

# **Cultural policy and resistance: producing the Black Theater Festival and understanding its effects**

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## **Introduction: valuing black art as a way of defending life**

The work we present is based on the experience of producing two editions of the Black Theater Festival, at the Federal University of Minas Gerais (Brazil), with the perspective of understanding cultural policy also as a form of resistance, and valuing black art as a way of defending life.

The first edition of the Festival was promoted, in the pandemic context, in 2020, completely digitally on social media. Works that had black themes as the main element, created by black students from technical, higher education and postgraduate courses, were selected through a public call at the university community. The Festival was made possible by the University Theater of the Federal University of Minas Gerais, Brazil, through a university extension project, which has carried out work based on the proposal of promoting interaction between the university community (in the arts area), students and teachers, with artists and researchers who have a purposeful role in society, and the general public. The event also fulfilled the role of helping students financially, albeit in a modest way, through the granting of scholarships for festival participants, at a time when most of the university's students were facing serious financial problems due to the pandemic. A situation that was

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even worse among black students, as they historically belonged to the lower socioeconomic strata of the Brazilian population.

The second edition of the Festival was held in 2022, already in person, counting in the same way as the previous one with a public call to the students university community, to select works that had black themes as the main element and that were created by black students from different courses and levels of university education. In addition to several free activities open to the general public and not just the university community.

From a perspective of exchange between the university community and artists and researchers, the Festival is an event that has an important cultural and pedagogical character, as black arts in the field of theatrical practices and theories are still few studied and disseminated in Brazilian academies. There are still few disciplines and cultural activities that present discussions about black art and theater in their content. Reflection of a recurrent epistemicide favored by a majority white teaching staff within most Brazilian universities.

To try to counter this reality, one of the mottos of the second edition of the festival was the campaign “For + black teachers in theater”. After all, how is it possible to conceive that at the University Theater, a technical theater school that is over 70 years old would only have one black professor, despite being located in one of the states with the largest population of brown and black people in the federation? In the higher theater course at the same university, after a lot of struggle from the students, actions like this one at the festival and the public prosecutor's office urging the university to comply with the law on quotas for public competitions, two black professors were recently hired as permanent teachers. There is also an expectation that, soon, the same will happen in the technical course at the University Theater.

On the other hand, every year, as the number of black students increases, due to the affirmative policies practiced by the university for more than twenty years, the interest of students and the general public in the theme of black theater also increases, since many do not see themselves represented, as black people, in discussions of traditional theater. Therefore, the festival opens space for an art that is articulated, in fact, in a more inclusive way, contemplating scenic and dramaturgical creations with black-centered perspectives and with powerful textual and performance productions. This way, the two editions of the UFMG Black Theater Festival were guided by openness to dialogue and discussion on the topic, enabling interaction between students, teachers, researchers and black artists. This action of an extension nature and, in principle, emergency, since the first edition was carried out during the Covid 19 pandemic, was designed as a way of valuing “a ancestralidade como sabedoria

pluriversal ressemantizada por essas populações em diáspora que emerge como um dos principais elementos que substanciam a invenção e a defesa da vida” (Rufino, 2019, p. 15). Organizing the festival with this theme and the objective of giving visibility and recognition to the production of black theater at the university and in the city was also a way for us to defend life in these pandemic times. We understand with Munanga (2020) that identity communities are built from common experiences and cultural references, and cannot be defined only by race, understood as a concept that operates, not biologically, but socially and politically. In that regard it is of extreme importance in the construction of cultural identity historical, linguistic and psychological factors as well. It is important to say that the first edition generated an important cultural product that systematized the activities carried out at the festival, producing a critical reflection on them, the digital book: “Teatro Negro UFMG arte na pandemia” (2021), organized by the authors of this paper and published by the editing laboratory of the Faculty of Languages and Literature. The book features theater criticism, academic texts and black drama of recognized Brazilian authors.

One of our main objectives in producing the festival, which has its third edition scheduled for November 2024, is to provide support and visibility to the creations, experiments, and researches that are being produced by black students at the university, thus providing, that their productions and scenic-performative exercises can be disseminated beyond the academic sphere. As a common point to blackness or black identities, Munanga points not to the color of the skin, but “o fato de terem sido na história vítimas das piores tentativas de desumanização e de terem sido suas culturas não apenas objeto de políticas sistemáticas de destruição, mas, mais do que isso, de ter sido simplesmente negada a existência dessas culturas” (Munanga, 2020, p. 19). Therefore, the proposed cultural action is an action that affirms the existence of these students at the university and the importance of their artistic creations within the university community and also within the city.

Furthermore, we understand that both at the university level and beyond, festivals and special events have assumed importance in cultural policy for local communities, marking attitudes of identification and belonging to social groups. Many communities around the world have benefited from this movement and this repercussion has legitimized theoretical and empirical studies on the topic, as Bernadette Quinn (2013) points out.

## **Methodology: new spaces for the circulation and dissemination of art!**

Black poetics have already demonstrated what they came for. It is nothing new that the themes that bring us together as black people have been discussed in spectacular contemporary productions carried out in different spaces throughout Brazil. Based on this premise, seeking to encourage the production of works from black perspectives and, at the same time, bring to discussion the multiplicity of themes that integrate and cross black poetics and subjectivities, we idealized and carried out the Black Theater Festival. Through a public call aimed at the university community, the curatorial team selected works that had black themes as the main element and that were created by black students from technical, higher education and postgraduate courses at the university, such as we have already mentioned. This broad call also made it possible to contemplate black theatrical artistic production at different levels, in the most diverse courses at the university, demonstrating that black art is powerful and its production is not limited only to courses in the Arts area.

