



UNIVERSITY OF  
**KWAZULU-NATAL**

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**YAKWAZULU-NATALI**

**INTERROGATING THE SYNTHESIS OF AFRICAN TRADITIONAL  
RITUALS AND SPIRITUALITY IN CONTEMPORARY SOUTH AFRICAN  
DANCE: CRITICAL REFLECTIONS ON THE DANCE WORK OF VINCENT  
MANTSOE, MOEKETSI KOENA, AND MY OWN WORK.**

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## **PLAGIARISM DECLARATION**

I affirm that this is my own work and that all references and sources not my own, have been duly acknowledged and referenced.

SIGNED:



DATE: 3 November 2020

## ABSTRACT

This part dissertation explores the synthesis of selected, black (*AmaZulu* and *Sotho*) South African traditional rituals and spirituality, and the way they are negotiated and manifest in selected contemporary South African dance. This will be effected by reflecting firstly, on an examination and analysis of the dance work of South Africa's Vincent Sekwati Mantsoe (*KonKoriti*- JOMBA! 2016) and Moeketsi Koena (*Point of View-New Dance* 2004). Both these choreographers enjoy both national and international reputations for their unique (and differing) fusion of South African cultural traditional practice and contemporary dance practice. I then move on to investigate how both Mantsoe and Koena have influenced and informed my own rehearsal style and choreographic processes, particularly with reference to the creation of *Alive Kids* (2016/17) - a dance performance work I created in 2016 and then re-worked in 2017 for the JOMBA! Contemporary Dance Festival at the KZN Gallery (August 2017). I will offer a detailed self-reflection and autoethnographic interrogation of my own rehearsal and creative process which describes and analyses, how-in this work-I began to push my own understanding of traditional Black South African culture and its links to ritual, spirituality- and contemporary identity. Finally I offer an autoethnographic study within what Timothy Rice refers to as "subject centred research" (2017:139). In investigating my own praxis and the influences and connections to South African dance makers such as Mantsoe and Koena, I have interrogated my own multifaceted Black identity as a dance maker and choreographer and how my traversing cultural and traditional practices engages with the growing lexicon of critical dance making in South Africa.

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## INTRODUCTION

I am a South African dance practitioner and dance lecturer (Durban University of Technology) with a passion for teaching, writing and choreographing. Dance has impacted my life in that it has created a space where I interrogate, examine and challenge notions of culture, religion and community as evidenced in my growing body of Contemporary dance theatre work. These include, *Unknown citizens* (2006), *Ungcagco* (2006), *Light of Hope* (2008), *Rejected Angels* (2009), *Colours of Dreams* (2010), *Cosi Cosi* (2011), *Nokulunga's Wedding* (2012), and *Alive Kids* (2016/2017). Dance in all its forms, has been part of my life for over 15 years.

Given my interest in Black South African traditional dance, culture and spirituality, and my training in contemporary dance, I am drawn to the contested notion of 'African contemporary dance' (a term I will critically interrogate in this dissertation). Noticing both the scarcity of research around South African traditional rituals-and the cognate journey into notions of 'African spirituality', and how these manifest in contemporary South African dance theatre, as well as the ways of creating/making/rehearsing dance work, this short dissertation seeks to address this gap. In turn, I aim for this study to allow me space to negotiate my own linked, present, and growing dance making practice.

This dissertation thus aims to explore the synthesis of selected Black (*AmaZulu* and *Sotho*) South African traditional rituals and spirituality and the manner in which they are negotiated and manifest in the work of two local choreographers whose work straddles these spheres. This will be followed by an analysis of the dance work of South African dancer/choreographers Vincent Sekwati Mantsoe (*KonKoriti-JOMBA!* 2016) and Moeketsi Koena (*Point of View-New Dance* 2004). Both dancer/choreographers enjoy national and international reputations for their unique (and differing) fusion of South African traditional dance, culture and spirituality with contemporary dance practice and performance (Friedman, 2012).

An exploration of their choreography in the context of a changing South Africa, is fascinating due to the style and challenges the content of the work poses. Both Mantsoe and Koena may be known to many through their captivating solo performances especially during their career with Moving into Dance-Mophatong. These performances generate discussion around the contested conceptualisation of 'African Contemporary Dance' and the diverse body of this fusion style of dance that is emerging from the African continent. I will then move on to



investigate how both Mantsoe and Koena have influenced and informed my own rehearsal style and choreographic processes, especially related to the creation of *Alive Kids* as an embodied way of navigating South African stories through dance. *Alive Kids* is a dance performance work I created in 2016 and then re-worked in 2017 for the JOMBA! Contemporary Dance Experience at the KZNSA Gallery. This dissertation will further offer a detailed self-reflection underpinned by autoethnography (Holman Jones, 2005) in order to interrogate my own rehearsal and creative process that is informed by my embodied understanding of traditional dance, culture and spirituality and contemporary dance technique.

In light of the above, the critical research questions this study plans to engaging are as follows:

- What is the confluence of (selected) *AmaZulu and Sotho* spiritual practices and contemporary dance making in South Africa?
- How Vincent Manstoe and Moeketsi Koena have influenced and informed my own rehearsal style and choreographic processes?
- What is the influence of African traditional and spirituality on my own dance making and performance practices as a contemporary dance-maker in South Africa?
- Why is *Alive Kids* (2016/2017) chosen as a case study for reflection?
- What was the process of creating *Alive Kids* for JOMBA Contemporary Dance Festival in 2017 and how did I consciously connect to rituals and spirituality?

Chapter One focuses on unpacking and interrogating cultural and spiritual practice in South Africa. This will be interrogated by assessing black *AmaZulu* and *Sotho* traditions through the politics of the dancing body, theory and practice of intercultural fusion in South African contemporary dance as a contested space of making meaning. I use this chapter to challenge and question the confluence of (selected) *AmaZulu* and *Sotho* spiritual practices and contemporary dance making in South Africa. This chapter draws from a variety of sources, initially the writing of US cultural theorist Richard Schechner (1988, 1991, 2002) is used to explore some 'origins' of theatre practice through ritual. Schechner argues that studies of

ritual offer explorations of the limits between life and theatre and lead to what he calls “performance” (2002:177). Schechner’s ideas are used to provide a critical foundation for my explorations around Black South African traditional dance, culture and spirituality.

Chapter Two will offer an analysis of selected performance works by Mantsoe (*KonKoriti*, 2016) and Koena (*Point of View*, 2004) in order to investigate the use of African traditional ritual and spirituality evident in these works. This chapter focuses on understanding and unpacking dance choreographic and dance making methodologies; specifically methodologies utilised by Mantsoe and Koena. In this chapter I lay out how each of the above two practitioner’s methodology works and importantly, how I was able to use them in developing my own working way.

Chapter Three focuses on interrogating my own dance work *Alive Kids* as a case study for self-reflection as well as the manner in which both Mantsoe and Koena directly and indirectly influence the creation and development of my dance work. I will offer an autoethnographic study of my own choreographic process for *Alive Kids* that looks at the fusion of African rituals and contemporary dance. My focused methodology chapter focuses on unpacking the use of autoethnography as research methodology for this study.

Autoethnography is “research that draws on personal accounts and experiences of the author/researcher for purpose of extending sociological understanding” (Sparkes, 2002:121). As a method it focuses on using self, and the understanding/or recognising of self/culture as a subject of study (Wade, 2015:194). Autoethnography helps in making this research unique; it invites the reader to experience “what it must have felt like to live through what happened” (Ellis & Bochner 1992:80 in Wade, 2015:201). *Alive Kids*, further interrogates my own black masculinity and how it links to issues of identity. This study examines the interface of race and gender in relation to the construction of performed Black male identities on stage. This interrogation will be premised on the idea that performance and theatre, as an active form, engages and challenges notions around representations, stereotypes or 'other'. The chapter takes the position that theatre is a cultural practice (Degenaar, 1991) through which ideologies such as those attached to performance in dance and everyday movement are sustained and at the same time challenged. I will look specifically at examples of performed construction of black masculinities, as represented by two specific KwaZulu-Natal based performers, Nqubeko

Ngema and Njabulo Zungu. This dissertation is thus an autoethnographic study in that it is framed within what Timothy Rice refers to as “subject centred research” (2017:139). In investigating my own praxis and the influences and connections to South African dance makers like Mantsoe and Koena, I hope to interrogate my own multifaceted Black (and male) identity as a dance maker and choreographer and how my traversing cultural and traditional practices engages with the growing lexicon of critical dance making in South Africa.

I employ Judith Butler’s (1988, 1990, 1999) notions of performativity to examine how in my own work *Alive Kids*, as well as in the work of Mantsoe, specifically (*KonKoriti*, 2016) and Koena (*Point of View*, 2004), meaning is enacted in the performance of daily life (culture). Mantsoe and Koena create choreography that negotiates moving sacred traditional ritual practices onto a stage, which makes their voice important to the creation and development of my own work. An analysis of these representations and changing conventions allow an audience (and myself as scholar) to read the relationship between theatre, dance and everyday life (Mangan, 2003). I treat both Mantsoe and Koena’s work as ‘text’ to be investigated and engaged. This analysis based on the creation and development of *Alive Kids* then falls within the idea of ‘performance as ‘text’ and thus I specifically engage with reading the performance of ‘fusion’ (Schechner, 1991), and how traditional black African dance forms emerge and are re-invented and used in these works.

Chapter Four will offer a detailed account of the origin, process, creation and development of *Alive Kids* for stage performance. According to Tushingham, Lloyd Newson wrote “it is crucial for my dance work to carry a message or embody narrative meaning rather than it is beautiful movements (visuals) on stage” (Tushingham, 1995). This chapter will offer a detailed analysis/description of the choreographic process of *Alive Kids* created in 2016 and then re-worked in 2017 for the JOMBA! Contemporary Dance Experience at the KZNSA Gallery. This choreographic process is divided into four phases: the conception of the work, the gathering of movement vocabulary, the arranging of these movements by teaching the dancers, and the creation of the final structure of the work and polishing it for the final performance. I will explain how my vision was realised through the dancer’s (Nqubeko Ngema and Njabulo Zungu) bodies through movement and performance as both dancers were carefully selected based on how accurately they might bring my vision to life. In this chapter I will offer a detailed analysis of how Koena and Mantsoe have influenced my own rehearsal style and

choreographic processes, especially related to the creation of *Alive Kids* as an embodied way of navigating South African stories through dance. This chapter links to Chapter Three which deals with questioning and understanding gender, Black bodies and masculinity in the South African context. It interrogates masculinities that have been constructed by society through culture, religion and media. I use this chapter to challenge and question these socially constructed roles black men have been expected to play in South Africa and the cognate physical actions they have been using to express themselves in dance theatre. This will assist with my performance research and analysis which uses the work of Mantsoe and Koena as a basis for interrogation into my own dance-making and performance practice. In conclusion, each of the two chosen dance/choreographer's methods of dance/physical theatre creation and development assist me as choreographer, as well as the way in which I guide the individual performer in developing my own working way. In my own strategy and perspective as a choreographer/dance maker their ideas will be highlighted throughout the dissertation. I look at myself and my personal identity as a Black male choreographer placing Black bodies on stage to negotiate my own linked, present, and growing dance making practice.

## CHAPTER ONE

This chapter initially focuses on discussing and interrogating traditional cultural and spiritual practice in South Africa by assessing black *AmaZulu* and *Sotho* traditions through the politics of the dancing body. Secondly, I use this chapter to demonstrate how African traditional dances (from the *Zulu* and *Sotho* traditions) differ from each other. Thirdly, I will look into the theory and politics of traditional/contemporary fusion and intercultural fusion in South African contemporary dance as a contested space of making meaning. This chapter draws from a variety of sources, initially the writing of US cultural theorist Richard Schechner (1988, 1991, 2002), and then from the works of Rustom Bharucha (2000) and Patrice Pavis (1996). Schechner's (1991) ideas are used to explore some 'origins' of theatre practice through ritual. There are longstanding concerns about the often unmediated manner in which Western choreographers have sometimes borrowed from people of the South and East cultures as legitimised by, what one might call, a 'western' license to thrill via the presentation of the 'other' (Schechner, 1991, 2002). He argues that studies of ritual offer explorations of the limits between life and theatre and lead to what he calls "performance" (Schechner, 2002:177). These ideas are used to provide a critical foundation for my explorations around Black South African traditional dance, culture and spirituality. Lastly, I will explore how South African contemporary dance and works of local choreographers such as Maxwell Rani, Gregory Maqoma, Jay Pather and others, have been influenced by a massive historical migration of people from rural areas to the cities as they came to look for work in the mines. I will argue that through urbanisation, dance and theatre became more expressive of changing political issues. The changing geography, mixing of cultures, races and languages created a new breed of performance culture in South Africa.

### Interrogating culture

It is important to note that the region which is South Africa was historically occupied by people stemming from three language groups: those related to *KhoiSan*, and those speaking any variation of the *Sotho* and *Nguni (Zulu)* language systems (Turner, 2018). Generally, those cultures speaking an *Nguni* language settled in the eastern coastal region of modern-day South Africa and include the subgroups of *AmaZulu* and *Xhosa* speaking cultures. This chapter concerns itself with those speaking *Zulu* and *Sotho* dialects. As a Black *Zulu* man who has

worked with different people from varied cultural and language backgrounds in South Africa, my experience has been that when we get into the rehearsal space, we exchange our cultures through dance. I have noticed that dance creates a platform for people with diverse cultural traditions and races (White, Indian, Coloured, Black *AmaZulu* and *Sotho*) to meet and work together in a visual form of communication that can be understood by all. In exploring ourselves through another culture, one must ask what that culture receives from our intervention. It is important to highlight the cultural differences between peoples in Southern Africa if we are ever truly to understand the complexities of the diverse cultures throughout the region. While it may be true that such labels as *Bantu*, *Nguni*, *Sotho*, *AmaZulu*, and *Xhosa* were colonial constructs developed to categorise and define relationships between Southern African peoples, prior to, and throughout colonial occupation, *Sotho* and *Zulu* speakers perceived themselves as belonging to their own specific cultures with specific traditions.

According to Gabriel Idang, culture is not something you are born with. It is learned from family, school, religious teachings, television and media and the government of a country (Idang, 2015). Culture is, however, also passed on from generation to generation. The acquisition of culture is a result of the socialisation process. Explaining how culture is passed on as a generational heritage, Aliu Babatunde Fafunwa writes that:

The child just grows into and within the cultural heritage of his people. He imbibes it. Culture, in traditional society, is not taught; it is caught. The child observes, imbibes and mimics the action of his elders and siblings. He watches the naming ceremonies, religious services, marriage rituals, funeral obsequies. He witnesses the coronation of a king or chief, the annual yam festival, the annual dance and acrobatic displays of guilds and age groups or his relations in the activities. The child in a traditional society cannot escape his cultural and physical environment (Fafunwa, 1974:48).

Idang goes on to state that, every human being who grows up in a particular society is likely to become infused with the culture of that society, whether knowingly or unknowingly during the process of social interaction (Idang, 2015). Further, identity, much like culture, is ever changing (Anderson, 1993). Political transformation in the 1994 landscape of South Africa demanded a re-imagining of identity and culture (Anderson 1993).

Contemporary South Africa has become known for its cultural diversity, spiritual diversity, different languages and various religious beliefs or norms. Eleven official languages are recognised in the Constitution, each belonging to a different ethnic group and entrenched in

a certain cultural identity. Wale (2013) indicates that South Africa's traditional cultural, and arguably, historical racial divisions were further emphasised and strengthened by the country's background of settler colonialism and apartheid and especially entrenched after 1948 when apartheid became the governing legislation. Apartheid was a system of legal racial segregation enforced by the government of South Africa between 1948 and 1994, under which the rights of the majority of black inhabitants in South Africa were systematically suppressed by laws and the minority rule by White citizens was maintained. From 1990 to 1993, forty-eight years after the institution of apartheid, negotiations between the apartheid government and the African National Congress (ANC) began. The purpose of these negotiations was to find the way forward for talks towards a peaceful transition of power.

South African dance and choreographer, Gregory Maqoma considers that this socio-political shift makes it difficult to define our identity as a South African nation today. He argues that the history of our country is bounded by our political past, especially the role of apartheid, as we moved into a transitional period (Maqoma, 2011). At present – 26 years on from 1994 – our society continues to challenge the cultural hegemony that is the legacy of apartheid, questioning what it is to be a South African citizen in our increasingly diverse society (Wale, 2013). Individuals still tend to identify with only those cultures and language groups similar to their own. Years of practising different ways of self-expression in cultural praxes and the fact that we do not always know, have insight into or understand the history and meaning of cultural praxes of the 'others', stands in the way of having mutual respect for the cultural praxes of the 'others' (Maqoma, 2011). This chapter aims, as a starting point, to bring to light knowledge of the cultural history and praxis of the traditional dance of *AmaZulu* and *Sotho* cultural groups, and to investigate this dance as possibly facilitating an understanding of the diversity and divergent dance histories of historically black cultural practice. For the purpose of this chapter, my focus will be how the *Zulu* and *Sotho* ethnic and cultural groups practise and negotiate their traditional dances.

