AFRICANS IN BRAZIL
A Pan-African Perspective

ABDIAS DO NASCIMENTO
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helm of the 1930 Revolution, had been governing the country arbitrarily with no constitution. During this period, I met and formed a lasting friendship with Sebastião Rodrigues Alves, then a corporal, who would prove to be a constant and dedicated militant of the Afro-Brazilian cause. We were both discharged from the Army in 1936 for resisting against racism, and our common struggles and fast friendship would not end until Rodrigues Alves' death in 1985.

In the Army: the Search for Direction

At sixteen years old, when I enlisted in the Army, I was a country boy, completely ignorant and naïve. I had no access to information or orientation in political matters, but I was full of enthusiasm and desire to act. It was very risky to participate in any Afro-Brazilian or other kind of movement, because soldiers were not allowed to get involved in politics or any activity of a social nature. Even so, in the barracks I used to hand out copies of the *Red Lantern*, the Communist party's clandestine newspaper, and I founded a paper called *The Recruit*, which circulated a few issues.

Basically, these things happened in a confused way. I did them in the complete absence of contact with anyone politically experienced or informed. I was a soldier, ready to obey orders, even to shoot at the people from the *Red Lantern* or the National Liberation Alliance[3] if the officers gave the order. There was no choice. I had no information, no context, no reading material. It was a dead end. But I was always searching. I couldn't just stand there, immobilized, with all that energy, that inner need to find my way, to get out of that rat trap. But, where to go? Which side to take?

In retrospect, it would be easy to say that the correct choice was the left. But it's not that simple. With me, everything is and always has been complicated. In the course of things, I tried all the options and I had just as much trouble with the left as with the right. During that confusing time, before I was out of the Army, I had clandestinely joined the Integralist movement![4]

I was dishonorably discharged from the Army after a fight at the

entrance of a nightclub (the Majestic, on Aurora Street in São Paulo), where my friend Rodrigues Alves and I were barred on racial grounds. This was in February 1936. We made it a good fight. The nightclub's receptionist got beat up, and so did the Police Commissioner for Political and Social Order, Egas Botelho, who endorsed the anti-African measure. Rodrigues Alves and I disappeared into the night. It happened to be Carnival, with huge crowds out dancing in the streets. But, finally, we were found. There's always an informer.

One morning, while we were still asleep in our rented room, the police surrounded the boarding house with a brutal war apparatus. They had enough forces for a search and destroy mission against an entire guerrilla army, let alone two young soldiers. They took us by force and dragged Rodrigues Alves and me through the streets of São Paulo like two black Tiradentes.[5] Beating us all the way, they took us to the infamous Investigations Office on Gusmões Street, which was the very portrait of horror.

To this day, my breathing stops and my blood turns cold in veins, when I recall how at least thirty prisoners were piled up in a cubicle designed for no more than eight people. I tried to balance myself on the lid of the communal latrine, which was simply a hole dug into the floor. Almost at every instant a prisoner would have to use the latrine, and I would move over as far as I could, forced to watch the operation from very close quarters. The stench inundated the entire atmosphere, which was already sinister because of the semi-darkness and the noise of a huge fan which ventilated next to nothing, but in compensation produced a greasy, monotonous, maddening din. We never knew whether it was night or day, since the sunlight did not penetrate that darkness, torn at intervals by tormenting cries that cut through space. They would indicate that one more prisoner was being "scientifically" interrogated.

After being kept in this dungeon for some weeks, to "learn our lesson," Rodrigues Alves and I were brought before General Almério de Moura, commander of the Second Military Region (São Paulo). Our saving piece of luck was that, while still a soldier, I had studied for a year, in 1935, at the Alvares Penteado School of Administration and Finance. The General decided that, as students, we would

existence. The movement spread from São Paulo to other states with significant African populations: Bahia, Pernambuco, Rio Grande do Sul, Rio de Janeiro, Minas Gerais, and Maranhão.

In 1937, with the installation of Getúlio Vargas' New State dictatorship, the Front was closed down, along with all other existing political organizations.

Like any other mass organization, the Brazilian Black Front had its internal problems of ideology and leadership. Actually, this fact is a good indication of its vitality. One of its leaders, Arlindo Veiga dos Santos, was involved with the New Patriots' Movement (*Movimento Patrianovista*), a rightist organization, while José Correia Leite was a socialist. This polarization led inevitably to the split which later occurred. However, I don't believe the incident had anything to do with the Communist Party.

The Footing: an Example of Brazilian Racial Democracy

Sometime around 1938, in the midst of the New State dictatorship, I joined a delegation of Africans from São Paulo on a mission to the nation's capital, then in Rio de Janeiro. In São Paulo city, there used to be a custom called the *footing* (yes, the name was in English) on Direita Street, in the downtown business district. A number of Africans would get together and walk up and down the street, taking up the sidewalks and adjacent streets as well. It seems there were complaints from the local merchants against those Negroes who blocked the view of their storefronts, albeit the *footing* took place on Sunday, when shops were closed. It was a strongarm government, and Police Chief Alfredo Issa banned this romantic Afro-Brazilian Sunday entertainment. So we formed a committee to take our protest to Rio de Janeiro, then the nation's capital. The group was composed of Fernando Góes (journalist), Rossini Camargo Guarnieri (poet), José Galdino (officer of an Afro-Brazilian recreational club), and me. The newspapers, then under strict censorship, couldn't publish anything except an article by Osório Borba, which managed to "get past" the censors. It wasn't worth much, except to show the courage of Osório Borba.

Integralism, Communism, and Prison

In Rio de Janeiro, after 1936, I continued my activities in the Integralist movement, which I had increased considerably in São Paulo after leaving the Army. The themes that attracted me to the Integralist movement were nationalist and anti-imperialist ones, the fight against capitalism and the bourgeoisie. It was an important stage in my life.

The Integralist movement was where I first began to understand, in an articulate way, my country's economic, social, and political reality and the implications of its international context. Integralist youth groups studied very hard and very seriously. I met and came to know people of rare quality like San Thiago Dantas; Gerardo Mello Mourão, the great poet whose fraternal friendship has crossed the years with me; Roland Corbisier; Rômulo de Almeida; Lauro Escorel; the late Jaime de Azevedo Rodrigues, courageous Brazilian ambassador to a European country, who gave up his diplomatic career after the military coup of 1964; Hélder Câmara, later Recife's famous bishop, whose progressive works on behalf of the poor prompted the military dictatorship to ban his name from being mentioned publicly; Ernani da Silva Bruno, the historian from São Paulo; Francisco Luiz de Almeida Salles; Ricardo Werneck de Aguiar; Antônio Galloti; Mario Mazei Guimarães; and many others. I came to know the Integralist leader Plínio Salgado quite well, since I worked in his office, and there was a time when I was quite friendly with him.

In the Integralist organization, I was separated from the Afro-Brazilian movement, and so I maintained two parallel activities. As soon as I witnessed racism within the Integralist movement, I left it for good.

I recall one incident by way of example. Along with Garrido Torres, I was organizing a campaign for the institution of Economics as an autonomous Faculty in the Brazilian university system. The campaign consisted primarily of reports and interviews with personalities in education and economic science, published by the Integralist paper *The Offensive*. As it turned out, the paper would print

the written material but infallibly would cut my image out of the photographs where I appeared with the interviewees. This was largely the work of the paper's Portuguese editor, Vitorino, a typical Salazarist Portuguese.[6]

The reactionary aspects of the Integralist movement are clear in retrospect, but those of us who joined at the time did so for very different reasons. It is easy for today's historians, social scientists, and young self-important leftists to degrade and berate those of us who once had ties with Integralism, no matter how explicitly we may criticize its errors or renounce our former association. These people don't understand what the movement meant in its historical context and have no better basis upon which to attack others than the long-buried convictions of the past and their own self-righteousness.

In December 1937, I was arrested with a group of university students. We were leafletting against the Vargas dictatorship and United States imperialism. At this point, I experienced the police brutality of Felinter Müller and Emílio Romano,[7] in whose hands I found myself suffering the same physical, mental, and moral aggressions and torture as other political prisoners. After a short time at the infamous police headquarters on Relação Street, I and five other companions in civic adventure were sent to the prison on Frei Caneca Street. From there, we were taken periodically to the National Security Tribunal,[8] where we were tried and convicted. I was held prisoner in the Frei Caneca penitentiary until April of the following year.

An interesting thing happened in prison. A group of students, all of us ex-Integralists, became friendly with various Communists, ideologically the archenemies of Integralism. Among them Captain Trifino Corrêa, arrested during the 1935 *Intentona* revolt. At first it was a tense, dramatic encounter. But very quickly the atmosphere changed. We became friendly and formed a kind of seminar on Brazilian Studies, where each of us spoke on a chosen topic. I contributed with a piece of research on roads and cattleways as Brazil's first means of communication during the colonial period.

