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Abdias do Nascimento in New York: Migration, Resistance, and Transnational Black Art, 1968–70

Abdias do Nascimento em Nova York: Migração, Resistência e Arte Negra Transnacional, 1968–70

Abigail Lapin Dardashti*

ABSTRACT

This essay examines the life and work of the Afro-Brazilian activist, politician, and artist Abdias do Nascimento in 1968–70, when he lived in New York City. I argue that, in this new space, Nascimento employed painting as both a vehicle to address his migratory experience and a tool to continue his anti-racism activism. Engaging with African American art both from the 1930s Harlem Renaissance and the 1960s Black Power movement, Nascimento produced images representing transnational Black solidarity within a cultural space that operated beyond national confines. Ultimately, Nascimento's work unsettles dominant modes of Brazilian and US representation at the time, employing elements from pop art to interrogate the art world's exclusion of the Black experience.

KEY WORDS

Afro-Brazilian art. African American art. Resistance. Anti-racism. Pop art. Migration.

RESUMO

Esse texto examina a vida e a obra do ativista, político e artista Afro-Brasileiro Abdias do Nascimento entre os anos 1968 e 1970, quando chegou aos Estados Unidos e morou na cidade de Nova York. Defendo que, nesse novo espaço, Nascimento utilizou a pintura tanto como um veículo para abordar sua experiência migratória quanto como uma ferramenta para continuar seu ativismo anti-racista. Engajado com a arte Afro-Americana da Harlem Renaissance dos anos 1930 e do movimento Black Power dos anos 1960, Nascimento produziu imagens representando a solidariedade transnacional negra dentro de um espaço cultural que operava além de limites nacionais. Finalmente, a pintura de Nascimento dessa época perturba os modos dominantes de representação brasileira e estadunidense dos anos 1960, empregando elementos da pop arte para questionar a exclusão da experiência negra nos museus e nas instituições de arte.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Arte Afro-Brasileira. Arte Afro-Americana. Resistência. Antirracismo. Pop arte. Migração.

In January 1969, after traveling for several months in the United States, the activist, theater producer, actor, and emerging painter Abdias do Nascimento (1914–2011) moved from the Upper West Side of Manhattan to Harlem, where he experienced the historically Black neighborhood’s activist art scene and its history (Jaremtchuk, 2018: 264). Cultural activism against anti-Black racism was not new for Nascimento; indeed, from 1944 to 1968 he founded and ran the Teatro Experimental do Negro (TEN) in Rio de Janeiro, which promoted Black representation in a predominantly white cultural scene (Nascimento, 2004; Domingues, 2009). During this period, he also organized the Museu de Arte Negra collection, and exhibition, as well as the Black Christ competition, two visual arts endeavors that brought together artists of all backgrounds to contribute to a growing visual history about Afro-Brazilians (Larkin Nascimento, 2016; Jaremtchuk, 2018; Cleveland, 2013: chapter 2; Lapin Dardashti, 2020: chapter 2). He personally supported individual Black artists like Sebastião Januário, whom Nascimento invited to live with him so he could leave his position as a butler and paint full time.¹

While Nascimento created his first works before leaving Rio in mid-1968, his consistent visual arts practice and imagery emerged while he lived in New York from December 1968 to August 1969, and then during his fellowship in Middletown, Connecticut, from September 1969 until May 1971.² He later explained that painting helped him connect with activist circles in New York because of his limitations with English: “Blocked by the English language, I found that I had inside me a different form of communication: I could paint” (Nascimento and Larkin Nascimento, 1992: 53). In the United States, Nascimento witnessed the prominence of African American visual art and its political potential, which inspired him to enact his activism through a visual medium. During this foundational period, I argue, Nascimento developed a visual language that not only confronted anti-Black racism in Brazil and abroad but also heightened his own Black consciousness as an artist in exile working among an international group of

African-descendant artists and activists. The impact of migration and forced exile motivated, in part, Nascimento's depiction of diasporic movement and resistance.

In the United States, the visual arts became fundamental to Nascimento's activism. In 1972, he said in an interview that while socially engaged drama had the potential to inspire viewers, "paintings also bring the essential hidden to consciousness, and provokes actions, not in the way of exhausting the viewer in a catharsis as in Greek theater, but in provoking the viewer into self-realization." For him, "the function of art is not only to transform but to create a new dimension to human life" ("An Interview," 1972: 41). As I demonstrate in this essay, Nascimento engaged with strategies from pop art and *nova figuração* to critique the Brazilian government's use of the Afro-Brazilian religion Candomblé to advertise tourist activities in the Brazilian Northeast.

