

THEATRE, NÉGRITUDE AND THE PERFORMATIVE UNMASKING OF BRAZIL'S "BLACKFACE MODERNISM"

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Abstract: This article examines the project and production history of the Teatro Experimental do Negro (TEN), founded by Abdias do Nascimento in 1944, in the light of the conspicuous lack of theatrical innovation and an almost complete absence of direct participation and intervention of Afro-Brazilian artists in the Brazilian modernist movement. My central argument is twofold. On the one hand, I propose that the representation or performance of Black identity and subjectivity that defines the bulk of the TEN's productions, and has often been criticized for its elitism and essentialism, was both the product of and a strategic response to a modality of aggressively disavowed racism prevalent in Brazil. Thus, among the specific targets of the TEN's interrogation of the representation of Blackness in Brazilian theatre and drama were the multiple and often unacknowledged effects of *branqueamento* on cultural and artistic representations of Blackness as well as the aesthetic claim to embody Afro-Brazilian subjectivity and sensibilities by white authors. The second part of my thesis explores the particular ways in which the contradictions arising from the TEN's working definition of Afro-Brazilian identity risked hampering the efficacy of the company's struggles against racial discrimination.

Keywords: Modernismo, Modernism, Theatre, Drama, Afro-Brazilian, Négritude, "blackface," *branqueamento*, Blackness, Race, Racism, identity, subjectivity, representation

Ironically, for a movement that erupted with such notoriously raucous performances inside a theatre, Brazilian Modernismo registered only a negligible impact on the country's theatre scene. During the movement's first tumultuous decade at least, Brazilian drama remained largely impervious to the sweeping modernist project that encompassed literature, music, visual arts, architecture, and landscape design, whose grandiose goal, as David Jackson indicates in a recent book, was "to transform the historical transatlantic dynamic into international recognition of a Brazilian aesthetic in the arts" (7). Whether we select Oswald de Andrade's *O rei da vela* (1937) as the "founding text of a new Brazilian dramaturgy"¹ (Magaldi "O país" 7) (putting aside the fact that it would be staged for the first time only in 1967) or choose instead the 1943 production of Nelson Rodrigues's *Vestido de noiva* by the pioneering troupe *Os Comediantes* as the opening salvo of a "veritable revolution" in Brazilian theatre, the fact remains that roughly two decades elapsed after the boisterous Week of Modern Art before contemporary Brazilian drama finally received "the jolt of modernity" ("o pontapé da modernidade") (Costa 141). A comparable incongruity arises from the remarkable dearth of Black and Amerindian artists in an artistic movement that labored so consistently to recover and incorporate Afro-Brazilian and indigenous cultural elements into its aesthetic (and arguably political) project. Despite the proliferation throughout the 1920s of often ephemeral regional offshoots of Modernismo outside of Brazil's two major urban centers, no Brazilian counterpart to the Harlem Renaissance or Afro-Caribbean Négritude ever emerges. Notwithstanding its "near absence" from dominant accounts of Brazil's artistic and cultural history (Domingues 113), the Teatro Experimental do Negro (TEN), founded by Abdias do Nascimento in 1944, merits closer critical scrutiny precisely because it undertakes to remedy both of these lacunae.

Six decades after the TEN's founding, Nascimento still insisted that the company had opened untrodden paths for the future of Afro-Brazilians, that it embarked on "an adventure in creative experimentation" and issued a "provocative" challenge to Brazil's prevailing and aggressively disavowed racism ("Teatro" 223). In such a context, he suggests, the group's very name was imbued with "revolutionary ferment" ("Teatro" 210). The reviews of the troupe's project published between the late 1940s and the early 1960s, when the company effectively ceased its theatrical activity, echo this positive appraisal. In 1948, for instance, the playwright Antônio Accioly Netto asserts that "the [TEN] works primarily for the renovation of Brazilian theatre" (60). A year later, the prominent Afro-Brazilian sociologist Guerreiro Ramos deems the company's project "one of the most audacious enterprises in [the country's] cultural life" ("O Negro no Brasil" 85), while Florestan

Fernandes, writing in the early sixties, maintains that the TEN led Brazilian theatre “in new directions and propos[ed] new links between life and art” (170). In a more recent overview of the troupe’s legacy, however, Petrônio Domingues classifies assessments like these as both “exaggerated and unfounded,” asserting that the TEN was neither a “precursor” of Black theatre in Brazil nor did it “revolutionize the country’s dramaturgy” (124).

One of the principal causes Domingues and several other recent critics have adduce, either implicitly or explicitly, for the purportedly muted repercussion of the TEN’s theatrical activity is the company’s alleged inability to overcome the dilemmas incumbering its conception of Afro-Brazilian identity. In other words, what reduces the scope of the group’s contribution both to Afro-Brazilian theatre and national dramaturgy writ large is arguably the construct of an essentialist Black subjectivity underpinning the group’s commitment to the “language and perspective of *négritude*” (as well as the latter’s attendant “valorization of a specifically Black culture and personality as a way of combatting racism” [Nascimento “Teatro” 218]). As Alexandra Isfahani-Hammond puts it, “Nascimento’s identity discourse is undermined by praise for a problematic genre of black representation” (10). According to Brazilian sociologist Ricardo Gaspar Müller, one of the central problems of this formulation of Afro-Brazilian identity stems from the asymmetry underlying the TEN’s project of cultural and racial reclamation (50). Even as Müller cautions against a “methodologically” spurious, “retrospective clairvoyance,” he suggests that because a “pioneering” Black elite entrusted to itself the task of performing and enabling this restoration from above, it ended up inevitably reproducing the very hierarchical structure that subtends the dominant notions of racial hybridity (or disavowed racism) that the company seeks ultimately to undo (50). Similarly, Domingues highlights the contradictoriness inherent (a) in the troupe’s promotion of Afro-Brazilian dramaturgy while staging plays authored primarily by white authors, and (b) in denouncing racial stereotypes while disseminating exotic and exoticizing representations of “Black culture” in its own productions (124). Maria Angélica da Motta Mauês identifies an ancillary antinomy intrinsic to Nascimento’s adoption of the notion of *Négritude*, namely, the “difficult and contradictory coexistence” of negative and positive racial traits in his construction of Black subjectivity (96). For instance, the derisive characterization of the Black apperception of the world as solely grounded on affect and intuition rather than reason and intellect acquires a positive inflection in the view that Blacks “think with their souls, [and with] their hearts ... by means of analogic images fashioned intuitively,” espoused by one of the so-called “apostles” of *Négritude* (Senghor 55). A similar transvaluation of racist stereotypes defines

Nascimento's call for the creation of "a theatre [grounded in] the mystical impulse of the Blacks," as well as in his definition of the TEN's "working methodology" as a "reclamation of African spontaneity" ("Espírito" 80; "A energia" 110).

