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Venus Hottentot vs. Modernity

In conversation with Lebogang Mashile

Venus Hottentot versus Modernity. *Entretien avec Lebogang Mashile*

Venus Hottentot versus Modernity. *Conversando con Lebogang Mashile*

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EDITOR'S NOTE

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- 1 *The lyrical and gutsy poet, performer, actress, producer and activist Lebogang Mashile was born in the United States in 1979 and returned to South Africa at the end of the Apartheid regime. She started studying Law and International Relations at the University of Witwatersrand in Johannesburg and ended up as an artist, focusing on topics like gender issues, teamwork and sexuality. Her poetry has been published in two compendiums, In a Ribbon of Rhythm by Oshun Books in 2005 and Flying Above the Sky, by African Perspective in 2008. In 2016 she was invited to co-curate Season 1 of The Centre for the Less Good Idea founded by William Kentridge and directed by Bronwyn Lace. The centre located in Johannesburg serves as a physical and conceptual space that aims to create and support experimental, collaborative and cross-disciplinary arts projects.¹*
- 2 *In this framework and setting, and as the result of the multiple conversations she engaged in as curator of the first Season of the Centre, Lebogang Mashile developed the performance Venus Hottentot vs. Modernity in collaboration with the poet and performer Ann Masina, the performer Tlale Makhene and the director Nhlanhla Mahlangu.²*
- 3 *The play symbolizes and addresses many aspects of modern day inequalities and questions aspects of identity and belonging. Especially in the context of South Africa, where race has had*

and continues to have a strong political legacy, ideas about belonging and being a citizen or non-citizen prove time and again acutely present. The play creatively refashions issues of belonging, race, gender and consumerism by projecting the historical figure of Saartjie Baartman, into the contemporary period as the 'Venus Hottentot'. It is this historical figure, and the multiple forms of exclusion Saartjie had to act on, which are taken up again by Lebogang to address similar ambiguities and inequalities surrounding black, big, female bodies in contemporary South Africa and beyond.

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[Anna SEIDERER] Could you tell more about your artistic practice as writer, poet, and performer? How do you combine those mediums in your work?

[Lebogang MASHILE] Poetry is the cord that runs through all of the things that I do. It is the lens through which I see the world. The late Keorapetse Kgotsile, a friend, mentor, and the former Poet Laureate of South Africa, defined poetry as "the highest register of language as expressed through the texture of life." I routinely come back to this definition, because for me it encapsulates everything. Poetry is a release, a taskmaster, a tool in my hand, but also a grueling taskmaster to whom I must submit. Poetry is the crown jewel of language, and in a place like South Africa, a mirror of truth for society.

The written word anchors what I do. It is the space where the distillation of ideas finds a home. Writing is a very intimate relationship, and, by extension, so is the relationship between the reader and the writer. Books and texts demand a certain level of intimacy and focus on the reader's part. There has to be a commitment to immerse oneself in the mind of the writer. I try to honor the reader when I am writing. Before I am anything else, I am a reader. That's how I came to writing.

In order to perform, I have to change gears and let the written text exist as though I have not written it. Otherwise I remain in a constant state of editing, self-questioning, and doubt. Years ago, Jerry Mofokeng, a renowned South African actor, director, and producer with whom I worked on a theatrical production called *Threads*, told me that I have to respect the words of the writer even if that writer is me. It changed the way that I look at my own work. It is impossible to truly give life to words on stage if you are not fully committed to them as a performer.

Performance makes it possible for me to survive and also for my words to travel to unusual places. South Africa has low literacy levels for one of the most developed countries in Africa. This is one of the many criminal legacies of apartheid. Despite this, poetry is a part of the lifeblood of the people and society. It is an important tool of cultural expression that most people immediately refer to. I am always amazed by this contradiction.

Lebo waiting to go on.

Photo © Stella Olivier.