South Africa has recorded a significant number of theatre productions incorporating *AmaZulu* and *Sotho* African and dance culture such as the late Welcome Msomi's *uMabatha* (1996), Mbongeni Ngema's *The Zulu* (1999) and Jerry Pooe's *King Cetshwayo* (2018) to name a few. These musical theatre productions have certainly spotlighted *AmaZulu* and *Sotho* culture and produced a number of cultural traditional dancers who have achieved career success.

## Traditional dance

African traditional dance historically (and in its on-going contemporary iterations), has been an important part of community practices and life in South Africa and is one subset of cultural knowledge that gives insight into a set of experiences generated by people living in those communities (Rani, 2013). It is one subset of local tradition that has developed over centuries of experimentation with ways to adapt to local conditions. African traditional dance, therefore, represents the accumulated knowledge of a people and embodies the collective wisdom and resourcefulness of the community (Rani, 2013). According to Harbans Bhola, traditional dance, like many types of indigenous knowledge, has guided indigenous peoples as to how to deal with local issues (Bhola, 2002:8). Anthropologist, Pitika Ntuli expands on the theme that cultural knowledge, in forms such as the role of festivals and carnivals, helped to maintain peace within communities (Ntuli, 2002:23). African traditional dance as an extension of these types of rituals has been viewed as not only an important recreational activity, but also as an accurate portrayal of the psyche of the people (Primus in Green, 1996:23; Hanna, 1965:7). The practice of African traditional dances of any category is suitable for the study of individual personality traits, as well as the correcting of socially inhibited dispositions (Primus in Rani, 2013; Nzewi, 2007:75).

In *Zulu* culture, traditional dances vary according to purpose such as weddings, *Ukuthwasa* (Healers and diviners Initiation ceremony), *Umkhosi Womhlanga* (performed by virgins). According to Adrienne Sichel, “for the majority of South Africans, traditional dance is something you do at weddings, funerals, celebrations, rite of passage or traditional healing rituals, even in the workplace or simply spontaneously. It is not necessarily something you purchase a ticket for to see in a theatre” (Sichel, 1997:151). I agree with Sichel as growing up in the Durban Township of *-Kwa Mashu*, my environment was exposed to styles of Zulu cultural traditional dance such as *Ngoma*, *Isizingili*, *Isishameni* and *Isicathamiya* influenced by cultural music, dance language and traditional costumes.

These are dances that have existed (and evolved) over centuries, and originated in the rural areas of South Africa based on “birth, death, puberty, marriage, hailing a new chief, discovering evil spirits” (Primus in Rani, 2013). For example, in a situation where an event (the naming of a newborn, new chief, seasonal change, etc.) requires dance and music, this could



be described as a “title event”. Everyone in the community can come and watch the dance. They acquire skills such as rhythm, spontaneity and individual interpretation which allow dancers to execute choreography without specific training or rehearsal. Bhola and Meki Nzewi expand on this as follows: “traditional dances can be sacred, to be attended by selected insiders, but can also be open for the entire community to partake in” (Bhola, 2002:8; Nzewi, 2007:94). Robert Nicholls expands on the notion of traditional dance by suggesting that most African dances are integrated into specific cultural situations. Not only are dances performed on particular occasions, but the movements and drum rhythms must have already been learnt by the dancers (Nicholls in Welsh-Asante, 1996:15). According to Doris Green, dance in African culture is a way of life (in Welsh-Asante, 1996:45). This culture is passed down from generation to generation within a group for religious, social or other ceremonial purposes (Snipe, 1996:68). As indicated above, these occasions are linked with activities such as birth, death, adolescence, war, recreation, initiation and ritual (Snipe, 1996:64). According to Omofolab Ajayi, “African traditional dance is not only a crucial way of communicating the sacred, but also leaves room for vocational, transcendental and celebrative dances” (Ajayi, 1996:14). African dance scholar, Tracy Snipe (1996), expands on this idea as follows: “African traditional dance is an expression of a physical, psychological and spiritual state of being that enables people to give meaning and context to their greatest joys, hopes, frustrations, fears or sorrows” (1996:23). Her statement can be applied to many different dance forms. Green argues that African traditional dance is not like any art form; it is not art merely for the sake of art, but is rather a source of communication (Green in Rani, 2013).

The African traditional dances in South Africa were performed apropos the event at hand; it may be the usual rituals performed, weddings, battles, and many more. These dances remain rich in meaning, but have become more moderate and beautiful in form (Kraus & Chapman, 1981:21). Today’s dances are less ritualistic and not attached to daily activities, but still communicate a certain message. It is beyond doubt that dance played a more important role in storytelling and the cultural teachings of ancient people. It was rich in culture and was highly esteemed in education. Yet the role of traditional dance in today’s society is not that much different.

Traditional and cultural dances display less ritualistic elements these days, but to those who are practising traditional dance the meaning and discipline that it had in the past has not

changed. The aims are still the same: to teach and educate (Kraus & Chapman, 1981:21). In particular, the role that dances played in traditional African cultures cannot be underestimated. Maxwell Rani states that, the African traditional dance in South Africa must be understood as a cultural strategy corresponding with the changing rural domestic modes of production and the formation of urban wage and labour systems (Rani 2013). Gregory Maqoma elaborates: when Africans of different cultures met in urban areas, such as the Johannesburg gold mines, they met in a new environment “with peculiar culture, values and norms to which they willy-nilly had to adapt” (Maqoma, 2001:75). Through such a cocktail of cultures and traditions in one space, the domestication of movements, language, dress codes and dances came into play (Maqoma, 2001). This will be dealt with later in this chapter when I speak about South African dance and the contested space of making contemporary African performance dance. Although some of the characteristics were derived from models that were rural and indigenous, the ultimate future of the dance rests in the urban context (Erlmann, 1990:200). In the next section I will explain further how *AmaZulu* and *Sotho* traditional dances are performed as well as how they differ.

## **Presenting Black Zulu Traditional dance**

The Black *Zulu* tradition is a significant part of South African culture and the *Zulus* are the largest ethnic group in South Africa. (Turner, 2018). According to Noleen Turner, *Zulus* refer to themselves as '*AmaZulu*,' which can only be translated as 'the people of heaven' (Turner, 2018). *Zulus* are people well known for their rich cultural practice in every traditional dance or festival. Turner explains that, even a *Zulu* girl's first menstruation is celebrated as form of *Umhlonyana* (coming of age), this is marked by drumming and dancing to a particular song. There are songs for hunting and for anything and everything. The *Zulu* people take pride in traditions that nurture a sense of belonging in every member of the community (Turner, 2018:65–83).

*Zulu* traditional identity is intimately linked to songs and dances, mostly traditional dance. Traditional healers, *sangomas*, accompany their healing with a special traditional dance and drumming. The *Zulu* are an exceptional community that appreciates culture and traditions, which they claim is much attached to spirituality and ancestry (Turner, 2018).

The dance practices of the *Zulu* people are well known. In this chapter, I will deal with some of these practices and the specific occasions on which they occur. Dance is an essential part of the *Zulu* community (Turner, 2018). They are practised in many traditional ceremonies. Turner further explains that, during these ceremonies, unmarried young men and women dance separately. Once in a while, married women and men would join in. The married women will ululate as the men clap, and the girls dance. Mostly the dances are accompanied by the beating of drums and intense singing.

The *umBholoho*, is a traditional dance performed during wedding ceremonies in which the family of the bride and groom compete to produce the best dance. The aim is to create positive antagonism between the two families that eventually breeds unity and happiness (Lewis, 2019). *Indlamu* is the most popular one as it performed by men mostly during weddings. It is usually a dance accompanied by war songs and is more like a war dance. It is performed by men dancing vigorously while showing off muscles (Lewis, 2019).

Furthermore, they imitate war rituals and perform mock fights and sometimes even stab imaginary enemies. *Indlamu* epitomises the true identity of the *Zulu* people and is untouched by Western culture. It is performed wearing full *Zulu* warrior regalia, which includes animal skin, head rings, spears, and shields (Lewis, 2019). A popular traditional dance known as *Imvunulo*, usually performed by an individual in front of a parade, is also part of the great dances from the *Zulu* (Lewis, 2019). The aim is to show off the different traditional attire; thus, it is performed in full traditional attire. It is also performed to showcase the roles of different people in the community as varying regalia denotes different stages of life.

The cultural nature of the *Zulu* is embodied in the *Isizingili* dance style. This is one of the most original traditional dances performed by both boys and girls. There is no musical accompaniment during this dance. Girls are partially dressed in woollen skirts, with seed pod rattles on their legs to accentuate the leg movements. It is performed mostly at weddings, but traditionally it was performed during hunting expeditions. It is a great part of the *Zulu* people as it enhances unity among the youth and encourages communal working (Lewis, 2019). This goes hand in hand with the *Isishameni* dance performed by young boys and girls and is common in many ceremonies. It is performed together, although the boys and girls are separated. Boys clap while girls dance (Lewis, 2019:180-182).

My favourite dance is *Ngoma* involving praise names and nicknames. Dance nicknames or praise names, as Johnny Clegg calls them, do more than designate individual identities (Clegg, 1984). They confer respect upon the named. In the case of *Ngoma*, they do so within a social system in which creative play with naming is regarded as a high poetic art and the acquisition of multiple names is a sign of prestige and accumulating status. Louise Meintjes elaborates: nicknames are also about an individual's singularity in relation to larger groups, whether his age-mates, his team-mates or his family (Meintjes, 2004). Each dancer chooses his own, or his friends confer it upon him. Some names circulate among teams though no one within a team shares a name; occasionally they are passed down within families; many are unique. As verbal items, names mark multiple aspects of a man's person: his professional identity, his relationship to women, camaraderie with other men, his personality, his lived history, his foibles and affections (Meintjes, 2004). The multiple dimensions of nicknaming denote ways that he is looked at by those who know him as well as ways in which he looks back to his upbringing. Names indicate what is noticed about an individual and what is held over him while they also suggest features of identity that he claims as part of his own narrative. By their semantic referents, nicknames provide poetic links that connect the dancing, quite directly, to a more specified articulated sense of masculinity. This is not to say that bodily posture, kinetics and musical aesthetics in and of themselves do not or cannot articulate a sense of masculinity. The stylistic features *ngoma* shares with stick fighting (a martial art) and with *amahubo* regimental song and dance certainly make some links, as does the practice of *ngoma* dancing through its ties to the history and social practices of male migrant labour (Meintjes, 2004).

The current study also revolves around *Zulu* cultural and political practices and how they have been fused with African traditional rituals and spirituality in South African contemporary dance. One familiar dance is the reed dance ceremony (Zondi, 2019). According to *Zulu* mythology, this is a dance performed by virgins. It is a ceremony attended by only virgin girls that takes place at the king's palace. The day before the ceremony, many virgin girls from all over Zululand converge in groups and await the day. The next day, they each pick a reed from a river and then follow the procession to the king's palace where each of the girls is supposed to hand over the reed to the king and his loyal servants and guests. A young royal virgin leads the procession. Nompumelelo Zondi states that if a girl who is not a virgin attends the

ceremony, the reed she is wearing will fall when handing over the reed to the king (2019:60-80).

The *Ukuthwasa* – Healers and Diviners Initiation Ceremony is a common practice among the *Zulu* people. This is an initiation ceremony undertaken by those who have received a calling, *Ubizo*, from the ancestors to become healers. Signs of *Ubizo* are not fully understood and sometimes may be confused with evil spirits, but it is possession by an ancestor who happened to be a healer during his lifetime. The calling is independent, and anyone can receive the calling; some are born with it and some get it later. Successful *Ukuthwasa* makes one a *sangoma*-healer. However, undergoing *Ukuthwasa* is not a guarantee of becoming a *sangoma* whose primary function is to heal the sick and also protect them from evil spirits. Drumming and parts of dancing are a vital part of a *sangoma* and are used for inducing trances: as a *sangoma* dances to the sound of drums, the body, and the mind are conjoined. As the dancing continues, the *sangoma's* state of consciousness is gradually shifted until he/she can communicate with the ancestors. The communication with ancestors and a good understanding of the patient's situation helps the *sangoma* to sense the appropriate course of action to take. It was with the *sangomas* that Vincent Mantsoe first learned South African contemporary dance.

Finally, *Umgcagco* - Marriage Ceremony, which is the practice that takes place during the marriage planning (Castelyn, 2018). As with many other communities, there are stages to a wedding ceremony among the *Zulu*. First, there is a payment of dowry, known as "*lobola*". After the endowment, *izibizo*, and *umbondo* follow. This is the giving of gifts to the families of the bride and groom. The actual wedding ceremony, *Umabo*, then follows (Castelyn, 2018:215–233). On the day of the wedding, the bride leaves her home very early in the morning and walks towards the groom's house. She is advised not to look back to avoid invoking bad luck and evil spirits. Back home, the father calls out the names of the clan's ancestors to inform them that his girl has left home. On arrival at the groom's home, the bride circles the house to inform the ancestors of her arrival. She then gets in through the kitchen without anyone noticing. The family of the groom is supposed to pay a fine for not coming for the bride. It is during this time that gifts to the groom's family are given. Then two cows are slaughtered for the ceremony. After a speech by the groom's father, a goat is sacrificed. During the gift giving part, dancing, drumming, and singing takes place.

In the political arena, African traditional ritual and dance is incorporated during the swearing-in ceremonies. After the intense rituals that recognise a leader in a political position, a feast, during which many cows and goats are slaughtered, takes place. Then the dancers are invited during which they will dance to the traditional songs and drums. After the feast, the leader will be initiated into his position of power and begin working.

## **Presenting Black *Sotho* Traditions**

The *Basotho* people trace their history back to the 1800s when the unrest caused in KwaZulu-Natal by Shaka, the *Zulu* king, spilt over into the interior of the country (Pula in Zulu 2013.). According to A.L. Pula, all *Sotho* belong to a clan and members share a clan name that associates them with a specific animal totem or an ancestor. Music and dance have always been an inextricable part of *Sotho* life. Many of their rituals and social activities were accompanied by song and dance. He identifies three traditional *Sotho* dances; the *mokorotlo*, the *mohobelo* and the *mokhibo*. On special occasions, to honour their chief, the men performed the *mokorotlo*. This entailed a rhythmical backward and forward swinging action accompanied by the stamping of feet. The lead singer sang in a high-pitched voice while the others accompanied him in a deep throaty refrain. From time to time, one dancer would break away from the group and dance in front of the chief, miming a battle attack. The others would encourage him by calling him by his dancing name. (Pula in Zulu, 2013).

The *mohobelo* dance was purely for entertainment and amusement and usually took place in the evening. It required great energy and stamina and was also danced by the men. Women performed the *mokhibo* dance on their knees, their hands and bodies gently swaying up and down. A choir standing behind them usually accompanied them with clapping and singing (Pula in Zulu, 2013). The early *Basotho* believed that man has two elements, the corporeal body (*mele*) or flesh (*nama*) and the incorporeal spirit (*moea*, also means wind) or shadow (*seriti*). According to the Bishop of the Catholic Church of Johannesburg, Buti Thlagale (2006), the *Sotho* practice of ancestral worship was based on the belief that spirits could be either good or evil (Thlagale, 2006). The ancestral spirits were good to their people and each family group was under the direct influence of its own ancestors. The ancestral spirits were praised and celebrated communally and played the role of regulating morality and protecting their descendants (Thlagale, 2006).

The ancestors of the chief protected the whole tribe. The ancestors were believed to have a direct influence on the everyday lives of the people, for instance, in such matters as illness. It was believed that the ancestors would sometimes induce illness in people to cause their death because they wished to have company in the afterlife. Contacting the spirits with the help of the traditional healer (*ngaka*), and the restoration of good relations could cure these illnesses. *Sotho* people have beliefs and practices that acknowledge other deities known as ancestral spirits. Ancestral spirits are spirits of *Sotho* men who have died. Klaus Nürnberger noted that each spirit is remembered and acknowledged by the family members as senior in rank, to be recognised as an ancestor, through ritual and practice (Nürnberger, 1975).

