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ABDIAS NASCIMENTO: the trajectory of a Black intellectual engaged in the dissemination of emancipatory knowledge between the 1920s and 1940s

Abdias Nascimento: a trajetória de um intelectual negro
engajado na disseminação de saberes emancipatórios entre as décadas de 1920 e 1940

Abdias Nascimento: la trayectoria de un intelectual negro
comprometido en la diseminación de saberes emancipatorios entre las décadas de 1920 y 1940

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Abstract: This article aims to analyze the trajectory of Abdias Nascimento between the 1920s and 1940s, in order to understand his formation process as an intellectual engaged in the causes of Black populations. We consider in this analysis the formative projects organized by him aiming at the dissemination of emancipatory knowledge, with emphasis on the experience of the Teatro Experimental do Negro. Nascimento is interpreted as a Black intellectual who represented part of the history of Black people in the fight against racial discrimination in Brazil. In theoretical terms, we will operate with the concepts of experience space and expectations horizons of Koselleck (2006), as well as with the concept of intellectual, proposed by Vieira (2011). The sources of this research were books, articles and photographs published in the press.

Keywords: Abdias Nascimento; intellectuals; Black movement; Experimental Theatre of Black People.

Resumo: Este artigo tem como objetivo analisar a trajetória de Abdias Nascimento entre as décadas de 1920 e 1940, a fim de compreender o seu processo de formação como intelectual engajado nas causas das populações negras. Consideramos nesta análise os projetos formativos organizados por ele que visam à disseminação de saberes emancipatórios, com ênfase na experiência do 'Teatro Experimental do Negro'. Nascimento é interpretado como um intelectual negro que representou parte da história dos negros no combate à discriminação racial no Brasil. Em termos teóricos, operaremos com os conceitos de espaço de experiência e horizonte de expectativas de Koselleck (2006), bem como com o conceito de intelectual proposto por Vieira (2011). O corpus documental desta pesquisa foi composto de livros de memórias e de matérias e fotografias publicadas na imprensa.

Palavras-chave: Abdias Nascimento; intelectuais; movimento negro; Teatro Experimental do Negro.

Resumen: Este artículo tiene como objetivo analizar la trayectoria de Abdias Nascimento entre las décadas de 1920 y 1940, a fin de comprender su proceso de formación como intelectual involucrado en las causas de las poblaciones negras. Consideramos en ese análisis los proyectos formativos organizados por él visando la diseminación de saberes emancipatorios, con énfasis en la experiencia del Teatro Experimental del Negro. Nascimento es interpretado como un intelectual negro que representó parte de la historia de los negros en el combate a la discriminación racial en Brasil. En términos teóricos, operaremos con los conceptos de espacio de experiencia y horizontes de expectativas de Koselleck (2006), así como con el concepto de intelectual, propuesto por Vieira (2011). Las fuentes de esta investigación fueron libros, artículos y fotografías publicadas en la prensa.

Palabras clave: Abdias Nascimento; intelectuales; movimiento negro; Teatro Experimental del Negro.

INTRODUCTION

The main objective of this article is to analyze the trajectory of Abdias Nascimento (1914-2011) in order to understand the process of his formation as an intellectual engaged in the causes of Black people¹. We consider in this analysis the tortuous and conflictive path of this intellectual's formation and, especially, the formative projects organized and developed by him based on a broad social action that involved the press, the different civil society movements and entities and, above all, artistic expression. As far as art is concerned, he was involved, directly and indirectly, with several forms of artistic manifestation, however, the focus of this study will be on dramaturgy. This form of artistic expression represented, during Abdias Nascimento's formative period, his main movement of criticism against structural racism and, by extension, the proposition of a project of formation of Black consciousness. This materialized in the experiences of the '*Teatro do Sentenciado*' [The Convicts' Theater] and, mainly, in the '*Teatro Experimental do Negro*' [Black Experimental Theater], which will be analyzed in the final part and conclusions of this article.

It is our understanding that reflection on Abdias Nascimento's formation process and dramaturgical undertakings links together two fundamental historical dimensions: the space of experience and the horizon of expectation. According to reflections made by Koselleck (2006, p. 306)², "[...] all histories are made up of people's lived experiences and expectations [...]", so that past and future are in permanent tension, although they never coincide. Experience is a completed process, while expectation is a hope that moves social actors in the pursuit of their dreams and projects. In this way, reflecting on Abdias Nascimento's space of experience, we see the persistent discrimination promoted by the structural racism present in Brazilian society in the first half of the twentieth century, which permeated much of his formative process, considering his experiences at educational institutions (at all levels), in the Army, in his professional life and, above all, in his work as a political activist in the Black movement. In turn, his horizon of expectation reveals an intellectual engaged in the dissemination of emancipatory knowledge, who longed for the transformation of Brazilian society through the affirmation of values and practices such as freedom of expression, racial and social equality, human dignity and political democracy.

¹ Our understanding of intellectual trajectory is as it was formulated by Bourdieu, in the classic argument about biographical illusion. Biographies are illusory because they impose an arbitrary rationalization on what is lived, in order to produce a single being, coherent and moved, in an unwavering way, by a life purpose. For Bourdieu, trajectory should be understood as a "[...] series of positions successively occupied by the same agent (or the same group) in a space [...] subject to unceasing transformations" (Bourdieu, 1996, p.189).

² Regarding the concepts of space of experience and horizon of expectation, see Reinhard Koselleck (2006), *Futures past: on the semantics of historical time*, especially the chapter 'Space of experience and horizon of expectation: two historical categories'.

In other words, we seek to integrate Abdias Nascimento's formation process and his cultural and political engagements, in the understanding that this path will enable the perception of the elements that made him a proponent of a project of formation of the political and social conscience of the Black movement in Brazil.

The question that guided this work is related to a premise of the history of intellectuals, namely: political engagement. In this sense, Edgar Morin (1981, p. 242) asserts that: "[...] when philosophers come down from their 'ivory tower' or when technicians go beyond their specialized field of application to defend, illustrate, promulgate ideas with civic, social or political value, they become intellectuals". This quotation represents the process that transforms the wise, the cultured or the erudite into intellectuals who, by possessing artistic, scientific or literary expertise, commit themselves to the defense of public causes. Thus, based on this principle, we ask: what led Abdias Nascimento to militancy in the Black movement? And, furthermore, what were his main strategies of action for the formation of so-called Black consciousness?