Diasporic Migrations

Departing from Rio, Nascimento traveled to Mexico City, Cuernavaca, San Francisco, and Los Angeles to visit Black theater groups in October and November 1968.³ In December, he decided to stay in New York because it was unsafe for him to return to Rio. On December 13, the Brazilian military regime passed the Ato Institucional V (AI-5), which stripped citizens of their constitutional rights, abolished freedom of speech, and gave officials carte blanche to prosecute and torture any dissidents (Sattamini, 2000; Serbin, 2000). During his trip around North America, Nascimento discovered an expansive network of Black militants, intellectuals, artists, and scholars with ideas parallel to his own, which also animated his decision to stay in the United States. He later explained that "a large difference is that, here in the United States, the value of my work was recognized" (Nascimento, in Cavalcanti and Ramos, 1976: 48). The support he experienced in New

York and Middletown encouraged the development of his painting and his engagement with African American art and history.



FIG. 1. Abdias Nascimento, *Riverside 1*, 1969. Acrylic on board, 26 x 34 cm. Museu de Arte Negra / Instituto de Pesquisa e Estudos Afro-Brasileiros, Rio de Janeiro. © Elisa Larkin Nascimento.

In New York, the painter Ann Bagley invited him to stay at her Upper West Side apartment for one month. Bagley and her husband had attended one of TEN's performances in Rio and respected Nascimento's outlook and his work. Using her leftover paint and brushes, he made *Riverside 1*, one of his first known works in the United States [fig. 1] (Almada, 2009: 98).

This painting represents Nascimento's view from his guest room window: Riverside Drive, the Hudson River, and buildings on the other side of the shore in New Jersey. Visual elements such as the bareness of the trees indicate the winter season serve as a metaphor for the hardships constantly experienced by people of African descent both in Brazil and in the United States. The buildings in the background belong to a distant space. Isolated from one another in *Riverside 1*, they seem movable like LEGO pieces; their grounding is haphazard at different distances in the background, which correlates with Nascimento's experience of movement and uncertain, interchangeable housing. The smoke coming out of one of the buildings is the painting's only indication of active human life, emphasizing the scene's isolation; the house's location across the water presents Nascimento's inability to reach this sign of life. The artist consciously chose to exclude any human figures in the painting, removing drivers, dwellers, parkgoers, and street residents from this typical daytime landscape, alluding to his loneliness and isolation.

The simplified forms and flattened perspective emulate the work of Harlem Renaissance African American artists from the 1930s and 1940s, especially Jacob Lawrence's series *Migration*. For this work, Nascimento consciously followed the figurative style of an African diasporic artist rather than relying on his knowledge of contemporaneous Brazilian art styles, such as the neo-concretism and *nova figuração*, among many others.⁴ Indeed, many elements of *Riverside 1* resonate with Lawrence's work. The organic shape of the trees, whose veering lines and winding tentacles spread throughout much of the surface in Nascimento's painting, are similar to the shape of the trees from Lawrence's *All People All over the South Began to Discuss This Great Movement*, which are straighter and take up a more calculated space [fig. 2]. The flat, color-coded buildings in the background recall those in Lawrence's painting *The Migrants Found Improved Housing When They Arrived North* [fig. 3].



FIG. 2. Jacob Lawrence, *The Migration Series*, Panel no. 26: *And People All over the South Continued to Discuss This Great Movement*, 1940–41. Tempera on gesso on composition board, 45.72 x 30.48 cm. The Museum of Modern Art, New York / Licensed by SCALA / Art Resource, NY. Gift of Mrs. David M. Levy. © 2021 The Jacob and Gwendolyn Knight Lawrence Foundation, Seattle / Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY.

