



# The Songs of Black Experiences: consonances and dissonances in the path between Grotowski and the *Workcenter*

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**ABSTRACT – The Songs of Black Experiences: consonances and dissonances in the path between Grotowski and the *Workcenter*<sup>1</sup>** – It is proposed in the paper to observe the role of African-diasporic songs in the work of Jerzy Grotowski and in the context of continued research at the *Workcenter* of Jerzy Grotowski and Thomas Richards. We reflect on the songs from their epistemological and political potencies and as fundamental elements for an ethnic-racial discursivity in studies of this important work in the field of performing arts. The notion of songs of black experiences proposes the understanding of the term *tradition songs*, central in Grotowski's work, as means of communication of diasporic and Afro-descendant experiences, contrary to the solely instrumental and uncritical use of these performative technologies.

**Keywords: Songs of Tradition. Ethnic-Racial Relations. Interculturality. Diasporic Poetics. Afro-Descendant Performativities.**

**RÉSUMÉ – Les Chants des Expériences Noires: consonances et dissonances dans le parcours entre Grotowski et le *Workcenter*** – Il est proposé dans l'article d'observer le rôle des chants afro-diasporiques dans le travail de Jerzy Grotowski et dans le cadre des recherches poursuivies au *Workcenter* de Jerzy Grotowski et Thomas Richards. Nous réfléchissons sur les chansons à partir de leurs puissances épistémologiques et politiques et en tant qu'éléments fondamentaux pour une discursivité ethnique-raciale dans les études de cette importante œuvre dans le domaine des arts performants. La notion de chants d'expériences noires propose d'appréhender le terme *chants de tradition*, central dans l'œuvre de Grotowski, comme moyen de communication d'expériences diasporiques et afro-descendantes, contrairement à l'utilisation uniquement instrumentale et non critique de ces technologies performatives.

**Mots-clés: Chants de la Tradition. Relations Ethnique-Raciales. Interculturalité. Poétique Diasporique. Performativités Afro-Descendantes.**

**RESUMO – Os Cantos de Experiências Negras: consonâncias e dissonâncias no percurso entre Grotowski e o *Workcenter*<sup>2</sup>** – Propõe-se no artigo observar o papel dos cantos africano-diaspóricos no trabalho de Jerzy Grotowski e no âmbito das pesquisas continuadas no *Workcenter of Jerzy Grotowski and Thomas Richards*. Reflete-se sobre os cantos a partir de suas potências epistemológicas e políticas e como elementos fundamentais para uma discursividade étnico-racial nos estudos sobre essa importante obra no campo das artes performativas. A noção de cantos de experiências negras propõe a compreensão do termo *cantos de tradição*, central na obra grotowskiana, como meios de comunicação de vivências diaspóricas e afrodescendentes, contrária ao uso unicamente instrumental e acrítico dessas tecnologias performativas.

**Palavras-chave: Cantos de Tradição. Relações Étnico-Raciais. Interculturalidade. Poética Diaspórica. Performatividades Afrodescendentes.**

## 1

Since the beginning of this century — with increasing access to the means of education and information, and through an acute critique of the theatrical historiography, thought, and production —, black scenic artists and researchers have been able to identify the epistemicides caused by the hegemony of the Eurocentric thinking-doing. In this exercise, they analyze the sophistications of the modes of operation that coloniality also placed on the narratives of theatrical research and creation, especially when confronted with the poetics built from intercultural relations and cross-cultural experiences.

It is as part of this flow that claims other perceptions about these narratives that we propound a problematization of the use of African-Diasporic tradition songs within the artistic-humanistic project of Jerzy Grotowski's post-theatrical work, including its continuation — albeit transformed — in the autonomous paths of research and creation of the *Workcenter of Jerzy Grotowski and Thomas Richards*.

Jerzy Grotowski (Rzeszów/Poland, 1933 – Pontedera/Italy, 1999), theatrical director and performing arts researcher, represented a revolution in Western theater through the proposals he formulated in the theoretical-practical field that he called Poor Theater, centered on the figure of the actor as the foundation of the performance and on the spectacle as a special device for the encounter with the spectator. Thus, by following a precise working method, which aimed at the performer's full psychophysical organicity, the total break of behavior masks was achieved, which would reverberate in the public, touching the collective social unconscious. His work as director in the *conventional* field of the spectacle, which spanned between 1957 and 1969, transformed the theatrical pedagogy, the modes of creation and production through the notion of theater as a research laboratory, deepened the notion of craft and ethics in group theater, and expanded the poetic possibilities of staging by considering the spectator's perspective in the space of action. The radicality of his work can be seen in historical spectacles, such as *Akropolis*, *Dr. Faustus*, *The Constant Prince* and *Apocalypsis cum Figuris*, conceived in the artistic scope of the team generically identified as the Laboratory Theater, along its different phases, names, locations (initially in the city of Opole, then in Wrocław, both in Poland) and formations.



His pursuit, which consisted in studying performative forms and the human being in a situation of performance as paths of knowledge of oneself and transcendence by the powers of the vitality of the being and immanence of their cultural origins, led him to break with the production of spectacles in 1972, the year he began the second major phase of his work, named as post-theatrical, and that continued until his death. This period is usually considered according to the following division: Paratheater (1969-78); parallel and simultaneously, Theater of Sources (1976-82); then, Objective Drama (1983-86), and, finally, Art as Vehicle, which started with the foundation of the *Workcenter of Jerzy Grotowski* in 1986, in the small Italian municipality of Pontedera, province of Pisa, region of Tuscany, and ended with the closure of the activities of this center in January 2022.

In this second major phase, the director was accompanied by a multitude of research partners, actors and non-actors, scholars from fields such as Anthropology and Psychiatry, practitioners of performative and religious traditions from different parts of the world, which in fact consisted in his great intercultural project (the collaboration between individuals of different ethnocultural origins) and the results of his cross-cultural works (which mix poetic and epistemic references from different know-hows). It should be emphasized that what we call work here should not be understood in the sense of staging, but of performative structures aimed at the perception of those who perform them (Grotowski, 2012), not as spectacles that aimed at an audience to validate their existence.

