncovering knowledge, or what Robin Nelson refers to as ‘the value of experiential “knowing through dancing”’ (2006, p. 111).

Nelisiwe Xaba is from Soweto Township in Gauteng, South Africa, and trained with the Johannesburg Dance Foundation and the Rambert Ballet in London. She has toured extensively either with her own dance works, such as *Plasticization* at the Barbican in London in 2007, or performed for other South African choreographers such as in Robyn Orlin’s *Daddy I’ve Seen This Piece Six Times Before and I Still Don’t Know Why They Are Hurting Each Other* (1998). Xaba fosters collaborations with visual artists and fashion designers, and in 2006 she worked with the fashion label Strange Love (Jomba 2006, p. 7) in creating *They Look At Me and That Is All They Think*. This performance work:

refers to the story of Sara[tjie] Baartman<sup>ii</sup>, known in France as the “Hottentot Venus” and how she ‘has become a symbol of the oppression of the African woman by colonisation, and

its zoo-like way of looking at Africans. Baartman's buttocks and genital labia were on display as representations of African sexuality, and in *They Look at Me and That Is All They Think*, Xaba, through her use of her costume, lighting, and choreographed movement, critiques this colonial and racist act of representing Baartman. For Xaba, this story is an allegory for her own artistic journey, from Soweto to the Eurocentric world of art today (Jomba 2006, p. 7).

As Natasha Gordon-Chipembere states '[t]he "Hottentot Venus" is a construction of a masculinist, colonial discourse on female sexuality that has a prevailing impact on the way that Africa and Diasporic women are represented in the twenty-first century' (2011, p. 10). Baartman, of Eastern Cape Khoisan descent, was taken from South Africa when she was twenty-one years old in 1810, and exhibited in England and France until she died five years later. After Baartman's death, her genitalia and her skeleton were on public display at the Musée de l'Homme in Paris until 1982, and thereafter remained in the museum's holdings until her return to South Africa in 2002 (Gottschild 2003, p. 149 - 154). Her title as the 'Hottentot Venus' is an insult that clearly reveals European racism; the etymological root of the term Hottentot is to stammer or stutter. This is because early European explorers were ignorant of what to make of the Khoekhoen/Khoi and San languages, and like many other colonised and oppressed peoples, the Khoi and San were categorised and labelled as if they were new discoveries that the European explorers had 'discovered', much like the flora and fauna of their colonised territories. Furthermore, the alignment of the term Hottentot with Venus was an oxymoron and racist ridicule, for how could Baartman, an African, be a Venus? (Gottschild 2003, p. 150). 'Baartman was displayed not as a person, nor as an art, but as a quasi-human artifact' (Gottschild 2003, p. 150).

Burt furthers his treatise on the gaze when he states that 'dance is something that a spectator watches' (1995, p. 50) and that the spectators are 'aware of their [the dancer's] presence' (1995, p. 50). I would add, so too is the dancer sensitive to the audience's presence, and is unlike in 'visual art and film' (Burt 1995, p. 50), able to acutely read and respond to the audience's presence, if they wish too. The dialogue between spectator and dancer is actively mediated. However, Philip Auslander states that 'not all forms of performance take advantage of this possibility' (2008, p. 68), nevertheless, I argue that Xaba is one of the artists that readily take up this option and is markedly responsive to the audience's gaze, by disrupting the act of looking by way of revealing and hiding her body from the audience. In the opening moments of *They Look at Me and That Is All They Think*, Xaba, in silence, is seated on her knees dressed in a white hoop skirt that spreads out on the stage around her, and to the right-hand side of her a roll of bubble wrap tied to a ladder is

