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The Brazilian Contemporary Dance Scene of the *Periferia*

Abstract

The aim of this article is to discuss the recent changes in scenic dance in Brazil. Until the beginning of the 2000s, scenic dance was primarily practiced by middle class white dancers, whereas more recently there is a greater representation of Afro-Brazilians and socially less privileged people who come from the outskirts of cities (*periferia*). The author argues that this change of paradigm is happening due to cultural policies implemented by local governments, as they attempted to provide entertaining and creative activities to help diminish violence in large urban centers, starting in the 1990s. Since these cultural policies have been developing and increasing during the last twenty years, and taking into consideration the issues of

decolonialization present in the broader panorama of Latin America, this article's goal is to discuss the growing presence of artists and dance collectives addressing ethnic and social issues in their work in an attempt to challenge established hegemonic values. In order to accomplish this task, the author refers to social theories related to decolonialization and marginalized communities of the periphery as established by various theoreticians, including Frantz Fanon, Milton Santos, Stuart Hall, Boaventura de Souza Santos, Walter D. Mignolo, and Anibal Quijano.

Keywords

contemporary dance, Brazil, periphery, decolonialism

Abstrakt

Współczesna brazylijska scena taneczna na peryferiach

Celem tego artykułu jest omówienie zmian w tańcu scenicznym w Brazylii w ostatnich latach. Do początku XXI wieku praktykowany był głównie przez białych tancerzy z klasy średniej, ale od niedawna w większym stopniu uczestniczą w nim także Afro-Brazylijczycy i osoby ze środowisk mniej uprzywilejowanych społecznie pochodzące z obrzeży miast (*periferia*). Zdaniem autorki ta zmiana paradygmatu jest efektem polityki kulturalnej władz lokalnych, które począwszy od lat dziewięćdziesiątych starają się zapobiegać przemocy w dużych ośrodkach miejskich, zapewniając mieszkańcom rozrywkę i zajęcia artystyczne. Celem artykułu jest omówienie rosnącej obecności artystów i grup tanecznych poruszających kwestie etniczne i społeczne i rzucających wyzwanie hegemonicznym wartościom, uwzględniając efekty prowadzonej od dwudziestu lat polityki kulturalnej, a także procesy dekolonializacji w szerszej panoramie Ameryki Łacińskiej. Autorka odwołuje się do teorii społecznych związanych z dekolonizacją i marginalizowanymi społecznościami peryferii, sformułowanych między innymi przez Franza Fanona, Milтона Santosa, Stuarta Halla, Boaventurę de Souza Santosa, Waltera Mignolo i Anibala Quijano.

Słowa kluczowe

taniec współczesny, Brazylia, peryferie, dekolonializacja

The *Periferia* and its Decolonial Perspective

One may observe a growing interest these days in subjects such as social inclusion, ethnicity, and migration processes, disability, violence, bodies that do not fit the aesthetic standard, and gender issues in both everyday life and academic studies. Such subjects appear in the curatorship of exhibitions, theatrical plays, and dance festivals, where the pre-established hegemonic values are challenged by creating thematic confrontations with conservative visions and principles. On the other hand, particularly in Latin America, these subjects are frequently discussed from the point of view of decolonial practices. Firstly, these practices aim at giving voice to the indigenous people, and mainly in Brazil, to both those of African descent and the underprivileged classes in the *periferia*,¹ which have had their culture devalued and marginalized since the beginning of colonization, in the sixteenth century.

However, when we talk about decoloniality in Brazil nowadays, many also consider contemporary dance works or those that make use of other dance languages originating from a heritage considered “Eurocentric” when they are choreographed by these groups or have these themes as the subject of their work. Therefore, this article does not focus, for example, on popular events such as samba circles or *cavalo marinho* parties. It does not even refer to hip-hop “battles,” or to funk dances that take place on the outskirts of large urban centers, but rather refers to groups, collectives, and artists that combine these languages and take them onto a theatrical dance scene, which we will refer to as “scenic dance.”

The scenic dance performed in the *periferia* refers to dance performed in the areas on the edges of a city or a society, and in some instances including slums in the middle of a city. For the most part geographically, economically, and socially marginalized, such low-income communities offer fewer employment opportunities and give limited access to high-quality education and healthcare, and in response, scenic dance groups aim at challenging pre-established, dominant, or hegemonic values. Therefore, excluded from the mainstream, the *periferia* includes ethnic minorities and others, such as people with disabilities, as well as those that are discriminated against on the basis of gender, race, or sexual orientation. Furthermore, those in the *periferia* have limited representation and political influence. In this latter sense, challenges to the marginalization experienced in the *periferia* may include the fight for recognition, civil rights,

¹ The periphery (*periferia*) is usually the lesser developed part of a town or region; it is most often located at the edge of a city/region and far away from the developed, more “sophisticated” areas.

and a voice in decision-making processes. This can be done through activism, art, or alternative narratives that highlight the experiences and perspectives of these marginalized communities.

Boaventura de Sousa Santos states in his book *Epistemologies of the South: Justice against Epistemicide* that it is necessary to understand that “the world by far exceeds the Western understanding of the world.”² He makes a further remark that there is “no global social justice without global cognitive justice,” as well as that “the emancipatory transformations in the world may follow grammars and scripts other than those developed by Western-centric critical theory, and such diversity should be valorized.”³

Boaventura de Sousa Santos consequently explores the concept of “cognitive injustice,” which recognizes and values the epistemological diversity by which people across the Global South lead their lives and provide meaning to their existences. These beliefs appear in the works of, among others, Walter D. Mignolo, when he refers to the concepts of decoloniality, global coloniality, the geopolitics of knowledge, transmodernity, border thinking, and pluriversality. Mignolo’s perspective is based on the idea that colonial empires have been responsible for building the relationship between colonialism and modernity since the beginning of the colonization of America in the sixteenth century.