In the end, these recent analyses seek to disclose the ambivalent and derivative nature of essentialist theories of Black identity and subjectivity. Indeed, more than thirty years ago Stuart Hall proposed in a seminal essay that Blackness "is essentially a politically and socially *constructed* category, which cannot be grounded in a set of fixed transcultural or transcendental racial categories" (225). As Anthony Appiah has memorably quipped, "few things ... are less native than nativism" (60). In a passage that is especially pertinent to Négritude, Appiah specifies: "the very invention of Africa (as something more than a geographical entity) must be understood, ultimately, as an outgrowth of European racialism; the notion of Pan-Africanism was founded on the notion of the African, which was, in turn, founded not on any genuine cultural commonality, but ... on the very European concept of the Negro" (62). To emphasize the contradictory or socially constructed nature of Nascimento's formulation of Black identity, then, appears to me less productive for a full-fledged understanding of the TEN's role and significance in Brazil's artistic and cultural history than a sustained inquiry into the context in which this essentialist construct was mobilized as an oppositional strategy. In what follows, I argue that Brazil's particular form of disavowed racism produced the conditions of possibility of the TEN's essentialist articulation of Afro-Brazilian identity. If the TEN in effect marks a milestone in an abiding process of questioning how Blacks are represented in Brazilian theatre (Julianna Souza 72), then I believe it is critical to identify, on the one hand, the unique modalities of racism that the TEN undertook to refute and, on the other, the particular targets of the oppositional tactics it deemed expedient to deploy at the time. In addressing these two central questions, I move concurrently to propose an explanation of how and why the contradictions informing the TEN's operative construct of Blackness ran the risk of becoming a disabling aporia in the group's anti-racist struggle.

Modernism and the *Teatro Experimental do Negro*

Upon his release from the now defunct Carandiru penitentiary, where he had founded the Teatro do Sentenciado (Convict Theatre) while serving a sentence for the crime of political "resistance," Nascimento sought to enlist Mário de Andrade's help in developing a Black Theatre in São Paulo. To Nascimento's disappointment, however, the "celebrated mulatto intellectual" either "politely rebuffed" him ("Teatro" 211) or disdainfully declined

(“ele não deu bola ... me tratou com desdém”) (“A energia” 108). “Disappointed” in the wake of subsequent and equally unsuccessful attempts to garner support for his venture, Nascimento left São Paulo for Rio in 1944, where he went on to establish the TEN later in the same year (“A energia” 108). The company’s inaugural theatrical experience was a collaboration in a production of Stella Leonardos’ *Palmares*,² a dramatic eulogy to Castro Alves in rhymed alexandrines staged by Paschoal Carlos Magno’s Teatro de Estudantes in December 1944. To be sure, the TEN was not Brazil’s first Black theatre company. Although it seems that Nascimento never acknowledged its existence (Domingues 123), the short-lived Companhia Negra de Revistas established in 1926 (it survived less than a year after its founding) preceded the TEN by nearly two decades. Heavily influenced by what James Clifford has described as “the negrophilia that [swept] avant-garde music, literature and art” in post-World War I Paris (901), and that, in due course, washed over Brazil as well, the Companhia Negra was Brazil’s first all-black theatre troupe.³ It may indeed have signaled the beginning of Black theatre in Brazil (Domingues 115). Unlike the TEN, however, and despite its efforts to hone a “new style” derived from Afro-Brazilian dance and music, the racially themed musical comedies the company staged fit largely within the bounds of a well-established and chiefly “commercial” comedic genre, the popular revue or *revista* (Domingues 115, 118).

By contrast, as evidenced by the qualifier “experimental” and Nascimento’s initial attempt to secure Mário de Andrade’s support for his project, from its inception, the TEN associated itself with the somewhat belated efforts of several *carioca* theatre practitioners (notably, Nelson Rodrigues and the storied theatre troupe *Os Comediantes* [1938-1947]) to align the Rio de Janeiro drama scene with the culturally transformative movement sparked by the Week of Modern Art. As Brazilian playwright Henrique Pongetti commented in late 1944, responding to the emergence of this new “Black theatre company”: between the Companhia Negra de Revistas’ “little rudimentary musicals [*revistazinhas primárias*] bereft of everything, even of decorative human material” and the TEN’s production of *Emperor Jones* lay not just “a bridge but an electric fence [...] There is [now] in Rio a Black intellectual elite capable of transposing to the stage the spirit of a play by O’Neill or Langston Hughes” (13). In effect, Nascimento strove sedulously to affiliate his project with contemporaneous Black Diasporic modernisms (“Prólogo” 19), which, as I indicate above, no spin-off of Brazilian Modernismo had yet attempted.

Thus, the troupe rehearsed (though it never brought to the stage) Langston Hughes’ *Mulatto*, which depicts the tragedy that predictably ensues when the biracial son of

a white plantation owner defies the disastrous racial hierarchies of the Jim Crow south. Another cogent measure of its modernist aspirations was its inaugural 1945 production of Eugene O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones*, an Expressionist play by an acclaimed playwright renowned for his innovative dramaturgy. The group would go on to stage three more plays by the Nobel Prize-winning American dramatist: *All God's Chillun Got Wings* (*Todos os filhos de Deus têm asas*), and two one-act plays, *The Dreamy Kid* (*O moleque sonhador*) and *Where the Cross is Made* (*Onde está marcada a cruz*). Along similar lines, in 1947, the company collaborated in an adaptation of Jorge Amado's *Terras do sem-fim*, the final production of *Os Comediantes*, the company widely credited with inaugurating theatrical modernity in Brazil. Indeed, one of the TEN's founding members, Tomás Santa Rosa (1909-1956), who created the costumes and sets for several of the TEN's productions and became perhaps one of Brazil's leading set designers, had earlier co-founded *Os Comediantes*. Relatedly, Zbigniew Ziembinski, generally regarded as the foremost Brazilian set designer (despite his Polish ascendance), who famously constructed the sets for Nelson Rodrigues' *Vestido de noiva* and worked closely with Santa Rosa and *Os Comediantes* throughout the 1940s, handled the lighting for the TEN's 1946 production of *Emperor Jones* ("Teatro Experimental" 167). Willy Keller, like Ziembinski, an expatriate theatre director who remained closely linked with Rio's modern theatre scene, directed the TEN's 1946 production of O'Neill's *Dreamy Kid* as well as the troupe's rehearsals of Henrique Pongetti's *Histórias de Carlitos*, a dramatic adaptation of selected vignettes featuring Charlie Chaplin's world-famous character The Tramp (e.g., Carlitos). In 1957, the prominent stage director Léo Jusi directed what was apparently the TEN's last production, Abdias do Nascimento's own, twice-banned play, *Sortilégio*. Finally, one of the TEN's last theatrical activities was its participation in the staging of Nelson Rodrigues' *Perdoa-me por me traíres* (1957).

