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Josephine Baker and Mercedes Baptista: cases of the representations of Black women in dance

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ABSTRACT – Josephine Baker and Mercedes Baptista: cases of the representations of Black women in dance – Based on the analysis of the trajectory of two dancers, Josephine Baker and Mercedes Baptista, this article proposes a reflection on the concept of stereotypes as per Stuart Hall. Being Black women, categories were applied to their movements without further depth: for Josephine, there was the identification with primitive dances; for Mercedes, the lack of recognition of a Black body in a leading role in classical dance. The ways in which they dealt with stereotypes and became agents of their bodies, and the marks they left in the western society will be the objects of analysis.
Keywords: **Josephine Baker. Mercedes Baptista. Stereotypes. Theatrical Dance. Representation.**

RÉSUMÉ – Joséphine Baker et Mercedes Baptista: cas de représentations de femmes noires en danse – À partir de l'analyse de la trajectoire de deux danseuses, Joséphine Baker et Mercedes Baptista, l'article propose une réflexion sur le concept de stéréotypes dans Stuart Hall. Étant des femmes noires, des catégories ont été appliquées à leurs mouvements sans plus de profondeur: pour Joséphine, l'identification aux danses primitives; pour Mercedes, le manque de reconnaissance d'un corps noir dans un premier rôle en danse classique. Comment elles sont fait face aux stéréotypes et sont devenues des agents de leurs corps et les marques qu'elles ont laissées dans la société occidentale, ils seront ici analysés.
Mots-clés: **Joséphine Baker. Mercedes Baptista. Stéréotypes. Danse Scénique. Représentation.**

RESUMO – Josephine Baker e Mercedes Baptista: casos de representações da mulher negra na dança – A partir da análise da trajetória de duas bailarinas, Josephine Baker e Mercedes Baptista, o artigo propõe uma reflexão acerca do conceito de estereótipos de Stuart Hall. Por serem mulheres negras, categorias eram aplicadas às suas movimentações sem maior profundidade: para Josephine, identificação com danças primitivas; para Mercedes, a falta de reconhecimento de um corpo negro em destaque na dança clássica. As formas como elas lideram com estereótipos e se tornaram agentes de seus corpos, além das marcas que deixaram na sociedade ocidental, serão aqui objetos de análise.
Palavras-chave: **Josephine Baker. Mercedes Baptista. Estereótipos. Dança Cênica. Representação.**

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The distinction between the Self and the Other has been widely applied in anthropological studies and also in the history of art, as we shall see below. There was always a distinction, guided by the concepts and rules of European society, which placed itself in a superior place or *more evolved* than the others, especially when it came to colonized spaces, such as the African and American continents, or little known, as, for example, in the case of Asia. The *primitive* subjects should be studied, analyzed and civilized, whether by the sword, the cross or *good manners*.

While a path of evolution of the species was being followed in the natural and human sciences, the field of arts emulated such thoughts, framing every type of cultural manifestation of non-European societies as handicrafts, or as of lesser value than *art with a capital letter*. The divisions became even more visible when such objects were taken to Europe and stored in museums. Unlike the objects – classified as works of art – produced by Europeans, those executed outside European geographies were destined for ethnographic and anthropological museums. They gained another reading, in which the aesthetic side was not the most relevant, but its representation as a symbol of a *primitive* society to be studied.

Pedro Cesarino (2017) highlights in his text the interest for these pieces, but as an interest for perpetuating the dichotomy between the civilized and the primitive, between the *Us* and the *Others*. The discussion, about what role the exhibited object occupied in the society from which it was taken, until not long ago seemed not to exist, the object being understood only as another element to mark the difference and the fascination for what did not represent western society of the time. This duality can be perceived in other art spaces, and not only in relation to objects found in museums.

If we think about the performative space and how some dances of non-European origins were seen, Cesarino's argument holds. Especially if we go back to the end of the 19th century until the middle of the 20th century: there were conventions of what could be considered a proper dance, a spectacle worthy of being on the prominent stages of western societies, and what could be read through a key of a ritual or a symbol of a society translated by primitive or folkloric dances shown on stage. The latter represented a space viewed as exotic, of tourist appeal, as well as the art objects that Cesarino analyzes in his text.

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Those involved in performing these dances on stage seemed to have no agency over what they presented, being merely manipulated by what the willing audience had asked to watch. However, the two cases treated here reveal that, even while reinforcing the idea of the exotic, their agency over what was shown on stage transforms them into holders of power in the situation presented. They are not subjects manipulated by the moment, but work the stereotypes associated with them in their favor.