By applying the concept of “modernity/coloniality,” he states that there is no modernity without coloniality, and that coloniality here is constitutive, and not a derivative of modernity. He also points out that in order to achieve and maintain their domination, colonialists made use of the instruments of racism and sexism to valorize Western culture, in order to devalue the culture of indigenous people, and of enslaved Africans.

The Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano, one of the exponents of the modernity/coloniality group (of which Mignolo was a member), also called attention to the existence of the exploitation and racialization processes in Latin America. These processes were anchored in the discrimination against and inferiorization of Latin American people (mainly of the descendants of indigenous and African people) used by the European elite to exercise its dominance over the population. Quijano coined the concept of the coloniality of power, in which he argued that colonial relations did not end with the end of colonialism, and mentioned that this did not only occur in the economic and social spheres, but in the cultural realm as well.

² Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *Epistemologies of the South: Justice against Epistemicide* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 8.

³ Santos, *Epistemologies of the South*, 8.

Considering the above-mentioned concepts, we may say that the art produced by indigenous people and people of African descent remained greatly undervalued for centuries. Thus, in the 1970s, when various governments started to plan the implementation of cultural policies to address these issues, several initiatives were designed to “bring culture” to the people that lived in the far-away countryside. A prime example of such a philosophy in South America is the Barca da Cultura (Culture Boat) project.⁴ The then Brazilian ambassador to Chile and cultural promoter Paschoal Carlos Magno designed the Barca de Cultura. The Brazilian Ministry of Education and Culture sponsored it, and it toured around fifty–five cities in Brazil during the period of the dictatorship (1964–1985). The predominant mentality of this project was that the “erudite/European culture” should take precedence and social projects should make it more accessible to the public. Until then, both the culture and background of the indigenous and the *quilombola*⁵ populations had not been taken into consideration and were hardly covered by the cultural policies of the government: “Certainly, these manifestations were considered unworthy of being recognized and treated as culture, when there were not simply repressed and silenced.”⁶

Although the first sociocultural projects began in the late 1970s, a cultural policy actually reflecting the importance of the most vulnerable population’s inclusion appeared only in the 1990s. One of the earliest projects was the Axé Project, in the state of Bahia, founded by Cesare de Florio La Rocca in collaboration with a group of Brazilians in 1990, which included Juca Ferreira, who would later become minister of culture in the Luis Inácio Lula da Silva government (2008–2010). This occurred, during the period when the democratic regime was in the early stages of being restored in Brazil, in order to diminish the growing number of violent acts in the largest cities in Brazil. With the establishment of a more inclusive cultural policy, which began during the Lula government from 2003, various sociocultural projects were implemented in the periferia, offering artistic training to its residents. Consequently, in the process of implementing

⁴ In February 1974, a boat with over 100 passengers including students, technicians, producers, assistants, journalists, and artists from various parts of Brazil left Pirapora (MG) and went up the São Francisco River to Petrolina (PE), then heading overland to Belém (PA), carrying with them theater, folklore, singing, music, and ballet shows. They also gave out books and offered puppet shows, magic, painting, and origami workshops to the riverside population within the regions covered. Its purpose was to provide an interdisciplinary experience and intense exchange of knowledge between the art cosmopolitans and the different cultural productions of Brazil.

⁵ *Quilombos* are territories that preserve ancestral knowledge in opposition to colonial logic, initially founded by African women and men who fought against slavery. They nowadays preserve knowledge regarding crops and Afrocentric culture.

⁶ Antonio Albino Canelas Rubim, “Cultural Policies of the Lula Government,” *Lusophone Journal of Cultural Studies* 1, no. 1 (2013): 247, <https://doi.org/10.21814/rlec.17>.

these projects, and above all, from the year 2003 on,⁷ it was becoming evident that, in addition to the need to provide access to so-called “erudite art,” it was also necessary to give voice to the people of these marginalized communities. Moreover, each group had a popular art of its own, and the mainstream started to accept these forms of expression as legitimate, no longer merely reflecting the idea of a democratization of culture, but in its place, one of a cultural democracy.

Then, in the speech at the ceremony of handing over the position, the minister Gilberto Gil said:

Let it truly be the home of Brazilian culture.

And what I mean by culture goes far beyond the limited and restrictive scope of academic concepts or the rites and liturgy of a supposed “artistic and intellectual class.” Culture, as someone once said, is not just “a kind of ignorance that distinguishes scholars.” Not only what is produced within the framework of forms canonized by Western codes, with their suspicious hierarchies. Nor will anyone hear me use the word “folklore.” The links between the erudite concept of “folklore” and cultural discrimination are more than close. They are intimate. “Folklore” is everything that, because of its antiquity, does not fit into the panorama of mass culture, that is produced by uneducated people, by “contemporary primitives,” as a kind of symbolic enclave, historically backward, in the contemporary world. . . . There is no “folklore”—what exists is culture. Culture as everything that is manifested in the use of something beyond its mere utility value. Culture as that what transcends the merely technical in each object we produce. Culture as a factory of the symbols of a people. Culture as a set of signs of each community and of the whole nation. Culture as the meaning of our actions, the sum of our gestures, the sense of our manners.⁸

The residents of the periferia considered the use of that geographical term as an expression of their political status, and thus the term became popularized. It was from that point possible to see it as a complex space, which admits the possibility of subversion against the cultural restrictions imposed on its

⁷ The cultural policies developed by the president and the ministers of culture, Gilberto Gil (2003–2008) and Juca Ferreira (2008–2010) was based on the broadening of the concept of culture, said “anthropological.” The assimilation of this broad notion allows the ministry to no longer be confined to the educated culture (in general: arts and heritage) and to open its borders to other types of cultures: popular, African-Brazilian, indigenous, of gender, of sexual orientation, of the media, of computer networks, of the peripheries, etc. Rubim, “Cultural Policies of the Lula Government,” 251–252.