[A. S.] When did you start working on the play *Venus Hottentot vs. Modernity*? How did you come to it?

[L. M.] I began working on the play at the end of 2014, although the story of Saartjie Baartman has been a reference point for the last twenty years of my life. I first learned about her in my years at university while I was discovering my own artistic voice. She was and still is a powerful symbol of the abusive, exploitative objectification of black women's bodies.

As I grew as an artist, and became more visible, the mirror that Saartjie held up to my life and work became impossible to avoid. I have had my own work devalued, decontextualized, and dismissed. I have had my body ridiculed and insulted. All of this left me at times questioning my own worth.

Pamela Nomvete, a South African actress, author, director, and producer, is someone with whom I have collaborated many times throughout my career. I credit her with being the inspiration for me making the jump from performing poetry to acting in theater and film. At the end of 2014, she had opened a space to allow artists, mostly writers and actors, to develop work through a workshop process. I did three sessions with her, and the genesis of *Venus Hottentot vs. Modernity* began.

This story jumped out at me with an urgency that I had not experienced before. It felt as though unpacking and exploring her story would allow me to better understand what had happened to me as a black woman and an artist. I have come to realize that Saartjie is the archetype for every black woman who finds herself in a position of visibility. She is a grand ancestor.

Lebo and Waldo.

Photo © Stella Olivier.

[A. S.] To what extent did the context of Season 1, which you co-curated at the Centre for the Less Good Idea, change the scenario?

[L. M.] Without the Centre for the Less Good Idea, the piece would not have expanded. Ann Masina, Bronwyn Lace, and Nhlanhla Mahlangu, who were all critical parts of Season 1 at the Centre, were essential to the creation of this story.

Beyond the individuals who were involved, being in an experimental multidisciplinary space allowed me to expand my own ideas of how and where the piece could live.

Celebrated and prolific South African artist William Kentridge said that his own work began to grow when he stopped putting boundaries on the form in which it could live. He says that he begins his creative process by listening to the story. The story tells him where it wants to live.

This idea deeply resonates with me. Once I let go of what I wanted the piece to be, it could tell me what it wanted to say. Being in the company of so many different kinds of creatives – from musicians, to performers, to designers, to choreographers, to digital artists – forced my ideas of what is possible within the realm of theater to stretch beyond my wildest imagination.

Theater is a vessel that can contain just about any art form. The process of stretching the story, and then contracting it to fit the true message and form the story is asking for, is one that will remain with me. The essential nature of collaboration across mediums for artistic innovation is also a principle that I chose to live by.

First meeting: Ann Lebo and Tlale present.

Photo © Stella Olivier.

William and Bronwyn watching *Venus*.

Photo © Stella Olivier.

[A. S.] Bronwyn Lace mentioned the creative process of the piece in the general dynamics of Season 1. Could you tell more about it?

[L. M.] In 2016, I was given an opportunity to be a co-curator in Season 1 at the Centre for the Less Good Idea, a multidisciplinary arts space created by William Kentridge. While at the Centre, I met Ann Masina, an opera singer and performer who has spent

the last decade working and touring with Kentridge on many of his productions. We immediately connected. We began talking about our own personal histories as women and as touring performers and, once again, Saartjie emerged.

The genesis for this piece was personal narrative. It is autobiography, superimposed on Baartman's history, with contemporary identity politics as a frame. While hashing out ideas for how to present the first season, we came up with the idea of having a boxing ring as a stage. I've been practicing kick boxing for the past few years as a form of exercise with my 7-year-old son. Bronwyn Lace, a visual artist, curator and animateur at the Centre, is also an avid boxer. The boxing ring as the physical container for the story made sense, because every aspect of Baartman's life was contentious. Her entire world was a warzone.

Bronwyn suggested the idea of doing a satirical internet video on hair. Black women's hair is the site of much conflict, controversy, control, and self-expression. The internet is a platform that black women globally are using to talk back to white supremacy and share knowledge about how to care for hair. The online natural hair movement is a radical self-care movement for black women. I resisted the idea at first, but then it made perfect sense.

