

INTRODUCTION

HUMAN EXPERIENCE carries with it the challenge of understanding life as we are living it. Changes and social dynamics displace set ideas, underlying aspects of phenomena become evident and modify concepts about those phenomena; widely known facts are obscured only to reemerge with new implications. Reality as we know it can be reconfigured by the intervention of factors that were in existence before but went unperceived or were hidden from view.

This process has a political dimension: the possibility of manipulating knowledge to change reality. The dynamics of seeking, constructing, and suppressing information and the intervention of those who propose to use this reconfiguration to operate changes are the ethical grounds on which human knowledge is developed. Like everything human, there is a dimension of power to this dynamic, which generates tension between those who control knowledge and those who seek it in order to intervene and transform themselves and the world around them.

The building of knowledge in Western civilization was largely the search for power over nature and over other human beings who were considered part of nature and therefore to be submitted to the control of knowledge. Western science was developed at a time when peoples formerly unknown to Europeans were “discovered,” and scientific method

was put to the task of helping Europeans dominate those peoples. The conquest and occupation of new lands by the “natural” right of those who considered themselves superior to the natives led to the genocide, subjugation, and enslavement of these “others” in order to build the modern world. Within this process, scientific theories were fabricated to justify genocide and subjugation. These theories would later contribute to the rationalization of further genocide against a minority of Western people targeted by discrimination. It was not until this point that the West perceived the barbarity of justifying genocide and science made a turnaround to deny its earlier justifications. However, the effects of centuries of domination could hardly be erased by a new manifesto of scientific rhetoric. Peoples who had formerly been the objects of scientific method began to unveil their own realities, which had been kept obscured. In this way, formerly oppressed peoples not only came to intervene in the constitution of knowledge but also challenged its very foundation.

In the Western world itself, scientific method was concerned with “progress” defined in relation to the production of material goods, and soon proved limited in elucidating the human existential dilemma. Also, the traditional goal of neutral and objective observation refused to materialize, even in the exact sciences, in which it has been recognized that the researcher’s intervention and outlook can influence outcomes. As scientific method came under question, the challenge arose to look for alternative ways to understand reality.

A researcher joining this march of knowledge can contribute to the dynamics of culture and social environment, a fact that raises ethical and political questions about the researcher’s place and procedure. Research can only begin with living experience, which makes it important to say a few words about my own life and the paths that brought me to the present work.

This book emerged from my participation in a larger search for ways to contribute to the articulation of public policies that can adequately deal with the operation of Brazilian racism in the education system. In 1981, when Abdias Nascimento and I created the Afro-Brazilian Studies and Research Institute (IPEAFRO), this reality was being discussed by the Afro-Brazilian social movement, which would grow and make its demands echo ever stronger. These demands were etched into the legislative process that created the 1988 Constitution, and have been present in the articulation of recent education policy. Yet now, as in 1981, the black movement in Brazil is still working to unveil a reality of racial inequality that has been hidden for generations by those dedicated to maintaining a rosy image of race relations in Brazilian society. I maintain that the construction of this image of “racial

democracy” was made possible by what I will call the sorcery of color, a founding and defining characteristic of race relations in this country.

This research project had its beginnings in a much earlier engagement in the study and experience of efforts to build a pluralist democratic society. As a high school exchange student, I had lived in Brazil and was fascinated by issues of cultural plurality, which the country revealed to me. Later I worked in the United States antiwar, civil rights, antiapartheid, and women’s movements, as well as the Attica Brothers’ Legal Defense and a Neighborhood Legal Services office in Buffalo’s Latino community. At the time, the almost obsessive fascination of many leftist intellectuals with classic European authors contrasted starkly against personal experiences that highlighted gender, ethnic, and race relations as crucial political issues and against the specific experiences of what was then called the Third World. It seemed clear to me that these issues, which profoundly affected people’s lives, were derived as much from the colonialist legacy of racism as from class relations in capitalist society. Yet that legacy was obscured by the conventional wisdom of class analysis.

At a time when these were pressing matters in my life, I met Afro-Brazilian artist, activist, and intellectual Abdias Nascimento. It was as if a set of theoretical considerations had jumped off a history page and come to life. My experience in Brazil had left me with the unforgettable image of a pluralistic society marked by severe inequalities; this man’s biography was a living portrait of Afro-Brazilian resistance against those inequalities. At the same time that I worked with him to take that message of resistance to world audiences, I also pursued my own research on Pan-Africanism. As we were in the midst of sealing a partnership for life, I also had the opportunity of participating in some important watersheds of the Pan-African movement with Abdias. These moments included the first meetings of the African Writers’ Union, the Second World Festival of Black and African Arts and Culture (Lagos, 1977) and the First Congress of Black Culture in the Americas, as well as the creation of the Zumbi Memorial and the Unified Black Movement (MNU) in Brazil in 1978.

