



Ìpàdè with Maestra Iara Deodoro: memories from the Afro-Sul Group, a piece of Africa in the South of Brazil

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ABSTRACT – *Ìpàdè with Maestra Iara Deodoro: memories from the Afro-Sul Group, a piece of Africa in the South of Brazil* – This paper follows the journey of the Black artist Maria Iara Santos Deodoro and her artistic-pedagogical work with the Afro-Sul Music and Dance Group. It also reflects and contextualizes certain events and topics in the debate on ethnic-racial relations concerning the Performing Arts in southern Brazil and further exchanges. Corporeality, orality, and musicality intertwined with dance are discussed as Afro-oriented perspectives practiced by the Afro-Sul Group in the fight against racism.

Keywords: **Maestra Iara Deodoro. Afro-Gaúcha dance. Dance History. Ethnic-Racial Relations. Rio Grande do Sul.**

RÉSUMÉ – *Ìpàdè avec Maître Iara Deodoro: souvenirs du Groupe de Danse Afro-Gaúcho, la part des Africains dans le sud du Brésil* – Le mot youruba ìpàdè, traduit comme rencontre, clarifie l'objectif de cet article : le rencontre entre les lecteurs et une coupure de le parcours de l'artiste noire gaúcha Maria Iara Santos Deodoro (Maître Iara), avec l'objectif de rendre évident la présence noire dans l'historiographie de la danse du Rio Grande do Sul et de débattre les relations ethno-raciales dans les arts vivants du Brésil. Maître Iara est artiste-fondatrice du Grupo Afro-Sul de Música e Dança (Groupe Afro-Sud de Musique et Danse), créé en 1974 dans la cité de Porto Alegre-RS, où depuis plus de 45 ans elle se consacre à l'enseignement et à la création de la Danse Afro-Gaúcha, en mettant en évidence la présence noir-africaine dans le sud du Brésil.

Mots-clés: **Mestra Iara Deodoro. Dança Afro-Gaúcha. História da Dança. Relações Étnico-Raciais. Rio Grande do Sul.**

RESUMO – *Ìpàdè com Mestra Iara Deodoro: memórias do Grupo Afro-Sul, um pedaço da África no Sul do Brasil* – Este artigo trata-se de um recorte da trajetória da artista negra Maria Iara Santos Deodoro a partir de sua atuação artístico-pedagógica junto ao Grupo Afro-Sul de Música e Dança. O artigo também reflete e contextualiza alguns eventos e pontos acerca do debate das relações étnico-raciais no tocante das Artes Cênicas no Sul do Brasil e possíveis desdobramentos. Discute-se a corporeidade, a oralidade e a musicalidade entrelaçadas com a dança enquanto perspectivas afro-orientadas do Grupo Afro-Sul na luta contra o racismo.

Palavras-chave: **Mestra Iara Deodoro. Dança Afro-Gaúcha. História da Dança. Relações Étnico-Raciais. Rio Grande do Sul.**

Introduction

The word of Yoruba origin *Pàdé*, apocope of *Ìpàdé*, is used in the context of the religions of African origin, (re)created in Brazil and fruit of the Black Diaspora in the Americas, to refer to the ritual ceremony dedicated to *Èsù*¹, a deity whose symbolism and importance as a dynamic element grants him first invocation status and, consequently, priority rites. Hence, from this (Afro) perspective, it is essential to salute him, since he composes the communication link between the Black, African-Brazilian and Brazilian ancestry.

The word *Ìpàdé* is also translated as encounter, meeting or act of gathering (Santos, 1986; Beniste, 2011), actions present in the religious rites of the ‘Terreiro’ communities. These communities can be briefly understood as “[...] religious communities in which music and dance, vital aspects of religion inherited from enslaved Africans, complement each other to offer a particular vision of the world” (Santos, 2006, p. 31) so that, respecting the symbolic importance of *Pàdé*, we emphasize that the use of the term *Ìpàdé* is intended to invite readers to a meeting and provide a glimpse of the work of Maria Iara Santos Deodoro, a Black artist from Rio Grande do Sul², known in the artistic world as Maestra Iara. This encounter makes it possible to promote the visibility of the Black presence in the History of Dance of and in Rio Grande do Sul and, at the same time, stimulates the debate about ethno-racial relations in Brazil’s performing arts.

In saluting African ancestry, we chose the figure of *Èsù*, because he is the entity responsible for the fluidity of communication that is established between the worlds, *àiyé*³ and *òrun*⁴, and between people. The encounter between those who read and the trajectory presented in the following text presupposes an invitation to get to know memories and territories whose dynamic and vivid Black-African ancestry calls for salutations corresponding to the symbolism of the conceptual operations proposed. Reflecting on *Èsù* as the dynamic principle and the principle of individualized existence in the Nago system, Santos (1986, p. 131) states:

Just as *Olórun* represents the principle of generic existence, *Èsù* is the principle of differentiated existence in consequence of his function as a dynamic

element that leads him to propel, develop, mobilize, grow, transform, and communicate.

As *Èsù* is a differential principle, “[...] a dialogic and mediator between Western and African mythemes” (Martins, 1995, p. 56), we reinforce its importance as a symbolic operator in this article, as a dynamic propeller in the diffusion of Afro-Brazilian civilizational values, especially those of ancestry. Philosophically, *Èsù* plays a fundamental role in safeguarding African memory, both in Africa and in the diasporic region and, therefore, in the dissemination of Afro-oriented and Black-referenced narratives.