Dancer, musician, and choreographer Nhlanhla Mahlangu assisted us greatly with movement and music for the piece. The character of Venus, played by Ann Masina, is a supernatural figure. She speaks in music and exists solely on stage. Even when she is not performing, she is on stage, which is a metaphor for the hyper-objectification of black women. Music allows us to move between different worlds sonically as Baartman did physically. The magic of Ann's vocal range allows us to reference different centuries and genres.

Ann and Tlale find voice.

Photo © Stella Olivier.

Ann Masina in workshop.

Photo © Stella Olivier.

[A. S.] Could you say more about the deliberately provocative choice of the title of the performance?

[L. M.] Saartjie Baartman's body, life, and memory are contested space. Even in death her story is not static. At the end of 2015, I went to visit her grave in the Gamtoos River Valley with my family. Her burial site had been desecrated by racists who splashed paint all over her tombstone. This was in response to a widespread debate in South Africa around the removal of statues that glorify so-called "colonial heroes."³ The most visible black women performers of the modern era find their lives and bodies at the epicenter of controversies, no matter how successful they are. In the creation of this piece we referenced Brenda Fassie, Busi Mhlongo, Miriam Makeba, Beyoncé, Tina Turner, and Whitney Houston. There are cords of scathing attacks, abuse, addiction, exploitation, hyper-visibility, and objectification that run through their stories to different degrees. No one fully escapes some or most aspects of what Saartjie had to endure. I think of her as the Matron Saint of black women performers. Situating this story within the modern era was deliberate. We wanted to tell a story that referenced history accurately, but that showed that Baartman's history is still alive and active today. Venus Hottentot is a myth come to life, an invention in the mind of a cruel marketer and promoter that came to dominate popular culture, fashion, and politics of her time. Saartjie was deliberate in how she curated the persona that she created on stage. Even if the name Venus Hottentot was imposed on her, she gave it life through her performance art.

Again, this tension exemplifies a push and pull between what is imposed and what is; between how we are seen and who we are as black women; between what we are told to be and what we are given space to say we are. In a world that is constantly in conflict with our race and gender, the act of simply being is not something that modern black women can take for granted. The modern landscape, like Baartman's world, is at war with us too.

Ann Masina: ring as stage.

Photo © Stella Olivier.

[A. S.] What interests you about Saartjie Baartman/Venus Hottentot?

[L. M.] So many historical and political forces intersect with Saartjie Baartman's life. In her life and story you find a crossroads between colonialism, slavery, misogyny, racism, the fine line between sex work and performance art, sexual exploitation, fame, hyper-visibility coupled with invisibility, silencing, and dehumanization. This makes her story very rich and ripe for my own self-exploration as an artist and as a black woman. Understanding Baartman helps me to make sense of what I experience in my life and career.

I am very interested in the fact that despite the harrowing circumstances she was forced to endure, she made powerful and deliberate choices. She chose to travel to the UK to become famous at a time when black bodies were crossing the Atlantic as slaves. She chose how she presented herself on stage. She created her stage persona and act. She chose not to come back to South Africa when she was given an opportunity to do so. All of this points to a woman who asserted her agency where possible and who exercised her power even though she was also powerless.

I am fascinated with the idea of fame and hyper-visibility as a tool of silencing, alienation, dispossession, and oppression. Saartjie Baartman was known as a freak, but was actually one of the most famous performers of her time. Fame, like slavery, is the ultimate tool of dispossession. It is also a coveted status that gets sold to people as an empowering and advancing tool. This is true now more than ever with the rise of social media. Humans now have the means to curate their own fame.

Lebo and Ann: dress rehearsal.

Venus Hottentot vs. Modernity. © Lebogang Mashile. Produced by The Centre for the Less Good Idea. Photo © Stella Olivier.