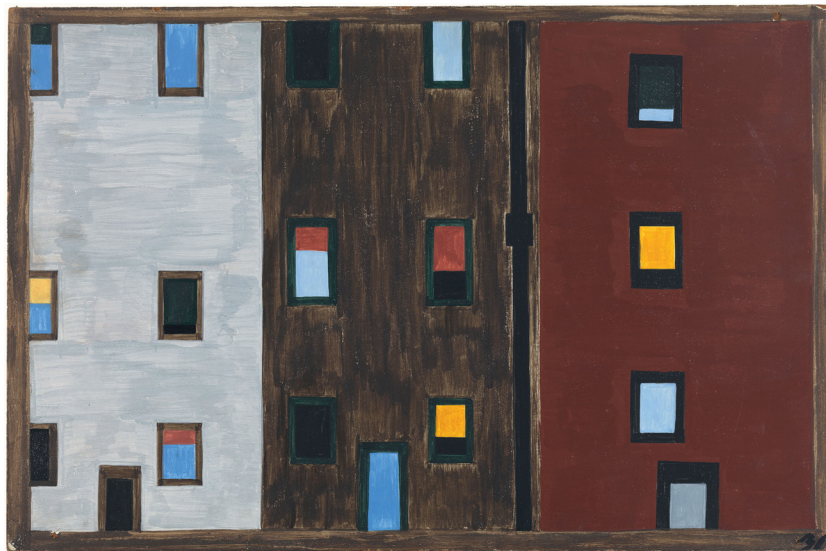


FIG. 3. Jacob Lawrence, *The Migration Series*, Panel no. 31: *The Migrants Found Improved Housing When They Arrived North*, 1940–41. Casein tempera on hardboard, 30.48 x 45.72 cm. The Phillips Collection, Washington, DC. Acquired 1942. © 2021 The Jacob and Gwendolyn Knight Lawrence Foundation, Seattle / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Another striking similarity lies in the use of color blocking and thick contours to identify major components in both works, making the images easily readable for diverse audiences. Comparative literature scholar Jutta Lorensen has argued that the colors in Lawrence's *Migration* signify "remembrance rather than history," echoing "the residual hue of a specific past" (Lorensen, 2006: 577). Parallel to Lawrence, Nascimento organized *Riverside 1* using color, selecting primary colors and earthy tones to express his displacement and inability to return to Brazil and connecting his experience to the long history of African American migration that was motivated by violence against Black people and the threat of death in the US South. Rather than sketching directly onto the canvas and then painting in the forms, as he would do in his later works, here Nascimento layered the painting with color, beginning first with beige and adding different shades to create forms with coatings.

Lawrence's *Migrations* must have interested Nascimento for several reasons. First, the Brazilian artist had encouraged the representation of Black people, culture, and stories by Black artists, an activist endeavor that was uncommon in Brazil, through his work at TEN. In the United States, Black artists depicted African American everyday life fluidly. Second, the story of *Migrations* paralleled his own story of constant exile within Brazil and abroad. He later explained: "I was always in exile in my own country. If I have a homeland, it is Africa. Brazilian society tried to refuse me my African roots, to cut them off, pull them up by force. Coming to the United States did not create my exile. Indeed, here I was able to express myself much more effectively, continuing the work I had been doing in other contexts" (Nascimento, in Nascimento and Larkin Nascimento, 1992: 49). *Riverside 1* documents Nascimento's new environment. He writes "Riverside," the street's name, on signs in the painting, which, coupled with the presence of faraway buildings, point to his desire to find place and home, as he situates himself in an existing physical place and aspires to unreachable homes. Yet

the almost futuristic quality of the work alludes to the far distance of home and the many obstacles laid out before it.

A few weeks after beginning to paint *Riverside 1*, Nascimento received a visit from Amiri Baraka, who looked at his paintings and agreed to write a preface for the catalogue of his first exhibition in the United States at the Harlem Art Gallery from March 14 to April 6, 1969, which featured 25 paintings (“Brazilian Artist,” 1969: 10). In the end, Babatunde Folayemi, the gallery’s director, wrote the introduction. Nascimento said that while “the preface never came through, the support and solidarity of my African brothers and sisters in the United States was there” (Nascimento and Larkin Nascimento, 1992: 50). This camaraderie appeared not only in Nascimento’s painting but also in his many exhibitions at grassroots art galleries in the United States.

Nascimento had been searching for a venue to exhibit his work, and the Harlem Art Gallery invited him to present it. He later recalled: “It was very difficult to find a space to do an exhibition. And they invited me to do the exhibition without even knowing me. I went to a meeting at Liberty House, a cultural organization, and I showed some paintings by coincidence, and they invited me” (Nascimento, in Almada, 2009: 101). The Harlem Art Gallery fostered African American cultural production in the context of Black empowerment. Folayemi and the artist James Sneed had founded the space after separating from another African American Harlem art group, the Twentieth Century Creators (TCC), as a result of ideological disagreements (Cahan, 2016: 22).⁵ Folayemi and Sneed’s interest in Nascimento’s work coincided with their broader aspirations for redefining Black art in the late 1960s. In addition to developing community-based galleries, they also fought to gain visibility in mainstream museums. They encouraged the production of both abstraction and figuration and adhered to contemporaneous styles such as pop art, using realism, bright color, and thick contours while also visibly politicizing their work by depicting

marches, banners, and oppression against Black people (Jones, 2006a; Jones, 2006b; Jones, 2014). Nascimento said his goals for his exhibition at the Harlem Art Gallery involved “[joining] hands with Black Americans here and abroad to keep [Afro-Brazilian] culture alive” (“Brazilian Artist,” 1969: 10). Conveying a new diasporic perspective, Nascimento’s presentation at the Harlem Art Gallery confirmed his affinity to like-minded diasporic artists seeking equality in the art world and beyond.