We could often see the "Knight of Hope," Luis Carlos Prestes,[9] sitting in the sun on the patio of the chapel where he was held. I

already knew Prestes from an earlier, very impressive occasion. As a reporter for the newspaper *O Povo*, I had covered Captain Prestes' trial by the Supreme Military Tribunal as the leader and main architect of the *Intentona*. It was a terrifying sight when he would show up in the courtroom all covered with blood. Prestes would turn to the officer-judges and, in an energetic and authoritative tone, denounce the guards who had beaten him in such a cowardly way just minutes before.

I met with Prestes other times, much later, at friends' homes or small meetings. I spoke with him enough to be able to testify to the complete absence in him of any positive attitude regarding African-Brazilian people's aspirations. Naturally, in classic Brazilian fashion, he "sympathized with" or could even declare "support" for our movement, but definitely he did not understand the specificity of our struggle.

Afro-Campineiro Congress

After being released from prison, I returned to São Paulo in 1938. For some time I was in hiding there, from police persecution. Although I had left the Integralist ranks, the political police were constantly on my back. They would detain me for a few hours and then let me go. Their goal was a simple one: general harassment. The Integralists came to my aid, arranging for a hiding place in a house in São Paulo's Brooklin neighborhood, if I'm not mistaken. It was during this period that my right ear became badly infected. I couldn't come out of hiding, but the ear was swollen and very painful. With no money for a doctor, I went to my old friend Francisco Luis de Almeida Salles, who took me to an ear, nose, and throat man and solved my ear problem.

Then I went to Campinas, São Paulo State, home of Geraldo Campos, a childhood friend from Franca and companion in the Rio de Janeiro penitentiary. On May 13, anniversary of an abolition that never really happened, we opened the Afro-Campineiro Congress, which we organized with the help of Nelson Omegna, the sociology professor at the Normal School. The Congress was held at the Arts

and Sciences Institute of that pretentiously racist city. Omegna also edited a newspaper that published pieces about the Congress and articles we wrote about the Afro-Brazilian situation.

Sharing the work involved in organizing the Congress were Geraldo Campos, Aguinaldo Camargo, Agur Sampaio, João Gualberto, Jerônimo (the typesetter) and me. For one week the various aspects of African-Brazilian people's living conditions were discussed: economic, social, political, and cultural. The most important thing for me was one session in which the Congress organizers swore an oath to return to Africa one day to make our contribution to the liberation struggle of the Black Continent, our ancestral home. Much later, I tried modestly to do my part. From the Sixth Pan-African Congress in Dar-es-Salaam, Tanzania, to Ile-Ife, Lagos, Accra, Dakar, Bissau, and Luanda, I made the effort to participate in African world affairs.[10] Perhaps the crowning moment of this Pan-African experience was when I went to Windhoek in March 1990 for the independence celebrations of Namibia, Africa's newest nation.

After the Afro-Campineiro Congress, I came back to Rio de Janeiro and finished my degree in economics at Rio de Janeiro University. The next year, 1939, I lived again in São Paulo, where I went to work for some time as a bank accountant and manager. In this job, I travelled to the rural areas of São Paulo State, serving at local branches in Garça and Vera Cruz, until that world of business deals among coffee and cotton barons suffocated me, and suddenly I astonished colleagues and superiors by resigning, abandoning bank books and accounts to breathe once more the breeze of Rio de Janeiro's beaches.

Back in Rio, I joined in the creation of the Holy Orchid Brotherhood and embarked on a series of travels and adventures with the group. My next major activity in Brazil would be to create the Black Experimental Theater (TEN) in 1944. This is one of Brazil's most well-known black movements, essentially because it was the first to join antiracist civil and human rights demands with concern for the recovery and promotion of African cultural values and identity as a tool for building Afro-Brazilian consciousness.

Origins and Antecedents of the Black Experimental Theater

I was already an adult, but I knew very little about the theater. I had enjoyed it ever since childhood, in Franca, when the theatrical effect of the religious processions I earlier described so caught my imagination. I also used to watch the puppet theater and always had a hidden desire to participate in the New Year's shows produced by the grade school I attended. Yet I was never chosen to do so, because of my color, of course. But they never had the honesty to say why.

I used to go to the circus, where there was generally a "pantomime," meaning a play, to close the show's second act. Inspired by the circus, I used to get together all the kids in the neighborhood in my back yard and produce shows. We all danced, sang, and clowned around. There was no assignment of roles. Everyone did a little of everything.

To me, as a child, theater meant the circus, or else the vague image of my father getting ready to dance in the folklore festival called counterdance. He would go out to the fields to gather leaves of *pita*, a plant with long fleshy leaves. He would mash the leaves thoroughly, squeezing out all their juice, and what was left were very white, fine fibers to make long hair and beards.

When I left the bank in São Paulo State and returned to Rio de Janeiro, around 1940, the Holy Orchid Brotherhood banded together in what was to be a lasting bond of friendship and solidarity. It was a group of Argentine and Brazilian poets: Efraín Tomás Bó, Godofredo Tito Iommi and Juan Raul Young, all three of Argentina; from Brazil, Gerardo Mello Mourão, Napoleão Lopes Filho, and myself. We made a long adventurous trip along the entire Amazon river, to Ucayale at the base of the Andes, sustained not by money (we were destitute) but by creative energy and group spirit.

We went on to Lima, where we saw a production of Eugene O'Neill's play *The Emperor Jones*. The show brought back to me all those childhood theatrical instincts. Most of all, I was indignant to see a blackfaced white actor, Hugo D'Evieri, playing the title role of Brutus Jones. There is a substantial African population in Peru, so

obviously this was one more form of anti-African discrimination, just as in Brazil, where Africans entered theaters only in the real-life role of janitor. This was when the idea occurred to me of creating a black theater in Brazil. I committed myself to embark upon the project when I returned home.

For a few years, we lived in Lima, La Paz, and then Buenos Aires. In Lima, aside from rediscovering the theater, an event which proved so important to my future, I also gave lectures on the Brazilian economy at the famous Peruvian university, the Universidad Mayor de San Marcos. Along with the other Orchid brothers, I also had a memorable meeting with Haya de la Torre, the founder and leader of the famous opposition political movement APRA, which was underground at the time. This did not prevent us from being invited by the President of the Republic, Manuel Prado, to lunch at the Palace. The Vice-President, Larco Herrera, gave us very special treatment. We published articles and essays in his newspaper *La Crónica*, which guaranteed our basic living expenses. More than that, Larco Herrera was a patron of the arts. One time, for example, he took us to the first rehearsals for the début of a Peruvian vocal phenomenon, Ima Sumac, whose accompanying orchestra was conducted by the Maestro Vivanco.

At the time of my stay in Bolivia, Godofredo Iommi had returned to Buenos Aires, while Efraín Bó and Napoleão Lopes had decided to go north to Colombia, Central America, and Cuba. Juan Raul Young and I ventured into the interior of Peru, to Arequipa, where the bedbugs in one hotel ran us out. We decided to spend the night on the benches of a park, lulled by the scent of its roses, until the morning came and we could take the boat that crosses Lake Titicaca and then the train to La Paz. The altitude (about twelve thousand feet) left me sick. My face was swollen to the point of deformity, lips cracked, breathing short. La Paz definitely did not mean peace to my health. I had to get out. Before leaving, though, we saw a play at the city's major theater: *Bodas de Sangre*, by Garcia Lorca. The nation's President, an Army Major, was in a balcony right next to us. Nevertheless, the play went on and the performance was excellent.

Buenos Aires was important to the development of my theatrical sense, because there I watched plays with a critical eye, thinking about the theater I would someday create in Brazil. I saw several productions of the Teatro del Pueblo, directed by Hugo Barleta. At the end of these productions there were very fruitful dialogues among director, actors, technicians, and audience. I learned quite a bit from those debates at the Teatro del Pueblo, and also from the activities of another Buenos Aires experimental theater group, La Mascara.

In 1942, I headed back to Brazil. After a few days in Montevideo, where the pangs of homesickness began to hit me after such a long absence, I was excited by the prospect of going home. But my enthusiasm soon suffered a nasty blow. It was as if Brazil wanted to make sure I had no false illusions about where I stood, even in the first moments of homecoming. The welcome I received from my country was to be barred by a smalltown nightclub in Jaguarão, Rio Grande do Sul. I was not to be allowed on the dance floor because of my "low color," I was told.

The Convicts' Theater

When I arrived in São Paulo, another surprise awaited me. For the same racial incident of 1936, which they called disciplinary (the one that triggered my first dishonorable discharge from the Army), I was now sent to prison, having been sentenced *in absentia* at a "trial" held while I was abroad.

