



Black Theater, Black Performance

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ABSTRACT – Black Theater, Black Performance – This article discusses the concept of Black Performance, which, associated with the Black Movement, consists of a set of expressive manifestations, from ritual to spectacle, which scenically organize modes of existing and resisting of the black people in the African diaspora. The methodological design consists in an approach from macro to micro elements, starting with a general definition of Black Movement, then questioning the concept of Black Performance as a category that can encompass both traditional ritualistic performances and artistic performances in the languages of theater, dance and performing art. Finally, Black Theater is considered as the focus of analysis based on its historical aspects.

Keywords: Performance. Black Poetics. Black Performance. Black Theater. Black Movement.

RÉSUMÉ – Théâtre Noir, Performance Noire – Cet article traite du concept de Black Performance qui, lié au Black Movement, consiste en un ensemble de manifestations expressives, du rituel au spectacle, qui organisent scéniquement les manières d'exister et de résister aux Noirs de la diaspora africaine. L'approche méthodologique est une approche du macro au micro, partant d'une définition générale du Black Movement, puis interrogeant le concept de Black Performance comme une catégorie pouvant englober à la fois les performances rituelles traditionnelles et les performances artistiques dans les langages du théâtre, de la danse et de la musique. Enfin, le théâtre noir est assumé comme objet d'analyse à partir de ses aspects historiques.

Mots-clés: Performances. Poétique Noire. Performances Noires. Théâtre Noir. Mouvement Noir.

RESUMO – Negro Teatro, Negra Performance – Neste artigo apresenta-se discussão sobre a noção de Performance Negra, que, atrelada ao Movimento Negro, constitui-se no conjunto de manifestações expressivas, do ritual ao espetáculo, que organizam cenicamente modos de existir e de resistir do povo negro na diáspora africana. O recorte metodológico é uma abordagem do macro ao micro, iniciando com uma definição geral de Movimento Negro, depois, problematizando o conceito de Performance Negra como uma categoria que pode abranger tanto performances tradicionais de cunho ritualístico como performances artísticas nas linguagens do teatro, da dança e da performance arte. Por fim, toma-se o Teatro Negro como foco de análise a partir de seus aspectos históricos.

Palavras-chave: Performance. Poéticas Negras. Performance Negra. Teatro Negro. Movimento Negro.



Thinking and discussing artistic languages associated with identity issues and markers, as in the case of ethnic-racial issues, is part of a political and pedagogical agenda to promote socio-cognitive justice, linked to the understanding that there are no neutral epistemologies or aesthetics, and those that claim to be are, in fact, hegemonies.

Post-abyssal thought can be summed up as a learning from the South using an epistemology of the South. It confronts the monoculture of modern science with an ecology of knowledges. It is an ecology because it is based on the recognition of the plurality of heterogeneous knowledges (one of them being modern science) and on sustainable and dynamic interactions between them without compromising their autonomy. The ecology of knowledges is based on the idea that knowledge is interknowledge (Santos, 2009, p. 44-45).

This perspective, defended by Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2009), of recognition of the plurality of knowledge, also involves the understanding of coloniality as a broad oppression system that fosters unequal relations, in the imposition of a racial/ethnic classification of the population and that operates in material, subjective and everyday dimensions (Mota Neto, 2016). Thus, in order to discuss Black Performance, it is essential that we start from the understanding that racism is a structural agency that acts sometimes explicitly and truculently — such as, for example, in a police operation in the city of São Gonçalo, in which, when breaking into a house with five children, the 14-year-old adolescent João Pedro is executed — sometimes implicitly, in language, in the standards of normality, in gestures, in thought, in the process of inferiorization, ridicule, invizibilization or even folklorization of the black people.

It is in this context that we comprehend Black Performance not as a manifestation of the exotic, but as a political and aesthetic movement that — in conjunction with the Black Movement — rises up for the dignity and citizenship of the black population. Perhaps we can even think of Black Performance as a facet of the Black Movement, which, in addition to acting within political movements — parties, unions, non-governmental organizations, associations —, also understood the discursive and mobilizing power of the body and the arts.

From a broader perspective on performance, the very action of the Black Movement could be understood and analyzed as performance, both



of which must be comprehended in terms of plurality, since claiming, for the black population, its attribute of humanity — seized by slavery and coloniality, which still resonates in the Brazilian reality — does not forgo the recognition of its diversity. That is, Black Performance, in fact, consists in black performances and the Black Movement consists in black movements.