The concept of stereotype used here comes from the formulation of Stuart Hall (2016). According to the author, when stereotyping a person – or a community –, they are reduced to a few characteristics, to traits that are exaggerated and simplified so that their identification is made quickly. For the author, this act, which helps create separations between the Self and the Other, maintains the balance between what is accepted and what is pathological.

Thus, keeping the separation within dualities, through stereotyping, becomes a way to maintain the prevailing social order, allowing the agents of that field to follow the norms created by them. The concept of field used here is from the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (2005, p. 244):

> The field of power is the space of power relations between agents or institutions that have in common the possession of the capital necessary to occupy dominant positions in the different fields (economic or cultural, especially). It is the place of struggles between holders of different powers (or types of capital) which, like the symbolic struggles between artists and the 'bourgeois' of the nineteenth century, have as a stake the transformation or the conservation of the relative value of the different types of capital that itself determines, at each moment, the forces that may be thrown into this struggle.

Within society there are different fields (economic, political, sports, arts) that work around specific practices, but that share the same structure – they are organized by *habitus* internalized in the agents who put them into practice, the dominant agents being those who have greater control over the structure employed in the field, trying to maintain or modify it thanks to their positions. The field affirms or denies the importance of a creator and his creation. In the case of the performative space, it defines what is or is not theatrical dance, reinforces stereotypes of what is, for example, a civilized dance, and what could be considered a manifestation of primitive movements.

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But how to break such a hegemony? Perhaps break is not the best term, however there are certain moments of rupture, certain spaces in which a conjuncture of social and temporal factors allows exceptions to appear. In this article, we will take a closer look at two characters who seem to have emerged at times when their performances became possible, as well as symbols of a certain rupture: Josephine Baker (1906-1975) and Mercedes Baptista (1921-2014), two Black women dancers in different times and contexts. Both had different trajectories, but both are marked by racism – according to their testimonies – and stereotypes of racialized women in the theatrical space of dance. Through the understanding of the marks created by society for their bodies and movements, they used the stereotype to their advantage, becoming agents of their practices and, by manipulating how they were represented, subverting the Other space destined for them.

The next two sections of the text introduce a brief history of the professional performance of Baker and Baptista, always leaving in evidence the issues faced by both by definitions of stereotypes in force at their time of action.

Josephine Baker and her interpretation of primitive dance

Josephine Baker was recognized with great prominence as a *performer* (singer, dancer and actress) in Europe, more precisely in France. However, her career began in the United States, in Saint Louis, Missouri, a state located in the Midwest. She was born in 1906, under the name Freda Josephine McDonald. Not knowing for sure who her father was, Josephine lived with her mother, a Black laundress named Carrie McDonald, until she was 13, when she decided to leave home and join a *vaudeville* show[1] called *Dixie Steppers,* as a maid. At only 15, in 1921, Josephine married for a second time and adopted the surname of her husband, William Howard Baker.

According to an entry devoted to her in the *Encyclopedia of the African Diaspora* (2008), Baker worked for a few years as a chambermaid until she landed a role as a *chorus line* dancer in the 1921 show *Shuffle Along* (Tanner, 2020)[2], the same year Josephine began making small appearances in shows, but never in major roles, as she was "considered too short, too skinny, and too dark-skinned" to be a diva (Gottschild, 2003, p. 154).

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Although her identity markers were, for the time, factors that prevented her career from progressing in the United States, in Europe they were valued, especially in France, and in 1925 she was called to participate in the show *La Revue Nègre* in Paris. The show, like Josephine, was a huge success among the city's bourgeoisie. Here, we take a phrase from the aforementioned entry, which reveals a society that dealt with the Other in an exotic way since "[...] Her dark good looks and sensuality struck a chord with sophisticated Parisians, who had developed a taste for all things African" (Campbell, 2008, p. 143). Stuart Hall highlights the need for the Self/Other binomial to highlight how we need to recognize ourselves in some to create an image, an identity, to which we belong. In issues related to race, this Other occupies stereotypical spaces and curiosity. According to the author:

> The marking of 'difference' leads us, symbolically, to close ranks, strengthen culture, and stigmatize and expel anything that is defined as impure and abnormal. Yet, paradoxically, it also makes 'difference' powerful, strangely attractive because it is forbidden, since it is a taboo that threatens the cultural order (Hall, 2016, p. 157).

Image 1 – Josephine Baker dancing the *Charleston* (1926).
Source: Photo from Walery (Public domain).