The following reflections are part of the research entitled *Falar Fazendo Dança Afro-Gaúcho: ao encontro com Mestre Iara*, undertaken at Master’s level⁵, one of the objectives of which is to highlight memories and Black narratives in the dance produced in Rio Grande do Sul. The main purpose of the aforementioned research was to understand how artistic-pedagogical practices in Black Dances⁶, conducted by Maestra Iara, conferred their own identity(ies) on the dance produced by the Afro-Sul Music and Dance Group. This artistic language establishes a specific accent and consolidates *Afro-Gaúcha Dance*, that is, the Black Dances produced in the context of the Afro-Sul Group.

In this article, we present a brief outline the study, emphasizing the memories about the emergence of the *Grupo Afro-Sul de Música e Dança* (South-Afro Music and Dance Group) in 1974, in the city of Porto Alegre-RS. We also recognize the place of this narrative in an Afro-perspectival epistemic territory⁷, in order to present the contributions of this Black artist to dance in the state of Rio Grande do Sul, as well as to discuss ethnic-racial relations in the performing arts in Brazil⁸.

The dichotomous gaze focused on history versus memory, theory versus practice, and writing versus orality has contributed to the perpetuation of the binarism typical of the positivist mode of thinking about knowledge, whose perspective categorically delegitimizes the plurality of ways of preserving memory. In the context of African and Afro-diasporic cultures, therefore, also in the context of Brazilian culture, Martins (2003) states that:

As wind, breath, diction, and performative event, the spoken and sung word is written in the performance of the body, portal of wisdom. As an index of knowledge, the word is not petrified in a static deposit or archive, but is, essentially, *kinesis*, dynamic movement, and requires attentive listening, since it refers to a *poiesis* of the performative memory of sacred songs and lines sung in the context of rituals. The study of this textuality highlights the inscription of African memory in Brazil in various domains: in the bundles of poetic and rhythmic forms and in the aesthetic and cognitive procedures founded on other modulations of creative experience; in the techniques and genres of textual composition; in the methods and procedures of safeguarding and transmitting knowledge; in the instrumental attributes and properties of the performances in which the body that dances, vocalizes, performs, composes, writes (Martins, 2003, p. 67).

The notion of opposition between writing and performance, marked mainly by hierarchies perpetrated by the *modus operandi* characteristic of the West, produces a systemic erasing of Black memories, excluding a large part of the Brazilian population from the recognition of the Africanity that is the foundation of Brazilian culture, especially from their ethno-racial belonging. However, it should be noted that the efforts to keep the memory alive were manifold, from newspapers, novels, folklore, pageantry, and associations founded by Black people⁹, among others.

This demand alone justifies the emergence of laws that guarantee affirmative action in the field of education, with Law 10.639 from 2003 being an important landmark that provides for the teaching of African and Afro-Brazilian culture and history at all levels of education (Brazil, 2003). Its relevance is evidenced by the fact that the narratives related to Africanity in Brazil and the memories of Black protagonism have been neglected by coloniality and ignored by whiteness¹⁰, which follows its colonial itinerary from its place of privilege, and whose maintenance is guaranteed by the structural racism instilled in the most diverse spheres of the Brazilian social fabric, negating any reflection.

By ignoring the writing of the Black body in the social spaces of power, relegating it to invisibility, we reject the various hypotheses that view corporeality as a document also produced by gestuality, producer of body

techniques that express the ancestral heritage of the African matrix, thus, Black identity(ies). Orality, in this sense, is taken as an ancestral African foundation for the construction of knowledge (Alves Neto, 2019).

As such, bearing in mind orality as a method of disseminating knowledge, listening was used as a procedure to carry out the research into artistic and pedagogical practices in Afro-Gaúcha Dance. In this sense, it is worth reflecting on the concept of oral tradition proposed by Hampantê Bâ (2010), since it presents aspects of how the African tradition spreads possibilities and ways of thinking about orality as an African civilizing value, available as a methodological resource for learning about ancestry in the territories of the Black Diaspora. According to Bâ (2010, p. 169):

The oral tradition is the grand scale of life, and retrieves and relates all aspects of it. It may seem chaotic to those who remain unaware of its secret, and employ the Cartesian mentality used to separating everything into well-defined categories. Within the oral tradition, in fact, the spiritual and the material are not dissociated. By moving from the esoteric to the exoteric, oral tradition manages to put itself within the reach of men, speaking to them according to human understanding, and revealing itself according to human aptitudes. It is at once religion, knowledge, natural science, art initiation, history, amusement, and recreation, since every detail always allows us to go back to the primordial unity.

Therefore, listening, feeling, moving, dancing, swaying, reading, reflecting, observing, analyzing, talking, writing, assimilating, rewriting, creating and rehearsing were some of the procedures listed, without hierarchy, in the research process¹¹, aiming to subsidize a study based on the gesture, which dialogically materializes the sound, embodying the rhythmic drums.