Pop Art and Afro-Brazilian Resistance in New York

Nascimento’s work at the Harlem Art Gallery exhibition was in conversation with Harlem’s Black empowerment and radicalism of the 1960s. He presented a series of paintings that he either sold or continued showing in his US exhibitions from 1969 to 1981, many of them informed, I believe, by his previous trips to Mexico and California, as well as his experiences in New York City. The display included *Exu Black Power #2 (Tribute to Rubens Gerchman)*, which depicts the messenger and *orixá* (deity) of the crossroads Exu [fig. 4]. In this work, Nascimento employs Exu’s pitchfork to stab a US flag and identify it as the aggressor of unequal and hegemonic systems, critiquing the lack of access to basic rights that Black people had endured for centuries. Exu’s attack on the US flag threatens the hegemonic system represented by this symbol. Through this imagery, the deity embodies Afro-Brazilians like Nascimento who stand in solidarity with the US Black Power struggle, promoting the appeal of the Black Panther Party, an Oakland-based political organization for Black people’s right to self-defense. When Nascimento visited California in fall 1968, he went to the Black Panthers’ headquarters in Oakland and met Bobby Seale, the cofounder of the party. According to Nascimento, Seale “immediately manifested his solidarity for the struggle of Afro-Brazilians” and “offered his help and support”

(Semog and Nascimento, 2006: 167; Nascimento, in Nascimento and Larkin Nascimento, 1992: 51). The dual presence of forks in the painting form a tension where Exu is participating in US anti-racist and anti-imperialist activism by striking the flag, while the other pitchfork pointed toward Exu is menacing him. Nascimento employs an orixá as a means to represent the Black body, showcasing resistance through various means, including religion, physical mobilization, protest, and actions against institutional racism.



FIG. 4. Abdias Nascimento, *Exu Black Power #2* (Tribute to Rubens Gerchman), 1969. Acrylic on canvas, 60 x 76 cm. Museu de Arte Negra / Instituto de Pesquisa e Estudos Afro-Brasileiros, Rio de Janeiro. © Elisa Larkin Nascimento.

Through its interconnected lines and flattened forms, *Exu Black Power #2* embodies the orixá's attribute of connecting and disconnecting

metaphorical paths, and alludes to the artist's constant movement. The deity's body is composed of basic shapes: a rectangular torso, straight lines for the legs, lozenge head, and the obliquely angled diagonal for arms, which comprises the center of the painting. The facial features also reflect this systematic arrangement: the eyes are lozenges, the nose is a long and narrow rectangle, and the mouth a straight, horizontal line. These simple shapes and their visual links enable the creation of linear connections throughout the painting. The arms come together as one straight diagonal through the torso and extend their paths to the downward-facing pitchfork on the left and the snakes on the right, through the lines across the flag and the vertical and horizontal yellow-and-black stripes that extend beyond the frame of the painting. The snakes emerge from Exu's eyes, expanding his vision beyond his two lozenge-shaped eyes to reach around and behind him. The pitchfork threatening to attack him is only connected to the yellow-and-black lines on one side, interrupting the linear connections created between the compositional elements. This element resonates with contemporaneous photographs of white policemen attacking peaceful Black demonstrators protesting for equal rights.

Linking the Afro-Brazilian struggle to African American resistance, Nascimento's work was very appealing to Harlem's art community. Journalist Alvin White wrote that "critics who have seen these remarkable works" were "amazed at the colorings and the deftness of Mr. Nascimento's brush" (White, 1969: 20).⁶ The exhibition became an early platform for his activism, playing a similar role to a march or demonstration. Embedded within New York's historic Black community, Nascimento was inspired by art-related activist events in New York. He likely saw the *Harlem on My Mind* exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, which resulted in the creation of the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition (BECC) on January 9 (Cahan, 2016: 64–65; Cooks, 2011: 74).⁷ The BECC organized picket lines and protests in front of the museum beginning on January 12, with artists

including Norman Lewis, Romare Bearden, and Roy DeCarava (Cahan, 2016: 72).⁸ During his stay in New York, Nascimento probably witnessed other art-related protests, including a sit-in at MoMA's garden on March 30 organized by the Art Workers' Coalition—a group formed in January 1969 seeking political and social change in large institutions—who demanded the construction of a Martin Luther King Jr. wing for Black and Puerto Rican artists (Ramírez, 2007: 47).