positioned. A brightly coloured shirt and leggings are visible underneath Xaba's white, almost transparent, costume, and wearing long white gloves, she weaves her arms in and out. The movement of her hands and arms appear swan-like, offering a fractured reading of the classical ballet *Swan Lake*. Her head tilts backwards and it is difficult to see her face. Her one glove has a brown tag attached to it suggesting that she has been labelled and catalogued like a museum specimen as Saartjie Baartman was. This allusion to how Baartman's body was dissected resonates when Xaba opens her arms out like wings moving forward, bringing her face into view for the first time. She curls over with her arms to the side as if she was flying and cradles her hands together on the floor. This creates a support on which she places her head slowly moving into a headstand. As she begins to lift her legs up into the air, the skirt is lifted, falling over her torso revealing her brightly coloured costume of underwear, leggings, socks, and high heels. Throughout the performance, Xaba is in control, playing with the audience and deciding when she will reveal or hide her body from the audience. Her brightly coloured costume unveiled by the white skirt has the effect of alluding to a tropical item, referencing how the 'exotic' or 'the other', such as Baartman, was exhibited in the colonial era. Xaba's hyper-exaggerated breasts and buttocks reflect bell hook's view that:

most often attention was not focused on the complete black female on display at a fancy ball in the "civilized" heart of European culture, Paris. She is there to entertain guests with the naked image of Otherness. They are not to look at her as a whole human being. They are to notice only certain parts (hooks 2003, p. 123).

Later, Xaba turns the skirt around so that she is positioned in front with her costume of inflated buttocks and breasts. She plays with the ladder kicking her legs high whilst standing on it, or suggestively opens and closes her legs whilst lying on the ladder. In another section in *They Look at Me and That Is All They Think*, a track by Dorothy Masuka starts to play overhead, and Xaba, in time with the music, playfully moves her legs as if they were dancing to the music. Throughout this choreographed motif, her body is again cut up and displayed with the skirt covering or revealing parts of her body in sections. Xaba's body is never presented as a whole, intimating how Baartman's body was cut up and displayed after her death. Using this theatrical device, Xaba underlines the negative stereotyping of the black African female as a sexual and exotic other as problematic, absurdist, and ethically corrupt on all levels; she reminds the audience of the horrific fate of Saartjie Baartman as a collection of museum objects. Midway during the performance of *They Look at Me and That Is All They Think*, Xaba, in silence, makes, for the second time, a tent out of her skirt into which she enters. This results in the audience seeing Xaba's shadow. Here she

slowly takes one glove off and hangs it, and then using her teeth, removes the other glove. Sexually suggestive shadows are made as Xaba slowly strips off her bra. The audience soon notice how her breasts are increasingly becoming larger and larger. A contemporary Rhythm and Blues track by The Pussycat Dolls (2005) plays overhead containing the lyrics ‘[d]on’t cha wish your girlfriend was hot like me. Don’t cha wish your girlfriend was a freak like me. Don’t cha, don’t cha. Don’t cha wish your girlfriend was raw like me’. Xaba’s breasts continue to enlarge, and so too do her buttocks. With humour, Xaba parodies how African women like Baartman were displayed to nineteenth century European society, and comments on how the stereotype of African female sexuality as ‘exotic’ and overtly sexual is still in operation in contemporary society as epitomised by popular music and culture that Xaba’s choice of music demonstrates. She plays with her shadow touching her breasts as the music track changes to French piano accordion music and starts to perform awkward poses as her whole body’s shadow became larger and larger. Xaba, who visibly inflates - and later deflates - her breasts and buttocks, emphasises the theatrical mechanics that created the fantasy of the African as exotic to begin with. Xaba’s body shadow size changes from large into small due to the light swing, until the shadow image shows her balancing and swinging on a trapeze; her skirt is now a circus tent. Under the circus tent is a place where animals are put on display and are trained to do tricks for the audience’s pleasure. They are to perform to amuse the audience. Baartman was treated like a circus animal, a possession put on display for Europe’s pleasure, and here Xaba parallels her own European experience with Baartman’s; perhaps contemporary European audiences desire Xaba to represent and perform what they deem African to be. Perhaps they are disappointed if this performance of African is not what they judged it to be? Maybe it was not ‘exotic’ enough? Xaba makes this sophisticated point about the notion of the African as exotic in her performance’s choreography, and I argue that Xaba demonstrates the absurdity of this European notion, and how this has literally harmed the African female body as horrifically exemplified by Saartjie Baartman’s experience. ‘Women were doubly colonized - by nationality and gender - in other colonial contexts’ (Hunter 2005, p. 11). Unfortunately, this negative stereotype of the African female body is still in circulation, even on the European contemporary dance stage where Xaba performs.