The ancestral spirit in *Sotho* culture has the power to affect the lives of his family in either a negative or positive way depending on their acknowledgement of him through ritual and practice. It is the responsibility of the family to perform sacrifices and the pouring of traditional beer as a means of acknowledging and recognising the ancestor and their superior. I agree, that ancestral spirits in *Sotho* culture rely on the descendants for survival because they are only remembered if there are people alive to acknowledge their presence through ritual (Nürnberger, 1975:177). In cases where ill fate has befallen the family, diviners or traditional doctors serve as a link between them and their ancestors to discover the cause of such problems. The diviner will then offer instructions, from the ancestral spirits, on how to proceed to restore that which was lost. People contact their ancestor through diviners for various reasons; it can be to acknowledge, seek blessings, and give thanks.

## **Fusion in African Contemporary dance**

African contemporary dance is an art of fusion. As the American cultural theorist Richard Schechner explains: "Fusion occurs when elements of two or more cultures mix together to such a degree that a new society, language or genre of art emerges" (1991:30). In this section the writing of US cultural theorist Richard Schechner (1988, 1991, 2002), is used to explore some 'origins' of theatre practice through ritual. There are persistent concerns about the liberal way in which choreographers can sometimes borrow from other people's cultures as legitimised by, what one might call, a 'western' license to thrill (Schechner, 1991). When making fusion dance work, understanding the cultural values, protocols, African traditional rituals and spirituality is vital. Choreographic visions in African contemporary dance are almost

always enhanced by African traditional rituals, culture, spirituality or music. Movement itself is rooted in cultural traditions. Schechner (2002) goes on to combine his analyses in performance theory with innovative discussions of popular entertainments, sports, politics and performance in everyday life in order to interrogate performance behaviour, not just as an object of study, but also as an active artistic-intellectual practice. The study of cultural practice in relation to contemporary performance becomes important in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as the pace and reach of globalisation is enacted in increasingly more complex ways.

According to Sylvia Glasser, cultural fusion is directly opposed to cultural apartheid (Glasser, 2019). By cultural fusion she means the synthesis of African traditional rituals and spirituality or integration of two or more cultural forms of expression that have their roots or sources in different traditions or different countries. The resultant fusion or hybrid form is, in its turn, also fluid or subject to change or continuous transformation. Rustom Bharucha writes:

fusion itself as a cultural phenomenon should not be reduced to a pre-existing beneficent state of being ... while nationalism is clearly the villain of this breezy utopian universalism, there are other contexts in which fusion has been nurtured through the fall-out of global trade, war, and colonial (Bharucha, 2000:31).

Voluntarism is the critical principle of fusion defined by both Schechner and Bharucha, but while Schechner advocates “cultures of choice” (1989:155), Bharucha argues that despite connections with neo-liberal individualism and philosophies of “freedom of choice,” voluntarism is yet a useful way of distinguishing fusion from the state – controlled project of multiculturalism (Bharucha, 2000:31). Glasser continues by pointing out that there is fusion that incorporates the rituals and beliefs systems of ‘other’ cultures that are of a sacred nature. With all forms of conscious fusion, issues of transcultural borrowing or cultural appropriation need to be addressed. By appropriation, Glasser refers to taking something that belongs to someone else and making it your own (2019).

In linking this dissertation to the above discussions, Schechner writes, "Each group or culture maintains its own distinct qualities, remaining separate" (Schechner, 1991:29). The problem with multiculturalism is that there is still a hierarchy that forms. As remains the case in South Africa, whites are placed at the top of the hierarchy while the Indian and Coloured are 'othered' with Black placed at the bottom (Munsamy, 2006). The grading that was created through apartheid's racial politics filters through to create these boundaries where the



hegemonic discourse again becomes dominant (Munsamy, 2006). This study thus, understands contemporary dance to have the potential, as cultural practice, to unpack this notion of grading and to voice the politically constructed identities within the Black race group.

This notion of grading in intercultural fusion does not seem to exist as it usually is understood as a process of blending races or more different cultures, genres or styles (Munsamy, 2006). Fusing dances from different cultural legacies symbolises a cultural meeting from all races. It could be seen as enriching the cultures, somewhat like fusion cookery, or as an appropriate cultural borrowing. For example Sylvia Glasser's work *Tranceformations* (1991) with MOVING INTO DANCE MOPHATONG exemplifies the fusion that has characterised South African contemporary dance-making since the 1990s. Glasser explains this fusion as something not fixed or frozen in time but as constantly changing. One of the basic characteristics of her self-labelled "Afrofusion" is the use of weight or gravity; in Afrofusion, the weight is generally into the floor rather than upwards and the pelvis is used to enhance movements (Glasser, 2019). This method of working has been witnessed in the work of Mantsoe and Koena. They both continue to share Glasser's philosophy of hybridisation or melding cultures and each has developed their own styles or signatures that are, in turn, not frozen in time but constantly changing/shifting.

The notion that fusion of styles and different cultures could produce a new centre of thinking through contemporary dance in Africa has been both proposed and challenged. The writing of South African choreographer and academic, Liane Loots, navigates the way in which the notions of fusion and interculturalism have and can produce a new centre of creating and thinking through contemporary dance in South Africa. Loots raised concerns around how to undo, unsettle and re-write colonially scripted narratives and representations of African dance and dancing bodies especially as they relate to a growing body of African contemporary dance work (Loots, 2012:56). This is also supported by the writing of Cape Town academic and dance scholar, Sharon Friedman. In her discussions of South African contemporary dance, Friedman poses questions around what South African dance should look like in terms of race, gender, ethnicity, quality of movement, which will further provide me space to negotiate fusion in the danced cultural narrative of post-1994 South Africa (Friedman, 2012).

As a response to these type of questions, Laurie Anderson stated: this post-apartheid phase, offers a multicultural country that allows cultures and cultural practices to intertwine, creating a Nation that, as a multicultural society, has an imagined sense of Nationhood, where each race group may exist equally (Anderson in Hall, 1996). The South African context has shifted, post-1994, to create a society that has, in theory, rid itself of racial segregation. However, racial and gender, stereotyping still lingers. An examination, through theatre, of these stereotypes will offer much needed insight into the construction of gendered, masculine identities within this current South African context.

A dancer and choreographer in this multicultural frame is able to create and critique identities in relation to race, culture and gender because of the impact that multiculturalism, fusion, and interculturalism, may have on an identity (Anderson in Hall, 1996). African contemporary dance examines cultural representations, often leading to intercultural exchange. Patrice Pavis (1996), a French performance theorist writer, argues that cultural exchanges are also possible through the theatrical medium. There exists, then, the possibility for intercultural exchange. Contemporary dance is seen as a cultural practice through which ideologies are sustained and at the same time challenged. Identities are shaped by cultural practices that occur within a context, and it is these identities that are represented on stage.

Loots argues that the performed cultural fusion does not address the real political and cultural questions pertaining to the historically determined operations of power in South African dance, because the body is not a neutral site onto which dance can be placed through training and choreography. "The body" Loots argues, "comes to dance already inscribed by discourses and choreography" (Loots, 2012:56). This idea is supported by Judith Butler's (1990, 1993) argument regarding performativity which insists that bodies are both inscribed by and also act as agents that participate in and perpetuate the performance of culture gender and other learned or socially encoded aspects of identity and categories (Butler, 1990; 1993). Loots' work thus introduces an important discussion in South African dance discourses by articulating how the dancing body and its representation are a political site of contestation in the contemporary postcolonial African context.

## **South African Contemporary Dance – contested space for making meaning**

South African contemporary dance has shifted and responded to contemporary concerns such as migration, urbanisation and industrialisation (Rani, 2018). Urbanisation in the South African context is seen as the movement of people from rural to so-called “developed” communities (Rani, 2018). And linked to this, since the colonisation of Africa, traditional South African dance has undergone extensive changes. Western colonial influence and rural-to-urban migration have changed the physical, socio-cultural and ideological spaces in which dance takes place. As people moved to townships, cultures clashed and both hybrid and new dance forms were created (Maqoma, 2011). One causal factor of this change has been the mix of different cultures or multiculturalism (Richards, 2007:40 in Rani, 2018). People from different South African clans were moving to the townships to find work, including people from *Xhosa*, *Sotho*, *AmaZulu*, *Pondo*, *Venda* and *Tswana* ethnic backgrounds (Rani, 2018). These are very distinct cultural groups with widely varying traditions. This merging and collaboration of different cultures has impacted on the meaning, context and function of African performing arts, including the sphere of dance (Erlmann, 1990:199).

According to Maqoma modernity, urbanisation and industrialisation have led to both the birth and destruction of traditions in South African contemporary dance (Maqoma, 2011). Rani supports this notion as he points that, with the modernity and industrialisation that came with the discovery of gold in Witwatersrand and diamonds in Kimberley, a substantial number of Black South Africans migrated from rural areas to the cities to work in the mines. This brought together *Xhosa*, *AmaZulu*, *Venda* and *Tswana* people, to name a few of the ethnic backgrounds, each with their own distinct rituals, traditions and beliefs; in an attempt to form a new unity, however, came a loss of tradition and diversity (Rani, 2018). The effects of urbanisation can be seen through the cultural forms of expression of these groups. Living in cities like Johannesburg, Cape Town and Durban provides a platform for cross-cultural productions especially in terms of dance.

You choose to live in a city, conform to the new lifestyle, the culture and value systems, or you choose to work in the city and still practice your 'traditional' beliefs and retain your value systems within the new circumstances. It doesn't however make one less African or more African than the other (Maqoma, 2011:5).

Maqoma believes that people from different backgrounds can transcend cultural barriers and create a new and dynamic culture; at the same time it is his belief that cities do not necessarily

define a person or a nation. In a city you fight for individuality and in our diversity, you fight for identity (Maqoma, 2011).

South African contemporary dance has been growing since the early 1990s in South Africa along with those who perform it, create it, and teach it (Samuel, 2016). Organisations like Dance Alliance in Johannesburg in the mid-1990s and later KZN Dancelink under Lynn Maree's leadership in Durban became influential lobby groups promoting Afro-fusion and multi-cultural dance platforms (Samuel, 2016). Samuel (2016) acknowledges Adrienne Sichel, South African dance writer and critic, as a dynamic advocate for Contemporary Dance and also a key role-player within this historical account. Since its inception in 1989, Dance Umbrella and JOMBA Contemporary Dance Experience (from 1998) are two of the longest running dance festivals dedicated to Contemporary dance in South Africa. These festivals provided (and in case of JOMBA! still provide) platforms for live contemporary dance in South Africa. These festivals facilitated the artistic expression of our culture through dance and assisted both individuals and groups to present their works to the public. The festivals have presented professional dance companies that synthesise African traditional rituals and spirituality in their work and it is in this work that this research has a particular interest. We have seen choreographers in this country (see below) whose works have captured the attention of many although in my view, there remains insufficient writing around the topic.

As I explain in the next section with examples from Glasser's work *Tranceformations* (1991) with MIDM, there is a prolific fusion of cultures and styles in South African contemporary dance which employs various practices, ceremonies, beliefs and meaning. Jay Pather's, *Bolera* (2003) and *Power of One* (2004) fuses forms such as Indian, Zulu, Shembe and Ballet. Pather has combined his interests in dances based on his choreographic methodology and long years of experience. Rhythm, gesture, footwork and music are the elements used to create cultural links. Having said that, not all dance fusion is about the meeting of cultural traditions in South Africa. Contemporary dance choreographers such as Boyzie Cekwana, Neliswa Xaba, Jay Pather David Gouldie and others, are interested in expanding the possibilities of dance expression by exploring other media - theatre, film, and video, the spoken word, visual art and architecture. Their works are notable for their strong symbolism and links to visual art. Their choreography, always a sensitive plant, twists toward the light, changes and germinates new reflections of the moral and physical characteristics of a time (Anderson, 2013). A dynamic art,

laced with challenging variations and redefinitions of its African and South African roots, dance reseeds itself with great vitality, throwing off forms and expressions that fuse and blend traditions and cultures in remarkable ways (Anderson, 2013).

In conclusion, this chapter reflects the need for intercultural activities – such as dance – in order to facilitate cultural exchange. The information collected, suggests that people learn effortlessly about the ‘self’ and the ‘others’ through dance. The outcomes of this chapter propose that dance can be an effective medium of creating understanding and tolerance between different cultural groups, and the ‘others’ and the ‘self’. This chapter has demonstrated how the *AmaZulu* and *Sotho* ethnic and cultural groups practise and negotiate their different traditional dances. *AmaZulu* and *Sotho* history in South Africa has travelled the path of a trying journey. The history of Black people, specifically those located in KwaZulu-Natal, governed by the racial politics of apartheid South Africa has been interrogated. Identities, like those that developed in and around KZN, were constructed in relation to segregation laws and notions of boundaries. This chapter has determined that Black people migrated to urban areas as a result of the 1913 and 1936 Land Acts. These acts restricted black settlements to a few well-defined rural areas which were largely unsuitable for farming. The black population could no longer make a living in rural areas. They were forced to abandon subsistence living and moved to the cities (Gelderblom, 2004:123 in Rani, 2013). The chapter has unpacked and interrogated cultural and spiritual practice in South Africa by assessing Black *AmaZulu* and *Sotho* traditions through the politics of the dancing body, theory and practice of intercultural fusion in South African contemporary dance as a contested space of making meaning. In the next chapter I will explore how the synthesis of selected black (*AmaZulu* and *Sotho*) South African traditional rituals and spirituality are negotiated and manifest in the work of two local South African choreographers (Vincent Mantsoe and Moeketsi Koena) whose work straddles these spheres of contemporary dance, spirituality and Black South African traditional dance.

## CHAPTER TWO

This chapter offers an analysis of selected performance works by Vincent Mantsoe (*KonKoriti* 2016), Moeketsi Koena (*Point of View* 2004) and my own work *Alive Kids* in order to negotiate the use of African traditional ritual and spirituality evident in the aforementioned works. This chapter focuses on understanding and unpacking the dance choreographic and dance making methodologies of Mantsoe and Koena. It outlines their personal history, and their choreographic works within the context of South African contemporary dance making. This will lay the groundwork for my discussion of the relationship between these South African artists and their broader social context as well as their influence on my own work. Significant to this chapter is the way in which Mantsoe and Koena (and their dance works) are positioned in post-apartheid South Africa. I attempt to outline the praxis of their dance methodology and, crucially, how I was able to access and use their methods in developing my own choreographic methodology.

### Colonised Dancing Bodies

South African contemporary dance sometimes critically responds to colonial assumptions and concepts, and challenges dominant Western aesthetic criteria by creating counter-narratives (Mbembe, 2017). This historically colonial script refers to the ways in which the African body became the object of Western colonial constructions, which produced many sensationalised stereotypes that perhaps had their origins in colonial and early anthropological thinking and writing (Mbembe, 2017). Desiree Lewis elaborates: by the 19<sup>th</sup> century Africans were deemed innately, biologically different and degenerate. And central to this essentialised belief were ideas about their distinctive pathological sexuality (Lewis, 2011). The African body was thus figured as crude, hyper-sexual and less than human, and these stereotypes fed a script that shaped the representation of African bodies in various disciplines, including the arts (Lewis, 2011). One of the primary constructs of colonialism and through which colonialism articulated its power was the construct of race.

Achille Mbembe explains that race became a primal form of representation that anchored its power by operating as a kind of all-consuming form, becoming image, form, surface, figure, and- especially- a structure of the imagination (Mbembe, 2017). Through the law of race, Black

came to represent difference in its raw manifestation - somatic, affective, aesthetic, imaginary, producing a separation between those deemed human and those deemed less than human, and between the idea of a self and other (Johnstone, 2010). Loots has written extensively on the notion of colonised bodies and how dance and movement, with particular reference to gender have been and often continue to be articulated within Western patriarchal paradigm (Loots, 1995). Loots discusses how prevailing assumptions of what constitutes the ideal dancing body, as exemplified by the slender, white body of classical ballet limit the participation and appreciation of dancing bodies that do not conform to that normative ideal, such as disabled, Black or female bodies in South African dance. She argues further that training methods associated with Western theatre dance forms like ballet and contemporary dance are still favoured in South African dance education (1995, 2010). Her research, including her artistic practice through the Flatfoot Dance Company, echoes concerns raised by a number of South African contemporary dance choreographers and scholars about how to undo, unsettle and re-write colonially scripted narratives and representations of African dance and dancing bodies (Johnstone, 2010).

For example, Friedman in discussing contemporary dance in post-apartheid South Africa writes that, from the late 1990s, discussion in the South African dance community intensified around issues of identity and heralded work in which identity was the main focus (Friedman, 2012). What is African, what is a South African, what should South African dance look like? (Friedman, 2012:89). The arrogance displayed by those in the dominant white cultures also showed a level of ignorance about the cultural, artistic and rhythmic diversity and complexity of African dances (Glasser, 1993:83). The suppression, prohibition and regulation of indigenous dances under colonial (and apartheid) rule are an index of the significance of dance as a site of considerable socio-political interrogation (Reed, 1998:506). Thus, returning to look at my indigenous dance is important because it affords me – as the artist (and the scholar) – space to re-think and re-imagine how this tradition is re-interpreted in the contemporary art making/dance arena.