As Nascimento's abiding interest in O'Neill's dramaturgy cogently demonstrates, the TEN's commitment to theatrical modernism and innovation also informed the scripts the group elected to perform. Aside from O'Neill and Hughes, the troupe rehearsed García Lorca's comic play *Amor de Don Perlimplín con Belisa en su jardín* and, in the late 1940s, performed a dress rehearsal of the first act of Camus' *Calígula* with the author in attendance. Camus, who was on a conference tour throughout the Southern Cone countries (Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay and Chile), reportedly "found the result very nice"²⁴ (Costa 142). Among the Brazilian "dramas for Blacks"²⁵ that were often expressly composed for the TEN, and which it eventually either fully rehearsed or produced, figure Nelson Rodrigues' *Anjo negro* (1948), Lúcio Cardoso's *Filho pródigo* (first staged in 1947) and *Auto da*

noiva (1946), which the company rehearsed but never staged, by the Afro-Brazilian writer Rosário Fusco, one of the founders of the modernist Grupo Verde and author of one of the rare examples of surrealist narrative fiction in Brazil: *O agressor* (1943). In the early 1950s, a youthful Augusto Boal, while still studying dramaturgy with John Gassner at Columbia University, composed at least three plays for the TÊN. *O logro*, subtitled “a ritual” and based on the myth of the Orisha Shango (Nascimento, quoted in Salazar 216) was staged in São Paulo in 1953. The troupe rehearsed Boal’s *Martim Pescador*, which portrays the quotidian challenges of a group of Bahian fisherman (Razuk 34-5), in São Paulo under Boal’s direction and with Grande Otelo in the starring role. The play was scheduled to premiere in 1956, but was never staged. Boal’s *O Cavalo e o Santo*, whose plot, as its title indicates, centers on Afro-Brazilian religious practices, was produced in São Paulo by an amateur troupe in 1954. Finally, Nascimento reportedly planned (but was ultimately unable) to stage Boal’s *Laio se matou*, an adaptation and transposition of Sophocles’ *Oedipus* into an Afro-Brazilian cultural context. In sum, and as Nascimento concedes, the TÊN’s productions generally targeted “intellectual,” predominantly “white and elite” audiences (“Abdias” 43).

In his retrospective appraisal of the TÊN’s project, Nascimento views the company’s eagerness to garner recognition from mainly White intellectual circles as both unwarranted and counter-productive—indeed, as “wasted time” (“Abdias” 45). He judges the troupe’s attempt to join the country’s theatrical vanguard (e.g., ‘civilize’ and ‘integrate’) a “mistake,” a desire for validation beset by “ambiguity,” by a disabling contradiction that led inevitably the company’s “estrangement [*afastamento*] from the people” (“Abdias” 43). This is precisely one of the key contradictions that Domingues highlights in his critical survey of the company. By directing its artistically “prestigious” productions almost exclusively at elite white audiences and opting not to promote the creation of a popular theatre, Domingues claims, the TÊN forestalled any possibility of connecting with “the Black public” (124). Nevertheless, what Nascimento and Domingues identify here is not as much a contradiction as a corollary to the TÊN’s founding vision. Unlike Solano Trindade, for instance, who collaborated with the TÊN in its early years, and who, along with his wife Margarida and the ethnologist Edison Carneiro, went on to found the Teatro Popular Brasileiro in 1950, Nascimento’s initial goal was essentially at odds with the development of a popular theatre.

Granted, “popular” is an imprecise and polysemic term, but it was in a broad sense *against* popular theatre, that is, against performance forms that characteristically draw mass audiences that Nascimento consistently defined the TÊN’s objective in its early period: “We needed to pick an author like O’Neill . . . to silence [those who] didn’t believe that Blacks

could do theatre; what was [then] expected of Blacks was Grande Otelo's monkeying around [*macacadas*] and the twerking moves [*rebolados*] of [the actress] Pérola Negra" ("A energia" 110). Guerreiro Ramos contended that a decade or so after the TEN's founding it had become "impossible to tolerate" a continued attribution of "naïve and popular" cultural expressions exclusively to Afro-Brazilians. Instead, they should vie to demonstrate that the value and merit of "négritude aesthetics" warrant the company's identification with the highest and most sophisticated level of artistic achievement ("Semana" 142). In fact, as Nascimento recounted on several occasions, the idea of creating a "Black theatre" in Brazil first occurred to him in 1941, after he watched a white actor in blackface interpret the role of Brutus Jones, the protagonist of O'Neill's *Emperor Jones*, in Lima ("Teatro" 209). As in the United States, the norm in Latin America and Brazil at the time was for white actors in blackface to interpret all prominent Black roles, notably Shakespeare's Othello ("Teatro" 209). Nascimento maintains that the project for a Black Theatre grew out of the "indignity" he felt at the exclusion of Afro-Brazilians both as actors and citizens from the "Brazilian stage" ("A energia" 107), an ignominy compounded by the scarcity of dramatic works capable of conveying "the profound and complex dramatic truth" of the Black experience in Brazil ("Teatro" 212). Nascimento selected *The Emperor Jones* as the TEN's inaugural production in 1945 precisely because of the singular opportunity it afforded an Afro-Brazilian actor (Aguinaldo Camargo de Oliveira) to interpret a leading part on the Brazilian stage. The kind of theatre Nascimento had in mind was thus clearly "art theatre," privileged and mainly European in provenance, whose producers and publics (in Brazil and elsewhere) have always been minorities, at times rather small minorities, and whose aesthetic demands predictably restrict their popularity with the majority of Brazilians. In short, the theatre tradition with which Nascimento associates the TEN from the outset is precisely the counterpoint of what Pongetti describes as the Companhia Negra's *revistazinhas primárias* ("little rudimentary musicals") (13).

Reclaiming the Autonomy to Define Afro-Brazilian Identity

Perhaps no other instance conveys the troupe's *contrapuntal*^b engagement with Brazilian modernism than the incident that allegedly led Nascimento to commit to establishing a Black theatre company. Although he concedes that he lacked the training and expertise to judge the performative skill of the Argentinian actor (Hugo d'Evieri) playing Brutus Jones in the Lima Municipal Theatre in 1941, Nascimento recalls that he sensed that something essential was lacking: a "specific passionate force required by the text," which only

a Black actor could infuse into the character (“Teatro” 209). In a broad sense, the full measure of the “burlesque emperor’s” tragic fate exceeded the bounds of “white culture’s rationalist logics” and could find its complete expression only in the African subject’s “magical conception of the world,” in his “ageless nuptials with the pristine forces of nature” (Nascimento “Teatro” 212). In an interview published in the TEN’s journal *Quilombo*, Nelson Rodrigues asserted that the conspicuous absence of Black actors from the Brazilian stage was entirely attributable to white “contempt,” elucidating that, “when a play requires a cast member of color, the following solution is adopted: a white [actor] is daubed white. A white painted [black], that’s the Black in [Brazilian] theatre”⁷ (quoted in Nascimento “Trecho” 5). One of the defining features of the TEN’s project thus became the reclamation of the agency of Black cultural representation. “Before the TEN the Black man was always treated as an object, as raw material ... We sought to ... transform the Black man into the protagonist of his own history” (“A energia” 115). Nascimento adds that such a task was particularly urgent in the late 1940s and early 1950s and as such, earned the approbation of Guerreiro Ramos (115). In effect, for Ramos, Négritude’s “poetic revolution” (of which the TEN is undoubtedly a crucial part) preludes the “total rebellion of peoples of color to convert themselves into [“authentic”] subjects of their own destiny” (“O negro desde dentro” 134).