Maestra Iara and the Dance

Maria Iara Santos Deodoro was born on September 25, 1955, daughter of Verônica da Silva Santos, known as Tia Lili, and of Vilson Santos. She grew up in the Petrópolis neighborhood, in Porto Alegre-RS, surrounded by her two biological sisters and an adopted brother. At the age of four, she lost her father.

Eager to keep the family together, her mother took on the responsibilities of motherhood alone. For this reason, Verônica dos Santos, Tia Lili, dedicated herself to work, and for a long time served as a cook, eventually becoming a famous chef for the Jewish bourgeoisie in Porto Alegre. Hoping to guarantee a quality education for her daughters and to be able to work calmly, in relation to the safety and well-being of the children in her care, Tia Lili began to look for scholarship opportunities in private schools around the city.

She (Tia Lili) created a protection system for us, especially for me being the youngest, so my middle sister, when I was four and she was eight, she was responsible for me. So she had to take care of my needs. My mother would leave home early and only come back late, because she worked in a family home and then in a restaurant, and then at night she would come home with lots of things, loads of food, and our house became an all-female house, and we were four women! (Deodoro, 2018).

Granted a scholarship at Colégio Santa Inês, a Catholic school run by the Congregation of the School Sisters of Our Lady, located in the Petrópolis district of Porto Alegre-RS, around 1963 and 1964, at the age of eight, Iara had her first contact with dance at school, through the physical practices of Artistic Gymnastics, which at the time was called “Modern Female Educational Gymnastics”, taught by Nilva Therezinha Dutra Pinto¹² (1934-2020), a physical education and dance teacher. Ms. Nilva Pinto, as she was known, was Maestra Iara's first teacher and was in charge of all her dance training, which took place concomitantly with her elementary and high-school education. It is worth mentioning that Ms. Nilva Pinto was one of the important precursors of dance education in school contexts in the capital of Rio Grande do Sul during the 1960s and 1970s. The group coordinated by the teacher in Colégio Santa Inês was characterized by an investigation of various cultures and its force was in the reinterpretation of Brazilian folk dances (Deodoro, 2018).

Within a private school context, mostly attended by white people, Maestra Iara claims that she did not feel prejudice in her childhood. “If I did, and probably should have, I didn't realize it. Nowadays, racism is much more aggressive” (Deodoro, 2018).

Education in Brazil, specifically in the period referring to the second half of the 20th century, does not discuss the social conflicts and inequalities resulting from racism, which structures the organization of Brazilian society. School is also marked by a theoretical line that tries to spread the idea that Brazil lives in a racial democracy, and the Brazilian educational system adheres to and spreads this discourse on *racial equality*, masking racism in ambiguous declarations. Schools refused to discuss the real conditions of subordination and social exclusion bequeathed to the Black population before and after May 13, 1888, when Law 3.353/1888, known as the *Lei Áurea* (Golden Law), was enacted (Gomes, 2017).



Figure 1– Maestra Iara Deodoro. Photography by Marciel Goelzer
Source: Archive of Grupo Afro-Sul.

As a teenager, Maestra Iara practiced Olympic gymnastics at SOGIPA (the Porto Alegre Gymnastics Society). The group was strongly influenced both by the movements that sought to catalog the traditional expressions of gaucho culture, with a focus on dance, and on the media culture of the time. The songs that played on local radio stations, which were on the soundtracks of international movies, besides being used for warm-up and body preparation, served as a theme for Ms. Nilva Pinto's creations. The performances on soap operas and in the movies, as well as artistic gymnastics, strongly influenced the group's work (Alves Neto, 2019).

Among the choreography inspired in Afro-Brazilian culture it is worth highlighting: *Cavaleiro de Aruanda*, *Dùndún*¹³ and *Navio Negreiro*. In some of the interviews she gave, Maestra Iara recalls details of the first African-

inspired choreography she ever danced. Entitled *Cavaleiro de Aruanda*, Nilva Pinto's choreography had as its soundtrack the song *Cavaleiro de Aruanda* by Tony Osanah, interpreted by the singer Ronnie Von¹⁴.

She created a dance that was a rehash of an Umbanda session; we had white clothes with a cloth tied around us, I was the only Black person in the group, but it was a well-executed choreography, a patchwork of things that she noticed from the ritual (Deodoro, 2018).

Besides teaching at Colégio Santa Inês in 1974, Ms. Nilva Pinto also taught dance classes at Colégio Anchieta in Porto Alegre. The classes got to know each other and the greatest differential of the dance group from Colégio Anchieta was dancing to live music, produced by the school choir.

In the group of instrumentalists that accompanied the choir, there was a young Black man named Marco Aurélio Faria, known as *Maestro*. Maestra Iara recounts that:

The group from Colegio Anchieta danced with the choir. The choir sang. There was a choir and a band. And in the band, there was a boy. He was the only Black kid there. I was the only Black girl here. We joined together, right! We joined forces, instinctively. And then Marco, along with his friends, including Paulinho, started to do this thing that is AfroSul. But it was only music. The kids started researching Black music. At that time, there was a very well-known African band, *Osibisa*. They listened to that sound and found it very familiar to them. And then they went to take part in a festival at Rosário High School, a student festival (Alves Neto, 2019).