Throughout *They Look at Me and That Is All They Think*, Xaba uses her body and her costume as a theatre apparatus to mediate her representation. It is on the skirt that the films are projected, and it is under the skirt, with the use of effective lighting, that she is able to alter her shape and form making her breasts and buttocks larger or smaller. Xaba appears to have control of – a sense of authority over - her representation. Burt reminds us that when there is ‘connection between looking and the process of identification by a reader or audience member [...] *one sees from their point of view*

[Burt's emphasis]' (1995, p. 51). Xaba offers the audience the opportunity to identify with her case of performing for Eurocentric audiences and her reflection on Baartman's experience. This then leads me to re-thinking Baartman and her agency and if she was able to respond to the audience's gaze; were there moments when Baartman subverted the colonial gaze and attempted to take control of her representation? Gottschild claims that 'Baartman did not dance' and stresses the static nature of her performance (2003, p. 153), however, Holmes (2007, pp. 66 – 67) notes that she sang and danced playing her ramkie (an African guitar). Perhaps, it was in these live instances of dancing and singing that we might reveal traces where Baartman responded to the audience and the manner in which they were looking at her, and, even if only for a second, how Baartman possibly attempted to subvert the dominant hegemony of Eurocentrism. Perhaps, in these brief moments, Baartman made visible to her audience how in order for their society to categorise itself as civilised, European society needed to fix her representation as the opposite. Therefore, little did her European audience know that when they were looking at Saartjie Baartman they were looking at a reflection of themselves...

Baartman's story must not be told in black and white like a theatre of silhouettes, rather Xaba, in drawing a parallel with Baartman's journey and her own In *They Look at Me and That Is All They Think*, ventures to tell both stories in a kaleidoscopic manner and exposes the construction of racial identity. During the performance, the spotlight on her increases gradually until her white costume shines so bright and with such intensity. This is the shine that Richard Dyer refers to in *White* where idealised white women 'glow rather than shine' (1997, p. 122). Dyer states that unlike glowing, where light emerges from within or above the body, shine is light bouncing off the skin, like sweat, and therefore connoting 'physicality, the emissions of the body and unladylike labour, in the sense of work and parturition. In a well-known Victorian saw, animals sweated, and even gentlemen perspired, but ladies merely glowed. Dark skin too, when it does not absorb the light, may bounce it back' (1997, p. 122). Xaba's white costume, which should absorb the light, instead bounces this light, burning the audience's eyes. This concept of whiteness as beautiful is reflected in the cosmetic industry which 'has been devoted to both the glow and avoidance of shine' (Dyer 1997, p. 122) from the shine blotting papers from high-end fashion houses to skin-illuminating creams from supermarket manufacturers. This ideal of radiant and transparent skin (Dyer 1997, p. 122), like Xaba's skirt, is also at play in the concept of black beauty. Margaret L. Hunter, explores how skin colour bias is connected to sexism in the United States of America, and how skin colour bias has led many women to try to alter their appearances, for instance by using skin-lightening creams, in order to become more 'beautiful' (2005, pp. 3 - 5) and I would add that this extends beyond North America. Hunter states that the line of reasoning that there are also white women who enlarge their

lips and tan their skins is a ‘way of deflecting racial domination and evading discussions of white privilege [...] a tan white woman is still a white woman [...and...] they are actually reinforcing existing racial stereotypes about African American and Latino/a sexuality’ (Hunter 2005, p. 66). This is because as white women they are in a position of privilege even with a tanned skin; darkening of skin colour does not disrupt the power operations as it is predicated on a binary argument of white and black as opposites thereby reinforcing the status quo, and advancing the stereotypical representation of black women. Besides, current fashion ideals of a tanned white woman are grounded on the tan being ‘fake’ and therefore a representation, and a lighter degree of colour and ergo not ‘too black.’