It is at this point, specifically from the Theater of Sources onward, that Grotowski (2012, p. 141) starts active collaboration with Afro-descendant artists and researchers, in finding what he named as “ritual songs from the ancient tradition” or “ancient vibratory songs” (Grotowski, 1996, p. 12), in the form of African and Afro-Diaporic song collections (initially Haitians, from the religious domain of *Vodou*, and later from Cuban *Santería*). This interethnic collaborative work around these specific songs was oriented mainly by the partnership with Haitian master Maud Robart and had its peak with the close relationship that Grotowski established with African-American Thomas Richards in the performative research and practice during the early years of the *Workcenter*.

After the director passed away, Richards, trained as an actor and musician, together with Mario Biagini, also a direct heir to this intellectual and investigative work, advanced in the research and creation proposals, returning to contact with the logics of theatrical production, but based on the notion of transit of performative action on that which Grotowski (2012) understood as a single current with two poles: at one end, art as presentation (the work carried out to reach the spectators' perception); at the other end, art as vehicle (the work carried out to reach the performers' perception).

Concluding this initial contextualization, specifically from 2007 onward, with the creation of the two work teams that constituted the *Workcenter* until the end of its activities — the *Focused Research Team in Art as Vehicle*, directed by Richards, and the *Open Program*, directed by Biagini —, the use of Afro-Diasporic tradition songs as tools for investigation and creation of the actor/performer was diversified, now involving the extensive repertoire of songs from the Southern United States (*Southern Songs*) and African-Latin Americans songs (from the rituals of *Palo* and other cultural/religious manifestations). However, it is from 2012 onward that, after a long lapse, the absences of other black/Afro-descendant performers to deal with these creative foundations — so dear to the Grotowskian post-theatrical project — begin to be perceived in this workcenter, thus starting to effect their presence, through auditions and invitations for new members, especially in the *Open Program* team.

The reflections that we present here originate from our own experience of artistic activity in the *Workcenter*, between 2012 and 2015, in the new context of research and creation and as part of the *Open Program*, during the period of greater black presence in that center.

## 2

We propose reflections founded on Afro-descendant identities, both political, since even Grotowski's post-theatrical work enables ethnic-racial discursivities in their performative results, and cultural, since their aesthetics are based on visible and audible African-diasporic expressive forms.

The point is not making an observation about an occasional artistic option for one-off creative work. The point is thinking about a long-term artistic research project, which we here call the Grotowski-Workcenter *con-*

*tinuum*, because it is about the continuous development of principles discovered as fundamental for the study and accomplishment of human potencies within an organized performative situation, which can traverse between theater (art as presentation) and ritual (art as vehicle). A long research that developed a performative technique, a discursive poetics and a dramaturgical language that parameterize the whole set of a work that moved for more than four decades (we are not considering here the theatrical phase and the early years of the Paratheater). Therefore, it is its long duration that makes it a complex critical thinking exercise, since the ethical rigor of the Grotowskian program and its continuation in the *Workcenter* do not allow a taxation/reduction of the use of the songs to the category of cultural appropriation.

To prove the consolidation of this investigation over time, we note that the relation with African-diasporic tradition songs was initiated by Grotowski in 1977, with his first visit to Haiti, already in the context of the research of the Theater of Sources, whose program sought to comprehend the common principles in the construction of presence that preceded cultural differences or differences of origin. In addition to this visit, the Polish director and researcher traveled to Nigeria on two occasions, between 1978 and 1979, and returned to Haiti at different times in 1979, as reported by the *Grotowski Institute* (Instytut Im. Jerzego Grotowskiego, 2018).

Beyond the primary *utilitarian* notion that is inferred from the conceptualization of Grotowski (2012) as to the African and Afro-Diasporic tradition songs as instruments of precision, there is — whether around, on or from within (Gilroy, 2012) the performance of these songs, as expressive forms of blackness in the Afro-Atlantic complex — their transformation into a mark of a cultural and political identity built as a reaction to the colonial slavocratic experience and the subsequent development of capitalist racism. Thus, in terms of the deepening of contemporary discussions of the epistemologies of the South (Santos; Meneses, 2010), inevitable questions arise.

Is it possible to consider, according to the systematic study and use with regard to the practical and theoretical production developed by the Grotowski-Workcenter *continuum*, that the African-Diasporic song in the mouth of non-black Europeans is decolonizing them in their condition as

subjects from a culture that imposed a project of world hegemony? Or is it only serving, as an existential *precision instrument*, to fill an ontological void that has long been present in the spirit of a culture based on the fragmentation and destruction of others?

Observing the intercultural experience as an action driven by the craving for creation of something new and invigorating in the Western theater from the 1970s onward, less as a technical and aesthetic exercise and more as a construction of existential meaning, we confirmed the observation of Roger Bastide (1983) that the European theater was in search of a spirituality diluted in its bourgeois enlightened-rationalist process, and that, in the black-African forms, it could rediscover the lost enchantment.

[...] The Europeans [...] hoped to find in these exotic manifestations a model based on which they could perhaps build a more valid theater. [...] Rediscover an essential theater, which is a feast of all senses, a communion of all hearts, the manufacture of another world, different from the one in which we live (Bastide, 1983, p. 139-140).

This ontological helplessness, especially in countries with colonialist history, is given by a symbolic desertification, that is, the loss of a potentiating relation with cosmologies and cosmogonies founding and unifying a community. A desertification that follows the delegitimization of the civilizing values of the cultures in which colonialist Europe interfered, made *exotic* fetishes, outside, distant and separated from their field of perception, understanding, contemplation and knowledge (Martins, 2003), delusions of ignorant people. In addition, evidently, to enhancing itself with the impoverishment of contemporary Christianity as a religiosity capable of generating a relation of enchantment with the world-life, due to its massification and reproduction, still as a form of institutional power of the West.

On the other hand, the ontological helplessness observed in the Afro-descendant person, displaced from an original *locus* of reference, Africa, is relativized, if not totally suppressed, because this person can still locate it through processes of cultural identification and epistemological claim, even in the social and identity fragmentation resulting from the diaspora. That is why it is valid to see the contemporary European theater artist, accustomed to the poetics and policies of interculturality, as the patient who seeks to cure the *abscess of himself* generated by the harmful aspect of the Western

*ethos*, that which instigates him to an excessive and illusionist pride, leading him to see himself as the main regulator — or even the only one — of the intelligence of a universal civilization put on stage. And thus we create a counterpoint with the Fanonian view applied to the black subject, who is no longer — at least in the intercultural and multiethnic theatrical context of the Grotowski-Workcenter *continuum* — the one “who suffers and seeks to be relieved” (Fanon, 2015, p. 290 apud Mbembe, 2017, p. 190, our translation), but rather the subject of Eurocentric whiteness.