Interested in researching African and Afro-diasporic musical aesthetics, marked by the anti-racism discussion, the young Marco Faria got together with some friends and proposed the composition of a protest-music that would address the racial issues in the Brazilian context. The song *Pergunta* was born, composed to be released in a student music festival that was to take place in the Colégio Marista do Rosário amphitheater, in Porto Alegre-RS. With the intention of producing a complete artistic performance for the presentation, the musicians decided to invite the young dancer, Iara Deodoro, and four other dancers to comprise the group.

The song composed by Maestro Marco Farias, in 1974, loosely translated as: I want an intelligent answer to calm myself down/What did my grandfather do wrong to make this happen?/ Sometimes I walk through the crowded street and you can't look at me/You never tried to listen to me or understand me/Why do you think you are more?/I will cool my head down like my ancestors/I will offer you an agreement where we will all be equal/because.../ After life there is more and you don't know.

During this period, Maestra Iara joined the group, which was renamed *Afro-Sul*. Since its creation in 1974, the group has been active, functioning as a powerhouse in the teaching and creation of Afro-Brazilian dances and music in southern Brazil. Her joining the group was fundamental for the young dancer to carry out artistic research in a collaborative manner, which later helped in the creation of her choreographic works and grounded her teaching method in Black Dances. These points encouraged the creation of *Afro-Gaúcha* Dance, bringing a particular accent to dance in Rio Grande do Sul, which reaffirms the presence of Black culture, from the African matrix, documented in bodies.

A piece of Africa in the South

Um pedaço da África no Sul (A piece of Africa in the South) is a phrase that is written next to the logo of the Afro-Sul Group at its headquarters, located on Avenida Ipiranga in the city of Porto Alegre. The architecture of the space is reminiscent of a large shed that gets crowded on festive nights, similar to a samba school rehearsal hall that holds 'feijoadas' on weekend afternoons to raise funds for the group and the community of regulars. The fixed core of the dance group is also responsible for the legal organization of the institution.¹⁵

On the eve of the shows, the hall of the Afro-Sul headquarters looks like a large carnival workshop, with performing artists taking turns to learn from visual artists, who are responsible for the visual aesthetics (costumes and scenography) of the group. Everyone is dedicated to the manual labor of finishing touches and details for the premiere of a new show, or the presentation of choreography from the group's vast repertoire. The main hall was built

around the 1980s. This space was part of the infrastructure lent by the Porto Alegre City Hall to the *Sociedade Cultural Beneficente Escola de Samba Garotos da Orgia*.¹⁶ The School was founded in 1983, in the city of Porto Alegre, by a group of friends, including some members of the Afro-Sul Music and Dance Group. This association is the initial step towards the institutionalization of the educational actions already undertaken by the group for the purpose of working with themes related to blackness, Africa, and Black ancestry. From that period on, several actions became viable through the legal institutionalization of the space. This organization made it possible, among other things, to build the headquarters. The activities of the *Sociedade Cultural Beneficente Escola de Samba Garotos da Orgia* were terminated around the year 1998, becoming *Bloco Afro Odomodê* (Martins, 2016; Silva, 2017; Alves Neto, 2019).

The space remains as the headquarters of the group and is strengthened as an urban ‘quilombo’, a ‘terreiro’. Sodr  (1988, p. 54) points out that the ‘terreiro’ does not intend “[...] to exclude the partners in the game (whites, mixed race, etc.) nor to reject the local landscape, but to enable the practice of an exiled cosmovision”, because “[...] culture was not made there as a demonstration effect, but as a vital reconstruction to encourage a continuity that generates identity” (Sodr , 1988, p. 54).

This cultural settlement at the crossroads of knowledge between Africa and Rio Grande do Sul is a territory that emanates ancestral African and Afro-Brazilian knowledge in its colors, sounds and gestures of resistance in the midst of the urban geography of Rio Grande do Sul’s capital city. Knowing more about that space demanded an awareness of the history of struggles waged since the 1970s by Black artists in movement, engaged in creating life possibilities through art. Here, dance appears as a symbol of resistance that constitutes organized entities within the Black Social Movement struggling for equality and social justice. Corporeality is the language for manifestos about ancestry, among other Afro-Brazilian civilizational values. As Am lia Conrado (2006, 2018) explains, in the 1970s, groups emerged in Brazil that provided visibility and legitimacy to Black culture through dance and music, such as *N cleo Cultural Afro-Brasileiro*, *Sociedade Mal  Cultural* and *Arte*

Negra, *Grupo Negô*, *Grupo de Teatro Palmares Inarone*, and the Afro-Brazilian Blocks, such as *Ilê Aiyê*, all of them in Bahia. In Pernambuco, the *Balé Popular do Recife* was founded. It is at this moment of national reaffirmation of the Black presence that *Grupo Afro-Sul de Música e Dança* emerges in 1974. Other organized entities, such as *Sociedade Cultural Floresta Aurora* and *Sociedade Satélite Prontidão* were part of this movement for the promotion, affirmation and legitimization of Black culture in the state.

Since the 1980s, artistic and cultural activities have been developed in the Afro-Sul space. From percussion classes, with teachers and masters from Porto Alegre and Africa, to regular Afro-Gaúcha Dance classes with Maestra Iara, as well as an event called Cultural Sunday and charity ‘feijoadas’, among other actions that give the space the status of a Cultural Point recognized by the Ministry of Culture (MinC). The engaged, militant and poetic artistic-pedagogical practices operate in the political dimension through gesture, whether in music or dance, just as the group did on their debut at the music festival in 1974 (Martins, 2016).