*I was born in white hospital. I lived in a white house on a white street. I had nightmares in a white bed. I took a white bus to a white school and played cowboys and Indians with other white kids. I learnt to read from a white book. I sat and wrote at a white desk. I swam in a white pool. I built a white camp in a white bush. I ran on a white athletics track. I surfed in a white sea. I made friends on a white beach. I had my first drink in a white bar. I danced on a white stage. I would eat the soft white inside of the white government loaf and leave the brown crust. I once spilt red juice all over my white dress. My mom called me ‘n akkedisie<sup>iii</sup> as my blue veins showed through my white skin. White bread. White sock. White snow. White heat. Great white shark. Egg white. White Knight. White fight. White kite. White flight. White margarine. White sheets. White wedding. White wedding dress. White cliffs of Dover. White hurts my eyes. Make your whites whiter ...<sup>iv</sup>*

Gary Taylor opens *Buying Whiteness: Race, Culture, and Identity from Columbus to Hip Hop* stating that ‘skin is the first sign system that we learn to read’ and ‘it would be hard for us not to notice its color’ as ‘we are creatures addicted to semiotics, to the interpretation of signs’; these skin colour groupings are ‘arbitrary and are neither geographically or temporally limited’ but do alter their meanings (Taylor 2005, pp. 2 - 3). South African apartheid policies such as the Population Registration Act of 1950 attempted to fix these signs and legislate racial segregation and difference. Adrian Guelke’s *Rethinking the Rise and Fall of Apartheid: South Africa and World Politics* includes a table showing the reclassifications of individual South Africans and their assigned racial grouping in 1986 (2005, p. 26), demonstrating both the arbitrary and absurd nature of this task, especially since ‘[T]o be South African is to be a hybrid, from which no singular origin is evident’ (Kellner 1997, p. 29). The practice of determining race by descent, like in the United States of America, was not adopted by the apartheid social engineers because of the history of inter-racial relationships amongst people in South Africa.

Testing for race on the basis of descent (the American ‘one drop of blood’ notion) was also out of kilter with the social meanings of race. Although popular discourses of race were shot through with notions of ‘blood’ – ‘pure’ races being ‘full-blooded’ - the daily-lived experience of race derived from the ordinary, immediate experience of how people looked and lived. ‘Full-bloodedness’ was a metaphor for racial purity rather [than] a literal statement of its preconditions. Indeed, with many supposedly ‘white’ South African families having distant, or not so distant, histories of intermarriage across color lines, the issue of descent was often a disconcerting one, and not considered the most appropriate basis on which to defend white privilege (Posel 2001, pp. 93 - 94).

The apartheid construction of racial groups differed to the American construct as unlike the American construct that was based on the individual’s descendants, the South African construct of race was closely tied to the physical appearance of the individual’s body. Xaba’s use of silhouette in *They Look at Me and That Is All They Think* makes obvious how the categories of black/white (and African/European?) are problematic and are contested. Instead they are heterogeneous, multi-faceted, ever-changing, much like how the interaction between light and dark changes the shape of shadows on Xaba’s skirt tent. Instead, Taylor proposes ““genres” of humanity’ for ‘geotemporal population sets’ as the:

word genre derives from the same Latin root as the biological term genus, but genres are cultural categories. Genres may be clearly or loosely defined; they persist, but also change over time, and they are sometimes deliberately mixed, in ways that create new genres with their own rules of definition (Taylor 2005, p. 3).

This notion of genre as a category for people groupings might suggest yet another label or division, but I argue that genre recognises the arbitrary and artificiality of people groupings and allows for debate, crossover, and various moments of hybridity and heterogeneity amongst all groupings; genre acknowledges the signs of representation in play, their spatial-temporality, and the political reasons and consequences of these sign systems.