⁸ Gilberto Gil’s inauguration speech, *Folha de S. Paulo* online, January 2, 2003, <https://www.folha.uol.com.br/folha/brasil/ult96u44344.shtml> (unless otherwise indicated, translations are those of the author).

inhabitants. It is in the periferia that deep ambivalences about urban space, such as the notions of poverty vs. wealth and center vs. periferia, are manifested. The periferia is a place where survival is difficult, where the population experiences scarcity on a daily basis. This leads us to the concept of the Brazilian geographer Milton Santos (2000), who refers to the periferia as a space of resistance to the perverse processes of the world. It is the contradiction between what the ideas of periferia and center symbolize that leads him to perceive this territory as a place where movements of resistance occur, in which history is circumscribed, and in which the future is already written.

For instance, in the dance field, the term periferia was first introduced by the hip-hop movement, which arrived in Brazil in the 1980s, and which later migrated to other artistic and cultural forms of expression, such as samba circles, evening parties, film clubs, and theater groups. The term periferia possessed, as one of its characteristics, an implied sense of denunciation, since it exposed to society its reality, thereby serving as a critique of the hegemonic neoliberal perspective. Therefore, the periferia contained and at the same time denied its own violence and poverty.

The proliferation of cultural projects in the periferia from the year 2003 on, which led to the formation of professional and artistic collectives, demonstrates that there has been an increase in cultural activities in those communities, although most of the theaters, cultural centers, cinemas, and other cultural venues still remain concentrated in the center of cities. That is why we also perceive an eagerness in the people of the periferia to express and celebrate their ancestors' culture, by presenting themes and movements related to their religious traditions (*candomblé*,⁹ *umbanda*¹⁰), as well as issues pertaining to racism and to various kinds of prejudices related to their social condition.

However, the aim nowadays is not merely to denounce, but also for group empowerment, by expressing who the people of the periferia are and what they represent. In this way, they reflect the ideas of Stuart Hall when he writes:

⁹ The Brazilian African-based religious practice of *candomblé* and related practices throughout the country use dance as a central feature of worship. Candomblé is an adaptation of the Yoruba spiritual tradition of West Africa, similar to the *santería* practice of Cuba. The *orixás* (orishas or deities) are believed to control the forces of nature. Candomblé dancers, mainly women, move counterclockwise, singing the praises of the orixás, while three male drummers summon the deities to the festival. Susan V. Cashion, "Latin American Dance," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, September 2, 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/art/Latin-American-dance>.

¹⁰ Umbanda is a Brazilian spirit-incorporation tradition. It first appears in historical record in the early twentieth century in the large cities of southern Brazil, especially São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro. Views of Umbanda contain a basic ambiguity: it is almost always classified as "Afro-Brazilian," but it is characterized as a mixture of Kardecist spiritism (a transplanted and Brazilianized European esoteric tradition) and candomblé (a transplanted and Brazilianized West/Central African tradition). Stephen Engler, "Umbanda: Africana or Esoteric?," *Open Library of Humanities Journal* 6, no. 1 (2020): 25, <https://doi.org/10.16995/olh.469>.

The founding myths of cultural identity are, by definition, transitory: not only are they outside of history, but they are fundamentally ahistorical. History is linear; the narrative structure of myths is cyclical. But within the story, its meaning is often transformed.¹¹

This is also the reason for an ever-increasing number of projects and, consequently, of professional groups and collectives that emerge due to their effort to rescue the “citizenship” of the communities they serve. In the last census carried out in Brazil in 2022, for example, it is possible to detect that there had been an increase of people recognizing themselves as black, brown, or indigenous.¹²

Therefore, especially in Brazil, many artists, collectives, and groups, as well as university students, use the term “decolonial” to designate those works carried out in the periferia that deal with ethnic and gender issues. Thus, these artistic works are not only based on popular dances of the indigenous and African traditions, but also in combination with Afro-American dances, such as breaking, locking, popping, krumping, vogue, and funk, all of which are commonly practiced in the periferia. People begin to view these dances as decolonial when they call for a search for their identity, affirmation, and recognition.

Many groups and collectives came into existence as a result of cultural projects established by NGOs and the government, which gradually modified the profile of dancers in Brazil. We can now see that more and more dancers who got their start in social projects now train in public technical schools, such as, for example, the ETEC, the Núcleo Luz, and EDASP in São Paulo, ETE Adolpho Bloch in Rio de Janeiro, and the Funceb in Salvador, and later move on to public universities to complete their training in the dance area.

¹¹ Stuart Hall, “Pensando a Diáspora (Reflexões Sobre a Terra no Exterior),” trans. Adelaide La Guardia Resende, in *Da Diáspora: Identidades e Mediações Culturais*, ed. Liv Sovik (Belo Horizonte: Editora UFMG, 2003), 29.

¹² In 2022, about 92.1 million persons reported being brown, which corresponds to 45.3% of the country’s population. Since 1991, this total had not exceeded the white population, which amounted to 88.2 million (or 4.5% of the population in Brazil). Another 20.6 million persons reported being black (10.2%), whereas 1.7 million reported being indigenous (0.8%) and 0.85 million, Asian (0.4%). These data come from the 2022 population census, ethnic-racial identification of the population by sex and age. See Caio Belandi and Irene Gomes, “Census: Self-reported Brown Population is the Majority in Brazil for the First Time,” IBGE News Agency website, last updated January 19, 2024, <https://agenciadenoticias.ibge.gov.br/en/agencia-news/2184-news-agency/news/38726-2022-census-self-reported-brown-population-is-the-majority-in-brazil-for-the-first-time>.

Dance Groups Engaged with the Periferia

In order to illustrate this process, we think it is important to make some comments on the aims and values of a few of these dance groups in the cities of São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, which have focused their work on social issues and that are in some way engaged in performing and training people from the periferia. When talking about these themes, and to encourage discussion on the periferia itself, we should move the subject of the periferia to the center of the discussion, as well as transporting the people from the center of the city in to get to know the periferia more closely. Therefore, we will address some works, such as those of the Cia Étnica de Dança, the Cia Sansacroma, the Coletivo Cal-câneos, the Grupo Treme-Terra, the Gumboot Dance Brasil, the Lia Rodrigues Cia de Dança, and the Cia REC of Alice Ripoll, which will help us understand this ever-evolving situation.