### 3

When we observe this cultural element from an afro-referenced perspective, that is, a way of connecting experience and reflection that is founded on black African/diasporic epistemologies and their know-hows as a basis for thinking about the theatricalities/performativities, we see that the tradition song is inherent to afrodescendant theatrical poetics, being heirs to performative conceptions as integrated systems of languages in Africa, or, according to Balogun (1977), “communication arts.” Within the different poetics, the songs can be understood, at first and/or only, as part of the total aesthetic aspect of the scenic work (visualities, sound-musicalities, textualities). This means that African-diasporic tradition songs are elements that constitute a black theatricality, but whose presences, even in these theatricalities, are not necessarily understood as inextricable parts of the organic functioning of the acting-staging set. They can be considered only as an attachable element, with the purpose of favoring only the formality of the work, and not as conductors of vital experiences of the artist’s subjectivity on stage manifested in sound form. Or they can be perceived as another materiality with which the spoken word reveals its power, as suggested by a Yoruba proverbial sentence: “It is the chant that enchants the word. Decanting makes it a treasure” (Nogueira, 2020, personal information, our translation).

Grotowski gave a para-scientific treatment to African-Diasporic ritual tradition songs (especially those of Nigerian and Caribbean origin), that is, he studied them and applied them in his research as precision instruments for the transformation of dense psychophysical energies into subtle ones within the initial process of Art as Vehicle. However, the possible synthesis

or reduction of these songs only to aesthetic or parascientific aspects does not mean the neutralization of their political, historical, socio-identity and existential/subjective sense for the black subject. After all, these songs are part of the diasporic expressions that contributed to the development of the cultures of modernity in the West, especially of urban cultures, for example, by means of the very diverse transformations of the *spirituals* that led to *blues* and then to *rock*, in the USA, or of the Central African rhythms that led to samba and then to bossa nova, in Brazil.

Also considering theater as an art of communication that employs several expressive channels simultaneously to support the presence of singing in a performative whole that does not separate it from other elements such as dance and instrumental musicality, we can resort to Bunseki Fu-Kiau, when, according to Ligiéro (2011, p. 135), he proposes that we observe African performativities as

[...] a single composite object ('tied'), the 'drumming-singing-dancing,' which would then be a *continuum*. In his analysis he points out that in almost all African religions the spirits of the main ancestors, when venerated through trance, return to earth to share their wisdom with their people. In these cultures, rituals take place in arenas, processions or in both, complementarily. In these spaces, devotees play drums, dance and sing in honor of the gods and ancestors: 'Life would be impossible in any African community without the invisible and reconciling healing powers generated by the powerful trio of keywords of music and enjoyment' (Fu-Kiau, n.d., our translation). Fu-Kiau states that when someone is playing an atabaque or any other instrument, a spiritual language is being articulated. Singing is perceived as the interpretation of these languages for the community present in the here and now.

Being then an interpreter of the languages of ancestry, singing fulfills a central function in the transmission of experiences, and announces an ethics of behaviors and attitudes in the immediate reality and for the possibilities of becoming.

The songs, in their various modulations, are energy radio transmitters, aesthetic languages dispersed in black oral textuality. In their rich and complex enunciation, they revitalize various genres, forms and compositions of African repertoires, as well as create new sounds. By singing and speaking, histories, stories, fables, tales, vissungos, proverbs, stories of deities, families, the creation of the cosmos and beings, stories of crossings, works and days, loves, terrors of slavery, struggles, interdictions, but also wars for freedom

are narrated, performed and recreated; the lessons, animals, plants and herbs, technological practices, medicinal plants, healing, devotions, the sacred, *inguiziras* and *quizumbas*, *ladainhas* and *corridinhos*, prayers, challenges, bursts, the doing of things, and the techniques of making, the mixtures of clay, the design and shape of houses, the lights of the moon and sun, their rises and sets, currents, flows, delights, ornaments and aromas (Martins, 2021, p. 98, our translation).

Thus, black singing is not a generic and copyrightless tool. It is the result of enchanted readings and traumatic disenchantments of the same world, while communicating the experiences of concrete bodies involved in these readings. These bodies are vibrated and revived as memories in other bodies. But the fact is that they do not vibrate in the same way for a black person who shares pleasure and pain by identification, and for a non-black person who approaches the experience by compassion, in the sense of a willingness to *feel with*. For the latter, seeking the origin of the power of life or death that the melancholic or utopian song dictates to him, and finding correspondence in his own relation with these boundaries of existence, is what can make him experience a feeling of world communion in the face of the original reasons that moved the songs, which occurs by the perception — free from the ties of racial categorizations — of human beings as a community factually limited by these same markers, at the same time biological and ontological (living and dying). However, the most secret codes of the experience of pain, opened by the key of exile, slavery and racism, cannot be accessed, as they are part of a given transhistorical reality experienced by African peoples and their diasporic descendants in the last five centuries.

It is from this point of view that the black singing emitted by the mouth of the black person is a struggle against the de-potentialization of their creative forces, the disempowerment of the construction of other futures, and the subalternization of African-diasporic know-hows, which always threatens it as long as the racist system continues to be reproduced. A fierce response, even when mild, to the emptying of ontological sense of self, present in what Mbembe (2017, p. 204, our translation) identified as “[...] the sign of emptiness or mutism — the fear of a collapse, the difficulty of inhabiting language again, of retaking the word, of having a voice and, thus, life.” A resistance that depends on the personal perception that the

tradition that sustains the meaning of a song will first sprout, based on the diasporic condition, from an intimate source of identification and sense of belonging.