Because of these experiences, Nascimento's imagery and style changed within his first year in the United States and also reflected his relationships with other Brazilian artists. *Exu Black Power #2* presents a shift from *Riverside 1*, as Nascimento engages with pop art and nova figuração rather than evoking 1930s African American art. US pop art and Brazilian nova figuração focused on popular culture, mass media imagery, and a critique of consumerism. However, nova figuração addressed the urgent need to challenge the right-wing military dictatorship and its repression as well as US imperialism in Latin America (Calirman, 2015: 120; Martins, 2006: 61–69; Maroja, 2018: 42–57). In Nascimento's work, *Exu* stands behind a barrier of yellow-and-black lines that allude to caution tape used to create a barricade to control a crowd. This pattern was prevalent in the 1960s in the work of the Brazilian pop artist Rubens Gerchman, who was Nascimento's friend and fellow expatriate in New York.

Nascimento's dedication of the painting to Gerchman reflects a formal parallel. Indeed, Gerchman designed the cover of Nascimento's 1968 book *O negro revoltado* using a similar yellow-and-black-striped pattern. He also collaged reproductions of images of Black people protesting in the United States that were likely publicized in the Brazilian press, symbolizing the lack of access to freedom of speech and expression especially for Black people [fig. 5]. The front cover displays a Black man being restrained and appealing or vehemently objecting to something, and a collage of another face over his shoulder. The accumulation of people translates the chaos of a protest interrupted by police violence or white supremacists. The back

cover features an image of people at a march, listening intently to a speaker, a marked contrast to the front cover. However, their serious faces match the anger displayed on the collage of the front cover. The anonymity of the figures on the book cover related to Nascimento's desire for all Afro-Brazilians, regardless of their class, to recognize the falsehood of racial democracy at a time when many considered it reality. The yellowing of the media images recalls traditional pop silkscreen and painting methods in which the same image would be reproduced several times, mimicking a newspaper and using unrealistic colors. Informed by Gerchman, Nascimento grounds Exu in the caution tape motif; the orixá cannot escape it and is barred by it. Exu becomes a metaphor for the Black man who is restrained by authorities—as depicted in Gerchman's collage—expressing distress through the upside-down flag, and nevertheless resisting against racism and the official structures that perpetuate it.

