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Fremdes Erbe

Nelisiwe Xaba and German Dance Heritage

Eike Wittrock

My Historical Introduction

It's a bad joke. This photograph (fig. 1) was taken in the dressing room of Dance Factory Johannesburg, South Africa, before the first showing of Nelisiwe Xaba's *Fremde Tänze* (Strange or Foreign Dances) during the 2015 Dance Umbrella festival. Xaba is dressed for the first part of her performance, wearing a costume made out of blond wigs in the shape of a pseudo-Zulu garment. Any minute, she will start parading among the audience members in the foyer of the venue to the sound of the "triumphal march" from Giuseppe Verdi's colonial megahit, *Aida* (1871). Her face will be sticking out of the center of an oversized serving tray, surrounded by donuts decorated with small stereotypical "Chinese," "African," "Mexican," and "Turkish" heads. Xaba found this popular pastry variation during carnival season in a bakery in Freiburg im Breisgau, Germany, where this show premiered in 2014. In this backstage photo, Xaba tilts her head to the side, folds her hands shyly in front of her body, and looks coyly into the camera. Next to her, I am nearly a head taller. I'm ready for my short appearance, dressed in my costume as a German dance historian visiting South Africa: a white T-shirt stretching over my stress-fed belly, embracing "local" culture by wearing an item of an authentic female Zulu garment and—outside of the frame—Birkenstock sandals with socks, as an indicator of my Germanness. You can see me raising my head in a mock gesture of superiority and power.

After Xaba's round in the foyer, and before she appears onstage—this time as a shadow among touristic images of Freiburg projected on the tent that serves alternatively as the show's main prop, projection screen, and costume—I will welcome the audience and give a short "historical introduction" to the (real) dancer Sent M'ahesa. This lecture was added to the piece for this particular performance in Johannesburg (and since then has been performed in several locations—by me, Anna Wagner, and Susan Manning) for two reasons. On the one hand, it was designed to introduce part of the material that Xaba was confronted with when she was invited to create a work within the curatorial project Julius-Hans-Spiegel-Zentrum, one of 60 projects of the federal funding initiative Tanzfonds Erbe (Dance Heritage Fund) dedicated to the creation of choreographic works reconstructing, reacting to, or being inspired by German dance history. On the other hand, it was also intended to expose my position as one half of the white

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German curatorial team of Julius-Hans-Spiegel-Zentrum inviting artists from all over the world to work with German dance history.¹

I have a very ambivalent relationship to this photograph. I have kept it on my iPhone ever since, once in a while showing it to friends or colleagues with a mix of amusement and shame. It illustrates, and ironizes, power dynamics that were contested but also reinforced in this project. What is this strange pairing, this coupling of a Black South African dancer and a white German dance scholar/curator? What is this *fremde Erbe*, this strange and foreign heritage? The heritage of a stranger, or a heritage that becomes foreign to oneself? Is this improvised imitation of a colonial pose not just a bad—but a really inappropriate—joke, part of what Mlondolozzi Zondi calls “mimetic irony” that is too close to the original scene (Zondi 2020:23)?

How do we get out of this pose, and when? And, how can this picture be reintegrated into a project using German dance heritage, the source context for this pose? As Jacques Derrida once said: “One never inherits without coming to terms with some specter, and therefore with more than one specter. With the fault but also the injunction of *more than one*” ([1993] 1994:24). Let’s assume for a moment that this image is a kind of ghost photograph capturing some of the specters of German dance history that still haunt us today. In that case this photograph of Nelisiwe Xaba and me conjures the cultural appropriation as well as the cross-cultural encounter that was so crucial to the development of modern dance.

Dance Heritage

When you inherit something, you don’t just inherit the wealth but also the debts. This may sound Oedipal, but it’s also German inheritance law.² However, in the same law, there’s a provision that allows you to turn down the inheritance. But this refusal of debts is possible



Figure 1. Nelisiwe Xaba and Eike Wittrock in the dressing room before the Dance Umbrella production of *Fremde Tänze*. *The Dance Factory*, Newtown, Johannesburg, 2015. (Photo by Fred Koenig)

1. For another project that aims to rethink dance heritage in its geopolitical implications, see Rani Nair’s performance *Future Memory* (2012), a collaboration with dance scholar and dramaturge Kate Elswit on Kurt Jooss’s solo for Lilavati Häger, *Dixit Dominus* (1975) (Elswit 2014).

2. For a historization of the concept of heritage and its conflation of biological reproduction, cultural tradition, and familial transmission of wealth see Willer, Weigel, and Jussen (2013).

only for individuals. On the scale of the society, communal debts pass from one generation to another. Likewise, each generation recreates history for its own needs. Yet there are also negative assets of history, which one sometimes wishes to evade but which nevertheless keep coming back. The past—even long gone—is never static. It is not even really dead, since its figures constantly haunt the present. History is a (plausible) fiction continuously performed. Public institutions are the platforms on which these histories are staged. Dance history is no exception.

