

“Afro-Brazilian Dance”

Or Better “Euro-American-Afro-Brazilian Dance”

Sam Gill¹

I wrote this response to dance classes I took somewhere in the mid-1990s. The tone is a bit stronger than I would use today, thankfully. The value to me of this piece is in recognizing that there is a potentially dark and colonialist side to dance classes that feature a person from another, usually exoticized, culture. Several years following this dance experience I founded Bantaba World Dance & Music and proceeded to do the very thing I found disturbing in this class. I sponsored visas for perhaps twenty artists from Africa, Indonesia, Latin America, and India. I hired them to teach dance and music classes representing their cultures to Americans. Interestingly dance teachers coming from Africa spent some time observing how to teach in a dance studio before they started teaching and they all quickly took on the row by row and move across the floor methods developed for ballet and other western art forms of dancing. Much could and should be written about this experience, but that will have to be done later. But most importantly, while I am not so sure that I knowingly participated in this process in the work I was doing at Bantaba, I still, to some degree encouraged and made possible the very dark side of this way of offering dancing that I comment on in the following essay. The bright side, and hopefully there always is one, is that people are genuinely interested in the cultures and values and lives of others who are very unlike them and that respect and appreciation of difference is cultivated and experienced. At this point what I know clearly is that cultural exchange is not uncomplicated and not ever simply what it appears to be. I also remain convinced that dancing and music are perhaps the most important media through which to engage in meaningful cultural exchange.

Scattered about the high school gymnasium were knots of women quietly greeting one another and chatting as they stripped off their wraps shoes socks. Some donned skirts. Only one man was among the group numbering perhaps fifty. He wore a skirt. He was huge and hairy of face and body and stinking already. A small stir was noticeable as the instructor, Rosangela Silvestré, entered. Several moved to greet her and she introduced her brother the drummer, Paulinho Dos Santos, to those around her.

After more fussing with clothing and finding places in rough lines about the floor, the dance class began. We all did our best to follow Rosangela. As I raised and stretched my arms above my head I felt my chest cavity expand. The accompanying intake of air relaxed and warmed me, releasing the tension of being a stranger here, a middle-aged man at that. A *gadjo dilo*—crazy stranger.² The interior smile that for me often

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² No doubt this reference came from the Tony Gatliff Gypsy film of this name.

accompanies dancing began to broaden and may even have spilled out to the corners of my mouth. Row upon row following mirroring the leader, we warmed up. Stretching. Moving. Simple step and arm sequences to each side. Variations in speed. Bit more stretching. From the back rows—the fitting place for a crazy stranger—I missed the signal but fell in with the group (we humans are close cousins to sheep and lemmings) and passed before the drummers making some inexplicable gesture of homage (I take it), the only vestige I would notice of an Africanism, or an American nod to an imagined and constructed Africanism, other than some aspects of the drummed rhythm.

As we file humbly past the drummers, who seem slightly embarrassed by the whole business, we find ourselves taking our places at the back of four lines formed at the narrow end of the space. Clots of bodies pasted to the ceramic glazed school block wall. Weirdly, despite the physical closeness no one makes eye or voice contact with me. The tightening of my body in expectation of the unknown draws my inner smile to a thin line. My thoughts went to something a Ghanaian friend told me. He said that in Ghana people don't dance with those they don't know. By sight, I know many of these women. I danced with them several weeks ago for a dozen hours under the rubric of Afro-Cuban dance, though it was neither African nor Cuban. Cindy, Lisa, Carmen, the other Lisa. But the personal shields are up.

Rosangela standing in front of the lines demonstrates a sequence. Three steps to the right—right left right—a turn with the backward kick of the left foot then to the left—left right left—with a backward kick of the right foot. Ya I can do that. My body begins to do that as she repeats. Now adding chopping movements with the parallel arms. Okay. Got that. Then the third time through at the end of the second sequence she spins and sprints her three steps down the floor and spins again ... which way? More steps another turn and then the sequence begins again. From my place against the wall I had to strain to see her and to find a tiny space in which to try out the move in some diminutive way. The drummers had begun and Rosangela shouted for the first four dancers to begin. Let's see okay right first but watch to see which way they turn the first second is there a third turn before starting oh shit what foot do you start on surely the right yes the right of course. Oh no it is my turn next here I go. Looking up halfway across the floor the group has moved to the opposite wall and dancers arriving there turn and their eyes emerge to observe the floundering or flourishing dancers repeating the pattern flowing towards them. Who are these women? Still no eye contact no smiles no gestures of encouragement no shouts of olé but I know they have seen I know that I have been seen.

