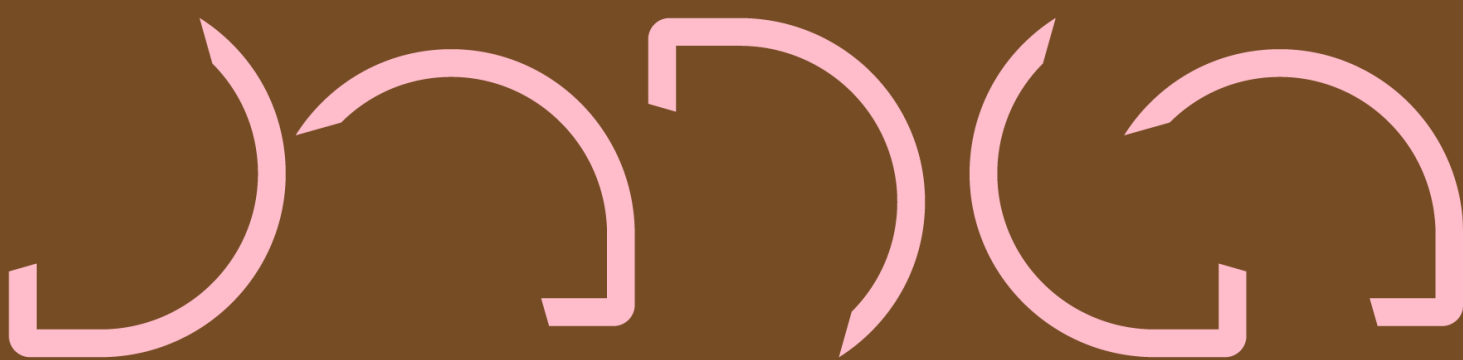


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# Aerial Company Dance: a proposal to rescue black corporeality in the Gafieira Carioca Dance

Paula Alvarenga Otero

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## *ABSTRACT*

This essay deals with the possibility of rescuing black corporeality in Rio de Janeiro's Gafieira Dance by approaching some of the social and cultural characteristics of the capitalist logic that influences the colonial planning of domination of bodies and their gestures, as well as forgetting the African origin of certain cultural movements, such as the Gafieira Dance. The essay focuses on some possibilities of unveiling and strengthening this dance and its powers as a language capable of creating fissures in systems of domination, by bringing the thinking and some creative and pedagogical practices of the choreographer and dancer João Carlos Ramos and his dance company, Cia. Aérea de Dança. The main authors who provide theoretical support to this writing are: Leda Maria Martins, Sueli Rolnik, Muniz Sodré and Luiz Rufino.

**KEYWORDS** Cia. Aérea de Dança; João Carlos Ramos; Gafieira Dance; Samba; Citizenship Action.

# **Aerial Company Dance: a proposal to rescue black corporeality in the Gafieira Carioca Dance**

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## Introdução

The capitalist and colonial logic of domination has a dizzying impact on the bodies and corporeality of city inhabitants, in close relation with urbanization processes. The urban skeleton-structure imprints different shapes on the skeleton-structures of bodies, by shaping racial, social, gender and territorial hierarchies. Here, I call the foundations of both the *house-city* and the *house-body* a *skeleton-structure*, inspired by the metaphor proposed by Sodré in which “house” would be a

living metaphor of the positions of resistance adopted by the black community. [...] The semiotic economy of the house, that is, its tactical and operational arrangements, made it a dynamic field for reworking elements of African cultural tradition, generating meanings capable of giving shape to a new mode of urban penetration for the black contingents (Sodré, 1998, p.15-16).

From the image of the *skeleton-structure*, in which a house is a structure that comes to life, in Sodré's words, above, it is possible to imagine that urban planning, with “governance tactics implemented in a part of the city as a model for the elites and with an ethnic-racial cut-element of coloniality” (Rolnik, 2020, n.p.) finds its imprint in the colonial planning of bodies, domination of their gestures and exclusion of the African origin of the feelings present in bodies and cultural movements, such as the Gafieira Dance, the focus of this essay. In this conjunction, more specifically in the city of Rio de Janeiro, black bodies and their gestures – ancestral load, bones, flesh, skin and vital energy – have, despite the achievements, suffered systematic attempts of erasure and oblivion. According to Rufino:

One of the most ingenious methods of this system of domination to annihilate others is through the production of oblivion. It invested massively in the destruction of communities, languages, rites and ways of explaining and interacting with the world. One aspect of colonization permeates the means of teaching. It causes a change that is not responsible for diversity, dialogue and the unfinished nature of the human (Rufino, 2021, n.p.).