For a long time, the task of transmitting (German) dance history in writing and performance was delegated to critics, balletomanes, and ballet companies. Around 2005, contemporary dancers and choreographers became engaged in what has been called “the archival turn,” using especially the legacy of modern dance as source material for their own works. Martin Nachbar’s lecture-demonstration, *Urbeben Aufheben* (Create Revoke; 2008) became one of the most talked about and studied examples of this attempt to connect past and present (Willeit 2010; Bleeker 2012; Hardt 2007 and 2012; Franko 2017; Huschka 2017; Siegmund 2017). In this work, Nachbar reflects on the transmission of Dore Hoyer’s *Affectos Humanos* (Human Affects), a late work by one of the key proponents of German modern dance (often labeled *Ausdruckstanz*).³ Having studied the (incomplete) filmic record of Hoyer’s choreography, Nachbar sought the aid of one of Hoyer’s dancers, and heir, Waltraud Luley, to incorporate historic movement material. Fabian Barba’s *A Mary Wigman Dance Evening* (2009), another early work of this archival trend, also approaches the corporeal transmission of the modernist legacy yet from a non-German perspective (see Barba 2011; Stalpaert 2011).

In both Nachbar’s and Barba’s works, contemporary male artists attempted to embody a corporeality earlier performed by female artists with very different training. These seminal projects were received and analyzed mostly in formal and aesthetic terms focusing on the limits of historiographic sources such as film and photographs, and the potential of a body-to-body transmission. Both productions were regarded as a challenge to dance’s presumed ephemerality.⁴

Jens Richard Giersdorf raised concerns regarding these readings, pointing out that they obscure the work’s subversive potential (2013:97–110). I expand Giersdorf’s argument and propose that the nonpolitical readings of choreographic reconstructions are themselves part of a political project. They do not take into account the political dimension of heritage in terms of its normative, even nationalist implications. By focusing on the formal aspects of reconstruction and underplaying the political, these readings are modernist themselves. The “archival turn” in contemporary dance thus (implicitly) reinstated a narrative of German dance history that had been challenged in previous decades:⁵ the glorious birth of *Ausdruckstanz* during the 1910s and 1920s principally by Rudolf Laban and Mary Wigman, only to see its development abruptly

3. For the complex history of this term, see Franco (2007).

4. Simone Willeit (2010) conducts a close reading of the different movement qualities in Hoyer and Nachbar, to look at the historicity of the dancing bodies in regards to changing techniques. Maaïke A. Bleeker reads Nachbar’s piece as “embodied thinking-through of the ideas of others” (2012:13), whereas Yvonne Hardt (2012) looks at how Nachbar’s “re/construction” of the body itself becomes the site both of archiving and transmitting choreographic knowledge—similar to the argument that Christel Stalpaert (2011) develops in regards to Barba’s reconstruction of *A Mary Wigman Dance Evening*.

5. Notably, two exhibitions at the Berlin Academy of the Arts provide material for alternative genealogies: “...jeder Mensch ist ein Tänzer”: *Ausdruckstanz in Deutschland zwischen 1900 und 1945* (“...everyone’s a dancer”: *Ausdruckstanz in Germany from 1900 to 1945*) in 1993 as well as *Krokodil im Schwanensee: Tanz in Deutschland seit 1945* (Crocodies in a Swan Lake: Dance in Germany since 1945) in 2003 (see Müller and Stöckemann 1993; and Müller, Stabel, and Stöckemann 2003). International scholarship also provided material for complex readings of German dance history that challenged this simplified genealogy, yet the German dance world (as well as German academia [see Manning 2017]) seemed to overlook the contradictions and difficulties, preferring a less controversial lineage.

stopped by the Nazis in the 1930s, then picked up again after the war by Wigman, Gret Palucca, Dore Hoyer, and their students, leading in a direct line to West German *Tanztheater*.⁶

That such a direct line can only be a retrospective reading constructed through ellipses, jumps, and omissions seems especially evident in light of Germany's 20th-century political history. Kate Elswit called this out as German dance's "particularly problematic legacy of rewriting and forgetting" (2014:11), a rewriting and forgetting that seems to happen once every generation. The above stated narrative then could be read as an ideological product of the Federal Republic of Germany, excluding the dance developments in/of the two dictatorial regimes, Nazi and Communist, that are—in very different ways—the *other* of the contemporary democratic state. Neither the complicity with the Nazis of modern dancers such as Mary Wigman and Rudolf Laban (Karina and Kant [1999] 2004; Manning [1993] 2006) nor the antimodernist aesthetic policies of the GDR (Giersdorf 2013) seemed to have a place anymore in this narrative in Germany in the 1990s (Manning 2017).