The idea of creating the black theater was still hot on my mind, but the São Paulo penitentiary was famous for its impenetrability and severe treatment of prisoners. So I decided to try founding a convicts' theater. This venture was a real test of my ability to deal with a sensitive and delicate situation. I would have to take advantage of the publicity surrounding the name and progressive philosophy of the penitentiary's new director. The São Paulo press and rumors inside the prison were saying that this physician, Flamínio Fávero, would radically change the prison's methods of dealing with convicts. As a Protestant pastor, Dr. Flamínio Fávero would human-

ize the institution, known as a steel and concrete fortress. Why not try the theater idea on him?

My first tactic was to enlist the support of a very active and intelligent fellow prisoner, Pericles, number 4349 if I recall correctly. He was convicted of embezzlement. He knew the Penal Code inside out, and legal bureaucracy as well, so he was very useful to a great many convicts whose habeas-corpus petitions and other legal documents he drafted.

Number 4349 liked my theater project. The new director, Flamínio, was unusually accessible and received us for an interview. Very courteous, he listened attentively to our proposal. Right then, he approved of and encouraged the idea, authorizing us to begin work immediately. Number 4349 and I divided up the tasks at hand: I took on the artistic orientation, choice of repertoire, training of actors, and directing of plays. Number 4349 was left with the responsibility of coming up with the materials and means of producing the shows: making sets and costumes, building a stage, obtaining props, and so on.

The Convicts' Theater was an extraordinary and fascinating experience. I urged fellow prisoners to write plays, and we put on two productions: an historical drama about the proclamation of the Brazilian Republic, and a musical comedy satirizing the prison system. For the first time, I found myself directing actors. We also formed a prisoners' band. All our shows were warmly received by the prison audience.

I finally got out of prison, after a long, hard legal fight for habeus corpus, which the Supreme Federal Court finally conceded.

Creation and Success of the Black Experimental Theater

My experiences on return to Brazil had only increased my determination to create a black theater organization. The goal would be not only to produce plays, but also to use the theater as a weapon to fight for the improvement of the quality of life for African Brazilians. I had to take one step at a time, though, and initially I would need support from other intellectuals.

As soon as I was released from prison, I looked up a few writers in São Paulo. My friend Fernando Góes introduced me to Mário de Andrade and others. There wasn't much receptivity to the idea of founding a black theater group. Mário de Andrade, one of Brazil's greatest writers, was a typical product of Brazilian racial ideology: one of those mulattoes who spend their lives passing and would never admit to any African identity. Intellectually, they are strictly European and feel horrified or threatened by any initiative asserting Afro-Brazilian cultural identity. Obviously, I was looking for support in the wrong place.

But there was something in the air in favor of the idea. Around that time, an article was published in one of São Paulo's newspapers, signed by Galeão Coutinho, discussing the need for a black theater in Brazil.

I decided to try creating my black theater in Rio de Janeiro. The first meeting was held at the Café Amarelinho in the Cinelândia area of downtown Rio. Aguinaldo Camargo, Wilson Tibério, Theodorico dos Santos, José Herbel, and Rodrigues Alves all participated. Shortly afterward, a white theater man named Paschoal Carlos Magno, just back from Europe, gave a lecture at the Brazilian Press Association or the Ministry of Education and spoke of the need for a black theater. At this point, we could predict that the same old scenario of cooptation would evolve. So we met again at the old Phoenix Theater to announce publicly that the Black Experimental Theater was already a reality.

Our next meeting was held at the home of Aníbal Machado, a writer from Minas Gerais State whose door was always open. He supported anything worth doing. As we spoke, he picked up the phone and called Carlos Lacerda, then editor of the major daily *O Jornal*.[11] Lacerda encouraged the idea and published news items about the project, but we couldn't get off the ground. Where would our theater function if we ourselves didn't even have a place to live? After a lot of wandering around, looking, asking, we finally obtained access to parts of the National Student Union (UNE) building on Flamengo Beach Street. When business closed down for the day at their restaurant, around 7:00 or 8:00 p.m., the black theater people

would get together there. Ironides Rodrigues, a law student, took on the task of giving literacy classes; after all, theater people must know how to read and write. Attorney Aguinaldo Camargo, who was a fantastic person, extremely intelligent, and undoubtedly one of the best actors Brazil has ever produced, gave courses in general culture. Recruitment was quite eclectic. We wanted people without training or experience, since theater experience for blacks usually meant sexually-exploited stereotyping, soap-opera melodrama, or degrading clowning. People like domestic servants, maids, and underemployed workers came down from the *favelas*[12] perched on the hills. Many a white mistress became very upset with us: putting outrageous ideas in her servants' heads!

The Black Experimental Theater (TEN)[13] was founded in October 1944, and in November we were already participating in a play written by Stela Leonardos called *Palmares*, produced by the Brazilian Students' Theater. It wasn't exactly black theater, but it had a scene based on the Republic of Palmares, founded by Africans in the sixteenth century.[14] Aguinaldo Camargo played Zumbi, and another two hundred TEN actors and actresses, among them Natalino Dionísio and Fernando Araújo, played the black Troy's rebellious people. After only one month's existence and very little rehearsal time, we faced a huge responsibility, with so many people on stage and three leading roles. We came out of the test very well.

From the beginning, we were racially open, accepting whites as soon as they accepted the premises of our theater. Some of them wanted to help, but most came with paternalistic attitudes: "You don't have the know-how, this is a technical problem." When I decided to start us off with a production of Eugene O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones*, these expert "advisors" were shocked. "You don't have the stamina for that play! You'd have to have a great actor and an outstanding director. Where will you find them in your group?"

Real support came from Eugene O'Neill himself. From his sickbed in San Francisco, he wrote us a moving letter, encouraging us in what we were doing and waiving royalties.

It was around this time that I first met with President Getúlio Vargas. Paschoal Carlos Magno, a leading personality in the Rio de

Janeiro theater milieu, had arranged a meeting of the President with theater people. It was held at Catete Palace in Rio de Janeiro, then the seat of the national government. As one of the speakers, I gave an account of the creation of the Black Experimental Theater. After this, the dictator-President pulled me over to a corner, and we looked through the windows to the gardens outside. He put his hand on my shoulder as if we were old friends, saying my name intimately: "Abdias, . . . " But I was all on my guard, because I had never found myself chatting with presidents before, much less *this* president, whose politics I had fought from the very beginning. Getúlio displayed the smiling, friendly face of someone who wanted to help.

"Abdias," he said, "all this stuff you're saying isn't very objective yet. You need to put your ideas together better." (I was talking about black people's social advancement, integration, and similar issues.) Getúlio was practical. He phoned the Mayor of the Federal District (city of Rio de Janeiro) and ordered that the Black Experimental Theater's first play be staged at the Municipal Theater. The Municipal meant the cream of reactionary high society. Black people didn't set foot inside it as actors or audience. The only Negroes in there were the janitors, and they came in after the curtain was down and the audience gone.

There was a lot of gossip and intrigue by fancy ladies trying to keep our premiere out of the Municipal Theater. They said they needed it for a show in honor of the Allied victory in World War II. But we stood firm: "It's the President's order!" We wanted to fight Nazi racism at home. So, on that one day, 8 May 1945, we put Eugene O'Neill's masterwork on stage.

Despite the nonbelievers, TEN's first production was a resounding success. It was a historic night for Brazilian theater and for the Afro-Brazilian struggle. We made a good start against difficult odds. It was chaos at the Municipal Theater; we had no rehearsal time, no money for sets. But although they were improvised from cheap cotton, the sets were extraordinarily beautiful and effective, thanks to the gracious collaboration of the famous artist Enrico Bianco. He was there just to help, in solidarity with our idea. Abigail Moura's

incredible music made magic in the theater. Other collaborators were Ricardo Werneck de Aguiar, who had translated O'Neill for us; photographer José Medeiros; dancer José Silva (known as the Sorcerer from the Congo); Sadi Cabral in the part of Smithers; and Arinda Serafim as the Old Native Woman. Serafim was an amazing woman, very strong, an illiterate domestic whose dedication and outstanding leadership were essential to the Black Experimental Theater's creation.

I remember one detail of that unforgettable night. In the setting of the scene inside the Emperor's mansion, there was a gong that Aguinaldo Camargo, as the great Emperor Jones, sounded to call his servants. Once, when he hit it, the gong fell, and I had to hold it in place backstage, in an excruciatingly painful position, unable to move until the end of the act. But the gong sounded on cue, and the show was a huge success.

In the same production at the Municipal Theater, before the drama of Brutus Jones began, we staged a reading of three fighting poems by authors from the African Diaspora of the New World: *Always the Same*, by Langston Hughes of the United States; *Menina de Favela (Slum Girl)* by Aladir Custódio of Brazil; and *Negro, Hermano Negro* by Regino Pedroso of Cuba. These texts were read in a dramatic chorale, with four soloists: myself, Aguinaldo Camargo, Ilena Teixeira, and Ruth de Souza. Thus, our very first public presentation had a radically leftist tone, unmistakably supportive of progressive world politics. Predictably, Brazilian "progressives" did not reciprocate that support. Later, under their usual pretexts accusing us of "racism" and "fascism," they did their best to destroy and discredit us.