Supported by this idea of engagement as one of the defining characteristics of the public behavior of intellectuals, we support the hypothesis that this movement from the private world to the public space, from the contemplative attitude to the taking of a political stance, is not the result of an impulse or even of biological determination. It is a long process of formation that combines individual and collective experience, as well as the mechanisms of signification and re-signification of these experiences, which, by becoming complex and relational, engender horizons of expectation that translate into political and social projects. In other words, it is not our understanding that Abdias Nascimento became an intellectual engaged in the Black movement because he was born Black, a grandson of slaves and whose father and mother were Black. In the same way, we relativize the very memory of the character in this narrative, who reports a kind of impulse while watching a play, when he felt that a "[...] heralding fire was lit within me" (Semog & Nascimento, 2006, p. 108-109), making clear to him discrimination and the need for his engagement in the cause of the Black movement³.

Abdias Nascimento is represented in this study as a Black intellectual who, beyond his irreducible experience as an individual, represented a part of Black history in the struggle against racial discrimination in Brazil. In this sense, analysis of his trajectory allows us to understand the social mechanisms that made possible the formation, social ascension and cultural and political protagonism of a man from a historically marginalized group. We therefore seek to identify how access to knowledge, whether in its scholarly form or learned in social experience, converts oppressed subjects into political agents who lead resistance. The categorization of

³ The play in question was *The Emperor Jones*, which Abdias Nascimento watched in the city of Lima, Peru, at the beginning of the 1940s, in which the main character was a Black man, but was played by a White actor wearing makeup to appear Black.

Abdias Nascimento as an intellectual is based on the definition given by Vieira (2011), who describes and explains the public behavior of intellectuals, especially those who worked in the first half of the twentieth century in Brazil, based on four characteristics:

- 1) sense of belonging to the social stratum that, throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, produced the social identity of the intellectual;
- 2) political engagement propitiated by the feeling of mission or social duty;
- 3) elaboration and propagation of the discourse that establishes the relation between education and modernity;
- 4) assumption of the centrality of the State as a political agent capable of carrying out social reforms (Vieira, 2011, p. 29).

Without the pretension of framing Abdias Nascimento in this definition, we intend to examine him considering three of these four aspects, namely: the moment in which he took on the social identity of an intellectual, his condition of engagement around public causes and his belief in education as a factor for emancipation of Black people and, by extension, for the improvement of society.

Abdias Nascimento's biography is well known, especially if we consider the period between the 1970s and 2000s. It was at this time that this intellectual gained great public visibility. As an exile during the civil-military dictatorship in Brazil, which began in 1964, he held professorships in several American and African universities. Upon his return from exile, he became a federal congressman representing the state of Rio de Janeiro (1983-1987). He was Secretary for the Defense and Promotion of African Brazilian Populations in the state of Rio de Janeiro until 1994. From 1997 to 1999 he was a senator of the Republic, succeeding Darcy Ribeiro. As a congressman, he introduced a large number of bills, both in the House of Representatives and in the Senate, related to the African Brazilian cause, among which we highlight Senate Bill No. 52, dated April 3rd 1997, which defines the crimes of racism and discrimination. Nascimento was an intellectual polygraph, as he produced poetry, literature, dramaturgy, social thought and Pan-Africanist activist texts. With more over 50 books published– between his own and collective works dealing with racism, inequality, human rights, African art and religion–, the intellectual obtained the culmination of this public recognition in 2010, when he was officially nominated to receive the Nobel Peace Prize.

This is the best known period of his trajectory, since it reveals him as a consolidated intellectual in the political and cultural fields. However, we will not deal with this phase of his life here, but rather concentrate on the process of his formation and, above all, on the moment of his taking a stand regarding his engagement in the Black movement. For this reason, we will focus on the period between the 1920s and the 1940s, although we may have to come and go in time in relation to this period.

The documental *corpus* of this research was composed of books written by Abdias Nascimento, including his memoirs registered in his autobiography, newspapers, magazines, interviews and photographs published in the press. The mapping, selection and collection of a large part of the sources took place by searching the following collections: *Instituto de Pesquisas e Estudos Afro-Brasileiros [IPEAFRO]*, in Rio de Janeiro; *Hemeroteca Digital da Biblioteca Nacional*; the University of São Paulo portal – *Imprensa Negra Paulista: periódicos 1903-1963*. We took special care in the use of biographical sources, and especially autobiographical sources, because if on the one hand they offer significant traces of life experiences, on the other hand they contain pitfalls proper to memory, such as the rationalization of what was lived, selection, distortion, forgetting and omission of events.

At the end of the analysis, we believe that, based on Abdias Nascimento's trajectory, it will be possible to collaborate with the discussion on the action and role of intellectuals in the public space. It is worth noting that this research also aims to contribute to highlighting the protagonism of Black intellectuals, reflecting on experiences and removing from obscurity and silencing subjects denied by a society that has not yet decolonized its way of thinking about race relations and that, to a great extent, maintains ways of thinking and acting typical of the slavery period.

FORMATIVE YEARS: SEGREGATION AND SOCIAL MOBILITY

Abdias Nascimento was born on March 14th 1914, in the city of Franca, in the interior region of São Paulo state. He was the second of the seven children of the couple José Ferreira do Nascimento (*Seu Bem Bem*) and Georgina Ferreira do Nascimento (*Dona Josina*). His father, originally from the Minas Gerais state town of Formiga, close to Franca, was a shoemaker in the handmade phase of the region's leather industry. His mother, born in Uberabinha, a town in Minas Gerais that would later become Uberlândia, was a cook, confectioner, seamstress and wet nurse. His grandmothers, *Dona Ismênia* (paternal grandmother) and *Dona Francelina* (maternal grandmother), were slaves at farms in the region. The Nascimento family was catholic, so Abdias Nascimento and his siblings received a traditional catholic education: catechism classes and first communion.

In his memoirs, Abdias Nascimento reports that in the city of Franca, “[...] Black people were all Catholics, or at best, Catholics and Kardecists” (Semog & Nascimento, 2006, p. 46), as he categorized his own mother. Other accounts given by him inform that Dona Josina “[...] had great knowledge about medicinal plants. Because of this wisdom, she was a very sought-after person [...] because she cured and helped many people” (Semog & Nascimento, 2006, p.30). Recognition of her as someone who cured and counseled not only the neighborhood, but also people of higher class was a factor that contributed to Abdias Nascimento's social mobility, because it was to be her influential contacts that would open some doors for him.