One of the first dance companies to follow this working philosophy was the Cia Étnica de Dança, created in 1994 and composed of both the choreographer Carmen Luz and the actress and dancer Zenaide Zen in the city of Rio de Janeiro, originally under the name Cia Étnica de Dança e Teatro. The group established its headquarters in a favela located on the Morro do Andaraí, in the North Zone (Zona Norte) of Rio de Janeiro, in 1997, and began by integrating artistic work with a social project. The group began offering training courses to the community to qualify artists who would later join the company, and technicians who would work in the performing arts field. In an interview with Karla Hansen, Carmen Luz stated that they chose the Morro do Andaraí because at that time there were no social projects and no cultural or entertainment options there.¹³ Between 1997 and 2000, the Cia Étnica created and performed the work *Cobertores* (Blankets), first presented as a performance and intervention, and later as a full-evening show. In this piece, the interpreters would start by observing homeless people, focusing on their movement when walking with their blankets. The choreography showed someone dancing in the scene, but only the blanket is visible. Initially, the artistic work was considered a mere social project with no artistic value. However, as a result of their performance at the Panorama Festival in the year 2000, the company gained notoriety. After that, Cia Étnica, which was focused on art as an instrument of social transformation and as a path to citizenship, continued its artistic research on the gestures, history, and movements of ordinarily varied body types, not all conforming to established

¹³ Karen Hansen, "Cia Étnica de Dança e Teatro: Entrevista com Carmen Luz," *Revista Educação Pública* 6, no. 1 (2006), <https://educacaopublica.cecierj.edu.br/artigos/6/1/cia-etnica-de-danca-e-teatro>.

norms of professional dance, and started a series of sociocultural projects with young residents of the region.

In another interview, published in 2009, Carmen Luz offers her thoughts on the training work:

For me, to turn a boy into a citizen is when we tell him that we are not there to give anything, but to exchange. Such a boy comes with all the experience of his community, but also feeling undervalued, with very low self-esteem. The first experiment is to make him improve his self-esteem. How can this be done? By including this question into a dance modality. Firstly, he is allowed to dance. We are not looking for skinny boys or skinny girls; the dance will incorporate their bodies, those bodies from the periferia. Nowadays, we already have muses from the periferia, and this is a cool project. We have all these bodies there, shaped by that geography, by those slopes. So, the first thing to do is to believe in this body, in this body as a generator of cool possibilities for each one, even if it is not a body molded with the purpose of becoming the body of a dancer, but a body one learns to respect, and from it to be able to better place oneself in one's own life.¹⁴

The Cia Sansacroma, created in 2002 by actress, dancer, and choreographer Gal Martins, is a contemporary dance group from the city of São Paulo. The name of the company is taken from the name of an imaginary bird from the legends of some African villages, known as a protector of children. The company focuses its work on controversial social issues, including themes related to racial and gender issues, and to the periphery itself. It operates in the southernmost part of the city of São Paulo, and has as its aim to decentralize contemporary dance and make it accessible to the whole city. It has been accomplishing this with a repertoire¹⁵ related to racism and the status of black people since its inception, starting with its first work, created in 2002. The group's recent work, *Vala: Corpos Negros e Sobrevida* (Grave: Black Bodies and Survival), was inspired by the philosophy of Achille Mbembe, and was created after a visit to the Pretos Novos Cemetery, in Rio de Janeiro—a site where archaeologists found more

¹⁴ Carmen Luz, interview by Claudia Ferreira and Heloisa Buarque de Hollanda, in *A Nova Expressão das Mulheres da Periferia: Relatório da Pesquisa* (Rio de Janeiro: Centro de Atividades Culturais, Econômicas e Sociais, 2009), 4–27, http://www.memoriaemovimentossociais.com.br/sites/default/files/publicacao/a_nova_expressao_das_mulheres_da_periferia.pdf.

¹⁵ Among the repertoire are such titles as: *Negro Por Brasil* (Black People for Brazil), *Identifique-se* (Identify Yourself), *Marchas* (Marches), *Orfeu Dilacerado* (Torn Orpheus), and *Fragmentos de um Choque* (Fragments of a Crash).

PHOTO COURTESY OF CIA SANSACROMA



Cia Sansacroma's *Vala: Corpos Negros e Sobrevidas*, dir. Gal Martins, 2022

than 5,000 fragments of the bones and teeth of black people. It is estimated that up to 20,000 bodies of enslaved Africans, who died during the three-month sea voyage to Brazil, are buried there. These findings are proof of the barbarism that occurred during the transatlantic slave trade to Brazil, one of the most violent, traumatizing, and horrific eras in world history.

According to Gal Martins:

Our purpose is to show that we were buried but despite everything we have survived. This burial is not literal; it symbolizes the attempts made to kill our ancestry by building the idea of the hollow body under the policy of violence that prevailed in the country then. Moreover, as black people, we must be constantly reborn.¹⁶

¹⁶ Tarcísio Cunha, "Cia Sansacroma estreia *Vala: Corpos Negros e Sobrevidas* no Sesc Belenzinho," *Agenda de Dança* website, January 1, 2022, <http://www.agendadedanca.com.br/cia-sansacroma-estreia-vala-corpos-negros-e-sobrevidas-no-sesc-belenzinho/>.