In the pandemic context, holding the Festival online was a way of contributing to the research and work carried out by students finding new spaces for circulation and dissemination. In the post-context after the pandemic, holding the Festival in person meant the strengthening and maintenance of a cultural policy that meets discussions about blackness and the affirmation of black identities, so present in our society today. The appreciation and acceptance of African heritage is part of the process of rescuing a subjectivity that is also collective, and seeks to positively reconstruct this identity by looking at ancestral history while claiming the right to its culture, its color and its body, understood as the “*sede material de todos os aspectos da identidade*” (Munanga, 2020, p. 19). Professor and intellectual Leda Maria Martins (2021) states the importance of building another type of thinking paradigm based on African corporeities, to which she dedicates her academic life. Among the various concepts coined by Leda are the *oralitura*, which brings together literary construction and oral transmission knowledge, and the notion of *spiral time*, which challenges the linearity of the causal relationship. When holding a festival that values artistic creation focused on the body (corporeality) and subjectivity(ies), we understand this action as a way of valuing other parameters of knowledge construction: practiced knowledge, knowledge in performance .

We understand that this paradigmatic shift has been carried out both by agents of the black movement, and by intellectuals such as bell hooks, Fu-Kiau Djamila Ribeiro, Grada Kilomba, Kabengele Munanga, Leda Maria Martins, Silvio de Almeida, among many others, and that the creation and realization of a festival like this can have the effect of disseminating

these discussions, promoting social inclusion, cultural diversity and human development in general.

It is important to highlight that this is the second festival of its kind that we have heard about in Brazil, and the only one still active. Since the Dona Ruth Black Theater Festival in the city of São Paulo was discontinued after three editions held between 2019 and 2021. There are other similar initiatives in the field of performing arts, such as the segundaPRETA, in the city of Belo Horizonte, which, in turn, was inspired by Terça Preta in Salvador and which generated other black days across Brazil, with the aim of promoting the presentation and debate of scenes and shows by black artists. However, we still have a lot to fight for with the private sector and public policies, since many of the initiatives mentioned above do not even have sponsorship, which often do not guarantee the continuity of these actions.

### **Results: numbers and beyond!**

To select the scenes, pieces and performance, the Festival had a curatorial team made up of artists and researchers from the city's black scene, representatives of different collectives and different black propositions.

In the first edition, on the days the event took place, short scenes or performances, from 1 to 20 minutes and shows over 40 and a maximum of 90 minutes in length, were presented on the institution's YouTube Channel. In numerical terms, we highlight:

- **Registered in the selection notice: 20 (twenty) registrations** of student artists.
- **Selected pieces: 3 (three) selected pieces**
- **Selected short scenes: 12 (twelve) selected short scenes**
- **Published texts: 5 (five) published texts**
- **Training activity: 1 (one) workshop**
- **Audience participating in the workshop: 55 (fifty-five) people;**
- **General public reached: Approximately 100 (one hundred) readings of texts published on the Issuu platform, approximately 2700 (two thousand and seven hundred) views on the institution's YouTube channel and approximately 8 (eight) hours of content.**

In the second edition, on the days the event was held, a video showcase was presented on the institution's YouTube Channel, short scenes or performances, from 01 to 20 minutes and shows over 40 and a maximum of 90 minutes in length. In numerical terms, we highlight:

- **Those registered in the selection notice: 30 (twenty) registrations of student artists.**
- **Selected pieces: 3 (three) selected pieces**
- **Selected short scenes: 12 (twelve) selected short scenes**
- **Guest shows: 2 (two)**
- **Training activities: 1 (one) workshop; 1 (one) dance circle; 1 (one) lecture; launch of 3 (three) books and 1 (one) blog; 1 (one) video show.**
- **Audience participating in the workshop: 25 (twenty-five) people;**
- **Public participating in activities in general: 1000 (thousand) people approx.**

We observed that the emphasis given to training activities in the face-to-face edition is in accordance with what was pointed out by Ana Flávia Machado et al (2016, p. 340). According to the authors:

a formação de público, pelo ponto de vista das políticas públicas para a cultura e a educação, deve ser analisada a partir das possibilidades criadas para democratizar o acesso do cidadão aos bens e serviços culturais, o que não significa apenas a oferta de eventos ou a entrada em espaços gratuitos ou subsidiados, mas que também deve ser vista a partir de um processo de educação formal (...), que proporcione ao cidadão o acesso ao conhecimento. E é esse domínio mínimo dos códigos culturais que pode garantir o direito de escolha sobre o desejo de frequentar, ou não, ambientes culturais e, conseqüentemente, de fazer parte de seus hábitos cotidianos.

### **Considerations: for an inclusive university space!**

Maintaining the character of enabling a socio-interactionist perspective, the Festival, from these two editions, proposes itself as a biennial action that will continue to pursue the goal of promoting relationships between teaching, research and extension, bringing reciprocity to the teaching-learning processes. Following these two editions of the Black Theater Festival, we reaffirm the purpose that actions like these can contribute to the construction of an inclusive university space, attentive to contemporary discussions of art and culture, which is socially inserted into the city's community and seeks to dialogue with it, interconnecting education and culture, as policies of resistance and social inclusion.

Given the countless forms of violence that our black brothers and sisters still face, arising from the most different forms of racism present in our society, it is perhaps difficult to

say that it is with joy that we are currently preparing the third edition of the Black Theater Festival for the year 2024. We prefer to say that it is with great courage, strength and fighting spirit that we continue together with other fellow teachers, administrative technicians and especially black students. That way, we hope that we can continue to celebrate the blackness of artistic production in dance, theater and performance. at this university, in an attempt to increasingly reinforce the importance of an academic environment that is, in fact, plural and anti-racist.

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Keywords: Festival; Blackness; Cultural Policy; University Policy; Resistance, Black Theaters.