Thus, in this article we aim to discuss the concept of Black Performance, which, associated with the Black Movement, constitutes the set of expressive manifestations, from ritual to spectacle, which scenically organize the modes of existing and resisting of the black people in the African diaspora. The methodological design consists in an approach from macro to micro elements, starting with a general definition of the Black Movement, then questioning the concept of Black Performance as a category that can encompass both traditional ritualistic performances and artistic performances that are conducted in the cultural scene through the languages of theater, dance and performing art. Finally, Black Theater is considered as the focus of analysis based on its historical aspects.

Identity in movement

The Black Movement can be understood as the set of various insurgent social and political organizations of the black population, which, in the past, fought, resisted and rebelled against the proslavery colonial regime and, in the post-abolition period to the present day, have fought and continue to fight to combat and overcome structural racism and racial discrimination.

The Black Movement in Brazil, its history, its main claiming agendas and struggles, is presented and discussed by Nilma Lino Gomes (2011)¹ in the article *O movimento negro no Brasil: ausências, emergências e a produção de saberes* [The black movement in Brazil: absences, emergencies and the production of knowledges] (2011). In this study, reflecting on the experiences and knowledges built by the Black Movement, the author underscores some historical phenomena and events, such as the creation of the Quilombos, the Malê revolt (1835), the Revolt of the Lash (1910), the Brazilian Black Front (1931-1937), the São Paulo Black Press, The Experimental Theater of the Black (1944-1968), the Unified Black Movement



(1978), the Black Women Movement, the Zumbi dos Palmares March Against Racism (1995), and the Zumbi + 10 marches (2005).

The Brazilian black movement has been prominent in the history of our country as the political subject whose claims have managed, from 2000, to influence the Brazilian government and its main research bodies, such as the Instituto de Pesquisa Econômica Aplicada (IPEA) and the Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística (IBGE). This political recognition has enabled, in recent years, a change within various sectors of the government and, above all, in public universities, such as, for example, the process of implementing affirmative action policies and practices geared toward the black population (Gomes, 2011, p. 134-135).

In the historical perspective presented in Gomes (2011), the origin of the contemporary Black Movement is situated in the context of the social movements that arose in the mid-1970s, in Brazil, in a great political coordination of struggle against the military dictatorship, established in 1964, which had strongly repressed and persecuted all kinds of revolutionary political organization. This reorganization led to the creation of the Unified Black Movement (MNU) in 1978, an organization at the national level considered a protagonist of anti-racist struggles in Brazil and which is often mistakenly seen as the very totality of black movements.

However, even though it was a collective of social and popular movements fighting against the military dictatorship, the specificity of the Black Movement consisted in the need to “[...] deny the official history and contribute to the construction of a new interpretation of the history of blacks in Brazil [...]” (Gomes, 2011, p. 136, our translation). This need was based on the perception that the existence of racism, present to date in the structures of our society, often denied and neglected by sectors of the left wing, needs to be questioned in depth in the struggle for the construction of a real democracy in Brazil.

This subject is revisited and widely problematized by Nilma Lino Gomes in the work *O movimento negro educador: saberes construídos nas lutas por emancipação* [The black educator movement: knowledges built in the struggles for emancipation], in which she asserts: “Thus, the need to deny the official history and to contribute to the construction of a new interpretation of the history of blacks in Brazil are aspects that distinguish the

Black Movement from the other social and popular movements of the 1970s” (Gomes, 2019, p. 54, our translation).

From a historical point of view, it is interesting to think about how the ludic and cultural dimension has always been an investment of the Black Movement, through beauty pageants, balls, and dance performances in its conferences, with the frank intention of affecting, as a device of the process of mobilization and identification. Perhaps, a high point of this political and artistic dimension of the Black Movement in Brazil was the role of Abdias do Nascimento — of whom we will speak later —, who, in addition to being a politician and intellectual, was an artistic producer of theater, having been one of the precursors of what we can call Black Theater, in addition to his skill for painting and poetry.

Thus, the Black Movement is an agent of development of epistemologies, generated within its own militancy, that retell the history of the African diaspora in Brazil and intend to write it in act — political, cultural — and that is also reflected in the agendas for claiming the right to education for the black population and the construction of an education for ethnic-racial relations that is anti-racist.