Culture is formed by dialectical processes, as the diaspora itself reveals, when, in the dehumanization/objectification of the African person throughout the Atlantic trade, it consequently generated a movement of knowledge and modes of being and doing in the clash between the ethnic diversities of blacks, Amerindians and European whites, which reconfigured the human history of the last 500 years, even though a false historical narrative of victories and progress has been established, by the imposition of colonial violence, by the last ones of this triad. Therefore, when we focus with a more attentive and profound listening on the black and diasporic tradition songs — as well as on other natures of artistic-aesthetic manifestation of these traditions —, it is also possible to see that the sense of culture in the *in common*<sup>3</sup> of the world is also inferred from these songs, extrapolating the exotic instituted by the supremacist worldview of whiteness, which generated the racialization of the world itself and its derivations in racism and eugenics. We see listening and/or singing an extensive black culture with singular features — although plural in its diversity of forms and locations — in the global common, from which black people should no longer be separated and robbed of their benefits, since they are “[...] an integral part of the history of the world [...] heirs to this history [...] as much as the rest of the human species” (Mbembe, 2017, p. 211, our translation).

#### 4

Du Bois (1999, p. 297) named the songs of the Southern United States as *Sorrow Songs*, songs of suffering. Gilroy (2012, p. 13, our translation) considers that “the cultures of the black Atlantic created vehicles of consolation through the mediation of suffering.” Based on these perceptions, we can take into account that the entire set of African-diasporic songs that composed the Grotowskian work and its continuation, from 1977 to 2022, are, above all, diverse communications of the black people, of a cosmological, affective and political order, missive songs that in their multiple transcultures in the diaspora the enslaved “articulated to the world” (Du Bois, 1999, p. 301).

As communications of experiences, memories, knowledge and readings of the same world, such songs also act as therapeutic forms for the reintegration of fragmented identities, devoid of a sense of origin and belonging, in short, deterritorialized, which could occupy only an established place in racialized modernity with their fixed locations in the “chromatic hierarchy” (Scott, 2019). This does not mean that we are dealing with this issue through a reified discourse, which is based on the unawareness of ethnic-racial belonging of a black person as a constant factor, but rather that, observing our experience in the context of the *Workcenter*, through research and creations around repertoires of African-Diaporic songs, we understand that such songs provided us with reconnections with cultural matrices of these origins, and helped in our process of construction of Afro-descendant identity.

Thus, the sense of *work about oneself*<sup>A</sup>, which accompanies the refined use that Grotowski discovered, through these songs, for his research on the human in a performative situation, feeds — as we defend — on a therapeutic sense inherent to them. We can even say atavistic, since these songs are consolidations in sonorous-musical forms of black subjectivities shaped by the impacts of the diaspora (the disintegration of ethnic groups and families, the slavocratic regime and the consolidation of racism, the destitution of rights and decent living conditions of the black population) and the mutations that it introduced in cultures of African origin (the combinations of distinct cosmoperceptions, the syncretisms, the creation of new artistic and religious expressions).

This therapy has the potential to trigger healing processes, according to the Fanonian perspective that Mbembe (2017) presents, that is, the possibility of being a relief to the suffering of someone in a condition of being separated from the shared world. Therefore, within the cross-cultural project that permeated Grotowski’s final path and continued in the *Workcenter*, this potency helped to sustain the very sense of intercultural experience that moved this project. That is because the Afrodiasporic songs from Haiti, Cuba, the United States and Colombia, for example, being the main tools of the work and central organizers of the scenic-performative practices developed there, and also the results of transformations of African cultures in

the diaspora, fully fulfill the communicative and palliative function that Du Bois and Gilroy, respectively, noted above.

Certainly, the African-Diasporic black song, considered according to its cross-cultural potency in the action settings of the Grotowski-Workcenter *continuum* (the many places of research, training, discussion and artistic presentation), but without losing its geohistoricity (its local identification (Africa and the Americas) and temporal identification through Afro-Atlantic flows) and its symbolism for diasporic black culture, also starts to act as a common communication language — we risk to say a *sui generis general language* —, since it is the main vehicle for establishing a shared terrain where people from different ethnic-national origins can touch on feasible — albeit rare and fleeting — moments of effective experience of a radical alterity and humanism, within controlled and safe situations, that is, the work room or the performative event. An alterity that “[...] is only possible if the Other is really another in relation to a term whose essence is to remain at the starting point, to serve as an *entry into* the relationship, to be the same not relatively, but absolutely” (Lévinas, 1980, p. 24, our translation), someone who is not reduced to a whitecentric expectation. A humanism that is an “immediate, universal and militant affirmation of the equality and value of human life” (Tricontinental, n.p., 2020, our translation).

This is how black tradition song acts as language, oraliture<sup>5</sup> (Martins, 2003) and ritualized conversation<sup>6</sup> (Lienhard, 1998). Thus it achieves one of the main, if not the main assumption of Grotowski’s artistic-philosophical conceptions: the *encounter*. Therefore, fulfilling a function that, through the reference from Fanon and Mbembe, we can name as a re-constituter *of the common*:

The reconstitution of the common begins with the exchange of words and the rupture of silence: ‘It is language that breaks silence and silences. So one can communicate or commune. The neighbor in the Christian sense is always an accomplice [...]. Communion is to commune with anything. [...] It is from the common that creative intentions can arise’ (Fanon, 2015, p. 234-235 apud Mbembe, 2017, p. 190-191, our translation).

As humanistic as the creative intentions of the Grotowski-Workcenter *continuum* may be, they will never erase a memory of pain and violence that

— as affections that still vibrate in the subjectivity of the black person, since they are radiations of a wave (Santos, 2019) triggered by the history of construction of the West on the foundations of racial capitalism of colonial slavery — are always activated by the political sense imprinted in the perception of black singing within Western society. A society that goes beyond the walls of ideals constituted within a rehearsal room or a house shared by people with multiple national and cultural origins.

Because these songs are imprinted *in* and reimprint *the* “souls of the black person,” remembering again Du Bois (1999). Thus, we understand that they are irreducible, although not a priori, to an elementary category of sound-music devoid of problems at the level of meaning and context, since they constitute responses that demand the status of humanity of black/Afro-descendant subjects (with cosmogonies, cosmologies, technologies and subjectivities of their own) created in the face of the setbacks of forced exile and by the search for gaps in the enjoyment of the possible vital potencies in the initially disintegrating situation of the diaspora and of the rigorous racist system of the societies where they were placed. By making themselves audible again through performance, these songs trigger perceptions that to an unalienated performer of a historicity inherent to them, that is, someone sensitive to the issue that these songs are also loaded with information about the black experience in the world, will claim sociopolitical positions according to a progressive, emancipatory and anti-racist expectation.

