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Resistance in Motion

Dance and Anti-Racism in the Afro-Contemporary Dance of Sankofa Danzafro

Carlos Correa Angulo and Rafael Palacios

> Nobody dances to look ridiculous. There is a grace in dance, some skills that make the body show off its full rhythmic potential, but we cannot stop there. Afro-contemporary dance is performed by individuals whose bodies have experienced historical conditions of structural racism. When these individuals dance, their bodies express their resistance to these exclusions.
>
> Rafael Palacios

INTRODUCTION

A fascination with aesthetic aspects and with the graceful movement of bodies has dominated our views of dance. Dance is characterised by a 'regime of visuality', in Rafael Palacios's words, which pushes both spectators and dancers to share the enjoyable sensations linked to observing bodies that move with music.[1] In the West, dance is often seen as entertainment, stirring something within us, transmitting energy or exuding transgressions. However, early anthropological approaches to the world of dance in non-Westernised societies demonstrated that, alongside music, dance was integrated into a broad system of social relations that supported religious and ritual practices (Boas 1930; Chernoff 1979; Hanna 1988; Robb 1961). Dance was also central to

[1] This chapter has benefited from the participation of Rafael Palacios, director of Sankofa Danzafro. His comments and conversations have significantly nurtured its content. Any inaccuracies are the responsibility of myself, Carlos Correa. Naming Palacios as co-author is an attempt to reduce asymmetries in the research process and to promote thinking and writing collaboratively. At times Palacios's voice will be more present, at others my own. We hope to have achieved an honest and polyphonic text.

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collective celebratory expressions that reinforced processes of identity boundary construction.

Since the 1970s, dance has garnered interest in anthropology, leading to four basic approaches that remain today. The North American Boasian approach sought to record native dances and introduced philosophical concerns about movement, power and race. The folklorist approach, developed in Germany and France, was concerned with describing and formally classifying dance, but lacked a historical component. The linguistic approach to dance was characterised by formal descriptions of movement patterns. And finally, a more holistic approach included analysis from social anthropology, medical anthropology, cognitive science and cultural studies, exploring the connections between dance and factors such as ethnicity, sexuality, gender, body, migration, identity and transnationalism (Kringelbach and Skinner 2014: 6–8). This approach views dance as an 'embodiment of social life' (Hughes-Freeland 2008: 1) that is both aesthetic and political, both narrative and performative.

An ethnography of dance begins with the premise that dancers, choreographers, spectators and researchers inhabit aesthetic systems rooted in cultural conventions (Kaeppler 2000). Dance ethnography focuses on how participants name and describe movement and conceptualise dance and its purposes. It analyses the formation of 'affective atmospheres' (Anderson 2009), which produce effects on audiences and dancers, and it investigates the relationship between movement and embodied knowledge (Reed 1998).

This chapter delves into dance in relation to ethno-racial elements, the representation of identity and the development of anti-racist agendas. The focus is on how the Colombian Afro-contemporary dance company Sankofa Danzafro develops anti-racist narratives through a particular aesthetic and a political positioning that criticises racism's impact on Black lives in Colombia. Among Sankofa's anti-racist strategies are i) challenging stereotypes about Afro-descendant people, emphasising the importance of 'listening' to the message of the dance, rather than highlighting the aesthetic visuality of the performance; ii) exploring how the embodied knowledge present in Afro-Colombian traditions can be used as a creative resource and a source of 'Afro-referentiality'; and iii) combining traditional and contemporary Afro-Colombian rhythms and movements to create musicality and choreography within an anti-racist narrative framework. We will identify these strategies in a recent Sankofa Danzafro choreographic creation, *Detrás del sur: Danzas para Manuel* (Behind the South: Dances for Manuel [referring to Manuel Zapata Olivella], 2021).

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We start by viewing dance as a 'place of enunciation', both political and aesthetic, which aims to break into the racialised social space of art and ideas of race, particularly concerning Black people in Colombia (see Chapter 1). In theories of enunciation, discourses are ways of intervening in the world through language (Van Dijk 2019). However, discursive meanings are not transparent; they depend on the context of communication, on extra-linguistic factors – social, ethnic-racial, political, emotional, and so on – and on the relationships among speakers and listeners. Therefore, discursive meanings exhibit a certain opacity (Benveniste 1971). Our focus is on how Sankofa Danzafro's dance moves between this opacity and the transparency of its messages. This interplay of opacity and transparency characterises anti-racist proposals based on dance, which also depend on the degree of engagement between the company and its audiences.

We approach Sankofa's work from the perspective of what Jacques Rancière (2000) calls 'artistic practices' linked to political processes of the production of subjectivities that seek to destabilise established orders of the 'sensible' (that which is sensed and which makes sense) and its visibility in art and society (Rancière 2005). In terms of a 'place of enunciation', we argue that Sankofa's work has a discursivity that is both performative and narrative (Austin 1990), and is characterised by a bodily and spatial materiality (Butler 1993), reflected in the spaces and acts of dancing. From a discursive perspective, performance contributes to the construction of affective atmospheres (Anderson 2009; Wetherell 2013) in which the assemblage of bodies, movements and aesthetic elements generates anti-racist effects.

We reflect, first, on the role of movement and engagement in constituting the 'affective atmospheres' that produce an 'anti-racist emotionality'. Next, we discuss different perspectives that shape the politics of the category 'Afro' in its relation to Afro-contemporary dance and anti-racism in the work of Sankofa Danzafro. Third, we describe the anti-racist strategies that guide the construction of Sankofa Danzafro's narratives, focusing on the work *Detrás del sur: Danzas para Manuel*.

THE JOYFUL SONG OF THE PARROTS: BODIES AND TOGETHERNESS – AN ANTI-RACIST EMOTIONALITY?

In the spring of 2021, following the most challenging period of the COVID-19 confinement, mobility began to be restored in Colombia. Although life had not returned to normal, people could now travel and

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FIGURE 4.1 Sankofa Danzafro dancers in their rehearsal retreat in Tumaco, March 2021 (© Carlos Correa Angulo, by permission).

see friends and family. Carlos Correa was able to accompany the dancers and director of Sankofa Danzafro as they left the city of Medellín for an artistic retreat in Tumaco, a town surrounded by tropical rainforest on the southern Pacific coast of Colombia. We went there to finalise the choreography and music for *Detrás del sur*. Over twenty-two days, the members of Sankofa formed, as dancers would say, 'one body' (see Figure 4.1).

Sankofa's dancers are young Afro-Colombians whose families come from rural areas of the Pacific and Caribbean regions of Colombia. Most of them have been directly or indirectly impacted by the armed conflict and violence in those territories, without this defining their identities. In fact, these events are rarely mentioned when the group is together (although some of Sankofa's artistic creations tackle these themes, for instance, the 2018 piece *Fecha límite* [Deadline]).[2] Some were born in the city of Medellín and others have migrated alone or with their families to the city in search of better opportunities or fleeing violence. Among the dancers, we can find stories with elements in common where family tragedies, structural violence in the region of origin and experiences of racism intermingle with personal entrepreneurial projects, attachment to certain musical styles and religious traditions (including a type of

[2] An extract from this work can be seen from minute 3′30″ in the video *Festival of Decolonial and Anti-Racist Art – A Documentary*, https://youtu.be/WB1fKmYkP9M.