The relationship of Abdias Nascimento's family with religion is a remarkable aspect in his childhood memories, evidencing relevance in his formation. From his memories of Catholic celebrations, in which his mother was involved in the organization of the *quermesses*, Nascimento provides information about the presence of Black people in these celebrations:

Great church festivals took place in the month of May; they were predominantly Catholic celebrations, attended by Black people who were mostly urban. There were few Black people in the city, but they all showed up at the Catholic festivals, and thus, together, gave the impression of being many more than they really were (Semog & Nascimento, 2006, p.44).

In his opinion, "[...] those festivals were collective spaces in which the community was able to get together, because there was no Black association or organization" (Semog & Nascimento, 2006, p. 45). It is likely that living with the same ethnic group brought Abdias Nascimento closer to experiences that contributed to his formation.

As a youth, Abdias Nascimento grew up in a family that, according to him, "[...] was very poor, always involved in the struggle for survival" (Semog & Nascimento, 2006, p. 51). Despite rather adverse living conditions, he pursued a school and professional education, as did a significant portion of the Black population. Testimony to this belief in school can be seen in the *O Clarim* newspaper, published by the Black press in São Paulo state: "Parents! Send your children to the temple of intellectual instruction – to school – don't let them remain illiterate as in times gone by!". The newspaper also reinforces the relationship between the formal education of Black people and the building of the national spirit: "[...] make the most of precious time to raise our race and our beloved Brazil" (*O Clarim*, 1924, p. 02).

At the age of seven Abdias Nascimento was enrolled at the *Grupo Escolar Coronel Francisco Martins*, in the city of Franca. The person responsible for his attending the city's first public school was his mother. According to him, Dona Josina valued schooling and, therefore, encouraged her children's interest in studying. Nevertheless, his experience at school was not easy, because at several times in his memoirs about elementary school, Abdias Nascimento gives accounts of scenes of discrimination. The first concerns the treatment given to him by his teachers. When referring, for example, to bad behavior, they said: "[...] get back in your place, charcoal"! When the comment was about how he did a task, he would hear: "[...] this little nigger hasn't done his task properly" (Semog & Nascimento, 2006, p. 49). Another noteworthy experience is the story of a very poor orphaned Black boy, who was his schoolmate:

Nobody knows for sure how he survived, because his clothes were in tatters, he had parasites in his feet, it was a real effort for him to attend classes, because he really didn't have the means. There was also the mother of another schoolmate, a woman who was truly cantankerous, who, I don't know why, one day got it in for Filisbino and, in the middle of the street, started beating the boy, giving him a tremendous beating, while people looked on with the greatest passivity and indifference (Semog & Nascimento, 2006, p. 50).

Regarding his interest in theater ever since childhood, he states that he suffered discrimination, although he only realized that many years later:

It was in Franca where I first saw theater, especially puppet theater. And right from that childhood time, watching the puppet theater, theater provoked curiosity and enchantment in me. But even at that time I felt the bitter taste of racism, because at the *Grupo Escolar Coronel Francisco Martins*, which was my first school, I was never one of the students chosen for the end of year shows. I memorized all the monologues, the poems that all the boys performed, I learned all the dances, all the gestures, all the mimics [...] And I am convinced that I would not have been a bad actor at those year-end shows; but I was never chosen to perform. [...] At that time, of course, the reasons why I was excluded from those shows were not very clear to me (Semog & Nascimento, 2006, p. 47).

A news item published in the *A Voz da Raça* newspaper corroborates Abdias Nascimento's impression of teachers' discriminatory treatment towards Black children in schools:

Not long ago, a Black colleague of ours told me a story about his intelligent son, who was poorly supported at school because his teacher had declared in the middle of a lesson that 'Blacks don't learn with her', as if a Black person attending a public school was begging for a favor (*A Voz da Raça*, 1933, p. 2).

The same newspaper article, signed by Castelo Alves, reports another discriminatory situation. According to the journalist, a teacher had stated about the Black boys joining scout groups that "[...] the little niggers would be completely amiss" (*A Voz da Raça*, 1933, p. 2). In both situations, the discriminatory and excluding attitude of the teachers towards Black students is evident, from which one can infer the systematic existence of racial prejudice against Black children.

Regarding the history of republican education in São Paulo state, Araújo (2013), shows that less than 10% of the school population were Black children. The author also presents evidence that after attending elementary school, Black children started work. This aspect can be evidenced by Abdias Nascimento's trajectory, since at the age of 11 he started at the *Escola de Comércio do Ateneu Francano* [Franca School of Commerce] to study accounting at night. According to his memoirs he “[...] attended the *grupo escolar* in the morning, worked in the afternoon and attended the *Ateneu Francano* at night” (Semog & Nascimento, 2006, p. 51). According to Macedo (2005), his enrollment at vocational school was only possible because his mother interceded on his behalf with the town’s mayor, thus getting him a scholarship.

We can deduce that young Abdias Nascimento took advantage of such opportunities since, in 1929, at the age of 15, he graduated as an accountant from the *Curso Commercial de Franca*.



Figure 1 - Nascimento's graduation picture, 1929.
Source: Nascimento (1929).

His graduation picture, as shown in Figure 1, allows us to infer that Abdias Nascimento was the only Black student out of the seven graduates, as well as revealing the absence of Black teachers at the institution.

In the edition of the *O Alfinete* newspaper published on September 3rd 1918, José Benedicto Martins expresses the importance given, at the time, to the need to have a trade, as means for Black people to achieve social integration:

Blacks need to have the aspiration of wanting to be something in the future; for this it is necessary that you all have the willpower, teaching your children what our fathers did not learn. Ever onward! My colored brothers, keep pace with the progress of our capital, send your daughters to learn sewing, embroidery and ironing; as for your sons, after they leave the *Grupo Escolar*, send them to learn shoemaking, tinsmithing, mechanics, bookbinding and typesetting etc. (O Alfinete, 1918, p. 2).

We note that the trades suggested by the journalist are located in modest positions in the hierarchy of the labor market, so that the profession of accountant, attained by Abdias Nascimento, places him in a condition of social ascendancy, considering the professional expectations of the Black population at the time. It is possible to infer that young Abdias Nascimento perceived, even if his awareness of racial issues was not yet constituted, that it was necessary to overcome challenges and seek new formative experiences. Segregation and racism were present, however there were forms of resistance and paths for social mobility, with schooling and professional training among them.