## **Negotiating the use of African Rituals and Spirituality in Post-Apartheid South African performance dance**

South African choreographers such as Lliane Loots, Boyzie Cekwana, Jay Pather, Gregory Maqoma, Vincent Mantsoe, and Moeketsi Koena (amongst others) are making work that seeks to challenge the notion of the 'correct' South African dancing body in order to create counter-narratives to colonial scripts and constructs about African dance and dancing bodies. To this end, and as an interesting (and contested) starting point, Gerard Samuel, considers Sylvia Glasser as one of the most critical role-player in South African Contemporary Dance (Samuel, 2015). Sylvia Glasser challenged the assumptions of dominant Western cultures within African and South African indigenous and colonial space (Glasser, 1991). Glasser, in 1960s and 1970s was one of the first South African choreographers to articulate the problematics of moving the sacred traditional ritual practices onto stage and, given that both of my case studies (Moeketsi Koena and Vincent Mantsoe) studied under her guidance within her Johannesburg company MOVING INTO DANCE MOPHATONG (MIDM), her voice and her legacy is important to this chapter. Sylvia Glasser's works for MIDM approached these issues by using her own version of intercultural experimentation or fusion to return African cultural expressions that had been diminished through colonial and apartheid value systems.

Whilst advancements in Space travel and the Cold War were pre-occupations in the West, the same period in South Africa, the 1960s to the 1980s, saw the tightening of apartheid laws: including the Group Areas Act and Separate Amenities Act of 1957, and the hardening of social norms and support for a cultural and sports boycott (Samuel, 2015). In terms of performance dance in South Africa, these wider Western frames were challenged by Glasser in the work of her company, MIDM and her provocative dance was part of a political movement (Glasser, 1991). According to Samuel (2015), Glasser disputed the status quo by stating, "In South Africa, where you dance, with whom you dance, what kind of dances you perform and your attitudes toward dancing will say something about you as a political being, as well as saying something about you as a performer/artist" (Glasser, 1991:34). MIDM also found itself in the heart of what was to become the Newtown Cultural precinct post 1994, a site that included the famed Market Theatre, home of much protest theatre (Samuel, 2015). The formation in 1978 of her independent, non-racial dance company in Johannesburg is a testament to her courage and vision to restore African arts and culture to its rightful place. Glasser had trained



as a dancer and anthropologist and had brought together both white and black dancers to forge MIDM. It remains a point of interest that Glasser's African anthropology roots and her own whiteness has played such a significant role in the defiance of the status quo which privileged classical ballet and Whiteness. From 1978, her early works such as *African Cassandra* (1978), *Dansynergy* (1978) and *Tranceformations* (1991), attempted to educate audiences about the diversity of African dance vocabularies and simultaneously engender a respect for African culture. At a time when high art was the domain of Western classical music, opera and classical ballet, Glasser deliberately selected African Traditional music, attire and movement as her preferred choreographic tools. This serves as a reminder that the influences on our work derive from all our intermingled hybrid identities (Samuel, 2016). Women's experiences, in particular the gradual but growing resistance of African women to a male-dominated society, was slowly beginning to be foregrounded in the work of the few, at the time, black female choreographers (Samuel, 2016). Loots has also pointed out that within the South African context, most often it is black men who are:

afforded a certain level of privilege denied their female counterparts: performance dance has attracted far more numbers of women than men and yet, that the 'mysterious artistry' of choreography has mostly not opened itself to black women says something more about continued racist and gendered structures and to whom support, funding and training is given (Loots, 1999:111).

The work of women like Portia Mashigo and Gladys Agulhas clearly reflected the above concerns and began to draw considerable attention. More recently, an increasing number of Black women choreographers, notable amongst them: Desiré Davids, Nelisiwe Xaba, Mamela Nyamza, Dada Masilo and others continue to produce ground-breaking work.

### **The example of Glasser's *Tranceformations* (1991)**

Glasser's work *Tranceformations* (1991) with MIDM is a good example of choreography that negotiates the use of African traditional rituals and spirituality in contemporary dance. Glasser's says, "The story is about change – ancient and modern change, physical, mental, and spiritual change, personal and collective change, political, social and cultural change" (Glasser, 2019:137-150). The choreography of *Tranceformations* is embodied in the changes that occurred in the minds, spirits, bodies and perceptions of the participants in the ancient healing ritual of the *KhoiSan* (Glasser, 2019). The trance dance Glasser references in this work was the

kinetic physical connection to the belief system of the *KhoiSan*. *Tranceformations* was developed into a contemporary performance ritual journey that explored the images and transformations visualised and experienced by the medicine men or shamans during their trance dancing or healing ceremony (Glasser, 2019). Both Mantsoe and Koena were part of the original cast of *Tranceformations*, a dance work inspired by the ancient rock art and trance dancing of the indigenous first people of Southern Africa - the *KhoiSan* or Bushmen. In the creation of the work, Glasser set out to interrogate whether there is/was a difference between reality and performed reality (Glasser, 2019). During rehearsals Glasser used the term 'real' for the trance dance the *San* people performed. This implies that the performance of the dancers in the work was somehow not real - or indeed, a performance representation. Despite this, the performers experienced some form of altered consciousness and would often, themselves go into a trance in rehearsals and in performance. In her recent 2019 book *Tranceformations and Transformations – Southern African Rock Art and Contemporary Dance*, Glasser leads a discussion as if she was projecting her perceptions onto the dancers (Glasser, 2019). She says, the audience asked her after seeing the performance of *Tranceformations* in 1991 how the dancers managed to portray the trance state so realistically or whether they really went into a trance state (Glasser, 2019). She replies that "even though the performers were incredibly intense and 'real', the dancers seemed able to return to the 'normal' state of consciousness without a major problem" (Glasser, 2019:137–150). Glasser's original *Tranceformations* links to Stuart Hall's ideas around cultural theory as Glasser's choreography becomes an important instrument through which the self, society and social issues were (and are) examined and critiqued (Hall, 1996:1–17). Hall argues that, "existence is a state of being alive or being real and is made up of mutually constitutive processes, which are continually in a state of transformation, fluid and thus always changing" (Hall, 1996:1–17). Glasser's *Tranceformations* is thus understood as a dance work that used traditional African cultural practice as a vehicle for expressing cultural existence.

## **South Africa Post 1994**

It has been over two decades since initiated by the fall of Apartheid in 1994 and fostered by the introduction of democracy under the political rule of the African National Congress (ANC), drastic political, social and economic change swept through South Africa. So too has the

practice of choreography in South Africa experienced many significant shifts as these social, political and economic factors continue to strongly influence the development of various artistic aesthetics and tendencies. In terms of a South African theatre/dance aesthetic (to use a broad term), the new era of democracy has served to open up many formerly fortified doors and has removed certain racially based historical boundaries. Contemporary South African dance has also experienced an opening of certain choices and performance opportunities in this emerging context (Krouse, 2006 & Pienaar, 1999 in Parker, 2007).

Since 1994, the shift to South Africa's democracy has created the space for most aspects of life to be revisited (Friedman, 2012). As noted by Gay Morris, "in the first decade of the "new South Africa" a widespread impulse to generate a culture that endorsed racial, ethnic and linguistic diversity, human rights and access for all to all the arts was entrenched by legislation" (Morris, 2008:109 in Johnstone, 2010). Dance makers and choreographers were, and have been, challenged to re-appraise the manner in which dance has been traditionally composed and to assess the relevance of the content and stories being told in the search for a South African voice. Choreographers were concerned with writing 'new' South African stories on the bodies of their dancers (Friedman, 2012). The question of a South African identity was intrinsic to much of the work. It is (and was) the process of exploring new artistic terrains that have caught the eye of many local dance makers who continue to concern themselves with conceptualising the direction and development of South African dance in the post-Apartheid era (Pather, 1999). After 1994, both Koena and Mantsoe (under the initial guidance of Glasser and their training at MIDM, and then as they stepped out into independent dance careers), began to fuse African traditional dance styles embracing rituals and spirituality in an attempt to negotiate new and valuable identities that looked back to old African value systems and cultural processes in a way that navigated their contemporary African identities. This 'fusion' (Schechner, 1991) began to give rise to some of the early generation of South African contemporary choreographers. The ensuing analysis and interrogation of their respective works will enable me to examine how selected traditional African ritual, music and dancing fuse (in a myriad of contested ways) with contemporary dance thus allowing me to deepen my own explorations around Black South African traditional dance, culture and spirituality within African contemporary dance performance.

## Interrogating the dance work of Vincent Mantsoe

I would like to begin by employing Cameroonian philosopher Achille Mbembe's concept of 'entanglement' (2001) to better describe the chaotic histories that lead to these various movement languages (traditional and contemporary) cohabitating in the post-colonial South African dancing body. Entanglement is Mbembe's concept of "post-colonial subject hood that acknowledges inherent and ongoing conflict and co-construction by colonial and indigenous forces" (Mbembe, 2001:128–129). In *On the Post-Colony*, Mbembe (2001) explains the post-colony as a space and time "of presents, pasts, and futures that retain the depths of other presents, pasts, and futures, each age bearing, altering, and maintaining the previous ones" (Mbembe, 2001:128–129). This very conflict is the message and is showcased in Mantsoe's work *KonKoriti* (2016) through the embrace of Black South African traditional cultural dance practice within a historically Euro/American dance form that was encouraged in South Africa's colonial and apartheid agenda.

When South African dancer and choreographer Mantsoe dances there is a certain localised African vitality to his performance that is simultaneously contained by his body and radiates outward from it (Cauthery, 2007). The sheer precision of, and life force contained within, his movements make him a captivating performer. In attending his workshops at JOMBA! 2016 Contemporary Dance Experience and speaking with him after his workshop, I learnt that he credits this jubilant life force to his ability to enter trance states whilst performing. Through the vehicle of his living, breathing, dancing body, Mantsoe is able to open himself to the healing energy of his traditional African spirit world, becoming a vessel for their knowledge and blessings. In his view, it is this rich interior life, based on traditional African teachings and the pantheon of his native *Sotho* culture, mediated by his ability to enter altered states of consciousness, which forms the basis of his work as a performer (Cauthery, 2007). He considers his dance and the role he plays as a performer to be one of medium for the will of his ancestors.

Mantsoe grew up in the Johannesburg townships of South Africa. As a child and young adult he participated in youth clubs, practising street dance and imitating the moves of Michael Jackson and other pop artists from American music videos (Braun, 2005 in Cauthery, 2007). Throughout his childhood, he woke every day to the sound of his mother playing a drum to

greet the ancestors. A descendant of a long line of *sangomas*, Mantsoe began participating with his mother, grandmother, aunts and extended family in traditional rituals involving song and dance. The *sangomas*, Mantsoe explains, “work as liaisons between the living and the dead. But it’s purely a healing process, using natural herbs to heal people, to enhance life in a positive manner, and to give guidance” (Braun, 2005 in Cauthery, 2007). In his late teens, Mantsoe began training in earnest with Johannesburg’s MIDM (Glasser, 2019). As explained earlier in this chapter, MIDM was founded in 1978 (at the height of apartheid) by Sylvia ‘Magogo’<sup>1</sup> Glasser as a non-segregated dance training centre. Through MIDM, Glasser approached dance “as a means of cultural resistance to the socio-political restrictions placed on daily life. At the core of the company’s work was the concept of integration - integration of people from diverse backgrounds as well as the assimilation of indigenous and foreign cultures” (Glasser, 2019:137–150). Mantsoe was deeply influenced by MIDM’s’ signature fusion of African ritual, music and dance with Western contemporary dance forms. The company is credited with creating an important and unique style, combining a respect for African beliefs and values with movement innovation (Cauthery, 2007). Today, as an independent artist, Mantsoe continues to honour his connection to MIDM and still describes his work as Afrofusion drawing on traditional African dance forms and contemporary approaches from modern, ballet and Asian forms such as Tai Chi and, martial arts (Braun, 2005 in Cauthery 2007).

Mantsoe participated as a spectator in the rituals performed by members of his family and though Mantsoe had seen his grandmother, aunt and mother commune with the spirit world through trance states, he was not trained and therefore not permitted to enter them himself (Cauthery, 2007). It, became apparent however to his family that Mantsoe had inherited a proclivity for traditional ways, that his “openness” to the spirits and to the *sangoma* ways was “strong” (Cauthery, 2007:237–268). As he grew older it became clear that Mantsoe was also a gifted dancer and it was through his dancing that his grandmother determined that the spirits were at work. “The spirits had advised that through his dance that he was to be a healing ‘ambassador’ and that he was to travel to distant places as a teacher and performer” (Cauthery, 2007:237–268). His aunt and grandmother began training Mantsoe in earnest, instilling the sacred and important work he was to carry out and finding ways he might

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<sup>1</sup> “Magogo” is the popular name for Grandmother

manifest this in his dancing. Entering trance states has become an aspect of his dance work and performance. Cauthery elaborates, “Through the spectacle of his dancing that bridged the traditional and contemporary, he could be a vehicle for enlightenment and spiritual communion” (Cauthery, 2007:237–268).

With reference to Mantsoe, trance thus becomes an embodied presence that he simultaneously brings with him and that moves through him (Csordas, 1994). When one watches Mantsoe dance, there is a sense of a rolling energy building and growing, that follows a transition from intense introspection towards release and revelation. The capacity to enter trance states like a pilot light that never goes out resides in his body (Cauthery, 2007:23–268). Mantsoe’s beliefs about the role trance plays in his life and the role he plays in its life, are predicated and validated by his own culture. In turn, this relationship to the energy he carries within him which also traverses the boundaries of his body into the performance space, is validated by the witnesses - presenters, audience members and other dancers - who become implicated in maintaining the self-objectification (Cauthery, 2007). If one accepts Bourdieu’s theorisation of habitus as the cultural structures that exist in people’s bodies and minds, then habitus is something that accompanies a person when he or she travels through the world. Pierre Bourdieu’s (2013) concept of habitus, like Butler’s (1988, 1990, 1999) concept of performativity, relies on physical embodiment, in essence habitus “[...] refers to the physical embodiment of cultural capital, to the deeply ingrained habits, skills, and dispositions that we possess due to our life experiences” (Bourdieu, 2013). Bourdieu’s theoretical underpinning enable an engagement with the dancing body as both subject and object through notions of embodiment (Davidson, 2016).

Mantsoe’s performance and choreography brings with him his sensibilities about trance. Such sensibilities include the power of trance to heal, to communicate and imbue the person who trances and those who witness with a sense of the sacred.

### *KonKoriti (2016)*

*KonKoriti* according to Vincent Mantsoe in his programme note at JOMBA! 2016 Contemporary Dance Experience, translates as:

“A state of being and is a tireless pursuit for self-rightness, a fine line of I, a last breath before the fall and rise. The monstrous silence of waves beating the shore, leaving humming tunes, inspired by the physicality, spirituality, power, pride of a ‘person’. Fall, rise, gasp for the last breath. Pride I, I am ... Like a Phoenix rising from the ashes” (JOMBA! Programme, 2016). Watching Vincent Mantsoe’s *KonKoriti* at JOMBA! 2016, my first impression of his work was a black body revealed by lights, standing at the back of the stage next to a wing opposite prompt side. Five microphones on stands were scattered around the stage. He took a few steps approaching centre stage with the intention to take ownership of the space and hit the pose looking directly at the audience as if raising a question or confirming that he was there. He walked a few more steps and began to move his arms while beginning the rhythmic stamping often associated with a traditional *sangoma* calling the ancestors in a ceremony. During the work, he moved the microphone stands and repositioned them towards centre creating a semi-circle that seemed to symbolise power. He began his choreography by inviting his ancestors on stage using foot stamping suggesting a *sangoma* ritual dance. Most *sangomas* dance and go into a trance before they divine or heal people. In traditional *Zulu* culture they are believed to be able to walk the fine line between the living and the dead. According to Glasser, the word *sangoma* is widely used and has been adopted by other languages in South Africa, including English (Glasser, 2019). Mantsoe used this ancestral trance in this performance of *KonKoriti*. His first choice of music had people talking in the background as if they were having a serious conversation about their state of being which was followed by intense Burundi Drumming while he went into trance. This access to trance and African spirituality resides within Mantsoe and is brought out in carefully constructed and choreographed performances that meet with (as he explained in our discussion) the spirits’ approval.

Mantsoe uses the language of the body and traditional spiritual practice as a means to communicate. *KonKoriti* demonstrates how an engagement with traditional dancing and traditional music can create curiosity in a contemporary setting and he has discovered ways in which specific costuming might enhance his work. He believes that the above process of inviting his ancestors onto stage with him, allows his spiritual ‘path or way’ to accept and learn from others without undermining the teachings ‘initiations’ or beliefs of his elders, but to

negotiate the synthesis of African Traditional rituals and spirituality into his contemporary dance making.