The genre of whiteness ‘is a slippery character, a fickle entity with a capacity to expand and contract its membership’ (Shaw 2007, p. 4). Research into white South African identity, including Steyn’s “Whiteness Just Isn’t What It Used to Be”: *White Identity in A Changing South Africa* (2002)<sup>v</sup>, the context of the apartheid regime, and the history of inter-racial relationships in the earlier periods of the country’s colonial past, makes whiteness in South Africa an interesting area of

study into the arbitrary and artificial nature of racial categorisation. The genre of whiteness in South Africa operates in a different manner to other parts of the world, as white South Africans were (and remain) a minority group who previously held political and economic power until the first democratic national elections in 1994 (and still do to some extent). Moreover, white South Africans as a genre have little in common with other white settler national genres, like Australians, New Zealanders, or Americans; descendants of white Europeans who settled during the colonial period in South Africa are in the minority unlike other settler states where descendants of European settlers are in the majority (Steyn 2001, p. xxiv), thereby aptly capturing how the geo-temporal frame affects the form the genre of whiteness takes. It must be stated that, like Distiller and Steyn, I am very mindful that there is a ‘danger of flattening out different subject positions and historical experiences (2004, p. 5) and of ‘the many sub-groupings that exist within any category defined according to “race”’ (2005, p. 5), and to this, I add nationality too, such as European or African. Steyn notes that it ‘appropriate to think in terms of *whitenesses* [Steyn’s emphasis]’ (200, p. xxx) and this of course applies when to the terms blackness, European-ness, and African-ness; the profuse nature of these genres.

During my practice-based research sessions, I explored how I might theatricalise the construction of whiteness in order to interrogate it, unmask white privilege, show my awareness of the political effects of whiteness in South Africa, and make visible how the constructions of whiteness and blackness, European and African, are associated in their constructions. In order to prove how whiteness has been normalised, I attempted to challenge whiteness by making it visible and therefore denaturalising it.

De-abstracting whiteness is to insist that white people have bodies - and thus needs, desires, and weaknesses (including racism) - and that we can smell bad and be clumsy and rude and stupid. It is also, seemingly paradoxically, to theatricalize whiteness and make it as a performance (but one that takes place in and through bodily habits that have psychic corollaries and concrete social effects). As a performance, and one that is embodied, whiteness can be interrogated and disidentified with. We cannot change who our ancestors were, but we can change what it means to have lightly pigmented skin (or whatever else gives us access to whiteness) in today’s world. We can embrace cultural works that theatricalize identity (and particularly, at this moment, whiteness) and in so doing both make it more visible and denaturalize it (Jones 2003, p. 97).<sup>vi</sup>

I am conscious that my staging of whiteness might be construed as fetishising whiteness, or neo-colonial in its drive, but this is definitely not my aim, nor my project's findings.<sup>vii</sup> I am committed to unmasking whiteness, its invisibility, and its associated privilege, especially as a South African who was classified as 'white' and who are 'traditionally located at the privileged end of social hierarchies (Distiller and Steyn 2004, p. 3). The apartheid category of a white South African was dependent on the construction of a specific black South African, and likewise similar to how Europeans in the nineteenth – and twentieth - century constructed Saartjie Baartman as unrefined in order to maintain their society as sophisticated. These dichotomies of black/white and African/European, are of course artificial, and in order to legitimatise European imperialism and maintain white/European privilege, there had to be constant reiteration of these categories across all mediums, from public exhibitions to government documents, and this still occurs... Both Xaba's performance and my own call attention to how the 'white' gaze is in operation underlining Frantz Fanon's comment that '[f]or not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man' (2000, p. 257) and by extension, a white woman must be white in relation to a black woman.