THE MILITARY EXPERIENCE: BETWEEN EVENT AND STRUCTURAL

At the end of the 1920s, under the government of President Washington Luís, Brazil was experiencing an austere economic policy. Determined to break with the traditional Old Republic agreement, whereby politicians from Minas Gerais and São Paulo took turns in power, the well-known *café com leite* policy, the president nominated São Paulo-born Júlio Prestes to succeed him for the four-year term 1930-1934. In opposition to Washington Luís' plans, the *Aliança Liberal* was formed, with the objective of supporting the candidacies of Getúlio Vargas and João Pessoa as President and Vice-President of the Republic, respectively.

It was in this political context that young Abdias Nascimento, aged 15, visited São Paulo City for the first time as a member of a delegation of athletes from Franca. They went to take part in a political-sporting event which aimed to promote Júlio Prestes' candidacy and, on that occasion, Abdias Nascimento, alien to political activity, felt great interest in the parade made by the Civil Guard of São Paulo. This division of the São Paulo police was created in 1926 and was inspired by the French police forces. The relevance of reporting this episode in the trajectory of Abdias Nascimento is justified by the impact it had on him and, above all, because we understand that this event was determinant for his engagement in the struggle for racial equality. In that context, it was common for young people from the interior region of the state and belonging to the lower classes to see the military forces as an opportunity for social ascension. Abdias Nascimento, in his memoirs, describes his experience of watching the Civil Guard parade and why it made such an impression on him:

First the beating of the snare drums and the tambours could be heard, but it was only some time later that the first soldiers of the Guard appeared at the beginning of the avenue, accompanied by the band, all handsome and well-rehearsed, with their wind and percussion instruments. The guards were lined up symmetrically. They marched with martially firm steps, and the whole thing gave me a thrilling sensation and gave me goose bumps. I was there, in the middle of the Franca athletes, with my neck stretched out like a goose in order to see the Civil Guard that was approaching, but I could only see White guards, very White. They were all blond, big, burly, they even looked like they were from another country, because I had never seen so many together before. And the parade went on and on, but no Black guard appeared (Semog & Nascimento, 2006, p. 59-60).

Initially, this description can be interpreted as a reworked recollection, based on his later experiences. However, when comparing his memoirs and other sources, we can reach certain conclusions. His perception about the absence of Black men in the Civil Guard is confirmed when we analyze the recruitment advertisement for new Civil Guards in 1929, republished by the *Diário Nacional* newspaper (1929, p. 3):

Read the following advertisement published in the '*Tribuna Popular*', from Itapetininga, on June 9th: Candidates for the São Paulo Civil Guard [...] Candidates must meet the essential conditions required by the respective regulation, which are: be at least 1 meter 72 centimeters tall, be able to read and write, have good behavior, minimum age of 22 years, preferably strong men, over 25 years, White, with good teeth and perfect physical constitution.

The publication of this advertisement in a newspaper which at the time was known as an instrument of partisan action in opposition to Júlio Prestes, brings with it a direct criticism of the then president of São Paulo, accusing him of affronting the Brazilian Black majority. According to Gomes (2005), a great campaign was undertaken by the organized Black population against the advertisement made by the São Paulo government, which resulted in its suspension. Abdias Nascimento says he was not aware, at that moment, of this logic of Black segregation, but in his memoirs he declares that in his youth that experience made an impression on him.

In that episode, corroborated by the newspapers of the time, we see the encounter between Abdias Nascimento's impressions about the Guard's parade and the structural logic of racism, which informed the production of public advertisements and discriminatory selection practices for holding positions within the State. Nevertheless, his discomfort about the selection of the Civil Guard did not prevent him from seeing the state capital as a place full of possibilities that went far beyond the limits of the small and provincial town of Franca.

Abdias Nascimento left Franca in 1930, aged 16, and joined the Army as a volunteer, despite 18 being the minimum age for enlistment. According to his memoirs, the issue was solved with the help of a Franca City Hall official, who, as an acquaintance of the family, altered his birth certificate (Semog & Nascimento, 2006). In São Paulo he was assigned to the Second Heavy Artillery Group, at the Military Barracks in Quitaúna, now called Osasco. This movement from the interior to the capital represented, to a great extent, the situation of Black people descended from abolition. The frustrations lived in the space of experience were combined with the horizons of expectations of integration into the prevailing social order, aspiring to social and moral valorization. The expectations of Black people after the abolition of slavery, according to Fernandes (2008, p. 64),

[...] led predominant aspirations and identifications in the direction of equalization with upper class Whites. The success achieved by immigrants further strengthened the expectations that resulted from this. However, the real alternatives ranged from *caboclicização* in the countryside to pauperization in the cities, passing through 'employment contracts' that did not result in a noticeable improvement of the situation lived in their previous existence, but rather often worsened it.

When Abdias Nascimento arrived at the barracks, Brazil was experiencing the 1930 Revolution, which marked the ascension of Getúlio Vargas, representing the dissident oligarchies in power. Nascimento was assigned to the *Casa das Ordens*, of the 11th Company of the 4th Infantry Regiment. His being placed in this position was, he claims, due to his high school diploma, which differentiated him from the majority of the contingent. His work in the *Casa das Ordens* provided him with further learning opportunities, which led him to be promoted to corporal. In this sense, Abdias Nascimento's schooling represented a social distinction among his peers, who remained as ordinary soldiers.

As a member of the army and assigned to a regiment in the state of São Paulo, Nascimento took part in the Constitutionalist Revolution in 1932. He was sent to the battle front, when he was wounded, although not seriously. And it was in the battlefield that he got to know the *Legião Negra* [Black Legion], which was a battalion comprised only of Black soldiers. According to Gomes (2005, p. 67),

[...] as a result of the efforts for 'regimentation of men of color', hundreds enlisted in the Constitutionalist Army. They were immediately militarily instructed, equipped and uniformed. On July 20, 1932, *Correio de São Paulo* newspaper reporters informed that in only four days more than 500 Black men had enlisted.

The Black Legion was dissident in relation to the *Frente Negra Brasileira* [Brazilian Black Front] (FNB), an entity created to defend the cause of Black populations, which, despite its headquarters in São Paulo, remained equidistant from the conflict because of its allegiance to Getúlio Vargas. On the other hand, the Black Legion was present on several battle fronts in the 1932 Revolution, when Black soldiers tried to demonstrate the engagement of their race in defining the destinies of the country (Gomes, 2005).

