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Eros Volúsia

Performance, creative poetics and identity affirmation

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I. Creating a Sense of Brazilianity

By the end of World War I (1914-1918), with the growth of a nationalist ideology in Brazil, French mannerisms started to decline. Would there be a worthwhile culture in a country that had just recently eliminated slavery, with a work-force mixed of three races, and presenting different areas of development from urban to rural? There was an agreement to the necessity of "finding new expressions capable of translating the dynamics of nationality. One should conclude that the country could not have a 'borrowed front', or a 'borrowed culture'" (Velloso, 2000, p. 17). In the main urban areas, such as Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, a different understanding of culture came into prominence, one based on nationalism. The Modernist Movement in São Paulo, reflected upon by intellectuals and identified by the Semana de 22, divided in two sides[1]. Mário de Andrade's less conservative group did not deny our roots, and neither was it closed to external influences, for it understood the necessity of establishing critical selections in this modern task of building nationality. Brazil, that up to that point still showed prejudice towards manual labor activities — a heritage from the slavery period — with the Modernist movement

[1] Brazilian Modernists ended up divided in two groups, one of them more conservative; this conservative side was formed by Menotti del Pichia, Cassiano Ricardo, and Plínio Salgado, among others. The other group was headed by Mário de Andrade, and proposed a new element, considering the Brazilian individual as rooted in a tropical, caboclo and mutant culture. Such individual was open to the absorption of other cultures, but not randomly, such as was the practice previously. In an allusion to anthropophagy, these individual would eat their "peers to retain their qualities, in a critique to the rampant absorption of European cultural models" (Velloso, 2000, p. 16).

started to reconsider and to change its ideas. Most of our intellectuals were forced to consider an image of Brazil that is also African and Indigenous, putting aside the romanticised, forcedly nationalist ("ufanista") and idealised.

Figure 1: Abaporu, Tarsila do Amaral, oil on canvas, 1928..[2]

In Rio de Janeiro, the reflection on Brazilian cultural identity happened differently, as it did not transit by the city's cultural elites. Another tradition prevailed, with cultural exchanges that happened on the streets, in cafés, in religious gatherings, and by the circulation of cultural goods that had happened since the 19th Century[3]. Cultural exchange had been common for a few years among intellectuals, artists and working classes, in places such as Festa da Penha, Casa da Tia Ciata, but also bars, cafés, and other public spaces, where people exchanged music, literature, samba de roda, and cultural and aesthetic thought currents. One might observe

[2]Abaporu is a classic Brazilian modernist painting, by artist Tarsila do Amaral. Its title comes from Indigenous tupi-guarani origins, meaning "a man who eats people" (a cannibal), by the junction of the terms aba (man), pora (people) and ú (to eat). It was painted in 1928 and offered to the painter's husband, writer Oswald de Andrade. The elements in the painting have provided the ideas that lead Oswald to the creation of the Anthropophagical Movement.

that in Rio de Janeiro Modernism happened in a different and peculiar manner, with cultural movement including middle and popular urban classes, and encompassing new musical genres, festivities, religion, language, culinary, lifestyle, and dances. Such phenomenon, strongly influenced by African traditions, evidencing western urban black culture comes from the favelas and reaches Cultural Industry in a consolidation during the 1930s — the "age of rediscovering Brazil" (Mota, 1990, p. 38). Black culture influences begin, little by little, to forge the history of Rio de Janeiro. This doesn't happen easily, since there is resistance in the acceptance of this culture, mainly by the elite and by most of Rio's middle class. Nevertheless, the expressive quality of this culture and its capacity for pulling more people to its orbit are determinant factors in this tug of war with Europeanised erudition and popular culture. What can be seen is a social accommodation of habits and manners, and not always harmoniously, as it is still the case to this day. On the one side, people from black cultures took on values of dominant cultures to be accepted, while, on the other side, people from dominant white cultures also took on certain values of black culture.