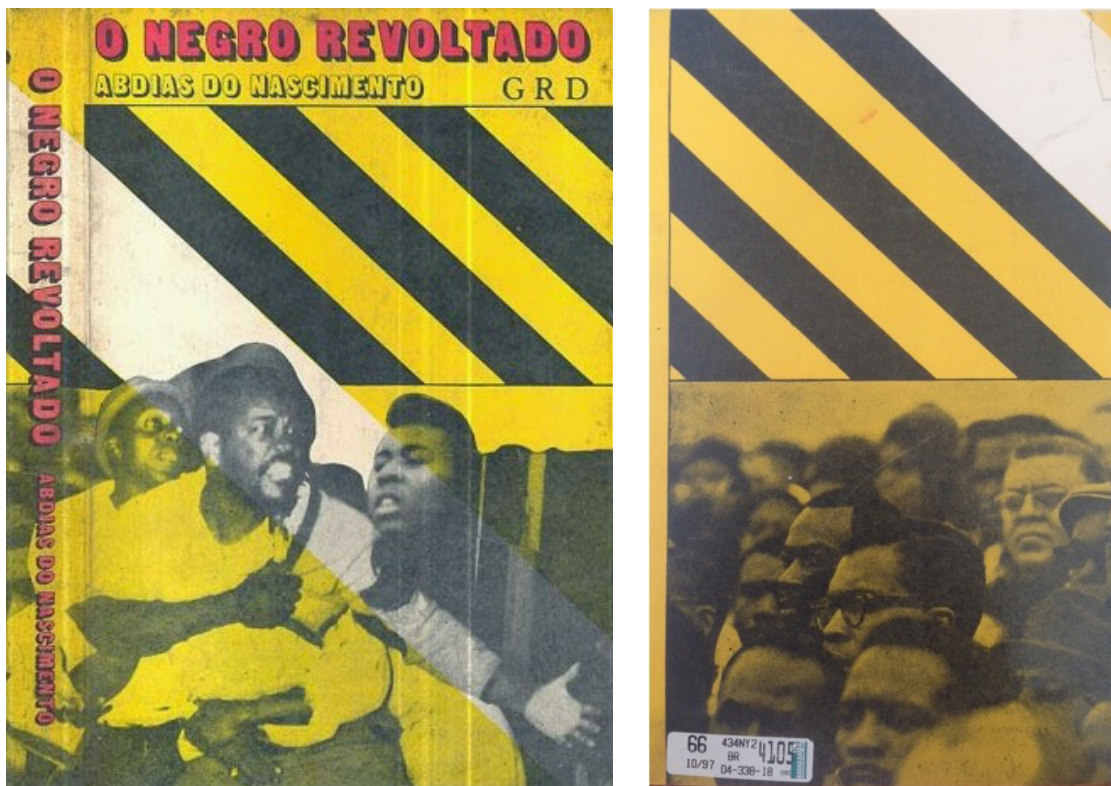


FIG. 5a-b. Rubens Gerchman, cover for Abdias do Nascimento, *O negro revoltado* (Rio de Janeiro: Edições G.R.D., 1968). © Clara Gerchman © Elisa Larkin Nascimento.

By 1968, Nascimento was familiar with pop and nova figuração, as they were important styles in the United States and Brazil. After the decade of the 1950s, which privileged abstraction as the avant-garde style, figurative modes like nova figuração appeared in 1960s Brazil to express the country's increasing social unrest and dismay at the repressive tactics of the military dictatorship. The Museu de Arte Moderna in Rio featured these new developments in landmark exhibitions including *Opinão 65* in 1965 and *Nova objetividade brasileira* in 1967. That same year, the Bienal de São Paulo exhibited many works by US pop artists, including Andy Warhol, Robert Indiana, Edward Ruscha, Robert Rauschenberg, and Jasper Johns, and Nascimento and Gerchman likely saw and read about politically charged works like Warhol's *Orange Disaster*, which depicted the death penalty's electric chair (*IX Bienal*, 1967: 212–13).



FIG.6. : Rubens Gerchman, *O Futebol, Flamengo Campeão*, 1965. Acrylic on Eucatex, 244 x 122 cm. Private Collection.
© Clara Gerchman.

Nascimento befriended Gerchman in Rio and the two artists continued meeting in New York and attended exhibitions together (Freitas, 2013; Sousa, 1971: 162).⁹ After the military coup in 1964, Gerchman employed the yellow-and-black-striped caution tape to infer crowd control, fear, and the diminishing freedom of speech in the country, focusing on scenes of everyday life and popular culture in Brazil, such as a crowd at a football match [fig. 6]. The vertical stripes control the unruly crowd, which is identified through amorphous and animalistic heads that are confined to the flattened space beyond the field in the foreground.

While Gerchman reportedly did not identify with US pop art's critique of consumerism when he arrived in New York, Nascimento connected his transnational experiences of activism to produce work inspired by both Brazilian and US pop. He depicted orixás as monumental icons that take up most of the space of the canvas, defaced mainstream emblems such as national flags, and evoked collage and symbolism from US Black Power originating in newspapers and magazines. Art historian Kimberly Cleveland has written that Nascimento's later paintings from the 1980s "exude the whimsicality of earlier Pop Art" (Cleveland, 2013: 51). Building on this suggestion, I propose that Nascimento's early New York works looked to US pop and *nova figuração*'s use of vivid colors found in mass-culture imagery as well as its political potential that made art a vehicle for accessible forms of protest. Pop's attention to mass-media imagery, vernacular culture, the immediacy of the image, legible content, and art's importance for resistance and protest appealed to Nascimento as strategies for the advocacy of anti-racism. After he developed his painting through works like *Riverside 1*, Nascimento adopted a flattened perspective, bright and saturated colors, and the monumentalized figuration highlighted by pop and *nova figuração*.

In *Exu Black Power #2*, Nascimento depicted monumental orixás at a moment in which the dictatorship leveraged these same images to promote tourism in Bahia and, in the process, encouraged white and foreign

consumption of Black culture. Indeed, the military regime led a cultural tourism campaign around the country and established the national organization Embratur in 1966 to manage this endeavor. In the northeastern state of Bahia, where Candomblé was and continues to be prominent, officials in charge of tourism highlighted the religion's West African roots as a part of the country's unique culture while still considering it fetishistic, folkloric, and legally controlling its practice (Teles dos Santos, 2005: 88). For instance, officials organized tourist visits to Candomblé *terreiros* (temples), advertised festivals like the Festa de Iemanjá during which flowers are deposited into the ocean for the deity of the sea, and required permits for *baianas de acarajé*, women who sell West African-derived black-eyed pea fritters in the streets of Salvador da Bahia (Lúcia Aquino de Queiroz, 2002: 76).