In this section we have sought to identify the tortuous process of Abdias Nascimento's formation, considering both his initial schooling and his formative experiences within the Army, highlighting the opportunities and setbacks that marked his trajectory, so that we will now present and analyze the continuation of this process of formation that resulted in his political engagement.

THE MOMENT OF ENGAGEMENT: NASCIMENTO'S EXPERIENCES IN THE *FRENTE NEGRA BRASILEIRA* [BRAZILIAN BLACK FRONT] (FNB) AND IN THE *AÇÃO INTEGRALISTA BRASILEIRA* [BRAZILIAN INTEGRALIST ACTION] (AIB)

Following the abolition of slavery, the debates around racial issues took on new contours. The fact that, by force of law, the slavery regime had ended did not guarantee that freedmen became integrated into the social order. The putting in place of a process of building equality and access to social rights continued to come from Black people themselves, who never passively accepted their condition (Munanga & Gomes, 2006). Prevented from manifesting their African religiosity, excluded from cultural and recreational spaces designed exclusively for Whites, Brazilian Black people organized themselves and fought for citizenship.

In São Paulo, the press was among the means used to vocalize the interests of the Black community. Miriam Nicolau Ferrara (1985) identified the following newspapers in circulation between 1915 and 1923: *O Menelick* (1915), *A Rua* (1916), *O Xauer* (1916), *O Alfinete* (1918), *O Bandeirante* (1919), *A Liberdade* (1919), *A Sentinela* (1920), *O Kosmos* (1922) and *Getulino* (1923). As a rule the publications provided news of weddings, birthdays and deaths, but there were also poems, advertisements and notices for the community. Ferrara identified the following newspapers in existence between 1924 and 1937: *O Clarim d'Alvorada* (1924), *Elite* (1924), *Auriverde* (1928), *O Patrocínio* (1928), *Progresso* (1928), *Chibata* (1932), *Evolução* (magazine-1933), *A Voz da Raça* (1933), *Tribuna Negra* (1935) and *A Alvorada* (1936). This latter period, in contrast to the previous one, was marked by the explicit presence of demands for political, cultural and professional rights. Recreational and cultural associations also emerged alongside the press. According to Domingues (2007), 123 Black associations were created in São Paulo between 1907 and 1937. Among these, the most

representative was the *Frente Negra Brasileira* [Brazilian Black Front], founded in the city of São Paulo on September 16, 1931.

The national context was one of economic crisis and political transformations that, according to Gomes (2005), the Black population and its leaders perceived as important for debating the racial issue. The word ‘front’ was widely used in the political vocabulary of the time; moreover, the FNB “[...] was no longer an association, but rather a front that was to reach various regions and bring together diverse leaders and initiatives of the ‘Black milieu’” (Gomes, 2005, p. 52). Increasing membership of Black men and women led to the association’s expansion, with branches opening in several cities in the states of São Paulo, Minas Gerais, Espírito Santo, Bahia and Rio Grande do Sul. Gomes (2005) presents estimates indicating that there were around 100,000 members spread throughout Brazil, with some 6,000 in the city of São Paulo alone and more than 2,000 in Santos. Once it was consolidated, the institution became a political party in 1936, but was closed down the following year after the proclamation of the *Estado Novo* [New State].

With the defeat of the *Paulistas* in 1932, Abdias Nascimento began his participation in the FNB. At first, as an anonymous militant, he described his participation in actions to combat racial discrimination as a principle of militancy (Semog & Nascimento, 2006). He expressed the following perception about that experience: “That militancy in the Black Front brought me a series of important discoveries, and also allowed me to go on building a new type of consciousness, a broader vision of racial issues” (Semog & Nascimento, 2006, p. 78).

His experience in the city of São Paulo marked Abdias Nascimento’s coming closer to the FNB and to the organized Black movement, but a series of episodes impacted his life in São Paulo, leading him to move to the city of Rio de Janeiro. He had successive reactions, later rationalized by memory, against the structural racism that permeated the daily life of Black people, who lived under surveillance and constrained to limited social spaces. The final episode occurred in a bar in 1936, when Abdias Nascimento and another Black colleague got involved in a fight:

We were army corporals and we were in plain clothes. Well, we decided to go to a bar called the Majestic, on Aurora or Vitória street. We got there and the usual thing happened: we could only go in through the back door. The reason? Because we were Black. Of course, it was inevitable that a big fight would ensue, with beatings, things getting smashed, cursing and shouting in all directions (Semog & Nascimento, 2006, p. 79-80).

The outcome of this event went beyond what the two friends expected. In the middle of the confusion, a police officer of the *Departamento de Ordem Política e Social do Estado de São Paulo* [State of São Paulo Department of Political and Social Order]

(DOPS) appeared. According to Abdias Nascimento's description, the police officer acted with arrogance and intimidation, taking the side of the people who were discriminating them. In short, the two soldiers ended up in jail and were later discharged from the Army. Out of the Army, without a job, without a place to live and with no way to sustain himself, Abdias Nascimento decided to move to Rio de Janeiro.

In the capital of the Republic, with effect from 1936, a new movement towards engagement emerged: the *Ação Integralista Brasileira* [Brazilian Integralist Action] (AIB). According to Semog & Nascimento (2006, p. 82),

[...] what led me [Abdias Nascimento] to integralism was its anti-imperialist and anti-bourgeois position. What interested me was its struggle against imperialism, against American penetration. The possibility of being in a movement with this aim excited me and touched me deeply. The appeal of integralism was much broader, especially in terms of nationalism; there was a marked concern for the defense of national identity, cultural heritage, wealth and natural reserves.

Abdias Nascimento, very young, only 23 years old, became a proof-reader for the integralist newspaper *A Offensiva*, and in 1937 he was arrested and convicted, accused of propaganda against the regime in power. He served his sentence in the *Frei Caneca* Penitentiary until April 1938. According to Abdias Nascimento, this experience provided an interesting situation,

[...] because all the Communist Party members who had participated in the 1935 communist uprising were imprisoned there. During this imprisonment, I met many good people and made many friends, among them Major Trifino Correia⁴. The leader Luís Carlos Prestes was also imprisoned there, but was kept separate, in the chapel room (Semog & Nascimento, 2006, p. 89).