It was the hope of many to destroy the Black Experimental Theater on our first night. The major daily *O Globo*, for example, had published an editorial attacking us and labelling us a "Palmarist group trying to create an artificial problem in Brazil, using the footlights' glitter." Unfortunately for *O Globo*, the critics applauded us, including its own Henrique Pongetti, who was full of praise, emphasizing the profound seriousness of the initiative.

We raised serious controversies, particularly later, when we

produced my play *Sortilege (Black Mystery)* on the stage of the same Municipal Theater. Reactionary journalists like Paulo Francis and Luisa Barreto Leite tried to silence our denunciation of the racism at the roots of Brazilian society, calling us "racists" and "Nazis." But in the end, the attacks as well as the praise were positive. The Black Experimental Theater was born with vigor and vitality, full of the accidents and energies of life. A reading of volumes like *Black Experimental Theater—Testimonies* (Nascimento, 1966), *Blacks in Revolt* (Nascimento, 1982), and *Plays for Blacks and Prologue for Whites* (Nascimento, 1961) illustrates the truth of this statement more completely.

The Afro-Brazilian Democratic Committee

By the end of the war, the Black Experimental Theater was operating in the space loaned by the leftist National Student Union (UNE), in part of the building owned by that organization on Flamengo Beach Street. But we needed a tool for political action. Our first goal was to work for amnesty for the political prisoners of Getúlio Vargas' New State dictatorship. We didn't want to involve the TEN in political work, so in 1945, Rodrigues Alves, Aguinaldo Camargo, and I created the Afro-Brazilian Democratic Committee. An open organization, with Africans and non-Africans participating, the Committee nonetheless explicitly assumed an Afro-Brazilian perspective and identity.

This position, emphasizing African values, caused a lot of irritation among certain groups and individuals, especially after political amnesty was won that same year, 1945. Ideological arguments began to prevail at our meetings. At one point, the Committee's majority belonged to the UNE camp (we did meet at their building). We Africans, who had founded the organization, suffered a frontal attack from the non-African majority. Instead of discussing matters of substance, they started to use my Integralist past as a password of confrontation. One time, they demanded a public confession and retraction from me. I refused. I had nothing to say in any session of forced self-criticism. There was nothing in my past

to regret or repent. I was not about to submit to leftist whitemail.

I came through that episode and left it behind me. However, it changed me. It is difficult, painful, to learn the lessons of life not by putting on or taking off the green shirt of Integralism, but by tearing one's own skin. I had suffered racism in the Intregralist ranks and had denounced fascism. I was not going to submit to another fascist maneuver now.

So UNE's bosses threw the three of us out, indicting us as racists. The real error was theirs. They wouldn't admit that Africans have their own specific problems, their own ideas, and their autonomous struggles in Brazilian society. We would have to give in to the correct line determined by people alien to our situation, our history, our needs. It's an abominable and absurd abuse: they use Africans when they need our support or our numbers, but they refuse to recognize or deal with our people's specific needs. This situation went to such extremes that an African like Raimundo Souza Dantas had the nerve to state publicly at one of the Committee's meetings that he had been sent into the organization by the Communist Party with the intention of recruiting us all. In fact, the Committee died out soon after we were expelled, because those who remained had nothing to do with African life in Brazil.

Years later, one of those UNE officers, attorney Paulo Mercadante, had the integrity to confess to me that the UNE people in the Committee had had us thrown out under Communist Party orders that had come from outside the country.

TEN: Headquarters and Censors

In the context of the incidents involving the Afro-Brazilian Democratic Committee, it wasn't long before the Black Experimental Theater was also kicked out of the UNE building. We took up the challenge and rehearsed in open air on the streets, by the pillars of the Ministry of Education and Culture building in downtown Rio. This problem of office and rehearsal space plagued us from the beginning of TEN's theater work to its end in 1968, when I came to the United States. People would ask, "Where is TEN's office?"

I would say, "Right here," and point to the little briefcase I carried under my arm. The home of the Black Experimental Theater was that folder full of papers, photographs, documents, news clippings. It was our archives and our institution.

When I opened that briefcase, TEN's business hours would begin. At the beginning, this would happen at the Café Amarelinho, later at Café Vermelhinho, or else on the eleventh floor of the Brazilian Press Association (ABI). I would give interviews, hold try-outs, appointments, rehearsals, all in this unique "office." During the Kubitschek administration, when Paschoal Carlos Magno was cultural advisor to the President, he almost managed to get us a house. But the School of Choral Music also requested the building, and Education Minister Clóvis Salgado decided in its favor. We tried to get a plot of land in Brasília, which was just being built. But Israel Pinheiro and the owners of the new Federal capital gave out land to anyone and everyone except dispossessed Africans. In the new capital or the old, it was always the same story: Africans' place is out in the morning dew.

At one point a good friend of mine, Thiers Martins Moreira, was director of the government's National Theater Service. He told me that his boss, Education Minister Clemente Mariani, a mulatto banker from Bahia, used to whisper into Thiers' ear: "Don't you support that Negro theater. We should do away with it, is what we should do. You should be trying to figure out a way to do that discreetly." This kind of behavior is typical of the ruling class in Brazil. They show surface sympathy to your face or in public, but they kick your ass from behind. We got around them, though. Forced out of UNE headquarters, we functioned for a while in the attic of the Phoenix Theater, thanks to Bibi Ferreira.[15] It wasn't very accessible, nor did it accomodate the activity and numbers that UNE could, but it was all that was possible.

People who worked with TEN didn't earn any wages. We had a hard time just surviving. Arinda Serafim, among the first of us, as well as Ruth de Souza and Marina Gonçalves, did the hard work of domestic servants. Aguinaldo Camargo was a lawyer. Lea Garcia, Ironides Rodrigues, Claudiano Filho, and Haroldo Costa were

students. I myself, and an infinity of others, were workers without jobs, all of us living on the edge. João Elísio, an outstanding personality in this group, was a teacher of ceremonial dance who came from the religious houses of Candomblé in Caxias.

The Black Experimental Theater was constantly in conflict with the Censorship Bureau. In Ricardo Werneck's translation of *The Emperor Jones*, for example, there was a phrase that went something like: "Good God, I'm scared shitless!"[16] Now we couldn't say that. When the censors got through with it, we ended up with, "I am afraid."

My own play, *Sortilégio*, written in 1951, was held up by the censors for several years before it was finally released for production and publication (Nascimento, 1957).

Around 1948, a real problem came up with the play *Black Angel*, by Nelson Rodrigues.[17] Initially, the play was banned for dealing with a subject taboo to official Brazilian Culture. After a long battle waged by the author, in which we participated, *Black Angel* finally was released by the censors. Later, when it was considered for presentation in an official season sponsored by Rio de Janeiro's local government at the Municipal Theater, the authorities required that the African-Brazilian hero, Dr. Ismael, be played by a white actor in blackface. In the end, they did not produce it. Finally, the play was staged by the Maria Della Costa company, directed by Ziembinski.[18] I'll never understand why, but they put a blackfaced white man on in the leading role. It was a tragic incident from the artistic point of view, and simply criminal sociologically speaking, because it symbolized the artistic lynching of Africans, one aspect of the social genocide that African Brazilians have been suffering for almost five hundred years of building a country for others.

There is no basis for blackfacing white actors in a country with a majority black population. To allege a lack of African actors for parts that require artistic skill is a bare-faced lie. And even people who call themselves progressive, like Paulo Francis, commit the same offense against African Brazilians. In his case it occurred when he directed Antonio Callado's play *Pedro Mico*. While proclaiming his "progressive" perspective, he used to (and still does) attack our

movement in his newspaper columns. In this respect, he is a typical product of a racist, reactionary, and genocidal society. Not only did they try to smother a movement that had enormous social and artistic significance, although it was numerically small, but they also did everything they could to destroy me personally. This, in short, is my experience with the so-called "vanguard" or "Brazilian left."

The Black Experimental Theater earned many enthusiastic admirers and inspired the formation of several other black theater groups throughout Brazil. With my authorization, for example, Geraldo Campos founded the Black Experimental Theater of São Paulo. In Rio de Janeiro, a group that had worked with us in Joaquim Ribeiro's play *Aruanda* decided to go on its own and founded the Grupo dos Novos, which would later become Brasiliana. The poet Solano Trindade, also inspired by the example of our theater, founded the Brazilian Popular Theater. Mercedes Batista, who initiated her career with us, founded her dance group after acting as TEN's dance director and after a year of study with Katherine Dunham in New York. In Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, various groups and shows have turned up, bearing witness to this day that Black Experimental Theater's seed is still germinating. Undoubtedly, the fruits will someday come forth in the form of a strong and irresistible National Black Theater.