While the state commercialized a superficial vision of Candomblé to attract tourism by presenting it as an authentic, rural, and secluded Black religion, Nascimento portrayed nontraditional orixás performing acts of protest against the government's promotion of racial democracy and repressive tactics. He openly admitted not following the traditional characteristics of the orixás: "I do not follow the strict ritual limitations in the paintings. If the temple were to commission a painting I would of course confine myself to ritual limitations" ("An Interview," 1972: 41). In relation to what art historian Esther Gabara has called pop's "embrace of openness and inauthenticity," I believe that Nascimento critiqued the state's commercialization of Candomblé in favor of a vision that synthesized the practice and focused on religion as a mode of protest (Gabara, 2018: 15).

Pop artists looked to popular culture as inspiration; Nascimento depicted orixás, an inherent part of Afro-Brazilian vernacular history and culture, as his primary subject matter. Art historian Kobena Mercer has investigated the "vernacular" in relation to pop, stating that it is:

a term not quite synonymous with "mass" or "popular" because what it foregrounds is not the numerical or demographic aspect of collective

identity but the quality of antagonism that arises in the social division between “the people” as a collective noun of group belonging and the rules and norms of “officialdom” that delimits what is and what is not permissible in public life (Mercer, 2007: 9).

Through his pop-inspired depictions of orixás, Nascimento portrayed a vernacular practice while also creating transnational images that exposed a secluded and oppressed Afro-Brazilian religion as a primary form of Black Brazilian resistance. Nascimento advocated the interpretation of Candomblé as a valuable iconography for representing the modern anti-racist struggle and the present oppression of Black people in Brazil and beyond.

Despite the formal parallels between Nascimento’s work with *nova figuração* and US pop, he fundamentally disagreed with the rejection of the art object in favor of circulating media-like prints. On the contrary, he utilized a traditionally framed canvas to challenge the discrimination of Afro-Brazilian religious iconography by creating transnational paintings that centralize orixás and articulate the impact of his migration and the relevance of Black Power for Afro-Brazilian resistance. In doing so, he gave new value to the art object. Through this inversion and emphasis on Black subjectivity, his work paralleled similar diasporic representations, integrating a narrative of African diasporic pop-inspired art. The accessibility and populism facilitated by *nova figuração* and pop motivated the artist’s creation of Black deities who addressed international artistic and activist circles and a broader working-class audience.

Conclusion: Tracing Diaspora through Afro-Brazilian Resistance

After traveling to Brazil in 1975 for an exhibition of his work, Nascimento explained the nature of his contributions in the United States: “When I

showed them [the paintings], I realized that my work presented an aspect completely crushed in the process of Black American history: the African roots. I felt that I could say a lot through a new language for me. . . . In the United States, [I] feel more useful to realize something.” Nascimento also realized that as opposed to in Brazil, where “the Black [person] continues to be ‘the son of no one,’ as if he was still being civilized,” in the United States Black people owned and operated their own companies, universities, academic departments, and journals, and developed intellectual circles and scholarship (Nascimento, in “Na pintura,” 1975: 4). This mobilization of African diasporic power, and specifically Black Power, to drive the narrative of history, art, and culture for people of African descent around the world continued to be the foundation of Nascimento’s activism during and after his stay in the United States. His artwork produced in New York articulates how his activism mixed ideas from US Black Power with representations of orixás carrying arms, confronting injustice, and reimagining icons such as Christ through the history of the diaspora.

Nascimento’s experience in the United States expresses the complex experience of migration for an artist and activist. On the one hand, Nascimento’s more intimate works like *Riverside* 1 demonstrate his loneliness and inability to extensively communicate in English when he arrived in the United States, while at the same time serving as a testament of his painting training. *Exu Black Power* #2 displays his rapid adaptation to New York’s Black art scene and his contributions to the city’s Black art activism. He employed strategies from pop and nova figuração to articulate his activism through a contemporaneous visual mean. While previously dehistoricized and marginalized, Nascimento’s groundbreaking painting presents a transnational lens on global Black activism in the late 1960s.