After several passes, each time improvising and adding onto the sequence before, Rosangela briefly indicates the name of the *orixa* we are dancing. What did she say? Which one is it? Is it male or female? You say this *orixa* is associated with the earth? I strain to hear to comprehend to imagine to think how this figure relates to the movements I'm doing so awkwardly. No one asks questions certainly not me I didn't

even get the name. I try to think of the houses of *candomblé* I have read about and seen in videos ... heavy-set women in huge nineteenth century colonial dresses. What have I learned from Angela and Barbara Browning? No relationship at all that I can see to what we're doing here. As we begin the next set of movements, I notice that many of the women in the class seem already to know these movements. Later I learn that many have taken Rosangela's class many times before when she has visited Boulder. Maybe I also missed the discussions of *orixas* and *candomblé* but I am beginning to doubt that there was one. In the next hour and a half we learn—well we are introduced to—choreographed sequences associated with three *orixas*. One, *Ogun*, I think, who is described as a very old man, is interesting to me. Though Rosangela keeps beseeching us to get down to lean over to take on movements of the “very old” I find the positions difficult in my middle-aged body. Maybe I'll get it better when I'm twenty years older.

Dancing is seductive. We dancers loose ourselves in our dancing bodies. Forget the issues and engage the dancing. This emersion is broken by the command to form a circle including the drummers. Community, oh good, I feel as I negotiate some place between but slightly behind two of my nameless female classmates who don't turn to acknowledge me there. A community closing, good. Then Rosangela in the middle of the circle calls out the first four dancers from one side of the circle instructing them to add together the three sequences we have learned and perform in the circle's center. Remarkably the first four are the best dancers and remarkably also they were the first in each of the four lines. How did that happen? Eagerly they step into the circle face the drummers and begin their dancing. Images flash through my mind: not a circle a proscenium arch god-king drummers before whom we had bowed Louis IV ballet hierarchy a hierarchy of skill. I find my body reeling backwards I cannot stop it I don't want to perform for the king-drummers and her shouting Brazilian highness Rosangela. I don't want to perform before the male gaze of these women whose eyes miss nothing without ever making contact depersonalizing degrading objectifying. Somehow I've become the feminine here but as I leave gathering my socks I needn't worry about my sense of courtesy for outside the arch, ops ... rather circle, one doesn't exist.

I return for the second class after having thought extensively about this experience. The class unfolds in the same form. This time there is no statement about *orixas* at all. At one point I ask fellow student Lisa who is the best dancer and the sponsor of the class what *orixa* we are dancing. She says she thinks Rosangela is just kind of experimenting around. Okay. This evening I make an effort to attempt to chat with other students. To ask about movement comment on how well I think another is dancing smile and force eye contact. Several politely modestly respond but none reciprocate. I don't know why these women are taking the class. I know even less why the huge smelly bearman forever a stinking awkward hulk subjects himself to constant humiliation. We are learning no songs, nothing really about *orixas*, the word “*candomblé*” hasn't even been uttered. The physical class decorum and group dynamics are very clearly that of ballet and modern: hierarchical impersonal competitive. Can simply the dance movement

affect teach transform? Can we know Afro-Brazilia by doing movements of our teacher/choreographer somehow inspired by something about which we know nothing? The pace of the course is such that no movement or sequence is really embodied (except perhaps by the two or three best dancers who clearly have done this class repeatedly before). There is no chance to gain even the level of bodily and psychological comfort that would allow one to begin to think about much less embody the spice and sauce and juice and feeling of the dance or to assess and savor the impact on one's body of becoming the movement. I'm quite certain I'm not the only one who feels this. I doubt it is my low skill level that distinguishes me among the half a hundred. My male gaze is upon them too. Most are stumbling and stammering through the movement.