The words hidden behind the words of these traditional songs of blackness — the *jongueiro*'s “*one saying and two understandings*,” according to Mestre Gil of Jongo de Piquete (IPHAN, 2007) — are not tasteless poetry, even when they speak of simple daily pleasures or contemplations of nature. They are impregnated with voices that were, in fact, interrupted, and that in such songs hid their own critical readings of the milieu of oppression to which bodies and subjectivities were subjected under the condition of *plantations* and their derivations — also remembering that the rites and their spaces of performance were extensions of resistance to the disappearance of a minimum of ontology.

The discourse contained in the black songs that permeate almost exclusively the repertoire researched/experienced/performed by Grotowski's continuous creative research and/of/in the *Workcenter* should not be lis-



tened to and read only according to an expectation of transcendence — although based on the rigor of the materialist work on the craft of the craftsmanship — of those who perform and/or capture them, but as a revival of these *secreted people*, hidden in the form of vibratory memories and who, in singing, speak again and can be heard as subjects of experiences of an unfriendly world-system.

In their performance, an Afro-descendant artist or spectator with minimal criticality will not chant or hear such a nature of singing as simply a *belle-art* constituted only of aesthetic, which in no way means that a pure and simple fruition of the artistic object is refuted, after all, form, content and meaning are intertwined in the artistic practice of any kind. But this fruition is not alienated, since the listening captures and understands the intricacies of the communication of pains, afflictions, pleasures and expectations that can be accessed only through the sharing of a field of common experiences. According to the Bakongo people's perspective "there is a fundamental relation between hearing, seeing and feeling/reacting [...]. To feel is to understand. The Bantu do not 'feel' pain unless they 'see it'" (Fu-Kiau, 2001 apud Santos, 2020, p. 87, our translation). Those who have always lived in a well-infrastructure middle or upper-class neighborhood, whether black or not, do not have the same carnal experience as those who have lived their whole lives under the precariousness of an unassisted extreme periphery. Although they may have alterity, they do not have an experiential memory of the environment. Those who have never been victims of racism, whether white or not, although they may have alterity, do not have the psychophysical experience of the trauma that is imprinted on the nerves of those who lived it, however brief and discreet the violence may have been. That is why there are so many reports of black Africans who say they discover racism only when they come to countries like Brazil. They find out through the skin, a fact.

The Afro-descendant artists, in the rehearing that animates them in the search for hidden voices and words, perceive that an African-diasporic mode of being, restricted in the condition of the diasporized and enslaved subject of the past, leaks and reveals many memorial presences of black ancestries. This rehearing is related — in the situation of the performance of the songs and their reception by the listeners — to new forms of agency

about the same process that previously moved in the context of the closed and privileged setting of the research, in the work room or in the rehearsals.

It is in this public form of activation of meanings that African diasporic songs reach their maximum power of spiralization (Martins, 2021), mythic-historical and poetic, when ancestral memory returns and is updated as psychophysical affection in free black subjects of contemporary times, who interpret and resignify the contents of their encrypted or explicit messages. This fact induces that on that “[...] only seemingly uninhabited stage, a language, a voice and words that make us feel that they are silent, reduced to silence” (Mbembe, 2017, p. 225, our translation) occupy the same space-time. In reality, they constitute visions of a cursed heritage to be unloaded (Rufino, 2019) of being remembered so much, as well as updates and revitalizations of black struggles for emancipation, causing as a whole those who act within the microcosm of an intercultural theater-scene, actors also in the macrocosm of a world-scene with ethnic-racial relations that are dynamic and intense, unfair and destructive, transfiguring and creative.

## 5

A shadow of the discourse of global patrimonialization of the black diasporic tradition songs permeated the Grotowski-Workcenter *continuum*, leading to a practice with a tendency to a dismissal of the notion of cultural property in favor of an uncritical universalization. This causes the main danger — which always lurks around, always returns — of the museification and archivization of the *world of the Others*, a common practice of colonial-imperialist policies, which still underlie today, even in the midst of decolonial advances. This is because such perspective of global patrimonialization of immaterial assets has the potential for that which Mbembe (2017, p. 227, our translation) perceived as an action of “neutralization and domestication of forces that were alive before,” in relation to the museological agency of the creative forces (cultural, political, social) of the black person. In such *museum* everything belongs to everyone, but the heirs of the main works pay the most expensive tickets, while certain privileged members of an intellectual and artistic elite of the Euro-American axis do not even pay — even waiting in line to enter — because the museums are headquartered in their own countries.

We consider that the African-Diasporic tradition song contains an *anti-museological* potency – according to the suggestive image of Mbembe (2017) – hitherto not perceived (or, if perceived, not assumed, considered, problematized) within Grotowski's historical path to the Workcenter. That is, a drive of life of its own and with such power that surpasses the Grotowski-Workcenter institution, crosses the identity differences and the limits of the intended humanism, building a fissure in that same institution, having in itself — as a geosymbolic reference of Africanities — and overflowing in the very institution the quality of a

[...] place-other, that of radical hospitality. A place of refuge, the anti-museum is also conceived as a place of rest and asylum, without conditions for all the refuse of humanity and for the 'condemned of the Earth,' those who witness the sacrificial system that has been the history of our modernity – a history that the concept of archive hardly encompasses (Mbembe, 2017, p. 228).

Thus, being limited to the archiving of the diaspora and its transnational phenomena, with its agencies and agents, the notion of an anti-museum serves us to understand the dynamic force that takes away any possibility of neutral universalism that may have been suggested as to these technologies of presence, since there is, in the practice of singing, a ritualized conversation of activation of memories and communication intentions in the situation of inter-human encounter.