This re-elaboration of the histories that were erased or *very badly told* occurs through different practices and, often, from collective memories, marked by the historical trauma of slavery and its social developments. Lélia Gonzalez (1984), in her article *Racismo e sexismo na cultura brasileira* [Racism and sexism in Brazilian culture], addresses the importance of memory in the process of restoring the histories that were invisibilized by the dominant discourse.

We are talking about the notions of consciousness and memory. As consciousness, we understand the place of ignorance, concealment, alienation, forgetfulness and even knowledge. It is through this that the ideological discourse makes itself present. On the other hand, we consider memory as the non-knowledge that knows, this place of inscriptions that restore a history that was not written, the place of the emergence of truth, of this truth that is structured as fiction. Consciousness excludes what memory includes. Hence, insofar as it is the place of rejection, consciousness is expressed as dominant discourse (or effects of that discourse) in a given culture, concealing memory, through the imposition of what it, consciousness, affirms as the truth. But memory is somewhat astute, resourceful: therefore, it speaks



through the blunders of the discourse of consciousness (Gonzalez, 1984, p. 226, our translation).

It is in this sense that, in our view, the idea of Black Performance can be understood as the aesthetic and kinesthetic dimension of the Black Movement, as a performatized expression of experience, as Flávia Cristina Honorato dos Santos (2019, p. 27, our translation) also discussed in her Master's dissertation:

Thus, we can define black performance as organized events or behaviors that are manifested by creating, in those who perform or in those who witness, an immediate connection with the idea of blackness, which here should be understood as synonymous with black identity.

If we think of performance in comprehensive terms, as proposed by Richard Schechner (2003, p. 4, our translation), who draws attention to the fact that “[...] performances exist only as actions, interactions and relationships,” we will see performances as relational events that are established in time and space, both through planned actions and everyday actions.

Performance stems from the need to make things happen and entertain; to obtain results and play; to show how things are and pass the time; to transform oneself into another and take pleasure in being oneself; to disappear and show oneself; to incorporate another transcendent one and to be ‘just me’ here and now; to be in trance and in control; to focus on the group itself and transmit to as many people as possible; to play to satisfy a personal, social or religious need; and to play only with contract or for money! The change from ritual to aesthetic performance occurs when a participatory community is fragmented, becoming occasional, as a paying customer. The movement from aesthetic performance to ritual happens when an audience consisting of individuals transforms into a community. The possibilities of movement in any direction are present in all performances (Schechner, 2012, p. 83, our translation).

This perspective, advocated by Schechner, leads us to consider both a theater play as a capoeira circle, or a *Black Lives Matter* protest march as Black Performance. However, within the scope of this article, we will consider performances in the domains of ritual and spectacle, emphasizing the latter. This is meant to avoid overly comprehensive generalizations, which both hinder a focused and in-depth analysis of the concept and can lead to the mistake of not understanding the plurality of black movements. However, it is important to state that building a debate on Black Performance

through the Black Movement is both a political position on our part and a strategy of not addressing this concept immediately from a non-black perspective.

To discuss Black Performance considering the Performing Arts and the traditional practices, we consider pertinent the view of Guilherme Veiga de Almeida (2008, p. 14-15, our translation):

[...] by freely using ritual and spectacle, the everyday life and the exotic as communicative phenomena, *performance* ends up inviting (or forcing) the theory to rethink the origin of these events that were never generated to act in communion. Thus, as an expressive genre that is the hybrid product of several cultural matrices, performance arises as an invitation to think according to new bases the principles of the very expressiveness. [...] If art and spectacle can be considered essentially aesthetic events, the ritual is not quite understood thusly, because, rather than aesthetic, the ritual is synesthetic. And it is precisely the synesthesia of the ritual that performers seek to include in their events.

It was from this perspective that the subject of the relation between the theatrical scene and traditional black performances was investigated and systematized by us in the Master's thesis *Poéticas e saberes da Capoeira Angola: caminhos para pensar a performance negra de atrizes e atores narradores* [Poetics and knowledges of Capoeira Angola: ways to think about the black performance of narrator actresses and actors] (Peixoto, 2021), which discussed the technical, poetic, symbolic, political and conceptual contributions that Capoeira Angola² can offer to creative and training processes in Performing Arts, considering an Afrocentric approach (Asante, 2009) to narrative performances, pondering Narrative Theater³ in relation to the notion of Black Performance.