In the 1940s the Federal Capital, a power and elite center, started producing and projecting to the country a different image of the carioca (the individual from Rio de Janeiro), combining the idea of someone who is a member of the list of civilised nations to the notions of a particular sway, musicality, and humour, brought by the popular and black cultural movement. This cultural broth is fed by samba, which gets a noted role on

> the idea of a Brazilian national unity, disseminating the interest by Brazilian matters, that is, popular culture, after a time of ripening inside inferior neighbourhoods and favelas, among the African and the American Indigenous people, mixed with the Portuguese, Italian and Spanish immigrants (Moura, 2000, p.56).

Samba was developed in Praça Onze, Carnival started shaping up into its current format, radio shows, the utmost miracle of technology, spoken cinema, amuse-

[3] Public spaces in Rio the Janeiro have acted since the 19th Century as points of convergence — dynamic spaces supporting performing arts. Streets and squares turned into gathering spots, facilitating distinct forms of social interaction among their usual frequenters, the slaves (Zenicola, 2012, p. 42).

ment parks, circuses, cabarets, cassinos, and the maxixe dance were an epidemic among middle and lower classes, as well as the teatros de revista (a form of vaudevilles), which motivated behaviour and affirmed ideologies attracting audiences, and turning artists into mass idols and role models. In this live exchange of cultural elements, one can observe the growth of humour through parody, and a larger acceptance of dance, of playfulness, of behavioural characteristics inherent of black cultures, in a daily life crossing of traditions, transformations and adaptations in the name of modernisms. According to Saliba,

> the body movement appealing to the senses (…) the only possible parodic image to this alternative representation of the Republic, might have been the one full of movement, of play, of fickleness, and even sensuality, expressed, for instance, in the most popular dance in Rio de Janeiro from the beginning of the century, the maxixe[4] (Saliba, 1998, p. 42).

Despite all that movement, artistic and cultural productions were still restricted to a specific audience. That is the reason why, according to Ortiz, the state tries to "stimulate culture as a means of integration, but under the control of State apparatus"[5](Ortiz, 2008, p. 16). Getúlio Vargas's government started supporting multiple popular manifestations, such as samba schools, while using the most popular means of communication of the time, the radio, as a strategy to publicise its populist and nationalist ideals.

> It is by means of a reinterpretation mechanism that the State, through its intellectuals, appropriates popular practices and presents them as national cultural expressions. Candomblé, Carnival, Reisados, etc, are therefore appropriated by State official discourse, that considers them as manifestations of this Brazilianity (Mota, 1990, p. 44).

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[4] Maxixe is an edible fruit from a creeping plant, and its name was, at that time, associated to other things perceived as low-levelled, as something pertaining to lower categories (Tinhorão, 1998, p. 64). The Maxixe Dance got this alias, but still went on to become the biggest trend and fashion of the period.

[5] "The relations between culture and State are old in Brazil. In the 1930s, we'll see that with the creation of the Estado Novo (New State), governmental manifestation was associated to the expansion of the network of cultural institutions (creation of the National Theater Service), to the creation of higher education degrees, as well as to the formulation of an ideology of Brazilian culture. The magazine Cultura e Política was, in 1941-1945, an ideological state office, at the same time when the DIP acted as a means of censorship" (Ortiz, 2008, p. 22).

In the 1940s, already under the influence of World War II, closer ties are forged between the American government and Latin-American dictatorships, in the good neighbour policy.

This situation provided a proximity of "economic investments, of diplomacy and the glamorisation of the image of Latin America in Hollywood cinema. That's when Donald Duck came to Rio, and met Zé Carioca" (Sevcenko, 1998, p. 159). Zé Carioca is a character of a small parakeet, created at that time by Walt Disney. The character is galant and humorous, he wears a jacket and speaks softly, we wears a hat and holds an umbrella, and he has a sway (ginga) [6] in his walk and a softness in his speech. Zé Carioca dates Rita, a brunette with long and wavy hair, presented as a rumba dancer, or as a Baiana, a doll that had her characteristics and bodily performance copied from Eros Volúsia (1914-2014). It is interesting to notice in this context that since the 1920s dance was going through a global fertile moment.