The archival trend in contemporary dance evident in Nachbar and Barba needs to be situated within a cultural-political frame. During the first decade of the 21st century, an important sustained effort was made to have the public recognize dance as an art form. While this effort can be traced back to publicly funded initiatives like the Tanzplattform Deutschland (Dance Platform Germany), which in the early 1990s promoted contemporary German dance in the newly reunified republic, the push exponentially increased when Hortensia Völckers was appointed founding director of the Kulturstiftung des Bundes (Federal Culture Foundation) in 2002.⁷ Völckers paved the way for today's diverse landscape of dance in Germany. Under her guidance, the Kulturstiftung initiated several funding structures to further broaden and solidify the position of dance, notably Tanzplan Deutschland (Dance Plan Germany), which revived the idea of the Tanzkongress (Dance Congress), and TANZFONDS ERBE.

Tanzplan Deutschland was a 12.5 million euro federal funding scheme from 2005 to 2010, conceived as a catalyst for the German dance scene (Tanzplan Deutschland 2009). By supporting festivals, productions, and infrastructure, Tanzplan's goal was "to provide dance in Germany with more recognition and establish it as an art form of equal value along with opera and theatre in the public perception and in the perception of those responsible for cultural policy" (Tanzplan Deutschland n.d.). Three of Tanzplan's long-lasting structures were the HZT—Hochschulübergreifendes Zentrum Tanz Berlin (Inter-University Centre for Dance Berlin), a contemporary dance and choreography education center with one BA and two MA programs; and two residency programs for choreographers, K3 in Hamburg and fabrik Potsdam. After Tanzplan in 2010, municipal governments took over the financing for these three institutions.

Tanzplan Deutschland also reignited the tradition of the Tanzkongress. Held in 1927 (Magdeburg), 1928 (Essen), 1930 (Munich), and then in 1951 and 1952 (Recklinghausen), the congresses were large gatherings of dance practitioners discussing aesthetics, pedagogy, and working conditions. Initiated by Hanns Niedecken-Gebhard⁸ and Rudolf Laban, the congresses

6. See Giersdorf (2013) for a critical account of East German *Tanztheater*.

7. Dance studies as a newly installed academic discipline in German universities provided the discursive support for this cultural-political move. It also raised the reputation of the art form by making dance a "proper" object of study. Before, dance studies only existed within academies and vocational institutions. Aurel von Milloss conceived dance studies as one of four "pillars" of dance education in the program he founded in 1961 at Rheinische Musikschule Cologne (Hardt 2014:10). A Tanzwissenschaft diploma course was installed within the College of Performing Arts in Leipzig in 1986 but closed in 1992 (Giersdorf 2009:24).

8. At that time, Niedecken-Gebhard was managing director of the municipal theatre in Münster, where he appointed Kurt Jooss as ballet director. Later Niedecken-Gebhard became the most important director of mass theatre in Nazi Germany, in charge of the opening of the 1936 Summer Olympics in Berlin, among other things.

not only manifested the optimistic potential of German dance, but Wigman's absence from the 1927 congress also indicated the schisms and controversies within the emerging modern dance scene. In 2006, the Federal Cultural Foundation revived the Tanzkongress in Berlin within the scheme of Tanzplan Deutschland and subsequently organized Tanzkongresse in Hamburg (2009), Düsseldorf (2013), Hannover (2016), and Hellerau Dresden (2019). Organized by Sabine Gehm and Katharina von Wilcke, the congresses between 2006 and 2016 brought together dance scholars, choreographers, and dancers, giving dance an "audible politico-cultural voice" (Wissen in Bewegung 2006:2; see also Gehm, von Wilcke, and Hartung 2017). The 2019 congress was the first under the sole direction of an artist, choreographer Meg Stuart. It foregrounded participatory and practice-based formats such as movement workshops and reading groups, and was modeled after experimental education programs (rather than public academic conferences, as were the previous congresses), taking Monte Verità and historic Hellerau as inspiration (Kulturstiftung des Bundes 2019). Like the artistic works from the 2000s, the congresses are part of the political and cultural effort to reconnect with the modernist tradition.