Black Insurgency to the sound of the drum

The 1970s, the period in which *Grupo Afro-Sul de Música e Dança* (Afro-Sul Music and Dance Group) was founded, is marked by the struggle of social movements against the political regime that curtailed the rights historically achieved by the Brazilian population. In this period, organized groups from the Black Social Movement emerged in several cities in Brazil. Below are some references to contextualize the historical moment of the debate about ethno-racial relations led by the movement of Black people engaged in the anti-racist and anti-colonial struggle, which exerted an important influence on the national and local scene in the second half of the 20th century.

The emergence of the *Movimento Negro Moderno* (Modern Black Movement) in the 1970s is the result of the learning and political movements undergone in the first half of the 20th century. Among them are actions in the urban space, marked above all by recurrent political demands dating back to the post-abolition period in Brazil. Education has always been one of the

central themes, debated in order to demand reparation for the long period of slavery. However, the State remained insensitive to the situation of the Brazilian Black population. In 1929, the first Congress of Black Youth was announced, but it didn't take place. One of the relevant agendas for the event was access for the Black population to the public education system (Pereira, 2010).

It is important to mention the *Frente Negra Brasileira* (Brazilian Black Front - FNB), based in São Paulo and organized around 1930, which was active in the construction of public debate about the Black population and the world of work. The group intended to build public policies that would safeguard the right of the Black population to join the Civil Guard of São Paulo, consequently setting a precedent for the entry of Black people into other spaces in the workplace (Pereira, 2010).

This history of struggles continues to develop and certain groups continue to move politically through artistic practices, presentations of performances, drawing or other arts. This use of Afro-oriented language deserves to be highlighted in the history of the Arts and represents a major contribution to consolidating the Black Social Movement on a national level. Below, we present some examples of groups that articulate the performing language and Afro-centered political movements and others that advance the political conversation, without being linked to artistic movements. In addition, we correlate the historical period that is the background for these political and/or artistic actions.

Teatro Experimental do Negro (Black Experimental Theater - TEN)¹⁷, founded in 1944, by Abdias do Nascimento, in the city of Rio de Janeiro-RJ, for example, inaugurated an aesthetic and political proposal in Performing Arts by positioning itself as an instance of militancy on and off the stage, embracing political proposals in the fields of education and culture as well as fostering a positive image of Black Afro-Brazilian Culture (Gomes, 2017).

In several cities in Rio Grande do Sul, Black Social Clubs were created, especially between the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. It is worth noting that these clubs were not exclusive to Black people,

but were run by Black communities and welcomed people of different ethnic-racial identities. The Black Social Clubs are important territories of sociability, education and resistance in the antiracist struggle. They are powerful centers of networking and Black political training, necessary to confront the hardships resulting from the way in which racism operated in Rio Grande do Sul (Nunes, 2016). Around the 1970s, the modern Black movement emerges, which is characterized by the affirmation of a Black identity as a way to negotiate the integration of Brazilian society. These modern groups erupt with issues guided by movements prior to this decade. Groups like the *Frente Negra* (Black Front), *União dos Homens de Cor* (Colored Men's Union), among other Black spaces, assumed a “[...] nationalist ideology of integration and assimilation, leaving the defense of African cultural forms out of this mobilization” (Guimarães, 1999 apud Campos, 2006).

In the face of the recession experienced during the Military Dictatorship (1964-1988), Institutional Act 5 (AI-5), issued by President Arthur da Costa e Silva on December 13, 1968, was a milestone in the trajectory of this generation that created political strategies through the educational power of Art because, besides suppressing the legislative branch, resulting in the loss of parliamentary mandate for those opposed to the military dictatorship, AI-5 legitimized measures to control artistic and cultural production in Brazil through interventions carried out by the Department of Political and Social Order (DOPS).

The main characteristic that marked the Black movement during the republican period, the New State and the beginning of the civil-military dictatorship was the focus placed on claims about the inclusion of blacks in society through access to education and the labor market (Pereira, 2011) since, at that time, few Black people were able to become literate, attend training courses or work in the labor market with pay equivalent to that of a white person in the same position. The labor market restricted the Black presence, a reflection of the racist ideology permeated systemically in Brazilian society at the time.

Another outstanding group emerged in 1971, in the city of Porto Alegre: the Palmares Group, created by young university students and led by the

poet and professor Oliveira Silveira. The group was responsible for organizing November 20 as *Black Consciousness Day*, in honor of the *quilombola* leader Zumbi dos Palmares (1655-1695). The proposal opposed the commemoration of the abolition of slavery, which occurred on May 13, 1888, in reference to the enactment of Law No. 3,353 of 1888. The justification for the change was based on criticism of the lack of guarantee for fundamental rights and the marginalization of the Black population in the post-abolition period (Campos, 2006).