[A. S.] Would you say that artistic performance offers a critical look at the political emblem Baartman has become in France and South Africa?

[L. M.] Art provides the tools to find meanings that can't be extracted from policies, laws, or a one-dimensional reading of historical facts. It allows us to insert emotions, spirituality, and positionality into static historical narratives. Creating art is essentially giving birth to meaning.

Baartman is a powerful and enduring political emblem for what South Africa has endured. The irony, of course, is that she never defined herself as a South African, like Jesus Christ never defined himself as a Christian. The home she came from was destroyed when she was abducted and trafficked to Cape Town as an indentured servant. She chose not to come back to the land that has chosen her as a symbol for what its people have endured, and rightly so. Why would she have chosen to return to the site of so much loss and pain?

Baartman's remains ended up in France in the hands of George Cuvier, the leading scientist in Europe at the time. He pickled her brain and her genitalia and then made a life-sized cast of her body which he used in presentations of his work until his death. The jars containing her pickled organs plus her body cast were kept on display until 1976 at the Museum of Natural History in France.

The treatment of her body in France is an extreme but consistent example of how black bodies are treated in societies that have had chattel slavery as a part of their histories. The black female body is a tool. It is an inanimate object devoid of the sacredness of life. It also points to what particularly fascinates white supremacist capitalist misogyny about black women's identities, namely our minds and our sexualities. Both of these are dissected, preserved, and depersonalized. Such is the cruelty meted out to us simply for inhabiting our identities.

Ann and Lebo in the ring.

Photo © Stella Olivier.

[A. S.] The metaphor with the hairdresser builds—in my opinion—an interesting tension through which the “decolonization process” is questioned. Is the aesthetic treatment you indicate a criticism of practices that identify themselves as “decolonizing” and that are in fact marketing operations? From this perspective, could you tell us more about how you engage in these “post-colonial” debates?

[L. M.] The hair debate is an extremely polarizing one for black women because it sets up black women for a debate about authentic blackness which is an impossible position to occupy because blackness in and of itself is a colonial construct.

The issue of hair is an intrinsic part of negotiating black identity, black femininity, and survival in a racist, sexist, capitalist world. Black women wear straight hair for a variety of reasons, ranging from self-expression to being able to secure employment in a white world. It is impossible to assume a black woman’s views about her own identity by the hair she wears.

The issue of decolonizing is much deeper than it appears on the surface. To truly decolonize, we would have to imagine systems outside of racism, sexism, capitalism, and every other system that intersects with people to do the work of decolonizing themselves. This means looking honestly at our history, acknowledging the resultant traumas and privileges, and then imagining a world beyond this.

Setting up a world in which white people’s mindsets are decolonized via a YouTube hair tutorial that is seemingly geared at black women is a deliberate and inherent contradiction. The world of online videos has created a safe space for millions of black women to explore the issue of hair and self-care as a community. This piece takes this world and turns it on its head for the white gaze.

It also exposes the contradiction of constantly probing, prodding, and problematizing black women’s bodies. The poor treatment of black women in spaces that have been marred by colonialism makes black women hyper-visible, and at the same time invisible, but it also, most importantly, exposes the subtle violence of racism. It exposes the cruelty of how whiteness views black womanhood.

The world of the piece does not spare white people from doing the work of decolonizing deep conditioning and collective amnesia. It is their work to do as much as black women's bodies are continually made the site of this work.

Lebo and Ann: dress rehearsal.

Venus Hottentot vs. Modernity. © Lebogang Mashile. Produced by The Centre for the Less Good Idea. Photo © Stella Olivier.

[A. S.] Can you tell us about some elements of the second version of the performance you are currently working on? What are the historical aspects that you focus on in the next piece? How does it relate to the current political situation in South Africa?