The Afonso Arinos Law Against Racial Discrimination

After the Afro-Brazilian Democratic Committee closed down, the Black Experimental Theater organized the National Black Convention in São Paulo in 1945, and then held another in Rio de Janeiro in 1946. At the closing session of the São Paulo convention, we released a manifesto which included, on my suggestion, along with other measures, a demand for a national antidiscrimination law. This document received the formal support of practically all the political organizations and parties existing at the time. It was read by Senator Hamilton Nogueira of the National Democratic Union (UDN), to the 1946 Constituent Assembly. Nogueira made an excellent speech presenting our bill.

During that period, when democracy was being restored after the New State dictatorship, I met with several national political leaders. One example was Octávio Mangabeira, the UDN's leader, to whom I was introduced by R. Magalhães Junior. Slick and sly, the old Bahian politician received me with the apparent sympathy characteristic of professional politicians, but soon started throwing me hot potatoes.

"Just think, in Bahia, when so and so, a black man, died, there was one of the biggest funerals I can remember. All the authorities were there, showing him great respect and high honor!"

"Precisely, your Excellency," I said. "What we want is for Africans to enjoy great respect and high honor while they're still alive."

He and his court of political foxes laughed good-naturedly. He tried to change the subject, but I would turn it around on him and get him by the tail: by the wolf's tail, because Mangabeira was one of those escapist Negroes, like so many other Bahians, who do everything they can to pass for whites and deny their African origin. Like these Bahian whites (*brancos da Bahia*), there are also *mineiro*[19] whites, one of whom is Afonso Arinos de Mello Franco.

Luis Carlos Prestes, Secretary General of the recently legalized Communist Party, supported our proposal of an antidiscrimination measure. I received the letter of support, as President of the National Black Convention. Nevertheless, it was no surprise to me when the Communist Party's Honorable Representative from Rio de Janeiro State, Claudino José da Silva, the only Congressman of African descent, voted against it. He justified his position alleging that the proposed law would narrow the broad concept of democracy! Later on he would confess, at a public session of the National Black Convention in Rio, that he had followed the Party line, voting against projects coming out of a black movement.

Like most Africans who rise to higher social positions in Brazil, this Representative did not think or act with any African consciousness. He displayed the skin color, but no commitment to the history, culture, collective problems, or destiny of the enslaved Africans who built the nation and their descendants. On the inside, ideologically,

he saw himself as a European Marxist-Leninist. A person so unidentified with his community could hardly be considered an African-Brazilian Congressman in any meaningful sense of the term.

With all this against it, the antidiscrimination bill was not approved. The Members of Congress agreed, at the time, to reconsider the proposal if and when concrete cases of discrimination occurred in the country. As if there were not already far too many.

Soon, however, an incident occurred that was scandalous enough to be noticed. Katherine Dunham, the African-American choreographer from the United States, was denied entrance to a hotel in São Paulo, despite holding advance reservations. Much later, at a convention held in her honor in 1984 in Chicago, Ms. Dunham and her husband, John Pratt, told me and my wife Elisa the following story: Dunham's secretary, who is white, had arrived at the hotel ahead of her and confirmed the reservation. When Dunham herself arrived alone, suddenly no rooms were available. In order to test and confirm the hotel's position, Mr. Pratt, who is also white, approached the desk alone and obtained a room. Thus, with the discriminatory nature of the hotel's position well defined, they made an appointment with a prominent São Paulo attorney. Having described the incident in full, they received the classic response that racial democracy has always given Africans in Brazil. After a self-important pause and a puff on his pipe, demonstrating the patience of someone accustomed to having his time consumed by unfounded claims of injustice, the attorney explained, "I'm afraid there is nothing I can do for you. We have no legislation against racial discrimination in Brazil, because there is no need for it. In our country there is no racial discrimination."

This happened in 1950, and as a result of the incident Congressman Afonso Arinos de Mello Franco (the "*mineiro* white" mentioned earlier) introduced a new antidiscrimination bill in the House. This measure became known as the Afonso Arinos Law. Actually, it should have been called the "Hamilton Nogueira Law" or the "National Black Convention Law," given its true historical antecedents.

This law restricted its definition of race discrimination to certain

instances and punished these practices with extremely light penalties, as misdemeanors rather than crimes.

As President of the National Black Convention, I organized a commission, composed of me and other Convention delegates including Sebastião Rodrigues Alves, José Pompílio da Hora, Aguinaldo Camargo, and Isaltino Veiga dos Santos. We were received by General Eurico Gaspar Dutra, who was then candidate for President of the Republic. He had been Minister of War for many years, so he was very familiar with the Army as an institution. The Convention commission went to General Dutra to protest against the military's discriminatory treatment of blacks. Dutra, who would soon become President, listened to us and responded in his characteristic way, without having to argue the subject. He stated that there were "reserve circulars" restricting Africans' entrance and ascension in Army ranks. At our request, he ordered Colonel Figueiredo, his chief of staff, to furnish us with a copy of the "reserve circular." Many were the times we called upon the Colonel, trying to get hold of the said copy, which never did come into our hands.

First National Congress of Brazilian Blacks

We had already organized the National Black Conventions in 1945 and 1946, and then the National Conference of Blacks in 1949. This conference was a preparatory exercise for the First National Congress of Brazilian Blacks. I presided over all these meetings, which were attended by delegates from various states, representing cultural organizations, fraternal and beneficent societies, religious organizations and authorities, and interested individuals from many different walks of life. During the Conference of 1949, Arthur Ramos[20] made a speech that was a pity not to have taped, for he died soon afterwards in Paris, where he was director of UNESCO. At that meeting we voted on the agenda for the First Congress, drafted by Guerreiro Ramos,[21] Edison Carneiro,[22] and myself.

In May 1950, the First National Congress of Brazilian Blacks took place in Rio de Janeiro, organized by the Black Experimental

Theater. It was a slow process, but we would not rest. The Congress was a landmark in Afro-Brazilian history. For the first time, we Africans discussed our concerns publicly, as masters of our own destinies, not only in the form of academic papers or formal oral and written communications, but more importantly in spontaneous improvisation. This spontaneity and self-determination were the accents that marked the radical difference between this First Congress of Brazilian Blacks and the previous Afro-Brazilian Congresses that had been held in the thirties in Recife and Bahia (see Larkin Nascimento, 1980:20-22). In these, it was the pomp and circumstance of white scholars and scientists that prevailed. They organized and directed everything, while African Brazilians were displayed merely as "ethnographic material," the object of research.

Africans were in charge of the First Congress of Brazilian Blacks, and at various sessions we aggressively confronted the subtle forms of paternalism emanating from "scientists" and other whitenesses. In the latter group we include, among others, the sociologists L.A. da Costa Pinto, Edison Carneiro, and Darcy Ribeiro.[23] Positive contributions of white allies were made by Roger Bastide and Hamilton Nogueira. Ironides Rodrigues, Sebastião Rodrigues Alves, Arinda Serafim, Aguinaldo Camargo, and Ruth de Souza were among the outstanding African-Brazilian participants.

Edison Carneiro was a mistake among us. I had always maintained a friendship with him, paralleled by strong divergence of views on Afro-Brazilian affairs. In Edison's mind, black people's problems were reduced to a mere aspect of class struggle (Carneiro, 1964). To me, this was insufficient. The racial contradiction in Brazilian society looms as the first obstacle, the immediate reality in the daily life of African-Brazilian people. White supremacism keeps them out of the very mainstream society where class contradictions exist.

TEN's Newspaper Quilombo

In 1949 and 1950, we published a newspaper called *Quilombo: Black Life, Problems and Aspirations.*[24] It produced about ten issues. Suppos-

edly it was a monthly, but with neither money nor advertisements, living on loans, it didn't have the means to establish a regular life. Guerreiro Ramos was one person who got into trouble financially supporting the paper. But *Quilombo* had its purpose. We published essays like those by Guerreiro Ramos on sociodrama and psychodrama, Sartre's famous piece entitled *Black Orpheus*, poetry by Carlos Drummond de Andrade, a speech given by Katherine Dunham about the state of disinherited peoples' religious worship, and many other types of articles. There even appeared a chapter of my unpublished novel, *Zé Capetinha*, the final version of which was never finished. We printed little announcements of birthdays, weddings, and anniversaries. We also published biographical sketches of people like Solano Trindade, Edison Carneiro, Guerreiro Ramos, and others.

Quilombo maintained a high level of quality illustrations (photos and drawings), which gave it a fine graphic presentation. It was created with love and care and printed in the offices of the daily *Jornal do Brasil*. We managed to balance readings for intellectuals with material for the general public.

Basically, the goal of *Quilombo*, as its title implies, was to take up the African freedom struggle begun in Brazilian territory by the heroes of Palmares and waged by Chico-Rei, Luiz Gama, José do Patrocínio, Karucango, Luíza Mahin, the martyrs of the *Malê* insurrections and the Tailor's revolt, and so many others in the African history of resistance in Brazil.