My own view is that his work honours ancestors who are with him in his life and challenges traditional *sangoma* movements in the hope of speaking a new, (perhaps contemporary spiritual), truth. In *Zulu* culture the ancestors are in fact deceased family members. This differs from respecting or remembering the dead in that it is a belief that the spirits of the departed continue to take an interest in the affairs of their living relatives. The ancestors' spirits possess the power to influence the lives of the living. They are not always benevolent and if certain traditional rituals are not undertaken, they can become displeased and will need to be appeased. An ancestor can appear to a family member in dreams, but only a *sangoma* can decipher its meaning.

In much of his work, therefore, Mantsoe remembers and acknowledges his ancestors to reconstruct their histories and give them a place in his contemporary reality. Like traditional storytellers, contemporary choreographers such as Mantsoe routinely draw from personal and ancestral experiences, invoking traditions in novel ways to comment on current situations. Likewise, by storytelling through movement, Mantsoe embeds the past into the present and demonstrates imitative and innovative techniques by using original and traditional movement vocabularies. Kariamu Welsh-Asante (1994) established the concept of ancestorism, or the assertion that one's ancestors play an active role in the activities of the living, as a criterion of African dance. Ancestorism is a praxis found throughout the African continent and seen in various genres of the diaspora. Welsh-Asante explains that a dance need not be performed in a sacred context to invoke ancestorism (Welsh-Asante, 1994). She writes that all traditional dances are convertible as 'agents' of the deities and ancestors, even if the intent of the dance was not for that purpose (Welsh-Asante, 1994). Therefore an invitation to ancestors in contemporary performance dance can also pull the past into the present and even the future, creating a circular understanding of time. Inviting ancestors into choreography disrupts linear time and the notion that a choreographer is the authority of the experience.

Mantsoe's dance choreography plays with and negotiates a meeting and fusing of cultural and spiritual expressions, which defines a style of contemporary South African dance that, in all its



beauty, signals a new generation of black male dance makers that began working in the early 1980s. I found his movements in *KonKoriti* influenced by his *sangoma* heritage with a fusion of tradition, African rituals, spirituality, culture, and African contemporary dance. His work evokes a spiritual connection to self – a state of being that speaks to a contemporary African context.

## **Interrogating the dance work of Moeketsi Koena**

Moeketsi Koena joined MIDM in 1990 as part of the Schweppes Scholarship Programme and was in the initial *Tranceformations* cast. He was part of the cast in all the performances until 1999 when he left to study in the Netherlands on a scholarship. Koena, like Mantsoe, draws inspiration from his own African spirituality and rich cultural/traditional background. His reputable dance practice fuses African and contemporary dance styles and techniques.

In 2004, I had the pleasure of working in a dance duet (*Point of View*) choreographed by Moeketsi Koena and performed by Portia Mashigo and myself, as part of *New Dance in the Dance Factory*. This festival was first launched in 2003, offering both local choreographers as well as those from other parts of Africa the opportunity to show their work. New Dance was guaranteed to be a platform for something new and exciting, as well as an entertaining experience for South African choreographers (Artslink, 2004). Koena's *Point of View* was predicated on the idea that the historically-situated and culturally-contextualised moving body is the focus for an analysis of how people make meaning in their lives. According to Koena, *Point of View* is a poetic and abstract exploration of human relationships, inspired by Can Themba's story '*The Suit*' (1963). According to Can Themba '*The Suit*' is about a man who forces his wife to treat her extramarital lover's suit as if it were a person in the house with tragic consequences. Though the story ostensibly focuses on the impact of oppression via the themes of adultery and revenge, it actually offers a more substantial comment on the impact of oppression on personal relationships and serves as a warning that unless mutual awareness is cultivated, the oppressed can become the oppressor.

### *Point of View 2004*

In this work, Koena used live drumming (percussion) and the evocation of sharp traditional *AmaZulu/Sotho* cultural dance movements to negotiate a spiritual connection that embraced

and reflected values of both the past and the present. Live drumming and his choice of a fusion dance language, both foster and mirror ideas around social transformation. The piece explored the role of the arts in traditional Southern African cultures and examined how African dance and music have reflected and incorporated change over time as a spiritual connection. It provided suggestions as to how dance and music can be used as a positive force in choreography. Koena describes a process of borrowing from his culture, childhood, and ancestors, and he notes the importance of understanding and appreciating the sources of his African traditional movements. The piece *Point of View* has a spiritual core, made tangible in physical expression. As a choreographer, germane to my study, he demonstrates that to be successfully integrated into the arena of performance as a contemporary artist, one does not have to disavow one's cultural and spiritual heritage.

In *Point of View*, there is no privileged body part or centre. As Brenda Gottschild explains polycentrism, "From the Africanist standpoint, movement may emanate from any part of the body, and two or more centres may operate simultaneously" (Gotschild, 2003). Any part of the body can direct any type of motion at any moment and usually at least two are working independently at once. Most of Koena's choreography is a type of manifestation of Gottschild's notion of polycentrism and is executed with a driving speed that carries dancers through high, medium and low levels of space, requiring deep knee bends, floor rolls and leaps to be performed with as much clarity as power. The result is that dancers beam through space with the freedom and ease of young children. Unlike an incredibly difficult petit allegro in ballet that would attempt to hide the challenge with an emphasis on lifting away from the pull of gravity, the speed and attack needed to accomplish Koena's phrases/choreography are quite grounded energetically, and dancers' facial expressions are encouraged so as not to hide the effort. The speed does not disturb the precision, yet each dancer is not meant to look exactly alike in Koena's work. According to dance scholar Jonathan David Jackson (now Cleis Abeni), individuation characterises "the work of the individual dancer as she or he moves to establish a unique identity according to her or his own physical capabilities, personal style, and capacity for invention" (Jackson, 2001:40-53). Despite the uniqueness of each dancer's form and style in Koena's work, the large gestures and loud aggressive utterances in unison, create a unified and dominating presence.

Also of note is the interdependence of dance and music in Koena's style which is symbolically reflected in the wider concept of social interconnectedness in African society. It is in this sense, as I have felt dancing his work, that the principle of inter connectedness, as an illustration of the African concept of *Ubuntu*, is reflected in dance and music in a form of polyrhythmic dancing.

In many ritualistic and spiritual forms, Moeketsi Koena's work (*Point of View* 2004) and Vincent Mantsoe's work (*KonKoriti* 2016) fuse traditional dance, rituals and spirituality to stage performances, which are often invested with religious significance and valued as traditional (and contemporary) techniques of divination and healing. Vincent Mantsoe and Moeketsi Koena's artistic vision, passion and spiritual way are part of their creative process. Creating different solo works, and the teachings that they carried out were based on the African traditional rituals and an engagement with a contemporary style of making performance dance.

### **My own choreographic methodology of working- articulating the influences**

My own way of working as a South African choreographer has always been located in my *Zulu* and *Sotho* tradition. My way of working links to and has been significantly influenced by Mantsoe and Koena as I also draw from personal and ancestral experiences, invoking spiritual traditions to comment on current situations. For an example, KwaZulu Natal, my religion and my culture are a playground for my own artistic craving as these aspects of my life feed me with embodied history. I grew up in The Christian Catholic Apostolic Holy Spirit Church in Zion well known as 'Nkonyane' Nkonyane' (or more colloquially as the "Zionists"). This church is named after later Prophet President Daniel (Mpaphezamanqe) Nkonyane who founded the church in 1906. In this church the congregants dance around the circle while singing, the song goes on for a long time with a circular loop of a rhythm. The prophet will enter an altered state of consciousness (trance) and make sounds that may seem strange. The Prophet's body will become tense and he/she will speak in a strange voice as the person in the centre of the circle is informed about their past or future. This happens while the song builds in intensity and when the Prophet comes out of trance, people will give him/her a back massage called *inhlambuluko*. This interesting mixing or blending of Christian and traditional African religious beliefs has influenced and informed my working methodology as a choreographer. I have

included material on some of the dancers' religious attitudes or beliefs to illustrate the diversity within the dancers as well as the relationship between the dancers and that of the *sangomas* and Zionists.

My own dance work, however, also makes a departure from the influences of Mantsoe and Koena as these choreographers are well known for going into trance during their solo performances. As a Zionist, I am familiar with this process as I had undergone through it in person at church. When I was in trance there was always a feeling of separation from reality, my conscious was altered, my soul burning with desire, every muscle of my body shaking out of the strength I possess, and felt like I have almost empowered my weaknesses. I was taken to another world, healed emotionally and spiritually. The spirits of the Zionist taught me how to respect the ritual of the other cultures. Because of this experience I think differently and work differently. It was and still is a transformed process for me that will be invested in all the work I create. I'm working on my own experimental dance style fusing different African traditional dances including *Ingoma* and *Isishameni*. In this way, my work is already a 'new' exploration of movement, and the confluences of tradition and contemporary dance. This has allowed me - while being influenced by other dance makers around me who share similar spiritual spaces - to follow my own path and developed my own style.

To conclude this section, cultural identities are not only a set of symbols, values or beliefs, but also a response to circumstances. Much like Koena and Mantsoe, in my own way I have tried to align myself with the many traditional values and cultural identities I embody as a contemporary Black South African. Most of the works I have created over the years have returned to my African spiritual and traditional identity. My own work *Alive Kids*— discussed in detail later in Chapter Three and Four, draws attention to the interplay between past and present self-identification and demonstrates how my performance making is one of many methods for negotiating Black South African contemporary identities.

## **Black Performance Theory**

*Black Performance Theory* by Carl Paris (in DeFrantz & Gonzalez, 2014) offers a critically important tool to look at the dance work under discussion as it introduces various frameworks within which Black (African) expressive works can be interpreted and in doing so, establishes

the dynamic nature of Black Performance. This makes it a key source of my own exploration into my own creative process with *Alive Kids*.

As discussed in Chapter One, Schechner (2002) provides ideas on a critical foundation for my explorations around Black South African traditional dance, culture and spirituality. Schechner's ideas are further offset through an engagement with the call by Paris (in DeFrantz & Gonzalez, 2014), for a complex engagement with the multiple meanings of *spirit*. Particularly useful to this engagement is Paris's assertion that spirit is understood variously as an unseen power, such as God, a divinity, a generative life force, a soul force and a cultural ethos of a people, all of which have distinctive interpretations across different cultures (Paris in DeFrantz & Gonzalez, 2014:100). Black Performance Theory (2014) is a collection of essays edited by Thomas F. DeFrantz and Anita Gonzalez and establishes ideas around Black expressive culture as an area of academic inquiry and acknowledges the emergence and dynamism of Black performativity (Paris in DeFrantz & Gonzalez, 2014:100). While set very much in the context of the USA and the concerns of the African Diaspora, Black Performance Theory offers interesting ideas and negotiations of Black/Blackness, Diaspora, Black sensibilities, performance, and theory: what they entail, where they happen, how they happen, and their implications (Paris in DeFrantz & Gonzalez, 2014:100). A primary claim made by DeFrantz and Gonzalez is that Black sensibilities emerge in performance whether Black bodies are present or not, but underlying this point is that Black performance is always enabled by Black sensibilities, expressive practices, and people. While the collection spans a wide variety of performative practices, I focus my interest on two essays that explicitly deal with African dancing bodies and Black sensibilities within mainstream performance dance. The first essay written by Carl Paris, explores the question of imminent spiritual potential in the works of postmodern Black male choreographers (Paris in DeFrantz & Gonzalez, 2014:100). The second essay is by DeFrantz himself and, "explores slippage from Africanist performance histories to global hip-hop corporeality's" (DeFrantz & Gonzalez, 2014:100). Both essays, though differing in topic and critique, discuss the transformational nature of the African Black dancing body on, through and by the mainstream.

In his essay, *Reading 'Spirit' and the Dancing Body* in the choreography of Ronald K. Brown and Reggie Wilson, Paris engages a variety of concepts around Black dance, Black theology, and anthropological sources. He begins his argument by discussing the role of spirit and the

spirituality in the African Diaspora worldview and how it permeates all aspect of Black life. Combining the inherent spirituality of both Black life and modern dance, Paris then interprets the work of Brown and Wilson, demonstrating how they merge African cultural elements and modern dance to produce choreography that links the negotiation of identities within Africanist cosmological and cultural identity (Paris in DeFrantz & Gonzalez, 2014:100).

In the introduction, DeFrantz and Gonzalez provide their definitions of “Black”. DeFrantz describes it as the manifestation of Africanist aesthetic and action engaged to enlarge capacity, confirm presence, to dare, while Gonzalez describes it as a response to histories and a dialogic imagination that responds to imagination about black identities (DeFrantz & Gonzalez, 2014). In so doing, they engage with how this sense of self interacts with traditional culture and the histories that produced it, and at the same time, they use the spiritual element of the dance to transform the contemporary sense of self.

Mantsoe’s *Konkoriti*, Koena’s *Point of View* and my own work *Alive Kids* all express cultural feelings, access traditional dance, beliefs, history and cultural traditions that draw from what South African scholar Clare Craighead refers to as African Black dance (Craighead, 2006:19). Within the South African context, Maxwell Rani writes, “Black dance refers to dance originating from indigenous African Black populations” (Rani, 2018:311). “Black dance” as a term, has often been used pejoratively as a label in the field of American dance criticism and aesthetics (Craighead, 2006:19). I argue that the cultural politics around the Black African dancing body as represented in Mantsoe, Koena and my own works conveys spirit and meaning through community and cultural representation. Their work has been created as a form of self-expression, a way of retelling and reliving history, a ritual for worship and a form of performed celebration. Mantsoe, Koena and I have something in common; our works attempt to challenge identity constructions and African dancing bodies formed through the dominant narratives of Blackness. According to Paris, Black Dance choreographies are underscored by community and a unification aspect (Paris in DeFrantz & Gonzalez, 2014). These ideas of how black identities are placed within a specific culture are shared by Stuart Hall (1996,) who argues that identities are shaped by cultural practices and representations. These ideas around identity construction and representations echo my work with reference to Mantsoe and Koena and the confluence of both my own years of contemporary dance

training and cultural learning I have within Black South African traditional dance, culture and spirituality.

Koena and Mantsoe suggest ways in which contemporary dance choreography can be fused with African traditional rituals and spirituality. According to Maxwell Rani (2018), traditional Black dance is part of a form of communication that allows individuals or groups to express feelings and beliefs and to preserve history and cultural traditions (Rani, 2018). It is also a form of expression that is often passed down from generation to generation for religious, social or ceremonial purpose (Snipe, 1996:68).

To conclude, it is also important to mention that I treat both Mantsoe and Koena's works as "text" to be investigated and engaged with in this chapter. My dance work *Alive Kids* (discussed in the following chapter) and those of Mantsoe, Koena as discussed above, write stories on the African black bodies of dancers through the use of rituals and spirituality. In this negotiation of Black identities, there also lies a connectivity and a community. This chapter has argued that contemporary dance in its local context serves as one manifestation of a growing African contemporary aesthetic. The next chapter will interrogate my own dance work *Alive Kids* as a case study that offers an opportunity for self-reflection and how both Mantsoe and Koena directly (and indirectly) have influenced the creation and development of this dance work. I will offer an autoethnographic study (explained in Chapter Three) of my own choreographic process for *Alive Kids* that looks at the fusion of African rituals and contemporary dance.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Introduction

Chapter Three focuses on interrogating my own dance work *Alive Kids* as an opportunity for self-reflection and considers how both Mantsoe and Koena have directly (and indirectly) influenced the creation and development of my work. This chapter firstly offers an examination of the contribution of autoethnographic methodology to an analysis of my own choreographic process for *Alive Kids*. Autoethnography is “research that draws on personal accounts and experiences of the author, researcher for purpose of extending sociological understanding” (Sparkes, 2002:121). Secondly, it will provide a reflection of my own choreographic process and subsequently, having explored the fusion of African rituals in my contemporary dance making, it will provide details on how Koena and Manstoe both influenced the creation of this dance work.

This chapter offers some details around the emergence of autoethnography as a valuable and viable means of studying one’s own work – particularly useful in arts research that looks to arts production and art making. I use autoethnography (itself a varied field of study) to support and reveal how this methodology relates to my own work both as a dancer/choreographer, and also as a self-reflexive artist/scholar. I set up this methodology in order to frame the discussion and reflections in Chapter Four around my own rehearsal and growing choreographic process, especially as related to the creation and rehearsal process of *Alive Kids* – a dance performance work I created in 2016 and then re-stage and reworked in 2017 for the JOMBA! Contemporary Dance Festival at the KZN Arts Gallery.