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In this way, how did Josephine Baker's acceptance come about? It is important to note that the biographies collected for this article focus on her life on stage, so we can only discuss her acceptance in the position of actress/dancer/singer *persona.* In the stage space, her character of exoticized woman was accepted and admired. She became attractive to an audience thirsty for the different, for the *African,* as stated by her biographer Kathy Campbell (2008).

The interpretation of her gestures and facial expressions was associated to the African continent, a shallow deduction coming only from the fact of her Blackness. Josephine mostly danced the *Charleston* when she was acclaimed on the stages of Paris (Image 1). The dance was created in the city of the same name, located in the state of South Carolina, soon after the First World War. The movements focus on the legs, which swing quickly and are put on display due to the dancers' short skirts. Josephine would enter at the end of the show and dance dressed in a small bikini, in which her breasts and buttocks were on show. Although the society of the time was already used to seeing dancers in such costumes on their stages, the shock (or surprise) at seeing Josephine performing in such a way was reported in newspapers of the time (Josephine Baker..., 2020a; 2020b).

We summarize here the concept of fetishism presented in Hall's text based on the example worked by the author. Saartjie Baartman, also known as Hottentot Venus, was a woman born in what is now South Africa and she lived between the end of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th century. Taken by a Dutch farmer to London, she became an attraction in England and France. Her body was laid out for curious onlookers who could touch it unashamedly. Her dimensions differed from those of European women: her buttocks were fleshier, as was her genital organ, and this caused her to be treated as an object, fetishized in both entertainment and scientific environments.

> Saartjie Baartman did not exist as a 'person'. She was disassembled into relevant parts, she was 'fetishized' – she became an object. This substitution of the *whole* for the *part*, of a subject for a thing – an object, an organ, a body part – is the achievement of a very important representational practice: fetishism (Hall, 2016, p. 205).

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Like Baartman, Baker would also be to some extent fetishized as an object, in the sense employed by Hall. Her performances represented the imagery of a distant Africa, where women danced voluptuously and walked half-naked. However, unlike Baartman, Josephine does not become an object to be possessed; her body parts are not more prominent than she is.

The difference is that Josephine, to some extent, in the understanding of the audience that receives her, embodies a role, however much it is an interpretation of a character very close to what they imagine her to be. She is on a stage, in a show. Her identity is associated with that of an artist. Saartjie does not interpret, she is the personification of a primitive body, and her interaction with the audience is not understood in the space of playing a character, even though, numerous times, she was put on show. She is read only by one key: that of an uncivilized exotic species.

Josephine manages to use the fetishization of her body to her advantage. She shows what the audience wants to experience: the stereotype of the sensual Black woman, but who presents herself in a threshold between the primitive and the civilized, and knows how to perform *African* dances at the same time that she can dance ballet. And so she can enter the scene, in the middle of a caricature jungle, as a native wearing a banana skirt. In 1926, she appears on stage and in the movies wearing the famous skirt, playing *Fatou*[3]. She enters swaying her hips and doing a mixture of dances, from the *Charleston* to belly dancing. Pointing to sexual moves, the bananas keep rattling around her hips. The image is a stereotype of the savage Black woman, but the one who is in control of the scene is Josephine (Image 2). Although she embodies the stereotype, she uses it, manipulates it, and becomes an agent of her own body and *persona*. It is no longer an Other just at the mercy of looks; it is an Other who recognizes herself in her differences but, by performing them in the theatrical space, manages to belong to it, and to be understood as part of that moment in society.

It is worth mentioning that the symbolism of the dance with the banana skirt has inspired the dramaturgy of the performance until the present day, to the point that there are rereadings of the use of the skirt and dance, as in 2006, the centenary year of Josephine's birth, when Beyoncé[4] performed the show *Fashion Rocks* honoring Baker, not only doing a choreography dancing the *Charleston*, but by also wearing a banana skirt costume.

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Image 2 – Josephine Baker wearing a banana skirt (1927).
Source: Photo from Walery (Public domain).

After her success in Europe, Josephine received recognition in the United States and toured the country and others, even performing in Rio de Janeiro (1939) with Grande Othelo at the Urca Cassino.[5]

Her agency over her body and her character helped her not to get *stuck* in the eternal role of the *sensual Black woman*. Her facial expressions, as already mentioned, evoked a certain comicality, which acted as counterpoint in the staging of sexuality presented by her body movements. The comicality of her facial masks, or rather the faces she pulled (*grimaces*, in French), acted as a kind of camouflage, in the sense used and quoted by the French dancer, performer and choreographer Latifa Laâbissi, in an interview with Gilles Amalvi (2010), in his program *Grimace du réel*. Such faces agencied a speech without words, which imitated a supposedly African speech, with facial accents of what was taken to be typical of the inhabitants (and descendants) of Africa, viewed as a whole, with no diversities.