The choice to seek, in traditional black performances, inputs for creation processes in Performing Arts and for the preparation and/or training of artists goes against the hegemonic conceptions of knowledge construction, based on an epistemological racism that rejected the knowledge of African, indigenous and African descent peoples of traditional theater schools, for example. After all, traditional black performances, such as Capoeira Angola, among others, can be understood as countercolonial, as they preserve and reinvent the symbolic, philosophical, artistic, intellectual and sociocultural values of countercolonizing populations, through the cult of ancestry in



their ritualistic cultural practices, as discussed by the quilombola author and activist Antônio Bispo dos Santos. Proposing a reflection on the countercolonial and non-exclusive character of these manifestations, as opposed to cultural practices associated with a dominant colonial/capitalist structure, the author compares capoeira with soccer:

The soccer game is governed by pre-defined static rules, where twenty-two people play, one person judges, and thousands of people watch. It can happen that among the people who watch there is someone who plays better than one of the twenty-two people who are playing. Still, it is quite unlikely that such person will get into the game. In a capoeira circle, governed by the lessons of life, we can have fifty people playing, one person teaching and very few watching. Among the few people watching, there may be someone who have never seen capoeira. However, if this person wants to, they can get into the circle and play.

A person of any sex and age who does not know any of the two styles is much more likely to be invited to join a capoeira circle than a soccer game. This exclusionary logic of soccer and inclusive logic of capoeira are present in everyday life and are part of the organizational process of the community. This is the importance of worldviews in the organization of societies (Santos, 2015 p. 42, our translation).

As a result of the investigations and reflections carried out during this research, and amid the writing of the dissertation, the notion of *black narrative performance* emerged, which was presented through a discussion of Black Performance, in relation to a look at Capoeira Angola as traditional black performance and also through the specificities of Narrative Theater.

Thus, in the preliminary formulations, made in the context of a Master's research, we used the idea of black narrative performance as a category of analysis to study a narrative performance situated at the crossroads between storytelling, Narrative Theater and traditional black performances, which seeks to approach the culture and image of the black people in an affirmative way, engaged with the anti-racist and feminist struggle, since it would not be consistent to discuss race without problematizing the issue of gender from an intersectional perspective⁴.

Expanding and continuing this research path, now within the scope of a doctoral research in the Graduate Program in Cultural Performances of the Universidade Federal de Goiás, we realized the need to better comprehend and characterize the idea of Black Performance so that, from there, we



can advance in the understanding and conceptualization of black narrative performance, which in turn is not only a concept, but above all a practice, which we believe can contribute to the creation and systematization of countercolonial methodologies for scenic investigation processes.

When talking about traditional black performances, we refer to expressive manifestations or ritualistic performative practices, mostly forged in quilombos, the birthplace of a significant portion of what we currently call Brazilian culture. In order to better characterize them, we list here some common elements that structure them, such as: the cult of ancestry; the encounter; the game; *doing with* rather than *doing for*; a differentiated logic of space-time; circularity; the non-division of artistic languages (Dance, Theater, Music, Visual Arts); and the importance of orality in their teaching-learning processes.

To provide a few examples of this type of performance, we can mention Capoeira Angola, Jongo, Tambor de Crioula, Samba de Roda and Batuque de Umbigada, studied by Silva (2012) as crossroads manifestations, the crossroads being a conceptual operation, understood as a slit that opens in the present and transports us immediately to ancestry, being the metaphor of a time-space and a place of intersections. According to Silva (2012, p. 67-69, our translation), “The crossroads is precisely the place where past and present overlap and, also, where issues related to the sacred in the cult of ancestry permeate [...]”.

However, it is necessary to point out that, when referring to traditional black performances, we take into account the reflection already pointed out in the article *Narrativas dançadas: entre tradições populares e a cena contemporânea* [Danced narratives: between popular traditions and the contemporary scene], that “[...] it must be considered that traditional black performances are alive and active in contemporary times; that is, they are not artifacts from a forgotten and missed past” (Silva; Hartmann, 2019, p. 93, our translation).

