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Contemporary Carioca

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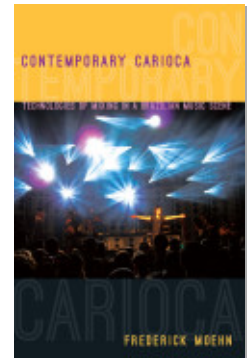
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PREFACE

Globalization is not the weapon of a single country for dominating another. . . . It is sufficient that cultural institutions be attentive to the invasion of mannerisms and to the most alive expressions of the country's art, its music. Fortunately, samba is quite strong.

—José Celso de Macedo Soares of the National Commerce Confederation

(*Jornal do Brasil*, 12 July 1999)

On 7 December 1998 the *Globo* newspaper sponsored a forum in Rio de Janeiro titled “MPB: Engajamento ou alienação?” (MPB: Engagement or alienation?). It brought together well-known musicians to debate whether Brazilian popular music (MPB) had lost the critical edge and national relevance it once had under the dictatorship, particularly from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s, when politically engaged song was at its height (figure 1). The participants included Marcos Valle, a singer-songwriter who was at the center of what is often called the second wave of bossa nova, beginning in the mid-1960s, and whose grooves had recently been rediscovered by a younger cohort based in the United Kingdom; Fernanda Abreu, who first gained fame as a singer and dancer in the pop-rock band Blitz in the early 1980s and later pursued a solo career mixing disco, funk, and samba influences; Adriana Calcanhotto, a singer-songwriter from Porto Alegre, in the South of Brazil, who moved to Rio and made a name for herself there



in the 1990s; and Gabriel O Pensador, a young rap artist who first gained recognition in 1992 for a song called “Tô feliz (matei o presidente)” (I’m happy [I killed the president]), a stark critique of then-president Fernando Collor de Mello, which Gabriel wrote while a journalism student at Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio de Janeiro (PUC-Rio).¹

As the discussion began, Marcos Valle recalled that in the mid-1960s he was among the bossa nova artists who felt it was important to help “rouse the people from the stifling of the military government.” The imperative to find ways to communicate past the censors through metaphors and double meanings in song lyrics, he recalled, provided “a very strong motivation for making real protest music.” Even then, however, he sought to preserve his right to write songs that were not specifically political such as “Samba de verão” (“Summer Samba”), which was about “the sun, Rio de Janeiro, and sensuality.” In the context of the dictatorship and the Marxist-oriented student protest movement of the mid-1960s, a culture had emerged in which one was either a politicized or alienated artist, Marcos observed. His musical circle felt a need to maintain an “openness with respect to expression” so as not to constrain creativity (his song “A resposta,” composed with his brother Paulo Sérgio in 1965, was a “response” to this state of affairs, intended to assert that one could participate in musical protest “when one wanted to,” he remembered). Now, in postdictatorship Brazil, there was no longer “that kind of . . . enemy,” although there were of course still significant problems in the country, and reasons to speak out.

Adriana Calcanhото similarly suggested that with democracy and free-

FIGURE 1. “MPB: Engajamento ou alienação?” debate invitation. Graphic design by Felipe Taborda. Used by permission.

dom of expression restored, there was no specific enemy to target. She did not feel motivated to write a protest song; she wondered who precisely she might target. For Gabriel O Pensador, one did not always explicitly need to say, “I’m against this, I’m against that.” What was important was to question, “each one in his or her own style,” and to get “into people’s heads.” Rather than asking whether contemporary Brazilian popular music was engaged or alienated, Fernanda Abreu thought, what was needed was a discussion of what it meant to be Brazilian at the end of the millennium, in an era of globalization, with information flowing ever more rapidly.

Was contemporary Brazil then no longer a good source for protest song?, the debate moderator, João Máximo (a *Globo* journalist), asked. Was there no necessity for political engagement in music because the country was doing fine? On the contrary, Brazil was a great source for protest song, Fernanda replied, but she rejected the moderator’s either-or framing of the question. She didn’t see herself “making a protest song in the sense of a militant, a partisan, taking a position A, B, or C of the left, arguing for A, B, or C proposal for a certain Brazil,” because she was in fact optimistic about the country. She was cognizant of persistent social problems such as the high rate of poverty, but she had the sense that “in terms of humanity” things were gradually changing as Brazilians learned “to facilitate tolerance, generosity.” It was not simply a question of alienation, because one’s artistic production could be distinct from one’s daily life as a citizen. What connected the two spheres of life was “opening up the mind” to an “understanding that the Other is different . . . but not worse.”