### Autoethnography as methodology

Autoethnography is a methodology that focuses on using self, and understanding/recognising of self/culture as subject of study (Wade, 2015:194). It is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyse personal experience in order to understand cultural experience (Ellis & Bochner, 2011); “Understanding researcher as subject of study” (Jackson, 2008:299). Autoethnography helps in making this research unique; it invites the



reader to experience “what it must have felt like to live through what happened” (Ellis & Bochner, 1992:80 in Wade, 2015:201).

As a method, autoethnography combines characteristics of autobiography and ethnography. When writing an autobiography, an author retroactively and selectively writes about past experiences. Usually, the author does not live through these experiences solely to make them part of a published document; rather, these experiences are assembled using hindsight (Bruner, 1993; Denzin 1989; Freeman, 2004). Research as a subject of study is similar to an autobiography. Autobiography is an account of a person’s life written by that person. In it (autobiography) the writer recounts his/her personal history of birth, education, career and life. Autoethnography however does not necessary journey with the narrative construct of the subject’s life, rather it deals with narratives and events in the subject’s life that can be systematically analysed (Ellis & Bochner, 2011). ‘Systematically analysed’ means it can be referenced/compared to some other writing or event/study, and, in the case of this dissertation, I am looking at live performance. Understanding cultural experience perhaps is a reference to dialogue and debates that instigate and shape social change (Reinelt, 1998; Holman Jones, 2005). Further, cultural experience offers an understanding of the context of one person, and in this understanding creates connections between writer and reader (Holman Jones, 2005:764). What autoethnography aims to do is introduce introspective stories, link emotions; embodiment, spirituality, and action were one person can identify with the other (Jackson, 2011). Sherick Hughes (2012) adds that the autoethnographic researcher shares with cultural groups who are identified by researcher as same to self (Hughes et al., 2012). This means that if the researcher is a theatre director, then the cultural group she/he speaks to would be theatre individuals, people who have the same interests as the researcher.

Through the use of autoethnography, my aim is to connect with the performance artist, specifically dance performer/choreographers through what I have effected as a choreographer in writing dance pieces and developing performers in preparation for performance. Roxanne Doty argues that autoethnography makes it clear that writers (and in my case; dance makers) are part of their work, part of the story they tell, they are connected (Doty, 2010; Holman-Jones, 2005). My initial step on the autoethnographic journey is to reflect upon the process and production of Manstoe’s *KonKoriti* and Koena’s *Point of View* and my own work *Alive Kids*. This should reveal the various themes and choreographic trends that

emerge in my work. It delineates the tools I did not use deliberately in the process of creating the choreography. This process of writing and reflecting, should provide clear documentation around my tracing of perceptions, choices and artistic preferences and, as such, provides insight into the way I have approached choreography.

Peter McIlveen states that the core feature of autoethnography “entails the scientist or practitioner performing narrative analysis pertaining to himself or herself as intimately related to a particular phenomenon” (McIlveen, 2008:3). Thus, it is not just writing about oneself, it is about being critical about personal experiences in the development of the research being undertaken, or about experiences of the topic being investigated. Reed-Danahay assigns three main characteristics to autoethnography:

- (1) The role of the autoethnographer in the narrative: is the autoethnographer an insider or an outsider of the phenomenon being described?
- (2) Whose voice is being heard: who is speaking, the people under investigation or the researcher?
- (3) Cultural displacement: some realities are being described by people who have been displaced from their natural environment due to political or social issues. (Reed-Danahay, 1997:3–4).

In this specific research, autoethnography is utilised to identify and articulate my emerging choreographic signature and the manner in which I have fused African rituals and spirituality in contemporary dance. Through utilising various autoethnographic tools, I determine how I reinterpret source material and translate that into embodied narrative. A clear delineation of the autoethnographic research approach, is relevant to this research: in an autoethnography study the researcher is writing about someone else’s culture and cultural practices and how that group understands and constructs meaning in (and of) their lives. When researchers engage in autoethnographical research, they study a culture’s relational practice, common values and beliefs and shared experience for the purpose of helping insiders (cultural members) and outsiders (cultural stranger) better understand the culture (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2010). Rosemarie Anderson then states that embodied writing or embodied choreography lets the body speak (Anderson, 2001:88). This notion of the body speaking, through the choreographed text is what will then create this sympathetic resonance in the

observer. The speaking body is a pertinent metaphor for embodied narratives where information is generated from the body through dance theatre as the form of expression.

As I have unpacked above, autoethnography is a useful qualitative research method to analyse people's lives and practice, a tool that Carolyn Ellis and Arthur P. Bochner define as "an autobiographical genre of writing that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural" (Ellis & Bochner in Denzin & Lincoln, 2000:739). There are different uses of the term and it varies according to the relationship between the researcher's personal experience and the phenomenon under investigation (Foster, McAllister & O'Brien, 2006). Autoethnography can range from research about the personal experiences of a research process to parallel exploration of the researcher's and the participants' experiences and about the experience of the researcher while conducting a specific piece of research (Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Maso, 2001).

Autoethnography falls under the bigger umbrella of interpretive qualitative research methodology. A qualitative research approach involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world, which indicates that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). They list ten precepts that are foundational to the methodology:

- (1) The researcher is part of the data.
- (2) The text is composed by a particular somebody, someplace.
- (3) The writing process is part of the inquiry.
- (4) Research involves emotionality and subjectivity of both the researcher and participants.
- (5) The relationship between the researcher and research participants is democratic; the researcher's voice should not dominate the voices of participants.
- (6) Researchers should accept an ethical obligation to give something important back to the people and communities they study and write about.
- (7) What researchers write should be "for" participants as much as "about" them.
- (8) Researchers and participants should be accountable to each other.
- (9) Research should be about what could be (not just about what has been).
- (10) The reader should be conceived as co-participant, not as spectator, and given opportunities to think about the research story or findings (2000:56).

“As I conducted this study, my overarching goal as an autoethnographic researcher was to better understand human behavior and experience in my own life” (Creswell, 2013).

A critique of this type of research is usually levelled at the researcher. By using one’s self as the source of data, the researcher can be viewed as narcissistic, too introspective, and too individualised (Sparkes, 2000; Wall, 2006). A focus on a single subject, who is placed on a metaphorical pedestal, is believed to lack the formality needed for academic texts. Paul Atkinson made these comments when reviewing an autoethnography, “the narratives seem to float in a social vacuum. The voices echo in an otherwise empty world. There is an extraordinary absence of social context, social action, and social interaction” (Atkinson, 1997:339).

Haewon Chang cautioned the autoethnographer to avoid the temptation of being “swept away by the power of storytelling and neglect the important mission of the autoethnography—culture interpretation and analysis of autobiographical texts” (Chang, 2008:55). While story and narrative may be engaging to the reader, it is important to go beyond telling a story or creating a journal entry (Tomkins 1996). However, Margot Duncan noted that criticisms have been levelled at the “more experimental forms of autoethnography in which the boundaries of scholarship are merged with artistic expression” (Duncan, 2004:11). Autoethnographies with strategies to support trustworthiness may be unclear in artistic expressions.

I agree with these criticisms and held myself to a high standard as I conducted my autoethnography:

1. My research sought to describe and systematically analyse my personal experience to understand cultural experience (Ellis, 2004). By so doing, I avoided the impulse to indulge in lengthy personal narratives that lack purpose and focus to this particular study.
2. I approached my research as a “political, socially-just, and socially-conscious act” (Adams & Jones, 2011:112). I kept in mind the goal of autoethnography as a method to connect my lived experiences in *Alive Kids* (2016/17) to wider cultural, social, and political understandings.

By referring to autoethnography, the self becomes the centre of examination and the self is the main source of data (Duncan, 2004:42). This suggests that my own culture values and meaning becomes the centre of the investigation. Autoethnography is a “reflexive means by which the researcher/practitioner consciously embeds himself amidst theory and practice and by way of intimate autobiographic account explicates a phenomenon under investigation or intervention” (McIlveen, 2008:13). The emphasis therefore, is on the researcher’s self as the subject, autoethnography is a marginalised research approach (Wall, 2006:7).

Autoethnography highlights the current movement towards personalised qualitative research rather than quantitative research. Nicholas Holt describes autoethnography as “highly personalized accounts where authors draw on their own experience to extend understanding of a particular discipline or culture” (Holt, 2003). This method offers a system of uncovering personal experience for the purpose of developing sociological understanding (Wall, 2006:38). Autoethnographers view reality as neither fixed nor entirely external but is created by, and moves with the changing perceptions and beliefs of the viewer (Duncan 2004:4).

Arts is developed out of the artist’s lived experience and it is through embodiment that narratives that can be created. McIlveen states the “prominent feature of autoethnography as writing about oneself as a researcher-practitioner, not an autobiography, but rather a specific form of critical enquiry that is embedded in theory and practice” (McIlveen, 2008 in Haskins, 2015). This co-existence of theory and practice is important to allow for reflection generated through the creation of art.

Ellis, Adams and Bochner state that autoethnography is both process and product (Ellis, Adams & Bochner 2010). They acknowledge the various ways personal experience influences autoethnography as it acknowledges and accommodates subjectivity, emotionality, and the researcher’s influence on research, rather than hiding from these matters or assuming they do not exist. Anderson maintains that in autoethnography the researcher is a complete member in the social world under investigation (Anderson, 2006:373-395). “Autoethnography, expands and opens up a wider lens on the world, eschewing rigid definitions of what we study, how we study it, and what we say about our topic” (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2010: 273-290).

As argued above, while autoethnography is largely a personal and introspective inquiry, it becomes the means through which I, as researcher and as artist carry more than a singular

voice. Over the past 15 years, I have choreographed several dance works as a way of articulating myself within the context of a larger South African (Arts) community. I have created dance work that re/produces cultural practice, spirituality, and which creates images and dances which heavily influence the performative and physical dance vocabulary I have developed through this research. Autoethnographical research becomes a method within this study that offers a “process in both research and performance of valuing, reclaiming, and foregrounding indigenous voices and epistemologies” (Swadener & Mutua, 2008:31). It has afforded me a growing methodology to collectively narrate, create, and perform work that speaks in my multiple tongues and style.

## **Reflection on my own choreographic process for *Alive Kids***

### *Choreographic Process*

In *Alive Kids* my aim was to be really physical with the dance work, to work with a lot of bodily contact and lifts thus examining the idea that men cannot touch each other in a spirit of gentleness, nurturing and care. I aimed to generate movement using touch, jumps, contact and lifts. I was interested to explore why black men are so afraid of (gentle) physical touch between each other, when in essence men have so much physical contact with each other.

Dealing with the concept of hegemonic Masculinities in *Alive Kids* was a reference to the power structure within a male-controlled society, or in other words, a society dominated by men (Connell, 2005; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Male dancers compete to be at the top of this societal masculinity hierarchy. It is believed that those at the top of the hierarchy are seen as the strongest and have the most resources within society. Men at the top of this hierarchy often hold positions of power and are thus more secure financially and socially (Connell, 2005).

Masculinities are constructed through gendered social politics (Connell, 2005:30), which insist that because our sexes are not the same, we are inevitably differently constructed socially; that because of our biology we should act and behave differently. According to Malan van der Walt’s dissertation, the sex-role paradigm theory says “men and women behave, feel and think the way as a function of their sex, and these perceived differences are determined at birth and fixed throughout life” (Van der Walt, 2007:3). In addition, Linda Brannon writes that

repairing cars being a physical and heavy lifting job it is predominately associated with men while repairing clothes, working with light fabric is associated with women (Brannon, 2004:161). So, for example, repairing a car has been socially constructed to be the domain of men while sewing is construed as feminine.

Melissa Leach argues that "unlike the biological state of maleness, masculinity is a gender identity constructed socially, historically and politically. It is the cultural interpretation of maleness, learnt through participation in society and its institutions" (Leach, 1994:36). The definition of masculinity is closely linked to and cannot be understood apart from the concept of gender. According to Connell, "'Masculinity' is simultaneously a place in gender relations, the practice through which men and women engage that place in gender, and the effects of these practices in bodily experience, personality and culture" (1995:71). In this specific study this account of gender as proposed by Connell will be employed: "Gender is a way in which social practice is ordered. In gender processes, the everyday conduct of life is organised in relation to a reproductive arena, defined by the bodily structures and processes of human reproduction" (Connell, 1995:71). Connell proposed that contemporary society is based on gender relations which generally accord social, political and economic dominance to men above women and affirm the pre-eminence of values associated with what Connell describes as "hegemonic' masculinity" (Connell, 1995:64). Masculinity as a social construction thus reflects and reinforces gender systems in which men are traditionally dominant and women in positions of submission. In the context of this study, the cultural values associated with hegemonic masculinity in particular, include the traits Waddington has recognised as part of the "cult of masculinity" (1999:298). These attributes typically pertain to those listed in Sandra Bem's (1974) sex role inventory and include aggressiveness, assertiveness and forcefulness.

As I continued with the process of research, I reflected upon the fact that Mantsoe's *Konkoriti* and Koena's *Point of View* negotiate and address hegemonically constructed male physicality and masculinities in the South African context. Both their works look at the "stereotypical generalisation of the emotionally constipated male ... Men who are unable to express their vulnerability, grace, humour and tenderness; men who are insecure about their sexuality; the work invites us to the precariousness of identities which often seem so energetically fixed" (Keefe, 2007:82). This then became the starting point for my own proposal for *Alive Kids*.



**Image 1: From left to right: Njabulo Zungu and Nqubeko Ngema in “*Alive Kids*”. Photograph by Val Adamson, 2017.**

In this duet no props were used - instead, the bodies became the props. I worked with two different bodies and identities; bodies that were physically different, behaviours that were not the same and dissimilar social experiences. The dance work became a place where these two dancers would challenge each other in all aspects. Again Paxton and Newson’s ideas on dance theatre were effective in the development of this piece.

Van der Walt writes that, “men construct their masculinity through an ongoing, long-term project of managing the expression and exerting control over their emotions and management of their physical appearance” (Van der Walt, 2007:2). The constructed ideal of a man therefore, means that he must appear physically strong, he has muscle and is well built. According to Connell, “true” masculinity is always thought to precede from men’s bodies – a body that naturally/appears more aggressive than that of women (Connell, 2005:72). With a body that appears weak there is a lack of acceptance. In addition, Connell writes, men are specifically thought to be more masculine (and hence manly) physically if they are involved in sports; sport that requires strong bodies and involves strong physical performances.

According to Peter J Burke & Jan E Stets, “femininity/masculinity/one’s gender identity refers to the degree in which a person sees themselves as masculine or feminine given what it means to be a man or woman in society” (Burke & Stets, 1988:1). The fact that these characteristics are socially constructed does not mean they are fixed, they offer construction around gender



that can be challenged, and this is what I set out to do in creating with *Alive Kids*. Masculinity/femininity are thus socio-political constructs, and these gendered terms do not – of necessity – form the basis of individual self-identity. According to Linda Brannon’s (2004) male sex role identity there exist social and political characteristics that are significant for men to identify, understand and conform to in order for their hegemonic masculinity to be intact. The characteristics range from physical to emotional and behavioural as articulated by Connell (2005) are similar to those interrogated in *Alive Kids*.



**Image 2: Standing – Njabulo Zungu and lifted – Nqubeko Ngema in “*Alive Kids*”: Photography by Val Adamson 2017**

We constantly worked with lifts that would combine both risk and off-centre positions; lifts over the shoulder, lifts over the back and carrying lifts. Each of the lifts combined characteristics classified as masculine and feminine which involved strength and light touch, bridging the gap between the two constructs.

Connell’s model, is considered particularly useful for an analysis of masculinity within *Alive Kids*. However, it is important to recognise at the start that masculinity cannot be understood as an isolated construct but has to be considered in relation to other aspects of social identity. Here the concept of intersectionality is useful. Kathy Davis explains how the term, “provides a useful visual imagery of how identity is constructed at the crossroads or intersection of different aspects of identity and how this can be applied in different contexts and in specific social situations or locations” (Davis, 2008:75). She defines intersectionality as the interaction

between gender, race, and other categories of differences in individual lives, social practices, institutional arrangements, and cultural ideologies and the outcomes of these interactions in terms of power (Davis, 2008:75).

For example, in my *Zulu* culture we even have a phrase that states *Qina njenge Ndoda* easily translating as “Be strong like a man”. According to Brannon, the more closely a man conforms to a combination of all these characteristics be they physical, behavioural and emotional, “the closer he is to being a real man” (Brannon, 2004:163).

