

# Tales of Home, Life, and Death: Panaibra Gabriel Canda and Faustin Linyekula

joan frosch, phd

center for world arts, university of florida

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History is not past. The lost lives of Michael Brown, Trayvon Martin, Steven Sotloff, and the thousands of unnamed who have succumbed to the Ebola virus this year to date, provide hard evidence. Historic (mis)constructions of personhood deployed to justify colonial conquest, perpetrate genocide, and subjugate millions as “slaves,” haunt us in 2014. For the life or death of our shared humanity, we must ask: “Who is (not) human?”

Whose life is the one to be valued, respected, if not, exceptionalized, and... whose life may be abused, lost, if not extinguished and remains unnamed? What combination of attributes—race, class, ethnicity, gender, religious affiliation, ability, sexual orientation, nationality, language, or age—confers the status of the human, “who manifests a subjectivity—that is, a consciousness like our own—that would allow us to consider each of them, taken individually, as another self” (an alter ego)?<sup>1</sup>

In their intimate works for *Tales of Home*, Panaibra Gabriel (Mozambique), creator of *Time and Spaces: The Marrabenta Solos*, and Faustin Linyekula (Democratic Republic of Congo), creator of *Le Cargo*, have telescoped their immensely complex histories to the scale of the person. The artists seem to say: “Come, look through my lens—you will recognize what was previously unseen, unnamed, or unknown to you. Think of me as an alter ego, it is a matter of the life or death of our shared humanity.” In one-on-one journeys through the folds and nuances of personal stories, we glimpse extraordinary lives from the inside out. Guided by the warmth of their breath, we enter histories long steeped in their flesh: whether standing down the lingering ruptures of colonialism and dictatorships, negotiating the plurality of time and identities, or embracing childhood memories and fascinations.

*Tales of Home* beckons us to move forward towards our shared future, hastened by the heart, and inspired by the imagination. “But that’s not *my* world,” audiences may initially think, ironically oblivious to the west’s complicity in African realities, past and present. However, in unexpected moments of performance, we will come to know the human experience anew and take our place beside these artists in the reflection of history.

## Panaibra Gabriel Canda

### **Choreographer and Dancer: *Time and Spaces: The Marrabenta Solos***

On June 25, 1975, after more than a decade of armed struggle, Mozambique liberated itself from over four centuries of the infamous violence of Portuguese colonial rule. On October 21, 1975,

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<sup>1</sup> Achille Mbembe. 2002. “African modes of self-writing.” *Public Culture* 14.1:239–273

Panaibra, a child of independence, was born to a dressmaker and a *marrabenta* player in the capital city that would soon be known as Maputo. However, within two years of Panaibra's birth until 1992, a brutal civil war poisoned Mozambique's hard won freedom.

As a youth, political upheaval, loss, and turmoil cut deep into Panaibra's bones. He sought an outlet in performance, and, like Faustin Linyekula, Panaibra gravitated to the vehicle of theater. *Casa Velha de Maputo*, a cultural center supporting the training and performance skills sought to provide a theatrical foundation to city youth. While live performance and its expression through the body felt right, theater steeped in classical Portuguese language felt stiff to him; and, portraying the lives of others seemed antithetical to expressing himself. Panaibra felt a new sense of freedom upon the discovery of "traditional dance" as taught by masters hailing from various regions of Mozambique. Ultimately, he felt constrained in the staged reiteration of dance traditions. The emphasis on codification and rigid choreographies was tantamount to approaching dance as an object in a "museum," in Panaibra's opinion, making dance as stiff and lifeless as his experience in theater.<sup>2</sup>

