Our techniques of the body, even those which we believe to be the most natural, are learned behaviors like walking, sitting, sleeping, and standing. These habits and customs vary among individuals, but they especially vary between societies. They are learned through the imitation of actions that have been successfully performed throughout a civilization’s history.¹

South African choreographer and dancer Gregory Maqoma exemplifies the aesthetic, ethical, political, and social imperatives of such body techniques with a new sublime.

Maqoma’s techniques are a seamless amalgamation of dance forms. They draw as much from African traditional movements as from Western postmodern choreography, and from movement references between and beyond these seeming binaries. The result is a clear reminder that African artists do not work in isolation; for some time now, there has been an ongoing, often unequal exchange of cultural and aesthetic forms. Indeed, this intermingling is so profound that even the dances considered traditional (and therefore perceived to be static, unchanging, and “authentic”) are always already in flux. They change under the influence and sway of each and every encounter, altered perhaps without a trace.

Maqoma began to dance as a youth, with a group of five friends who called themselves the Joy Dancers (“Vuyani”, Maqoma’s Xhosan name, means “joy”). Eventually, he found his way to the Moving into Dance organization in 1990 as a part-time student, and in the following year joined the company, which would provide him the opportunity to tour outside of South Africa as well as to teach dance. He subsequently studied at the Performing Arts Research and Training Studios (P.A.R.T.S.) in Brussels, a contemporary dance laboratory emphasizing aesthetic engagement with music and theater, founded by internationally renowned choreographer Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker and Bernard Focroulle, Director of the National Opera De Munt/ La Monnaie. P.A.R.T.S.’s curriculum places emphasis on dance technique, including classical ballet.

release technique, Central European dance, and William Forsythe’s improvisational movement, as well as a range of body studies influenced by Eastern philosophies such as yoga and Shiatsu.

It was in this context that Maqoma discovered what is now recognized as his unique choreographic voice. Maqoma reflects the diverse dance methods in which he is trained, yet he is also profoundly driven by his personal experience. *Exit/Exist* is the latest piece in a long-standing body of work that extends Maqoma’s auto-ethnographic exploration and experimentation with his culture in relation to South African history. The choreographer assembled a remarkable range of collaborators to realize the multidisciplinary work, including South African director James Ngcobo, South African songwriter Simphiwe Dana, Italian composer and musician Giuliano Modarelli, and South African musicians and singers Complete.

*As Exit/Exist* attests, South Africa’s peculiar apartheid scheme has influenced Maqoma’s aesthetic project from the very beginning. The systematic, violent erasure of black South Africa’s history from prevailing discourse is of particular concern for him. *Exit/Exist*’s out-of-sync, fragmented, and disorienting traversal of time pivots on the story of Chief Maqoma (1798–1873), a nineteenth-century leader of the Xhosa ethnic group in the Eastern Cape of South Africa. Chief Maqoma was a renowned Xhosan warrior who exemplified the struggles that beset black South Africans for generations: his battles over three frontier wars against European hegemony intervened between colonizers and the colonized well into the last years of the twentieth century. Chief Maqoma’s singular story speaks to something profound about the South African collective. While South African historical discourse casts Chief Maqoma as a problematic character in the settler history of the country, oral traditions of his descendants have provided counter-narratives to the prevailing narrative of his life and revolutionary activities. Maqoma the choreographer is one such progeny, positing a reconsideration of Chief Maqoma’s rebellious motivations and legacy.

2013 is a timely moment to witness Maqoma's piece because it marks the centennial of the notorious Native Land Act, a system of land tenure that was the first legislative act of South Africa's segregationist apartheid policy. South African Shakespearean translator and political activist Solomon T. Palaatje (1876–1932) writes of the Native Land Act that "The South African Native awakens to find himself, not actually a slave, but a pariah in the land of his birth." The Act disenfranchised the black population by legalizing the dispossession of land, rendering a paltry percentage available for ownership by the majority of the South African population and delimiting where land possession was possible. Methodically moving the population from their home territories, the Act justified the elimination of traditional farming. This forced the black population into overcrowded townships and proliferating urban areas as the mining industry

boomed. The one-hundredth anniversary of this legislation highlights the continued inequality of land ownership in South Africa today.

*Exit/Exist* elaborates upon and complicates this strange reality. Maqoma and his interlocutors present a visually compelling, musically seductive, and kinesthetically evocative work that, through subtle and deft experimentation, puts forth a reconsideration of a man and a nation that are constantly transforming. Maqoma takes the stage in a gold suit, his back to the audience, lithely flowing through his supple solo with dynamic rhythms stamped out from the soles of his feet. His wrists and fingers ephemerally caress the air as the core of his being undulates, tilts, and flexes. He is accompanied by four a cappella singers sitting in near darkness at the rear of the stage. They, along with guitarist Modarelli, sonically cajole the story of Chief Maqoma as a beguiling interface with Maqoma’s elegant movements. We are swept through Chief Maqoma’s story with evocative imagery, such as Maqoma’s bovine hide sheath; the crystalline shimmer of salt cascading from Maqoma’s hands; the white ritual textile that serves as a projection screen as the dancer’s feet keep apace at an astounding speed; and the choreographer gleaming, anointed in a square of pale yellow light, his body covered in oil, acknowledging the ultimate ritual gesture of having arrived at the final moment of life. Having arrived at this moment, Maqoma puts forth the most divine and haunting dance of them all with languid and loose writhing of his arms and legs, sweeping through space as he shifts his weight seamlessly from hip to hip in movements of grace, ecstasy, and mystic self-transcendence. Maqoma ends the dance as he began it: donning the iridescent suit, illuminating the ways in which specters of the past persist in the present.