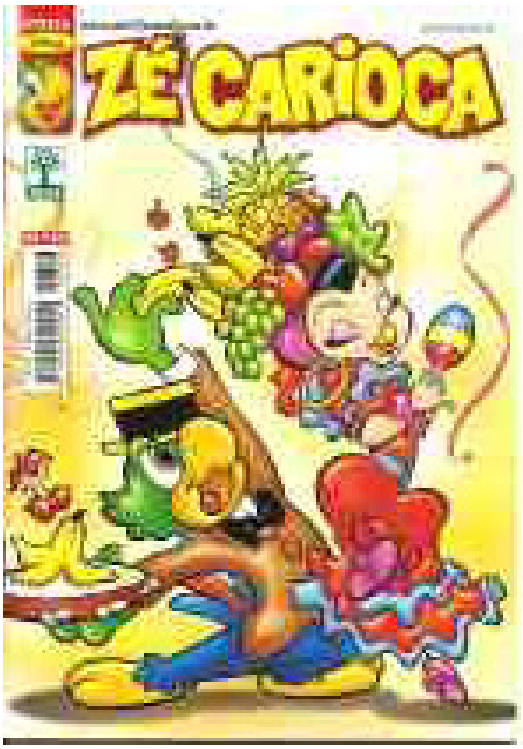

Figure 2: Comic book Zé Carioca,
unidentified graphic art, FUNARTE, 1940

[6] Ginga is a form of movement characterised by elusive detours, a reluctance that is dissimulated or not; it is a form of escaping action, while creating new actions, and it comes from African-Brazilian origins, present both in Capoeira Angola, and in the dance of Samba de Gafieira. The ginga is reflected in the body as a way of being in and facing the world, acting as a self-induced and spontaneous jerk of the body that established the new positioning necessary to the action which will be initiated, thus subtracting something to induce another possibility. This action keeps movement novelty, vivacity and quality, making corporeal performance a vigorous one.

> There is a consensus among multiple researchers that it was the tense atmosphere of World War I that decisively propelled dance based on frenetic movements to become one of the prominent symbolic activities of social life. (…) pre-war iconography was no longer a Roman woman dressed with the attributes of success. The iconography of civilisation was a long-haired individual, strumming a tango on his violin (Sevcenko, 1998, p. 58).

In Brazil, as well as abroad, dance was more accepted; rhythms, singing and bodily expression became more intense and vibrant. Maxixe, bolero and tango were successes in world cultural capitals, such as London, Paris and Buenos Aires. In Rio, this acceptance of dance was experienced by the bourgeoisie that became adepts of the gafieiras in the regions of Cinelândia and around Praça Tiradentes. Dances of African origins, such as the lundu, the polca and the maxixe became more accepted starting on the late 1920s. With faster music and a sensual proximity of the bodies dancing came a possibility of relaxation and informality to a language that was more bodily, of changes reflecting the new values emerged in this modern society. In this cultural context, in a time of intense searching for this Brazilianity, Eros Volúsia arises as a dancer, teacher, choreographer and creator of Brazilian Dance, a bridge, both multiple and contradictory, between tradition and popular in this reality.

II. Eros Volúsia

Eros Volúsia started dancing at the age of 4, and began ballet classes at 5 under Maria Olenewa and other great masters in the Teatro Municipal do Rio de Janeiro. Her first public performance, at 8, at the Teatro Municipal, was attended by Brazilian president Washigton Luís. At the occasion, she was barefoot, accompanied by a guitar and batucada (an African influenced Brazilian percussive style), something daring and incompatible with the elitist traditions of that very traditional stage. The audience did not know what to make of her performance. The initial silence was disrupted by the president, commanding the applause. Thus, she began a career that catapulted her "into the artistic scenery of Brazil as the creator of our popular dance (…) I danced a samba accompanied by a group of young violinists" (Volúsia, 1983, p. 44). But her story begins before that. Born into a family of artists, Eros Volúsia grew in an environment of great cultural efervesce. Her family home was frequented for generations by writers, such as Arthur and Aluízio Azevedo, Pardal Mallet, Luiz Murat, Coelho Neto and Olavo Bilac and great musicians, such as

Carlos Gomes, Chiquinha Gonzaga, Alberto Nepomuceno and Francisco Braga. Her genealogy counts four generations of artists. Her great grandfather was a violinist, her grandmother Teresa Costa marked an era of national theatre, having moved later on to radio, and both her parents, Gilka Machado and Rodolfo Machado were poets. But Eros Volúsia had another influence besides the artistic one experience at home on daily basis in her family soirées: African Brazilian culture. And such influence was soon manifested.