Kgafela Oa Magogodi, although focusing on the performance of identity and the body in South African cinema, states that 'to fix identity is to take a position or "to take a picture" and shape it through the camera lens, angles, editing and other effects' (2002, p. 255). In my practice-based research project, I experimented with the way my identity as a white South African is shaped, and I used photography - the fixing of the moving image - and live performance, in order to construct a project that was 'more race conscious than racist' (Magogodi 2002, p. 253), and therefore attempted to increase the visibility of whiteness thereby exposing white privilege. To fix my identity as a white South African requires "the picture" to be taken and re-taken and re-take; an outcome of my research project is that I am acutely aware of the ongoing process of South African identity construction, how this relies on a particular category of blackness and whiteness, and how the understandings of these specific forms of blackness and whiteness are implicitly dependent on each other. This contingency literally occurs in the processing of photographs - negatives, positives, black, white, colour, sepia, and effects - hence my use of photography as part of my research method *How I Chased a Rainbow and Bruised my Knee*. During one of my practice-based research sessions, I performed in front of the family photographs projected onto the performance space's rear wall, and this resulted in the use of my body as a fluid screen as the slides were reflected off my body and costume. In the performative-presentation of the findings from my research, slides that documented my project taken by Lauren Park during my practice-based research sessions were

projected, and I included a collection of family photographs sometimes with the inclusion of text that I had typed on critical reflections of the research conducted.

[A]rtists, critics, and theorists have thus attempted to use the camera and the family picture as instruments of social questioning. They have interrogated not only the family itself, but also its established traditions of representation. They have taken the family out of its monolithic imagery to embed it in a fractured contemporary history shaped by the ideologies of race, ethnicity, gender, class, and sexuality (Hirsch 1999, p. xvii).

At the onset of my reading for this project, I had come across Heilna Du Plooy's article 'Traces of Identity in the Mirror of the Past' where she stated that 'memories and histories are thus re-evaluated and discursive and narrative reformulations become part of a redefinition of identity' (2002, p. 130). This comment inspired my inclusion of the family photographs and the typed text of my memories of growing up in apartheid South Africa, enabling me 'to take responsibility because all people bear the marks of history' (Du Plooy 2002, p. 136). These memories and photographs of my ancestors were used in the performance to theatricalise my identity and expose the mechanics of this identity construction. This would allow me to redefine my personal relationship to apartheid and my body's role in the historical narrative of South Africa, as 'autobiography, like dance, is situated at the intersection of bodily experience and cultural representation' (Albright 1997, p. 119). The slides I used in my presentation were processed as negatives, colour, sepia, and a combination of the photographic developing states and their resultant effects. I discovered this combination of states and the procedure of developing photographs and the resultant effects in my practice-based research sessions when I stood in front of a projection of a slide photograph in negative state, and the documenting rehearsal photograph was taken in negative/reverse state and then never developed into its positive state. This resulted in my image remaining in this negative/reverse state and the projected slide photograph, due to the flash of light from the camera, reverting to its normal state of sepia - a beige colour. The interchange between slides was set at a pace that limited the period of time the viewer could read the images, and thereby highlighted how this process of identity construction is ongoing, never ending, and can never be fixed.

In the performative-presentation, I covered parts of my body using efute. This is a type of white clay that is painted onto the body when performing ancestor veneration as the colour white is associated in southern Africa with the ancestors. I painted my shins with the clay, and then moved to cover my face with the efute as I slipped in and out of the light that the waves of slides provided. The clay started to dry and crack as a spotlight began to shine directly onto my face and body. 'In

apartheid, the body – skin and hair in particular – is the site of signification that overrides all subsidiary attachments (such as clothing) or movements (such as dance) [...] hence, post-colonial resistance focuses on the subversions of apartheid's classified bodies' (Gilbert and Tompkins 1996, p. 211). As the spotlight began to fade, and as the efute dried on my face, the white colour of the clay changed to beige, a mixture of brown and white, hence another genre of whiteness or blackness. Brenda Dixon Gottschild states in her conclusion of *The Black Dancing Body: A Geography from Coon to Carnival* that her book's aim is to:

debunk the white/black body construct, the white/black race construct: to show that white bodies are black bodies are white bodies are brown bodies, and so on. I mean this not only in terms of aesthetics but also of identity and biology (2003: 297).

Gottschild's comment is akin to the outcomes of my research project that the white/black construct is entangled and is open to contestation. By employing practice-based research as one of my methodologies, it is evident that the construction of identities are 'not only unstable because they are fragile negotiations, but also because they are always succumbing to the shock of visual misrecognition' (Mendieta 2003, p. 412). Drawing on Gottschild's concluding statement, *How I Chased a Rainbow and Bruised my Knee* shows that I am a white body and a black body and a white body and a brown body and a white body and a beige body, and, an African body and an European body, and an Afro-European body and an Euro-African body...