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The notion of mobility, movement, and individual choice to be in motion (after Peter Sloterdijk (b. 1947), a German philosopher and cultural theorist who conceptualizes modernity as a space and time of movement) takes on quite real historical meaning and significance in South Africa.

Black South Africans were required to carry “pass books,” a kind of passport, which limited when, where, and for how long they could be outside of their designated areas. Their movements were subjected to excessive policing not only by authorities but also by white citizens. In this context, movement was not merely a matter of desire, in the modern scenario, but rather was linked to the fundamentals of personhood. In relation to the black South African,
Sloterdijk’s concept reveals the proliferation of kinds of movement—the kinds of revolutionary movements that topple regimes like apartheid through side steps, fugitive leaps, and underground maneuvers that insist on action, change, and potential; the kinds of movements made by Chief Maqoma, Nelson Mandela, and countless others working in the black radical tradition.

And yet Maqoma the choreographer lives precisely in Sloterdijk’s modern “world in motion,” notwithstanding the fact that the dynamics of past regimes both exist in the present and persist as an accumulation of history. Maqoma described Soweto, the township where he grew up, as “the country’s main black metropolis and leading center of black urban culture—a world on its own.” Indeed, it is in South African cities where the country’s myriad ethnic groups co-mingle, and where people encounter immigrants and their cultural forms from around the world. Their intermingling has reverberated beyond influencing styles of music and dance to permeate dress code and language. It is in this context that Maqoma came of age, in a space and time of tremendous flux that coincides with pivotal political movements for the abolition of apartheid in 1994. This was a profound shift for the country, leading to increased economic opportunities and a surge in immigration, particularly of those from other African countries. The movements of people, both migrants and immigrants, are for a multitude of reasons, among them forced economic and political pressures such as land displacement; environmental causes; lack of employment opportunities; ethnic and civil wars; and the incessant repercussions of European colonization and modern capitalism.

For Maqoma, the multicultural matrix of his homeland has a vital importance in his artistic endeavor. It provides him with a particular perspective for storytelling resonantly realized through movement, sound, text, and costume. South Africa is a vortex with a culture of shared energies reflected in the multiplicitous nature of Maqoma’s choreography. The function of storytelling present in Maqoma’s work uses individual and personal narratives to say something about a collective experience, and he accomplishes this vital task by opening fissures in striated narratives that allow for multiplicity of entry points for audiences to experience and enter the work. The use of language, strong visual components, and elaborate musicality reflects a tendency towards interdisciplinary approaches. The insistence on multiplicity in

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aesthetics also points to the artist’s agency in consistently disavowing and complicating stereotypes of Africa, African dance, and the black body.

Maqoma’s choreographic approach counters perceptions of African dance held by Africans and non-Africans alike, challenging their expectations of traditional and ritual dances with specific ethnic and geographic positions. From the very beginning, Maqoma produced dance routines that mixed South African urban popular rhythms and styles with the movements he observed of American and European pop artists on television. His routines also followed the then-popular tendency of commingling ethnic and social dances from a range of black Africans coexisting in the townships, as well as their relation to the larger African Diaspora—ever-evolving, distinct new urban forms dating back to the early twentieth century. The Marabi, a vibrant form related as much to American jazz as it is to a range of traditional South African forms, is an example of the interrelated, inseparable, and amalgamated qualities of dance and music. Rich quotidian performances of identity, including the Hippies, Ivies, Pantsulas, and Retros all created their own distinctive and hybrid stylistic expressions of dress, language, and movement. These manifestations of identity reflect the intersectionality of ethnicity, race, gender, class, and sexual and religious orientations that constitute and structure a productive tension between the past and the present and the circumstances that inform everyday life. Maqoma’s choreography mediates these seemingly distinct aesthetic, social, and cultural realms to illuminate the ways in which they are connected yet constantly in negotiation, roving in a reality of flux.

Maqoma is “constantly inspired by these complexities. It is from these tensions, confrontations, and mixing of ideas and artistic form that we create new and innovative art works.” South Africa was politically and economically isolated for most of the twentieth century, but when apartheid technically ended, there emerged a generation of South African artists and choreographers whose work conceptually and aesthetically resonated to a profound extent throughout the world. These artists were shown in international art biennials and presented on international stages: Nicholas Hlobo, Nandipha Mntambo, Zanele Muholi, Tracey Rose, Athi-Patra Ruga, and Nelisiwe Xaba. While they work in a range of media and have distinct voices, their art explores to varying degrees the country’s political and social context and history, along with its cultural rituals and iconography. At the core of their investigations is the negation of a singular notion of South African identity and an assertion of individual agency.

In Exit/Exist, Maqoma marks and proposes a singular response to apartheid and the legacy of the colonial project in South Africa through a highly affective performance drawn from the story of a cultural legend. His performance incessantly calls back the ghosts that haunt the

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5 Ibid, 4-5.
6 Ibid, 6.
contemporary manifestation of the country in a dance that actualizes the past—a dance which does not dissipate, but rather persists, in each and every moment as present and future. Maqoma’s body acts as the membrane of time constantly producing the future; a future that is the ceaseless return, folding and carrying traces of the past. His effective and affective circuiting of time displaces memory from the subject and instead situates it as the fog of a collective experience, the speculation of collective memory within the experience of his body.

Maqoma sieves memories through movement techniques that are a reminder of German philosopher, economist, and revolutionary socialist Karl Marx’s (1818-1883) notion of kinetic maxim: “It does not so much express what you should do but what you have to overthrow in order to do it, namely all conditions that inhibit kinetic potential.”

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For further information:
www.mappinternational.org
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7 Sloterdijk, 38.

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