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Afro-Catholicism particular to Colombia's Pacific region). There is also lots of dancing, laughter and endless parties, with an abundant repertoire of Afro-urban rhythms and genres that they enjoy and reference in their personal dance explorations or with other companions. The most popular genres include salsa choque, exotic, popping, break dancing, funk, locking and krumping.[3]

The dance performance *Detrás del sur* was inspired by the book *Changó, el gran putas* (Changó, the Biggest Badass, 1983) by Afro-Colombian intellectual and writer Manuel Zapata Olivella (see Chapter 1). The book narrates the genesis of Afro-descendant communities in the Americas. Not easily classified as a novel, *Changó, el gran putas* adopts an epic style that, in the words of the book's prologue writer, Darío Henao, summarises 500 years of the history of Black people in the Americas by re-interpreting historical facts through 'mythical realism', a style that combines 'imagination and myth to reconstruct the memory of Afro-American peoples using the Yoruba cosmology of the Bantu peoples of sub-Saharan Africa' (Henao 2010: 12). Because it narrates this history using Afro religious, spiritual and epistemic frames of reference, the novel has recently been recognised by literary historiography in Colombia as an expression of the anti-racist work that Zapata Olivella developed over more than four decades. It makes extensive use of 'Afro-referentiality', one of the anti-racist strategies adopted by the Black movement in Colombia.[4]

Rather than being an adaptation of Zapata Olivella's book, *Detrás del sur* is an embodied and danced version of the book based on reflections provoked by its reading. Sankofa's choreographer and dancers experienced an 'affective connection' with the book's depictions of exodus, struggles, the geographies of pain, helplessness and the need to come together that are experienced by the book's characters after being violently uprooted from their place of origin in Africa and forced to settle in the Americas. According to some writers on anti-racism (Ahmed 2005; Eddo-Lodge 2021), affective connection is what characterises the

[3] These are all Afro-urban rhythms. Some, such as salsa choque and exotic, were developed in Colombia by urban Afro communities. Others reveal the influence of US African-American culture.

[4] In Colombia, 2021 was officially declared a year of homage to Manuel Zapata Olivella, highlighted as the most brilliant mind of Afro-Colombianism in the twentieth century and a symbol of anti-racist struggles in Latin America: see www.elpais.com.co/cultura/2021-tambien-es-un-ano-para-leer-a-manuel-zapata-olivella.html

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durability of a global Black community with an Afro-diasporic consciousness imbued with the trauma of enslavement and the struggle for freedom.

During the retreat's working days, which lasted up to eight hours, Rafael Palacios organised several exercises of exploration and creation based on the book. Dancers, musicians, and others present experienced the creation of affective atmospheres, which were characterised by ambiguity and indeterminacy when people tried to describe their affective-emotional states (Anderson 2009). There was also a 'non-conscious experience of intensity' (Shouse 2005) that at times generated emotions connected to personal memories of painful events and everyday experiences of racism. Carlos Correa recorded the creation of these affective atmospheres in field notes:

> We are all in the open-air studio on the beach in a reading session on the first part of the book *Changó, el gran putas*. This part deals with the subject of curses. It begins with the singing of a mysterious character, Ngafúa, who begins to narrate with the kora, a stringed instrument, the tragedy of the exodus of enslaved Africans. The narrator introduces an atmosphere of suspense, preparing us to listen to the terrible story he is about to tell, which recounts the exile of Africans enslaved and taken to a different and distant land. As we move forward, Ngafúa reveals that the 'Trata', the title of the book's second chapter, is the result of the curse of Changó, the orisha [god or spirit] of thunder, lightning, justice, virility, dance and fire, according to the Yoruba religion. The only way to get rid of this curse is for the exiles to stay united through *muntu*.[5] The very orisha that cursed them would also go with them to America, as a captive and as a liberator. We fall silent and think about the curse. We talk about what a curse feels like, how we know that a person or a family is cursed. The conversation fills with familiar examples. As one person speaks, the others listen and begin to get impatient, some begin to sweat, others appear troubled, looking down at the floor, as if remembering something. The director asks the dancers to begin to explore the sensations they are experiencing. They should do it using movements, something that comes from within, something that we are aware of. They need to embody, to put into movement what they are feeling at this moment, what the reading has aroused, and for this they only have the body. 'To heal the curses you first have to be aware of them', he says. They all begin to think about their own curses, the ones they and their families have been struggling with for years. They all look at each other. They begin to tell stories about their family members. 'My father was killed …': one dancer refers to the violent death of her father, an Afro-Colombian

[5] *Muntu* literally means 'person' in many Bantu languages, but the concept transcends this meaning, since it includes living and dead people as well as the animals, vegetables, minerals and things that serve them. More than entities or persons, material or physical, it alludes to the force that unites persons with their ancestors and descendants in the present, past and future (Zapata Olivella 2010: 649).

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like her. 'That's why we don't go downtown [in Medellín] anymore because if it wasn't the police giving us problems, it would be the thieves', a young male dancer said with tears in his eyes; he recounted how they were abused by the police in public places, him and his friends, young Black men.

The dancers positioned themselves around the sides of the studio, concentrated and began to make movements to the rhythm of the music that the musicians were playing … with their eyes closed, as if held in a trance. Most of [the dancers] hold their heads in their hands, others writhe as if they were shaking something off. One of the dancers hugs herself and cries, another shivers as if she were cold, one dancer takes big strides as if running away from something. One dancer starts to move her belly, another seems to want to vomit and holds on to the uprights of the studio. Some of them speak openly of racism, identifying all these things as what happens to people who are like them, to Black people. All of them have sad expressions on their faces, they are self-absorbed, some with moist eyes, others looking distressed, there is an *indefinable current* that unites them and at the same time keeps each person in their own space. The atmosphere of the room becomes gloomy, there is grief in the air that becomes heavy and suffocating. Only the roar of the sea a few metres away is audible.

After several minutes, the director stops the music. He asks: 'What emotions do you feel when doing this exercise?' 'How do we break the curse then?' one of them answers, crying. 'After being freed from the curse, what comes next?' two dancers ask at the same time with moist eyes. Finally, they feel encouraged to verbalise the vague sensations they experience in the body but do not know how to name. 'I feel rage', says one. 'I feel pain'; 'uncertainty'; 'I feel like an orphan'; 'despair'; 'I have no hope'; 'rage'; 'I feel I don't want to hear any more, I am full of rage, it is unfair that we have to live with this curse', finally says one of the senior dancers while trying to hold back tears.