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Notes

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- 1 Sebastião Januário, interview with the author, Rio de Janeiro, August 24, 2016.
- 2 During this period, Nascimento painted, lectured, and widely exhibited his new works at community galleries and established spaces. Nascimento's exhibition locations in the United States include the Harlem Art Gallery (1969); the Malcolm X House, Wesleyan University (1969); Yale University Art and Architecture Building (1969); Crypt Gallery at Columbia University (1969); Norton Hall, Buffalo University (1970); Gallery of African Art, Washington, DC (1970); Gallery without Walls, Buffalo (1970); Museum of the National Center of Afro-American Artists (1971); Department of Afro-American Studies, Harvard University (1972); Studio Museum in Harlem (1973); Langston Hughes Center for the Visual and Performing Arts, Buffalo (1974); Fine Arts Museum, Syracuse (1974); Howard University Gallery of Art (1975); Inner City Cultural Center, Los Angeles (1975); Puerto Rican Studies Center at Buffalo University (1974, 1975); Ile-Ife Museum of Afro-American Culture (1975); and Taller Boricua, New York (1980). In Brazil, he exhibited in 1975 at the Galeria Morada in Rio de Janeiro. Following his fellowship at Wesleyan, he obtained a tenured position in the State University of New York (SUNY) Buffalo's Puerto Rican Studies and Research Center, which he held until he returned to Brazil in 1981. Nascimento sometimes secured such positions by meeting colleagues at his lectures and exhibitions; for example, Dr. Karl Scheibe heard Nascimento's artist talk at Yale and subsequently arranged for his fellowship at Wesleyan. Karl Scheibe, telephone interview with the author, November 13, 2018.
- 3 In October 1968, Nascimento embarked on a two-month trip to visit Black theater groups in Mexico City, Cuernavaca, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and New York with funding from the Fairfield Foundation. The Fairfield Foundation promotes educational programs and historical preservation.
- 4 The formal parallels between *Migration* and *Riverside 1* confirms Nascimento's knowledge of Lawrence's work, which was widely published and recognized in the United States at the time. Nascimento likely gained familiarity with it even before arriving in New York, as it had been mentioned in the Brazilian press since its creation in the 1940s. A few months before Nascimento left Brazil, *Correio da Manhã* published an extensive article about 1930s protest art in the United States mentioning Lawrence "Arte de protesto," 1968: 2). Lawrence's work had also appeared in African American magazines distributed in Brazil, such as *Jet* ("Jacob Lawrence on U.S.-Sponsored World Tour," 1953: 48). Nascimento had met Katherine Dunham when she visited Brazil in 1950, and she probably spoke to him about African American art and the Harlem Renaissance (Das, 2017: 135). Dunham had given a dance course at Nascimento's TEN (Antonio Rosa, 2007: 87). On November 19, 1968, about a month before Nascimento arrived in New York, the Studio Museum in Harlem opened the exhibition *Invisible Americans: Black Artists of the 1930s*, which included works by Lawrence such as *Free Clinic* (1937). Nascimento surely saw this exhibition, which stayed opened until January 5, 1969. The exhibition also included works by Charles Alston, Richmond Barthé, Joseph Delaney, Palmer Hayden, Malvin Gray Johnson, Archibald Motley Jr., Douglas Pippin, and Augusta Savage, as well as Hale Woodruff, Romare Bearden, Aaron Douglas, Norman Lewis, artists whose work Nascimento would encounter again along his journey in the United States (Cahan, 2016: 130).
- 5 While both groups advocated a Black aesthetic, the Harlem Art Gallery focused on visual arts

presentations while other TCC members maintained a more interdisciplinary approach, also displaying clothing, dance, and other media.

- 6 Journalist Alvin White wrote that “Mr. Nascimento is hopeful his Brazilian paintings will enjoy the same vogue Haitian art acquired.” In his early years in New York, Nascimento aimed to make New York “his permanent residence” (White, 1969: 20).
- 7 After much resistance against the exhibition from the African American community because of its exclusion of Black contemporary artists and Black leadership, Sneed, who co-ran the Harlem Art Gallery and whom Nascimento knew, was hired to organize a parallel contemporary art exhibition that did not materialize (Cooks, 2011: 74; Cahan, 2016: 64–65).
- 8 Other participants included Benny Andrews, Norman Lewis, Tom Lloyd, Reginald Gammon, Earl Miller, Richard Mayhew, Claivn Douglass, Felrath Hines, Russ Thompson, Frank Sharpe, Vivian Browne, Raymond Saunders, Henri Ghent, Alice Neel, and Mel Ramos.
- 9 Anna Bella Geiger, interview with the author, Rio de Janeiro, July 9, 2018. Gerchman had won the prize for foreign travel at the IV Salão de Arte Moderna of the Distrito Federal and lived in New York from 1968 to 1973. Nascimento invited Gerchman to participate in events once he became a full-time faculty member at SUNY Buffalo after 1971. For instance, Gerchman spoke at the symposium “Brazil: Cultural Trends in Literature in the Arts” at SUNY Buffalo on November 13–14, 1971, organized by Nascimento.

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