This reconnection with its history indeed strengthened the public and political recognition of dance. Yet instead of investing the complex entanglements with various other modernist projects, both aesthetically and politically, dance in general was attributed a critical function as an antidote or resistance to modernist abstraction. As Johannes Odenthal, program director for music, theatre, and dance from 1997 to 2006 at Berlin's Haus der Kulturen der Welt (House of World Cultures) pointed out, dance became a "cipher for the other history of modernity and postmodernism,"⁹ introducing "the body" as a category of thinking differently about modernity (Odenthal 2005:11). Nevertheless, over the years the reflections about dance and its political implications became more complex. This is evident also in the development of the dance congresses. Over the course of five editions, the focal point shifted from an internal, abstract reflection on dance to an explicit consideration of dance's social and political functions. The mottos of the congresses mirror this evolution: "Knowledge in Motion" in 2006, "No Step without Movement" in 2009, "Performing Translations" in 2013, "Being Contemporary" in 2016, and "A Long Lasting Affair" in 2019 (with preparatory "salons" in New York, Bogotá, Madrid, Helsinki, New Delhi, and Ouagadougou, organized in collaboration with Moriah Evans).¹⁰

In my experience, the 2013 Düsseldorf Tanzkongress marked a turning point in contemporary dance's relation to modernism in Germany. Opening the congress was Congolese artist Faustin Linyekula and CCN-Ballet de Lorraine's *La Création du Monde 1923–2012* (The creation of the world 1923–2012; 2012). A lecture by the French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy was scheduled for the morning after the performance, followed by a dialogue between him and Linyekula. As keynote of the congress, Nancy's talk was a highly anticipated event, since his extensive writings about the body and the relation of self and other were widely read and discussed within the contemporary dance community and academia. But because of the great

9. All translations from German are my own.

10. Around the time I was finishing the first draft of this essay, I was invited to join the Tanzkongress 2019 team as a curatorial advisor. Many of the concerns that guided me in this essay also played a role when advising Tanzkongress 2019. As the first congress to happen in East Germany since Magdeburg 1927, it is the first of the millennial congresses to acknowledge East German dance history. Through international collaborations (supported by the Goethe-Institut) it tried to decenter a Eurocentric perspective, a move Sandra Noeth had undertaken in previous congresses with the "Déposition" project in 2013 and the "Border Effects" focus in 2016. Nevertheless, the Tanzkongress remains an institution of national cultural politics, and through its genealogy is closely connected with modernist questions of dance, such as the social potential of choreography and its creation of utopian communities. It seems more reasonable, to me, to work through than against them. That this work is not nearly done was clearly shown by the intervention during Tanzkongress 2019 of a group of curators, scholars, and choreographers demanding access for and visibility of disabled choreographers (see König, Mülter, Perel, and Winter 2019).

impression Linyekula's piece made on him, Nancy skipped his lecture in favor of going directly into the conversation (moderated by the French dance historian and curator Claire Rousier) (see Kulturstiftung des Bundes 2017).

In *La Création du Monde 1923–2012* Linyekula provided a performative comment on Millicent Hodson and Kenneth Archer's faithful reconstruction of Jean Börlin's 1923 choreography of the same name, with music by Darius Milhaud and costumes by Fernand Léger. The original *Création du Monde* was a "symbolic creation story" based on "a naively paradisiacal image of [Africa], which stood in stark contrast to the economic exploitation and political oppression of the colonies" (Tanzkongress 2013). Because Linyekula was legally bound not to change Hodson and Archer's choreography, and because the reconstruction uncritically re-presented the racism of the original, he provided a prelude and coda to the historical ballet. For the opening of his work, Linyekula countered Börlin's stereotypical portrait of Africa with an equally stereotypical version of "contemporary European ballet." As the scenery for the reconstructed original slowly moved in from the wings, and the dancers unpacked their costumes from travel boxes, Djodjo Kazadi—identified by Linyekula in the discussion the following morning as an alter ego of the choreographer—slowly moved back and forth at the edge of the proscenium. For the coda, Linyekula set an energetic contrast to the modernist calm of Hodson and Archer's reconstruction: Kazadi shouted and screamed accounts of postcolonial Congo—accusing the Western world and the contemporary Congolese government of perpetuating the colonial condition, to which works like *La Création du Monde* had contributed aesthetically and intellectually.

The piece created a perfect opening for the Tanzkongress. Its quiet beginning and violent ending did not allow the audience to accept the reconstruction ahistorically. Linyekula's opening and closing forced a different reading of Börlin's 1923 dance. The ironic beginning juxtaposed with the clear outrage at the end evoked different responses: identification and solidarity with the colonial critique but also shame. For some, the formalist beginning was confusing. Was it "just" a postmodern exploration of movement material, or a parody of a white Cunninghamesque style? And how does it relate to the message at the end, which seems so easy to decipher? One conference participant called Linyekula-Kazadi's intervention an "invisible dragon" flying around the auditorium, a felt presence of the unmentioned racism of dance modernism. However, this dragon was not a ghost from the past, but very of the present moment.¹¹