Traditional black performances, in worshipping African ancestry, preserve, reinvent and re-signify philosophical, sociocultural, symbolic, intellectual and artistic values of African peoples victimized by colonial epistemicide, as a form of political and poetic resistance and, even, survival to the context of physical and symbolic death imposed by the slavery system in the

past, and by the racism that structures social relations today. In these manifestations, there is the production of black poetics that, by affirming their African ancestry, valorize this identity and deny the place of subalternity attributed to the black population by the colonial racist logic, accentuated by capitalism.

Often, these black poetics, engendered from traditional performances, are drivers of artistic creations within the scope of dance and theater. However, we observed that Black Theater can sometimes be understood through other contexts, being characterized as such, or through the black presence on the scene, even if in non-Afrocentric formats, texts and patterns or, then, through the performatization of the social drama of the population, which Lima (2011, p. 83, our translation) classified as “[...] engaged black theater, which concerns a theater of militancy, of posture, admittedly, political”.

Still, it is necessary to take into account the perspective presented by Leda Maria Martins (1995), in her emblematic work *A cena em sombras* [The scene in shadows], in which the researcher discusses the importance of knowing and reflecting on the theatricality of expressive forms of black culture, such as capoeira, congados and reinados, among many others, since such performances provide fundamental inputs for in-depth reading and understanding of Black Theater. In her own words:

Thinking of a Black Theater in a strict sense requires, therefore, the understanding and recognition of this theatrical framework that founds the expressive experience of the black, without reducing it to a grouping of texts prepared by black writers or gathered by a racial theme. [...] The study of Black Theater, thus, imposes the familiarization of critics with the nature of forms of expression and with the bundle of semiotic and, therefore, discursive relations of the black culture, as promoters of the aesthetic and expressive particularity of this theater (Martins, 1995, p. 65-66, our translation).

Examining Black Theater

If the aesthetic dimension of the Black Movement is the Black Performance, it, in turn, must be considered in its materiality, that is, as act. In the context of the Performing Arts in Brazil, artists from both the theater and dance have been demanding, for some decades, the adjectivation of black people to give visibility to the identity agenda and to draw attention to the anti-racist struggle. Accordingly, we consider that it is possible to



understand Black Theater as a practice and conceptually based on its historical path. To this end, we focused on the discussions conducted by Leda Maria Martins, Evani Tavares Lima, Christine Douxami and Julio Moracen Naranjo and also on our artistic experiences.

At first, it is important to explain that Black Theater in Brazil has been constituted and expressed in many ways, through various voices, bodies, forms, aesthetics and poetics and developed different political discourses. We think that this diversity reflects the richness and complexity of African and Afro-Diasporic cultures and we do not intend to determine, here, a closed concept about Black Theater, but rather to better understand it in its breadth and contribute to a deepening of studies on Black Performances.

According to Douxami (2001) and Lima (2011; 2015), some aspects can be taken into account to consider a production as Black Theater: the presence of black artists on the scene; a dramaturgy that addresses issues related to blackness and the social issues experienced by the black population; a black production; or the presence of a female black director or a male black director.

However, we agree with the two abovementioned researchers when they problematize the presence of female and male black artists on Brazilian stages prior to the advent of the creation of the Teatro Experimental do Negro (TEN) by Abdias do Nascimento in 1944, as this presence, in most cases, reinforced racist stereotypes.

In the article of Lima (2015), *Por uma história negra do teatro brasileiro* [For a black history of the Brazilian theater], the author presents a history of the black experience in the Brazilian theater since the period of the invasion of Europeans and the beginning of the process of colonization and enslavement of black and indigenous populations. In addition to describing the history of the black presence in performing arts, the researcher problematizes and analyzes the quality of such presence and the diverse contexts where it occurred.

According to Lima (2015), the presence of black characters in the Brazilian dramaturgy, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, reflected the “[...] black from the point of view the white” and, thus, built and/or reproduced always negative stereotypes of the black population.

With respect to the Black Revue Companies, active in the early twentieth century, the author considers that

[...] this large space occupied by black artists did not exactly represent a change of mentality in the relationship between the holders of the rules of cultural production and black artists. At least from the point of view of affording them benefits, or even diminishing the association of the image of blacks with derogatory values. That is, it served much more a commercial strategy than any advance as to reestablishing the value of blacks and their culture on stage (Lima, 2015, p. 102, our translation).