> The humble environment I experienced as a child among the usual capoeira practitioners in Morro da Mangueira, and the nostalgic batucagés at Cascadura, already engaged me in these rhythms in our neighbour's yard, João da Luz's famous meeting place (Terreiro), the old babalaô said my dances were sent by Iemanjá! (Volúsia, 1983, p. 44)

In her childhood memories, she speaks of her different dances, not regarding their African origins, but their African-Brazilian performance quality. A dance from the slums, capoeira, more individual and bodily, and another dance, from the suburbs, the batuque (drumming), more collective, social and ritual. Her career ascended meteorically, structured by her studies of classical dances. Nevertheless, she carried in her body other memories and performances of black dances. This junction of aesthetics marks her distinction, having sometimes been compared to Isadora Duncan, and also complimented by Ana Pavlova:

> this girl I just saw in exercise has everything to become a great classical ballerina: good posture, magnificent waist, flexibility, ballon, firm pirouettes and hands that speak, and are of an uncommon beauty (Volúsia, 1983, p. 42).

Although she learned classic academic technique, she never developed a preference for this genre, and soon passed to the creation of Brazilian dances. From that moment on, she creates choreographies and develops her tendency to nationalist and/or expressionist dances, "those that communicate states of mind!" (Volúsia, 1983 p. 44). In reference to her own work at that time, she declares: "maybe I can translate my national creations as: dramatic, symbolic, and recreational, but they are all impregnated with a great dose of expressionism" (Volúsia, 1983 p. 44).

By the end of the 1930s, Paschoal Carlos Magno presented Eros Volúsia in a exhibition called Exposição dos Cinco, where she danced three choreographies: Morte do Cisne (The Dying Swan), Lenda de um Beijo (Legend of a Kiss), Agonia da Saudade (Agony of Yearning). Poet Augusto Lima, who watched the dances, said that "those restless legs were forming the foundations of national dance" (Volúsia, 1983 p. 31).

Soon, Luiz Edmundo invited her to illustrate with a performance his conference at Escola de Belas Artes, about the reconstruction of 46 dances from Colonial Brazil. From that invitation, Eros Volúsia developed researches in many regions of Brazil, and her results would subside her method of work, established from and based on African-American-Indigenous dances. About that performance, Eros Volúsia gives a testimony:

> That was the first time that such dances happened at that place (…) while I performed a fetishist dance number with authentic music from Umbanda, I had to finish the dance in silence, for most of the members of the orchestra entered a trance during the presentation (Volúsia, 1983, p. 44)

Figure 3: Eros Volúsia, Life Magazine, September 22 1941

Her consecration in Brazil lead her movement to be copied by Walt Disney designers for the creation of Zé Carioca's girlfriend character. American journalist Mart Preston came to Brazil to interview Eros Volúsia for Life Magazine.

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Figure 4: Eros Volúsia, in the movie Rio Rita, directed by
S. Sylvan Simon, unidentified photographer, FUNARTE, 1942

Her photoshoot was chosen as the magazine's cover, and she was hired by Metro Goldwyin Mayer to dance in the movie Rio Rita (1942), in this occasion, she worked in Hollywood and appeared along Bud Abbotti and Lou Costello[7] . Following her success in the United States, she was invited by the French government to be a part of the French-Brazilian Folk-Danse festivals. Other than the festivals, presented at Théâtre des Champs Elysées, she danced at the Boîte Drap D'Or, at the Club Champs Elysées and at the Cassino D'Enghien. Still in Paris, she gave a conference on Brazilian dances at the Archives Internacionales de la Dance, inaugurating the section of Brazilian dance of this archive and becoming its correspondent. One of her most applauded choreographic works was Macumba[8], nicknamed in France the hair dance, which showed a movement of a growing rotation of the head that is still used by Brazilian dancers to this day.