Finally, we briefly highlight other aspects of her life: Baker was an avid advocate for racial equality, participating in the *National Association for the Advancement of Colored People* (NAACP)[6], and was invited to participate in the 1963 civil rights march on Washington[7]. She also appeared in the

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French films, *Zou Zou* (1934) and *Princess Tan Tan* (1935), always in leading roles in which she could show off her singing and dancing skills.

Mercedes Baptista and her theatrical dance

In the same year that Josephine Baker made her debut on the New York stage, 1921, Mercedes Baptista arrived into the world, in Campos de Goytacazes, in the state of Rio de Janeiro. Her family didn't have much money, and little is known about her father, as he didn't live with her. Her mother was a seamstress and, when Mercedes was still a child, she decided to move to the federal capital, which at the time was Rio de Janeiro. Mercedes was introduced to cinema and, when she saw child actresses such as Shirley Temple[8] and Judy Garland[9], she made a decision: she would be famous. It is worth mentioning that her two inspirations were actresses who also danced and sang in their films. However, Mercedes did not have the financial conditions to invest in a career as an actress or to learn a musical instrument. As a teenager, she started doing small jobs to help her mother. Even though she was already working, Mercedes retained her desire for fame and saw dance as a possibility. One day, while walking through the city center, she came across the *Serviço Nacional de Teatro do Rio de Janeiro* (National Theater Service of Rio de Janeiro) and discovered that they had a dance course there.

Mercedes managed to get into the course and began her studies with Eros Volúsia[10] (1914-2004) in 1945, learning classical ballet and folk dance. As a student, she had some moments on stage, but only brief performances. During this time, she met Yuco Lindberg[11] (1908-1948), who let her attend free classes at the *Escola de Danças Clássicas do Theatro Municipal* (Classical Dance School of the Municipal Theater). In 1947, she made her debut on the Municipal stage in the students' show. She participated in two plays, *The Nutcracker*[12] and *Iracema*[13], playing the main character in the latter. According to a statement made by Edmundo Carijó, a dancer who participated in the show, to Paulo Melgaço da Silva Junior in his book *Mercedes Baptista: a criação da identidade negra na dança* (Mercedes Baptista: the creation of Black identity in dance - 2007):

> Yuco created Iracema for Mercedes; she lived the Indian. It was a work focused on her hair. She had huge hair, a real bundle on her head, and he

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> knew how to use this mixture of hair and rhythm. She did very well; she looked beautiful (Silva Junior, 2007, p. 16).

From her colleague's testimony, it is apparent that Mercedes' physical type, a recognized and declared Black woman (Image 3), seemed to limit the choice of characters she could play.

It was in the 1940s and 1950s when she began to perform her craft. Classical dance, in this case ballet, does not necessarily have very defined profiles, since all the dancers who are part of a corps de ballet or a school already have a body type deemed ideal for dance. The element that defined whether someone would become the first ballerina or stay at the bottom was their expressive virtuosity and good technique. However, by the time Mercedes was beginning to dance, markers such as her skin tone mattered. Thus, in repertory ballets, she was never the protagonist, since she did not fit a profile imagined by choreographers and directors (many, at that time, European) and would never gain the prominence she craved even though she had mastered the technique.

In 1948, Mercedes entered and passed the public exam for the *Corpo de Baile do Theatro Municipal*, becoming the first Black dancer to enter the prestigious venue in Rio de Janeiro, along with fellow Black dancer Raul Soares. It is important to point out that she was not the first to attempt the exam: in 1945, Consuelo Rios, a Black ballerina who had studied with important ballet teachers at the time, tried to take the exam, but was prevented from enrolling by a Theatro Municipal official. Consuelo, in her testimony in Silva Junior's book (2007), recalls that another person from the institution, sometime later, explained that, to be a ballet dancer at the Theatro, only "white candidates, or, at least, mulattoes in disguise were accepted" (Silva Junior, 2007, p. 18).

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Image 3 – Mercedes Baptista, 1959.
Source: *Fundo Correio da Manhã*/National Archive/Wikipedia (Public domain).

Only two years later, Mercedes joined *Corpo de Baile*. This fact did not mean a change in the way Black bodies were interpreted and stereotyped in dance, since becoming an employee of the Theater had no direct relation to the opportunities for roles available to her in the company's productions.