We have a break. Broken sobbing can be heard. We resume reading after we gather again and have all calmed down a bit. Faces gradually return to their calm expression. We resume reading. We read about the *muntu*, the remedy for the curse, according to Zapata Olivella's book. The *muntu* is divided into 4 categories: *kintu, kuntu, hantu* and *muntu* that mark the relationship between human beings, ancestors, animals, plants and objects. *Muntu* is understood as 'a vital force' that holds all things together. This principle of unity that marks African religious thought was fundamental for survival and adaptation to the new environment in America, we read. When we mention each of the parts that make up the *muntu*, we come to the *kintu*, which refers 'to animals, plants, minerals, inanimate things and their communion with human communities' (Sierra Díaz 2016: 28).

Just then, a flock of parrots enters the studio. They begin to sing loudly and their singing silences us. We don't know where they came from, we didn't notice when they arrived, they are just here now singing very loudly and looking at us. After a few minutes, they fall silent. We resume reading. We mention the *kintu* and the parrots began to sing again loudly. Next, the place filled with a cool breeze; some feathers floated down in the middle of the studio; we were all in a reverential silence. It was as if the parrots were greeting us. The atmosphere becomes light, the air is filled with a fragrance like Indian orange blossoms, a wild flower

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whose scent we had not noticed before. Bodies relax. Everyone feels like getting up and touching the parrots, but no one does. We let ourselves be enveloped by their joyful song. They are there, affirming their presence and companionship. We feel a communion that we cannot explain. Rafael tells them that they must achieve *awareness of emotions*, of the inner space that we all have inside; the problem is that we spend too much time distracted by what is outside. 'All gods curse their children', he continues. 'The story of Changó is of a deity who cursed his children, but gave them the key so that they could make their way through the pain and seek their freedom. That is what we have to do. Freedom is impossible if we do not join together, as a single body, with the same pain, but also with the same temperance, just like these little parrots that are here today and sing to us, refusing to be ignored' (Carlos Correa, field diary, 23 March 2021).

The formation of affective atmospheres involves 'ways of naming collective affects' (Anderson 2009: 78), which have the ability to be transmitted from one body to another and between human and non-human entities (Brennan 2004). This transmission occurs in spaces charged with affective forces, as 'currents' emerging from 'bodies affecting other bodies and yet exceeding the bodies they emerge from' (Anderson 2009: 78). The analytical distinctions between affect, emotions and feelings are not entirely clear (Shouse 2005). In the ethnographic episode here, several elements converge that are part of the so-called affective turn characterised by an 'interest in embodiment, emotions, and aesthetics … and the in-between-ness: in the capacities to act and be acted upon' (Caze and Lloyd 2011: 3).

Among dancers, musicians and Sankofa's director, the conscious exploration of emotions leads on to the formation of narratives wrapped in an anti-racist emotionality. The allusion to events of everyday racism mingled with reflections on the uprootedness and exile of people in *Changó, el gran putas* brings about the establishment of an affective atmosphere charged with meaning, on the one hand, and affective 'intensity' on the other. We argue that the affective dimension of creating *Detrás del sur* has several phases in which each dancer first engages with the novel, then with their experiences of daily racism, next with other dancers and, finally, with the affective atmosphere formed by relations between human and non-human entities (dancers, birds, music, sound, movement, corporealities, space, territory, etc.).

Our argument, in line with Anderson (2009: 79), is that dance is an 'aesthetic object' that displays an 'affective quality' with a gradation of 'intensity' specific to a given context. Dance works with emotionality and affectivity in the same way as with the tension between the subjective and the objective. There is a back-and-forth between two

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oppositions, 'narrative/non-narrative and semiotic/asignifying', with emotion being associated with narrative and signification, and affect with non-narrative and asignifying (Anderson 2009: 80). The dancers' initial difficulty in expressing in words what they were experiencing with their bodies is illustrative of this tension between the narrative and the non-narrative, the verbal and the nonverbal, the cognitive and the bodily, emotion and sensation. We encounter these tensions when we investigate embodied phenomena of movement, such as dance, from the perspective of affectivity.

During the creation process of *Detrás del sur*, there were different intensities of engagement that formed affective atmospheres, configuring an Afro-referential anti-racist emotionality that emerged from the collective space generated by sharing experiences of racism. Sankofa Danzafro's anti-racist strategy analyses the bodily sensations and emotions generated when the traumatic experiences of everyday racism are intentionally embodied. Knowing how racism is *felt* through movement, body memory and intersubjective experience is the first step in developing a dance-based anti-racist consciousness among the company's members.

Engagement is a process charged with affectivity. In the process of creating *Detrás del sur*, there were different degrees of engagement that are configurations of anti-racist affectivity. The first register of engagement occurred with the reading of Manuel Zapata Olivella's book, which situates the origins of Afro-descendants in the Americas in a collective experience of pain that is deeply emotional and leaves traces in the bodily memory. Second, there was an engagement with the characters in the book and their stories. These stories are characterised by the collective 'trauma' of enslavement and by collective struggles for freedom, adaptation and the creation of new conditions to live in a situation of domination. Trauma and tenacity, pain and bravery, mourning and courage are mixed together. These feelings can be defined, according to Eric Shouse (2005), as sensations 'that have been checked against previous experiences and labelled', and that allow 'making sense of the world from experience and not from representation' (Besserer Alatorre 2014: 13).

An intersubjective relationship and affective connection is formed between the Black dancers and fictional characters who share traumatic experiences of racial discrimination and a common struggle against domination and racism. This emotional identification is preceded by an experimentation with sensations, music and movements that create a spatialisation of affectivity. In this phase of engagement, the aesthetic-material interaction between dancers, music and movements involves movements

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that embody the sensations produced by racism, felt as the 'curse' that connects their own life experiences with those of historical fictional characters with whom they share a common origin. The work of exploring sensations through body and movement is what Shouse (2005) calls 'affect', whose 'abstractivity' makes it transmissible in ways that feelings and emotions are not.

Now, one of the ways in which affect circulates and impacts on others is through assemblages of bodies (Anderson 2009; Massumi 1995). Dancers' individual explorations lead into collective explorations of a shared sense of being part of a painful event that is both historical and contemporary. The interaction with the music and with elements of the environment such as the roar of the sea, birdsong and weeping contribute to an anti-racist emotionality that forms when individual sensations are made conscious as the dancers come together and can then be described in emotional terms – anger, pain, uncertainty, etc. This anti-racist emotionality makes conscious the painful emotions that racism provokes in the lives and histories of Black people and embodies them in order to remove their paralyzing force. To do conscious work with emotions through the body is to learn to control them. Racism works with a surreptitious emotionality, producing discriminatory events and racialisations that reproduce racial stereotypes and structural racism. When the Sankofa dancers in *Detrás del sur* choose to inhabit the place of the emotional pain that racism causes, as a historical and contemporary experience, they are undermining its manifestations and, consequently, dealing with the problem. Thus, examining how racism feels in the body is a way of confronting it from a conscious emotionality, which seeks to counteract racism by working with the body and its capacity to construct narrativity through dance.