Taking into account the historical and critical history presented in Lima (2015), it seems to us that the mere presence of black artists on stage does not guarantee the production of a Black Theater that can, from our perspective, be encompassed by the concept of Black Performance, to the extent that this concept is used in order to understand and analyze training and creative processes with countercolonial engagement, as studied by Monica Pereira de Santana (2017, p. 65, our translation), who understands Black Performance as “[...] an aesthetic, creative action that aims to cause cultural and social transformations, having in the body its symbolic and strategic field”.

The concept of Black Theater is considered quite comprehensively in Lima (2011, p. 82, our translation), who defines it as encompassing “[...] the set of spectacular black-mestizo manifestations, originated in the Diaspora, which employs the cultural and aesthetic repertoire of African matrix as a means of expression, recovery, resistance and affirmation of the black culture”. Based on this definition, the author divides Black Theater into three categories: black presence theater, Black Performance, and engaged black theater. The black presence theater, as the nomenclature already announces, is defined by the presence of black artists on stage. Black Performance is thought by Lima (2011) according to paradigms that coincide with those we consider in this article to characterize traditional black performances. In turn, engaged black theater comprises productions, groups or companies with openly militant and political postures.

In reflecting on the black experience in the Performing Arts in Brazil, according to the discussions and historical paths presented in Douxami (2001) and Lima (2011; 2015), we observed that the advent of the Teatro



Experimental do Negro (TEN), with its artistic and political role, is a milestone based on which we can establish a before and after with regard to Black Performance and the presence of female and male black artists on stage. This is consistent with the understanding of Martins (1995, p. 44, our translation):

In the advantageous place of reference that is constituted by the theatrical performance, a particular drama unfolds for blacks: the invention and circulation of a shadowed image, of an invisible face, of a repressed voice that the Teatro Experimental do Negro, from 1944, will try to decentralize, break and unveil.

Created by initiative of Abdias do Nascimento, together with other artists and intellectuals, TEN guided its actions according to a desire for social transformation, in the sense of fighting racism and valorizing the black population in Brazil through education, art, and culture.

The anti-racist political engagement of the TEN, which can be noticed through an analysis of its artistic productions, is also noticeable when we observe the artists involved in these productions. Many TEN artists had a low level of education and worked in subordinate functions in the labor market, commonly occupied by black and indigenous populations in Brazil. The TEN was a space for theatrical, intellectual and political artistic training and even offered literacy courses. “Thanks to this policy, a company with more than 50 actors was created, which operated, often, with a reduced team, from 1945 to the late 1960s” (Douxami, 2001, p. 318, our translation).

The TEN’s artistic-political work brought important aesthetic innovations to the Brazilian stages as, in the process of creating black poetics, there was a need for new dramaturgies and artists. Thus, there was the creation of new texts with black characters free from the stereotyped, limited and racist type-casting that existed until then, and also the rise of a new generation of important black actresses and actors, with new possibilities of acting through the creation of these new characters, dramaturgies and shows, such as Ruth de Souza, Léa Garcia, Haroldo Costa, and Aguinaldo Camargo, among others.

The members of the *Teatro Experimental do Negro* created and fostered the development of a black dramaturgy. We can mention several texts whose cre-



ation was influenced by the existence of the TEN, with *Anjo negro*, by Nelson Rodrigues, being the most significant work, which was created based on the life of Abdias do Nascimento (Douxami, 2001, p. 318, our translation).

In its shows, despite the use of some techniques, forms and aesthetic references of European theater, TEN sought to build its own poetics and, drawing from the source of African cultures, also added, to its theatrical productions, the languages of dance, music and poetry.

The creation of the TEN, which operated in Rio de Janeiro from 1944 to 1968, when Abdias do Nascimento was exiled in the United States, is a milestone in the history of Brazilian theater, both for the aesthetic innovations and political importance of its productions, and because the advent of the TEN led to several other groups and companies, dissents or continuations of their aesthetic and political proposals. In this sense, an important dissent that we cited as an example was the Teatro Folclórico Brasileiro, created in 1949 by artists who had been part of the TEN. This company, which some time after its creation came to be called Brasiliana, had as an important influence the Pernambuco poet Solano Trindade, who would later found the Teatro Popular Brasileiro.