PHOTO COURTESY OF CIA SANSACROMA

Cia Sansacroma's *Vala: Corpos Negros e Sobrevidas*,
dir. Gal Martins, 2022

Achille Mbembe, in the essay *Necropolitics*, based his work on the concept of biopower and its relationship with sovereignty and the state of exception. The author says that the maximum expression of sovereignty lies in the power and ability to choose who can live and who can die, while the exercise of sovereignty is made explicit, among other possibilities, by the control over mortality. As a scholar on slavery, decolonization, and blackness, he related Foucault's discourse on power to a state racism present in contemporary societies, which strengthened death policies (*necropolitics*). Gal Martins's choreographic conception revolves around the issue of genocide imposed on enslaved blacks, who came to Brazil between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. She transposes this idea to the twenty-first century. She points to the issue of skin color prejudice when expressing the idea of cleansing, of bleaching, in order to justify social values, urbanity, civility, public safety, and order and to justify the homicides of blacks, often by the police, who consider them criminals.

At its headquarters, the cultural center Ninho Sansacroma offers, in addition to the company's work, a program by other dance companies from the region of Capão Redondo, in the city of São Paulo, seeking to make a link between central and local productions. Involved with a political movement called Peripheral Culture, the Espaço Ninho Sansacroma has a big responsibility, and has as its goal an intervention to meet the social and cultural reality of this specific population, enabling a practice of the democratization and decentralization of contemporary dance production and other elements of body arts in the city. The work of Espaço Ninho Sansacroma also includes the training of artists that already direct their own collectives, as is the case with Vitor Almeida who, while still dancing at Cia Sansacroma, founded the Coletivo Calcâneos in the East Zone (Zona Leste) of São Paulo. Vitor began his studies at the Pescadores de Ilusões cultural project, followed by studying at the Escola Estadual Maria de Lourdes in the São Paulo's East Zone, then at the Núcleo Luz cultural project, and finally at the ETEC de Artes. Vitor Almeida's dance history followed a path that may be considered the result of the training offered by cultural projects for the low-income population. Through its dance, the Coletivo Calcâneo deals with the various facets of social vulnerability. The group expresses itself with the intent of instigating critical-reflective questions through its dance for the periferia population.

Another example is the Cia Treme Terra, founded in 2006 and directed by João Nascimento and Firmino Pitanga. The company adopts a style called by its founders Contemporary Black Dance. It develops a technical study in body practices associated with Modern Dance, Capoeira, and Dance of the Orixás,¹⁷ in constant dialogue with live music that comes from traditional drums and electro-acoustic instruments. Hence, the company structures itself in a trans-cultural and transdisciplinary way, to become an element in the "culture of resistance," embroiled in political issues that are linked to the history marked by the process of the African diaspora in Brazil. Most of the cultural roots of the Brazilian people are found in the African heritage (of the Bantus, Jejes, and Nagôs peoples), as well as in the heritage of indigenous peoples and of immigrants from other cultural backgrounds, which has led to an expansion of territories that present infinite aesthetic, thematic, and poetic references.

The cultural exchange between these cultures forms a bridge in a spherical and mutating perspective. For instance, the creation of *Terreiro Urbano* was inspired by the mythology of the orixás, composed of choreographies and music

¹⁷ Any of the minor gods or spirits of traditional Yoruba religion and its South American and Caribbean offshoots, such as santería and candomblé.

that dialogue with this universe and form pictures of the African diaspora and its influence on other cultures that are imbedded in a great metropolis. The idea is not to present the traditional *terreiro*¹⁸ on stage in the same way it is done in African sacred rituals, but rather to create a contemporary reinterpretation of these rituals, a kaleidoscope of Afro-Brazilian culture based on the mythology of the orixás, their songs and movements. The show also incorporates the aesthetics of hip-hop, and unites traditional African rhythms with hip-hop and all of its aesthetics, including rap music and a graphite painting made virtually on stage. Another important work by this company is *Black Skin, White Masks*, inspired by the Frantz Fanon book of the same title. The sources of this performance are studies on ethnic-racial relations in Brazil. Poetically, from a contemporary and urban reading, the scenes discuss racism in the context of a sociocultural pathology and healing rituals inspired by the manifestations in candomblé yards.

The Cia Treme Terra gained notoriety through being highly appreciated both by theater audiences on the outskirts of cities and in both wealthy and lower-income neighborhoods of the city center. The company also works to valorize and popularize Afro-Brazilian culture by providing artistic training workshops for young people at its headquarters, located in the Rio Pequeno neighborhood, close to the slums, in the West Zone (Zona Oeste) of São Paulo.

The Instituto Nação established the Afrobases in 2009, with the purpose of strengthening the ethnic and cultural identity of low-income youth living in their neighborhoods, aiming at improving self-esteem, the feeling of belonging of the individual to their group, to their community, and to their city. The purpose of all these endeavors was to collaborate in the effort to reduce social disadvantages and increase access to culture, in full compliance with the Statute of the Child and the Adolescent (ECA, Law 8069/90). The Afrobases are independent community cultural centers, in which artistic workshops are held in percussion, dance, and appreciation, literary-musical soirées are put on, and Brazilian culture of African origin is disseminated, as well as where cultural workshops, meetings with masters and griots,¹⁹ and round tables, cinema, phonographic production, and weekly rehearsals with Cia Treme Terra also take place.

Another success story is that of dancer and choreographer Rubens Oliveira, whose development as a dancer included time spent as a member of the Arrastão project at Campo Limpo, a neighborhood in the South Zone (Zona Sul) of São

¹⁸ A yard where the rituals for candomblé and other Afro-Brazilian religions take place.

¹⁹ West African troubadour-historian. The griot profession is hereditary and has long been a part of West African culture. The griots' role has traditionally been to preserve the genealogies, historical narratives, and oral traditions of their people; praise songs are also part of the griot's repertoire.