THE 'AFRO' IN AFRO-CONTEMPORARY DANCE AND ANTI-RACIST PERSPECTIVES

The definition of 'contemporary' has been the subject of debates both within and outside the field of dance (Siegmund 2003). When and where does the contemporary begin in dance? Does the contemporary refer to a temporal, technical or aesthetic notion?

According to Adeline Maxwell, the consensus is that contemporary dance emerged from a break with the aesthetic ideals and techniques of classical ballet, when Isadora Duncan, Lote Fuller and Ruth St. Denis in the USA, alongside Rudolf Von Laban, Mary Wigman and Kurt Jooss in

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Germany, proposed various innovations – for example, dispensing with the pointe shoes in ballet, making movements on the floor – that led to new forms of dance, which 'quickly moved from experimentation to academization' (Maxwell 2015: 23). Contemporary dance became institutionalised as a supposedly 'universal' dance with its own aesthetics and ways of creating narratives and rhythmic patterns.

Sankofa defines its project as 'Afro-contemporary'.[6] Although it shares with contemporary dance a temporal frame that places it in 'the now', for Sankofa being contemporary entails challenging the racism experienced by Black people today. In Afro-contemporary dance, the 'Afro' is a contested field where notions of difference and particularity overlap. Eduardo Restrepo (2021: 21–22) identifies four meanings around the term Afro. First, Afro can subsume 'Black' by emphasising racialised aspects of difference. Second, Afro can refer to ancestry, kinship and a community of common origin. A third emphasis is on 'traces of Africanness' that might be identified in the transnational Afro-diasporic community. Finally, Afro refers to cultural traits characteristic of Black communities, without these necessarily being African in origin.

Behind the politics of naming and conceptualising such ideas as 'Black', 'Afro', 'African origin', 'Afro-diasporic', 'African', and 'Afro-descendant', there are both racialisation mechanisms and sensibilities that underlie political subjectivities (Lao-Montes 2009). Some meanings of 'Afro' become dominant for certain contexts, while others quickly fall into disrepute or disuse, depending on the confluence of national and international actors, who may be internal or external to Afro-descendant mobilisations (Wade 2013).

In the field of contemporary Afro dance, where Sankofa Danzafro is located, anti-racism is expressed primarily by the decision to be explicitly 'Afro' through the embodied practice of dance. This means that contemporary Afro dance seeks to be associated with affirmations of Afro identity at local and Afro-diasporic levels. Transnational ethnic affiliations play with the overlapping political meanings of Afro. Thus, for example, in the case of Sankofa Danzafro, at times the Afro is emphasised as belonging to an Afro-diasporic community, at other times there is an open affirmation of common ancestry, or the racialisation of a re-signified Blackness, or

[6] Whereas contemporary dance, arising in response to a crisis of modernity in the arts, establishes an aesthetic rupture in relation to classical ballet, introducing new rhythmic patterns, forms of expressiveness and body movement, it still works with a Eurocentric ideal of the body. It mainly responds to Western concerns about self-renewal and searches for new ways to express the inner being of the fragmented subject.

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an ethnic affirmation that politicises 'Black culture'. These moorings and displacements of the meaning of Afro in the positionings of Sankofa and its dancers are emphasised according to the contexts of interlocution, whether those are funding institutions (almost always state-owned) or festivals and tours with their diverse audiences.

The contemporary aspect of Afro-contemporary dance is framed by the intention to explore, based on the current conditions in which dance is performed, the traditions – the past – that influence its dramaturgy and narratives. As discussed at the conference 'African Contemporary Dance? Questioning Issues of a Performance Aesthetic for a Developing and Independent Continent', held as part of the JOMBA! Contemporary Dance Experience festival (Durban, 2004), the term 'Afro-contemporary' seeks to establish a methodology for critically examining tradition and engaging it in a dialogue with the challenges faced by African societies (Douglas et al. 2006: 107–112). In simpler terms, Afro-contemporary dance is seen as a creative technique.

The JOMBA! conference debates about Afro-contemporary dance, involving renowned African choreographers, are echoed in the ideas of Rafael Palacios. For Palacios, tradition is not an immutable flow coming from a static past. Rather, he conceives it as a dynamic space for the exploration and deep understanding of Afro-descendant cultures. In various conversations, Palacios has emphasised tradition as a 'place to return to through investigation'.

> There are traditions in Afro-Colombian dances that need to be examined, investigated. Some of these dances emerged during colonialism and were a way of aspiring to and imitating European ways of dancing, their aesthetics, the appearance of those white bodies. But there are other dances that satirise, parody and resist those ways of dancing. They combine movements and rhythms of African origin, mixed with rhythms and languages developed in Colombia by our Afro communities. (Palacios, personal communication, 24 March 2020)

This critical approach to the past is fundamental in Afro-contemporary dance and is of vital importance for Sankofa as a company. The word *sankofa* originates in the systems of thought of the Akan people of present-day Ghana: it means going back to the past, to the roots, as a way to understand the present and envision the future. *Sankofa* is symbolised by a bird whose feet are pointing forwards, while its head is turned backwards to grasp an egg with its beak. Thus, revisiting the past is a way of creating one's own history, which is constructed from the perspective of Afro peoples in all their heterogeneity and

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uniqueness. The politics of history, which arises from examining the past, is an essential condition to face the problems that currently affect the Afro-diasporic community.

The director, choreographer and dancers must therefore investigate tradition, enquire into its meanings, contextualise its uses, and not simply 'learn the technique'. The investigation of tradition is the first step in an anti-racist process of decolonising dances and bodies and liberating their potential. A critical examination of tradition leads to an awareness of the aestheticised racialisations that persist and are reproduced by Black people themselves in some of their dances, albeit with the aim of dismantling them, locating their origin and showing that they resulted from a process of domination that tamed subjectivity and shaped the expression of Black identities. From this anti-racist perspective, the expression 'decolonising the body' refers to exploring the forms of domestication of the body in Afro dances, a process that can be seen in various elements: these include body postures and clothing that express a relationship of submission (for example, typical costumes of Afro-Colombian dances in which female dancers wear aprons, dance with their heads bowed, assume a posture of servitude, etc.). The domestication of the body is also seen through the surveillance of sexuality, controlling dance as an incitement to sexual debauchery. This idea about dance justified many of the prohibitions of Black dances during and after the colonial period. From these mechanisms of control, the rhythmic capacities and potentials of Black bodies were diminished and subordinated through the imposition of forms of dance considered less 'erotic' and more 'civilised'.