Klaus-Peter Köpping—who saw the work during the conference—gives a complex reading of it, tracing its numerous sources and references and showing how Linyekula makes

the former colonial geographical representation into an apt metaphor for joint endeavors to re-"member" by giving Europeans and their "Others" their inextricably entwined identities back through awakening their/our body-memories, being affectively "moved" by our mutually dependent inter-actions. (Köpping 2017:72)

Numerous discussions among the mostly white European spectators continued the next morning when Nancy and Linyekula spoke. I vividly recall how it became more and more clear

11. Historians have thoroughly studied Germany's colonial endeavors, yet this knowledge does not seem to be widely distributed and has not had its repercussions in contemporary politics in general (Conrad 2008; Zimmerer 2013). Only recently has awareness of German colonialism moved into the arts. For example, the call to reflect on the colonial origin of German collections, especially those of ethnographic museums, was first met with harsh resistance, as can be seen in the debate around the Berlin collection and its move into the newly founded Humboldt Forum (No Humboldt 21! 2013). Very recently, there has been an increased effort by museums to reflect on the German colonial past and present and their repercussions in the arts, which resulted in numerous revisions of collections, such as "Hello World: Revision of a collection" at Berlin's contemporary art museum Hamburger Bahnhof (May–August 2018), and "Beyond Compare: Art from Africa in the Bode Museum" (permanent, since October 2017).

that Nancy's continental European philosophy was completely unable to cope with what was at stake. Köpping politely calls it a "failure in the practice of 'dialogue'" (2017:60). In the conversation, Nancy developed universalizing claims for dance, while at the same time providing a racist reading of a specific passage of slight hip movements as "essentially African" dancing. My (and others') growing frustration culminated when Nancy, pondering how language becomes a sensual, material experience in art, referenced a passage in Linyekula's work spoken in an "African language." Turning to Linyekula, Nancy asked him the name of this language, to which Linyekula replied "French!" The inability of one of Europe's most respected philosophers, whose reflections on the body provided the philosophical base of so many important readings of contemporary European dance,¹² to understand his own language when presented as a postcolonial accusation, left me and many others speechless. Nancy's essentialist interpretation, and the impossibility of his vocabulary to account for the multileveled challenge of Linyekula's reframing of *La Création du Monde's* deeply ingrained racism, left a deep mark in the German dance scene's collective memory. It became obvious that we were not yet equipped with the conceptual tools to speak about, and work out, the colonial implications of our modernist dance heritage.

Dance Politics

In 2011, two years before the Tanzkongress in Düsseldorf, the question of German dance heritage was put onto the official agenda when the Federal Cultural Foundation established the funding initiative Tanzfonds Erbe as a successor to Tanzplan Deutschland. Suddenly, dance heritage not only became a tool for artistic development, but also was embedded in national cultural heritage politics. Tanzfonds Erbe differed from Tanzplan Deutschland by shifting the focus to history:

For many years, the history of modern dance was only visible to a limited extent in the public sphere—despite the fact that the international reputations of numerous artists such as Mary Wigman, Dore Hoyer, Tatjana Gsovsky, Rudolf von Laban,¹³ William Forsythe or Pina Bausch began in Germany. (Tanzfonds Erbe n.d.)

With a budget of 8.1 million euros, Tanzfonds Erbe enabled the production of 60 projects dealing with the history of dance in Germany. A report evaluating the first two years of the funding identified two conflicting poles: the belief that dance as an ephemeral art form cannot be preserved, and in opposition to that the need to conserve for future generations dance as a cultural heritage (Dümcke 2015:6). Intentionally not proscribing a canon, Tanzfonds Erbe left it up to artists to decide which aspects of German dance history they wanted to work with—as faithful reconstruction, critical investigation, or as a point of inspiration (Tanzfonds Erbe n.d.).

Yet, as much as the initiators of the Tanzfonds Erbe tried to diversify the perspective, something like a canon nonetheless emerged. Within the 60 projects of the initiative's seven years, Mary Wigman was the artist most often referenced. Three of her works—*Le Sacre du Printemps* (The Rite of Spring; 1957) as well as *Totentanz I* and *II* (Death Dance I and II; 1921 and 1925)—were reconstructed by Henrietta Horn and Städtische Bühnen Osnabrück (see Huschka 2017 for a critical analysis). There were also projects that worked critically with Wigman, such as *Undo, Redo and Repeat* (Christina Ciupke and Anna Till, 2014) and the *Witch*

12. Nancy's writings on dance and the body are widely read in German dance studies (Nancy [1996] 2000, [1992] 2008), and essays of his are featured and provide a philosophical reference point in edited volumes such as Brandstetter, Egert, and Zubarik (2013) and Brandstetter and Hartung (2017).

13. US and British scholars omit the aristocratic "von" from Rudolf Laban's name. German scholars retain the "von" that Laban inherited from his father, a high-ranking officer in the Austro-Hungarian Army.