Resolved to seek alternatives to May 13, Oliveira Silveira, Antônio Carlos Cortes, Ilmo Silva and Vilmar Nunes held some discussions at Andradas about the lack of other references to blacks in official history. Based on this observation, they decided to research dates that could be representative for Black people. A magazine from the collection *Grandes Personagens da História* (Great Characters from History), published by Editora Abril, about the figure of Zumbi dos Palmares, caught the group's attention. This was a strong reference because he was a libertarian character, not a liberated one. At the same time, the resistance history of Palmares was recognized, albeit unofficially, as a landmark of the Black presence in Brazil (Campos, 2006, p. 51).

Since then, November 20th has been celebrated as *Black Awareness Day*, in reference to the assassination of Zumbi dos Palmares, which occurred on November 20, 1695. Besides including November 20 in the national calendar, the Palmares Group (RS) was one of the precursors in including the agenda of building a new Black identity, referenced in global and local aspects, since the political debate on the importance of Africanity was latent. In this regard, the work of Oliveira Silveira is noteworthy for featuring the theme as a central and extremely relevant point in his poetics, to the point of later becoming known as the Poet of Black Awareness. Oliveira Silveira (2021) stated that, for the Black population and for the Black movements, Black Awareness meant “[...] the search for a knowledge about ourselves”.

The political action of the poet Oliveira Silveira and other militants from Rio Grande do Sul engaged in the anti-racism struggle in the 1960s and 1970s made the country realize that there are Black men and women in Rio Grande do Sul, especially in terms of raising fundamental political and artistic issues for the emancipation of Black body-subjects in Brazil and,

simultaneously, resisting and challenging the privileges of the whiteness that reside in the state with the largest number of European colonies in Brazil.

Since the foundation of Afro-Sul, in 1974, the members have played a leading role in the development of research focused on African and Afro-Brazilian art and culture, especially in the study of performances that intersect music and dance, evident in the body-drum relationship. The territory promotes real encounters between people interested in (some measure of) dialogue about racial issues that plague the Black Brazilian population. These gatherings, accompanied by dance executed in soft and strong gestures, cadenced by contractions, which are present in the technique developed by Maestra Iara, take on a political-aesthetic character. In a definition of territory Sodré (1988) says:

Territory and its sociocultural articulations appear as a dynamic category of their own, irreducible to representations that turn it into a pure receptacle of forms and meanings. This dimension encourages the production of thinking that seeks to discern the movements of circulation and contact between groups and in which spaces emerge not as autonomous data, strictly determinant, but as a vector of their own effects, capable of impacting the conditions for the effectiveness of certain human actions (Sodré, 1988, p. 15).

It is worth noting that the Afro-Sul group's main territory is a model in terms of sociocultural spaces strongly guided by Afro-Brazilian civilizing values.¹⁸ Whether through the corporealities evoked in the teaching of Black Dances, in the musicality, which echoes from the percussion classes taught by Master Paulo Romeu,¹⁹ in the shows, in the artistic immersions, in the face-to-face meetings at the group's headquarters, or remotely, via lives and educational posts on social networks, the group's actions are established as a political-aesthetic movement.

The artistic-pedagogical actions developed by Grupo Afro-Sul are many, and take place according to the institutional schedule. Usually, they are open to the general public, or inside the kitchen, in the intervals between classes, rehearsals, or during long hours of conversation that focus on topics ranging from techniques for preparing a good 'feijoada' to analyses of the international political situation. These actions promote the diffusion of Afro-

Brazilian civilizational values, as well as indicate the historical disparities revealed by racism and point out strategies for the fight against racism, both in the local and global contexts, implementing channels for an education in ethno-racial relations through art. This is made possible through the efforts of Maestra Iara in promoting artistic-pedagogical practices that explicitly link the techniques and poetics of Black Dances to Afro-Brazilian civilizational values.

Over the course of 30 years, Maestra Iara has been working on the grounding of her own pedagogy, which is constantly changing and is known by her students as *Pedagogia da Bagunça* (Pedagogy of the Mess). Markedly feminist and anti-racist, her pedagogy assumes that the power of anti-racist education lies in the gestures taught and learned in dance and percussion classes.

The relationship between body, drum, and ancestral memory is exalted in the dances of Black expression and aesthetics, whether in sacred rituals or artistic creations. According to Maestra Iara (Alves Neto, 2019), listening to the drum was one of the first procedures she experimented with for the creation of her artistic and pedagogical work. The polyrhythm present in the language of the beats was embodied and translated into dance. As a creator in Black Dances, the language of the drum was a fundamental element in the experience of accessing and strengthening her ancestral memory, in and through the body.

From these processes, we can see that it is in the dance and the beating of the drums that rock the bodies of the members and visitors of the group, in the debates in the development of the dramaturgies that are gradually created for the composition of the group's shows, and in the values and aspects that guide the sociability of the territory that Grupo Afro-Sul promotes the fight against racism. It is in the aesthetic-corporeal know-how of the group wherein resides the resistance invigorated by orality, corporeality, and musicality, which promote the Vital Force emanated by dance. As an example, we could mention the productions²⁰ and *Reminiscência, memórias do meu carnaval*,²¹ responsible for mobilizing Afro-perspectivist political debate on issues

such as Yoruba mythology and women in contemporary times, and the institutional racism that marginalizes carnival in Rio Grande do Sul.

These choreographies present unsubmitive Black corporealities that through their poetics foment strategies for social emancipation. Besides being a dancer, Maestra Iara is a trailblazer in the production of an aesthetic-corporal contribution of an anti-racist and decolonial political nature in the field of the Performing Arts, particularly in dance, in the capital of Rio Grande do Sul.