If the 'Afro' in Afro-contemporary dance implies an examination of the past, it also refers to techniques of creation and methodologies of dance research based in Africa. There is a genealogy that locates the origin of Afro-contemporary dance in the Mudra Afrique school, in Senegal, in the context of the struggles for the decolonisation of Africa and a unity based on the 'common destiny' of all Afro-descendants as proclaimed by Pan-Africanism (Adi 2018; Shepperson 1962). Under the premise that through knowledge of the past (one's own history) and awareness of the present one could confront the challenges that the future would bring to African peoples, in 1977 Léopold Sédar Senghor and Maurice Béjart set about the task of founding the Centre Africain de Perfectionnement et de Recherche des Interprètes du Spectacle Mudra Afrique (African Performing Artists Centre for Development and Research, Mudra Afrique). Germaine Acogny, considered the mother of

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Afro-contemporary dance, originally from Benin, was appointed director of the Mudra Afrique school, becoming its most emblematic figure.[7]

The Mudra Afrique school as led by Germaine Acogny around African dances can be defined as a postcolonial cultural production, whose intentions, in Acogny's words, were to combat stereotypes about Afro bodies and 'colonial ideologies reinforced by professional dance training institutions' (Swanson 2019: 50). In her ethnography of Acogny's École des Sables, Amy Swanson identified several principles taught there that give identity to Afro contemporary dance: the creation of a movement vocabulary by adopting a known dance structure, but endowing it with an African aesthetic; the inclusion of aesthetics influenced by the natural environment and the surrounding dancers; and the search for traditional knowledge to find routes to narrate the present (Swanson 2019: 50–54). The emphasis on dissociated movement, the transmission of a collective flow of energy when dancing, the undulation of the body, whose central axis is the spine, circular formations and diagonal steps are some of the elements that characterise Germaine Acogny's technique and that are employed by Rafael Palacios in his dance training, along with variations that he has introduced.

The Mudra Afrique school and Germaine Acogny laid the foundation for many African dancers from Senegal, Ghana, Kenya, Benin and Burkina Faso, among others, to enter the institutional system of African dance education with high standards of quality and training. Afro-contemporary dance arrived in Colombia in 1997, introduced by Rafael Palacios; he had had over five years of training in France and Africa, under Acogny herself and Irene Tassembedo, one of Acogny's first disciples, who has her own school of Afro-contemporary dance in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso. That same year Sankofa Danzafro was born in the city of Medellin, Colombia. By the mid 2000s, under the influence of Palacios, a handful of Afro-contemporary dance companies emerged on the national dance scene, with the main ones located in Medellín, Cartagena, Cali,

[7] *Mudra* means 'gesture' or 'sign' in Sanskrit. An early branch of the Mudra School was in Brussels, founded by French choreographer Maurice Béjart in 1970; however, its focus was not on African dances. Germaine Acogny later founded her own school, the École des Sables, in 1998. She wrote the book *African Dance*, in which she laid the philosophical and technical foundations of Afro-contemporary dance. The Mudra Afrique school in Dakar, Senegal, lasted only from 1977 to 1983. However, despite its short existence, several African dancers were trained there and became recognised exponents of Afro-contemporary dance. Among the most prominent is Irene Tessembedo, from Burkina Faso, who was the teacher of Rafael Palacios and has been one of the main promoters and co-creators of Afro-contemporary dance in Europe and Africa.

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Barranquilla and Bogotá. Among these, Sankofa Danzafro stands out for its explicit political commitment to the fight against stereotypes, which is at the genesis of Afro-contemporary dance from the Mudra School to the present day. The company's main motto is 'We dance not only to be seen, but to be heard', emphasising the anti-racist character of their works.

Afro-contemporary dance quickly went from experimentation to standardisation after its entry into the market of global dance cultures, characterised by an exoticising fascination with everything defined as 'African', which turned Afro-contemporary dance into a commodity consumed mainly by the USA and Europe, and more recently by Latin America (Kringelbach and Skinner 2014; Maxwell 2015; Samuel 2011; Swanson 2019). Added to this is the danger Rafael Palacios warns against of the 'emptying of meaning', which, by decontextualising Afro-contemporary dance from the subjects and territories where it is practiced, not only loses sight of the political and contested epistemological meanings that are expressed through the dance, but also ignores the racism that Afro dancers face as racialised subjects in the world.

SANKOFA'S CONTEMPORARY AFRO-COLOMBIAN DANCE AND ANTI-RACIST STRATEGIES IN *DETRÁS DEL SUR*

During 2017, while Rafael Palacios was pursuing a master's degree on epistemologies of the South in Ecuador, he directed *La mentira complaciente* (The Complacent Lie). This Afro-contemporary work focuses on how Black people have to 'embody' racialised social stereotypes about their sexuality, histories and identities in order to be integrated or 'consumed' in the art market and especially the field of dance. During the exploratory exercises, the director asked each dancer to experiment with an element that would be part of the dramaturgy of the work: the loincloth. Several of the dancers expressed their concern about having to wear a garment that has symbolised the barbarism that supposedly characterises Black populations. Palacios explained that he wanted them to become corporeally aware of what it means to wear/embody a stereotype that has for so long denigrated Afro populations. The aim was to awaken a degree of attention to corporeality and to the sensations – the autonomous manifestation of affectivity (Massumi 1995) – provoked by the sensation of having to wear a denigrating garment. The dancers would then have to combat those sensations using movement and dance channelled through 'technique' – that is, the dance knowledge they had already learned from traditional dances in their regions of origin – to

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transform them into something new, endowing them with 'narrativity', that is, with the ability to express contemporary human experience from a specific positionality (Torres Perdigón 2021).

This exercise of bringing attention to sensation allows us to analyse several constitutive aspects of Sankofa Danzafro's Afro-contemporary dance project: working with embodied knowledge in a conscious way; seeing movement as an expression of multiple materialities; co-producing spaces that can be both physical – movements in a place – and intersubjective – shared interior and imaginative space.

One of Sankofa's dancers who has been dancing in the company for more than fifteen years said that he felt suffocated and overwhelmed when he first wore the loincloth. So he decided to turn to prior knowledge he had about a traditional dance, *currulao*, from his home region, Tumaco, a city on the Colombian Pacific coast. Among the genres of *currulao*, there was a work dance that was performed during the rice harvest. The dust from the rice caused the skin to itch and this gave rise to a type of dance that he learned as a child. While he was doing his dance explorations with the loincloth, he felt his own body remembering the movements and body sensations of the rice harvest dance. He began to make movements that connoted annoyance, irritability, discomfort. For example, to the rhythmic beat of male and female *cununos* (a type of conga drum), he would shake and brush invisible dust off his skin, scratch in desperation, pull at his sweaty clothes to remove them, contort himself, make rapid hand and foot movements that then gave way to a state of surrender, only to return with greater vigour, like someone seeking to get rid of an itchy sensation all over his body. All these bodily sensations were associated with the unpleasant feeling of wearing the loincloth. The stereotypes that materialised in the loincloth caused itching. This is what Sankofa Danzafro's contemporary Afro-Colombian dance project is all about: to make use of embodied knowledge to allow rhythmic explorations that challenge the discomfort caused by 'carrying/embodying' racial stereotypes, which can then be contested using conscious and reflexive movement in front of audiences observing Black dances, who receive a message that has to be 'heard'.