While, in the main, “protagonism,” “representation,” and “authenticity” pertain to theatrical or performative contexts, an implicit target of the sustained and wide-ranging project of cultural revindication and restoration the TEN undertook was the strain of “blackface modernism” still prevalent in the late 1940s, the phenomenon that Alexandra Isfahani-Hammond has aptly designated *white negritude*: “the white-authored representation of black experience” (5). As Isfahani-Hammond indicates (48-9), a prominent instantiation of this appropriation and containment of “black articulation” is Gilberto Freyre’s paradoxical assertion in his 1947 preface to the white poet Jorge de Lima’s collection *Poemas negros* that Lima’s “Afro-Northeastern poetry [is] truly the embodied expression of a Brazil mellowed by African influence” (16). In a striking literary variant of the performative “blackface” that Rodrigues denounces, the renowned Brazilian sociologist argues that the fact that Lima excels at articulating the African traits of Brazil’s national “character” confirms that it isn’t Black “blood” that endows poets with the sensitivity required to seamlessly identify with Afro-Brazilian traits but the “power of empathy” and “cultural transfusion” (16). By positing an essentialist Black subjectivity Nascimento necessarily abrogates the “faculty” that Freyre ascribes to a white poet of embodying this identity authentically “from the outside.” “One thing is what the White man expresses as the feelings and dramas of the Black man; another

thing is the latter's hitherto concealed heart, that is, the Black man seen from the inside. The experience of being a Black man in a White man's world is untransferable"⁸ (Nascimento "Teatro" 214). Whatever its ambivalences, one of the principal objectives of the TEN's uncompromising embrace of Négritude is thus to wrest the prerogative to represent Afro-Brazilian subjectivity from a predominantly white intellectual and cultural elite.

Equally significant to this recovery of the agency to define Afro-Brazilian identity is the transvaluation of positive and negative attributes that Mauês problematizes. Hence, Guerreiro Ramos proposes that the Black subject's "psychic potential" (*potencial anímico*) constitutes a "revitalizing force within the West," where music, painting and poetry have become so sophisticated as to approach engineering⁹ ("O Negro no Brasil" 88). In the closing lines of "New York," Senghor advocates for a similar coalescence of rationalism and spontaneous vitality, famously bidding the North American metropolis to "let black blood flow into your blood/ That it may rub the rust from your steel joints, like an oil of life/ That it may give to your bridges the bend of buttocks and the suppleness of creepers" (in Moore 247). This evocation of the vitality and exuberance of black culture as a salutary foil to an overly technologized and rationalized West echoes in turn modernist primitivism's reversal of the stereotypes of savagery and inferiority long ascribed to African art and culture into positive attributes of aesthetic "liberation and spontaneity" (Clifford 901). Like Freyre, both Senghor and Guerreiro Ramos posit the integration or assimilation of the African into European culture as an established fact. However, whereas Freyre ascribes almost exclusively to white poets the dominant "authorial" role of expressing (indeed embodying) what he considers a greatly dissolved and hybridized Afro-Brazilian character, Guerreiro Ramos assigns to Blacks the agential role in the restoration of primordial value to an "exhausted" white culture ("O negro no Brasil" 89). As the Afro-Brazilian sociologist soberly concludes, "this is the hour of the man of color" ("Esta é a hora do homem de côr") (87). In the final instance, of course, the peculiar mode of protagonism that results from this rigid, racialized dichotomy between reason and extemporaneity inevitably reinstates (or leaves intact) the subordination of the Black subject to an enduringly ascendant "white culture." As the late Cameroonian philosopher Marcien Towa wryly remarked about Senghorian Négritude, while the European goes on conducting the grand symphony of civilization, the African is relegated to the rhythm section (113).

In Brazil, however, where "the perverse ideology of 'racial democracy'" held sway (Nascimento "Teatro" 219), where plausible articulations of racial and cultural hybridity predicated on the *seminal* role of white masters consigned Blackness ["negrura"] (female

Blackness especially) to subalternity, this reversal assumed “great sociological and political importance” (Ramos “O negro desde dentro” 131, 133). By calling into question both Freyre’s reductive “theses” (Nascimento “A energia” 115) and those elaborated by like-minded ‘professional friends’ of the Blacks, the TEN strove to produce the conditions of possibility for the autonomous assumption of an “authentic” Black subjectivity (Ramos “O negro desde dentro” 134-5). This is basically the effort that Nascimento defines as “the TEN’s struggle to enable the Black man to perform [*representar*] his own heroism” (“A energia” 115). In this context, what Nascimento describes as Darcy Ribeiro’s insistence that “peninsular culture” maintained a “hegemonic” clasp over “all the African and indigenous peoples of Latin America” becomes antinomic to “the aims of the Black struggle” (“A energia” 116). What is more, to submit unquestioningly to the cultural logic of this “total des-Africanization” (Ribeiro 220) epitomizes the Afro-Brazilians’ quintessential *hamartia*, their fatal tragic flaw.

Hence, to accept contemporaneous objections to the TEN’s efforts to create a Black theatre company because Brazil had allegedly resolved what W. E. B. Du Bois famously called the world problem of the 20th century: “the problem of the color line” (5) was inevitably to restore the Black subject to the “subaltern place” that the TEN was urging him to abandon once and for all (Nascimento “Uma experiência” 125). It was also to doom him to repeat the fatal error of acceding uncritically to the ruling idea that Brazilians “are building a nationality and affirming the race of tomorrow [...] without prejudice, without stigmas, intermingled and fused in the crucible of every blood” (“Teatro de negros” 11). In effect, a cursory survey of the dramas the TEN produced in its decade or so of sustained theatrical activity suggests that the *hamartia* afflicting most of their protagonists resides precisely in this deeply ambivalent predisposition to perceive themselves and their “cultural heritage” through the lens of “the white man’s cultural patterns” (Ramos “O negro no Brasil” 87). As I argue in the next section, to frame the tragedy of racial discrimination in Brazil (a country “much more racist than the United States” [Nascimento “A energia” 107]) in this particular fashion entails its own blind spots and contradictions. Nevertheless, these dilemmatic impasses relate only tangentially to the fact that most of these plays “were written by white authors” (Domingues 124).

The Emperor Jones: “typically negroid, yet...”

As Nascimento recalls, the immediate and chief obstacle to the TEN’s effort to stage the essential “dramatic truth” of the life and personality of Afro-Brazilians was the

dearth of Brazilian plays in which Blacks were not reduced to comic foils, elements of local color, or “decorative” cut-out characters (“Teatro” 212). In the face of this flagrant omission in the national dramatic repertoire, O’Neill’s expressionistic play about a former Pullman porter and escaped convict turned brutal dictator of “an island in the West Indies as yet not self-determined by White Marines” (O’Neill *The Emperor*) emerged as the “natural” choice for the company¹⁰ (Nascimento “Teatro” 212). According to Nascimento, what rendered *The Emperor Jones* especially compelling was the coincidence between the themes the text foregrounded and the TEN’s artistic and political project. For instance, the play’s protagonist epitomizes “the Black man’s experience in the white world”: “Brutus Jones’ drama [...] is the existential dilemma, anguish and pain of people of African origin in the racist society of the Americas” (“Teatro” 212, 209). More specifically, Jones’ conduct embodies the fatal error that this racial tragedy arguably elicited. Liberated from slavery only to be flung into “society’s lowest rungs,” he wanders adrift in “a world that is not his,” internalizes capitalism’s “pernicious values,” and allows himself to be seduced by a “mirage of power” (“Teatro” 212). As I suggest below, the Irish American playwright’s fraught construction of racial identity raises vexing questions which remained unacknowledged both in the TEN’s productions of the play and Nascimento’s subsequent considerations of its supposed import.