Paulo, and, later on through participation in the Dança Comunidade project, led by choreographer Ivaldo Bertazzo.²⁰ He was very impressed by the Project Arrastão in 2002, when he was among a group of students that his teacher took to see the show *Dança das Marés*, staged by Bertazzo with sixty-two young residents of the Complexo da Maré,²¹ in the North Zone of Rio de Janeiro. A short time later, upon returning to the city of São Paulo, Bertazzo created a new social project to teach his dance method to fifty-five youngsters, who would later act as multipliers in their communities. Rubens Oliveira joined Bertazzo's project, where he made a great impact and achieved much success. Oliveira, while with Bertazzo, experienced a meteoric rise in his dance career. During his involvement in Bertazzo's project, the group presented four shows in four years in Brazil and abroad. During this period, the group became professional, continuing its training during pre-established working hours. When another project of Bertazzo, *Cidadão Dançante*, ended, Oliveira went to South Africa to intensify his research on gumboot dance at the place of its origin.²² On his return to Brazil in 2008, he formed the Gumboot Dance Brasil Group and began to work as a choreographer with former members of Bertazzo's project. Oliveira decided to propose a project for the NGO, Arrastão. He then created the Dança Pélagos group, with thirty young people from a background similar to his own when he first arrived at the Arrastão project.

The Gumboot Dance Brasil Group, basing its work on the Brazilian historical context, develops and improves the research made on the gumboot movement. This research was updated and harmonized according to the dancers' body structures, taking into consideration different sources, such as capoeira, classical ballet, Indian dance, breaking, contemporary dance, and street theater. One of its works, *Subterrâneo*, draws a parallel between the experience of African miners in the nineteenth century, with the challenges involved in their survival, and that of the Afro-Brazilian and the peripheral population of the largest Brazilian

²⁰ Ivaldo Bertazzo (born 1949) is a Brazilian dancer and choreographer. He invented the "dancing citizen", a concept that brought ordinary people from different professions and social classes to the stage. In 1975, he created the School of Movement—Ivaldo Bertazzo Method, in which he valued awareness of body movements. The dancer also deepened his studies on physiotherapy as a way to further enrich his technique. In 30 years, he has created 36 shows. He has worked on the notion of citizenship allied to dance. His dance concept formed part of the methodology of several NGOs and projects of dance groups located in the periphery of São Paulo.

²¹ Complexo da Maré is a large slum in Rio de Janeiro with around 140,000 inhabitants.

²² Gumboot dancing originated in South Africa during the oppressive apartheid pass laws. Gumboot dancing was originally a means of communication between miners who were forbidden to speak to each other. Gumboot dance has since evolved into a South African art form. The dancers expand on the traditional steps with the addition of contemporary movement, music, and song.

metropolises today. The group has also experienced great success, with its shows appreciated by people from both wealthy and low-income neighborhoods.

As has been described above, innumerable collectives, groups, and companies on the periphery have links to sociocultural projects in the regions in which they are located and have as a goal the intention to act as multipliers. Regarding these dance groups that support the communities of the periferia, we must not fail to mention some international examples too, such as the work being done by choreographers Lia Rodrigues and Alice Ripoll. However, these two examples deviate a little from the context exposed until here, as they are white artists and come from the middle class. However, these examples can help the reader outside of Brazil to understand this growing tendency to talk about periferia.

Founder of the Lia Rodrigues Companhia de Danças, Lia Rodrigues is recognized for her efforts within the Complexo da Maré neighborhood and for her choreographic productions related to sociocultural and political issues, expressed, above all, through criticism and denunciation of the causes and effects of injustice, poverty and violence. Lia Rodrigues was born in São Paulo in 1956 and has had a long professional career. As a child, she lived far from the periferia. She had access to dance training, studied classical ballet, and attended the Faculty of History at the University of São Paulo, one of the best universities on the continent. She co-established the independent contemporary dance group Andança in 1977. From 1980 to 1982, she worked at the Compagnie Maguy Marin, in France. She moved to Rio de Janeiro in 1983, where she choreographed theater shows with many directors. Lia founded her own company, the Lia Rodrigues Companhia de Danças, in 1990, and created the Panorama Festival in 1992,²³ which she directed until 2004. At the suggestion of critic and researcher Silvia Soter, Rodrigues transferred her company that same year to the periferia, to the Complexo da Maré, where she developed artistic and educational activities in partnership with the NGO Redes da Maré. Her company and its partnership filled a void created by the closure of a previous project in that community, the Centro de Estudos e Ações Solidárias da Maré (CEASM), coordinated by Bertazzo, sponsored by Petrobras, and which was in operation between the years 2000 and 2002. Thus, when CEASM found out that sixty-six young people had been abandoned, without assistance to continue their dance careers due to the termination of Bertazzo's project, the director of CEASM asked Silvia Soter to find a way to help these young people. The Lia Rodrigues Companhia de Danças created a group called Corpo de Dança da Maré, in which children and young

²³ The Panorama Festival is an acclaimed dance festival, which has been held since 1992 in the city of Rio de Janeiro.

people from the Complexo da Maré participated, under the professional direction of renowned professional musicians, actors and dancers, for a period of three years. This collaboration led to the foundation of the Centro de Artes da Maré in 2009, and the Escola Livre de Danças da Maré in 2011.

Silvia Soter reported that she and Eliana Sousa Silva wrote the proposal to establish the Escola de Dança da Maré in 2003, based on a project sent to Petrobrás for public notice. In her own words:

We designed the project, and I created the Escola de Dança da Maré, which actually opened its doors in 2004. So, we made two groups: one group we called the “training group”. They were young people who got some experience with Ivaldo Bertazzo. They worked daily in the afternoon and received an allowance. They had excellent teachers and they worked intensively At the same time, we created another group, which offered workshops open to the Maré community, to democratize dance access to the Complexo da Maré. There were older people among them, so we offered creative dance, body awareness, and urban dances . . . So, we founded a school, which worked from 2004 to 2005 and had more than 500 students enrolled.²⁴

Still, according to Soter’s account, although the Escola de Dança da Maré suspended its activities due to a loss of sponsorship and to political issues, the Companhia da Lia Rodrigues remained in the Maré. The CEAMS institution was dissolved, and, in 2007, another one was created, the Redes de Desenvolvimento da Maré. Also in 2007, Eliana Sousa Silva invited Silvia Soter to carry out a new project, and in 2008, Lia Rodrigues founded the Centro de Artes na Maré (CAM).

