



**RRRRRAÇA CABARET, OLODUM THEATER GROUP:
poetics of the crossroads (Exu)**

CABARÉ DA RRRRRRAÇA, BANDO DE TEATRO OLODUM:
uma poética do encruzilhamento (Exu)

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Abstract: This text, part of a larger study, offers reflections on the creative process of the show *Rrrrraça Cabaret* (1997) by Olodum Theater Group — SSA, and the construction on the mechanism of laughter (humor, irony, and comedy) as a mechanism to face racism. Its critical-methodological approach is based on the critique of the creative process (Salles), and its foundation includes participant testimonies (1997), decolonial thought (Quijano), Afrocentricity theory (Asante), Black theater (Bakary Traoré), and African worldview (Eduardo Oliveira). Its reflections culminate in the assertion that anti-racist laughter is constructed via crossroads (Exu) that are reified in actors' bodies — body-laughter-Black corporeality — and that, via laughter, which operates and disseminates racism, that this regime is also transgressed following Black-referenced actions, for, by materializing itself in the corporeality of the actors as a space-time of intersection, racist and anti-racist laughter coexist, enabling clash, intervention, insurgency, and its resignification — which this study has called decolonial laughter.

Keywords: *Cabaré da Rrrrraça*; creative process; crossroads (Exu); decolonial laughter.

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Resumo: O presente texto, parte de um estudo maior, apresenta reflexões sobre o processo criativo do espetáculo *Cabaré da Rrrrraça* (1997), do Bando de Teatro Olodum — SSA e a construção do mecanismo do riso (humor, ironia, cômico) como mecanismo de enfrentamento ao racismo. Tem como abordagem crítico-metodológica a crítica de processo de criação (Salles) e como alicerce: depoimentos de participantes (1997), o pensamento Decolonial (Quijano), Teoria da afrocentricidade (Asante), Teatro negro (Bakary Traoré) e Cosmovisão africana (Eduardo Oliveira). As reflexões desencadeadas culminam com a asserção: o riso/antirracista é construído via encruzilhamento (Exu) reificado nos corpos dos atuentes — corpo-riso-corporeidade-negra. É a partir do riso operador e disseminador do racismo que também se transgride esse regime, por meio de ações negrorreferenciadas. Pois, ao se materializar na corporeidade dos atuentes, enquanto espaço-tempo de encruzilhamento, o riso racista e o riso antirracista coexistem viabilizando o embate, a intervenção, a insurgência e sua resignificação, o que este estudo tem denominado de riso decolonial.

Palavras-chave: *Cabaré da Rrrrraça*; processo criativo; encruzilhamento(Exu); riso decolonial.



1 Introduction

If racism in humor, a common place in our sociocultural and historical context, is an unavoidable theme to be addressed, a pertinent point regarding the fight against structural racism concerns the fact that this confrontation urgently needs to reflect on the use of anti-racist humor as a form of resistance, a political weapon, by revising the perspective on the issue. This implies reflecting on the notion of speaking place because, although one's social position fails to prescribe a discursive consciousness about said position, the *locus* in which we are socially inserted lend us other experiences and thus specific perspectives that enrich struggles for social equity by bringing different viewpoints on the social agenda of structural racism.

However, we know that the colonial speech and practice saw the colonized body as devoid of subjectivity, voice, and soul (hooks, 1995). Considering this historical fact, political awareness is imperative because the enunciation *locus* is signaled by our geopolitical location and by the socio-historically established hierarchies at its intersections (class, gender, ethnicity, among many others) to which the body is exposed, making a political awareness of this diasporic Black body/corporeality vital for promoting intervention and activist practices.

Thus, it is from my Black corporeality that I adopt writing as a political act—writing as a form of resilience and release—and am driven to appropriate my place as a Black woman who daily experiences racism. On this, I borrow Fanon's words in the following excerpt:

An investigator can choose between two attitudes toward his subject. First, he can be satisfied only to describe—in the manner of those anatomists who are all surprised when, when describing the tibia, they are asked how many fibular depressions they have. That is because in their researches there is never a question of themselves but of others; in the beginning of my medical studies, after several nauseating sessions in the dissection room, I asked an older colleague how I could prevent such reactions. He simply advised: “My friend, pretend you're dissecting a cat, and everything will be all right” [...]. Second, once he has described reality, the investigator can make up his mind to change it. In principle, however, the decision to describe seems to imply a critical need to go farther toward some solution (Fanon, 2020 p. 145).