Xaba's material body was classified as 'black' during apartheid and mine, 'white'. Our physical skin colour and our biological markings have permitted us a particular experience of South African life.

What made the apartheid system of racial classification notoriously distinctive was its panoptic scope: every single South African citizen was now compelled to register as a member of an officially designated race, on the understanding that this classification would then inform every aspect of that person's life (Posel 200, p. 89).

In *How I Chased a Rainbow and Bruised My Knee*, my practice-based project generated in response to Xaba's *They Look At Me and That Is All They Think*, I recognised how there are multiple representations of whiteness and blackness, and how my genre of whiteness has played a role in apartheid's narrative and that that it is responsible for negative impacted on other people's lives; the 'relation between collective guilt and individual responsibility or individual guilt and collective

responsibility is a burning issue in South Africa' (Plooy 2002, p. 127). I wanted to publicly acknowledge my body's historical involvement in colonial and apartheid South Africa: 'no one should be ashamed of belonging to the identity categories into which they happen to have been born, but one is accountable for one's active role and passive complicity in oppressive systems and discourses' (Shohat and Stam 1994, p. 344). This viewpoint is at the centre of this article's research project, and is at the heart of my personal politics. My findings that emerge from my practice-based research project *How I Chased a Rainbow and Bruised My Knee* theatricalise my whiteness and aim to make identity construction visible thereby showing its ongoing process, as shown by the use of the photographs and slides in various processed states in my performance and a stress on how there are no fixed points nor margins but rather how there are numerous probabilities; 'identity has to do with continuity as well as discontinuity' (Plooy 2002, p. 136), and it is this that Baartman, Xaba, and me perform.

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<sup>i</sup> This performative writing extract is from my documentation of watching Xaba's use of costume to play with her silhouette in her performance.

<sup>ii</sup> There are many examples of the various spellings of Baartman's first name and a debate over which is more respectful thrives. I prefer the term Saartjie, as this was the name she used herself, was given at birth, and is an affectionate South African term for Sarah. Although, there are those that dislike the diminutive version as it is considered to infantilise the subject. Please see Holmes, R. 2007. *The hottentot venus. the life and death of Saartjie Baartman: born 1789 - buried 2002*. London: Bloomsbury, for a study of Baartman's life and her legacy, especially in relation to contemporary South African society. Holmes also makes the case for her own preference of using the name Saartjie (2007, pp. xiii – xiv).

<sup>iii</sup> Afrikaans for small lizard.

<sup>iv</sup> Extract of a performance slide text from *How I Chased a Rainbow and Bruised My Knee* (2006). This text was written in response to both Nelisiwe Xaba's *They Look at Me and That Is All They Think* (2006) and Mlu Zondi's *Silhouette* (2006). I saw both performances on the same night at Jomba! Contemporary Dance Experience in Durban South Africa, in 2006.

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<sup>v</sup> This is the foremost critical text of the genre of whiteness in South Africa and had a profound influence in my thinking through of my whiteness as a South African. Steyn's (2002) offers close readings of about fifty white South Africans of various ages and genders, and how they articulate their whiteness during the transformation of apartheid South Africa into a post-apartheid state.

<sup>vi</sup> Please see Brewer, M. 2005. *Staging whiteness*. Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press. Brewer examines the historical representation of white identity by offering close readings of British and American play texts of the twentieth century. Although I do not directly refer to her research due to its focus on the performance of whiteness in Euro-American theatre, her study on the performance of white identity on the theatre stage, and how this performance reflects current conceptualisation of whiteness off the stage, accentuates Amelia Jones's (2003) reference to the performance and theatricalisation of identity, and how both studying and experimenting with this offers a possible method to critique the normalisation of whiteness and its associated cultural and economic capital.

<sup>vi</sup> 'We are who we are, but we are also agents and mediums for change when granted the latitude to respond to what is needed' (Gottschild 2003, p. 143).