Dance Project (Christoph Winkler, 2016). In addition, many other projects referenced the canon of German modern dance and Tanztheater, using the work of Gerhard Bohner, Rudolf Laban, Pina Bausch, Kurt Jooss, and Reinhild Hoffmann. Tanzfonds Erbe clearly solidified a modern dance genealogy from the early 20th century to today.

As much as Tanzfonds Erbe provided an opportunity for artists and curators to enter the archives and investigate dance history, strikingly, most of the projects avoided looking into the history's political implications. In retrospect, leaving it up to the artists and curators to select the dances, artists, and motifs to work with ended up reinforcing a celebratory genealogy, an imagined family tree. Thus, it's hardly a surprise that dance productions between 1933 and 1945 remained mostly absent from Tanzfonds Erbe.¹⁴

But what does it mean to exclude works from a despised period? What effects does this exclusion have on the identity of the art form? How is it possible to work through the problematic aspects of dance history? How can one work critically with aesthetics that contemporary choreographers don't wish to bring back because of their fascist and racist context? How can the borders of the field be tested by looking at alternative histories, contesting the inclusion and exclusion of historical narratives, opening up and dispersing lineages and genealogies? These were some of the questions motivating curator and dramaturge Anna Wagner and me when we devised the Julius-Hans-Spiegel-Zentrum as part of Tanzfonds Erbe.

Fremde Tänze

The Julius-Hans-Spiegel-Zentrum was an itinerant research center dedicated to the study of global modernities in dance; both the simulation of an arts center with a residency program as well as the name of a festival presenting commissioned works, talks, and films. It had two iterations: one in Freiburg in 2014 (funded by Tanzfonds Erbe with support of Theater Freiburg) and another in Berlin in 2016 (funded by the Capital Cultural Fund, in collaboration with Sophiensæle Berlin). Julius-Hans-Spiegel-Zentrum was based on an idiosyncratic collection of archival material documenting the exoticisms of German modern dance. The term "exoticism" in our project originally served as a loose marker for appropriations of non-European movement motifs by German choreographers, but was eventually broadened to include documents of the multiple modernities present in contemporary German dance. The material was collated from many sources, mainly as copies from German dance archives, but also from the internet and various print sources. For example: the research of the second edition of Julius-Hans-Spiegel-Zentrum in Berlin focused on the archive box "Exotic dance" from a Berlin photographic collection. This box included images from dancers all over the world, many of whom performed in Berlin during the early 20th century (Wagner and Wittrock 2016).

For both editions, Julius-Hans-Spiegel-Zentrum made an architectural intervention designed by the architect duo Studio Umschichten (Lukasz Lendzinski and Peter Weigand). In Freiburg, Lendzinski and Weigand transformed the grand foyer of the municipal theatre (usually frequented by operagoers) into a multifunctional space used by the resident artists not only for productions, but also as a home for our archive accessible to the public during allocated hours. In Sophiensæle Berlin, a small mostly unused side space was turned into a studio/presentation space where visitors to the Julius-Hans-Spiegel-Zentrum discovered a hidden

14. The project of the collective Hauptaktion on German gymnastics movement (*Versuch über das Turnen* [Essay on Gymnastics], 2017) was the only project to explicitly deal with fascist and colonial Germany, while several other projects traced the effects of emigration during the Nazi era. There were also other projects with a postcolonial focus, such as the *Witch Dance Project* (2016), a curatorial project by Sophiensæle and Christoph Winkler with contributions by Dana Michel, Danya Hammoud, and Melati Suryodarmo among others; and Trajal Harrell's *Caen Amour* (2016), focusing on Orientalist aspects in modern dance.

deployed reappropriations of modernist techniques, performative critiques of colonialism and racism in the contemporary dance scene, highly stylized and expressive choreographies, and camp recreations of historical material. Whereas we invited international artists to the first edition of Julius-Hans-Spiegel-Zentrum to bring non-German perspectives to German modern dance (e.g., Indonesian artist Eko Supriyanto collaborated with the local deaf community to create two solos based on Spiegel, and French-Algerian artist Nacera Belaza inserted herself and her ritualistic approach to dance into the lineage of Wigman), we shifted our focus in the second edition to highlight the diverse backgrounds of young Berlin choreographers. We wanted to focus more on the stylistic exclusions of what is deemed “contemporary” in European contemporary dance (e.g., Sara Mikolai’s secret ritual for a photograph depicting devadasi dancers, or Tümay Kılınçel and Nuray Demir’s performative reflection on images of German-Turkish women). Through their recourse to forgotten, or suppressed aspects of modernity, these archive works opened up alternative futures for the heritage of German modern dance.