Likewise, we point out that Black bodies constitute Black-Brazilian embodiments within a holistic perspective—a concept coined by African Jan Christiaan Smuts in his 1926 book, “Holism and Evolution.” Derived from the Greek word “holo,” the term can be understood as complete, whole, and emphasizes the interconnection between phenomena, valuing their totality. Black Theater is also relevant to this discussion, always taking the term as a plural concept that renews and reinvents itself along with society—an understanding adopted as a precautionary measure against the trappings of conceptual seduction, which disregards mobility. Hence our adoption of Black Theater—embodied in the Olodum Theater Group—as one that has as its primary axis the aesthetic-political-ideological-racial crossroads and critical humor via Black corporeality on stage.



We also highlight the notions of Afrocentricity, colonialism, coloniality, and decoloniality as they ground the reflections in this research. Briefly, based on Quijano (2005), colonialism describes the specific historical-social period of colonization, whereas coloniality refers to the link between the present and the past, which has survived colonialism as a supporter of the logic of colonial relationships between knowledge and ways of life, that is, as colonization of minds, bodies, and social and cultural structures. Since coloniality is underpinned by race/racialization and Eurocentrism, decoloniality refers to the action/practice of confronting subalternization and the oppression of colonization/coloniality. As for Afrocentricity, according to Asante (2003; 2016), it presupposes the restitution of African and Black diasporic peoples as protagonists of their narratives, experiences, and knowledge as masters of their cultures and histories and thus promoters of transformative and resignifying actions. This implies confronting oppressive epistemologies and structures that are conceived as universal.

Considering this briefly outlined scenario, the reflections on the construction of laughter (humor, comedy, irony) as a mechanism to confront racism in the creative process of the show *Rrrrraça Cabaré* (1997) by the Olodum Theater Group had as guiding resources traces of the creative process via immersion in the testimonies¹ of its creators; an immersion in a reading exploration based on the perspective of the crossroads (Exu)—philosophy and *modus operandi*, a metaphor of transits as a Black-referenced spiral-moving tool—in an attempt to navigate across networks of creation in search of explanations; a space-time of conflicts, confluences, divergences, convergences, clashes, interventions, and insurgencies. I would also highlight its inventive, heterogeneous nature, its multiple emergent voices, clashes, negotiations, and deviations. As for the “how,” we use the “critique of the creative process” developed by professor and researcher Salles.

Its basis lies on the relationship of one index to another and vice versa, that is, on the “establishment of relations.” As such, theories emanate from connections, thus being a “theory implicit in artistic practice” (Salles, 2017, p. 11). Other notable features of creative processes include the ideas of movement, complexity, non-linearity, and the imprecision of precisely delineating a beginning and/or end. In her words, disregarding the relevance of such traits would constitute “[...] a simplistic view of the creative act, showing a path that has its origin in a sudden insight, which takes shape throughout the creative process. A path from initial chaos to the order that the work offers” (Salles, 2011, p. 29).

Thus, investigations about the creative process focus on the creative movement “[...] in which the study of documents manages to go beyond the mere description of an immobilized structure [...]” (Salles, 2011, p. 30). Through this lens, scholars studying creations in progress must bear in mind that their attention should lie in the movement from one part to another, implying a notion of continuous time that “leads us to the aesthetics of the unfinished” (Salles, p. 29). According to Salles, scholars studying the creative process must be careful not to read each index in

¹ The interviews took place via *Zoom* from November 2021 to June 2023.



isolation lest they lose their heuristic power and consequently fail to gain insights into creations in progress.

The show *Rrrrraça Cabaret* premiered on August 8, 1997, and held its last performance in 2017². It resulted from a group creative process involving improvisation and a structure around sketches based on narratives of experiences lived by Black actors and actresses and/or their peers. The characters included eight women, six men, and one *travesti*. Its original cast consisted of Agnaldo Buiú (Brogojó), Auristela Sá (Flávia Karine), Cássia Valle (Marilda Refly), Cristóvão da Silva (Patrocinado), Fernando Araújo (Nego John), Geremias Mendes (Seu Gereba), Jorge Washington (Taíde), Lázaro Machado (Edmilson/Edileuza), Lázaro Ramos (Wensley de Jesus), Leno Sacramento (Abará), Merry Batista (Dr. Janaína), Nildes Vieira (m. C. Patrícia), Rejane Maia (Rose Marie), Tânia Toko (Dandara), Valdinéia Soriano (Jaqueline), and other actors who participate or have participated in the group and served as substitutes. Jarbas Bittencourt wrote the lyrics and Paulinho do Reco, from Ilê Ayê, the songs of the show.