Later, Abdias and I moved to Brazil and began to engage in the rebuilding of the state of law as the 1964 military regime was giving way to a gradual political liberalization. With the support of São Paulo’s Archbishop Dom Paulo Evaristo Arns, we created the Afro-Brazilian Studies and Research Institute (IPEAFRO), which was initially housed at the Pontifical Catholic University of São Paulo. The first congressional elections were held in 1982, the same year that IPEAFRO organized the Third Congress of Black Culture in the Americas. In 1983, Abdias Nascimento took office as the first Afro-Brazilian congressman whose political platform was built on the issues of

antidiscrimination and public policies to build racial equality. I had the opportunity to take part in the drafting of his bills of law, including the first affirmative action proposal (P.L. 1.331/1983) and a major antidiscrimination measure (P.L. 1.661/1983), as well as the drafting of constitutional provisions dealing with policies for building racial equality.

One of our major goals with IPEAFRO was to contribute to the inclusion of African world culture and history in Brazilian education and to help prepare teachers to deal not only with curriculum content but also with the dynamics of race relations in the classroom. To this end, we organized seminars and events as well as teacher training courses—including one entitled *Sankofa*, held at the State University of Rio de Janeiro from 1985 to 1995—and published several books.¹ These actions involve issues of identity, since they have to do with social dynamics built on an image of African descendants created by racist ideology, which has been reflected in educational institutions and curricula.

As the Afro-Brazilian social movement grew in activity and political weight, the proposal to modify school curricula gradually gained acceptance. This goal was inscribed in the principle of cultural plurality that had been expressed in the 1988 Constitution and in the passing of myriad municipal and state legislative measures mandating the incorporation of Afro-Brazilian history and culture in school curricula. These developments later culminated in the passage of federal law 10.639/2003, which made the same provision for the country as a whole. But there was a large gap between legislative recognition of the need for change and daily practice in the schools. This fact led IPEAFRO to organize events for teachers and policy makers, and to offer teacher training on African and African Diaspora history and culture. For these activities, we adopted the name *Sankofa* from the West African *Adinkra* system of ideographic writing and proverbial wisdom, which denotes the need to know the past in order to build the present and the future. At the same time, a significant grassroots community movement, the College Entrance Preparation Courses for Blacks and the Poor, was raising the issue of Afro-Brazilian access to university education. Fewer than one percent of university students in Brazil are black, though the general population is officially 45 percent black. The grassroots community-based College Entrance Preparation courses offered free preparation for the *vestibular*, standardized college entrance exams that were the only criterion of admission to university. Certain universities offered scholarships to students admitted from these courses. This development highlighted the need to provide theoretical and informational bases for a new approach to education, one

that could accommodate this new student population, which was interested in elucidating its own history, culture, and experience. In this context and in this spirit I embarked on the present research project with the objective of contributing to this end.

While my life partnership with Abdias Nascimento cannot help but have an impact on my understanding of certain issues, it is also true that I already possessed a basic outlook, which I brought into the relationship. I do not believe it has been significantly altered, but certainly its development has been enriched by the opportunity to share the experiences, observations, and reflections of a longtime veteran of the Afro-Brazilian movement. In any case, neutral objectivity remains an illusionary goal for the researcher in the social sciences. I believe that the information and observations recorded here can be useful and elucidating—indeed, particularly those aspects gleaned partly from access to my husband's life work and archives. For example, existing literature in English and in Portuguese does not include much beyond a passing mention of the Black Experimental Theater and its offshoots and legacy. Often the only references are facile dismissals of the organization as elitist, self-contradictory, and tinged with reverse racism. In my view, the issues involved both in this characterization and in a more detailed consideration of the organization's trajectory are essential to the understanding of Brazilian race relations and the African Diaspora experience.

Initially, two obstacles to the discussion of these issues must be overcome. In Brazil, any mention of racism unfailingly elicits a warning against the danger of what is considered to be even more pernicious: the possibility of reverse racism by the target population against the mainstream one—blacks' racism against whites. This specter is raised particularly with respect to Afro-Brazilian organizations. Such a dynamic in the debate generally halts communication before it can begin. It is part of what singularly characterizes racism in Brazil: silence and ideological repression. As it is commonly understood, a racist is someone who speaks of racism or mentions that someone else is black; silence is considered the nonracist attitude. A pillar of domination, silence is one of racism's most effective devices in Brazil.

Complementing silence, the process of making African descendants invisible as actors and creators in national history and culture is another form and symptom of racism. This tendency permeates Brazilian life, and is reinforced by the appropriation of Afro-Brazilian culture and history as part of a "Brazilian" identity defined apart from, and exclusive of, the African matrix. The absence of African descendants from school curricula and textbooks is a result of this process, which is another characteristic of the sorcery of color. By recording some aspects of this suppressed history, I

hope to contribute to the efforts to overcome this constructed invisibility of African descendants.

