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Wayne County Community College District
Foundations of African American Art
Winter Semester - 2023

**The Significance of Art Within the African Diaspora:
A Focus on Brazil and the United States**

Introduction:

This semester, as part of our regular 16-Week Course, our class will focus on a research project which was researched during a Fulbright-Hays research trip to Brazil during the month of July 2022. The project, titled “The Significance of Art Within the African Diaspora: A Focus on Brazil and the United States” will comprise of 2 assignments as scheduled below:

- Assignment #2, Week # 4: 02/07/2023, and
- Assignment #3, Week # 6: 02/21/2023

The objective of this project is to introduce students to the history of the African Diaspora as viewed through the lens of Black artists in the Americas. More specifically, information about these Black artists, also called African American artists, will be drawn from the United States and Brazil:

- Images of art acquired from both countries will be provided for the students to review, compare, and describe.
- The class will focus on the contributions African American Artists provided in the cultural, social, and political landscapes of both countries.

Much of the Brazilian focus will be based on the life and contributions of Abdias do Nascimento, (b. 02/14/1914 – d. 05/23/2011). Lectures

will be given throughout the semester to explain how Nascimento played such an important role in the development of the African Arts Movement in North America, South America and throughout the African Diaspora.

In the preface of the book, *Africans in Brazil*, Dr. John Henrik Clarke, Professor Emeritus of African World History at Hunter College wrote:

“Nascimento has for many years been the main contact between the Africans in Brazil and the Western World and Africa itself. He has challenged the concept that Brazil is a nonracist society, and he has shown that some of the same prejudices exist against Africans in Brazil as against Africans in the United States and in the rest of the Americas.” (Nascimento, Nascimento, 1992 pg. ix).

Nascimento will be used as an example of an African/Black man who, throughout his life, confronted the tough dichotomy of growing up and identifying himself as African/Black while living in a society that oppressed African/Black people.

Nascimento’s beliefs and activism caused him to be imprisoned on several occasions. Starting at age 22, he was dishonorably discharged from the Brazilian Army, which he joined at age 16. Throughout his life he continuously felt the sting of prejudice from the ruling white establishment. For example, he stated that he was once barred from a nightclub dance floor for the following reason: In “Jaguarao, Rio Grande do Sul. I was not to be allowed on the dance floor because of my ‘low color,’ I was told.” (Nascimento, Nascimento, 1992 pg. 23).

Students will be required to include other political and artistic figures and their contributions to art and artists of the Diaspora during a time when it was difficult if not dangerous to

participate. Nascimento learned through his lifelong struggles to use art as a means of expressing his feelings for and about African people. He became an exhibiting painter in 1968 while working as Curator of the Black Arts Museum project, for which he became one of the founders in that same year, 1968.

The idea of a Black Arts Museum was sparked by an exhibition created by Guerreiro Ramos and supported by Abdias Nascimento, who suggested exhibiting artists' concepts of a Black Christ. Nascimento stated: "More than a hundred artists, African and non-African, exhibited their works. We installed an exhibition at the Ministry of Education building, and the event really messed with Christ's image in Brazil. In a closer approximation to historical truth than his traditional depiction as a blue-eyed Aryan, Jesus began to be portrayed with the dignified appearance of African color and features. Djanira won the contest, with her painting *Christ on the Whipping Post*, portraying Christ as an enslaved African. One result of this event was the idea of founding a Black Arts Museum, which would come to fruition later, in May 1968." (Nascimento, Nascimento, 1992 pg. 40).

Nascimento tackles the tough question in one section of his book titled *Self Criticism*, the questions of why try integration with people that have proven they do not want to integrate with you? They not only do not want to integrate with you but go out of their way to persecute all African people. He states: "Nevertheless, I do have reasons for self-criticism. The integrationist perspective, which (for better or worse) had been my orientation since the thirties, essentially implied a certain distance from our people" (Nascimento, Nascimento, 1992 pg. 42). This attitude of trying to gain acceptance by people who have proven time and time again that they hate

you and do not want to integrate with you is a dilemma that many people of African ancestry find themselves in.

Many African people especially those who are part of the African Diaspora seem to suffer from symptoms of what is known as Stockholm Syndrome. It is a condition where many hostages develop a psychological bond with their captors during captivity. Not only have African people developed a psychological bond over these more than 500 years of captivity, but many Africans of the Diaspora have abandon all identification of who they were, and taken on wholeheartedly the culture and ways of the captors or enslavers.

Kimberly L. Cleveland States about Nascimento: “In 1944, he founded the Teatro Experimental do Negro, which not only provided Afro-Brazilians the opportunity to participate in the theatre, but also offered literacy classes to the corps members, the majority of whom were unschooled domestic servants, and unemployed (Cleveland 2003, pg.46). Nascimento went on to say about many of his plays: “It was a mistake to insist on addressing the intellectual milieu. There was the error of wanting to ‘civilize’ oneself, the futile hope of being ‘understood’ by the society’s elites. ‘Integration’ meant African culture’s effort to be recognized by ‘Brazilian’ society, as if Brazilian society were other than African” (Nascimento, Nascimento, 1992 pg. 42). Much like African and many other oppressed people have done, Nascimento labored over this dilemma his entire life. Trying to be accepted as an equal by their oppressors has proven to be a futile act, especially among people of color.