> Madeleine Rosay[14], Vaslav Veltchek[15], Edy Vasconcelos[16] and Nina Verchinina[17] gave me good opportunities in my career, without looking at my colour. The problems came later. I suddenly found myself excluded from everything, and even if I put a doormat covering my face they wouldn't let me step on stage. Only once I crossed the stage wearing pointe shoes, and even then, I was at the back (Silva Junior, 2007, p. 20).

Abdias do Nascimento and Experimental Black Theatre

In Mercedes' trajectory it is worth highlighting two artists who were fundamental in the development of her dance and, consequently, her dance company.

The first is Abdias do Nascimento (1914-2011), actor, poet, artist, playwright, writer, professor and activist (we mention only a few of his multiple facets), who worked in the struggle for Black Brazilian populations and towards the recognition of their culture. Among his vast contributions, the creation of the *Teatro Experimental do Negro* (Experimental Black Theater - TEN) stands out, and how it influenced Mercedes and her career.

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In 1941, Abdias attended the play *The Emperor Jones*[18], based on a 1920 play by Eugene O'Neill (1888-1953), at the *Teatro Municipal* in Lima, Peru. He left the play dismayed that the role of the hero, meant to be a Black man, had been played by a white actor with his face painted black. Despite not knowing anything about theater at the time (Nascimento, 2004), the matter of the play resonated with Abdias and he began to question: where are the Black performers in the theater? Did they not exist, or were they only chosen to play caricature roles and never the main character?

> My questions went even further: in my country, so proud of having exemplarily solved the coexistence between blacks and whites, the presence of Blacks on stage should be normal, not merely in secondary and grotesque roles, as occurred, but by playing any Hamlet or Antigone character as long as they had the required talent. In fact, the opposite transpired: even an Emperor Jones, when brought to the Brazilian stage, would have to be played by a white actor wearing Blackface, as had always happened with Othello. Even in native plays, such as José de Alencar's *O Demônio Familiar* (1857), or Ernani Fornari's *Iaiá Boneca* (1939), the norm was to exclude the authentic Black in favor of the caricatured Black. A white actor or actress would be colored black when the role contained a certain theatrical prominence or dramatic qualification. Black actors were only used to imprint a certain local color to the scene, in ridiculous roles, with pejorative connotations (Nascimento, 2004, p. 212).

Questioning the absence of Blacks in Brazilian theaters or realizing that they were always reduced to a stereotype (there were five stereotypes in roles for Blacks identified by Donald Bogle cited by Hall (2016): Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks), Abdias realized the importance of creating a nucleus of theatrical training aimed at the Black Brazilian population. In 1944, TEN began its activities in the city of Rio de Janeiro, with courses on literacy, general culture and notions of theater and interpretation, the latter taught by Abdias. More than 600 people enrolled in the literacy course (Nascimento, 2004), and the other courses also had a high number of participants. The following year, their first production, *O Imperador Jones* (The Emperor Jones), premiered at the Theatro Municipal in Rio de Janeiro**.**

With the intention of valorizing Black culture and the beauty of Black women, a topic very dear to Abdias, TEN held annual contests: *Rainha das Mulatas* and *Boneca de Pixe*. In 1948, Mercedes won the Queen of the Mu-

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latas contest, and her relationship with TEN, and particularly with Abdias, began to blossom. She worked as a dancer, choreographer, and collaborator with *Teatro Experimental*, participating in the congresses and discussions on racial equality that Abdias organized with other agents.

On the stages of the Theatro Municipal, Mercedes was not cast, according to her own words, because she was Black. She had become a *backstage* employee of the institution. However, together with Abdias, Mercedes gained prominence due to her dance and her Blackness. She was valued and celebrated. It was through this expanding network in search of an appreciation of Black culture that Mercedes met Katherine Dunham (1909-2006), an important African-American choreographer and researcher of dances involving the Black diaspora.

Abdias invited Dunham to teach at TEN to strengthen the ties between Brazil and the United States, with a view to more intense exchanges between both in the cultural sphere, which happened when Dunham offered scholarship places in her company, in the United States, to Black Brazilian dancers. Mercedes was selected for the scholarship and moved to New York, where she began studying at the *Dunham School of Dance*.