Detrás del sur: Danzas para Manuel

According to Derek McCormack (2008), dance analysis encompasses the body, space and cultural geographies, as well as the various ways in which bodies move. Because of this, both dance and 'danced movement' are culturally produced and express an attitude that is both social

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and political and must be analysed beyond representation and meaning (Thrift 1997).[8] Dance performance does not always attribute a particular significance to each movement. As Rafael Palacios says in the epigraph at the beginning of this chapter, the movements and the cadence of dancing bodies express a pleasant gracefulness that often only relates to the dramaturgy or choreography of the work. However, when it comes to anti-racism in dance, sequences of movement, interpretation of gestures, music and dramaturgical elements such as lights and costumes weave a narrative that delivers a concrete message to audiences. In that sense, to dance is to tell a story.

Detrás del sur: Danzas para Manuel is divided into five acts, mirroring the structure of Zapata Olivella's book. These acts do not obey a spatio-temporal linearity. Instead, they present a narrative unity that emphasises Afro-descendants' contestation of the structural conditions of racism they face. The acts mix together rhythms arising from experimentation with the music of Afro-Colombian communities (of the Colombian Pacific and Caribbean regions) and fusions of Afro-urban rhythms. The names and order of the acts changed during the development of the work, but at this early stage the first act was 'Muntu': it addresses the emergence of the Afro diaspora in the Americas, the role of race mixture as a founding metaphor, and the birth, rebellion and death of Benkos Biojó (associated with the orisha Changó in Zapata Olivella's work).[9] The next act, 'Diaspora' (also called 'The Ship'), symbolises the transatlantic voyage and the dispersion of Africans and their descendants in America. Here an atmosphere of desperation and agitation is depicted, combining strong and emphatic movements with contortions and elevations. The following act, 'Unction', represents the orishas and ancestors in communion with the Afro men and women, highlighting how they bestow wisdom, knowledge and value on the *muntu*. In Figure 4.2, the middle figure represents *muntu*, who anoints the figures on either side, who are the children of *muntu*. The scenes are characterised by movements that

[8] We recognise a distinction between 'dance', which refers to the set of techniques and bodily aesthetics related to a cultural, political and social context; and 'danced movement', which refers to the relatively spontaneous rhythmic movement in which shared rhythmic cultural forms are present.

[9] Biojó was a historical figure attributed with the seventeenth-century founding of the Palenque de San Basilio near Cartagena de Indias. Some historians have indicated that he participated in the founding of other *palenques* – as the communities of formerly enslaved escapees and their descendants were called – such as the Palenque de la Matuna near Tolú.

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FIGURE 4.2 Scene from 'Unction' in *Detrás del sur* by Sankofa Danzafro, on stage at the Joyce Theatre, New York, 2024 (photo by Steven Pisano © Sankofa Danzafro, by permission).

imitate the atmosphere of flora and fauna, the environment and the integration of humans and nature, one of the characteristics of *muntu* as a philosophy and religious system. Hand movements and extensions of the torso are emphasised, along with jumps and long strides: the choreography conveys a sacred playfulness. The next act, 'Epic 1', represents the struggles with which the children of the diaspora fought to achieve their freedom, the fights and battles fired by rebellion. The movements and rhythms are a mixture of traditional Afro-Colombian dances and African rhythms characterised by rapid beats and explosive percussion; the choreography is based on energetic movements that require dexterity, speed and precision. The movements on stage combine several horizontal planes and the attitude of each dancer denotes pride, vigour and strength. Finally, 'Epic 2' depicts the struggles waged by Black communities in the present against forms of exclusion and racism and the social protests in which they participated during the 2021 national strike in Colombia.

Combating Stereotypes: Message and Performance

So far, we have focused on how anti-racist sensibilities are generated by affective and emotional responses among dance company members

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FIGURE 4.3 Scene from 'The Birth of a Warrior' in *Detrás del sur* by Sankofa Danzafro, on stage at the Joyce Theatre, New York, 2024 (photo by Steven Pisano © Sankofa Danzafro, by permission).

without addressing the issue of audiences, whose affective responses are also implicated in Afro-contemporary dance's anti-racist perspectives (Correa Angulo and Alarcón Velásquez 2024). As we have noted, Sankofa Danzafro's motto is 'We dance not only to be seen, but to be heard', which means that strategies of creation and performance are ultimately oriented to audiences. As already mentioned, in Afro-contemporary dance – and in dance more generally – a regime of visuality predominates, particularly situated in the gaze of the spectators. As a result, the messages conveyed by the dance are often diluted by the intensity of the spectators' aesthetic gaze on the bodies. These messages are characterised by a tension between the opacity and the transparency of their meanings, which are thus not always clear to the public and are only gradually assimilated. For example, Figure 4.3 is from a scene that, at the time, the dancers called 'The Birth of a Warrior', which shows a woman and the son she has just given birth to: this evokes the (re)birth in the Americas of both Changó and Benkos Biojó, referring to various meanings in Zapata Olivella's novel. These references can be opaque for some and transparent for others, depending on their degree of familiarity with the novel.

Although stereotypes do not operate exclusively in visual mode, they tend to work in the sphere of the visible, which serves as apparent

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evidence that they refer to 'reality'. In *Detrás del sur*, on the other hand, there is a communicative intention that is expressed not only in the aesthetic choices of the dramaturgy, but also in the invitation to the spectator to 'hear' a message. In one of the musical pieces in Act 3, 'Unction', the vocalist repeatedly instructs the audience 'oíd, oíd' (hear, hear) while the dancers perform slow steps with exquisite elastic movements. This is based on the first lines of an intense poem in the first part of *Changó, el gran putas*: '¡Oídos del Muntu, oíd! / ¡Oíd! ¡Oíd! ¡Oíd! ¡Oíd! / ¡Oídos del Muntu, oíd! / He visto en sueños a Changó' (Ears of the people, hear! / Hear! Hear! Hear! Hear! / Ears of the people, hear! / I have seen Changó in dreams). The command to hear is directed at the children of *muntu*, that is, to Afro people, but on stage, due to the immediacy of the performance, the instruction involves the audience. Similarly, in the first act, 'Muntu', a character emerges from the back of the stage reciting an unintelligible message. He shouts and makes emphatic intonations with his voice; he interpellates the audience, looking them in the face and telling them, 'Listen, understand.' But no one can understand, because the character speaks in *jeringonza*, a Spanish form of pig Latin, incomprehensible to the uninitiated. This choice of language represents the misunderstandings in communication between dancers and audiences.