It is considered one of the Collective's most popular shows, with performances outside Brazil on African soil at the invitation of the Angolan Ministry of Culture in celebration of Theater Week. In 2003, they were featured in the Arte da África-Teatro (Art of Africa-Theater) event at the Banco do Brasil Cultural Center in Rio de Janeiro and in the Latin American Theater Group Exhibition in São Paulo, held by Cooperativa Paulista de Teatro, conducting a workshop on their working method and exchanging aesthetic experiences with groups from other countries (such as Venezuela, Colombia, Argentina, and Chile) and other Brazilian states (such as Sergipe, Minas Gerais, and Rio Grande do Sul, etc.), ending their tour at the event "25 Days of Activism," held in Vitória, Espírito Santo, with *Rrrrraça Cabaret* in 2006, to name a few events.

We can infer that the dramatic and stage texts were created by improvisation—theatrical games in line with the director's statement that "[...] if there is a method, mine is to listen," justifying it by stating that "it all starts from listening and trying to answer or trying to ask back. *Rrrrraça Cabaret* exaggerates this because it emerged from a question, but I usually work from this: questions and answers (Meirelles, 2021)³." In this perspective, this study adopted Chacra's (2020, p. 40) conceptual perspective on improvisation, which chooses the "binomial expression—theatrical improvisation—for it is broader and more comprehensive, in which the term 'theatrical' becomes a quality of improvisation [...]. This eliminates the obligation to 'draw a line between form and improvisation,'" concluding that the "two-word expression—theatrical improvisation—is, in fact, the fusion of these two words into a single meaning" (Chacra, 2020, p. 41).

Our initial motto was questioning, or rather, establishing the game of "asking/answering:" "Are you Black? What does it mean to be Black?" in the person of Marcio Meirelles, the director of the show at the time. All answers to this question were organized into thematic blocks, including

2 With a new season running from May 17 to June 19, 2024, which is part of the *O Projeto Cabaré 25+25* (The Cabaret 25+25 Project), alluding to its 25th anniversary.

3 In an interview with the author via *Zoom* in 2021.



ones such as miscegenation; racism in advertising, in the media, and in the labor market; the stereotype of the Black-sexual-sensual-genital; religious intolerance; Black *versus* consumption, and identities. The Collective's discursive approach to these themes shows their peculiar humor. This constituted a moment of artistic transition, production, and maturing as a group. These perceptions and desires gradually took shape in the form of a show that premiered on August 8, 1997, at Cabaré dos Novos in the Vila Velha theater in Salvador, in which 15 Black men wearing blue contact lenses and afro wigs on stage discussed a variety of topics within a discursive heterogeneity around being Black.

2 The construction of anti-racist laughter under the aegis of the idea of crossroads (Exu)

“We are the beginning, the middle, and the beginning.
Our trajectories move us; our ancestry guides us”
(Nêgo Bispo, 2019)⁴

This study adopted the nomenclature “crossroads” as it considers the idea of action and movement it aesthetically and philosophically imprints, thinking it based on the dialogue between the concept of crossroads in Martin's 1997 “Afrografias da memória.” However, this study also considers the idea of crossroads in its religious bias within its epistemological proposal, in line with the worldview of Black African peoples.

The epigraph above enables us to think about the pertinence of the African worldview/ancestry and its resignification/update on Brazilian soil in this reflection. Martins' words define ancestry as “a structuring mode of the Black-African cosmoperception, dispersed across its numerous and diverse cultures” (Martins, 2021, p. 58). Moreover, Oliveira states that

Ancestry, in turn, is not the affirmation of the heroic, narcissistic self: in ancestry, what counts is the history of a people, the symbolic arsenal acquired by it during the course of time. Who tells the story of the self is one's tradition. The history of the self is linked to the history of one's ancestors. The self is part of a whole and is important precisely to the extent that it makes up this whole and not the other way around. That is why we can say that without ancestry there is no identity. Identity is found in tradition and not in the narcissistic gaze (Oliveira, 2006, p. 120).