Her choice to accept the scholarship was very much based on the lack of space she encountered in her work as a dancer. At Dunham's school, Mercedes came into contact with dances from Haiti and other countries from the Black diaspora, and also became a classical dance teacher at the institution (Silva Junior, 2007). Due to bureaucratic issues connected with her work at *Corpo de Baile*, she decided to return to Brazil. The scenario had not changed, even with the increased qualifications on her résumé: the structure of the Theatro Municipal, at that moment, seemed not to accept that Mercedes could be cast in leading roles. Faced with this apparently immutable situation, she decided to found her own school and dance company, the *Ballet Folclórico Mercedes Baptista.*

Mixing the rhythms of Brazilian popular dances with her own classical dance base, she achieved relative success with the company, touring America and Europe (Image 4). The Ballet gained great prominence in the revue genre, since it included dance numbers with professional dancers. Her work with the revue theatre earned positive reviews in the newspapers of the time

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as, for example, in 1957, when she did the choreography for the show *Rumo à Brasília* by Silva Filho's company:

> The critic RVM comments: In the music and costume designs, the *Ballet Folclórico Mercedes Baptista* is the most positive contribution to the show. We have no hesitation in identifying the work of Silva Filho, Consuelo Leandro, Manuel Vieira, and the Ballet *Folclórico Mercedes Baptista* as the main elements behind the expected success (Silva Junior, 2007, p. 46).

Mercedes passed away in 2014 in the city of Rio de Janeiro due to heart problems and diabetes. Until her death she continued to practice her craft, teaching classes, choreographing for samba schools and conducting seminars about her *Ballet Folclórico*.

Image 4 – Mercedes Baptista and her *Balé Folclórico*, c. 1950.
Source:Wikipedia / National Archive (Public domain).

Two artists: representations based on Josephine Baker and Mercedes Baptista

Having presented the two artists, it is possible to identify common points between them. Although they were separated by the Atlantic and a difference in years, Josephine and Mercedes saw that their artistic practice had consequences by being assimilated to stereotypes of what a Black wom-

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an's body symbolized. However, by agencying the common imagery attached to their bodies, they did not fit into the subalternity often associated with what was expected of racialized female bodies.

For instance, it could be argued that the stage (and the sets) of classical dance was impermeable to Mercedes' figure, so the spotlight was never given to her. It was only when she left the Theatro Municipal in search of new spaces, in which her appearance and practice had a relationship with the proposed whole – the TEN, the revue theatre or performing in the Ballet Folclórico – did she find success in the eyes of others.

Unlike Mercedes, Josephine became big news due to the contradiction and shock she provoked: the European theater stages were not used to receiving a Black dancer in tiny costumes performing *primitive* movements. The dissociation of the elements made her stand out, either through the fetish of prejudice or the colonial admiration regarding the Other and their capabilities.

Between them, there was a common factor: both artists had to work with the stereotypes assigned to them. But by using them as agency, aware of the dance they were practicing, and the news they were generating, they managed to exert control over their bodies and practices, not becoming objects of desire or admiration, like the museum pieces plundered from the South or like Saartjie Baartman. They manipulated the scene of life on stage, simulating social facades and identities pre-established for them, agencying camouflage.

They still represented the Other, but by being in the performing space, they seemed to present less danger of a disruption to the social order. Thus, camouflaged in the characters they played of themselves, they achieved a level of acceptance in the field of arts and were not merely classified as performers of ritualistic dances. Their choreographies were incorporated as elements of entertainment and they managed to coexist with what was considered proper for the stage at that time. In their trajectories, they symbolized a small rupture with what was seen as permitted or forbidden.

However, even with these small sparks of change, it is worth taking up a question raised by Hall (2016): have there been changes in relation to the stereotypes of Black women performing non-classical dances in contemporary society? Do the spaces gained have equity with classical dances? Or,

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should she wish to enter classical dance, will a Black woman reach the position of prima ballerina? Or will she be given a prominent role, regardless of the dance company in which she participates?

In research conducted for her website *Dos passos da bailarina* (transformed into a book), the author Cássia Pires revealed disturbing data. In 2013, the date of the research, there was not one Black prima ballerina in the world's major dance companies (Pires, 2013). The author replicated her questioning in an article for the portal Geledés, *As bailarinas negras e o ballet clássico* (Black dancers and classical ballet), in 2015, in which she pointed out certain Black dancers who had achieved prominence in large companies (Pires, 2015).

Moving forward to 2018, researcher Sekani Robinson presented quantitative research on Black women in American ballet companies in which she revealed that only 5% of the corps in major American companies was composed of Black dancers (Robinson, 2018). Despite some changes, such as the insertion of pointe shoes with a greater variety of skin colors that cater to non-white people, the representation in classical dance of Black men and women is still small, especially in leading roles.