[L. M.] The next phase of this piece is a closer reading of Saartjie Baartman's life. It is a biographical piece, a two-hander, with myself and Ann Masina playing the roles of Saartjie and Venus Hottentot. It currently sits as a 45-minute-long one-act piece, but we are in the process of developing it into a one-and-a-half-hour with two acts. It explores her time in South Africa – which is an under-told story – in the first act and her rise to fame and resultant death in the second act.

We have held on to the concept of collapsing time in order to make it clear that the issues raised in the piece are relevant in a modern context. The set is minimalistic and consists of a 3 × 5 meter rostrum with a screen for projections behind it. The props are equally sparse. The idea is for the show to be as portable as possible so that we can take it on tour. The vision is to be able to perform it in atypical theater spaces like halls, schools, clubs, and even churches. This piece is a springboard for a range of conversations about black womanhood. Following our performances, there will be a discussion to unpack the issues in the piece.

Many people know of Saartjie Baartman, but few know the details of her life. In this sense it is an educational piece, but it is also an exploration of contemporary black female identities and representation.

Some of the issues we examine are slavery, addiction, sex and sexuality, agency,

spirituality, religion, fame, exploration, and hyper-visibility. This is by no means an exhaustive list.

Lebo and Ann: dress rehearsal.

Venus Hottentot vs. Modernity. © Lebogang Mashile. Produced by The Centre for the Less Good Idea. Photo © Stella Olivier.

Ann and Lebo in the ring.

Venus Hottentot vs. Modernity. © Lebogang Mashile. Produced by The Centre for the Less Good Idea. Photos © Stella Olivier.

Ann as Venus.

Venus Hottentot vs. Modernity. © Lebogang Mashile. Produced by The Centre for the Less Good Idea. Photos © Stella Olivier.

NOTES

1. See www.lessgoodidea.com.
2. See vimeo.com/211475131.
3. This refers to the protest movement Rhodes Must Fall.

ABSTRACTS

In this interview, the multifaceted South African artist Lebogang Mashile discusses her creative process and collaborations concerning her play *Venus Hottentot vs. Modernity*. Saartjie Baartman is a main source of inspiration and this can be seen through Mashile's use of different art mediums (poetry, writing and performance). The intricacies and paradoxes of slavery, colonialism and their contemporary legacies are addressed so as to reflect on the hardships black women have faced and still have to face to this day.

Dans cette interview, l'artiste polyvalente sudafricaine Lebogang Mashile aborde le processus créatif et les collaborations liés à sa dernière pièce *Venus Hottentot versus Modernity*. Source d'inspiration centrale dans sa pratique artistique multiforme (poésie, écriture et performance), Saartjie Baartman lui permet d'évoquer les complexités et les paradoxes de l'esclavage, du colonialisme et de leurs héritages contemporains ainsi que les difficultés, présentes et passées, des femmes noires.

En esta entrevista, la polivalente artista sudafricana, Lebogang Mashile, aborda el proceso creativo y las colaboraciones vinculadas con su obra *Venus Hottentot versus Modernity*. En su práctica artística de gran diversidad (comprende poesía, escritura y performances), la figura de Saartjie Baartman se vuelve una inspiración central que le permite a Mashile evocar tanto las complejidades y las paradojas de la esclavitud, el colonialismo y sus herencias contemporáneas como las dificultades que experimentaron y siguen experimentando las mujeres negras.

Nesta entrevista, a artista polivalente Sul-Africana Lebogang Mashile fala do processo criativo e das colaborações ligadas a sua última obra *Venus Hottentot versus Modernity*. Fonte de inspiração principal para sua prática artística multifacetada (poesia, escritura e espetáculos), Saartjie Baartman permite-lhe evocar as complexidades e os paradoxos da escravidão, do colonialismo e de suas heranças actuais, tal como as dificuldades, presentes e passadas, das mulheres negras.

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Mots-clés: art, Afrique du Sud, genre, Baartman (Saartjie), race, colonialisme

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