One of the challenges in combating and dismantling stereotypes is the difficulty of ensuring that audiences 'listen' to the Others who are the objects of stereotyping. The action of listening is made possible by affective charges that underwrite the communicative aspect of the message (Van Dijk 2019). The primacy of the exoticising gaze that focuses on the dancing Black bodies thus makes it impossible to truly hear what is being communicated. The viewer's gaze returns again and again to the bodies, their appearance, their skills, the amazing abilities they demonstrate while dancing: the unspoken premise is, 'They are Black bodies: that's why they can dance like that' (see also Chapter 7).[10]

Sankofa's anti-racist work seeks to break with the gaze and its primacy in the shaping of stereotypes. As Mary Louise Pratt (1997) points out, the gaze is laden with an exoticisation that makes possible the emergence of the stereotype. Víctor Segalen (2017) states that exoticism arises from the operation of the senses, especially those of sight and smell, in a way that

[10] The company's audiences are heterogeneous. For example, the exoticising gaze changes when it comes to Black audiences who are involved with debates about racism, coloniality and dance. For details of an audience study conducted during this research, see the next footnote; see also Correa Angulo and Alarcón Velásquez (2024).

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distances what is being sensed. Exoticism implies a gaze and, therefore, distance. It arises in encounters that occur in contexts of power inequality and the colonisation of bodies, territories and resources, and that, in the voluminous canon of travel literature, are represented as involving an element of surprise. The genesis of the stereotype is thus based on surprise, although once a stereotype exists, this element disappears insofar as a stereotype implies complete predictability.

Breaking with the exotic gaze is perhaps the most ambitious objective of an anti-racist strategy such as Sankofa's. To this end, in *Detrás del sur*, there is a careful narrative that also generates effects of surprise, but with a very different valence. A spectator of Sankofa's work said this:

> It took me by surprise. Because you expect to find Black bodies doing one thing and suddenly they're showing through dance, something else. We were expecting them to do one thing and they did the opposite. It was a rather uncomfortable and surprising feeling. (Alex, focus group 1, April 2021)[11]

Sankofa's works generate an anti-racist effect on the audience by using the effect of surprise in reverse. Audiences are surprised when they see Black dancers enacting a story that, far from being mere entertainment, makes viewers question how they have imagined Black people in ways that may be deeply stereotypical and that imply unequal power relationships.

In the material and symbolic reproduction of racial systems, not only are discourses generated, but also 'structures of feelings', as defined by Raymond Williams in the 1970s, which link mechanisms of racialisation with emotions and sensations (Berg and Ramos-Zayas 2015: 655; Sharma and Tygstrup 2015). So an emotional dimension shapes the creation of stereotypes and racialised representations that become, with use, conventional ways of knowing and relating to others (Ahmed 2015).

However, racial stereotypes are not always active, just as racism is not always actively affecting Black people all the time, but needs specific spaces and moments for it to operate even without being noticed (Lentin 2016; Moreno Figueroa 2010). There are moments when racial stereotypes are activated and deactivated during the performance, according to

[11] Our audience study consisted of interviews and focus groups conducted via Zoom with followers of Sankofa Danzafro, who were contacted through the company's social media channels. The study aimed to learn how audiences received Sankofa's work. Participants included Afro-Colombians and people described in Colombia as white-mestizo. See Correa Angulo and Alarcón Velásquez (2024).

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the audience's degrees of connection to the narrative. In the interviews we conducted among Sankofa audiences, some participants emphasised that at first they did not understand what the works were about, but were dazzled by the dancing, the costumes, the lights and the scenery. Then, later during the performance, they suddenly felt that the message of the dance directly challenged them and made them question the image they had of Afro-descendants.

> It's something you don't expect. There's a moment when you realise that the dancers are talking about the racist way they are viewed by white people. Sometimes you feel uncomfortable because it's like you're being singled out. You realise that the whole performance is a message that seeks to show us how Afro people are treated and how they are seen in society. Then you ask yourself about the way you have looked at them up to now. It is not a performance that you go to just to see them dance and have fun; there is discomfort. (Diego, focus group 2, May 2021)

Provoking discomfort in audiences happens when they are challenged about their imaginaries and representations of Afro-descendants. The message makes use of all kinds of histrionic and dramatic resources to achieve this effect, including satire and the exaggeration of erotic behaviour. Being 'heard' is often achieved not with words, but by enacting an anti-racist argument that challenges the audience at the emotional heart of their stereotypical prejudices.

In *Detrás del sur*, the aesthetics can be described as 'typically Afro'. The dancers wear red cloths that wrap the body but leave the men's torsos bare, while masks allude to an iconography that has become representative of Africanness in the global dance market (Samuel 2011). However, this aesthetic gradually paves the way towards a narrative that is told through dance and that has at its core forms of resistance that reveal the agency of Afro-descendant communities in overcoming historical and contemporary vicissitudes. In each of its acts, the work shows Afro communities as subjects of knowledge with forms of self-government and with religious and thought systems that have practical utility in facing the problems of daily life. The performance moves back and forth between past and present-day struggles.

AFRO-REFERENTIALITY AS A CREATIVE RESOURCE

During the creative retreat in Tumaco to develop *Detrás del sur*, a documentary film was made with the title *Detrás del sur: Danzas para Manuel. Prácticas artísticas antirracistas* (Behind the South: Dances for Manuel.

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Anti-Racist Artistic Practices).[12] The documentary outlines how Afro-referentiality can be deployed as an anti-racist strategy in the several ways: these include the strengthening of bridges among Afro-descendant people; the centring of *muntu* and *ubuntu*; and the creation of work in *el territorio* (the territory).

Bridging

Afro-referentiality strengthens epistemic bridges connecting Afro-descendant people. The process of making *Detrás del sur* starts with literature and extends to dance, because dance works with the body, which is where the multiple violences of racism are most clearly experienced. The work is based on *muntu*, seen not only as a system of thought and a philosophy of the past, but also as present in reappropriated and updated form in the organisational processes of rural and urban Afro communities in Colombia. The work addresses racism from a historical perspective and updates this discussion for the present. *Detrás del sur*'s anti-racist power derives in part from the intertextuality it establishes between Afro aesthetic objects of different orders – in this case, literature and dance. *Detrás del sur* quotes the literary text, but the text acquires meanings that are co-produced by interpretation through dance. This intertextual dialogue – understanding intertextuality as the concatenation of various discursive formats – consolidates a field of anti-racist enunciation that makes visible the existence of racism and proposes ways to combat it through artistic practice. One such way involves breaking with expectations about literature – usually associated with 'white' spheres of production – and rupturing stereotypes of Afro dance. As for literature, the author Zapata Olivella creates a literary universe replete with messages conveyed by living and dead characters, ancestors and their enslaved descendants, orishas and entities of nature. These messages are not always clear to others; they are encrypted and must be deciphered by those to whom they are specifically addressed. This ecological dimension of mythical realism establishes ruptures with the conventional ways in which nature usually appears in Westernised literature. As Sommer astutely notes (Sommer 2018: 319–320), Afro-descendant literary traditions have always been dedicated to seeking freedom in creative and innovative ways. When it comes to writing, 'freedom lies in the *how*, not the what'. As a strategy in

[12] See www.digitalexhibitions.manchester.ac.uk/s/carla-en/page/sankofa.