The poet Oliveira Silveira had fraternal ties with members of the Grupo Afro-Sul and, when questioned by Maestra Iara, who felt removed from the bureaucratic routines of meetings held by groups of intellectuals from the Black movement, Oliveira Silveira affectionately attested to the importance of the dance know-how developed by the teacher in the fight against racism, as a means of developing Black awareness. Oliveira Silveira reinforced that arts education is a legitimate place for Black activism, since Black bodies in movement unveiled a political-aesthetic thought-action based on Afro-Brazilian civilizing values. These values underpin her artistic-pedagogical proposal to stimulate an effective political debate on ethno-racial relations in dance (Deodoro, 2018).

Considerations for other final gestures

Memory is the content of a continent, of its life, its history, and its past, as if the body were the document. It is no wonder that dance, for Black people, is a moment of liberation. The Black man cannot be free until he forgets, through gesture, that he is no longer a captive (Nascimento, 1989).

The Black Brazilian intellectual Muniz Sodré (1988) points out that European colonization also occurred through attacks in the semantic field. This implies considering that several symbolic relations of the order of knowing and doing, in relation to the African *ethos*, the *arche*, the memories anchored in the body, the gesture, the orality and other materialities of info-communicational competence were aggressively submitted to invisibility by the modern-colonial world system.

We reiterate that certain justifications used by the academic canons emphasized a supposed illiteracy in Black African and Afro-diasporic cultures, and this discourse is reinforced by our contemporaries who ignore and delegitimize orality, gesture, and the body as possibilities for memory writing. For the authors Serrano and Waldman:

The adoption of orality by many African peoples ended up being used as a sign of illiteracy. It should be recognized that the expression ‘illiteracy’ makes no sense for certain African peoples, because their cultural choices have always enabled efficient communication, even dispensing with the written word in many contexts. (Serrano; Waldman, 2007, p. 95).

Regarding the literacy of Black men and women in Brazilian Portuguese, one example is the historiographical data about the creation of several newspapers (printed) whose editorial staff was composed entirely of Black men and women in the first years after the abolition of slavery in 1888. There are records that report the existence of actions of this nature since the mid-19th century, during the slavery period in the country, in which Black men popularized anti-racist discourses through writing made possible by the profession of typographer (Oliveira, 2017).

Historically, the legacy of Africanity in Brazil has been erased, not only in the South, but throughout all the routes of the communities once enslaved and dispersed in the process of the African Diaspora. The presence of the Black population in the most diverse fields of knowledge intends to recognize this presence.

The presence of resistance gestures, especially in the context of the history written in dance by Maestra Iara intends to contribute to the recognition of the diversity of Black authorship in the field of Black Dances and, thus, to consolidate the proposition, in the social space, of performative actions that are intimately linked to Black and affirmative political discursiveness. This form of existence and resistance articulates counter-hegemonic narrative possibilities. I return to the understanding of gesture as a visual materiality that creates clouds of meaning (Gil, 2004) that write discourses on lived experience in the world. Such an interpretation recalls valuable contributions by the celebrated Black poet and historian Beatriz Nascimento (1942-1995),

who points to memory as the content of a continent, a formative corporeality in the writing of the body in the world and, above all, announces dance as a space of liberation.

The narrative of the gesture in the artistic-pedagogical practices of Black Dances, developed by Maestra Iara, produces the (re)writing of the history of dance in Rio Grande do Sul, since such practices produce key images for the process of decolonizing the knowledge of and in the body, essential to the process of forgetting the captive-gesture and embodying freedom as the foundation of existence. Her creations aggregate different generations on the stage, in an inventive way, and her performance as a dancer reveals how much a woman's body can promote longevity in a political and libertarian way. For Maestra Iara, today's society has weakened our ability to listen to ancestral memory, and so we do not recognize the indications and warnings that the energies of nature send us. As Maestra Iara recently evokes in her interviews, online courses and lives, held on the social networks of Afro-Sul Odomodê²², since the beginning of social isolation due to the Covid-19²³ pandemic, this mother, grandmother, administrator, choreographer, dancer and director continues dancing, raising funds for the maintenance of the headquarters and the group's activities through 'feijoadas' (delivery) and calls for proposals, promoting lectures in digital media to disseminate and comment on the creative processes of the shows that she directs in Afro-Sul Odomodê. In this manner, she conveys her message to those who follow her on social networks, her *seguiafros* (afrofollowers) as she calls them. Her anti-racist struggle, in an America marked by colonization, inequalities, and erasures, is to celebrate the beauty and wisdom of the ancestral legacy of an African matrix pulsating in the Black culture of Rio Grande do Sul through dance and music. Hail Maestra Iara! Hail Master Paulo Romeu! Hail the Afro-Sul family! Those who bravely reaffirm the presence and the Black memory in Rio Grande do Sul in their art with an Afro-Gaúcho accent.