CAM is presently a large space that operates in two sheds, one which is occupied by Lia Rodrigues’s dance company and the other belonging to the Escola Livre de Dança da Maré and to the theater residency, where it carries out ongoing works and activities free of charge, articulating dance, training and socio-educational actions around two pedagogical programs. Nucleus 1 provides dance initiation workshops and is open to anyone who wants to dance, while Nucleus 2 offers daily training in dance and dance courses, with the goal of turning its students into professional dancers and encouraging research of creative material for fifteen youngsters. To join the Nucleus 2 program, the candidate must pass a selection process. The successful candidates receive a grant of USD 164,00 per month, donated by the Fondation d’entreprise Hermès. They may stay as long as

²⁴ Silvia Soter, interview by Maria Claudia Alves Guimarães and Beatriz Silvestre, November 4, 2022.



PHOTO RENATO MANGOLIN, COURTESY OF ALICE RIPOLL

Alice Ripoll and Cia Suave's *Cria*, dir. Alice Ripoll, 2017

they deem necessary, which may be one year, or even as many as four years or longer—its length varies, depending on how much time each individual needs to complete one's training.

CAM is a space for creating, training and sharing arts, as well as the headquarters of the Lia Rodrigues Companhia de Danças, where it has created and premiered its works: *Pororoca*, *Piracema*, *Pindorama*, *Para que o céu não caia* (So That the Sky Does Not Fall), *Fúria* (Fury) and *Encantado* (Enchanted). In 2009, with the support of the Prince Claus Foundation, it carried out the project, Nova Holanda—Novos Horizontes: Dança para Todos, with free dance classes for the residents of the Complexo da Maré. According to its coordinators, the CAM is maintained mostly by foreign sponsors, who also fund the Lia Rodrigues Companhia de Danças and the Escola Livre de Dança da Maré. However, Rodrigues's work does not refer directly to the communities of the periferia. It focuses on a strong, more generalized critique and denunciation of the causes and effects of injustice, poverty and violence. For example, in *Fúria*, presented in 2018, Rodrigues assembled a collection of images of the present and the past—images

of joy, pain, violence, and love—from Brazil and from the world. She and her dancers worked with a multiplicity of identities, mobility, appropriation of signs, and disguises of symbols. CAM created *Encantado* (2021) during the pandemic. Concepts of magic, enchantment and fascination were the guiding thread of the creative process, relating to a reflection on nature and on the actions that impact and threaten life on Earth. One of the questions raised throughout the performance was: how to charm our fears and place ourselves in the collective, close to each other? Dancers from other regions of the city were invited to join the cast, as well as dancers who trained in the Maré. Lia Rodrigues's project is not only aimed at those residing at the Maré Complex. When she performs in the city of Rio de Janeiro, she performs in the Maré Complex, but it's with the intention that people from other regions of the city will travel to and come in contact with the people of one of the most violent areas in Rio.²⁵

Another internationally renowned example is the work of artist Alice Ripoll in Rio de Janeiro. Born in a privileged, middle-class family, Alice Ripoll studied psychology before shifting her focus to dance. She began her career by taking a technical dance course at the Angel Vianna school, and then graduated in 2005 at the Faculdade Angel Vianna, a dance and physical rehabilitation center. That is why her work reveals her background in contemporary dance and somatic techniques (as we can see in her works at the beginning of her career, which she later combined with her interest in the urban cultures of the underprivileged classes).

According to Ripoll, after her first group was dissolved, she started to give contemporary dance classes within the framework of a social project in the *Chácara do Céu* slum, run by an NGO. She only worked there for a few months, since the project was soon cancelled. Despite that, she decided to continue instructing with only her own financial resources, because her students wanted to continue to learn dancing, and she aspired to create choreographies. She also felt that she had a social duty to help her students. Moreover, her interest in the culture of the periferia, such as in hip-hop music and dance, was growing and becoming more important to her than the conceptual paths of contemporary dance. She was particularly interested in funk shows, which she watched in Ramos (a neighborhood in the North Zone of Rio de Janeiro).

Therefore, Ripoll founded the Cia REC in 2009, where she developed a powerful group of dancers from the slums in Rio de Janeiro that elaborated on and recreated contemporary art. They danced hip-hop, since they initially had

²⁵ Ana Kiffer and Adriana Pavlova, "A dança expandida de Lia Rodrigues: Uma experiência artística e política na favela Maré," *Repertório*, no. 35 (2020): 185–207, <https://doi.org/10.9771/r.vi35.38561>.



PHOTO RENATO MANGOLIN, COURTESY OF ALICE RIPOLL

Alice Ripoll and Cia Suave's *Cria*, dir. Alice Ripoll, 2017

little experience in other techniques. She then started working with them on contact improvisation. The first performance of this group was *Cornaca*, which premiered in 2010. According to Alice Ripoll's website, this work touches on the universe of affections:

Five men on stage go through choreographies and situations that suggest the most varied ways of expressing a relationship. Friendship, competition, struggle, exclusion, care. The piece approaches different possibilities of body contact and the displacements that emerge from them.²⁶

Her work has since then alternated between dance and performance, and the shows often question not only the sociopolitical situation in Brazil, but also allow the dancers to express their own experiences and memories through dance movements.

²⁶ "Cornaca," Alice Ripoll website, <https://aliceripoll.com/Cornaca>, accessed February 25, 2024.