This essay seeks to reflect on possibilities of unveiling and strengthening Gafieira Dance and its powers as a language capable

of creating fissures in systems of domination, by dialoguing with the thinking and some creative and pedagogical practices of the choreographer and dancer João Carlos Ramos and his Aerial Company Dance, based on the animation of a vibrating skeleton, which can shake the rigid control structures that hover over the dancing bodies on the floor of the gafeiras, the floor being the city itself.

Muniz Sodré (1998) pays attention to the implementation strategy, which began at the beginning of the 20th century, of solid resistance in order to escape the domination imposed by whiteness, organized in residences in the area called, at the time, Cidade Nova, where “famous heads of cults (ialorixás, babalorixás, babalaôs), known as *uncles* and *aunts*, promoted dance meetings (samba), apart from religious rituals (candomblé)” (Sodré, 1998, p.14, author's emphasis).

For Leda Maria Martins (2020), there is an intertwining between African cultures, in their diversity and differences, with diaspora cultures, which nourishes a contextualized thinking in a dynamic of advances and retreats that happen simultaneously, the measure of which is constitutes and is updated based on

a matrix thought, that of ancestry, the *mater* principle that interrelates everything that exists in the cosmos, transmitter of vital energy that guarantees the existence, at the same time, common and differentiated of all beings and everything in the cosmos, extension of curvilinear temporalities, ruler of the achievement of cultural practices, inhabited by a time that is not divided and not measured by the Western model of linear and progressive evolution (Martins, 2020, p. 42).

Orality was a privileged way of producing and transmitting knowledge, through “bodily performances, through rites, songs, dances, kinesthetic and kinetic ceremonies” (Martins, 2020, n.p.) The expressions *transmission of vital energy* and *curvilinear temporalities*, coined by Martins (2020) are, in my opinion, impregnated in the skeleton-body-city that underlies the Gafieira Dance and its subversive plots embodied “in the curved time of the spirals” (Martins, 2020, n.p.). These terms will be discussed later.

I will provide a brief presentation and analysis of some specific aspects of Gafieira Dance in the city of Rio de Janeiro, mediated by the activities of Aerial Company Dance, of which

Ramos is the founder and director, as well as the artistic and social micropolitics present in its trajectory, which resists the “models and composition of the process of domination and control of the urban body” (Rolnik, 2020, n.p.) and aims for “possibilities of experience, even if partial, of a democratic city” (Rolnik, 2020, n.p.).

In the last decades of the 19th century, balls and other festivities in several neighborhoods of Rio de Janeiro, held by free black people, had a strong impact on popular culture. According to Pires (2022), the search for civil rights among the population at the time made leisure and art a channel for defending their citizenship, a struggle that continues and is necessary today, despite many achievements. According to Ligiéro (2011), the term *Gafieira* emerged in the 20th century to designate ballroom dances in which black and mixed-race people gathered to dance and socialize. The white elite referred to them as “uncultured” who supposedly produced “gaffes” in a row. “But it was precisely there that a unique Rio way of singing/dancing/drumming samba, maxixe, and even choro became a dance thrived, in addition to popularizing countless other Afro-Atlantic musical traditions” (Ligiéro, 2011, p.143).

Therefore, the origin of *Danças de Gafieira* is the dance hall, and is strongly linked to social and family aspects. “Black people in the Baixada suburbs had recreational clubs for families to get together and socialize. There was a very strong family issue. Traditional families, like the Reis Family” (Ramos, 2024, n.p.). Listening to Ramos' words, I understand that these places functioned as “spaces with strength to build processes in favor of social emancipation” (Coutinho, 2020, p.40).

This social dance generated a dance aesthetic that was more committed to the body identity of the practitioners, as there was an aesthetic diversity in the dance hall. Different was valued. Even though the steps were the same, there was an individual gesture within the collective room. According to Ramos (2024), from the advent of ballroom dance academies, in the 1980s, there was a pasteurization of these gestures and people began to dance in a similar way; more than that, they start to desire this standardization. Ballroom dance teachers from the South Zone and the city center become recognized as references for *gafieira* dancing, which, in a

way, stimulates the creation of branded dance steps, collective body marks of those gestures that were previously singular and representative of an Afro-Brazilian cultural identity.