As much as the dancers Nqubeko Ngema and Njabulo Zungu are *Zulus*, men’s bodies are not determined only by biology, but are also defined and disciplined through the gender order of society (Connell, 2000:12). There is no masculine identity prior to social interaction. I thus propose and argue that masculine identities are learnt through a typified social exchange that has already been set out by society. Male gender roles are shaped by the context in which they are formed, and through interactions with power systems and other individuals that occur within these contexts. Within these contexts, in South Africa specifically, there are hierarchies that form, which govern the gender roles that are fashioned. Butler supports this notion by acknowledging that “the sexual hierarchy, along with cultural context, produces gender” (Butler, 1999:12–20). Gendered identities, like the identities that are constructed in a specific context, are located in the cultural practices of that context. This new awareness piqued my interest in dance and choreography, which became an integral part of my process for *Alive Kids*.

### *Dancer’s roles in Alive Kids*

*Alive Kids* itself is a performance and the performers in it resemble everyday life (Mangan, 2002). Theatrical performance, according to Michael Mangan (2002) is no different to ‘real life’, in terms of the playing of a role and the putting on of a character for a specific context and reason. The role that is created for theatre, however, is greatly mediated and structured (Mangan, 2002). *Alive Kids* incorporates constructed male identities that are repeated and re-enacted. These constructions are based on representations from society.

Nqubeko Ngema and Njabulo Zungu were selected without an audition and they are both graduates of the Durban University of Technology's Drama Department. My choreography requires dancers who can express physical intelligence. By the term physical intelligence I refer to what Juanita Finestone, in an interview with Gary Gordon, articulates as an insistence on an embodied presence (Finestone, 2010:31). This embodied presence in Nqubeko and Njabulo is visible, to me, through the performer's relationship to space, time, weight and flow. This embodied presence was crucial to this specific choreographic process as my main aim was to generate an embodied narrative through a physical theatre approach.



**Image 3: Njabulo coming out from the dustbin. Image illustrates Njabulo's solo in *"Alive Kids"*. Photography by Val Adamson, 2017.**

In the above pictured solo, I asked Njabulo Zungu<sup>2</sup> to bring his own life experience of abandonment and discover how it affects his body. He had experienced a sense of desertion in various forms in his own life and drew on those experiences when responding to tasks and generating personal movement material. I wanted him to have a sense of connection with my personal narrative of abandonment so that he was able to "perform emotionally motivated movement material generated from inner sensing" (Victoria, 2012:170). This idea of connection between me and dancers was vital in this process as I wanted us to find a connection as a type of creative "sympathetic resonance" (Anderson, 2001:84).

When Njabulo emerged from the dust bin, I wanted the embodied narrative of half nakedness to be communicated through a form of this "sympathetic resonance" (Anderson, 2001:84).

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<sup>2</sup> Personal Communication, 22 October 2016, Durban

This was important in this specific process as I felt a deep sense of connection to, and empathy for Njabulo (and in fact both dancers). I encouraged both my dancers to create a movement language that would invite the observer's sense to come alive to the images they created. We looked closely at how everyday pedestrian movement could be transformed into movement material.

This documenting of my emerging choreographic style/methodology that uses improvisation, personal narratives and everyday gestures is an important part of my choreographic journey and makes me question what I am doing instinctively when I am choreographing. This enabled me to access the cognitive process behind my creative decisions in order to gain insight into my own choreographic preferences so that I can apply these cognitive processes in order to expand on my creative decisions.

### *Costumes and Props*

The costume (Jackets) and props (White powder) that I used in *Alive Kids* need to be integral to the movement language and the dancer's bodies so that they become an extension of the dancer's emotion/physical and cognitive somatic expression.



**Image 4: Nqubeko Ngema's solo utilising white ancestral clay powder in "*Alive Kids*". Photography by Val Adamson, 2017.**

With regards to the image above, the creation of the environment with flying powder allows for interesting movement possibilities to merge as the dancers negotiate/interact with this

white clay powder. This adds to the visual dimension of the choreography as the embodied narrative is felt and experienced in relation to the objects. Sandra Blakeslee and Matthew Blakeslee reiterate this and state that any object in contact with your body becomes mapped within your brain and part of your personal space (Blakeslee & Blakeslee, 2008:4). In this piece costume and props become an object for the body to dialogue with through improvisation “a connection is formed between the body and props” (Tuffnell & Crickmary, 2004:121). This constant dialogue between the props, costume and dancers, creates the landscape and mood for the dance work to unfold. A sense of contrast emerges as various choreographic devices were used from the same movement ‘motif’. It is through this process of intertwining/reinvestigating and combination that multiple layers of the embodied narratives are constructed.

## CHAPTER FOUR

This chapter offers a detailed account of the origin, process, creation and development of *Alive Kids* for stage performance. I claim Newson's (1995) ideas that: "it is crucial for my dance work to carry a message or embody narrative meaning rather than it is beautiful movements (visuals) on stage" (Newson as quoted by Tushingham, 1995). This chapter is structured in the following manner: firstly I will define and offer a brief narrative around *Alive Kids*. This will intersect with how the work initially evolved Secondly, I will offer a detailed discussion of the choreographic process as it developed, initially in 2016 and then re-worked in 2017 for the JOMBA! Contemporary Dance Experience at the KZNSA Gallery. This choreographic process includes the following phases: the conception of the piece, the gathering of movement material, and the arranging of movements by teaching the dancers. I will explain how my vision was executed through the dancer's bodies and through the resultant movement language. Both dancers were carefully selected to work with me based on a long working relationship together and a resultant sense of "knowing" we have with each other. Thirdly, I will move on to offer a detailed analysis (and picking up from Chapter Three) on how Koena and Mantsoe's own working process have influenced my own rehearsal style and choreographic processes, especially as they relate to the creation of this work as an embodied way of navigating (my) South African stories through dance.

This chapter links to Chapter Three, in continuing to negotiate the questioning and understanding around gender, black bodies and masculinity in the South African context and particularly in my own dance making. I use the final part of this chapter to challenge and question these socially constructed roles black men have been expected to play in South Africa and the cognate physical actions they have been using to express themselves in dance theatre. This will assist with my own autoethnographic performance research and analysis which continues the parallel linking and analysis of Mantsoe's and Koena's dance making process. Through connecting to them, I interrogate myself and my personal identity as a black male South African choreographer placing black male bodies on stage to negotiate my own linked, present, and growing dance making practice.

## How the idea of *Alive Kids* came about as a choreography

*Alive Kids*, is a choreographed virtuoso dance duet that offers the image of two street children finding grace. This work is about personal transformation. I was driven by trying to harness emotional expression and re-thinking/interrogating the contemporary constructions of black masculinity. I created this work through shared stories of, and around images of poverty. In 2016, I began this work as part of the independent production-Master's course work exam programme, performed in the Square Spare Theatre at the University of KwaZulu- Natal (November 2016). I approached two dancers (Nqubeko Ngema and Njabulo Zungu) to work with me as I have been part of training and mentoring them both and felt they were ready for this challenge. I had already worked with them in other student- based projects and annual dance dramas at the Durban University of Technology (DUT) where I am currently working as a dance lecturer. Both Ngema and Zungu are graduates of this institution.

Studying towards my MA while simultaneously working full-time, afforded me a limited amount of time to work on this craft for the final performance, hence the two dancers were chosen without an audition process as I knew I could trust them as dancers and performers. In my first rehearsal in the dance studio at DUT, we spoke a lot about how Nqubeko and Njabulo could access funding as both these young dancers were accepted to spend a year at the Limon Dance School in New York although the invitation did not come with financial support towards air- tickets to get to the USA. During this fundraising time and setting out on this rehearsal process, the title came to mind as both Nqubeko and Njabulo referred to themselves as street children<sup>3</sup>. In one of the early rehearsals we spoke about keeping their/our names 'alive' since this was one of those really tough times as funding doors were shutting in their faces. This word ('Alive') was used as a gesture – a choreographic impulse- to bring back hope and keep their/our spirits alive no matter the struggles faced in this, and other life situations. As it evolved, doing this work with me kept them 'alive' throughout this process. With the title secured, the choreographic journey began. Their trip to New York in 2016 was postponed to the following year due to lack of funding, to allow time for Nqubeko and Njabulo to raise funds. *Alive Kids* was created with some influence from this experience. It is sad to

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<sup>3</sup> Personal Communication, 22 October 2016, Durban

mention that the issue of funding for both dancers to travel to New York reoccurred and, to date they have not been able to go.

### *The development*

Securing the title and the ideas of two young men thinking about themselves as street kids, I began to explore, in our rehearsal process ideas of embodiment, African spirituality, identity and black masculinities. These ideas (already discussed in depth in Chapter Two and Three) included me setting up ways of looking at the opposition of power structures created through cultural conditioning and the impact that these structures have on my own (and the dancers) identity. By pairing my choreographic process with these 'themes' or impulse, I developed a working concept for *Alive Kids* which involved relating these elements to my own past experience as a dancer. In the first encounter with the dancers I set them a task of writing - from their body's perspective - what it felt like to be 'other' or how it felt like to have something they believed was fundamentally 'wrong' with who they were. Each performer drew from their personal experience of 'otherness'. From the dancer's written response, each one created their own movement/phrases. Nqubeko's phrases were more gentle, light and floating while Njabulo's phrases were more direct, expansive and weighted. From the differing qualities that merged I generated a theme of darkness.

During this process of accessing and developing a dance for the work, the music was also being selected. This particular procedure presented a major challenge and took a great deal of time. The relationship between dance and music is important. While movement is the source of dance, music is the companion that helps achieve a work's conceptual intent. In order to convey my specific concepts, I had to be especially critical of any piece of music that did not illustrate my embodied research. In particular, I avoided music that was too lyrical in nature in order not to destroy my original concept which embraced conflict. The music needed to be instrumental to complement an expressive vocabulary of choreographed movement. The sound-score was a vital part of the 'felt' experience as it contributed to how the emerging physical dance language generated meaning. I looked for music that triggered an emotional response in me, some kind of somatic inner experience. I required music that could link all the sections and create transitions from one section into the next with a sense of relentlessness. I also wanted a piece of music to start and continue till the end without pause.



## **The creation, the process and the final performance**

### *The creation methodology*

My creative commitment was, and continues to be, to design, create and choreograph dance pieces that investigate the emotional components of interpersonal relationships amongst black South African men, exploring the dynamics within ancestral spirits and daily interactions. My background as both a dancer/choreographer and academic includes working with these themes and ideas as I use my art practice to negotiate my own sense of self. These experiences, as with all of my life experiences, have influenced and shaped my artistic intention in choreography.

In the creation process I wanted to create a movement phrase that could be the initial movement stimulus and from this phrase, through costumes/props and choreographic manipulation, other material could be generated. I personally generated a movement phrase drawn from my feelings of struggle and the sense of being a refugee as my own body tried to articulate what it felt. There was a clear sense of conflict within myself, an internal battle that I honestly faced every day. I had a kind of ancestral vision that offered an image of abandoned children sitting in the sky, a deep voice appeared from the sky as a form of announcement that these children died out their mother's womb. Inner conflict, and trying desperately to find a meaning from this image, was my starting place. I could not overtly verbalise my feelings clearly around such a sensitive issue so I allowed my body to begin to interpret and speak to the image. I moved with inner sensing listening to my body, attempting to express through movement my deepest feelings. Gestures of reaching up to the sky, acrobatic jumps and lifts were found during this improvisational phase. This 'vision' served as a muse to me as a choreographer to help ignite the creative process.



**Image 5: From left to Right: Njabulo Zungu and Nqubeko Ngema in “*Alive Kids*”. Photography by Val Adamson, 2017**

Each step in the process of creation was also designed to train, develop and strengthen self-identity within the two dancers with the intention of honing their diverse abilities to work together psychologically, physically and creatively. In the creation process I utilise touch with the dancers as it functions as an effective mode of communication and allows a connection between my body and theirs. I found myself holding different parts of their bodies in order to help them initiate the movement from a certain part. By holding and shifting their bodies with gentle touch I was able to communicate with them the dynamics of movement I was investigating. David Kirsh speaks about the sounds choreographer’s make calling them ‘sonifications’ or vocalisations and how these help to communicate the shape, emphasis or dynamics of the phrase (Kirsh, 2009:190). I was constantly calling out the dynamics of the movement phrase I was working with by “haaaa, wozaaaa, gca-gce-gce gca”. This allowed me to communicate through sonifications and created the dynamic of the phrase (Haskins, 2015). Within the creation process these sonifications became a language that the performers began to understand and embody through their bodies.

## **How Moeketsi Koena and Vincent Mantsoe have influenced my own rehearsal style and choreographic processes.**

As a performer and choreographer I have been working with dancers for about 20 years. Throughout these years I have learnt various styles, techniques and importantly, methods of training and developing my body as well as the performer's body. In these various dance training and making methodologies, I have constantly been drawn (as detailed in Chapter Three) to two dance choreographers, Mantsoe and Koena. I have found a resonance with these two choreographers despite their vastly different geopolitical contexts and histories, and part of this dissertation is an attempt to unpack this personal 'resonance' and look more deeply into what these dance choreographers have offered to my growing understanding of dance making and dance training in my own context of South Africa. I believe they have offered me ways of developing an understanding of my own and the dancer/performer's physicality, psychology and the imaginative assets I believe are needed in any performer and especially in the politically charged 21<sup>st</sup> century in art and dance making in South Africa.

In creating *Alive Kids* I was drawn to their bodies, methodologies, influences and ideas around how they fuse African rituals and spirituality in their works especially the role of the *sangoma*-like movements/body language. Firstly, I am fascinated by how Mantsoe and Koena use the body as subject, where the body is the focus of experience and use the experiences that are located within their bodies as source material when creating a choreographic work. It is this sense of being present in each moment as they exemplify that has inspired and moved me.

This sensing and feeling characteristic of their African and yet contemporary dance work is reflected, I hope, in my own work. I am also drawn to the way their bodies are full of stories that speak to the situation in which it finds itself. For example, Mantsoe's body in *KonKoriti*, unites with his ancestors by inviting them on stage in a form of calling. These ancestral stories that are utilised in his choreography generate movement language that allows his senses to be activated 'impulse by impulse', sensation by sensation through a body 'knowing' (Anderson, 2001:89). Vida Midgelow states that the body is central to our participation and perception in and of the world around us. It is in and through the body that our experiences are shaped and given voice and vice versa (Midgelow, 2013:11). This acknowledges the claim

‘bodies tell stories that people cannot or will not tell, either because they are unable, forbidden, or choose not to tell’ (Kriegar, 2005:350).

It took me a while to achieve this ‘sensing and feeling’ so easily seen in Mantsoe and Koena’s work when I was working with Ngema and Zungu. I had to ask both dancers to use their body to think with. This was difficult to achieve and I set a choreographic task or what Kirsh refers to as a “choreographic problem” (2009:191), for each dancer. These choreographic problems provided the dancers with something to respond to and work off. Kirsh states that:

if a movement originated as a solution to a problem the dancers are likely to imbue it with greater feeling affect or quality- what some call greater intentionality; they will find the phrase easier to remember; and they will have intellectual ‘anchors’ that can serve as reference points in the phrase later (Kirsh, 2009:192).

Both dancers created, through our improvisational beginnings, their own movement language and began generating their kinetic response that carved into space, allowing their bodies to speak.

As a choreographer I believe we evolve by taking what we have learnt, assessing what has been successful, and then by combining these notions with our own ideas and concepts, we create something new. With regards to Koena and Mantsoe, I found that employing the totality of either of their methodologies was not entirely possible for me, but that certain elements of their methodologies and dance technique resonated with me and I could engage with these elements and work with them in my own choreography.

While Mark Franko has connected “dance technique and instruction to the perpetuation of larger cultural and historical ideologies” (2006:1-18) few methods yet have attempted a critical study of how performative impact is connected to a dancer’s own embodied experience (Davidson, 2016). Julia Davidson offers an understanding of embodied experience as central to the performative impact of dance, my research examines the dancing body’s role in constructing its own performativity (Davidson, 2016).

### **Working with Nqubeko Ngema and Njabulo Zungu in the dance studio at DUT**

During the early creation stage, several choreographic methods were used as a form of data collection including, dance improvisation, contact work, and lifts. The purpose of exploring creative-based avenues within the technique class was not to make choreography within the

technique class, but to offer a tool for “tuning in” to what the body’s voice may wish to express; more of an opportunity to create in the moment of doing. These various creative methods enabled the occasional repetition of certain unique phrases, which established a reoccurring theme within the work. During one of the first rehearsals, I prompted the dancers to generate several phrases of movement based around two separate and yet complex ideas/themes: poverty and abortion/termination of pregnancy. I utilised the breaking of an egg to create a sense of them being forcefully separated from each other- and the idea of ‘the mother’. The object of the egg and white clay powder generated the movement language for the separation scene as it provided the impetus for movement phrase. The use of these particular themes and the prompting of improvisational techniques allowed the dancers to invest their own time, energy and personal narrative into the creation of the piece. By allowing the dancers to have a hand in creating and workshopping the work, I felt as though I was including not only my voice but theirs as well and thus the work started to evolve outside myself to include the narratives of the two dancers.