While Nascimento lauded O’Neill’s 1920 drama for its extraordinary “artistic caliber” (quoted in “O Teatro” 180), the play has been more fittingly described as “a paradoxical achievement” (Eilefson 98). On the one hand, by pushing the boundaries of mainstream American theater, and placing an African American actor in a leading role for the first time, *The Emperor* signals a crucial “advance” in the development of ‘art theatre’ in the U.S. (Le Bastard 5). By the same token, O’Neill strove consciously to undercut “the imperialist and repressive attitudes towards blackness” prevalent in U.S. culture (Monks 544). On the other hand, however, the play ultimately endorses “stereotypes of blackness by confining black identity to the authentic and primitive ‘black body’” (Monks 544). Thus, as Brutus Jones flees from the imperial palace into the forest, in the wake of an uprising by the very “bush” Blacks whose ignorance and credulity he has manipulated in order to tyrannize them, he retraces the familiar “descent” (from civilization into primitivism) underpinning Marlow’s journey into the “heart of darkness” in Conrad’s eponymous novel.¹¹

As Aoife Monks remarks in her shrewd analysis of the play, Jones’ colonizing methods are closely implicated with his performative whiteness (547). Indeed, Jones reveals to the “cockney trader” Smithers that it is by learning to mimic the “white quality talk” he overheard aboard Pullman cars that he “winds up Emperor in two years” (O’Neill *The*

Emperor Scene 1). In this instance, Monks suggests, the play comes close to undoing the fixity of racial hierarchies (547), to questioning the received notion that racial identity is “an indelible mark or code somehow written into the bodies of its carriers” (Gilroy 103–4). Yet at the same time, Jones’ flight into the wilderness is recast not only as a retreat into his personal past (his murders of a fellow Pullman porter and of a prison guard leading to his escape from a chain gang) but, as I mention above, as a Conradian journey back in time (a slave auction, a slave ship and, in the penultimate scene, a remote animist past in “primeval” Congo) (Monks 547). As he plunges further into these psychic and temporal depths, Jones is gradually stripped of the trappings of his mimicked “white power.” The imposing uniform he dons in the first scene has, by scene six, been reduced to “no better than a breech cloth” (O’Neill *The Emperor* scene 6). As Monks aptly notes, Jones’ descent “becomes an act of unmasking, removing his signs of whiteness and unveiling his black body beneath the masquerade of civilization” (547). Jones’ descent renders race “a stable, inescapable, corporeal fact” (Monks 548), an indelible mark irrevocably stamped on Jones’ unclothed body. In the last instance, then, O’Neill’s characterization of the Black Emperor ratifies the very rigid racial hierarchies that the playwright initially endeavors to call into question.

This ambivalence is readily discernible in O’Neill’s character description of Jones in the stage directions: “His features are typically negroid, *yet* there is something decidedly distinctive about his face” (*The Emperor* scene 1; italics mine). As the distinguished American actor James Earl Jones queries regarding O’Neill’s use of the conjunction in the 1970 Caedmon Productions audio recording, how would employing the conjunction *and* alter our perception of Jones’ character? Although he ultimately defended O’Neill’s depiction of his protagonist as appropriate for his intended audience, the award-winning actor adduces incisively: it is “as if ordinarily there is not dignity in the negroid face ... as if there is something keen and *unnegroid* about him” (quoted in Steen 346). O’Neill’s own attitude toward race is similarly ambiguous—as attested to by his notorious disputes with Charles Gilpin, the first actor cast in the play’s title role, over the use of the n-word as well as several of Brutus Jones’ specific lines—a struggle which, as Monks argues, was essentially “over the power to represent colour on the stage” (549), that is, precisely the struggle at the center of the TEN’s project.¹² The reaction of Black audiences, artists and intellectuals to the play was, likewise, complex and contradictory. Despite the “progress” that the inaugural attribution of a leading role to a Black actor ostensibly represented, the play’s “insistence upon atavism and primitivism” raises undeniable concerns (Wikander 225). Relatedly, some contemporaneous intellectuals and journalists understood the play as “a direct satire” of Marcus Garvey and his

'back to Africa' movement (Wikander 225), viewing its ruthless protagonist as "inspired" by the controversial activist. Indeed, Garvey himself rejected the play's alleged implication that "he was a political opportunist [intent solely on] his own financial gain" (Siomopoulos 57). By contrast, W. E. B. Du Bois offered a qualified defense of the dramatist's prerogative to represent Black Americans realistically (with "human foibles and shortcomings," rather than exemplarily, as "perfect and proper and beautiful and joyful") (quoted in Monks 549). Nonetheless, as Langston Hughes recalls, the play's reception by Harlem audiences inured to more ribald, vaudevillian fare (perhaps not entirely dissimilar to the spectacles that the short-lived *Companhia Negra de Revistas* offered in the 1920s) was considerably less sparing: "who wanted *The Emperor Jones* running through the jungles? Not Harlem!" (*The Big* 258-9).

In light of the play's reception history among Black Americans, Nascimento's endorsement of Brutus Jones' authenticity is decidedly ironic. In the context of this synoptic discussion, it might suffice to underscore the coincidence between Nascimento's account of the African's "paralogical" cosmivision and O'Neill's primitivist conception of Black subjectivity. As I suggest above, in his dramatization of the precipitous collapse of Brutus Jones' civilized veneer before the irresistible onslaught of 'the pristine forces of nature', O'Neill reproduces a characteristically modernist (or Conradian) figuration of the primitive. It is this construction of the primitive that Nascimento tacitly validates¹³. The extent to which Nascimento's definition of Black authenticity is predicated on O'Neill's primitivism recalls Achille Mbembe's crucial point concerning the invented or mimetic character of constructions of African tradition and Black identity: "the Black man [...] exists only because of a colonial library that intervenes in and interferes with everything—including the discourse that seeks to refute that library—to the extent that, in terms of identity, tradition and authenticity, it is impossible, or at least very difficult to distinguish the original from the copy, from its simulacrum" (94). Given the prevalent and generally disavowed racism that Nascimento denounces, compounded by the absence of dramatically compelling Black characters in the Brazilian theatrical repertoire, it is perhaps not altogether surprising that he would seize upon what Mbembe might call the pre-constituted authenticity of a protagonist whom contemporaneous Harlem audiences dismissed as "a blackface caricature" and "an outrageous vision of blackness"¹⁴ (Steen 345).

As we have seen, for Nascimento, the "existential dilemma" into which Brutus Jones descends by uncritically assimilating the values and preconceptions of dominant white culture and self-destructively severing himself from his own cultural matrix and racial identity mirrors black Brazilians' submission to the prevalent ideology of "whiteness" ("Prólogo"

19). This of course is the fundamental tragic flaw the TEN sets out to “unmask” (Nascimento “Prólogo” 19), the fatal error that repeatedly dooms the protagonists of most of the plays the company elected to produce. It is the persistent recourse to this predicament as the determinant criterion for the selection of the dramas to be produced that seems ultimately to have induced Nascimento to overlook what in retrospect loom large as these plays’ flagrant contradictions to the group’s project. The three productions I briefly turn to in what follows exemplify this ambivalence. The TEN’s decision to pick O’Neill’s third and final play featuring black protagonists, *All God’s Chillun Got Wings* (1924), as its second production in 1947 was thus motivated by more than its artistic quality (Nascimento quoted in “O Teatro” 180) or the success of the group’s three previous productions of *The Emperor Jones* (Nascimento “A energia” 110). According to Nascimento, both *The Emperor* and *Chillun* effectively conveyed the Black man’s passions, hatreds, the movements of his soul and the inner workings of his singular drama (quoted in “O Teatro” 180). Despite their foreign accent (or “tônica alienígena”), the two plays accorded with the political and esthetic aims of the company to a degree that no existing national playscript ever could, since, as of the late 1940s, there were supposedly still no Brazilian plays “adequate to [the TEN’s] objectives” (quoted in “O Teatro” 180).