The second obstacle to the discussion of race in Brazil is resistance to the idea that African populations in different parts of the world share a common experience. The presumption is that blacks in Brazil are in a unique situation determined solely by the circumstances of their society and have little or nothing in common with black populations in other parts of the world. Critics have frequently accused the black social movement in Brazil of attempting to import foreign standards and raising a problem that has never existed before. On the other hand, the concerns of the black movement often revolve around issues specific to Brazil rather than racism as a world phenomenon.

But racist domination is worldwide in scope. It derives from the historical imposition of Western hegemony over non-Western peoples and its essence is expressed in the ideology of white supremacy. The standard of whiteness affects the identity constructs of all dominated peoples, making the issue of identity crucial, but oftentimes, it is expressed in specific local terms. In Brazil, the sorcery of color transforms mixed-race identity into a permanent search for the simulation of whiteness.

Thus, I set out to seek a theoretical foundation to deal with racism and identity in the global context and shed new light on what has been considered, I believe erroneously, a series of characteristics unique to Brazil. While the sorcery of color creates situations and produces effects peculiar to Brazil, it is grounded in the global phenomena of white supremacy and Western hegemony, which in turn share a broad common ground with patriarchy and gender oppression. I suggest that these two areas of social change have recently become inseparable. Therefore, the present work seeks to approach race and gender simultaneously, with a theoretical grounding articulated in terms of resisting and breaking down barriers, which will eventually lead to the building of new identities. Some choices I made regarding terminology should be clarified from the start. I use the word "American" in the broad continental sense, including North, South, and Central America and the Caribbean. Thus, the term "African American" refers not only to blacks in the United States but to those in all the Americas. I also use the terms "indigenous," "First Nation," or "Native American" in the same sense, and I adopt the practice of the Afro-Brazilian social movement by using the term, "African descendant," and its counterpart, "African Brazilian," to emphasize the historical and cultural references to African origin. I use the phrase, "African descendant," because it retains the reference to identity links among Africans wherever they are in the world. I use the term "Diaspora" in the sense of geographic dispersion of a people who, while spread over the world in new social and historical

conditions, maintain their reference to origin and identity. In the case of African peoples, this does not refer only to the process of enslavement but also to previous moments in which dispersion took place in a context of freedom and sovereignty.

This book conceives ideology as an ordered system of ideas, norms, rules, and representations that operate socially and are perceived, or often remain unperceived, as if they have existed by or for themselves, separately and independently of social, material, and historical conditions. The essence of ideology is that it obscures the process of forming these ideas, representations, norms, and rules in the context of power relations. Ideology's function is to prevent those who are being dominated from perceiving the mechanism of domination.

In this book, I hope to unveil facts and considerations that have been kept hidden and reveal new ones that have been emerging from recent efforts to transform power relations in Brazil. This effort is worthwhile not only for the intrinsic value of such facts and considerations, but also for their utility in effecting social change. I hope to contribute to the effective implementation of recent federal legislation mandating inclusion of African and Afro-Brazilian culture and history in school curricula. In this way, I hope to participate in the creation of new spaces and possibilities for the effective exercise of African Brazilians' human and civil rights.

Very few works in Portuguese, and none in English to date, have examined the meaning, import, and history of psychology in regard to the ideology of race and its social impact in Brazil. In Chapter 3 of this work I seek to do this and also to treat the implications of the consideration of race in the practice of psychology by looking at evidence of a new way of therapeutic listening, which I call an "Afro-Brazilian ear."

At the end of the text I have included a bibliographical note on English-language sources on issues discussed in this book. A few of these works in English make brief reference to the Black Experimental Theater (TEN), an important civil and cultural rights movement in Rio de Janeiro between 1944 and 1968. None of them, however, involve an in-depth study of that organization and its critics, which is a task I take on in *The Sorcery of Color*. I also look at the Afro-Brazilian activism of São Paulo in the first part of the twentieth century from a perspective that emphasizes continuity and coherence with the demands and ideas of later movements. In the process, I engage in some critical reflection on certain analyses that have been proposed heretofore. I examine the Afro-Brazilian relationship to the Negritude movement and the significance of that movement in historical perspective. To this end, I look closely at TEN—its actors, activities, texts, and intentions—and I place

it in the context of African world theater and dramatic literature. In this process, I articulate some critical observations on existing work around this theme.

The research for this book was greatly facilitated by my access to the records and archives of TEN, which have been collected by its creator, Abdias Nascimento. They are now in the custody of the Afro-Brazilian Studies and Research Institute (IPEAFRO), which we founded in 1981. IPEAFRO is currently organizing these papers for preservation, a project that began in 2003 with an initial grant from the Ford Foundation. IPEAFRO is working with Brazil's National Library, the Library of Congress Rio de Janeiro Office, the Center for Research Libraries, and the Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro (PUC-Rio), to convert these materials to microfilm and ultimately to digitize them for online consultation.

Clearly, the story I tell in this book is documented by these papers and has been shaped by the testimony of the protagonists of the events they record. I believe that the facts and viewpoints of this history, along with other information and considerations brought to this work, will help English-speaking readers to understand the Brazilian panorama of race relations with its sorcery of color and its penchant for virtual whiteness.