From the perspectives of Douxami (2001) and Naranjo (2011), the propositions of Abdias do Nascimento and Solano Trindade correspond respectively to two important lines or conceptions of the Brazilian Black Theater, the first characterized by militant political engagement with the Black Movement and the second by valuing the manifestations of Brazilian popular culture and the presence of the black population, adapting them to the stages. According to Naranjo (2011, p. 62, our translation):

The Brazilian black theater presents some artistic and ideological trends, such as: a black theater that pursuits African heritage in a relatively classical form, developing reasoning and a theatrical text of black militancy or an engaged popular black theater, which seeks to value the black person as a member of a mestizo society, showing their participation in the construction of a national culture with a theatrical aesthetics focused on their black artistic heritage.

Still according to the conception of this author, Black Theater is a current that transits and varies according to the social historical context, producing “[...] performances and dramatic works that express signs of theatricality based on three points: ‘identity, citizenship and ritual acts of the black



man in any cultural context he lives” (Naranjo, 2011, p. 66, our translation).

It is interesting to note, in the author’s discourse, how the term “performance” is distinguished from “dramatic works” and, in fact, we often perceive in the context of black culture that the term performance is used as a synonym of popular cultures, or also as a category that brings dance and theater together, as we can see in the text of the introduction to the book of the I Fórum Nacional de Performance Negra [1st National Black Performance Forum]:

The I Fórum Nacional de Performance Negra is born from the understanding that Brazil needs a theater and a dance that express the greatness of the influence of its black population. Hence the need to enhance the creative and transformative capacity of black groups and companies in the performing arts that, in recent years, have enriched the cultural scene, promoting a deep dive into the pursuit of a certain type of dramaturgy, music and dance hitherto absent from Brazilian stages. [...] The strengthening of the Afro-Brazilian scenic expression also stems from a broader process of actions of the black movement, which placed in the public sphere a black alterity dissociated from discriminatory stereotypes (Bairros; Mello, 2005, p. 8-9, our translation).

This approach, although legitimate, considering the polysemic use of the term performance in the Portuguese language, is substantially different from what we try to defend here as Black Performance, according to a Performance Studies approach, based mainly on Schechner (2012), which propose a broadening of this notion in order to enable a transit between ritual, languages and everyday life, including political and entertainment acts. As is also the case of the concept of *cultural performances*, coined by Milton Singer (1972), who understands them as forms of artistic and cultural expression that obey a previous program, with a determined sequence of activities, proper place for their occurrence, start and end time, even if imprecise, and which are expressed through different communicative means, such as narratives, singing, dancing, visual arts. This perspective tends to be a broader approach to performance, with studies that fit the interdisciplinary interest between Anthropology, Cultural Studies, Communication, Arts, and others.

And why Black Performance and not Afro, Afro-Latin, Afro-Brazilian Performance, or any other definition that addresses the issue from a cultural and geographical perspective and not necessarily ethnic-racial? This is an issue that undoubtedly deserves further reflection, especially considering, in particular in Brazil, the complexity of racial definitions. Thus, without seeking immediate answers, but aiming at a more in-depth approach to this discussion, it seems important to reflect on the questions raised by Martins (1995) in problematizing the term “black” as a concept constituted in a network of relations, when adopting the expression Black Theater in her studies.

What is talked about when talking about black? The skin color of the playwright or actor? The theme? The culture? The race? The subject? In fact, a bit of everything, or rather, the talk is about the relation of everything. The black, the blackness, does not translate, in this work, the substance or essence of a subject, of a race or culture, nor a simple recurring thematic motif. The term points, above all, to a textual, dramatic and scenic notion — representative. This notion recovers the everyday subject, referential, as an instance of the enunciation and of the enunciated, which is made and constructed in the fabric of the dramatic discourse and in the weaving of the representation.

Blackness is not thought of here as a *topos* holding a metaphysical sense, or an absolute. It is not apprehended, after all, as an essence, but rather as a semiotic concept defined by a network of relations (Martins, 1995, p. 25-26, our translation).

However, it is evident that this idea of blackness inevitably involves an association with the African continent, be it genetic, historical or mythical and by the ideological principle according to which the black population needs to unite around the struggle for rights, dignity and full citizenship.

But the African dances and theaters, would they also be Black Performance? Naranjo’s perspective on the issue of black identity is interesting:

Only Afro-descendants can call themselves blacks. Their ancestors were simply Africans, and even today they speak of themselves as Dogon, Zulu, Massai, Ibo, etc. Black terminology claims, as a self-assignment, to extend its domain to a specific American or Caribbean nation. If one is black, Afro-descendant, it is because this identity was inherited from slavery: every African in America has been considered nothing more than a black. Thus they were seen and categorized by the colonizer and this categorization must now be assumed as a proud claim to conscious identity, as a culture of resistance (Naranjo, 2011, p. 75, our translation).