The arrest was published in *O Jornal*, on December 28, 1937, with photos of those involved (Figure 2). Abdias Nascimento is first, looking from left to right.

⁴ Trifino Correia was one of the leaders of the *tenentismo* movement in the state of Rio Grande do Sul, in 1924. He was also a sub-commander of the Prestes Column. In 1935 he was part of the directorate of the *Aliança Nacional Libertadora* [National Liberation Alliance] (ANL) and participated as a leader of the communist uprising.



Figure 2 - Headline of the *O Jornal* newspaper, December 28, 1937.

Source: *Accusados de promover...* (1937).

According to the research done by Jaqueline T. Sentinelo (2010), the discourse of the integration of races was a strategy of Integralism to regiment the Black population and, thus, strengthen itself as a political organization representing all inhabitants of the nation. Moreover, some FNB leaders shared Integralist ideals of national unity and the formation of a Brazilian race. The FNB itself supported integralism, especially because of the idea disseminated by the movement about the need for a second abolition of slavery, since the 1888 abolition law had been insufficient. Not by chance, the FNB motto (God, Homeland, Race and Family) was inspired by the integralist slogan, with the addition of the word race. Added to this is the fact that the barbarism of fascism, Nazism and the Holocaust were not yet internationally known or condemned.

Besides his fleeting time at AIB, the city of Rio de Janeiro provided Abdias Nascimento with a new set of experiences that brought him closer to African Brazilian culture and to militancy in the Black movement. In the capital city of Rio de Janeiro, he went to live in a room in the Mangueira shantytown, near the Mangueira samba school club. This increased closeness meant he could dialogue with the community, learning “[...] lessons about popular culture when talking with those people” (Semog & Nascimento, 2006, p. 88). The following year he moved to Duque de Caxias, located in the *Baixada Fluminense*, in the Greater Rio de Janeiro region. There he met and spent time in the company of Solano Trindade, who was a great connoisseur of Black culture and close to the Brazilian Communist Party. In this sense, his move there also marked his formal disassociation from the integralist movement and, above all, a gradual shift toward left-wing political positions that would characterize his ideological vision from then on.

Another intellectual with whom he had close contact was Abigail Moura, a composer and conductor of the African Brazilian Orchestra. It was with this maestro that Abdias Nascimento got to know the African Brazilian musical tradition expressed in several other ways besides samba. In Abdias Nascimento’s words, the influence that these contacts had on his formation is perceptible:

These relationships and friendships allowed me to go deeper and deeper in building awareness of my African dimension, which I had almost lost; if it were not for this biographical coincidence, I would have ended up being like so many others, one more of those intellectuals detached from their origins [...] this contact with African religion and with my origins made me meditate, reflect about my life, and about my people. I could see my own transformation. The world around me took on a different meaning; being a Black person began to have other meanings, very different from the ones that White people or racists tried to reduce us to (Semog & Nascimento, 2006, p. 87-88).

It was during this period that he decided to take up once more the degree course in Economics he had begun at the Alves Penteado School of Commerce in São Paulo, at the University of Rio de Janeiro, where he finished his studies in 1938.

It can be said that his experiences in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro in the 1930s were decisive for making Abdias Nascimento an aspirant to the intellectual field. The Constitutionalist Revolution, the Brazilian Black Front, his expulsion from the army, his adhesion to integralism, his imprisonment, his graduation from college and studying African Brazilian cultural traditions were a set of experiences that triggered a systematic reflection on the need for political and cultural engagement. Nevertheless, although his consciousness was maturing, a more solid participation in the intellectual field and a concrete means of social intervention capable of disseminating emancipatory knowledge for the Black population were still lacking.

THE INTELLECTUAL AND HIS SOCIABILITY NETWORK: THE *SANTA HERMANDAD DE LA ORQUIDEA*

As the capital of the Republic, the city of Rio de Janeiro attracted many young people interested in art and politics. In this context, Abdias Nascimento lived alongside the writers Napoleão Lopes Filho and Gerardo de Mello Mourão. The latter was also a member of AIB, where he was the director of the organization's newspaper, *O Povo*. In his contact with these intellectuals, Nascimento identified common interests related to art, culture and politics, expanding these reflections and debates, when, through Gerardo de Mello Mourão, he got to know three Argentinean poets and writers: Godofredo Iommi, Efraín Tomás Bó and Juan Raúl Young. The six members of the group developed a close coexistence and “[...] swore a pact of aesthetic and existential shared experience that they called the *Santa Hermandad de la Orquidea*” (Nascimento, 2014, p. 139).

With regard to this, Nascimento reports:

[...] and that was how we lived, and we called ourselves the *Santa Hermandad de la Orquídea*. Because the Orchid has no life of its own; the Orchid takes its life from a tree and we take life from the divine: that was what we lived from; from the divine. The *Santa Hermandad de la Orquídea* was an adventure (Nascimento, 2014, p. 140).

The group read and debated on numerous classical authors, among which we highlight Dante Alighieri, Miguel de Cervantes and Johann Hölderlin. Abdias Nascimento's approach to erudite readings and foreign languages reveals an essential constituent factor of this intellectual's formation process. The cultural and political capital of the group was broad and multifaceted. Abdias Nascimento had completed a degree course in Economic Sciences, while Gerardo de Mello Mourão had been a seminarist and had attended Law School for some time. The latter, since childhood, had studied Latin, Greek, German and music, and was interested in journalism and literature. Napoleão Lopes Filho was a poet and writer, while Godofredo Iommi had studied economics and had been President of the Buenos Aires University Federation. Efraim Thomás Bó and Juan Raul Young were university students linked to the Argentine Communist Party. With these qualifications and experiences, the group called themselves *periodistas* [journalists] and started to travel around Brazil and some Latin American countries holding conferences on topics related to economics, poetry, literature and even philosophy. The group's itinerancy was made possible with scarce economic means, but with a lot of ingenuity, establishing at each stop new relationships that went on to form its sociability network.