Panaibra rededicated himself to the primacy of the self and body over form. In 1995, he presented his first work in Maputo. In 1997, *Danças na Cidade*,<sup>3</sup> a Lisbon-based exchange of choreographers



and dancers extended an invitation to Panaibra "...and that's when I discovered contemporary dance which allowed me to reinvent myself."<sup>4</sup> Returning from Portugal, he attempted to set work on the Maputo based traditional dance troupe with whom he worked. They rejected his new ideas and even called him crazy. Ever practical, "So I formed a working group with some dancers excited by the novelty" of his approach; giving rise to the creation of Mozambique's first contemporary dance company in 1998.<sup>5</sup>

Today, regarded a pioneer of contemporary dance in Mozambique, along with Maria Helena Pinto and Augusto Cuvilas, Panaibra has developed a body laboratory of experimental dance that navigates theater, music, history, and the inquiry of identity in the global present. He explained a part of his approach, "I try to give another [contemporary] meaning to traditional dance, to reinvent it. Living today, you can only be living in the contemporary moment." What else should "contemporary" mean? His work pokes holes in the prevalent notion that working in contemporary dance means adopting a western movement aesthetic. On the contrary, he argues, "The artist transcends the rigid forms to release the body, I do not have to follow the western forms."<sup>6</sup> His approach critically *extends* the notion of contemporary. Such critical non-dominant perspectives in

<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise noted, the information on Panaibra is culled from my interviews in 2010 (Nairobi, Kenya) and 2011 (Albuquerque, New Mexico).

<sup>3</sup> The former *Danças na Cidade* became a celebrated biannual international cultural festival known as *alkantara*, which seeks to broaden perspectives beyond a euro-centric of contemporary dance.

<sup>4</sup> Africultures. <http://www.africultures.com/php/index.php?nav=article&no=11934#sthash.uDTZKrnT.dpuf>

<sup>5</sup> *ibid*

<sup>6</sup> *ibid*

thinking about arts practice infuse the notion of the contemporary with a fresh and compelling global awareness.

Panaibra is engaged in a theater of transformation, not reiteration. In *The Marrabenta Solos*, he chooses to work with concepts in real time rather than fix choreography, "I discover new ways of challenging the body," he explained.<sup>7</sup> Panaibra nests the work in the spirited urban dance music of *Marrabenta*, which parallels the evolution of Mozambican modernity and Panaibra's life in it. Onstage, collaborator and virtuoso guitarist Jorge Domingos accrues the power of the *marrabenta* historical trajectory to mind-blowing effect. The intensity is not unexpected: the name "*marrabenta*" comes from musicians breaking their guitar strings with their high-energy playing (breaking in Portuguese is *rebentar*; or *arrabentar* in Maputo's vernacular).

Arising mid-century from the barrios of Maputo, *marrabenta* quickly expanded popular tastes beyond the popular Portuguese *Fado*. The lyrics of this homegrown yet highly syncretic form interpolated daily life to extol love, give praise, or dish out social criticism. In the lyrics of the song "Xitchuketa Marrabenta," Stewart Sukuma framed *marrabenta* as the "chant of our nation," the music of a people who would never forget; declaring *marrabenta* the dream of the people of the barrio, freed from slavery, oppression, and foreign domination.<sup>8</sup> During the war of liberation, the colonial government, long suspicious of the *marrabenta* scene, accused a number of *marrabenta* venues of harboring "terrorist activities" and shut them down. Threatened, *marrabenta* musicians fled the country—mostly to South Africa—to return after independence with new musical influences in tow. Innovations within *marrabenta* have continued to make the music relevant to new generations hip to multiple African and global influences. Fusions with hip-hop, and an upbeat dance music called *pandza*, which mashes up reggae and *marrabenta* have emerged.