Figure 5: Eros in her solo Macumba, n.d., unidentified photographer, FUNARTE

[7] Eros Volúsia also worked on many national movies, such as: Favela dos Meus Amores (1935), Samba da Vida (1937), Caminho do Céu (1943), Romance Proibido (1944) and Pra Lá de Boa (1949).
[8] The choreography Macumba does not have a date of creation.

After this career start similar to that of Carmem Miranda, Eros decided to come back to Brazil to work on the courses she had previously created. Back to Rio, in Cassino Copacabana she released the song Tico-Tico no Fubá, in an accelerated version, making the song known world-wide. Before her international travels, she was appointed teacher at the Ministry of Education's Serviço Nacional do Teatro. When she came back, she devoted herself to forming her own dance group. As a teacher of the old S.N.T., she created a Choreography Course, aiming to provide artists to the national music theater. Ballet classes at S.N.T. were practical, but also kept in mind a theoretical approach. Students were taught technical body training through academic dancing, which Volúsia considered a "universal and indispensable method to prepare the body for the acquisition of any artistic choreographic learning" (Pereira, 2004, p. 34). For that course, she eliminated another practice once considered normal in Brazilian dance schools, by allowing black, mulatto and pardo students to frequent classes and to be members of her dance company. The ending of this racial discrimination was copied by many other schools. That course issued numerous talents of all races, that came to artistic prominence in the Teatros de Revista, national cinema, as well as dancing in the corps de ballet of the Teatro Municipal do Rio de Janeiro. Among them, we might mention Sebastião Araújo, Gilberto de Assis and Mercedes Baptista. Her work with Grupo Coreográfico, as well as her travels and lectures on the methodologies of national choreography always showed an intent on evidencing the system and developing a dance she called National Dance. When she presented the first Ballet Brasileiro, with students of her school, she was awarded a Gold Medal by the Associação de Críticos Teatrais for best choreography of the year, for the presentation of three dances, entitled Recordações do Congo, Taieras and Fandango. By researching popular themes of African-Brazilian and American-Indigenous origins and making them into choreographic creations, Eros Volúsia transported to the stage a new style of dance and performance, one with Brazilian roots and rhythm. In Reflexões sobre Dança Brasileira, em específico o Maracatu, she wrote:

> I felt I could no longer be restricted by academic methods (…) the love for Brazilian rhythms and for the dances that communicate states of mind demanded I widened my field of action (…) diverging from the common elements of our rhythms, most of them from black origins, that are embodied in the practitioners' legs and hips, maracatu is da dance of the scapula, a rotating shoulder movement,

> accompanied by the neck in musical elasticity, while the feet glide, just marking the beat. Quick turns of erect bodies are executed only from time to time (Volúsia, 1983, p. 81).

Eros Volúsia describes maracatu exalting it, because the dance, according to her, is one of the remnants from "congada - the most fertile choreographic creation of African-Brazilians" (Lima, 2000, p. 61).

From her research, stylisation, and choreographic recreation of American-Indigenous and African-Brazilian dances one can conclude that Eros transposes social, political and ethnical limits. Through the performance of those dances, tradition is learnt, recreated, and transmitted, and permanently fixated in artistic choreography. From her personal dance, Eros Volúsia became the image of the beautiful girl in skimpy outfits, a Hollywood sensual standard of

> American musicals and movies of the 1930s to the 1950s (…) her success was tremendous, because she combined the most expressive languages of action and of modernity, sport, dance, glamour, collective coordination, and a primacy of individual destiny (Sevcenko, 1998, p. 251).

Tulle, silk, sequins, gold and silver fabrics, necklaces, bracelets, cuffs, tiaras, bodices, high heels — the certainty that pleasure existed and that one could long for it.