In the city of Lima, capital of Peru, one of the places where the brotherhood stopped off, Abdias Nascimento lived an experience which according to him was transformative. In his perception,

[...] this inner movement came about because of the opportunity I had to see, for the first time, the play *The Emperor Jones*. It was produced by the *Teatro del Pueblo*, with which I later had other contacts, and the emperor was played by the Argentine actor Hugo D'Eviéri, who was obviously White and painted black to portray the character. That was when I understood –because I was older, more experienced, I had taken part in Black rights movements – I grasped the whole thing. It was because I could never act in a theater, because I had never seen a Black actor, because I had never seen an all-Black play, I had never seen Black culture represented on stage: it was because White people wouldn't let me [...] that circumstance left me stunned, thoughtful, focused, boiling. It was like a sense of surprise, but with a different impact. I felt my soul stirred, in such

a way, as if I had found something I had been searching for a long time, without really knowing what it was, but something of great importance. I was moved, my eyes watered; and right there, in the theater, before the play *The Emperor Jones* ended, the newest flame of a heralding fire was lit within me. Clearly and definitively, I decided right there and then: I am going back to Brazil and I am going to do Black theater. What's more, I'm going to start with this play (Semog & Nascimento, 2006, p. 108-109).

In his book *O genocídio do negro brasileiro: processo de um racismo mascarado* (1978) [The genocide of the Black Brazilian: a process of masked racism], Abdias Nascimento explains a more elaborate understanding of the experience, with regard to the plays that were staged in the Brazilian theater:

The plays that were performed on these stages reflected with absolute intransigence the life, customs, aesthetics, ideas and the entire social and cultural environment of the dominant, White society - as if more than half of the population, of African descent, did not exist. When an actor or actress of African origin had the opportunity to step on stage, it was invariably to play an exotic, grotesque or subordinate role; one of many Black stereotypes devoid of humanity (Nascimento, 1978, p. 162).

As such, working against the rejection of the Black as an actor and interpreter of himself began to guide Abdias Nascimento's horizon of expectations, and he sought theatrical training. Thus he went to Buenos Aires, together with two members of the brotherhood, Godofredo Iommi and Raul Young. In the Argentine capital Abdias Nascimento got a scholarship at the Faculty of Economics, and thus was able to support himself for a year, during which he devoted himself to learning about scenery, staging, directing, acting and details of theatrical production at the *Teatro del Pueblo*. The objective of this theater-school was to promote innovative dramaturgical experiences and spread art to the people. Nascimento provides the following account of this experience:

I became a regular at the *Teatro del Pueblo*, which was a kind of free theater school [...] Right after the performances all the plays were discussed with the audience. The text, the direction, the interpretation, the scenery, the costumes were discussed. Everything was subject to discussion, reflection and criticism (Semog & Nascimento, 2006, p. 110).

The experience of living abroad and his experience with the *Hermandad Orquidea* were fundamental for his formation as an intellectual, so that in this period it is already possible to identify in his trajectory the articulation between political

awareness, becoming part of the intellectual field and the strategy of social intervention through theater, understood as a means of engagement and formation of the Black community.

The plan was set: return to Brazil and work on a dramaturgical project engaged with the cause of Black people. However, life has many setbacks. During Abdias Nascimento's time abroad, the Brazilian Army took out disciplinary proceedings against him, and sentenced him in absentia to one year in prison. Abdias Nascimento only found out about the trial upon his return to Brazil in 1943 when he was arrested. No records were found in the sources available that provide a detailed account of this episode. The only information we have about this spell in prison is what is contained in the book *Submundo: cadernos de um penitenciário* [Underworld: penitentiary notebooks], written by Abdias Nascimento while serving his sentence. According to this source, his trial concerned a fact that occurred when he worked in administrative services in the barracks and refused to type a trial balance, disobeying a lieutenant's order. This apparently minor misconduct landed him in Carandiru Penitentiary, in São Paulo.

In prison, Abdias Nascimento came across a penitentiary management project, which had as its director and creator the physician Flaminio Fávero, who aimed to regenerate prisoners by including work and artistic activities in the prison routine. This proposal involved many cultural activities, including theater. Turning the tragedy of imprisonment into an opportunity, Nascimento led the creation of the *Teatro do Sentenciado* [The Convicts' Theater]. The theater group's premiere, reported by the São Paulo press (Figure 3),

[...] was a great celebration for us, the theater players. Because not only did we demonstrate in practice the artistic possibilities of convicts [...], but, above all, the panorama of Dr. Flaminio's most discussed innovation was unveiled: the foundation of a theater, in which plays would be performed by convicts themselves (Nascimento, 1943, p. 348-349).



Figure 3 - Article published in the São Paulo newspaper *A Noite*, on November 16, 1943. Source: *O Teatro do Sentenciado...* (1943).

The knowledge he accumulated in Argentina at the *Teatro del Pueblo* theater-school, gained materiality in his experience with the *Teatro do Sentenciado*, which was his first theatrical experiment. In this sense, the dramaturgical experience he had during the year he was in prison enabled Abdias Nascimento to identify art as an instrument of formation, capable of raising the awareness of those marginalized by society.

TEATRO EXPERIMENTAL DO NEGRO [BLACK EXPERIMENTAL THEATER]: DISSEMINATING EMANCIPATORY KNOWLEDGE

Abdias Nascimento left prison in 1944, when the political context of the country was one of gradual resumption of democratic freedoms. If during the *Estado Novo* regime trade unions and cultural associations were under permanent surveillance by government repression and security organs, including the organized Black community, now was the moment for taking up once more the projects defended by these groups. Munanga & Gomes (2006, p. 121) state with regard to this new scenario that:

[...] With effect from 1943, an intense movement for the return of democracy began in Brazil. The harm caused by the *Estado Novo* in Brazil and the ongoing Second World War further increased awareness of rights among part of the Brazilian population. It was in this context that Black people also continued their struggle to organize themselves, demanding their rights.

In this new setting, Abdias Nascimento stated that, when he left prison, he was determined to implement his project of founding a theater of and for Black people. With this purpose, in São Paulo he tried to establish some contacts that would make the project possible, but they did not meet his expectations. So he moved to Rio de Janeiro, moving forward with the project imagined in Lima, planned in Buenos Aires, tried out in the Carandiru prison and, finally, in the process of being put into effect in Rio de Janeiro.

