

Mind the Gap: The Artist in Culture Studies

Venue: Universidade Católica Portuguesa

Date: 2-3 November 2015

Title: Black dance and its poetic policies: strategies of visibility in the contemporary context.

Name: Fernando Marques Camargo Ferraz

Institutional affiliation: Universidade Estadual Paulista – Unesp (São Paulo/Brazil) and University of Flórida (UF- Visiting Scholar from August 2015-2016).

Sponsor: FAPESP (Process: 2015/06910-4)

Contact details: fernandoferraz@hotmail.com or fferraz@arts.ufl.edu

Speaking about dance in Brazil is no easy task. We lack two basic things: understanding about the trajectory of artists who have dedicated their lives to building a coreographycal repertoire and teaching methodologies to dances connected to African-Brazilian cultural manifestations as well as understanding about the recalcitrant whitening policies which make our culture and society suffer, always willing to whiten the beauty patterns and to make effective discussions about Black affirmative action impossible.

The assumption of this paper is in the existence of a Black Dance and that it stands amongst the artistic fields of the African diaspora. However, the transatlantic location that is publicized about it does not interrupt its invisibility processes. The Brazilian producers of Black Dance have historically worked hard to be recognized and to have access to the means of cultural production. These artists form a plural field acting in different spaces – in the Afro-Brazilian temples (aka *terreiros*), in their communities, in the public schools, in non-governmental organizations, in the Schools of Samba – but they also operate in dance companies, in independent artistic groups or as autonomous researchers and artists linked to a university or not. These positions become more and more complex as these actors manage to circulate in more than one of these places, planning a more kaleidoscope-like and rhizomatic context, able to nurture transits and to disorganize their distinctions and limits in all areas – economical, spacial, social, cultural, ethnic-racial and artistic.

Acknowledging the know-how of a Black dance requires considering issues about the affirmative action in an unequal country such as Brazil, including in the scenic arts. It is also required to question stereotypes about the Black dancing body and about

what a Black corporality would be as far as dance is concerned, no matter what color that moving body is.

Why name this dance? Because the artistic field is also inserted in socio-political disputes in which privilege is reproduced and artistic practices have no power to unify the differences by themselves or exempt themselves from reifying the stereotyping and/or exclusion processes that do take place within the dance world.

It is not about questioning how legitimate it is for a white person to get involved with the traditional culture of African descent or for a black person to take part in a Eurocentric art. After all, there is, above all else, artistic freedom. On the other hand, there is also an urge to stand up for a transparent political stance – towards denying presumably non-political or ideologically exempt attitudes – which make an effort to denaturalize socially excluding, stigmatizing and/or racist situations which spring from the inequality among the dancers, in the invisibility of the blacks, and in the lack of black protagonism. There is also an urge to discourage the denial of the debate about what the white privilege actually is in the means of production and consumption, having the cultural circulation as a starting point, and an urge to build a critical look upon the condescending points of view of both black and white researchers as far as the processes of exotification and commercialization of the black culture.

I wonder if in the name of autonomous poetics I can ignore political processes in which the artist is located and does not question the spaces where power and speech are. Would it be unreasonable for a white artist to question his responsibility and contribution to the anti-racist warfare, especially when they interact with poetics that is linked to the culture of African descent? Is it just about the use of and manipulation of that culture or is there, therefore, an inherent ethical relationship that questions the place socially established to black people, their actual possibility of protagonism, which is, by the way, a demand still so little understood, though it is as old as the black movement itself?

What must also be part of the debate is the pitfalls of the black political discourse, when it reproduces a conservative perspective of black cultural traditions. This perspective demands a monopoly around the multiple forms of expression; however, this approach essentializes and also disconnects the Black cultural traditions and actually supports the disconnection between these repertoires and the more contemporary and hybrid artistic processes. How can you reconfigure the discourse about the authenticity and purity of the Black cultural and artistic manifestation which

has been publicized as positive when this discourse many times actually solely reproduces the exotic and commercial black image? How can you deal with the idea of a black identity as a finished, complete, and crystallized product? What is the relationship between the identity policies in Black art and the repositioning that doing art seems to require?

This article does not intend to solve these issues, to generate a manual on how to counterattack the mistakes and handicaps in the production of a black dance or even to indicate its limits. What it does intend to do is to launch a critical look over the language of Black dance and to reflect upon its history and current events. My aim is to build an overview which helps to rethink the political poetics of Black dance today, using as a guiding principle the analysis of the political tensions present in the dance world in São Paulo City (Brazil), in which the black dance artists have mobilized in order to question publicly about the institutionalized racism in scenic arts. This process was possible thanks to the organization of artists in forums dedicated to building strategies of access to governmental subsidies towards contemporary dance in that city. This articulation enabled groups who were previously on the margin of these subsidies to have access to them, bringing about the urge to reflect upon the impossibility of imagining paradigmatic poetics in contemporary dance, criticism to the class and race stigmas, as well as the defense of the plurality of bodies and aesthetics in this field.