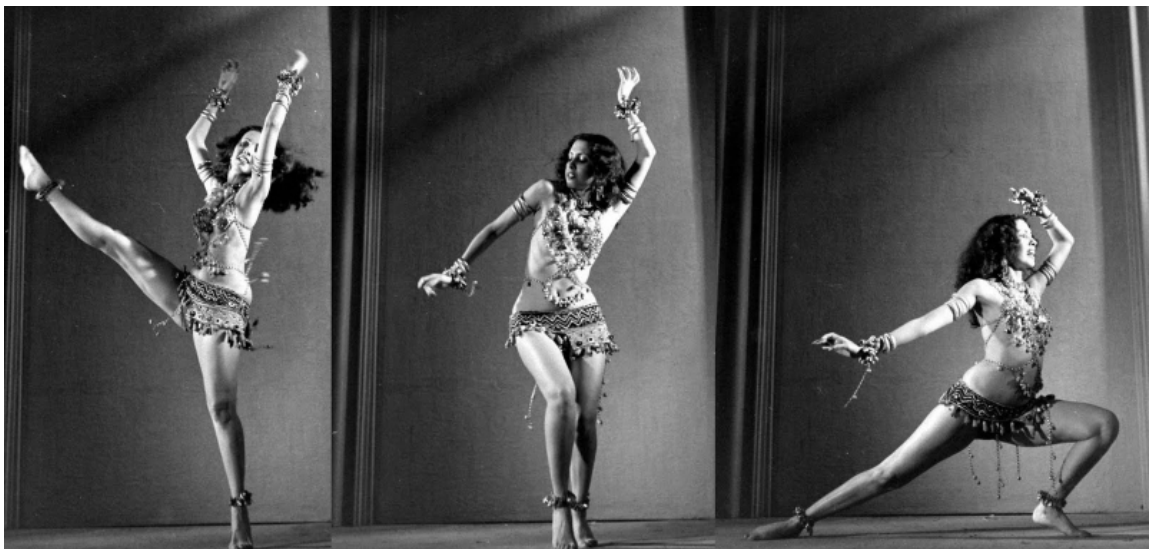

Figure 6: Life Magazine photoshoot, unidentified photographer, FUNARTE, 1941

III. The Dance

What we notice is that Eros Volúsia, moved by an intent of building a Brazilian nationalist thinking and by the interest of understanding and better-knowing Brazilian dances, chooses and is chosen to be the representative of this movement. Consequently, she establishes in her research, movements towards different directions, both inside Brazil and abroad. Eros Volúsia traveled through Brazil, studied our culture, still called folklore at that time, and researched a multitude of dances, interested in noticing our cultural traditions, the symbolisms of the body and its performative virtuosities. Such as Mário de Andrade did before her, she did not intend on focusing on our past, but on understanding present time from popular culture; corporeal Brazilianity, the relations between bodies and the living aspects of current imagery and imagination that, in all cultures, bring wisdom, logic, and knowledge to the people. She wants to understand the tradition by what is still current and alive, its praxis. In a performative vision, she associates the body as social and spectacular, while trying to understand a corporal way of being, behaving, acting, speaking, singing, embellishing. An interchanging tradition, that Mário de Andrade called "mobile traditions" and "lessons to be meditated upon, not repeated" (Andrade, 1992, p. 32). Thus, Eros Volúsia, just as the Modernists from São Paulo, understands the past as a path, never as a permanence, and as the intellectuals from Rio de Janeiro, she perceives the richness of the circulation of cultural goods that happened among intellectuals, artists and popular classes, originating a cultural and aesthetic performance creation with a distinct African-descendent bias.

Instead of establishing contact and cultural exchange among the many Brazilian regions, her proposition created the fundament of a Brazilian dance, a dance that reveals emergent forms of behaviour of our African-American-Indigenous identity. Similarly, while travelling abroad, she performs an action of modern anthropophagy, ingesting and devouring bodies and spirits, digesting and metabolising them into similar, but not identical, and therefore, distinguishable individuals. This digestion must be selective, since the modernist anthropophagy metaphor implies the recreation of ideas that come from abroad, as if they were originally ours, but only after they have been through a selection — from cannibalism to assimilation. Thus, she uses her dances to put into dialogue rural elements and the urban

western African culture, interweaving her classical technique as a ballerina of the Teatro Municipal do Rio de Janeiro with the results of her researches. Eros brings closer the Europeanised erudite and the rural popular and the African urban, in interesting dances for the stage, and in free recreations of traditional dances such as congados, reisados, maxixes, and batucadas.