This gestural change is, from many perspectives, perverse, not only physically, in the sense of disarticulating the spontaneity of the dance steps, but symbolic, in the sense that it makes its origins invisible and configures itself as an instrument of power over bodies. In this way, a dance like the gafieira, germinated in African Bantu culture<sup>2</sup>, starts to be taught under a Eurocentric pedagogy and legitimized by whiteness.

Ramos highlights:

we need to feed our culture. I realize that year after year, this Congo Angola legacy is increasingly being lost to the detriment of this more spectacular dance, this more internationalized dance, more show business. The black guys, who are wonderful, start working to put on a show, to throw the woman and spin three times in the air and fall. Ok, it can be very good, but don't lose your sandal, your floor, where you stood, because otherwise you'll disconnect from it. And then the dance balls were lost. That's why the dance balls no longer have any meaning because the dance ball is for dancing, for interacting, it's not for you to put on a show, that's on stage [...]. Things are being pasteurized. Everything is the same. No, everything is not the same. Everyone may be coming from the same background, but each region has its own cultural particularity (Ramos, 2024, n.p.).

The Rio de Janeiro's samba, for example, is a typically urban dance that arises from the multiplicity of black dances and rhythms, present at the beginning of Brazilian social formation.

Ramos walks through his childhood territories through memory:

I remember that when I was a child I lived in Lins de Vasconcelos. Behind my house, going up, there was a hill on the left, it was Morro da Cachoeirinha, in front, Morro do Amor and on the right side was Morro do Barro Vermelho. So you see that in just one place you had several territories. And I remember that when some different guys appeared in the neighborhood, the *malandros* knew where they were from by the way they walked, the way they spoke. This is a survival strategy. Depending on where they went, they would shoot first and ask questions later.

From Ramos' speeches, it is clear that gesture and territory are closely related to each other and to the geographical movements carried out by Afro-descendant culture in Rio de

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<sup>2</sup> For in-depth information consult ZENÍCOLA, Denise Mancebo. Performance da Ginga: a dança do Samba de Gafieira. 1. ed. Rio de Janeiro: Mauad X: FAPERJ, 2023

Janeiro. The cultural production that comes from these movements, as well as their consequences, becomes peculiar, however, it cannot be ignored that “[...] every culture is crossed by relations of domination, more or less oppressive, between classes and social functions , and there is a history of bitter struggles between the people and dominant estates” (Sodré, 2020, apud Zenícola, 2023, p.78).

The universe of Gafieira Dance became “fashionable” again in the 1980s, and brought dancers and teachers into focus, as well as the creation of new styles and dance steps, becoming “a product to be sold to a middle class eager to learn steps in dance academies and practice at dances offered in different parts of the city” (Zenícola, 2023, p.110). If, on the one hand, these constant changes and new aspects acquired in the trajectory of comings and goings characteristic of urban popular dances guarantee their survival over time, on the other, they adjust to some gestural conformities of the dominant classes. In this sense, the *malandragem* of Dança de Gafieira would be in bringing to light the ancestry of agents whose territories and actions are at the origin of these dances.

Ballroom dance academies in the South and Center Zones, for example, have privileged infrastructure conditions, marketing development and better tools to manage their businesses. The question that arises is that this model, according to Ramos (2024), excludes the voice and turn of professionals who live in the outskirts and suburbs and reduces their sphere of participation in dances and in the transmission of dance teachings, stripping the Gafieira Dance of its own Afro-Brazilian identity, running the risk of, in some situations, making it an urban commodity devoid of substance. Recovering the power of social and artistic construction of these professionals also means rescuing the origins of Gafieira's urban dance as an intangible heritage. “Honor the existences that meander through time and ritualize life as something that is not merely utilitarian” (Rufino, 2021, n. p.).

From this context, we are invited to reflect that the insurgent bodies of Gafieira, with their “experiences, knowledge and ancestral technologies that emanate from the diversity of ways of feeling,



vibrating and practicing the world with the things that pass through it” (Rufino, 2021, n.p.) are, in a way, active characters in a “democratic uprising”. Therefore, I present some aspects of artistic thought and Dance pedagogy developed by Aerial Company Dance, founded in 1985, in Lapa, Rio de Janeiro. The Company was born in the context of the formation of the Circo Voador (Flying Circus) artistic companies, opened a little earlier, in 1982. The objective was to promote open classes and, from there, create a dance company with people coming from different places in the city of Rio. In this way, the Company's activities played a fundamental role in promoting the city's cultural scene as a whole.