The scholar emphasizes the integrative and collective character of this perception of the world (although it is a cultural construction and thus subject to changes throughout history). The author reaffirms such relevance by pointing out that the “African worldview finds its internal concatenation and external force in the principle of ancestry, manifested in the tradition of Afro-

⁴ Antonio Bispo dos Santos, quilombola leader, philosopher, teacher, poet, writer, and political activist. He worked in social movements and wrote books and articles about the history and struggle of Black people. He died on December 3, 2023.



descendants” (Oliveira, 2006, p. 121)”. However, the Black-African worldview shows a dynamic spiral movement that constantly updates ancestral memory by privileging past time rather than fossilize it. Thus, collective memory is present in the bodies of Black African descendants in diaspora, that is, it is embodied, producing no disjunction between the spiritual, physical, and material dimensions. Thus, I reaffirm that this study conceives these Black bodies based on the conception of Black-Brazilian corporeities, that is, understanding subjects acting in their socio-historical-social, emotional-affective, and mental-spiritual-bodily dimension via their experiences (which constitute the basis for their artistic creation process).

Another, among others, valuable point for these reflections involves pointing out the political, social, and cultural content of the adoption of the notion of African worldview on Brazilian soil, whether in 1997 (the premiere of the show) or in the present day since it includes the experiences of enslavement and racial discrimination, also configuring a political action; a worldview forged in Africa permeated with the sacred and re-signified, just as in other geographical spaces to which Black Africans were forcibly taken in the diaspora. The sacred has ancestry as its source, which is preserved and ritualistically updated by the worship of ancestors — a collective ritual. In the words of Oliveira (2006, p. 52), “the past is privileged because this [is] the time of the ancestors. [...]. African time, as the African universe, is pregnant with ancestry. The same ancestry that permeates all beings on the planet (African universe) inhabits the mythological and current time.” However, nowadays, the actors are the descendants, so the update must be supported by the memory of the ancestors based on their wisdom. The speech by director Marcio Meirelles below denotes a realization, at the time—already in the group’s formation audition in 1990—that those Black bodies organically took the place of the subjects of their lived experiences and/or that of their peers, raising a Black-diasporic point of view this reflection conceives under the bias of ancestry:

In the beginning it was exactly with that, the unveiling of my history. [...]. When we did the first audition there were almost a hundred people [...] We selected thirty. [...] They had a way of representing the world, emotions, peculiar relationships because they were not based on Eurocentric or American theater. The formats, the methods of construction of the psychological characters, etc. came from other places; they came exactly from race, exactly from a peripheral life (Meirelles, 2021).

According to Bakary Traoré (1972), in “The Black African Theatre and its social functions”, the theater of the African peoples in its origin played an important social role in bringing individuals together, promoting intense social cohesion and becoming a reflection of customs, habits, and conducts. This improvised oral-based theater, strongly linked to the daily life of his community and his ancestors (ancestor worship) also shows a comic bias to debate educational social issues, peacefully coexisting with tragedy, comedy, the human, the divine, life, death, and the intertwining of discourse, music, movement, and dance.

The creative process of the studied phenomenon has as its axis the improvisation that welcomes the marks of spontaneity and rituality, having the “question/answer” game as a catalyst



in the interaction between the macro and the micro. The spontaneity of the improvisations in the generative process has a pre-thought and pre-planned background: actors' *in loco* research. However, another portion arises from ancestral wisdom: ancestral memory, presentified and updated via actors' Black corporeality. To this end, the mechanism of the "question"—a resource used by the director—founds its neuralgic point as an instance that establishes questions, resignifications, and updates by promoting interactions and interrelations with the macro, the micro, and a provocation: a critical self-reflection in each member and critical reflections between them, that is, between each of them and the director; between the director, each of them, and the whole; and the director with himself, each of them, and the whole (since he also participates in the game). Such experimental character and the subsequent improvisation open a space for the emergence and the immersion of experiences, conflicts, and tensions due to enslavement and historical and sociocultural discrimination those involved in the process experienced (as it concerns a past and present problem). Since, as Kilomba points out (2019, p. 29), "everyday racism incorporates a timeless chronology" and due to the experiences lived in the creative process.