Notes

- ¹ *Êsú* or Exu, according to Rufino (2018), this orixá can be understood as an explanatory principle of a displaced world in the diaspora that refers to movements, ambivalences, and the unfinished. According to the author (p. 73) “[...] it is the element that underlies and substantiates the actions of frontier, resilience, and transgressions, codified in the form of pedagogy.” Put another way, it is a pedagogy that seeks the repositioning of memories and cognitive justice in the face of the trauma of violence fabricated by colonialism.
- ² See interview Dantas; Duarte; Baptista (2016) and Dornelles (2020).
- ³ World, planet (Beniste, 2011, p. 144).
- ⁴ Heaven, firmament, divine plane where the different forms of spirits and divinities are (Beniste, 2011, p. 625).
- ⁵ Further details in Alves Neto (2019). The research was conducted in the Graduate Program in Performing Arts at Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul with funding received from the Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Level Personnel (CAPES) - Brazil (CAPES).
- ⁶ According to the definition of Black Dances elaborated by the Senegalese artist and researcher Patrick Acogny (2017, p. 152), Black Dances are understood as the dance practices and choreography produced from the inspiration in local and heritage dances originating directly from the African continent, “[...] whether they are dances derived from the African continent, or dances with a mystical and spiritual inspiration coming from the African imaginary and wisdom.” In recent years, some authors have been dedicating themselves to a careful and critical look at Black dances. In this sense, the production of authors in Bahia, such as Santos (2015); Conrado (2018, 2006) among others, stands out.
- ⁷ According to the philosopher Renato Noguera (2012, p. 147) the term *Afroperspective* can be understood as a “[...] set of viewpoints, strategies, systems and ways of thinking and living with African matrices.”
- ⁸ On Black performing arts in Brazil see Conrado (2017) and Conrado and col. (2020).

- ⁹ On associations and newspapers that highlight Black protagonism related to culture and art in the center of the country see the production of Domingues Petrólio (2010, 2017, 2018).
- ¹⁰ On questions involving coloniality, ethnic-racial relations and cultural outcomes, further details may be found in Alves Neto (2019), based on authors such as Quijano (2005) and Oliveira; Candau (2010).
- ¹¹ The qualitative research sought to comprehend and analyze the verbal and gestural enunciations of Maestra Iara in her events and classes, which were considered the primary source of data collection. In addition, the research included performances, interviews, and classes as another data collection strategy, and also as a response to the erasure and invisibility produced in relation to Black references and presences in Rio Grande do Sul (Alves Neto, 2019).
- ¹² Nilva Pinto is recognized as an important dance teacher in the educational context in Porto Alegre-RS. Ver Nunes (2017)
- ¹³ According to Venturin (2020) *Dùndún* is the generic name given to the West African drum family that developed alongside the *djembe* in the drum collection associated with the Mande culture. It is a cylindrical drum, with skin at both ends, tuned by string and played with drumsticks.
- ¹⁴ VON, Ronnie. Cavaleiro de Aruanda. Youtube, posted by Cantos Santos on April 23, 2011. Available at <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NrJso-xCHYXg>>. Accessed on April 15, 2021.
- ¹⁵ Odomodê Afro-Sul Sociocultural Institute.
- ¹⁶ *Sociedade Cultural Beneficente Escola de Samba Garotos da Orgia* was created in the 1980s by a group of which some members of the Afro-Sul Music and Dance Group were part. Being involved with the school, Maestra Iara acted as a flag-bearer, choreographed the carnival “*Alas*” and “*Comissão de Frente*” and developed her work as a director of the samba school SCB *Escola de Samba Garotos da Orgia*.
- ¹⁷ For further details on the trajectory of Teatro Experimental Negro (TEN) see Nascimento (2004).

- ¹⁸ According to Trindade (2005), vital energy, circularity, orality, corporeality, musicality, playfulness, and cooperativeness are among the aspects considered Afro-Brazilian civilizational values.
- ¹⁹ Master Paulo Romeu is an artist-founder of the Afro-Sul Music and Dance Group as well as a percussionist. He has been married for over 40 years to Maestra Iara with whom he has three biological daughters: Paola Deodoro, Edjana Deodoro and Khadija Deodoro.
- ²⁰ O Feminino Sagrado: um olhar descendente da Mitologia Africana (The Sacred Feminine: a descendant gaze from African Mythology) (2016). Excerpt available at <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KqLhFq-yJAQ>>. Accessed on August 11, 2021. Report available at <<https://txtcena.art.blog/2020/06/08/a-cena-tecnologica-em-tempos-de-racismo-afro-sul-odomode-e-as-estrategias-para-escapar-do-nocivo-monocromismo-artistico/>>. Accessed on April 16, 2021.
- ²¹ Reminiscência, memórias do meu carnaval (Reminiscence, memories of my carnival) (2019). Excerpt available at <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QzU5L9abPbk>>. Accessed on August 11, 2021.
- ²² See Facebook: <<https://www.facebook.com/afrosul.odomode>> and Instagram: <<https://www.instagram.com/afrosul.odomodeoficial/>>. Accessed on August 11, 2021.
- ²³ To see a video of Maestre Iara's dance performance, accompanied by dancers from the Afro-Sul Dance Group, follow the link, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HK9fx8aVHM8&t=3115s>> Accessed on September 01, 2021. The video is the record of a performance held on September 13, 2017, in the UFRGS Auditorium, at the show *Lá vai Maria* by the group Três Marias from Porto Alegre. In the video, Maestre Iara and her dance group perform the jongo in front of 11 musicians

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