The title of the work in Portuguese—*acordo*—suggests a few meanings, such as: wake up, agreement, accordance, and convention. Another alternative is to read the title literally, the way it is written: “a-COR-do,” which separately means “the-color-of.” Without giving an answer to the question, the artist proposed to the audience to think of the city through the perspective of the performers she had been working with for eight years. They were black and lived in a favela. They suffered the discrimination that is applied to someone who is black and poor, and they were often mistaken for outlaws and intimidated at checkpoints by the police. Therefore, Ripoll states: “Once intimidated, poor people do not occupy the city, they only move between the favelas. The checkpoints are borders that function as a wall.”²⁷ This resonates with previously stated ideas of Milton Santos, in reference to the periferia, and with those of Frantz Fanon, when he writes about the need to give voice to the Afro-Brazilian people. On the other hand, Ripoll asks us to consider the many workers who are around us, fixing, building, cleaning, providing services for the middle and upper classes, and commuting to work from the periferia to the center of town. “Who’s stealing what? Whose crime is it?”—Ripoll and her dancers pose these questions to the audience, in order to make the public think about prejudice and about the relationship that society has with its working poor.

Alice Ripoll and the Cia REC’s joint work *Lavagem*, is an abstract work that activates multiple linguistic and semiotic connotations. The word *lavagem* means the act of cleaning, but it also means pigswill. This show presents very poetic scenes, especially when we see scenes with soap bubbles, referring us to the idea of a dream, a hope. In a conversation held after the premiere of *Lavagem* at the Ciało/Umysł Festival in Warsaw,²⁸ Alan Ferreira, who worked with Cia REC, and brought the idea of the show to the company, said that this performance also expresses a political criticism, by conveying the idea that the washing refers also to our mothers, grandmothers, and great-grandmothers who worked as laundresses, and insisted on and were proud to leave clothes very white and clean, in order to contradict the prejudice that associates black people with dirt. So, the dance and acting of the dancers is based on family memories, on African rituals, and on images of their ancestors’ daily lives.

Alice Ripoll spoke to me in an interview about the composition of her group today.²⁹ Many of those that started with her are no longer with the company,

²⁷ “acordo,” Alice Ripoll website, <https://aliceripoll.com/acordo>, accessed February 25, 2024.

²⁸ “Lavagem,” Ciało/Umysł Festival website, <https://cialoumysl.pl/wydarzenie/lavagem-2/>, accessed February 25, 2024.

²⁹ Alice Ripoll, interview by the author, August 3, 2022, Rio de Janeiro.



PHOTO MANOEL VASON, COURTESY OF ALICE RIPOLL

Alice Ripoll and Cia REC's *Lavagem*, dir. Alice Ripoll, 2021

with the exception of Alan Ferreira, who has been with her from the beginning. When she founded Cia Suave, she auditioned in order to choose not only the best *passinho*³⁰ dancers, but also dancers that had other repertoire, and Rômulo Galvão was one of them. He studied dance at a university, and danced *axé*³¹ and other Brazilians dances. Almost all of her dancers come from the periferia or from a poorer stratum of society. Although this occurred naturally at the beginning, when she now needs to replace someone, she prefers a person with the same profile as the previous one, in order to better express those same social issues that are portrayed in her work, such as racism. In addition to that, she and the company's cast believe that they should be providing opportunities for underprivileged people. Thus, the cast is primarily composed of inhabitants of favelas and from the periferia.

³⁰ *Passinho* is a term used in the Brazilian baile funk scene to refer to a specific dance move or step.

³¹ *Axé* is a music genre with its own dance style that originated in the state of Bahia in the 1980s during the popular carnival celebrations in Salvador. It combines various rhythms such as samba-reggae, frevo, reggae, merengue, forró, candomblé rhythms, pop-rock, as well as other Afro-Brazilian and Afro-Latin rhythms.

However, by working with the company, the dancers have been given the opportunity to work and dance professionally, and to travel abroad. As a result, their participation in the group has allowed them to improve their social status. It is interesting to point out that her companies perform more frequently abroad than in Brazil, proper.

Conclusions

Based on the examples presented, we have shown that the Brazilian dance scene has changed considerably, with the implementation of more inclusive cultural policies, especially in the last twenty years. Since these projects are still very small in number, while Brazil has a very large vulnerable population, they consequently reach a small proportion of the population. And whereas in the past, most of the dancers were members of the upper- or middle-class elite, the number of dancers who come from less privileged backgrounds has increased significantly. A full picture of the Brazilian dance scene provides us with examples of artists who began their careers in social projects and who today dance professionally while also working as teachers in projects in the periferia, such as Vitor Almeida (Cia Sansacroma and Coletivo Calcâneos), Rubens Oliveira (Gumboot Dance Brasil), Leonardo Nunes (Cia Lia Rodrigues) and Rômulo Galvão (Cia Suave). Some of these artists had the opportunity to study in technical schools and then study dance at public universities. Examples like these are very frequent among the new generation of contemporary dance professionals, as well as in dance courses at universities across the country.

These artists quite frequently bring proposals that reflect social issues related to life in the periferia, as well as seeking to express them in a language that is derived from a mixture of capoeira, traditional Brazilian dances, combined with dances of African origin, and urban dances. As per a decolonial perspective, they seek to give value to their culture, their values, and their inclusion in a society where social exclusion is commonly practiced. As a result, even the programmatic content of these courses have undergone changes in order to embrace a more decolonial perspective, considering that they also provide more access to Afro-Brazilian, indigenous, and low-income students. Most of the students live in the periferia, in the outskirts of large urban centers and in the countryside. So, new spaces often open up to engage in discussions on disability and gender issues, as well as for the teaching of traditional Brazilian dances, capoeira, and hip hop, even while these dance groups, projects, and schools try to maintain a confluence with anatomy studies, kinesiology, and techniques such as classical

ballet, modern dance, and contemporary dance, combined with studies in improvisation, creation, and pedagogical issues.

Thus, these emerging artists are multiplying and transforming the Brazilian dance scene, bringing the periphery to the center of their discussions. In addition to transforming the dance scene, many also end up acting as art educators and engaging in cultural projects, frequently returning to their places of origin in order to enrich their communities with the knowledge they have accumulated and further extending this chain of artistic training.



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