When Grotowski (1993) speaks of the tradition song as a work of anonymous authorship, he is reproducing an operating mode of use of African-Diasporic material as an archive of the world, which, although full of potency for the construction of vitalities in any cultural circumstance in the present time — see its influences on urban black music in mass culture from the 20th century to the present day, from *soul*, in the Civil Rights Movement in the USA, to *rap* as a denunciation of police violence and structural racism in the Brazilian society of *racial democracy* —, it is simultaneously kept in the shadows of the undifferentiable. Its placement does not point to this fullness of potency that African-Diasporic songs provide as immaterial containers of black experiences in the modern world, which means precisely the simultaneous or sequential ability to awaken memories that strengthen identities and create notions of belonging, to instigate en-

gagements in actions of struggle for rights, to fabulate alternatives for more just and plural models of democracy and society.

The desire to cross this obtuse situation justifies the movement that today, in the intensity of the new perspectives from which there are discussions on ethnic-racial issues (Afrocentrism, intersectionality, decoloniality, identity) and their manifestations in the contemporary world, makes us, as black artists who face the work of the Grotowskian line, seek where are the historical presences of the blackness that animate these songs. Or, transversalizing with the words of Mbembe (2017, p. 229, our translation), we seek the bodies and memories that are in the shadows, in such a way that, by prospecting, “[...] on pre-existing features, our own silhouette; we capture the outlines of the shadows, and try to see ourselves, through the shadow.” But not as new shadows, but as dense and forceful presences in all spaces of artistic creation. In other words, as heirs who bring this set of oralitures to light to illuminate ourselves in our creative actions in various places and contexts of the world, but without giving up the game of light and shadows that should compose the creative practice of a diasporic poetic that operates by valuing the right to opacity, “the subsistence in a non-reducible singularity [...] that is the most alive of the guarantees of participation and confluence” (Glissant, 2021, p. 220-221, our translation) and not the total surrender to an idealization of a form established in the common imaginary, based on epistemological colonialism, about Africa and its Africanities.

In this sense, it is important to highlight then that, even if we do not go into greater detail due to the limits of this article, the presence of the main Afro-descendant collaborators in the Grotowski-Workcenter *continuum*, from the Theater of Sources to the end of the activities of the Workcenter in January 2022. People like artists Maud Robart and Tiga Garoute; *vodou* priests Eliezer Cadet and Amon Frémon; psychiatrist Louis Mars; performers Chrystèle Saint Louis Augustin, Grazielle Sena, Suellen Serrat, Ophélie Maxo, Eduardo Landim, Sambou Diarra and Denise Graham; in addition to Thomas Richards himself. The latter — being an African-American person — is a central figure to deepen reflections on ethnic-racial issues in the historical context of the Grotowski-Workcenter, as legitimate heir to the investigative work of the Polish director, whose name has been used to designate the Workcenter since 1996. We seek to address this sub-

ject in our doctoral research on Africanities, construction of Afro-descendant identity, and ethnic-racial relations according to the professional experience in this extinct artistic research, creation and training center.

## 6

The English Romantic poet William Blake (2005) published in 1789 the poem book *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*. In this book, through the biblical idea of Paradise and Fall, he relates the notion of experience to the moment of human life after the end of childhood, which would correspond to a state of essential purity.

The American historian Martin Jay (2009), to talk about the notions of experience throughout the history of Euro-American philosophy, presents Blake's original idea and writes, in 2005, *Songs of Experience: Modern American and European Variations on a Universal Theme*.

In turn, the Spanish education philosopher Jorge Larrosa, based on Jay, proposes new reflections on the sense of experience, from an existentialist perspective, and says:

In the tradition, there is no idea of experience, or a recognizable series of ideas of experience, but what we have is the syncopated appearance of a series of passionate, intense, pressing, emotional and exciting songs, which have experience as a theme or as the main motif, if we understand the terms 'motif' and 'theme' in their musical sense. [...] Experience is something that happens (to us) and that sometimes shakes, or vibrates, something that makes us think, something that makes us suffer or enjoy, something that fights for expression, and at times, sometimes, when it falls into the hands of someone capable of shaping this tremor, then, only then, it becomes a song. And this song crosses time and space. And it resonates in other experiences and in other tremors and in other songs. In some experiences, these songs are songs of protest, rebellion, war songs or songs of struggle against the dominant forms of language, thought and subjectivity. At other times they are songs of pain, of lament, songs that express the complaint of a subjugated, violated life, of a caged life potency, of a trapped or chained possibility. Others are elegiac songs, funeral songs, farewell songs, songs of absence or bereavement. And sometimes they are epic, adventurous songs, songs of travelers and explorers, of those who always go beyond the known, beyond the safe and the guaranteed, even if they do not know very well where (Larrosa, 2015, p. 10).

For the three Western authors, the notion of songs of experience is not necessarily musical or even related to sound. It refers to an organization of a poetic discourse, according to Blake, and intellectual, to Jay and Larrosa.

However, to us, the use we make of the term *song of experience* is literal, since we treat it as a poetic element of the actor/performer in the theatrical/performative practice, and not in the sense of a literary discourse. This should not connote any form of hierarchy, since it is not a matter of comparing semantics of the term *song*, but only of adequacy to the precise use of each sense in its own epistemic field. Here, song of experience refers to the act of singing, the musically articulated emission of the voice, and its subjectivities. And specifically the singing of the black, diasporic, Afro-descendant person. Which does not constitute ethnocentrism, but, remembering what we said above, afroreferentiation. It is an idea of song translating black existential experiences as the accumulation, organization and transmission of a sensitive experience and a thought questioning the/in the world, both objectively (construction of a repertoire) and subjectively (collection of information) through African-diasporic epistemologies.

Thus, we think that experience is this sensitive living and questioning thought divided in the form of many secrets. Secrets that are, at the same time that they keep multiple perceptions of the world, in relation to visible and invisible phenomena, from ancestry to black historicity, which speak of the preservation of tradition in movement and resistance to death brought by racism. And in songs, in particular in the Afro-Diasporic songs of which we speak, these secrets are converted into radiant sound vibratory forms, that is, they are the very voices of ancestors (human or non-human) who *speak* from an ontological space-time before and after the singing being (conception, experience and death), and which are updated in it, updating it as the bearer of the living word of a tradition. Vibrations and radiation (Jesus; Pereira, 2021) that were, are and will still be generated by affections and that were, are and will provoke affections. Vibrations and radiation that come from the historical impact of traumas and desiring drives of life and death, as well as reveal and transmit social ethics, devotions to ancestors and the most varied cosmologies and mythopoetics of peoples. These secrets, which hide by revealing and reveal by hiding (Oliveira, 2020), are the

foundations of Afrodiasporic songs born from the great experience of crossing of the Black Atlantic.