According to Macedo (2005), Abdias Nascimento considered that his dramaturgical project would be received better in Rio de Janeiro, in comparison to São Paulo, since the theatrical world was more established there. So he moved back to Rio de Janeiro and his enterprise quickly gained support and publicity. On October 17, 1944 the *O Jornal* newspaper published an interview with Abdias Nascimento, evidencing the support received, both from the Black community interested in knowing and getting involved with the project and also from artists and intellectuals, as follows:

The Black Experimental Theatre has been founded once and for all, thanks to the support we have received from Pascoal Carlos Magno, director of the Brazilian Student Theatre [...] since the press reported the foundation of the Black Theatre, we have received the best and largest demonstrations of support and appreciation, demonstrations coming from all social levels. Black people were the first to take an interest in their theater, trying to get in touch with us in order to offer assistance. Bibi Ferreira offered us the Fênix Theater for performances on Mondays; Dulcina and Odilon put themselves at our disposal for whatever we needed. Jaime Costa, with his long experience and providing the people with their best hopes for the future of Brazilian theater; Luiza Barreto Leite and many other professional artists showed solidarity toward us. Following this, we received support not only from artists, which in itself would already be a lot; but also from intellectuals (*O Jornal*, 1944, p. 2).

The first activity of the *Teatro Experimental do Negro* [Black Experimental Theater] (TEN) was to collaborate with the staging of the play *Palmares*, in December 1944. However, beyond its theatrical activities, the TEN developed a variety of actions centered on the theme of race, such as conventions, conferences and seminars. It also organized beauty and art contests, offered literacy courses, artistic and cultural courses for beginners, as well as editing and publishing the *Quilombo* newspaper.



Figure 4 - Literacy class held by the *Teatro Experimental do Negro*.
Source: Nascimento (n. d. a).

Engaged in this purpose, it was the TEN's proposal to value black people in Brazil through education and art. To this end, it proved necessary to teach its first participants to read and write, recruited from laborers, domestic workers, slum dwellers without a defined profession and/or modest civil servants. Some 600 people, both male and female, enrolled in the literacy course sponsored by the TEN and given by the writer Ironides Rodrigues (Figure 4). The TEN also offered a basic beginners'

course on general culture, for which Aguinaldo Camargo was responsible. Abdias Nascimento taught acting.

The TEN gained autonomy when it mounted its first exclusive production. It was the same play that had drawn Abdias Nascimento's attention to the lack of opportunities for Black people in dramaturgy, *The Emperor Jones*, by the American playwright Eugene O'Neill, on May 8, 1945, staged at Rio de Janeiro's *Teatro Municipal*. In this production, in contrast to the play staged in the city of Lima in 1940, the main actor, the Emperor, was played by a Black actor. Ruth de Souza, who would become one of the greatest actresses of Brazilian theater, acted in this production, in the only female role in this play. Abdias Nascimento, besides being an author, director, producer and theater teacher, also worked as an actor (Figure 5).



Figure 5 -Abdias Nascimento as Othello in the play by William Shakespeare, n.d.
Source: Abdias Nascimento... (n.d. b).

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Our interest in this research was based on the idea of offering a tribute to the intellectual and political investment made by Abdias Nascimento. Thus, considering his characteristics, it was our understanding that the greatest tribute we could offer him would be a thorough and critical study of his trajectory, without making

concessions to laudatory narrative and mythification of this intellectual. Following Bourdieu's recommendations, we have attempted to avoid biographical illusion, interpreting the character's trajectory in its contingencies, contradictions and discontinuities, which are proper to the experience of life.

As such, this work was dedicated to demonstrating the process of Abdias Nascimento's formation and consolidation as an intellectual, identifying him as a Black man, who can represent the struggle of a historically segregated and marginalized social group. Linked to this, we sought to identify the actions performed by this intellectual in his attempt to disseminate emancipatory knowledge, based on the Black Experimental Theater. Such actions express the constitution of knowledge that was produced in the experience of cultural life, oriented toward transforming oppressed subjects into active political agents.

This research therefore proposed to analyze the period of the intellectual's formation, focusing especially on the long, tortuous and contradictory process that led him to engagement, so as to circumscribe the study to the period between the 1920s and 1940s. We explored various sources that testify to Abdias Nascimento's trajectory, including his own memoirs, although we were careful to relativize them, as in the episode in which he states that he took up the cause of Black emancipation in a moment of sudden awareness, as if, in his words, a heralding fire had unveiled a reality not yet perceived. It is not a case of casting doubt on the feeling portrayed by the character we analyzed, but rather to postulate a historical explanation about this intellectual's engagement in the public scene, as a long, discontinuous process free from determinations, whether biological or psychological.

We attempted to permanently compare Abdias Nascimento's spaces of experience and horizons of expectations, interpreting both the setting of segregation and the movements towards engagement, and the projects, dreams and desires of this intellectual to transform the reality of the country. As such, the analysis provided, beyond Abdias Nascimento's trajectory, an understanding of the history of African Brazilians, identifying their daily adversities, their efforts and their permanent challenges. Thus, Abdias Nascimento presents himself as the figure of a Black man, born at the beginning of the second decade of the 20th century, the grandson of enslaved Black people, the son of a shoemaker and a confectioner, who represents in great measure the history of Black people and, by extension, the history of racial discrimination in Brazil.

His trajectory bears testimony to the relations existing in the economic, ethical, aesthetic and religious composition of the society that was formed in Brazil in the colonial period. Centered on a European worldview, Brazilian society forcibly subdued Africans, breaking violently with their customs, their traditions, degrading the values of Black metaphysics, morality and beauty. However, the Black people continued resisting and reacting in order to keep their customs, beliefs and values alive.

The TEN project, as an intervention for building their own knowledge, born out of social and political experience, is understood as an educational action to value culture, history and the knowledge developed by the Black population. Furthermore, it is recognized that this educational project has an emancipatory character, since it is produced by people whose history is marked by a context of oppression and domination, but who, even so, continue to persist and present issues that problematize their marginalization. As such, this research sought to demonstrate that there is a specific type of knowledge that transforms, legitimates and strengthens actions to claim rights; knowledge that confronts, opposes and dialogues with conventional academic knowledge.

And so it is our understanding that, following the path of Vieira's concept of the intellectual (2011), we have revealed the formation of Abdias Nascimento's feeling of belonging to the social group of intellectuals, based on his familiarity with the language, with the themes and with the problems of his culture. In this sense, the sociability network of the Black intellectual from the interior region of São Paulo state, built in this period in Brazil and in several Latin American countries, was decisive for this movement of engagement in the ongoing disputes in the public space. In the same way, we see his belief in education as an emancipatory principle and instrument.

Finally, we hope that the discussion about Abdias Nascimento can be deepened and expanded in further research, as well as serving as motivation for bringing to light the trajectories of other Black intellectuals.

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