Although Africa has also been marked by colonization and coloniality, it must be considered that the American case is substantially different from the African case, because, in our view, the need to elect the ethnic-racial marker as a political flag comes as a reaction to the racialization of a certain group with a certain origin whose ideological unity is necessary in terms of fighting for rights. However, once again casting a homogenizing look at Africa does not seem to us to be fulfilling a contestatory mission.

Final Considerations

Since the mid-1940s, with the advent of the work of the Teatro Experimental do Negro, we have seen, in Brazil, a type of theatrical production that, engaged with the ethnic-racial agenda, seeks, in an action coordinated between art and politics, to question the social situation of the black population, as well as to create narratives that recognize both their history of oppression and of struggle.

From our point of view, the theatrical manifestations, which are identified as black, in addition to giving visibility to the body and to Afrocentric dramaturgies, participate, together with the traditional black performances and political performative acts, in a large category of analysis and organization of thought, which is Black Performance.

As a macro-category, the concept of Black Performance would also encompass interdisciplinary initiatives such as black narrative performance, the result of the encounter between storytelling, theater and traditional performances, or, then, afroartivisms. Thus, we consider that Performance Studies — not only from the perspective of Richard Schechner and Milton Singer, but also from many others that have been contributing to this interdisciplinary field —, allied with important studies on ethnic-racial issues and black identity, can contribute with a greater definition of the concept, without ignoring, of course, its polysemy and dynamics of practices.

This path has been followed in the very footsteps of black artists and intellectuals who reflect on their practices, ensuring that this conceptual construction is done in an implicit way, as is the case of the works of Evani Tavares Lima and Mônica Pereira de Santana, which were cited throughout the text. Apropos, the latter author has recently defended her doctoral thesis, in which she broadly reflects on the role of Black Performance in the



processes of recognition and reinvention of themselves of black artists in the contemporary scene, who through their aesthetic productions question and subvert the place of subalternity that is imposed on black women by the structures of coloniality (Santana, 2021).

Finally, it is important to highlight the Fórum Nacional de Performance Negra, which, in its five editions, held from 2005 to 2021, has been carrying out the relevant work of bringing together several groups, companies, artists, intellectuals, militants and representatives of the public administration to discuss the main demands of Black Performance makers and to develop strategies within the scope of creating and maintaining fundamental public policies in the struggle to conquer and guarantee rights for black workers in art and culture.

In the wake of these contributions, this article is included in the field of the debate on Black Performance in an effort to think about in relation to the social movement and in a field of approximation between theater, dance and popular cultures⁵.

Notes

- ¹ Nilma Lino Gomes is a full professor at the Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais (UFMG) School of Education. She was Pro-Tempore Dean of the Universidade da Integração Internacional da Lusofonia Afro-Brasileira (UNILAB) (2013-2014). She was also minister of the Secretariat for Racial Equality Promotion Policies (SEPPIR) (2015) and of the Ministry of Women, Racial Equality, Youth and Human Rights (2015-2016) of the President Dilma Rousseff administration.
- ² “Capoeira is an Afro-Brazilian cultural manifestation whose practice combines different languages and expressions, which may include dance, fight, music, dramatization, play, game, and spirituality. Among the different forms of expression of this practice, Capoeira Angola is understood as one of the styles of capoeira, which is characterized as such based on a discourse about tradition established on a mythical and historical organic bond with its African ancestry” (Peixoto, 2021, p. 14, our translation).
- ³ “Narrative Theater, one among other trends in contemporary theatrical production, has as one of its main characteristics the strong presence of epic ele-

ments combined with dramatic and lyrical elements in the set of features of the staging” (Peixoto, 2021, p. 17-19, our translation).

- ⁴ Intersectionality is the study of the overlap or intersection of social identities and related systems of oppression, domination, or discrimination. In Brazil, it saw major exposure through the publication *Interseccionalidade* by Carla Akotirene (2019), in the collection *Feminismos Plurais*.
- ⁵ Translated with financial support from the graduate studies in Cultural Performances at the Federal University of Goiás.

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