Political Endeavors

It had always been painful for me to observe the absence of Africans in my country's politics. This had been particularly so when I read Joaquim Nabuco's statement that Africans alone had built the nation. The image I retained from childhood memories was of my uncle Laureano do Valle working in all the elections as a votehunter for the Republicans or the Democrats (those were the parties at the time), and my father voting by *cabresto*,[25] obeying the local political chiefs' determinations. When Franca sent a Federal Representative

to Rio de Janeiro, then the nation's capital, it elected Antonio Pereira Lima, the racist founder of São Paulo's Civil Guard, which barred Africans.

I tried to change black people's political image. I ran for office several times, for the Federal District City Council, for State and Federal Representative. I ran on different party tickets but always lost. One time it was because the Social Labor Party wanted an "ideological voucher," an official appraisal of one's politics taken from police files. It was an arbitrary demand. I went to court and got a "security mandate," a guarantee of constitutional rights, and argued the unconstitutionality of their position. But the court dragged its feet, didn't rule on my petition, and the deadline for candidates' registration went by. So I couldn't run on that ticket.

Another time, we (Rodrigues Alves was my main accomplice) created a Black Affairs Department in the Brazilian Labor Party (PTB) of Guanabara State.[26] This development made a lot of waves, and African Brazilians nominated me to be their candidate on the PTB's slate for Representative. That was an indication of the Black Affairs Department's activity. Everything seemed to be going well. Then all of a sudden something snagged. I don't really know where. Perhaps it was in the Party's regional steering committee. All I know is they cut me out of the ticket. Why? They cited my Integralist past. As if in that sack of cats that was the PTB there had ever been any ideological coherence.

Another time, I tried the more conservative Social Democratic Party (PSD). As far as I was concerned, all these parties were the same in their essential fraud against black people. At the last minute, this one torpedoed me, too. I was running for the City Council. Unexpectedly, Marshall Mendes de Morais, President of Guanabara's PSD, moved me to the slate for Federal Representative, replacing me with his driver, a black man called White Rose. I hardly had a chance at winning a seat on the Council. How could I compete for a federal post? It was all a hoax to bleed out black votes. I didn't contest that election either.

I also had some relations with the Brazilian Socialist Party, and my last attempt before exile was again in the PTB, where I had

tenuous ties with Leonel Brizola. In 1962, I ran for the State Assembly and campaigned extensively in the *favelas* in the South and North zones of Rio de Janeiro. I had the support and permanent collaboration of an extraordinary African-Brazilian woman, Marietta Campos, who later would marry the French-Guyanese poet Léon Damas, one of the founders of the Negritude poetic movement, along with Aimé Césaire and Leopold Senghor. My slogan in that campaign was based on the Brazilian phrase *to vote white*, meaning a blank ballot: "Don't vote white, vote Black: Abdias Nascimento." This time I came close to a thousand votes.

Returning from exile in 1981, I worked closely with Leonel Brizola in the consolidation of the Democratic Labor Party (PDT), legitimate successor of the predictatorship Brazilian Labor Party (PTB). As the PDT's national Vice-President, I ran for the National Congress in the 1982 elections, taking office in 1983 as the first African-Brazilian Representative in Brazilian history dedicating his political activity to Afro-Brazilian concerns. In 1990, the PDT nominated me to the Senatorial race, and I was elected Deputy to Senator Darcy Ribeiro. Governor Brizola, on taking office in 1991, created a State Secretariat for the Defense and Promotion of Black Peoples, appointing me as Secretary.[27]

Aesthetics, Christ, and the Black Arts Museum

Before 1950, the TEN had been organizing beauty contests among African-Brazilian women. We were sensitive to these matters, questions of aesthetics. Vaudeville-style theater had always included black and mulatto women as hipwigglers, but when it came time to talk about "Brazilian aesthetics," the judges always displayed Hellenistic tastes. They imported their concepts of beauty from Europe: pure cultural alienation. There were also leftist critics who confused the beauty contests for an opportunity to exploit black women sexually. These people could never understand that the point of these contests was to put a final end to the Brazilian tradition, which had prevailed since colonial times, of looking at African and mulatto women as mere objects of erotic pleasure.

Another controversial project was the visual arts contest we held in 1955 on the theme of the Black Christ. Guerreiro Ramos invented this idea, and I took it up with enthusiasm. A discussion of cultural symbols in their most profound dimension, the religious one, seemed opportune and valid to me. One more attempt at integration, this project was sponsored by such respectable figures as the Cardinal of Rio de Janeiro, Bishop Jaime Câmara, and my friend Bishop Helder Câmara. The Catholic Church has always been very sly with this strategy of incorporating elements of other people's cultures into its own domain.

More than a hundred artists, African and non-African, showed their works. We set up an exhibit at the Ministry of Education building, and the event really messed with Christ's image in Brazil. In a closer approximation to historical truth than his traditional depiction as a blue-eyed Aryan, Jesus began to be portrayed with the dignified appearance of African color and features. Djanira won the contest, with her painting *Christ on the Whipping Post*, portraying Christ as an enslaved African.

One result of this event was the idea of founding a Black Arts Museum, which would come to fruition only later, in May 1968. Its opening was heralded by a course in African art that we held in the auditorium of the National Fine Arts Museum in Rio de Janeiro. This was a very gratifying experience. The auditorium had a capacity of two hundred people and was continually overcrowded with interested students. Several speakers made presentations, among them R. Teixeira Leite, Flexa Ribeiro, Raimundo Souza Dantas, Grande Otelo, Edison Carneiro, Nelson Pereira dos Santos, Adonias Filho, Florestan Fernandes, Alceu Amoroso Lima or Tristão de Athayde, and Thiers Martins Moreira. While it was very well-attended, perhaps it was a bit too eclectic. But I was always on the alert, putting my two cents in where it was needed, to maintain the course's character and identity.

Right after that, with my collaboration, the daily *Morning Mail* put out a series of interviews about the importance of the Black Arts Museum. Its first exhibition of collected works opened on 13 May 1968, at Rio de Janeiro's Image and Sound Museum. The exhibition

space was conceded by the Museum's director, Ricardo Cravo Alvim.

Self-Criticism

The Black Arts Museum suffered from a certain ambiguity. It was for, by, and about Africans, but it also had works by non-Africans. The very nature of a museum is static. It is known and visited by the middle class and upwards, appreciated by the "initiates," the "cultured ones." If it were really to fulfill its purpose, our museum would have to be mobile, climb the hills to the *favelas*, visit the rural areas. The artwork needed to be discussed, widely known, enriched with different experiences. The idea was to recognize and respect African art with the African-Brazilian people in mind. We didn't have the financial or material means for this type of aesthetic and cultural revolution.

Nevertheless, I do have reasons for self-criticism. The integrationist perspective, which (for better or worse) had been my orientation since the thirties, essentially implied a certain distance from our people. The Black Experimental Theater, for instance, did put on a few shows in the *subúrbios*,[28] and once in a house of *macumba*, the Afro-Brazilian religion widely practiced in Rio de Janeiro. Those were the most enjoyable moments, with that immediate, spontaneous response. The audience understood everything, participated as an integral part of the show. But they were exceptions. Usually, we played to the traditional theater audience, meaning the white upper classes. It was a mistake to insist on addressing the intellectual milieu. There was the error of wanting to "civilize" oneself, the futile hope of being "understood" by the society's elites. "Integration" meant African culture's effort to be recognized by "Brazilian" society, as if Brazilian society were other than African. Yet the white ruling classes control the means of recognition and prestige. So we circulated in surroundings that were not exactly our own, using the language and the contacts of people who not only exploit Africans economically, but ignore and despise our culture.

The Excluded Ones

Our movement's ambiguous situation in those days, which put us somewhere between the people's aspirations and those of the elite, was most evident on festive occasions. During Carnaval, sometime during the Dutra presidency,[29] Ruth de Souza, Claudiano Filho, and I had invitations to the dance at the Hotel Gloria. It was a fancy, aristocratic ball, but we had invitations, so why not go and have some fun? There we were at the door, invitation in hand, a special invitation at that, and they wouldn't let us in. They said it was because of the banner we were carrying. "So we'll leave the banner outside!"

Our night out turned into a problem. The hotel people kept saying they didn't want us in there, and we kept fighting and arguing. It was absurd! Time went by, and we were still outside the door, making noise. White friends arrived, spoke to us, and left us behind. Everyone could party except us, with our badge of color. One went by and then another: Paschoal Carlos Magno; Michel Simon, that French writer who was very friendly with us; the head of the National Theater Service. Everyone walked in and left us behind.