In this context, Nelisiwe Xaba conceived *Fremde Tänze* during a six-week residency in Freiburg in the first edition of Julius-Hans-Spiegel-Zentrum. *Fremde Tänze* has a very simple proposition. Consisting of a series of performative vignettes

accompanied by music, separated by costume changes, it parodies the structure of a modernist dance evening. Xaba took this structure from programs in the archive of Julius-Hans-Spiegel-Zentrum, mostly of Sent M’ahesa and early Mary Wigman. Wigman’s repertoire included *Four Dances After Oriental Motifs* (1920), *Series of Dances After Russian Songs* (1922 and 1926), *Slavic Dances* (1920), and *Hungarian Dances* (1919) (Wigman Stiftung n.d.). M’ahesa toured with *Old Egyptian Dances* (1909), *Indian Melody*, several *Arabesques*, *Siamese Goddess*, *Bedouin Dance*, and *Siamese Dance* (all ca. 1910–1920).¹⁵



Figure 3. Artists at the Julius-Hans-Spiegel-Zentrum in Berlin examining archival documents. From left: Nuray Demir, Tümay Kılınçel, and Sara Mikolai. (Photo by Christina Stivali)

15. The exact premiere dates of M’ahesa’s works are unknown; I refer to program leaflets in the Kujawski scrapbooks collection from the Theaterwissenschaftliche Sammlung Schloss Wahn of Cologne University.



Figure 4. Photo of Sent M'ahesa in costume. (Photo by Wanda von Debschitz-Kunowski; from Brandenburg [1913] 1917:21)

The creations of Sent M'ahesa, whose stage name was an invented Egyptian name, exemplified the exoticist imagination of early German modern dancers who appropriated folk and ritual motifs. Born in 1883 as Else von Carlberg, Sent M'ahesa debuted in Munich in December 1909 with a program of *Alt-Ägyptische Tänze* (Old Egyptian Dances).¹⁶ She widely toured theatres and cabarets in Germany and abroad until she stopped dancing in 1920 and opened a guesthouse in rural Sweden. Later in her life she returned to the performing arts, working as a librarian in the theatre library at Drottningholm.¹⁷ Sent M'ahesa's most famous creations were simple dances in abstract modern costumes that were intended—and perceived—to be Egyptian. A contemporary description in Hans Brandenburg's canonical early account of German modern dance stresses how M'ahesa's creations were free interpretations of ancient Egyptian reliefs, which translate their geometrical designs into a modern play with flatness, and sculpturality that had more to do with contemporary design than with “the pyramids” ([1913] 1917:83). M'ahesa's core aesthetic strategy was turning herself into an exotic spectacle. She shamelessly appropriated other cultures even

to the point of brownfacing. Yet, as Brandenburg states and as can be observed in the photos by Wanda von Debschitz-Kunowski, M'ahesa never strived for realism, but instead translated ancient forms into abstract, contemporary ciphers—or simply utterly ridiculous designs.

16. There are different stories as to what her name means. Katja Lembke followed a rumor that von Carlberg consulted an Egyptologist, who suggested a name that translated as “likeness of a cow” (*sentī em hesat*; Lembke 2012:33). According to performance studies scholar Ali Faraj, “Sitt Mahasen” in Arabic loosely translates as “the woman who has all the beauty.” Historical myths are as exciting as historical truths.

17. She also contributed sporadically as author and translator to the German newspaper *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, using both her stage pseudonym as well as her real name (Petersen 1972).

In *Fremde Tänze* Xaba employs a similar strategy of exoticization, but with a very different intention than M'ahesa. Xaba is reflexive and critical, mixing references to different localities and historical periods. Black Forest folklore in the form of the “Schwarzwaldmarie” song accompanies a cheeky reference to the fake sign language interpreter at Nelson Mandela’s memorial in 2013 (Topping 2013); the casual racism of contemporary everyday life in Germany (such as the decorated donuts Xaba encountered in Freiburg) meets the historic Orientalism of Verdi’s music; and a 1920s French show dance number is executed to Nina Hagen’s 1980s version of a 1930s German pop song.¹⁸

Performing in her signature style of a reluctant and disengaged attitude, Xaba meets the expectations of the local audience in Freiburg by fashioning herself (partly) as the object of an othering gaze. In discussions held before the premiere and after the performances, those expectations were explicitly articulated: “This is not what I expected from a dancer from...uhm...Africa,” one spectator remarked.