In the end, Nascimento’s praise for the theatrical qualities O’Neill’s plays aligns him more closely with white U.S. critics than with African Americans, who “criticized O’Neill for his perpetuation of stereotypes” and were particularly “outraged” by *Chillun* (Holton 30, 39). For instance, the African American literary critic William Stanley Brathwaite argued in 1925 that O’Neill’s “preoccupation, almost obsession” with the 1890s “formula” of “atavistic race-heredity” significantly marred the aesthetic attributes of both *Chillun* and *Emperor Jones*, suggesting that the authentic portrayal of “the real tragedy of Negro life is a task still left for Negro writers to perform”¹⁵ (42). As Deborah Wood Holton concludes, O’Neill’s efforts to lend dramatic shape to black life—not only in what has been rightly called one of the most controversial productions in American theatre history¹⁶ (Ullom 81) but in the black-themed plays he crafted between 1918 and 1923—were “both blind stereotypic reflections of then prevailing superior attitudes towards black people in general, and also subtle, complex investigations that revealed a possibility for deeper cultural understanding” (Holton 29). While Nascimento was certainly alive to O’Neill’s sustained attempts to plumb the depths of black America’s “peculiar drama,” he remained surprisingly unmindful of O’Neill’s “blind” reproduction of prevailing racial hierarchies and constructions of black primitivism in both plays. Presumably, for Nascimento, one of the more resonant elements of *Chillun*’s plot was

the sense of impossibility adumbrated in the lines of the black spiritual from which the play's title derives.¹⁷ As the late African American playwright Thomas Pawley points out, these verses “suggest that only in heaven would the [interracial] couple achieve happiness,” thus echoing *Chillum's* central proposition that in a racially polarized social context “marriage between a white woman and a black man [was] doomed to failure” (81, 69). What seems likewise destined irrevocably to fall short of its aim is the protagonist Jim Harris' desire to gain his white wife Ella's love and respect by proving to her that he can be “the whitest of the white” (O'Neill *Chillum* 62). While the extent of Jim Harris' abasement as he vies to become “white” in Ella's eyes neatly reaffirms Nascimento's thesis concerning the “perversion of white culture in the minds of blacks” (Nascimento “A energia” 111), the magnitude of his “neurotic” love for a selfish and psychologically damaged white woman “strains credulity” (Pawley 77). Because it lies “beyond the pale of reality,” the central premise of the plot is thus also the play's principal “weakness” (Bower). It is nevertheless precisely this unremarked plot flaw that structures many of the so-called “dramas for [and by] blacks” that the group staged in the decade that follows its inaugural productions of O'Neill's two black-themed plays.

“Um racismo que chega a incomodar”

The first Brazilian play the TEN staged was *O filho pródigo* [The Prodigal Son], which Lúcio Cardoso (1912-1968) wrote expressly for the company. Rightly recognized as one of the first Brazilian writers to publicly assume his homosexuality and known for his close and long-lasting friendship with Clarice Lispector, Cardoso belonged to a generation of Brazilian writers whose “Catholic romanticism,” or “spiritualist” and “intimist” literary production, set him apart both from the 1922 avant-garde project and the politically engaged neo-realism of the 1930s (Vianna 164). Little wonder, then, that the overarching allegorical mood of *O filho pródigo* should diverge with, even gainsay the TEN's socio-political commitment. As its title (and stage directions) suggest, the play's setting is vaguely Biblical, or parabolic. A black farming family (the patriarch, his three sons, a daughter and the wife of his eldest son) dwell at the crossroads of a pilgrimage route in an indeterminate time and place. In the main, their existence conforms with the seasonal cycles of rural life. Far removed from the bustle and traffic of urban life, both Assur, “the prodigal son,” and Afla, his sister-in-law, begin to yearn for the wealth and luster of a world they can only glimpse inchoately through their sporadic interactions with the traveling pilgrims.

What renders both the situation and the characters implausible and the dialogue “artificial,” as Nascimento observed more than four decades after the play was first produced in 1947 (“A energia” 111), is the coding of this longing as an incongruous desire for racial whiteness. As Alía confesses to a pilgrim elder:

Whenever I would run my hand across [my husband’s] face, I would say to myself: coarse skin, rougher than the soil forsaken by rain ... And despair took root in my heart, and I would dream of white and sensitive men [...] I hate those around me, I hate God for making me like this, scorched by this accursed sun! (Cardoso *Filho* 41, 57)

(Quando passava a mão pelo seu rosto, dizia comigo mesma: pele bruta, mais dura do que a terra desdenhada pela chuva ... E no meu coração nasceu o desespero, e eu sonhava com homens brancos e delicados [...] detesto os que me cercam, detesto a Deus que me fez queimada por este sol de maldição!).

The fragile psychological foundation of this yearning for whiteness (which virtually every family member eventually reproduces as though by osmosis), by individuals who had supposedly subsisted in ignorance of any other “race” except their own, did not go unremarked in coetaneous reviews of the play. For example, writing in 1947, Rosário Fusco dismissed the play’s structuring premise as utterly “false,” adducing tenably that, given its isolation, the family could just as credibly have imagined “green, yellow, or red” human beings (49). Reviewing the second (1953) production of *O filho* in São Paulo, the influential theatre critic Décio de Almeida Prado is even more trenchant. To regard one’s skin color as a curse in the absence of any social interaction with other racial groups, Prado argues, is to assume that a “natural” racial hierarchy exists and to reflexively accept as valid social norms from “strange and unknown lands” (119). As Miriam Mendes argued thirty years later, “the concept of whitening [*branqueamento*] is far too perceivable in the play” (143).

One could of course interpret Assur’s final return home as a reclamation of his cultural “origins,” a chastened and definitive repudiation of the destructive allure of the “white world” beckoning seductively¹⁸ beyond the immemorial confines of his ancestral rural enclosure. However, a less hasty reading might discern in Assur’s resigned submission to a life of unending, back-breaking toil a disturbing reflection of “the white project of the tamed black man” (Müller 34). The scathing appraisal of the “eminently corrosive,” sapping and “devitalizing” effect of the African cultural legacy on the “spirit of the nation” that Cardoso offers in his posthumously published diary (*Diário* 53) redoubles the irony of the play’s ending. Significantly, in his call to summon the “inhuman” strength necessary to recover the vital energy that Brazil lacks by rejecting “the shadow side” (“*o lado de sombra*”) of the national

character (*Diário* 53), Cardoso repeats the admonition articulated in a 1929 issue of *Leite Criólo* to “erase” the backward, “*cachaça*-drenched soul” (“alma encachaçada”) of Black Brazilians from the “national character” (Vivacqua 86).