One way of addressing this gap was the creation of independent companies and projects – such as Mercedes Baptista's – that were geared towards non-white dancers, with the *Dance Theatre of Harlem* (New York) being one of the greatest examples (Frajuca; Menezes, 2021). In the realm of contemporary dance and its developments, it's noteworthy how Black women continue to agency their bodies and perform on stage.

Taísa Machado, actress, writer and researcher of dance and sexuality, has been developing the Afrofunk project, founded in 2014 in Rio de Janeiro. She offers practical workshops on ancestral dances and the African diaspora and all the dances have hip movements. During her practices, Taísa not only teaches the movements, but also talks with the participants (always women) about the body that dances, sensuality, the experiences in the periphery of Rio de Janeiro and the *Ciência do Rebolado* (Faustini, 2020). In addition to the workshops, Machado performs shows and lectures about the place of women and funk in our society. Despite this, such examples still seem to be the exception and not the norm. Black female figures in dance are still not in the majority and the struggle for their rightful place is ongoing.

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Finally, regarding Josephine and Mercedes: we are moving towards a late recognition of the two artists. Further academic studies on the company and the figure of Mercedes Baptista are being developed, and the extensive research of the author Paulo Melgaço da Silva Junior on Mercedes has generated books, such as the one mentioned in this article, *Mercedes Baptista – a dama negra da dança* (2021), and there was also an exhibition at the SESC Copacabana, Rio de Janeiro (2021), curated by the same author. Baptista was also the subject of the inauguration of a sculpture in her honor in the Largo de São Francisco da Prainha, in Praça Mauá, in the central region of Rio de Janeiro, in 2016, very close to the Cais do Valongo.[19] On the other hand, in 2021, Josephine Baker's remains were buried in the *Panthéon de Paris,* [20] a space never before occupied by a Black woman.

Josephine and Mercedes marked their eras and continue to perpetuate their stories as symbols of rupture and pattern-breaking. Highlighting them is to brush history against the grain, as in Benjamin (1994 apud Baker, 2022, p. 60), and makes such movements and voices heard.

Notes

1 According to the American Vaudeville Museum's website, this was a theatrical genre that emerged in France in 1792. It includes music, dance, circus, and comedy. It was a very widespread genre in the Americas, especially in the United States. Available at: https://www.vaudeville.org/histories/. Accessed on: 30 nov. 2021.

2 It is important to highlight that the show, written and set to music by four Black people, is considered part of the Harlem Renaissance movement, which took place between the years 1918 and 1929. The movement, recognized at the time as the New Negro Movement, was centered in Harlem (a region located in New York City) and promoted African-American cultural expressions in the fields of music, theater, and literature. Despite the difficulties in producing the play, it met with success at the time.

3 Fatou, a character played by Josephine, is a native woman from an unnamed country, just a native of the African continent. Fatou is inspired by Fatou-gaye, a character in the novel *Le Roman d'un spahi* (1881) by Pierre Loti. Fatou-gaye is the Senegalese lover of the main character, Jean Peyral, a French soldier. The book was widely known in France, even in the 1920s, and was

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made into a film in 1936, so the name chosen for Josephine's character already referred to the public's associations of the image of Black African women.

[4] Beyoncé (b. 1981) is an American singer, songwriter, actress, dancer, and entrepreneur. She was born in Houston, Texas. She was part of the musical group Destiny's Child before launching her solo career. She is known worldwide not only for her songs, but also for her wide-ranging role as a public figure.

[5] The Urca Cassino building was created in the centennial year of Brazil's independence, 1922, functioning initially as the Balneário Hotel. In 1933, it became a hotel-casino, a common undertaking for the time, after being acquired by businessman Joaquim Rolla. Until 1946 – the year in which gambling was banned in Brazil – it functioned as a show venue for high society, with national and international performances. After the end of its gambling and entertainment activities, it became the headquarters of TV Tupi between 1954 and 1980. It reopened for activities only in 2006, now as the headquarters of the European Institute of Design.

[6] The NAACP is the oldest, and one of the most influential civil rights associations for Black Americans. Created in 1909 by a broad group, which included W. E. D. Du Bois, Mary White Ovington and Moorfield Storey, among others, it acted on different fronts to "guarantee equal rights for all people, eliminating discrimination based on race". Available at: https://naacp.org/.Accessed on: 30 Nov. 2021.

[7] March held in the capital of the United States, Washington, on August 28, 1963. Organized by activist Martin Luther King, it brought together more than 250,000 people who fought peacefully for an end to racial segregation in the country. King's speech, I Had a Dream, marked the demonstration and is constantly quoted by politicians and public people.