“If you want to make a song about disco dancing, and someone else wants to make a song about misery in Brazil—this freedom of expression, and in particular *respect* for this freedom of expression, is what interests me,” Fernanda said. In this newly open environment, people could finally “speak a little bit more about Brazil” and ask, “What country is this?” Citizens were moving away from the “accommodating attitude” that people manifested under the dictatorship, when no one “did anything because it didn’t matter anyway.” The political class, Fernanda said, “screwed up a lot of things,” and it was now time for citizens to do something—“not necessarily to overthrow so-and-so—but to work on understanding the person at your side, to see if you have a prejudice, racial, or sexual . . . to have a relationship with the people around you,” and this could come out in the music. A conversation was needed among music makers about, for example, what the pop rock of the 1980s represented. “What is happen-

ing differently now in the nineties, how are people producing music, what are they thinking, what do they think of the Brazil of today, since the *abertura*,” that is, the political opening that led to redemocratization in the early 1980s? What was important, in other words, was contributing—as creative musicians—to a vibrant public sphere.

If the moderator of the debate viewed the songs of the late 1960s and 1970s that protested the military dictatorship and United States imperialism as the model for “engaged” music, he now saw a lowering of cultural standards on contemporary television (especially on the variety show *Ratinho*), and in the emphasis on sexualized dancing in the type of samba known as *pagode*. The commercialization of this latter genre and of *axé* music (a form of pop from Bahia, in the Northeast of Brazil) and *música sertaneja* (Brazilian country music) signaled for this apparently left-leaning intellectual the alienation of “the masses.” What, he asked the panelists, did they sincerely think of the *música baiana* (a generic term for pop music from Bahia) and *pagode* trends? Were they “commercial, alienated, or what?” Media fabrications, Fernanda Abreu responded. What mattered was a diversity of cultural voices and options for cultural consumption. What was especially interesting about Brazil was its “musical richness.” It was great that there was *música sertaneja*, *pagode*, *axé* music, MPB, rock, pop, dance, rap, and hip-hop, she said. The problem arose when these things became formulaic. Fernanda liked “the democracy of being allowed to choose.”

Wasn’t Fernanda “disappointed in the people for being alienated?,” the moderator pressed. No, she replied, appearing to grow irritated with the framing of the questions. She did not want to think of “the people” as victims, she said, yet Brazil still suffered from misery, poverty, and a lack of education, of information. The political opening was relatively recent, she observed, and issues of inequality and development would not be “resolved in five or ten years.” Nor were the media as such to blame, because there was actually “space for segmentation into every type of culture and art.” The problem was that that the media often privilege cultural manifestations that do well in the IBOPE (Brazilian Institute of Public Opinion and Statistics) opinion polls, constraining the possibilities of expression. Marcos Valle similarly claimed not to be interested in “determining whether what the people like to hear is better or worse.” Brazilians needed the opportunity “to hear every kind of music.” If, when one turned on the television, one heard “one kind of music from beginning to end,” then it

was difficult to know about other options for listening. Once this was balanced out, he thought, “the people will be able to choose.”

Notwithstanding reservations about mass media and markets, the musicians at this debate were by and large quite positive about Brazilian music at the end of the century, as the country was preparing to commemorate its quincentennial in extensive public celebrations. They were particularly excited about the freedom to mix influences, which they saw as a necessary condition for achieving universalism. Fernanda Abreu, for example, was happy that Brazilians could finally make music that expressed “the regional universal Brazilian.” It was cool to see people from a new generation speaking of traditional Brazilian genres like *maracatu*, *côco*, *embolada*, *samba*, or *samba de roda*, she said, while mixing these with hip-hop, rap, and “scratch,” using techniques such as sampling and digital audio media such as Pro Tools. To make “Brazilian” music, she enthused, it was no longer necessary to feature instruments such as the *pandeiro* (tambourine), *violão* (the classical-style guitar favored in samba and bossa nova, among other genres), or *tamborim* (a small frame drum used in samba). When the year 2000 arrived, Fernanda thought, Brazilians would manage to make a kind of music similar to what they had “always heard from abroad,” that had a certain *liberty* that was “super interesting.” Yet Brazilians would also succeed in making their own music. Brazilian music had the potential to be “a wonderful phenomenon in the world in the coming millennium.” Fernanda was excited.