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Figure 1: They Look At Me and That Is All They Think, The Elizabeth Sneddon Theatre, August 2006. Photo by Val Adamson. Courtesy Jomba! Contemporary Dance Experience.

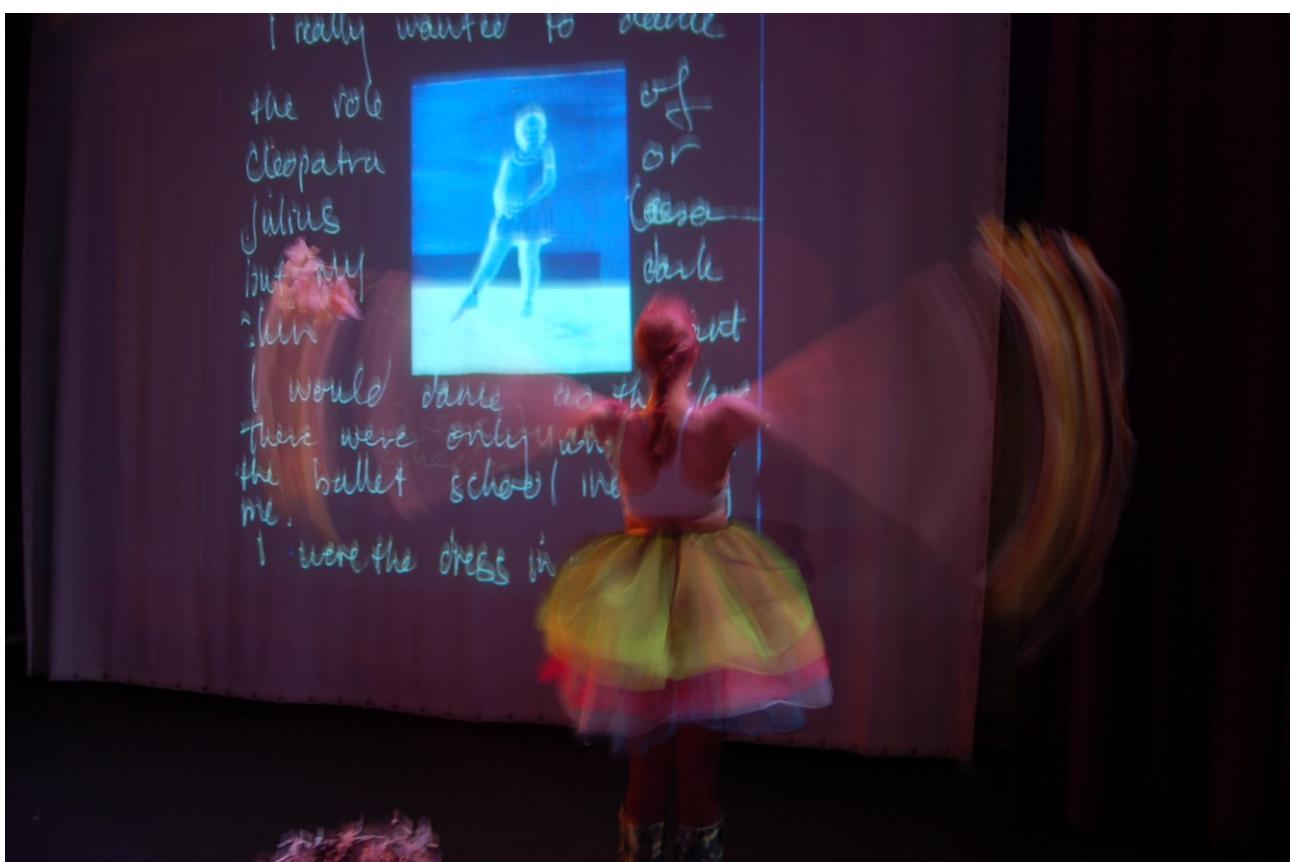


Figure 2: How I Chased a Rainbow and Bruised My Knee, The Harold Pinter Studio, July 2007.

Photo by Lauren Park.