Unsurprisingly, then, Mendes considers the company’s choice of *O filho* infelicitous, since the text not only fails to adequately represent “black theatrical experience,” but “has nothing to do with the concept of Négritude as conceived by Nascimento” (143, 149). In light of these acute rebukes of the representation of blackness in Cardoso’s play, it is difficult to accept at face value Nascimento’s contention that the “the circumstances of the moment” precluded a more critical grasp of *O filho* (“A energia” 111). Only the posthumous publication of Cardoso’s *Diário completo* (1970), Nascimento claims, enabled a full understanding and the subsequent recognition of Cardoso’s “bothersome racism”¹⁹ (“A energia” 111). Although Nascimento now expressed regret for having produced the play, he concurrently conceded that staging a play by an “intellectual” of Cardoso’s prestige and stature served the company’s conjunctural purposes (“A energia” 111). To be sure, two additional productions followed the play’s premiere, in 1953 (São Paulo) and 1955 (Rio). Whether or not the actors discussed the merits of the play at length,²⁰ Nascimento had only lofty praise for *O filho* in the interviews he gave at the time. Thus, while Fusco faults Cardoso’s script for its ubiquitous “commonplaces” and “deficient imagery” (50), Nascimento finds a “rare beauty” in its “poetic atmosphere” (quoted in “O Teatro” 180). And while Prado regards the play as trite and sorely lacking in dramatic authenticity (120), Nascimento describes it as “a beautiful poetic drama” (quoted in Salazar 216). A more plausible explanation for the reoccurrence of Nascimento’s “blind spot” regarding the play’s problematic representation of race is that Assur’s anagnorisis—to the extent that it stems from his recognition and subsequent renunciation of the illusory appeal and destructive potential of the “white world” and culminates in his return to his original “black” roots—reaffirms the TEN director’s conception of the fatal flaw of *branqueamento*.

Of the three original Brazilian plays the company brought to the stage in the ensuing decade, Nascimento’s *Sortilégio* (1951), which premiered in 1957 under Léo Jusi’s direction, seems to culminate the group’s decades-long “experimental” effort to produce a genuinely Afro-Brazilian dramaturgy. In a modern (or modernist) iteration of the canonical reshaping of pre-Hellenic myth into Attic tragedy,²¹ Nascimento’s “Black Mystery” (the play’s subtitle) pursues the dramaturgical path broached by Joaquim Ribeiro in *Aruanda* (1946) and José de Moraes Pinho in *Filhos de santo* (1949)—which the TEN staged in 1948 and 1949, respectively—by turning to Candomblé and Umbanda mythology as the source and meaning

of “black tragedy.” *Sortilégio* draws considerably from these two earlier plays in its dramatization of Candomblé lore and practices, while imbuing them with a more explicit militant element. At the plot level, however, aside from Shakespeare’s *Othello* and Nelson Rodrigues’ *Anjo negro* (1946), the play’s conspicuous intertexts are O’Neill’s two black-themed plays. Thus, like Brutus Jones, Emanuel, *Sortilégio*’s alienated protagonist, is haunted both by the ghosts of his personal past and the powerful, vengeful spirits not of an amorphous, atavistic primitivism but of the ancestral faith he apostatized, indeed willfully repressed in order to immerse himself unquestioningly in white society. As happens with O’Neill’s fallen emperor, Emanuel’s suit and tie—the emblematic attire of the professional class he has ascended to, and an accessory to what Augusto Boal calls the ill-fitting “white mask” disfiguring his true features (151)—have been discarded and replaced by a “loin cloth” (“tanga”) (*Sortilégio* 193). Like *Chillun*’s Jim Harris, in his “obsession [to] improve the race” (187, 175), Emanuel abases himself by marrying a disreputable white woman who feels entitled to spurn him and regard him as inferior by virtue of the color of her skin (189). In the end, the crime for which the “Voices” of the recrudescing “cult of [his] people [and] religion of [his] blood” (178) pronounce Emanuel “guilty” (182), the capital offense for which the Orixá messenger Exú ultimately puts Emanuel to death is not as much his murder of his wife Margarida, but his complicity in what Nascimento would later designate “the pure and simple genocide” of Brazil’s black population by dint of racial “whitening” (*O genocídio* 69).

Against the backdrop of this searing indictment of Brazil’s vaunted “racial democracy,” both Nascimento’s partiality for and his disconcerting inattentiveness to O’Neill’s and Cardoso’s ambivalent dramaturgical treatment of race and blackness acquire a different significance.

In essence, what the TEN director found most compelling about these plays was the extent to which they reaffirmed both his “essentialist” conception of Black identity as well as his uncompromising denunciation of Brazil’s insidious yet disavowed racism. As Nascimento’s unwitting reaffirmation of Lúcio Cardoso’s troubling repudiation of the “shadow side” of Brazil’s national character underscores, his anti-racism remains “wedded to the most basic mythologies and morphologies of racial difference” (Gilroy 50). Nevertheless, we should not lose sight of the key fact that these “identities and solidarities [were] forged at great cost from the categories [bequeathed] by their oppressors” (Gilroy 51). While no doubt assailable for its constructed and ultimately derivative element, the concept of Négritude Nascimento mobilized played a pivotal role in the company’s efforts to call into

question the reflexively reiterated commonplace that “racial differences do not exist” in Brazil (M[agno] 212). The operative notion of an essentialist black subject necessarily undercuts Freyre’s conception of Blackness as a kind of floating signifier, evident in his exultant, counter-factual assertion that, in contrast to the U.S., there is “no ‘African poetry’ in Brazil,” but rather a poetic zone “colored” by the influence of “an African already mostly dissolved into a Brazilian,” a zone with which Brazil’s “most aristocratic and rigorously white” regional poets are nonetheless intimately “bound” (15-16). To posit a genuine black subjectivity was inevitably to expose the inauthenticity of the performative, i.e., “blackface” poetics Freyre endorses. Nascimento’s militant repudiation of the ideology of *branqueamento* implicit in these canonical disavowals goes beyond the effort to demystify it to reveal its arguably destructive (or “genocidal”) underpinnings: the eradication of the black race through miscegenation. However “problematic” (Isfahani-Hammond 10) or contradictory (Mauês 96) Nascimento’s form of black representation may be, the fact that the Getúlio Vargas administration prohibited the production of *Sortilégio* twice in six years strongly suggests that, as an oppositional strategy, it may not have been entirely ineffectual.

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Endnotes

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all translations into English are my own.

² Since the bulk of the play centers on key episodes from the brief life of the "Poet of the Slaves," the 200 TEN actors (Nimtzovitch 219) who performed under Nascimento's "direction" in the third act (entitled "The Republic of Palmares") "reproduced a *quilombo*" (Nascimento "A energia" 109) that seems to have been loosely based on Castro Alves' poem "Saudação a Palmares."

³ For a fascinating and detailed study of the sustained and productive intercultural exchanges between Paris and Rio in the 1920s through the medium of popular review theatre, see: Lisa Shaw's "Afro-Brazilian popular culture in Paris in 1922."