The location of Circo Voador, in Lapa, a traditional and culturally diverse neighborhood in Rio, created an environment conducive to experimentation and the convergence of different artistic languages. The Company has a repertoire of shows, among which *Mix and Send* (1992) stands out. With a poetic narrative, it evokes archetypes from Rio's popular culture, such as the *Malandro*, whose various facets are the expression of the permanence of this mythology in Brazilian culture. Remembering bodily and rhythmic dramaturgies that cohabit in the black body before the diaspora, focusing on the history of social structural processes through dance and its mythologies, is what allows a people healthy and balanced forms of existence and permanence.

Shaped by paintings in which each dancer tells their personal stories, *Mix and Send* is updated over time with new remounts, according to the events and sensations that the present imprints on the artists' bodies and on the dramaturgy. In one of its latest versions, one of the dancers tells the story of her feelings when faced with the abuse she had suffered, saying that when she was alone, motionless, there was only one thing she felt, she thought she had a fever. The fever can be born in silence, through the voices of several women who tell about their abuse; “it can come from the joy of a black person, laughing big. For those who are into samba, the important thing is to laugh, to take it to a positive place. Life is difficult. We don't want to make it more difficult. Our therapy is different. Laugh to transmute. It's falling and getting up (Ramos,2024, n.p.).

Currently, Aerial Company Dance has its residence in the collective Citizenship Action, with which it develops partnerships such as the Citizenship Action Dance Center<sup>3</sup>, with the participation of young people and adults mainly from the regions of Gamboa, Saúde, Santo Cristo and surroundings. The location of its headquarters in Gamboa, a central area in Rio de Janeiro, allows the Company to integrate its activities into various regions of the city. One of the recent projects of this partnership is the realization of a Training Immersion for Ballroom Dance professionals called Chão de Gafieira (Gafieira Floor), aimed at different territories of the city, with practical and theoretical classes, so that the experience of Gafieira Dance and its Afro-Brazilian origins diasporic aspects are shared and recognized in their family, social, gestural and professional legacy. It is guided by the Gafieira Banto concept and the language of Samba-Dance, and aims to promote access to understanding the formation process of Gafieira Dance in Rio de Janeiro.

In 2025, Aerial Company Dance will complete 40 years of activities dedicated to the construction of choreographic works in dance that reflect in its research and artistic investigation the fusion of Rio de Janeiro samba and gafieira with contemporary dance, in which ancestry, religiosity and the boundaries between ritual, everyday life, theatricality, popular dance and contemporary dance are tensioned, based on what Ramos calls Gafieiras Banto<sup>4</sup> and Samba-Dança, whose research and development are part of the aforementioned pedagogical and social project Chão de Gafieira, which corroborates the thinking of Rufino regarding the importance of “the circulation of knowledge that repositions and vitalizes beings affected by colonial violence” (Rufino, 2021, n.p.).

At this moment, I dialogue with Martins (2020) and return to the expressions presented at the beginning of this essay, transmission of *vital energy* and *curvilinear temporalities*, brought by the author. Rhythm is an expression of life, and its effects can be

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<sup>3</sup> In 2021, Ramos created the online workshop – “Corpo Samba Online” – Held by the State Secretariat of Culture and Creative Economy of Rio de Janeiro. Artistic direction of the national project “Samba-Dance Against Hunger, in partnership with Citizenship Action –Christmas Without Hunger Campaign (2020). Creation and artistic direction of Ação Dança – Citizenship Action Dance Center – (2022).

<sup>4</sup>Available at: <https://youtu.be/T4IL1Odh16w?si=hR9oSueqf6NVTLjr> Access at: 8 august.2024.

felt physically in the body. It is the unity of pulse, lungs, heart and blood circulation, in a cadence that makes existence possible in life. Awareness of respiratory action nourishes the transmission of vital energy and internal motivations, present in all living beings and expressed in movement through waves. Samba-Dance is well-being, however, the collective unconscious of colonized Western culture has difficulty seeing this aspect in artistic and pedagogical proposals developed from samba. Unlike European dances, in which the strength and support of the center are prioritized so that the movements of the limbs can develop, in Samba-Dance this vital consciousness is nourished by the cadence of the samba and the wave impulses that originate from the center of the body, something present in all African dances. From this, the body structure of the basin is like the hull of a ship that rocks on and with the wave, and all movements of the extremities are born from this action (Ramos, 2024).