Thus, in an understanding of vibration as a memorial record of people who lived and transcribed these experiences in sounds, and radiation as the continuous process of transmission of these previous experiences that affect the experiences of contemporary people (Jesus; Pereira, 2021), black and non-black, that we also dialogue with the Grotowskian conception, learned during our period of work in the *Workcenter*: that singing is another way of speaking, and that there is no essential difference, only formal difference between the two actions. That is, the song, as an objective discourse of a person's subjectivity, is the articulation and expression of thoughts and affections through a musical structure. We should note that being in agreement with this conception does not represent any contradiction when we refer to the notion of song in a literal and non-literary way, because we unite the idea of speech to that of singing, since both compose what Martins (2009) names poetic vocalities, representing poles of the same current where the enunciated word occurs in theater. On this current, poetic vocalities transit, in such a way that speaking (or *saying*) also carries aspects of musicality, such as rhythm, melody, timbre and vibration.

Song as a means and collective singing as an encounter experience fulfill a function in ritualized conversation, thus corresponding to what grotowskianly is understood as another way of speaking. It is, therefore, also another place of existence and cultivation of the potency of enchantment of the *word* and its *decantation*, with its performance in the *Workcenter* – in the pre-Covid-19 times – having been found in the exercise of creating a possibility of sociability governed by what we here understand as the space of the common (Mbembe, 2017), especially through the actions that the Open Program conducted with African communities in the Americas (USA and Brazil) and African immigrants in Italy and other European countries. Such actions were important channels for practicing multicultural and multiethnic encounter from the perspective of alterity and radical humanism to which we refer – where blacks and whites also exercise the overcoming of colonial categorizations as Fanon desired. Because they are encounters built by valuing the different presences, with their singularities and politicalities inherent to the bodies, through the relations established between artists and

non-artists, mediated by songs and their different performativities, with the affections they provoke (the experiences of enjoyment and melancholy), fully shared among the people involved.

The economy of affections positivized in such situations, given by the primacy of a communication voiced in chorality, the organized and synchronous collective action of *bodyvoices*, ratifies an attitude proper to a policy of friendship<sup>7</sup> sustained in dialogue, articulated by the technical-poetic components that organized the community performative event conducted by the black and non-black actors of the *Open Program*. An event, such as the *Open Choir*<sup>8</sup>, for example, using Mbembian thinking again as a reference, is configured as an action of evocation of “[...] word and language, not only due to the power of revelation and its symbolic function, but mainly because of its materiality” (Mbembe, 2017, p. 241, our translation).

What we are then defending as songs of black experiences are a communicational and oralitural totality expressed in a song collection that has precise identification in a place of origin and in the new places of culture constituted in the diaspora, cultivated around geosymbolic territories such as crops, plantations, slave quarters, terreiros [Afro-Brazilian religious spaces], churches, prisons and streets.

These are the spaces where the word, in the musical form of the songs, reveals by hiding and hides by revealing clamors, hopes, passions and acceptance of the unfathomable mystery, where reason, tamed under the white-western lights, in general, does not accept it as an insurmountable limit of the cognition of existence. And, also, as a concrete phenomenon of creation of objective and subjective existence, individual and collective, “[...] above all, within this community instance, within this instance of enunciation and response, singing is dreaming. Singing is dreaming of frequencies. Singing is dreaming of the body that sings. Singing is dreaming for what is sung” (Santos, 2021, personal testimony, our translation).

The word, therefore, as an articulation of the thinking-feeling-saying expressed in the poetic vocality of the song, is part of the whole of the gesture that expresses the spirit of the experience that black carnality has undergone before, through pain, *banzo* [homesickness, depression for lack of freedom, discontent with life and death wish], faith, euphoria and joy. It erupts from a silence (Mbembe, 2017), but not from a Nirvanic silence, but

that which precedes an explosion of vitality. Such irruption comes in the form of words that are articulated in ideas, fabulations, sensations and images of the world or, also, in the place of a semantic articulation, which can come as noisy, rough sounds, as in the unpolished *blues* of the early twentieth century, waves and radiations of “hoarse screams and howls – hallucination” (Mbembe, 2017, p. 233, our translation). Hallucination as a lucid response to the violence imposed on the being of a blackness made “public enemy number 1” of the humanity of the ideal human, the white with its whitenesses, whitishnesses and whitefications of the world.

The songs of black experiences are sound images of the subjects who embodied and incorporated them over the centuries of movements in the Black Atlantic (diasporas, returns, compulsory or chosen cultural exchanges) and expressed them in the saliva of their tongues. Being rite-performative technologies, from the contexts of the local cultures where they come from (whether in Africa or in the Americas), they operate on the psychophysics of the individuals and collectivities of the communities that sing them, aware of the forces that they move and the intentions that demand them.

Thinking about their affections in theater, as we have pointed out above, such songs provide a powerful objective way of *working on oneself* that the scenic artist can undertake, which Grotowski grasped and understood throughout his post-theatrical works, in which they were part of the elements “to work on *the body, heart and head of the ‘actors’*” (Grotowski, 2012, p. 137, emphasis added, our translation). Such songs provided the basis for the process of creative investigation, through their effective vibratory qualities and psychophysical drives linked to them, which led to an organic behavior of the extra-quotidian body and the performance of physical actions.

The traditional songs (like those of the Afro-Caribbean line) [...] have their roots in organicity. It is always the song-body, never the song dissociated from the impulses of life that pass through the body; in the tradition song, it is no longer a matter of the position of the body or the control of breathing, but of impulses and small actions. Because the impulses that cross the body are exactly those that carry the song (Grotowski, 2012, p. 144, our translation).