Performing both the expectations as well as a resistance to them, Xaba incorporates showy dance numbers taken from a 1920s filmic recording of the *Folies Bergères*, along with a pseudo-African dance; she lays out a panorama of spectacular dances yet withholds her energy. In the closing scene “Tableau Vivant,” Xaba sits in front of the tent/skirt and assembles a short skirt from tampons and drinking straws, mimicking the set-up of the historical *Völkerschauen* (people’s exhibit), which often included exhibitions of people executing “traditional” craft work. Yet her fake folklore practice—which she conceives as a feminist comment on the taboo of female genital hygiene in contemporary South African society—goes on for such a long time that the Freiburg spectators became extremely uncomfortable. The audience grows aware of its own gaze, and expectations of a performance of a “dancer from—uhm—Africa.” Xaba makes direct connections between this kind of exoticizing gaze (which she often encounters when performing in Europe) and the *Völkerschauen* and colonial displays prominent during the era of modern dance. As Xaba noted:

[Y]ou are either conscious about the continuity of histories of display, also colonial displays, or not. And I think we are always conscious about it, because there’s also a way of performing where you want to please this audience of others, that is not familiar to you. Look at the trailer of André Hellers *Afrika! Afrika!* for instance, it’s eclectic and teeth are always out. The performers know that they are making it up, in order to please the audience. But they’re not political about it, for them it’s simply their job. This kind of performance you also find in the so-called contemporary dance world, especially in festivals like *Danse l’Afrique Danse!* [Dance Africa Dance!]. This festival is not open to a global economy, but confined to the French economy and cultural parameters. There is something admirable and well-intended about attempts like this, but when you start scratching deep you understand that this style of curating is still very colonial. In these festivals you see how desperate people are trying to be chosen and please the French programmers. (in Xaba, Riebeek, Wagner, and Wittrock 2014)

Along with her performed resistance to the exoticist gaze, Xaba proposes an alternative historiography of modern dance in Germany. Going through a series of different numbers, Xaba embodies dance styles and performance techniques from different genres, regions, and times (not unlike modern dance pastiche programs) and thus suggests a connection among them. In Xaba’s work, modern dance appears as just one band of a broader spectrum from the 20th century centering on (imagined or authentic) foreignness.¹⁹ All this material is presented in one performance, with Xaba’s body as the focal point of these conflicting historical lines.

18. See also Manning (2020) for more references.

19. Her performance suggests a trope similar to what for instance Trajal Harrell proposed in *Caen Amour* (2016)—also produced within the TANZFONDS ERBE funding scheme—where a reparative retrofiction asserts that the hoochie koochie performers of popular entertainment venues such as Coney Island “were well aware of plural modernisms” (Harrell 2016).



Figure 5. Nelisiwe Xaba in “Tableau Vivant,” the final scene of *Fremde Tänze*. Theater Freiburg, Freiburg, 21 February 2014. (Photo by Maurice Korbel; courtesy of Nelisiwe Xaba)

Xaba’s work in the Julius-Hans-Spiegel-Zentrum not only proposes an alternative take on the past, but also opens up an alternate future. *Fremde Tänze* proposes we think of M’ahesa not as a dead end, or a side show of German modern dance, but as a way to revisit canonized figures such as Wigman. Through the lens of M’ahesa’s dances, the exoticist and popular entertainment aspects of Wigman’s work become apparent. In addition, Xaba salvages M’ahesa’s dramaturgy of eclectic, nonconnected vignettes that become a tool drawing cross-cultural and cross-temporal connections in *Fremde Tänze*. While conceived within a curatorial project whose aim was a general revision of modern dance narratives, Xaba developed a contemporary feminist perspective that commented on the expectations concerning the Black female body from the perspective of contemporary South African culture and politics as well as from the European perspective. Xaba’s multifaceted work hints at the intersections of these discourses, and their contemporary implications. She employs historical structures and motifs to insistently speak about contemporary issues while exposing the difficulty for a female Black choreographer to do so within the European gaze. In this layering of times, places, and viewing structures, Xaba re-invited us curators as “objects” into the performance—opening the performance with caricatures of ourselves trying to explain whatever historical premise might have been the starting point of this work.

It would be wrong to read Xaba’s work solely as a response to German heritage questions. In order to open the discussion of what German dance history is to a wider field, and to enable a plurality of perspectives, Anna Wagner and I as the curators of Julius-Hans-Spiegel-Zentrum employed the archive as a tool both to collect knowledge about disregarded aspects of dance history and to develop critical perspectives within and about what had been discarded. With its stated (and impossible) aim to store everything, the archive necessarily holds a surplus. Using the archive, sometimes the past is a delayed message challenging established narratives, hinting at what has been forgotten, excluded, or overlooked; and enabling us to build another future out of traces of the past. As Jacques Derrida put it: “the structure of the archive is *spectral*. It is spec-

tral *a priori*: neither present nor absent ‘in the flesh,’ neither visible nor invisible, a trace always referring to another whose eyes can never be met” ([1994] 1995:54). But, more important than the ghosts, spirits, or specters who appear in the archive are actual bodies and artistic voices such as Xaba’s who enter the archive and destabilize present narratives.

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