In this way, the rhythmicity of the black body echoes in curvilinear temporalities, and has the capacity to recall collective knowledge about time, bringing joy and a sensation of pleasure from movements worked on in the relationship between the wave and time, through the rhythmic action of samba. By valuing the recognition and recovery of the basic ancestral principles that identify the black corporeality of Brazilian dance, and supported by its social, historical, ancestral and symbolic roots, the practices of Gafieira Banto, including Samba-Dança, awaken from gingas and “swings”, as Ligiéro (2011) points out:

Male and female dancers use the same type of ginga, a movement that is also the basis of the capoeira movement. When dancers enter the ginga they rotate the torso and hips in synchronized and opposing movements, so that the right leg is in front of the body in conjunction with the left arm, and then the left leg moves forward as the torso moves forward. moves to the right and the right arm moves forward. The ginga in samba gives the impression that the dancer is walking, although he only shifts his body weight from one foot to the other without moving much. The transitions in this case are very smooth and follow the sensual cadence of samba. The arms, slightly bent, keep a line above the hips and make a kind of zigzag from one side to the other (Ligiéro, 2011, p.143).

The Gafieira Banto pedagogy, developed by Ramos and initiated in 2018, guides his innovative educational proposal in the

field of Dance, as it understands Gafieira and its technical resources as an expression of Afro-Brazilian dance and with the power to “recover obstructed feelings for centuries of cognitive dismantling and disarray of memories” (Rufino, 2021, n.p.). The most important aspect of the classes is to bring back to partner dance the concept of play, ritual, enchantment, and illuminate ways of moving that remain alive in time as a non-utilitarian act. In this sense, it does not aim to prepare bodies that only know how to copy and execute steps; his pedagogy moves away from mere preparation to have access to the current methods of the dominant model of academies, which forgets the diversity of experiences when practicing Eurocentric teaching methods, and comes closer to Rufino when he says: “Education cannot be at the service of the dominant model, as it, in its radicality, is the driving force that makes it possible for us to embark on and remain attentive and active in the processes of decolonization” (Rufino, 2021, n.p.).

Therefore, at Gafieira Banto, conduct in which one of the parties is subordinate to the other is not taught, something that was culturally instituted in the ballroom dance environment in the wake of patriarchy and has become common to the point of often being identified as a characteristic of this dance. I borrow Marina Henriques Coutinho's thoughts regarding the diversity of “theatrical practices that have crossed the border of conventional commercial theater rooms to reach and act in other spheres [...]” (Coutinho 2020, p.39) and the I take it to dance, where the invitation from Aerial Company Dance is a game that bypasses and goes beyond the borders of academies and commercial dance stages. When Coutinho (2020, p.40) questions “to what extent these actions make the world less comfortable for capitalism, since they aspire to autonomy in the face of patterns of domination” and, when looking at the recent past, I see an echo of for Aerial Company Dance’s research for the recovery of the origins of the Gafieira Dance, this dance for two between corporeity (*house-body*) and territory (*house-city*).

To conclude, the recognition and possibility of rescuing the basic ancestral principles that identify the black corporeity of the Carioca Gafieira Dance proposed by João Carlos Ramos compose

a project of investigation and awareness of the body originating from samba, supported by its social and historical roots, also ancestral and symbolic. Its approach encompasses a wide field of activities that includes teaching methodologies, lectures, Aerial Company Dance shows and dancing balls, with the aim of recreating a convivial space capable of articulating contemporary and historical feelings and actions, simultaneously. Thus, there is an approximation of the universe of Gafieira with the field of political discussion, by mobilizing a fertile ground of formative experiences with workshops and conversation circles, which invites its participants to reflect on the constitution of each *house-body* and *house-city* – terms mentioned at the beginning of this essay – and to question the dynamics of hierarchies and social constructions through dance. The artistic-pedagogical and political strategy of Aerial Company Dance in relation to the Gafieira Dance and its transformations takes shape in the statements presented in this essay, by understanding it as a field of social transformation that hopes to establish a fairer, happier and more swingy ground.

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