The above conceives *Rrrrraça Cabaret* as a result of a "question/answer" game (a theatrical exercise marked by listening/asking/listening in a movement) of *in loco* research, experiences, and experimentation (the act of knowing by experience, trial, and error). It also reads the director's "question" as a decolonial act (even if one considers its unconscious occurrence) by noting that the question "are you Black?" "what does it mean to be Black?" implicitly brings the notion of the tripod coloniality/race/racism. In other words, it brings a latent idea of a place of domination/coloniality that includes a power relationship and requires the possibility of agency and resistance. The question the director asked at the time established answers that were given by actors' oppositional views and elicited an Afrocentric practice as the actors speak for themselves, that is, the focus lies on their corporeities giving rise to an Afrodiasporic ancestral memory and its actualization.

Almost synchronically there emerges the representational game in which the "representative self" of each actor (that is, those who work with the masks of their characters) responds in a movement of critical self-reflection to those questions and exercises listening in the process since the question is asked to the actors and their characters. It is interesting to underline that the then director is a non-Black and that the studied event occurred from 1996 to 1997. Thus, the answers to the director's questions lie in performers' past, in their ancestral heritage, which their embodiment and the laughter that permeates the generative process bring to resent and update it. In other words, the questions beget laughter, the aesthetic resource of laughter establishes a counterpoint, an intervention at the crossroads with the Afrocentric perspective, promoting the ultimate clash between racist and anti-racist laughter.

This space-time (crossroads) includes the laughter from the coloniality of power and the place from which emerges the laughter that confronts it. Under the aegis of the crossroads, this place is linked to the racist laughter. However, the perspective of Black corporeality gives the theatrical performance a ritualistic character, opening paths based on the experiences



and/or worldviews of these subjects, whose political commitment is to counter-hegemonic actions. Thus, anti-racist laughter refers to culture expressing other ways of doing, thinking, and being centered on the African worldview and established by the Brazilian diasporic Black embodiment.

Such reasoning evinces, among other things, the idea that the colonial world system situates Black bodies based on the experience of oppositional and exclusionary difference, from which position they produce actions and knowledge. However, the existence of such attitude requires a minimal ethical and political awareness from individuals.

3 Final considerations

The reflection triggered by reposing pertinent questions to the analyzed fields (the Performing Arts and the Human and Social Sciences) and by bringing anti-racism under the lens of laughter as a resource configures another angle of reflection/investigation (beyond the theoretical/academic issue) and contributes to anti-racism studies in Brazil. It also enables us this provocation: conceiving laughter and racism in combination is possible only in the sense of racist humor. In other words, conceiving humor as a vehicle to reiterate and disseminate racism (commonplace in our sociocultural and historical context) inevitably curtail practices that promote its reinterpretation by immobilizing humor into a single meaning.

Laughter in the creative process of dramatic and stage texts was conceived within the Black Diaspora cosmogony, reinterpreted/updated in Brazil under the aegis of Exu, which requires situating oneself from a non-Eurocentric speaking place; in other words, made by Black artists. Since this crossroads materializes in the actors' bodies standing at a crossroads in the act of crossing, racist and anti-racist laughter symbolically clash for the latter carries the threat of subversiveness in which its power lies. The following statement by Oliveira (1972) corroborates this: "Exu never returns something in the same way he swallowed it." Thus, the show is conceived as the Poetics of the Crossroads that materializes in the bodies of its performers, or rather, in the space-time-body-laughter-Black embodiment with laughter as the end-result of comic, humorous, and ironic performance; these bodies embody a theatrical and ritualistic performance at this crossroads (an Exu-esque perspective, that is, Exu as ancestral wisdom).

Black bodies embody a crossroads on stage in a theatrical and ritualistic performance—reifying the confrontation with the colonality of the body, a being and knowledge introjected into Black embodiment by colonizing ideological representations in their intersections and layers. Racist and anti-racist laughter coexist in the idea of crossroads as non-exclusive dichotomous pairs, enabling conflicts, interventions, fissures and opening new paths. Thus, the laughter that operates and disseminates racism also transgresses this regime: laughter/colonialism denoting violence *versus* laughter/anti-racist/decolonial implying resilience, resistance, and transgression operated via Black



embodiments, reinterpreting Colonial racist laughter by intervention/confrontation/insurgency—what I have called “decolonial laughter.”



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