Figure 7: Macumba, by Eros Volúsia, n.d., unidentified photographer, FUNARTE

Eros Volúsia, in her arduous search for Brazilian themes, reveals herself as a devourer of our socio-cultural peculiarities, while searching for concrete forms of cultural expression, integrating and reinterpreting fragments in a more ample perspective. According to Ortiz,

> In this sense, (…) African-American-Indigenous cultures are not simply experienced in their particularities, but that which is singular of each one turns into a more generalised instance of knowledge. By integrating in a coherent whole the fragments of African and American Indigenous histories, intellectuals build an identity that unifies agents previously separated. In this sense, identity is an element of unification for the parts, as well as a fundament for political action (…) directing them towards social movement (Ortiz, 2008, p. 54).

Eros processes an embodiment of elements from popular and tradicional contexts in a re-traditionalised appropriation. Putting herself as a participant capable of reflecting on her own culture, her experiments produce indisputable cultural prod-

ucts, which are a result of a varied chain of contact with Brazilian identity. Such deep incursions allow for a performative reading of historical material, through pieces of recreation that stage elegant productions, even while showing a certain modernist euphoria. As a result, she develops a freer way of dancing, in a sudden emphasis of psychism, as she liked to put it, while thinking about the complexity of our country.

Figure 8: Eros Volúsia, n.d.,
unidentified photographer, FUNARTE

An artisan committed to a game of symbolic construction, she assumes the Brazilian being, rooted in her tropical culture, caboclo and mutant, with a strong sense of modernist national-popular identity. Her aesthetic might even come close to an archetypical dancing, asleep in the unconscious, nevertheless, her dance is not subordinated to a simple and thoughtless impulse, neither it is an echo of the past. Bringing such movements to her own skin is just the opposite: the explosion of a present and current image, one that is a novelty even if it happens from a direct ontology of dance. Eros studies the nature of dance, the existence and the reality of Brazilian people and their current affairs. In this context she works choreographically towards the creation of Brazilian dance. The dancer creates and dances in the essence of being, because she tries to put into categories what is essential and fundamental, and that is why her images are seductive. They are

seductive not because they are intentional phenomena of seduction, but because they determine their presence in action, therefore finding in reach the tensions and inversions they had to suffer during this process. At the level of her poetic performance, the duality of artist and researcher is painted and presented as incessantly active in its inversions. Thus, the dancer, "in the novelty of her images, is an origin of language" (Bachelard, 2008, p. 187).

Figure 9: Eros Volúsia, n.d., unidentified photographer, FUNARTE

She eats choosing what interests her, and in this selection she creates a dance for the modernist myth, and the national identity insinuated is kept alive in its journey to contemporaneity, in constant updates. Even with some convenient reductions to romantic conservatism, she leaves a permanent artistic legacy of mixed-race dance, a sentimental refuge for that moment's notion of Brazilianity. As such, this legacy unfolds in body narrative processes, in movement techniques, in sensible ways of using the body. Thus, the dancing body becomes a form of touching and at the same time it indicates in itself a poetic act, one that might alter previously assigned values with new meanings, and betraying, perverting and loosening apparent realities. In danced stagings, Eros shows with sharpness the meanings and roots of a possible national identity. Even more, she leaves us, aside the choreographic legacy, with an important documental legacy[9] of the poetic and creative Brazilian dance.

[9] In 2002, Universidade de Brasília (UNB) created the Centro de Documentação e Pesquisa Eros Volúsia, attached to the Departamento de Artes Cênicas. In 2004, Roberto Pereira, a dance history professor and dance critic with Jornal do Brasil, published a biography titled Eros Volúsia a criadora do bailado nacional - perfis do Rio.

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