But the songs are not merely forged with objective work material, finalized in the subjective work of the actor. They also result from a work of and in the body that sings for the emergence of a substantial presence made of a potency for change, for affirmation of memory and that constantly reinscribes the black experience in the world, acting in the time-space of immediate reality and in the possibilities of becoming. Thus, such songs-images reveal the historical forces (civilizations, ancestors and ancestry, dispersion in the beyond-Africa), political forces (the defenses of one's own existence and autonomous agency in the construction of oneself and knowledge) and mythopoetic forces (the sacred, the enchantment of/in the world, their cultural forms) with which they are constituted. That is, the songs of black experiences are living archives in themselves and (re)vivifiers of the psychophysical totality of the person, and, in addition, claim and reflection of/on an existential, epistemological and civilizing statute of African matrices and their continuations in the diaspora. Thus, such songs-images ratify these same forces, even if opaque, with which they are constituted, acting on the readings practiced on the black body, as forms of

[...] photography, specular images, effigies and even reflections. However, they are, above all, indicial icons, whose relation with the subject is both physical (in the sense that these images are faithful to the objective appearance of their author) and analogical (in the sense that they are nothing more than indicial vestiges of the subject). They are made to capture those who look at them [**or and listen to them**], forcing them to lower their weapons (Mbembe, 2017, p. 231, emphasis added, our translation).

The disarmament should be of whiteness, when non-black people act with such songs, but it can also be of blackness, when blacks/Afro-descendants observe the existence of an ethics of these *otherities* that act in relation to these cultural heritages and, at that moment, the radical encounter in the in-common created by the theatrical/performative situation becomes really possible.

7

The songs of black experiences are not naive, as the Eurocentric folklorist discourse narrated until the mid-twentieth century, when the construction of the field of Cultural Studies provided critical parameters to think about cultural practice in relation to sociological influences. If they

are treated as naive, they are emptied and neutralized as forms of communication and criticism of world meanings, and thus are placed as likely to have only psychophysical effects and absolute aesthetic values, being disqualified and de-potentialized in their political agencies.

Leaving this path leads us to understand that a song that acts as a reliquary of ancestral memory and motor of becomings is a singular expression of an Afro-Originary and diasporic humanity, an effective means for blacknesses to communicate in time and between geographies. In other words, the songs as continental forms of different voices that act on the subjectivities of singers and listeners, and specific language that we have, as black people of African descent, “to tell ourselves about ourselves, to tell the world and act on it” (Mbembe, 2017, p. 241, our translation).

Therefore, these songs of black experiences cannot be reduced to mere products of an ontology of anonymity, an immaterial heritage whose destination is only the public domain, precision instruments that few black surgeons utilize. They are scalpels that cut souls of all humanities in the present — if used with spiritual and performative competence — and that were born because before black bodies were excised from their territorial roots and literally gashed in their very flesh with whip, iron, knife or bullet. The “carnal prayer” (Grotowski, 2015, p. 24) that generated them, in this case, was more painful from the beginning, even if the appearance of what we hear is of jubilation. It is not jubilation for the sake of jubilation. It is for the liberation from the original pain caused by slavery that inaugurated the wide, long and deep liquid road of the Black Atlantic.

The songs of black experiences in the world, carrying therapeutic words to be used in the renewed civilizing mission of the human soul covered in the shrapnel of the wars promoted by the politics of enmity of the last and of the present century, is part of this discursive complex of the presence and representativeness that the political voice of blackness integrates and claims. It really is a singing that says, a saying in musical form.

In the age of the Earth, we really need a tongue that constantly punctures, pierces and digs like a drill, knows how to be a projectile, a kind of absolute right, of will that incessantly torments reality. Its function is no longer only to release the locks, but also to save the life from the disaster that looms (Mbembe, 2017, p. 250).

Yes, these many songs teach with charm because they are the first tools, rather than for anyone else, for the black-African and Afro-descendant creative spirits, who remain alive and/or can (re)live (in)those who sing them.

Grotowski (2012, p. 143), since the beginning of the work with these song collections, noted that there is a danger that the singer may, suddenly, be sung, thereby having a loss of self, a becoming “the property of the song,” in other words, a submergence in pure resonance, hence being necessary that the person kept attentive so as to “stand up.”

Paraphrasing, contradicting and saying farewell to the Polish master and to the Workcenter, from another point of listening we say that the singers-actors, of any ethnic-racial origin, who worked with them, stood up, from the beginning to the end of the performative act, precisely because they were (re)enchanted by the potencies of the songs of black experiences, and, at the same time, kept their own songs standing, which, through embodied voices, reverberate across time.

## Notes

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- <sup>2</sup> O presente trabalho foi realizado com apoio da Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior - Brasil (CAPES) - Código de Financiamento 001.
- <sup>3</sup> The notion of in common is presented by Mbembe (2017, p. 68-9, our translation) as “a relation of co-belonging to and sharing” the world, whose lasting existence is associated with the fact that such relation occurs between “the set of its dependants, together with all species,” something only possible through the achievement of “justice and reparation.”
- <sup>4</sup> Term derived from the work of Constantin Stanislavski, subject to open interpretation and without a single definition, but which is based on the idea that the scenic artist can develop, at objective and subjective levels, by responsible ways of relating to technique, ethics and the sense of acting, a path of constant improvement of their own perception, intellection and creative action as a person in the world.

- <sup>5</sup> Martins defines this term as that which comprises the intertwining, through the corporeal-vocal performativities, of the epistemological set of a certain cultural tradition, which are expressed in the spatial-temporal agency of the diversities of manifestations, which inscribe the set of knowledges of a people through an inscription performed by dances, theatricalities, musicalities and poetic vocalities.
- <sup>6</sup> Lienhard (1998) uses this term to define the set of performative elements that practitioners of Palo Monte, an Afro-Cuban religious tradition of Bantu origin, use to establish a connection with Africa, as an idealization of the ancestral source and ontological belonging.
- <sup>7</sup> We have used this term to propose a friction with the antonym term *enmity policies*, proposed by Achille Mbembe, through which the author elaborates his reflections on the necropolitics practiced in the world since the twentieth century. Through the notion of amity policies, in our current studies, we seek to understand the forms of association and cooperation based on radically humanistic and alteritive artistic practices.
- <sup>8</sup> This event is part of a series of actions that the *Open Program* carried out between 2013 and 2019, which involved ways of integrating a large number of participants, whether performing arts professionals or not, in spectacle structures or in spontaneous performative actions created around the act of singing in choral.

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