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literary arts, 'complicity' and a sense of restlessness play a significant role in engaging audiences and readers. For its part, Afro-contemporary dance breaks with expectations of what Afro dance is expected to do: entertain. Beyond simple diversion, Afro-contemporary dance conceptualises, situates, explores and elaborates planimetries loaded with meaning.[13]

Muntu and *Ubuntu*

As an Afro-referential and anti-racist work, *Detrás del sur* makes visible a subject that is dismissed in the hegemonic centres of thought and intellectuality: *muntu* and the philosophies of several African peoples. Often, in discussions of *muntu* or *ubuntu* – organisational, religious and philosophical principles of African peoples that are re-actualised in the Americas – there is a tendency to label them as essentialist or as romanticisations of the past. They are not appreciated as systems of thought and philosophies worth studying rigorously or being of interest to science. *Muntu* and *ubuntu* are concepts in the thought systems of Yoruba peoples that explain and make sense of their human experiences and their being-in-the-world. They are products of their contexts and explain their contexts, as do Aristotelian philosophy or Olmec principles of thought. However, they are considered pre-scientific or pre-philosophical. Making these issues visible situates Afro-descendant people as subjects of knowledge.

El territorio

Afro-referential anti-racism is rooted in ideas about territory. *El territorio* – the territory – is the term the dancers used for the historically Black Pacific coastal region as a whole, with connotations of an ancestral homeland, belonging and ownership.[14] To develop the work in 'the territory' of the Pacific coastal region is a political move more than a romanticisation. Tumaco is a racialised space traversed by multiple forms of raw violence, carried out by drug traffickers, para-military groups, guerrillas, local criminal gangs and smugglers, and leading to a striking degree of militarisation. In interviews, the dancers were asked what it meant to them to create the work in this place.

[13] 'Planimetries' is a term commonly used by Sankofa dancers and in formal descriptions of choreographies in dance. It refers to the angles and planes formed by dancers among themselves and in relation to the scenery and the audience.

[14] By extension, *el territorio* is also used by Sankofa dancers to refer to city neighbourhoods, for example in Medellín, where they feel Black people form a community.

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> It would have been cheaper in Bogotá, because Tumaco is expensive due to its distance, but coming to create in *el territorio* is a way of nurturing the political content of creation. To be here is to identify in these geographies [i.e. these spaces] stories and aesthetic, cultural and emotional elements that give a special meaning to the creation of this work. (Adriana, personal communication, 24 March 2021)

El territorio also contributes sounds, emotionality and a particular sensation of spatiality with which several of the Sankofa dancers are familiar because it is where they come from. These elements enrich the creative process and give concrete meaning to the concepts and aesthetic forms that constitute the work: the music, for example, was composed by Plu con Pla, a band from Tumaco. In *el territorio*, the recursive relationships among community, nature and resources can be appreciated in a way that would be impossible to see in the city. These elements contribute concrete meanings to the notion of *muntu*, which, in its sense of togetherness, feeds powerfully into the work. So, creating dance in *el territorio* generates an anti-racist effect because, using the elements and relationships that have been assembled, dancers burst onto the stage with an aesthetic endowed with concrete and specific content.

AESTHETICS, POETICS AND ANTI-RACISM

The development of an aesthetic that seems relevant and makes sense to Afro communities is one of the anti-racist strategies explored in *Detrás del sur*. While the work is not an adaptation of the literary text, the costume design, the characterisations, the dance movements, the communicative intent and the music align with the tone of Zapata Olivella's epic novel. For example: the bodies of the dancers are covered with bone-coloured ash to represent the children of *muntu*; the red of their tunics alludes to Changó; the white-blue attire of one dancer evokes the goddess Yemayá; the bell-carrying narrator, Ngafúa, represents a common ancestor.

The work takes movements rooted in Afro-Colombian dance techniques and transforms them into steps and movements that are associated with the idea of *muntu* and its pluralistic integration of ecology, knowledge and body. The contortions, the dissociations, the stomping, the undulations of the spine and the direction that the hand takes with respect to the back – these movements generate an aesthetic that affirms the Afro-contemporary technique and the way it resonates with the movements of the flora and fauna in the environment of Black communities in *el territorio*.

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The versatile choreography at times leaves aside the movements of strength and thrust associated with Afro dance techniques to give way to softer, slower, more leisurely movements. In the execution of certain dance techniques, the dancers go from delicacy and restraint to more explosive movements that build the narrative and its communicative intentionality. All this forms a poetics that integrates patterns of movement evoking contemporary and traditional ideas of what constitutes Afro.

CONCLUSION

Whether we dance to the rhythm of music or to the rhythm of life, dance is a cross-cultural expression that tells us something about the subjects who dance, their cultural practices and the stories inscribed on their bodies. The message emphasised by Sankofa Danzafro challenges the persistence of racism and its expression through stereotypes, exoticised images and the lack of recognition of Afro referents in current epistemologies. At times, Sankofa Danzafro directly alludes to racism by questioning stereotypes and elaborating narratives that dignify Afro-descent through its works. At other times, it does so through the enhancement of Afro-Colombian identities, their histories, their geographies and their knowledge embodied in dance. In this sense, Sankofa Danzafro's Afro-contemporary dance project has a double purpose: to dismantle the racialisation of the Afro in dance and to decolonise the body by directly combating racial stereotypes about Black people. It does the former by directly questioning stereotypes and the undervaluation of Afro dance by means of conscious explorations generating an emotionality that leads to a narrative that 'has to be heard'. The latter is achieved through a critical review of tradition to see how parts of it reproduce colonial structures that may be present in their aesthetics, movements and performance.

In *Detrás del sur* we can see how the anti-racist strategies in Sankofa's creative processes construct a message that provokes sensations and questions in audiences, especially with respect to stereotypes about Afro-Colombian people, Afro-referentiality as a creative resource and the development of an Afro-representative aesthetic. These anti-racist effects are achieved in the racialised field of dance by an engaging with the audience, to varying degrees, to create an affective atmosphere combining bodily movements and sensations, which is consciously projected onto audiences to surprise and unsettle them. An open question is whether anti-racism in artistic practice is limited to an 'effect' that has the capacity to 'affect' the viewer only in the moment (Besserer Alatorre 2014), or

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whether it produces a narrative that can survive the fleeting immediacy of performance (Taylor 2002, 2020). What is certain is that the anti-racist narrative constructed by Sankofa not only uses dance as a vehicle, it also employs other elements of discourse. Postings on social networks, synopses of the works in the handbills, the interviews given by the dancers and the director, all contribute to and complement the anti-racist strategies of the dance performance.

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