*The Marrabenta Solos* shakes out onto the stage decades of rubble of failed ideologies and ideals. In real time, Panaibra traces the history of his country, masterfully articulating the complex historical trajectory of a free Mozambique from revolution to the fragile democracy of the present. Panaibra sets forth the boundaries and freedoms of the space using fragments of modernity and tradition long stored in his flesh. He lays down the burden of the post-colonial body, his body, the African body, the "small Portuguese of black color" body, and the communist body and declares "...the creation of an experimental laboratory for the



democratic body." Each performance is an experiment in democracy tooled by the immediate, live interaction of musician and dancer. The more Panaibra unpacks into the space—and the greater historical weight he shares with us—the closer he appears to get to freedom...to state his independence, assert his agency, and proclaim his personhood with conviction. "I am," he declares as we arrive at the summit of his complex journey to self. An exhilarating life moment! Lights out.

(continued...)

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<sup>7</sup> Interview notes VSA, 2011

<sup>8</sup> "Xitchuketa Marrabenta," by Stewart Sukuma <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yI1wxh7AnMA>

Behind the scenes, the lights never dim on Panaibra. As director of CulturArte, Panaibra has hybridized artistic practice and creative entrepreneurship, stimulating innovative models for sustainable arts practice. CulturArte has positioned itself as an independent service organization for choreographers, dancers, independent dance companies, and other artists. Its members, however rooted in the rich traditions of Mozambique and Africa and ever open to global interaction, seek to create new artistic languages. Through its center for the development of contemporary art and dance, CulturArte also aims to position itself on a regional scale by supporting the training of young artists and managers, pursuing the development of the cooperation with the southern African region, and initiating dialogue and artist exchanges and the presentation of new works. Panaibra's regional collaboration efforts seek to foster the creation, exchange, and reflection on sustainable development for dance artists working and living on the continent.

## Faustin Linyekula

### **Choreographer and Dancer (Democratic Republic of Congo): *Le Cargo***

Violence and turmoil defined Belgian's seventy-five year domination of the Congo from start to finish. King Leopold II's reign of terror of the Congo Free State began in 1885. He ruled by torture and greed and an estimated five to eight million Congolese lost their lives by the time he stepped down in 1908. In 1960, the Belgian Congo's colonial government's frantic withdrawal dismantled "an entire bureaucracy and without making provision for a successor,"<sup>9</sup> kicking off decades of chaos. In fact, Congo's tragic legacy of bloody conflict and trauma—paired by the abuse of its vast natural wealth—has persisted from its initial contact with Europe in the late 15<sup>th</sup> century to today. Since the 1990's, the Democratic Republic of Congo's vast natural resources have funded wars killing more than 5.4 million Congolese. As the global market value of tantalum skyrocketed, the DRC's coltan reserves became known as the *blood diamonds of the digital age*.<sup>10</sup>

Congo's turbulent history is the tragic muse of Faustin Linyekula. His bold dedication to artmaking in the face of conflict earned him the principal award of Prince Claus Foundation for Culture and Development—and, to paraphrase Faustin, a long-term experiment in how to remain standing when everything has collapsed around you. In 2001, at the height of the Second Congo War, after eight years of self-imposed exile in Africa and Europe, Faustin visited the DRC to conduct a workshop. To the dismay of his family and disbelief of friends, the rising choreographer and theater maker decided to stay. He settled in Kinshasa, creating a dance and visual theatre company named



<sup>9</sup> Alan Cowell. 1992. "Mobutu's Zaire: Magic and Decay." *New York Times Magazine*, April 5.

<sup>10</sup> Tantalum is the coltan extract essential for the production of cell phones and microprocessors; the term "blood diamond of the digital age" was coined by Jeffrey Mantz in 2008 and has since been picked up by popular media. Coltan has also been referred to as "blood coltan."

Studios Kabako. Evoking memory and imagination, the name “Kabako” memorialized a beloved friend from his youth; and studios imagined a set of “mental spaces” where Faustin could craft stories of home—not exile. In 2006, as the war subsided, Faustin returned to his hometown of Kisangani to claim his inheritance, “a pile of ruins.”