I was hesitant to prompt the dancers with too many conceptual ideas at the beginning fearing that it might construct an obvious narrative and result in premature character development. During this early stage, my goal was to create a surplus of movement/dance phrases, which could be pulled from, and used throughout the entire body of work; a body of material if you will. While most of the phrases that the dancers and I created were discarded later on in the process, several unique gestures were taken from these early improvisation strategies. The most prominent included an individual “touching”, playing with white powder and a repetitive “sharp” gesture to create an atmosphere for the white powder to spread out to the space from their jackets. I found moments from the sensory touch where they supported each other creating a sense of security, where their bodies were present in each moment of the tactile visceral experience. These three gestures were integral to establishing a conceptual structure to the piece (arms, touching and legs) and were used throughout the entire work. The repetitive use of these actions, as well as several others that were created through the early use of improvisation, allowed for a connective pairing between individual sections. The individualised movement led to the creation of a duet for two male dancers.

## The Process

My own Zionist spirituality has always been implicitly part of my choreographic process. Zionists have a unique tradition which is rooted in African traditional religion. Zionists according to Sibusiso Pewa use singing and dancing with aggressive gestures as a symbol of unity and solidarity to fight the evil (Pewa, 1997). Peter Larlham supports this view when he looks at the functions of dance in the African society of which the Zionists are part. He says that dance and song play a major role when group solidarity and harmony are most necessary (Larlham, 1985). From the Zionists point of view, if a song is not danced to, it creates a feeling of emptiness which does not lead to the envisaged climax (Pewa, 1997). The climax is the point where some worshippers begin to speak in tongues employing aggressive/violent movement which is the attainment of the Holy Spirit called *Umoya*.



**Image 6: Njabulo Zungu's solo during the arrival of spirits in *"Alive Kids"*. Photography by Val Adamson, 2017**

The image above shows Njabulo Zungu connecting with his ancestors on stage and sprinkling white clay power to fight evil spirits. White clay powder in this section is considered as a way of communicating with the ancestors, and also the ancestor's way of communicating with the

people who are watching or taking part in that ritual. In my church, the arrival of the spirits means that the one who is possessed can start with the healing ritual. A prophet will sprinkle holy waters around the room to chase away evil spirits. It is at this point where an outsider (Non-Zionist), may perceive Zionist worship as chaotic. In actual fact, the Zionists are members of a religious movement that practises both Christian and traditional African religions. African religion involves traditional ancestral beliefs, customs and ritualism. Contrary to their contemporary Christian mission churches, the fundamental faith of the Zionists is exercised through water by immersion, spiritual trance, and attainment of the Holy Spirit (*Umoya*), prophecy, divine healing and speaking in tongues (Pewa, 1997).

As a choreographer, my inspirations tend to emanate from this background. In *Alive Kids* I wished to make this connection more overt. In all of my experience as a choreographer and as a dance lecturer at DUT, my choreographic process in *Alive Kids* was guided by the belief that meaning is primarily personal, and that despite commonalities, each of us has a point of view uniquely our own. With its plurality of techniques and philosophies, African traditional rituals and spirituality lends itself especially well to this belief systems. African spirituality tends to be an adaptive system of belief, shaped, as is qualitative inquiry, by the participants and the audience. When starting a new choreography, often I do not have a clear idea. As mentioned earlier, I spend hours alone in the studio considering the concept, working out African traditional movements and listening to different music including spiritual Zionist music.





**Image 7: Njabulo Zungu and Nqubeko Ngema in “*Alive Kids*”. Photograph by Val Adamson, 2017**

With regards to image above, in this section Nqubeko Ngema (Lifted on Zungu’s Shoulder) first initiated a need for undergoing trance. He was possessed, his face, eyes, feet, nose, fingertips, hair, chest and his back displayed incredible power. Seeing my movement influenced by this cultural/spiritual landscape, the subsequent unfolding of masculinities and how these sit on the dancer’s bodies helps to flesh out the ideas and shape the phrases into coherent dance structures. For me, choreography is like a dialogue, a process of bringing ideas to the dancers who can make them visible. The involvement of the dancers then gives me new ideas that I try to integrate into the concept, and so the work progresses. African traditional rituals and spirituality in contemporary dance provides its own coded (and open) meanings that create a medium in which cultures can exist. I originally assumed that, for both Ngema and Zungu, this way of working (both Somatic and deeply personal) was part of their own unconsciousness during creation but the performance proved that it is, in fact, a dancerly way of being and sensing that enables performative agency within the choreographic process. The way that dancers kinaesthetically attend to their own bodies whilst learning choreography denotes a



constant process in which the dancing body can be seen as the direct result of an embodied narrative.

## The Final Staging

This final staging of the creative process proved to be the most challenging. At this point, the piece was roughly put together and still missing an ending. I found myself losing energy and inspiration as I kept lacking progress towards completing the work. Since I was struggling, I needed the external eye of my supervisor Dr Lliane Loots, to provide me with guidance around the concept and the movement vocabulary of the piece. She provided me with useful responses and thoughtful questions, which aided in the refinement and the eventual completion of the work. Her feedback was important in this specific process as I felt the work lacked, what felt like to me, empathy. During this stage, I also met with the dancers to discuss costume design, which provided the final technical aspects to the piece. These theatrical elements were equally as integral to development of *Alive Kids* as the movement, music, and general concept. By working with Loots (and the feedback and critical outside eye offered essential to all choreographic processes), I was able to extend my concept and ideas to establish a final staged presentation of the work. Similar to the final selection of music for the piece, I used the soundtrack juxtaposed with the sound of a violin and piano (Discussed in Chapter Three).



Image 8: Nqubeko Ngema's solo in "*Alive Kids*". Photograph by Val Adamson 2017

With regards to the above image, in this middle section we see Nqubeko Ngema's metaphoric soul divorces his body his spirit body connects with Njabulo's (background) spirit in space. I wanted to keep away from distracting from the choreography through too obvious costume and lighting choices. Specifically, I wanted both these technical aspects to be minimalist in nature to avoid producing unintended meanings from the movement or concepts already present in the work. I wanted both bodies and the body of work to speak. To create the look of a uniform and contemporary feel, I wanted each individual dancer to have a costume that also looked old and torn apart. The use of white clay powder in their jackets complemented the costumes of the two dancers in the work. The selection of final props and costume pieces included, half pants (shorts), black, and grey jackets with slight dark colour, white powder, round washing dish, eggs and a dustbin. These props and costumes were sourced from DUT Drama Department's costume wardrobe and chosen specifically for this work.

The choreography that was finally generated during rehearsals allowed for the piece to be divided into five distinct sections: an opening group section, a solo, a duet, and two other duet sections. These five sections helped to establish a narrative structure that could be easily followed by the audience. As the piece had an established narrative and most of the choreography was generated through improvisational techniques, technique classes and resultant (inter changeable) phrases, and contact work, the relationships between the dancers and their interaction with the selected music became a key component for conveying the conceptual elements of each of these sections.

The first section was performed in silence and featured Ngema who was placed downstage. In this section, he breaks an egg in the basin as a cue for the music to start. The second section was Zungu's solo emerging half naked from the dustbin/rubbish bin. His bin was located upstage opposite-side. The third section was the duet that explored masculinities, embodiment, and touching. The movement for this section was originally set to be entirely in unison, however, the different directions the dancers faced and the absence of musical cues or counts caused most of the choreography to be executed at a different timing by each dancer. This had an interesting effect in the final performance of the work. Instead of the movement remaining in unison, both dancers started the phrase together and almost immediately became out of sync with each other. This created a sense of similarity and yet a simultaneous separation between the dancers, despite the specific movement being executed

in a similar way. While this may have not been the original intent of the choreography, as rehearsals progressed it helped to emphasise the notion of individual differences within an established duet dynamic and, in turn, helped to convey the concept of a collective society becoming worn out or breaking down under the weight of constant repetition.



**Image 9: From left to right: Nqubeko Ngema and Njabulo Zungu in “*Alive Kids*”. Photograph by Val Adamson 2017**

The last two sections offered Nqubeko’s solo followed by a final duet when Nqubeko breaks an egg at the end. The breaking of an egg represents the African people’s belief that ancestors can cure sickness and can solve any problem. An egg on Njabulo’s face represents a healing method for those who are sick. For the stage lighting I worked with Clare Craighead a day before the technical rehearsal to talk through my concept. She advised on using open white and most general lighting as this would complement the white power on dark jackets as this work was to be performed outside at the KZNSA Gallery space. Clare had lit the first version of this work in the Square Space Theatre in 2016. The lighting plot was, in the end, simple and understated. Long transitions were placed between cues to avoid distracting the audience from the movement and concepts being presented on stage. The performance in the Square Space Theatre was an indoor thrust stage surrounded by audience on three sides. The Fourth side serves as the background/cylorama. Dancers were staged in three angles moving in all

ways, vertically, horizontally, forward and backward. It is often the most workable option for long, narrow spaces like this theatre. The Audience was placed on raised platforms to either side of the stage space. The challenge once faces when staging a dance piece in this small theatre is the floor of the stage at the same level as the first audience row. The dancers had a challenge to do full turns, high jumps and lifts as the roof was quite low. Whereas the KZN Gallery performance was an outdoor space (also used in a thrust formation) with no roof and sometimes its setup involves the audience moving from place to place following the dancers and performance. This outdoor stage may make use of the natural light as it changes during the day, particularly sunset. There was no real wing space to the sides, although there may be temporal entrances located there. Usually this space allows for the temporary setup of seating in a number of different configurations to enable a wide variety of productions to be presented. In this kind of setup, you have to be willing to improvise because you never know how people are going to react, while in a theatre context like the Square Space Theatre, audiences generally understand the rules of engagement, how they are expected to behave in this space as audience members. When you take work outside you are entering into a different kind of social contract with the people engaging with the work. This kind of situation presents its own set of beauties and challenges. I was interested in allowing people to choose their own perspective when watching dance outside of the theatre compare to indoor performance. Sometimes I planned for distance and perspective, and other times close viewing was intended. I enjoy challenging the audience's memory or perceived "use" of a space by placing something unexpected in the pathway.

In both versions of the work there was a lot of interaction with the audience, lighting, special effects and most especially with the addition of performers' vocalisation. Outdoor/site responsive dance differs greatly from stage work. I found safety as a major concern, as dancers often find themselves working on concrete flooring- never really ideal. As a choreographer, I welcome the unexpected situations that arise as most people have few opportunities to see dance up close with natural sound buzzing from the street. I found that presenting *Alive Kids* at the KZN Gallery became a way to reach entirely new audiences.

Overall, I was extremely satisfied with the final result. Despite some of my early choreographic challenges, the completion of my preliminary research and the development of the concept generated the desired emotional effect for the final performance. Even though there are areas

of adjustment still needed for the choreography in order to add additional elements to the work, I believe most of these modifications are minor and their absence did not negatively impact the premiere. The dancers described their experience in similar terms. Zungu mentioned how much he loved being a part of the choreographic process, while Ngema described the piece as both “beautiful and powerful.” After the difficult process behind the research and creation of this work, these positive comments from the dancers were gratifying.

In conclusion, I would like to reiterate the statement I made at the start of this chapter. Through connecting to Vincent Mantsoe and Moeketsi Koena, I interrogated myself and my personal identity as a black male South African choreographer placing black male bodies on stage to negotiate my own linked, present, and growing dance making practice. As I write the full extent of how I created *Alive Kids* I feel there are elements that I am unable to explain or expand upon just because there are no words I can use to explain them. This is, of course, the difficulty of working with rituals and spirituality and finding written language to explain and expand on it. The way I work develops with every new work I create, with every new body I work with. How I worked developing *Alive Kids* will not be the same as how I will maybe develop my next and on-going work. What I can be sure about however is that, using ideas from Mantsoe and Koena in interrogating my own identity as a black male South African choreographer and creativity of the performers will be something that is constant.

## CONCLUSION

The dance narratives of contemporary South Africa are, and have been, a strong force when fused with African rituals and spirituality in contemporary South African choreography. Whether these narratives are overtly personal or merely stem from a personal exploration, it is apparent that many black South African choreographers, working in the contemporary style, are drawn to reflecting their traditional and cultural practice in their dance-making. While the exploration of questions relating to identity in a changing socio-political environment such as contemporary South Africa, can be seen as unavoidable and even, imperative, it is crucial that the exploration of these narratives and processes do not occur within a stagnant creative context. The political isolation of South Africa during the Apartheid era and the lack of substantial cross-national discourse that resulted within the local dance community, has perhaps slowed the extent of significant experimentation with regards to form. It is thus the task of contemporary South African choreographers currently making work, to combine these emerging questions of gender, identity, both personal and communal, with critical and innovative approaches to our dance making.

I look at myself and my personal identity as a black male choreographer placing black bodies on stage to negotiate my own linked, present, and growing dance making practice. I have, in this study, looked critically at my own praxis and the influences of and connections to, South African dance makers Vincent Mantsoe and Moeketsi Koena. The methods employed by both of these selected dancer/choreographers in the creation and development of dance/physical theatre assists me as a choreographer, and as performer to develop my own working methods and style.

As a choreographer I am constantly learning, I keep finding new performers to work with, all of whom bring a different perspective and different bodies to work with which makes the way I work shift and move. What I have mostly learnt, however, during my time as a choreographer, performer, and teacher, is that I have a lot of learning to still do. In many ways, writing this MA dissertation has been an act of deep reflection around what I have done and how I have done it, and what I could possibly do in the future-both the same but also differently.

In Chapter One I unpacked and interrogated cultural and spiritual practice in South Africa. I interrogated Black *AmaZulu* and *Sotho* traditions through the politics of the dancing body, theory and practice of intercultural fusion in South African contemporary dance as a contested space of making meaning. I used this chapter to challenge and question the confluence of (selected) *Zulu* and *Sotho* spiritual practices and contemporary dance making in South Africa. I looked at the theories of Richard Schechner (1988, 2002) to explore some 'origins' of theatre practice through ritual. Schechner's ideas are used to provide a critical foundation for my explorations around Black South African traditional dance, culture and spirituality. In Chapter Two I discussed the two chosen practitioners, Vincent Mantsoe (*KonKoriti*, 2016) and Moeketsi Koena (*Point of View* 2004) in order to investigate the use of African traditional ritual and spirituality in the aforementioned works. This chapter focuses on understanding and unpacking dance choreographic and dance making methodologies. I looked at both Mantsoe and Koena's methodologies, influences and ideas when it comes to developing dance work and performers. In this chapter I set out each of the above practitioner's methodological ways of working and importantly, how I was able to learn from them and use them in developing my own way of working. Chapter Three focused on interrogating my own dance work *Alive Kids* (2016/17) as an opportunity for self-reflection and how Mantsoe and Koena both directly and indirectly influence the creation and development of my own dance work. I embraced autoethnography as the methodology of self-reflection for the dissertation. I linked both Mantsoe and Koena's ideas back to my own autoethnographic journey and discussed how their methodologies echo the significance of self in the development of dancer/performer skills and abilities. The chapter looked at how autoethnography can be a useful method of research academically and in the performing arts. I looked specifically at examples of performed construction of black masculinities, as represented by two specific KwaZulu-Natal based performers, Nqubeko Ngema and Njabulo Zungu. This dissertation is thus an autoethnographic study in that it is framed within what Timothy Rice refers to as "subject centred research" (2017:139). I further looked critically at the content and meaning of *Alive Kids* - particularly ideas dealing with issues of masculinity and identity. The chapter looked at the social constructed ideas around gender, specifically masculinity. It examined socially constructed ideas around black men specifically in the South African context and the way in which the work *Alive Kids* interrogated these ideas.

Finally in Chapter Four, I offered a detailed account of the origin, process, creation and development of *Alive Kids* for stage performance. I focused on looking at self, i.e. myself and my working process. In this chapter, I considered my work *Alive Kids* from 2016 to its re-make in 2017 for the JOMBA! Contemporary Dance Experience at the KZNSA Gallery. I scrutinised how I used the methodologies of Mantsoe and Koenig in this work. As a choreographer, having analysed my work, I am more clearly aware of where I stand within my choreographic journey. I have a clearer understanding of how or why I make the choreographic choices that I do and where I might extend these choices in future work. This dissertation is, in many ways a type of choreographic manifesto and has enabled me to articulate my artistic preferences in my choreographic style. As a human being I am constantly shifting and this manifesto has enabled me to see where I am at the moment. In all my works, there is an overlay of visual imagery. The performers always function as co-creators using a thinking bodily practice. There are many ways in dance that we can use to express ourselves but I believe in order to be more accessible and perhaps reach a wider audience we need to learn how to combine and integrate varying techniques, styles and skills. It is this notion that I continue to attempt to pursue.



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