The next day, I denounced the incident in an open letter to the Chief of Police, which was published in the *Daily News*. Dr. Santana, an African-Brazilian physician from São Paulo, wrote a letter to President Eurico Dutra. In the end, the police officer in service at the Gloria, Agnaldo Amado (who wasn't all that white himself), was deemed the responsible party and was transferred to another precinct. They explained that the punishment was not severe because "he was just following orders."

In another episode, Irene Diggs, an African-American anthropologist from the United States, was barred at the Hotel Serrador in downtown Rio de Janeiro. She was on a cultural mission for the Department of State and had a suite reserved by the American Embassy. But when the hotel employees saw that Negro woman arriving at the desk, they said they had no room. She called a press conference, gave interviews, and the press raised hell. Typically the

hotel denied that it had discriminated against Diggs on racial grounds. So journalist R. Magalhães Jr. challenged the hotel to host an African-Brazilian couple for a weekend. I was asked to be the guinea pig, and I said, "I'm not prejudiced. One repentant discriminator is worth a hundred racists in jail."

So, one fine day, there I went with my wife Maria de Lourdes Valle, to check out luxury life at the Serrador. I'm not sure if they thought Negroes were pompous and ostentatious or what, but they received us with the utmost ceremonial courtesy. It was a game with marked cards. I checked in early. At lunchtime, I came down to the Night and Day, which at the time was the most fashionable place for high finance executives and the political cream of Rio de Janeiro. I sat down at a table and along came the maitre d'hôtel, by the name of Freixinhas, as I recall.

Freixinhas: "You can't sit here."

Me: "Why not?"

Freixinhas: "This restaurant is exclusively reserved for the hotel guests."

Me: "Yes? Then it's reserved for me."

Freixinhas: "You are a guest at this hotel? What is your room number?"

Me: "716."

Freixinhas: "Where's the key?"

Me: "Right here."

Freixinhas made a face of utter horror and disappeared down the corridors to try to get to the bottom of this anomaly. He came back transformed, acting like a lady. I could hardly breathe without the waiters running in my direction asking what I wanted. So I thought, "I've got to invent another game, because this one's over." I invited all my friends, African and non-African, to a reception in the hotel's salon. This turned out to be uproar personified. Africans who had never set foot in a hotel started climbing up and down the stairs, using the social elevators, talking loudly. It was scandalous! The management got scared and prohibited my guests from travelling to other parts of the hotel. They could only frequent the salon. This created problems, because among my guests were white politicians

and journalists. I have pictures of this scene: City Councilman Tito Lívio; composer Ari Barroso; Carlos Lacerda, who would later be governor of Guanabara state; the artist Santa Rosa, maestro Abigail Moura; actor and attorney Aguinaldo Camargo. Everyone was drinking and laughing. There were speeches, applause, a veritable antiracist rally. The hotel owners didn't know what to do. They must have thought, "This goes to show, we really can't have Negroes in here!"

The Media, the Left, and Africans

The news media are always ready to publish stupid, meaningless stuff about Africans, but they cut out anything serious. Newspapers, magazines, radio, and television may put out a piece of news here or there, but discriminatory and prejudiced attitudes always prevail. At one point, a paper called *The Sun* was founded in Rio de Janeiro, and they asked me to write a column. By the third article they had vetoed me. I was exposing racism in Itamaraty, the Foreign Ministry. It turned out that one of the paper's owners worked in the diplomatic service. The sun was not about to rise for me. Another time, African journalist João Conceição began to publish a column in the *Evening Daily*, also a Rio de Janeiro newspaper. He didn't get through two weeks in the paper; they fired him and cancelled his column as soon as he tried to deal seriously with African concerns.

A similar incident happened at Tupi TV. When I put on *The Emperor Jones* for the Rio de Janeiro television audience, there were so many phone calls protesting against it that the station decided to suspend broadcast of the other plays that had been programmed for the Black Experimental Theater cast. Another time, in a television series, African actor Jorge Coutinho was playing the part of a servant who falls in love with the master's white daughter. They were to be married. There was another avalanche of protest letters and phone calls attacking the character and the station. They had to kill the character rather than consummate this marriage, which was so outrageous to Brazilian racial democracy.

In contrast, explicitly or subtly anti-African material is published

off-handedly. Sometimes it's not so subtle. This item appeared in Zózimo's social column in the daily *Jornal do Brasil*, 6 April 1975:

> Monday was decorator Júlio Sena's turn to receive for a black tie dinner, in the annual festival of honor celebrating Dona Maria Cecília Fontes' birthday.
>
> The Largo da Mãe do Bispo [a colonial square in Rio de Janeiro] was decorated with eighteenth century motifs and served by Negro waiters, sometimes playing the role of slaves. The litter in which the boldest guests were carried into the inner rooms had been dug up by the host and used abundantly for entertaining the select few who were present.

Leftist cultural and intellectual circles were not much different. During the struggles of the early sixties,[30] for instance, I worked with the Centers for Popular Culture (CPC) and in the film *Five Times Slum*. African Brazilians were always treated as outsiders. At best, we were the left's "folklore." At worst, we were "divisionists" potentially responsible for the pulverization of working class unity. Basically, the left identified with European ideology, and its "vanguards" belonged to the country's so-called elite. Bossa Nova, for example, used Afro-Brazilian themes as part of its vanguard posture. But when the poet Vinicius de Moraes, leader and symbol of the Bossa Nova cultural trend, decided to write a play developing those themes, he remained faithful to his European aesthetic ideals. Resorting to Greek mythology, his symbol of prestige, Vinicius couched his Afro-Brazilian cultural motifs in the language and contexts of Greco-Roman tradition, creating a *Black Orpheus*.

Blackfaced white actors, Black Christ, Black Orpheus: in the last analysis, they all conspire in the historical rape of my people. African religious culture is rich and alive in our religious communities all over Brazil. We have no need to invoke Greece or the Bible in order to raise it to the status of mythology. On the other hand, Greece and Europe owe to Africa a great deal of what they call "Western Civilization."

For all these reasons, I changed my position. Today, I am

convinced that courting white people to get recognition is wasted time, aside from being the wrong perspective. We must deal with our own needs, without waiting for white people. We can address them afterwards, but first we must define and assert ourselves as Africans. Otherwise we end up being manipulated. This was the case with the Communist Party, among others. They think that to make a statement of African tradition and lifestyle is divisionist. But they're always there, trying to influence our movement and divert it to their ideological line. If they think the Afro-Brazilian question is nonsense, why put their noses in our affairs? The only reason is to try to manipulate us.[31]

Based on my personal experiences and those of my people, it seemed inevitable that Afro-Brazilian mass movements would abandon the integrationist position for one of autonomy and independence. This began to happen in the 1970s, with a new proliferation of Afro-Brazilian organizations. In Rio de Janeiro, we can cite as only three of many examples the Institute for Research on Black Culture (IPCN), student groups linked to the Center for Afro-Asian Studies (CEAA), and the Brasil-Africa Studies Center (CEBA) of São Gonçalo. In São Paulo, many similar groups appeared.

In 1978 in São Paulo's capital city, a young African-Brazilian worker named Robson Silveira da Luz was tortured to death by the São Paulo police, and at the same time the Tietê Rowing Club in that city barred four African-Brazilian athletes from membership. On 7 July 1978, Afro-Brazilian groups held a large protest rally, something very exceptional in that repressive context, on the steps of São Paulo's Municipal Theater.

Back in Brazil for the first time since my exile in 1968, I was among the two thousand people who came out for the demonstration, to denounce the police brutality that has always harassed African-Brazilian communities. In an intensely emotional moment, we read in unison an open letter denouncing racism and committing ourselves to resuming the fight for African people's freedom and physical and spiritual integrity.

In the aftermath of this incident, we founded the United Black

Movement Against Racism and Racial Discrimination (MNU). At the time, it seemed to have considerable potential as a national movement. I was elected to represent the organization outside Brazil and helped to consolidate it inside the country in 1978 and 1979, travelling to different cities and states for that purpose. Rather than preaching integration, the MNU asserted the African-Brazilian majority's right to take part in the country's destiny without renouncing our African cultural and national identity. In the course of the 1970s and 1980s, countless other Afro-Brazilian organizations were created with much the same general position.

For a number of reasons, including some of its militants' identification with ideological tendencies of European origin, and their consequent attempt to use the organization to serve the interests of certain political parties, the MNU did not grow significantly, and today it exists actively in only a few cities.[32]

The new generation of black organizations continued a practice traditional to Afro-Brazilian movements: the participation of women in its ranks and leadership, and discussion of their specific concerns. Among the most outstanding early examples of this participation were Professors Beatriz Nascimento, Lélia Gonzalez, and Helena Theodoro, who continued in the tradition of Arinda Serafim, Marina Gonçalves, and Guiomar Ferreira de Mattos of the Black Experimental Theater, Luiza Mahin of the *Malê* insurrections in nineteenth century Bahia, and Aqualtune of Palmares.