For the years I have known Faustin, this prolific dancer, choreographer, director, curator, and producer has reiterated: “Dance is an attempt to remember my name.” He explained with care to my students at the University of Florida, “When I say my name it connects me to history and to a whole web of ideas and relationships.” My work is “people-specific...about the individual” in relationship to the world. In *Le Cargo*, Faustin asks himself: “How do I continue? Where do I find the energy to continue?” To date, Faustin has deployed the “ridiculousness of art” to bridge to the future, recycling slivers of hope scavenged from the detritus of tragedy. While he continues to inscribe himself anew on the walls of history, he underscores that ‘citizen of the Democratic Republic of Congo’ is only his most recent national identity; the legacy of “...the former Zaire, former Belgian Congo, former independent state of Congo” weighs heavy on the body.

Since his return home, Faustin has asserted his uncompromising voice feverishly, fearlessly, and generously. He has choreographed and produced 15 major international touring works to critical acclaim, supported 13 projects by artists to whom Studios Kabako lends mentorship and guidance, and collaborated with diverse artistic entities from Ballet de Lorraine and the Comédie Française, to Raimund Hoghe. Together with colleagues Panaibra Gabriel Canda, and Andreas Ouamba (RDC/Senegal), he created *Pamoja*, a capacity building program for artists, technicians, and company directors in dance and theater on the African continent.

With Vienna-based architect Bärbel Müller, Faustin designed a series of interconnected neighborhood cultural (un)center(s) intended to connect, revitalize, if not heal, diverse, conflict-weary communities across Kisangani. With a population of approximately one million people, the capital of Orientale province in DRC’s northeast is the third largest city in the nation. Envisioned as a practice of “urban acupuncture,” the project would support creative processes, including physical studio space for Studios Kabako; host artist training and development workshops, and expand production in entrepreneurial activities—including music, film, and video production—creating a flow of energy and ideas. In addition to support for Kisangani’s creative across the arts spectrum, dedicated spaces would encourage community public dialogue to intersect with arts projects. The buildings are scheduled to open in Kisangani in 2015. Given the instability of the region, however, the initiative is far from certain: “Tomorrow it could be over,” he freely admits. To date his success has defied the historical odds.

In spite of, or perhaps, because of his success, and the increasing weight and responsibility of his growing enterprise, in 2011, Faustin recognized his need for self-renewal. His work had long served him as a “space of sharing, maybe to be a little less alone.” However, after a decade of tireless creation in ensemble, Faustin choose to focus in and create a solo. In his original notes for *Le Cargo*, Faustin wrote about his change of heart:

*Today, I feel the need to return to myself. Back to my earliest memories, to go back to Obilo, this small village 80 kilometers from Kisangani where I went with my sister by train to see my father. What remains of my father’s house? After all these years of war, do people still dance after night has fallen—the dances I was not allowed to attend as a child?”(Linyekula 2011)<sup>11</sup>*

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<sup>11</sup> Faustin has provided the following direct commentary on *Le Cargo* in the program notes for the work: “Si la forme du solo ne m’attirait guère malgré quelques tentatives vite détournées comme le projet Radio Okapi où je conviais chaque soir des artistes à m’accompagner ou les performances du Cargo proposées ces dernières années dans des galeries ou studios,

I recalled Faustin's solo installation during his *carte blanche* showcase also entitled *Le Cargo*, at the Centre National de la Danse (Pantin) in Paris, June 2005. There he appeared to transform a small dance studio into the inside of his complex mind: we heard the voices ringing in his head—in the echo of recorded political speeches and dialogues. We stepped in and among books, photos, and memories. In one long section of the work, Faustin balanced upside down, supporting his weight on his head, upper back, and hands, legs dangling skyward. His perseverance overtook the obvious discomfort of the position. Layers of history wedged him in, a body squeezed and turned-upside-down, perhaps subjugated, even terrorized—but here. The installation made palpable the power of an individual's will to survive, however inverted by history—a key finding for the creation of his 2011 solo.