⁴ In his recollection of the episode, Camus provides a more ambivalent assessment of the dress rehearsal: "Bizarre de voir ces Romains noirs. Et puis ce qui me paraissait un jeu cruel et vif est devenu un roucoulis lent et tendre, vaguement sensuel" ("It's bizarre seeing these Black Romans. Besides, what seemed to me a cruel and brisk game has become a slow and tender, vaguely sensual cooing" (*Journaux* 107-8). The other play the company rehearsed in Camus' presence was Joaquim Ribeiro's *Aruanda*, which the French writer appears not to have fully understood because he relates that the "deceived" husband kills his wife at the end of the play (108). Camus thus misses a fundamental element of the plot. The husband actually disfigures Rosa Mulata once he realizes that she has been "betraying" him with the spirit of Gangazuma (not "l'esprit de l'amour"), whom she lustfully summons to inhabit her husband's body. By killing her, the husband would of course have enabled her to join her otherworldly lover in the realm of Aruanda.

⁵ *Dramas para negros* was the title of the collection Nascimento edited and published in 1961.

⁶ My use of *contrapuntal* in this context is obviously informed by Said's well-known adaptation of the musical compositional technique of counterpoint to comparative literary analysis: "a contrapuntal perspective is required [...] to think through and interpret together experiences that are discrepant, each with its particular agenda and pace of development, its own internal

formations, its internal coherence and system of external relationships, all of them co-existing and interacting with others” (32).

⁷ Ironically, the leading role of Dr. Ismael was interpreted by an actor (Orlando Guy) in blackface in the 1948 production of Nelson Rodrigues’ *Anjo negro*.

⁸ This assertion echoes Guerreiro Ramos’: “the version of the Black man [rendered] by his ‘professional friends’ and those who even in good faith, see him from the outside is one thing. Another thing is the Black man [seen] from the inside” (“O negro desde dentro” 135).

⁹ Might Ramos be referring obliquely to *O engenheiro*, the 1945 poetry collection by João Cabral de Melo Neto, the so-called “engenheiro da palavra”?

¹⁰ In a December 6 1944 letter, O’Neill, already quite ill, generously granted TEN permission to stage the play in Rio de Janeiro: “You have my permission to produce *The Emperor Jones* without any payment to me, and I want to wish you all the success you hope for with your Teatro Experimental do Negro. I know very well the conditions you describe in the Brazilian theatre. We had exactly the same conditions in our theatre before *The Emperor Jones* was produced in New York in 1920 – parts of any consequence were always played by blacked-up white actors. (This, of course, did not apply to musical comedy or vaudeville, where a few negroes managed to achieve great success). After *The Emperor Jones*, played originally by Charles Gilpin and later by Paul Robeson, made a great success, the way was open for the negro to play serious drama in our theatre. What hampers most now is the lack of plays, but I think before long there will be negro dramatists of real merit to overcome this lack” (quoted in Nascimento “Teatro” 212-3). The play premiered on V-E Day (May 8, 1945) at the Teatro Municipal in Rio, as celebrations of the Allied victory in Europe erupted all over the city. According to Nascimento, it was a “terrible day,” (“A energia” 110). However, Ruth de Souza, who interpreted the role of the “Old Native Woman” in the play’s second staging (July 29, 1945), describes the performance as a resounding “success,” and recalls that it was surprisingly well-attended (124). The playwright A. Accioly Netto waxes poetic about the date’s felicitous historical symbolism: “it was truly a grandiose night. On the streets, the people happily celebrated the fall of racist Nazism ... and, inside the Municipal [Theatre] ... a group of Blacks on stage demonstrated unquestionably, through their own intelligence, that there are no superior races ... with the right to dominate and enslave others” (58). The company staged three additional productions of the play, the last one (1953) in São Paulo.

¹¹ Several critics have pointed out this evident connection.

¹² As Le Bastard notes, “O’Neill used white actors in blackface in an early play entitled *Thirst* (1916), in which he himself interpreted the role of the black sailor” (5).

¹³ Without access to Ricardo Werneck de Aguiar’s translation of the play, it is of course impossible to ascertain whether the TEN’s staging retained one the play’s caricatural elements (Steen 345): the use of a language or “patois” indelibly “colored by race” (Mendelssohn 20).

¹⁴ Recent productions of the play, notably the New York-based Wooster Group’s 1993 staging—reprised in 1998 and subsequently recorded on film in 2009—have attempted to grapple with, or “deconstruct” the play’s problematic representation of race and gender.

¹⁵ Interestingly, in his December 1944 letter to Nascimento (cited in endnote 10), O’Neill essentially agrees with Brathwaite. As he notes, “What hampers most now [black actors’ chances of playing “serious drama in our theatre”] is the lack of plays, but I think before long there will be negro dramatists of real merit to overcome this lack” (quoted in Nascimento “Teatro” 213).

¹⁶ The interracial relationship at the center of *Chillun*’s plot was already quite controversial. However, the “storm broke” when reports emerged that a white actress (Mary Blair) would kiss the hand of her Black stage husband (Paul Robeson). New York’s Chief Magistrate warned that any display of affection between a white female actress and a Black male actor would unleash ‘dangerous racial disorder’. O’Neill received several implicit as well as overt

threats, including a racist screed written on Ku Klux Klan stationary. The playwright famously scrawled ‘Go fuck yourself’ at the bottom of the threatening letter, and sent it back to the Klan grandee who had mailed it to him. Although the play finally opened on 15 May 1924 at New York’s Province Town Playhouse, the prologue (which called for a cast of interracial children aged 10 to 13), was read by the stage manager because the mayor refused to issue permits to the under-age actors. (Most of the information contained in this paragraph comes from Glenda Frank’s article [77-80; 86].)

¹⁷ “All o’ God’s chillun got-a wings/ When I get to heab’n I’m goin’ to put on my wings/ I’m goin’ to fly all ovah God’s Heab’n” (“All God’s Chillun Got Wings.” https://www.negrospirituais.com/songs/all_god_s_chillun_got_wings.htm)

¹⁸ In the play, this power of seduction is rather conventionally personified by a female pilgrim (as white as “the breaking dawn”) (Cardoso *O filho* 51) who bears an obvious resemblance to Lilith, the demonic figure of Judaic mythology (Müller 30), and lures Assur away from his ancestral home.

¹⁹ “Lúcio [revela] um racismo que chega a incomodar o leitor” (Vianna 155-6).

²⁰ There seems to be some discrepancy regarding how extensively the group discussed the plays it staged. While Nascimento stresses that they discussed the texts at length (“A energia” 111), the actor José Maria Monteiro, who played Assur in the play’s premiere in 1947, remarks that during the rehearsals of *O filho*, “there was not much discussion of the plays” (154).

²¹ Nascimento underscores this link in a 1949 interview with *Correio da manhã* when he compares the action in Pinho’s *Filhos-de-santo* with the role of fate in “classic tragedy” (quoted in “O Teatro” 181). In his “Director’s Notes” on *Sortilégio*, Augusto Boal makes the same connection: “in its multiple and varies aspects, pre-Hellenic Greek liturgy shows innumerable points of contact with black liturgy, which is likewise varied and multiple” (“Notas” *Test* 153). Finally, Sábato Malgadi suggests a link between Rosa Mulata’s possession by the spirit of Gangazuma and the action of Plautus’ classical play *Amphytrion*, in which Jupiter sleeps with Amphytrion’s wife Alcmena (the mother of Hercules) by appearing to her in the guise of her husband Amphytrion (“*Aruanda*” 214).