Dictatorship, Persecution and Exile

Things became very difficult after the United States-sponsored military coup of 1964, but as I see it the worst change was in 1968, when the regime became more hardline. Until then, people were able to do some things, at least in the cultural arena. I founded the Black Arts Museum in May 1968.

A group of African Brazilians also organized a round table discussion, sponsored by the journal *Brazilian Notebooks*, on the topic "80 Years of Abolition." The São Paulo magazine *Reality* put out an issue on racism, but under hidden pressures the result was very poor.

The most serious articles, by Florestan Fernandes and Fernando Góes, were cut by the Censorship Bureau. We had better luck with the journal *Brazilian Civilization*, which put out a special issue on theater, including an article I contributed on black theater (Nascimento, 1968).

Along with my Afro-Brazilian militancy, I had also been active in the Superior Institute for Brazilian Studies, ISEB, a progressive think tank founded during the Kubitschek and Goulart administrations. After the military coup, ISEB was extinguished and its members persecuted. As a result of both activities, I was named in several Military Police Investigations (IPMs). In 1968, invited on a grant from the Fairfield Foundation on African Affairs, I went to visit New York for two months. My visit coincided with the hardline turn in the military regime, and I realized that going back to Brazil was no longer an intelligent option.

Exile in the United States

As I said before, I was always an exile in my own country. If I have a homeland, it is Africa. Brazilian society tried to refuse me my African roots, to cut them off, pull them up by force. I had to put out roots from the top down, by conscious effort, sending them out in the air like some plants do. Coming to the United States did not create my exile. Indeed, here I was able to express myself much more effectively, continuing the work I had been doing in other contexts.

One big difference is that here in the United States, the merit of my work was recognized. This is something I cannot deny. I was fifty-four when I left Brazil, yet I had always been an outsider there. For example, the only time I was invited to speak at a Brazilian university was on 13 May 1968, at the 11 August Academic Center, at the University of São Paulo Law School. The Law School's director refused to allow the event to be held in the main hall, forcing us into clandestinity from the start. So I spoke on the patio, threatened by the arrival of professors who would put a stop to this nonsense and get rid of this band of Negroes. My topic was "Negri-

tude." On the basis of this incident, a group of African students created an organization at the Law School, which probably didn't last long.

When I arrived in the States at the end of 1968, I had just begun to do artwork in my little Copacabana apartment. A Columbia University department bought one of my paintings for a thousand dollars. This was a real pleasure. Not so much for the money itself, but for the recognition.

Real recognition came from New York City's African-American community. My first exhibit was held at a small gallery in Harlem. Amiri Baraka, whom I had met with at Spirit House in Newark (accompanied by African-American social scientist Angela Gilliam), agreed to write a preface for the catalogue. He went to see my work at the house of the Bagley family, who had generously offered me a place to stay in Manhattan. The preface never came through, but the support and solidarity of my African brothers and sisters in the United States was always there. The writer John O. Killens was the first to buy a canvas of mine, the face of a *filha de santo*[13] with rivers of ceremonial blood.

When my second exhibit was being held at the Crypt Gallery in Columbia University, there was a demonstration by African-American students, with widespread damage to university property, including the gallery. To my surprise, when I went in the next day, amidst the chaos and rubble of what had once been the gallery's furniture and other objects, my paintings were still in place, intact! The only difference was that, on some of the artworks which expressed my people's oppressive living conditions, the students had put up signs saying "Justice!" It was as if the exhibit was part of the protest demonstration.

During this time, my relationship with the African community in the United States grew and broadened. I made several visits to the New Lafayette Theater and had meetings with dramatist Ed Bullins and with the poet Marvin X. At the New Lafayette I saw some plays that were unforgettable, partly due to the dynamic nature of the sets and the audience. They were unconventional sets that gave the impression of natural disorder, but actually they obeyed a criterion

of arrangement and use of space that made for extraordinarily flexible and beautiful staging.

Barbara Ann Teer spoke to me passionately and intelligently of her project of building a National Black Theater. An energetic woman with revolutionary impulse, she left a very deep impression in my spirit. But of all the visits and meetings I had, one stands out from the others: the visit I made to the Black Panthers' headquarters in Oakland, California. Since Chairman Huey P. Newton was in prison, a meeting was set up with Panther leader Bobby Seale. When I got there, in the company of an aging white woman, a writer, I was afraid there would be tension. But Bobby Seale was very gracious. When he found out about my political exile, he manifested solidarity and offered his help and support. Working Pan-African solidarity strengthened my confidence in the future of the Africans who were rising up all over this part of the world. When I visited Harvard University, this same sentiment led me to join the vigil around the presidential building, which had been taken over by African students protesting against the university's investments in South Africa. But the Black Panthers' military apparatus demonstrated a dignity and consciousness that would be impressive even to the least impressionable of individuals.

Soon after this, the Yale School of Drama invited me to be Visiting Lecturer. This illustrates what I was saying about recognition of my work. No school of theater in Brazil had ever taken notice of me, almost certainly never would, and if one did, it would avoid me like the plague. At Yale, I encountered a lone African-American student, Pamela Jones.

In 1970, through Professor Karl Scheibe, the Center for the Humanities at Wesleyan University, Middletown, Connecticut, invited me for a year as Visiting Fellow. Next came the State University of New York at Buffalo, which offered me a position as Associate Professor at the Puerto Rican Studies and Research Center, created and directed by a magnetic and dynamic personality called Francisco Pabón. In two years I was promoted to Full Professor with tenure, teaching African Culture in the New World and African experience in South and Central America.

I was invited constantly to speak, exhibit, participate in panels, seminars, and conferences. Thus, I have spoken to the audiences of the Studio Museum in Harlem; Yale, Harvard, Howard, Princeton, and Tulane Universities; U.C.L.A. and the Inner City Cultural Center of Los Angeles; the Center for Positive Thought, the Black Dance Workshop, the Museum of African and African-American Arts and Antiquities, and the Langston Hughes Center in Buffalo; the All-African People's Revolutionary Party Conferences in Washington, D.C. on African Liberation Day; and many other events and places, always denouncing Brazilian racism against more than seventy million Africans who are oppressed in my country, unable to speak and express their values effectively.

Of course, I have suffered discrimination in the United States. I went to the Human Rights Commission in New York City with a case against a woman who wouldn't rent me an apartment because of my color. Of course, white United States Americans participate in the oppression of Africans and other peoples the world over. But here in the United States, the protest movement reached a level that has forced the ruling classes to respect or fear the African community. Also, the political regime sustaining democratic rights and freedom provides cracks in the system, opportunities to work constructively for the African cause. These opportunities were won at the cost of much blood and many African lives. In Brazil, however, African blood has been spilled for centuries with virtually no result. This is the difference.

By way of illustration, it is useful to point out that Africans have been in Brazil since 1500 or very shortly thereafter, while in the United States they arrived quite a bit later. Slavery in Brazil was abolished in 1888, almost three decades after abolition in the United States. Africans constituted two thirds or more of the population in colonial Brazil, and their descendants are still a majority today. Yet, despite the violent oppression suffered by Africans in the United States, here they fought and won, at great cost, victories as yet unattained by Africans in Brazil.

On the level of power and decision-making in the country's national institutions, the African-American community in the United

States is far more advanced. One example I witnessed personally is that of the Congressional Black Caucus, which twice invited me to speak on the situation of Africans in my country. The first opportunity was in 1980, at the invitation of Representative Walter Fauntroy of Washington D.C. and the National Alliance of Postal and Federal Employees. I was honored to be introduced to the audience by former Attorney General Ramsey Clark, whose generous recognition of my work in the cause of justice for African Brazilians was particularly gratifying. In the first report ever heard on the subject by those dozens of Black Caucus members, I summed up briefly the historical and contemporary situation of Africans in Brazil, a people who are daily humiliated, destitute, and oppressed.

The second time I addressed the Caucus was in 1983. At that time I represented Rio de Janeiro State and the Democratic Labor Party (PDT) as the first African member of the Brazilian National Congress dedicating his political work to the Afro-Brazilian cause. At the initiative of Representative Mervin Dymally, through the competent offices of the late Professor Archie Singham, I went to Washington in September 1985 to participate in the Black Caucus Legislative Weekend conference on "International Dimensions: the Reality of an Interdependent World."

The United States Congress boasts an organization like the Black Caucus, made up of African-American legislators who represent a minority population of about fifteen percent. In Brazil, by contrast, Africans are a majority with virtually no Congressional representation at all. This fact, in itself, is a poignant statement of the nature of Brazilian race relations.

The crowning gratification of my experience in the United States is the joy that came to me in the person of my wife, companion, and collaborator Elisa Larkin Nascimento.

Art and the Orishas

A sensational thing happened to me in the United States. Blocked by the English language, I found that I had inside me a different form of communication. I could paint, and in artwork I would be