In *Le Cargo*, Faustin asks if and how he might “rediscover dance, or a certain somewhat romantic idea of dance, as what would be just before or after words, just before or after a scream, just before or after a story?”<sup>12</sup> In this journey towards himself, along rail tracks “long swallowed by the forest,” Faustin boards a train that no longer exists. He enters the silence of the past to unlock mysteries of his childhood. An expert in unearthing ruins to locate shards of history, pieces of self-constructs, fragments of traditions, Faustin recreates treasured moments of his own early life...and, suddenly, music breaks the silence and he is dancing in the nighttime dance

circle he only imagined dancing in as child. The shadow of his body looms large, and like the books he loves, we see that his body, too, moves across time carrying its own history. For Faustin, the body is ancient and holds the deepest memories—opening spaces of the past that books cannot.

However much his journey is a personal one, he seeks to share it so that others may feel that they, too, engage in discovery. How can his reality, so remote to those outside of the situation, become relatable? Faustin is searching. “If I want to continue living and working from there (the Democratic Republic of Congo) and making work that attempts to talk about the Congo, I have to find a new impulse now. Over ten years now, I've been telling the very same stories of ruins and violence, or people trying to resist ruin and violence; now I feel, it's killing something in me.”

As if to reiterate Faustin's methodology, Nigerian artist and art historian Olu Oguibe stated, “It is enunciation, the ability to reiterate *our* power over *our* selves that subjectivizes us. It is this ability and freedom to enounce, too, which precludes us from dominance by others, which takes us, as it

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c'est que mon travail était avant tout un espace de partage, peut-être pour être un peu moins seul... Mais je sens aujourd'hui la nécessité de revenir à moi. Remonter à mes premiers souvenirs, revenir à Obilo, ce petit village à 80 kilomètres de Kisangani où j'allais avec ma sœur rejoindre mon père en train. Que reste-t-il de la maison de mon père ? Après toutes ces années de guerre, les gens dansent-ils toujours la nuit tombée, des danses qui, alors enfant, m'étaient interdites?” (Linyekula 2011).

<sup>12</sup> “Comment retrouver la danse, ou une certaine idée un peu romantique de la danse, comme ce qui serait juste avant ou après les mots, juste avant ou après le cri, juste avant ou après le récit?” (Linyekula 2011).

were, beyond the bounds of power"<sup>13</sup> In the power of enunciation, Faustin's solo has inspired his latest ensemble creation *Drums & Digging*. The work premiered in June 2013 and is currently in performance across cities in Europe and Africa.

## Art as Antidote

The solo works of Panaibra and Faustin have long marinated in the flesh. As the artists peel back the layers of their lives, they assert the body as the quintessential vehicle of history. The body, the container of the human spirit, brings "home" the intangible force of their tales. Claiming the sovereignty and vulnerability of the human spirit, the artists command a vivid and compelling reality where irony, power, fragility, courage, and fear converge in the bones: proof positive that the foremost tool of theatrical expression is the body. Yet, the body is also the primary object of oppression. In attempts to control, if not destroy the human spirit, atrocities are perpetrated to demean the body, break it, and worse.

As they construct vibrant theatrical worlds from the shards of histories they have inherited, Panaibra and Faustin proclaim—and incite—the agency, complexity, and richness of each human life...and imagine a future in which all global citizens have an equal stake.

Moving together with the artists, we, too, engage in a personal journey. Along the way, we are asked to magnify our visions of the world. In the process, we grow; and enhance our own personhood. As the force of spirit overtakes the container of the body, sick or well, known or unknown, tattooed or veiled, we unequivocally declare, YES, WE/THEY ARE HUMAN. Engaging with and embracing a larger scope of humanity, we are moved to take responsibility for ourselves as individuals who stand with and for each other. With such momentum, WE move forward.

*Photo Credits: Faustin Linyekula, Agathe Poupeney; Panaibra Gabriel Canda: Arthur Fink*

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<sup>13</sup> Olu Oguibe 2004, 13; original emphasis.