I need to return to ask some of them why they are taking this class. My hypothesis at this point is that it is a cool thing to do among a group who most in their late twenties and thirties are no longer (if they ever were) capable of the physical demands of ballet but haven't a clue that one might move beyond the ideological/political/social demands of ballet, of the Western dance aesthetic. The labeling as "Afro-whatever" with some occasional mumbling about *orixas* by a cute fit person with an accent (to be black or dark colored is even better) assures the necessary exoticism. Unfortunately, I feel it is a commodification that trades on a way of dealing with colonialist guilt, exoticize the oppressed and buy them. The final act. I'd find this interesting and humorous if I thought that those marketing the goods were secretly taking advantage of the once oppressors, but I see not a hint of this. The best thing for me is in experiencing my feminine self, feeling the violation of the male gaze, and enjoying being *gadjo dilo*.

I return yet again and will again I'm sure. This time no horizontal proscenium at the end, rather a poorly taught choreographed sequence of about thirty counts with all of us in lines behind Rosangela. The movements are easier this evening. There is even about one minute of singing at the beginning of class. I don't know why we don't maintain this singing throughout.

My task tonight is to do field work, to ask these women with the male gaze why they are taking this class, the shields are impenetrable, but then again I know I'm piss poor at field work. Just not aggressive enough. Again no mention of the *orixa* involved. But the absence of competitiveness allows me to enjoy the movement. As class ends Rosangela says that her African heritage honors the power that comes from the earth; that her (what does she say? seems she used a vague reference but I'd translate it as) European influence comes from above. She says that she draws upon both energies. They come into her and inspire her dancing. Everyone applauds. Lisa asks me if she can introduce me to Rosangela and I hang around. She is open and gracious as I try to be. I ask her if she practices *candomblé* when she is in Brazil. She says that her mother is a priestess in *candomblé* (which she seems also to refer to as Yoruba) and that she knows about it, but that she isn't part of any house of worship. She says she hates the word "religion" (I

haven't told her that I teach religion, but I tell her she needn't use the word) because it denotes the organized and that there is always a bad side to religion. She goes on, I needn't encourage her with questions, to say that her dance is not the dances of *candomblé*, but rather they are inspired by it. A woman standing nearby chimes in and says that the dances to her seem "modern" in genre. Rosangela agrees that they are modern, but inspired by her experiences of the *orixas*. She says that in former Colorado Dance Festival classes she has more strictly taught their dances, but she can't do so without the rhythms. I don't get this since she has brought her brother to drum the rhythms. She says she's interested in talking with people here who teach various topics related to dancing and I politely say I'd love to talk more with her.

So now I feel the class should be renamed for accuracy, "Afro-Brazilian inspired modern dance taught with European sensibilities" or perhaps "Euro-American-Afro-Brazilian Dance" (EA first because that is what I believe is the most influential). But then who'd take such a class with the exoticism blurred and diminished? Rosangela, as a dancer, seems clearly centered in the European American dance tradition in terms of technique and sensibilities (the hierarchical, competitive, linear presentation of the class). Her Brazilian heritage informs her creativity in this genre. But, of course, what's so unusual about this? The huge majority of all classes taught in this country under the title "African" have the same background. But this again raises the question about why all these classes are labeled the way they are—African, Afro-Cuban, Afro-Brazilian—when the European influence is actually controlling. The evidence of the controlling European influence is simple enough: the fact that the dances are done in classes, in studios, being paid for, having starting and stopping times, are done by people most of whom don't know each other outside the class. Can it be any other way? Rosangela shirks the dark side of religion; there can be a dark side to dancing as well. Worth repeating.

We Americans are attracted to what we think are the dances of the dark people of dark continents, but what's really dark is that these dances are often not their dances at all and most of us don't care to involve ourselves enough in those cultures to realize it. Cultural dances have remarkable sophistication, yet they often serve as little more than inspiration for the dances taught under cultural labeling as "authentic." We identify through our labels our own dance creations (accompanied by vague hints of origination or inspiration) with terms naming those peoples we have for centuries oppressed (murdered, enslaved, deprived) and then congratulate ourselves on our cultural openness, our lack of prejudice. The saddest part of this, for me, (and it is sad because I see no alternative) is that we attract individuals among those we have oppressed to sell us these experiences thus authenticating them for us as truly exotic. Is not the honor we invariably lavish on them, simply a clever way of honoring ourselves?