[8] Shirley Temple (1928-2014) was an American actress, dancer, and singer. From 1935 to 1938, she was the highest-grossing child actress at the box office. As a child she rose to stardom acting in musical films. Her image as a child made it difficult for her to get adult roles, so she decided to retire as an actress at the age of 22.

[9] Judy Garland (1922-1969) was the stage name of Frances Ethel Gumm. An actress, singer, and dancer, she became known as one of the great stars of Hollywood musical films in the 1940s and 1950s. While still in her teens, she appeared in the movie *The Wizard of OZ* (1938) as the main character Dorothy.

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She managed to maintain her career in entertainment even as an adult, but died at just 47 years from an accidental overdose..

[10] Eros Volúsia was a Brazilian dancer, recognized for working with elements of Brazilian popular culture in her movements. Trained in classical ballet at Theatro Municipal, she incorporated lundu, maxixe, and other dances originating in Africa into her choreography. She was the first dancer to dance barefoot in Brazil in a theatrical dance show. It is worth mentioning the imaginary that surrounded her figure and her artistic work, translated as the ideal representation of the proclaimed miscegenation of the three races. In an article in the American magazine Life, on September 22, 1941, with the title Brazilian Eros Volusia Does Negro Witch Dance, the dancer was presented as a young woman whose blood contained the three dominant *races* present in Brazil: Portuguese (white), Indigenous and Black, but that, notwithstanding this mixture, she chose the dance that came from the African jungles. Despite this mixed identity, Eros was acknowledged as a white woman, so certain spaces of protagonism on the stage could be occupied by her without much questioning (Brazilian..., 1941).

[11] Yuco Lindberg (1908-1948), a native of Estonia, moved to Brazil in 1921. He passed through São Paulo before settling in Rio de Janeiro, where he served as director of the Maria Olenewa dance school (the current name of the Theatro Municipal do Rio de Janeiro).

[12] *The Nutcracker* is a classical ballet performance, traditionally staged in December, near Christmas. It is based on Alexandre Dumas' version of a children's tale written by E. T. A. Hoffmann, and was composed by Piotr Ilitch Tchaikovsky. It premiered in St. Petersburg (Russia) in 1892 and continues to be staged. The staging in which Mercedes participates was done in 1947, with Yuco Lindbergrado reworking José de Alencar's novel of the same name. The 1947 production had music, libretto, and costumes by Laura Figueiredo and set design by Mário Conde.

[13] *Iracema* is a ballet inspired by José de Alencar's novel of the same name. The 1947 production had music, libretto, and costumes by Laura Figueiredo and set design by Mário Conde (Silva Junior, 2007).

[14] Madeleine Rosay (1923-1996) was a ballerina at the Theatro Municipal do Rio de Janeiro. She joined the Corps de Ballet in 1936 and was the first Brazilian to receive the title of Prima Ballerina (Silva Junior, 2007).

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[15] Vaslav Veltchek (1897-1967), dancer and choreographer. He was born in Prague (Czech Republic) and moved to Brazil in 1939, working with Maria Olenewa in Rio de Janeiro. In 1940, he moved to São Paulo to be the first director of the Escola Municipal de Bailados. He also worked as a choreographer in Rio de Janeiro from the 1940s to the 1960s.

[16] Edy Vasconcelos, trained by the Ballet School of the Theatro Municipal do Rio de Janeiro.

[17] Nina Verchinina (1912-1995) was born in Moscow (Russia). She directed the Corps de Ballet between 1946 and 1947, when she introduced the modern technique (Silva Junior, 2007).

[18] It is worth noting that this same piece served as the underlying dramaturgy for a choreography (1956), by José Limón (1908-1972), director and choreographer of the José Limon Dance Company, performed by a Black dancer soloist, over a soundtrack by Brazilian Heitor Villa-Lobos (1887-1959). Revived in 2011, it was presented at the SESC Vila Marina Theater (São Paulo) by the American company (Navas, 2011).

[19] The Cais do Valongo is located in the port area of the city of Rio de Janeiro. It has been considered a World Heritage Site by Unesco since 2017. It was the place where enslaved people disembarked and were traded. The site received between 500,000 and one million Africans.

[20] Inaugurated in 1758, it was originally intended as a shrine to Saint Genevieve. However, since the French Revolution (1789) it has been a monument intended to honor notable personalities in the history of France, receiving in its crypt the mortal remains of these individuals.

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