Nascimento stated in another section of his book titled Perspectives: “I have been to the Caribbean, Europe, and Africa, and I find that African people’s problems are essentially the

same. Of course, there are historical differences and contrasts. To a great extent, Africans in the United States absorbed, or were absorbed into, the cold and individualist Anglo-Saxon mentality” (Nascimento, Nascimento, 1992 pg. 62). Many Africans around the world, including those who are part of the Diaspora, have maintained much of their African Culture, which is readily displayed in Brazil. Conversely, such cultural knowledge has been mostly eliminated from the memories of African Americans in the United States. They have no idea where they came from, their family names, or from which ethnic group they belonged to, and many do not care to know.

Nascimento was selected as an activist of interest because during this period of time in history with the Civil Rights movements in the United States and around the world being in the forefront of the news, he helped to create world-renown art exhibitions created by African artists throughout the African Diaspora, especially in Brazil, and on the Continent of Africa. During his lifetime, Nascimento exhibited extraordinary courage. He set an example as a politician, artist, and a freedom fighter for the Human Rights of African people throughout the Diaspora.

Unit Goals:

1. Students will be asked to identify artists in the United States and Brazil who contributed to Human Rights, by using their artwork as a means for change.
2. Students will research what Abdias do Nascimento contributed to the art and political movement of Black Brazilians and will compare him to a Black American in the United States who did the same.

3. How has African Artist of the Diaspora in both Brazil and the United States work been different and similar over the last 150 years?
4. By the end of the class students will write a research paper that will include the art and artists who made contributions to the Human Rights of people from around the world.

Learning Objectives:

Students will develop papers that speak to their understanding of artists' roles in the United States and Brazil. The papers will describe why the students think the artists they choose should or should not be considered as ambassadors of culture and change.

Students will do the following:

1. Write papers throughout the semester using the MLA style and the correct works cited format.
2. Use research sources to define the artist's role in the African Diaspora as storytellers and humanitarians.
3. Conduct research to find similarities in works created by Afro Brazilian and African American artists.
4. Document the ways Abdias do Nascimento contributed to politics and Black Arts Movement in Brazil and throughout the Diaspora.

Essential Questions:

1. During the 20th century, what changes did African American artists in the U.S. and Brazil add to the humanitarian movement for Africans throughout the African Diaspora?
2. During the last century what changes have been made by Africans of the Diaspora? Students will choose at least 2-3 key points.
 3. What has not changed for African people of the Diaspora since the end of Chattel Slavery?
Note: Slavery ended in the U.S.A. on December 18, 1865, and in Brazil on May 13, 1888.
 4. How can contemporary African Artists of the Diaspora play a role in helping to change society?
 5. How can artists play a role in political change for Africans of the Diaspora?
 6. Students will be asked to think deeply and write about what they believe **their role** is as agents of change for themselves and other people of the African Diaspora.
 7. How has the artwork of African American and African Brazilian artists changed during the 21st century?
 8. What role did countless African American and African Brazilian political leaders, and others play in the movement for social change during the last century, including Abdias Do Nascimento, Malcolm X, Dr. Martin Luther King, Kwame Nkrumah?

Summary and Rationale of work for the semester:

1. During the past 150 years, since the end of Chattel Slavery, what have Africans in the Diaspora done in their fight for social justice?
2. As the key political, artistic, and impetus for the Black Arts Movement in Brazil and the Diaspora what role did Abdias do Nascimento play among African leaders who were artists, orators, and agents of change for all people of African heritage.
3. What role are artists today playing in the Human Rights Movement?
 - a. Is their work being used as instruments of change?
 - b. Are artists just making art for art's sake?
 - c. Are artists forgetting about their own people of the Diaspora and their plight as oppressed people?
4. Are artists today out just for money or are some still connected to and working for political and social change? Students will answer this and other questions regarding the character of artists producing artwork today.
5. Can African people tackle the tough question of why ask for acceptance and integration with a people that have shown during the past 500+ years they want to destroy African Culture, by continuing to create the type of psychological damage that is prevalent in

African Communities around the world especially among African people of the Diaspora, such as Brazil and the United States?

Lesson Plans:

Students will receive information at the beginning of the semester providing a foundation for lessons to come. They will watch videos and be given reading assignments that will prepare them for the semester.

Videos:

1. African American Art and Artist
2. African Diaspora

Text:

1. African American Art Past and Present, By Samella Lewis

Supplemental Text:

2. Nascimento, A. D., & Nascimento, E. L. (1992). *Africans in Brazil: A Pan-African Perspective*. African World Press.
3. Bearden, R., & Henderson, H. (1993). *A History of African-American Artists From 1972 to the Present* (Vol. 1). Pantheon Books.

Class Syllabus Provided

Works Cited:

Africandiasporadvd.com (2017). *Afro Brazilian Leaders* [DVD]. Brazil.

Bearden, R., & Henderson, H. (1993). *A History of African-American Artists From 1972 to the Present* (Vol. 1). Pantheon Books.

Cleveland, K. L. (2013). *Black Art in Brazil: Expressions of Identity*. Univ. Press of Florida.

Lynch, S. (2018). Fulbright Hays Curriculum Project. *Black Orpheus A Retrospective*, 1–7.

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