“After Blitz,” Adriana Calcanhotto added, referring to the band in which Fernanda Abreu got started, “rock and pop in Brazil suffered a period of becoming old fashioned,” while the media tended to saturate the market with anything that had already become a success, stifling other possibilities. Now, however, there was “a great effervescence,” with artists like Chico Science mixing northeastern traditions with rock and hip-hop influences, or Gabriel O Pensador using rap. “It’s completely cannibalistic,” Adriana said. These musicians, Marcos Valle chimed in, were “doing something that is fantastic. . . . These connections between everything, this richness. . . . It is so many folks, everyone adding their contribution. I think Brazilian music is . . . the richest music in the whole world. Wherever we go, everyone notices, because there are many people doing good work.” It was just necessary “to distribute this space a little better” so that “the people” could “choose what they want to hear.”

Amid such optimism, however, Gabriel O Pensador—who, being the

youngest artist on the panel, had experienced the dictatorship only as a small child—pointed to an adversary in an unexpected place: upper-middle-class Brazilian youths preoccupied more with international consumer culture than with local realities. “They don’t want to participate,” Gabriel lamented. “They’re very egotistical. . . . They want to do well for themselves, and they don’t believe very strongly in change.” His social circle had money and studied in good schools in the South Zone of Rio de Janeiro, he noted. So when in 1993 he released his song “Retrato de um playboy (Juventude perdida)” (Portrait of a playboy [Lost youth]), in which he offered a scathing critique of the lifestyle of the privileged white middle-class Carioca male in his late teens or twenties, he sought to criticize his own generation, he said. The Little Playboy (*playboyzinho*) of the rap is a spoiled daddy’s boy who, when not sleeping, lives a life of diversion, going to the beach, surfing, hanging out with his buddies drinking beer, practicing the martial art jiu-jitsu (but only for fun), and doing whatever all his friends are doing. He is a conformist who lacks personality and just fits into the system; he thinks that he is high class but actually “belongs to the worst race that exists.” The Playboy treats with scorn and violence the humble maid who feeds him, washes his clothes, and cleans up after him; he enjoys ridiculing the poor beggar in the street. In the poor capitalist country that Brazil was, the playboys were “proliferating by the thousands,” Gabriel warned. Neither patriots nor nationalists, they preferred the Stars and Stripes.

It is ironic, perhaps, that Gabriel, a young white musician of privilege, should choose rap as the musical medium for delivering a critique of his peers who looked to the United States in their lifestyle choices (see Bol-
lig 2002). Such is the contradictory positioning of the middle-class subject in “emergent” economies. By the time of this debate, Gabriel had in fact grown disenchanted with rap music from the United States, he conceded, as the artists who inspired him when he began writing songs were recycling the same ideas about sex and drugs over and over again, having discovered that they sell albums. Protest and anger, then, could become little more than a false posture, Gabriel felt. What Marcos Valle had said about the freedom to choose what one sings about was therefore very important, he concluded, for market forces could constrain freedom of expression as much as a censoring dictatorship.

As Brazil re-democratized in the 1980s, it simultaneously entered a world in which market-oriented reforms were transforming the hemi-

sphere and beyond. The so-called Washington Consensus promoted “free” markets rather than regulatory states as the engines of progress and development, and the “market-triumphalist” and United States–led character of capitalist expansion came to be called neoliberal globalization (Kingfisher and Maskovsky 2008, 116). Policies favoring privatization and the lowering of corporate income taxes, contraction of government and social welfare programs, the deregulation of industry and markets, respect for private property, the weakening of organized labor, capital mobility, and so on, seemingly spread from one country to another in recent decades, including Brazil. In fact, however, neoliberal projects have been messier than much of the literature suggests, and individual actors have promoted a variety of policy directions in hybrid, multiple, and contradictory contexts (Brenner and Theodore 2002, 351; Larner 2003, 509–10).

When I arrived in Brazil in August 1998 to begin field research for this book, President Fernando Henrique Cardoso, who first came to prominence as an influential dependency theorist but now was promoting market-oriented reforms, was in the middle of his reelection campaign. Contemporary reactions to his policies were sometimes strongly negative. For example, on 22 September 1998, when the Monica Lewinsky scandal was raging in the United States, the *Globo* columnist Arnaldo Jabor fumed that the “moralistic rigor” that “Old Testament Republicans” sought to impose on Bill Clinton was “equal to the rigor of the economic measures they prescribe to us.” Not everyone was colonized by Puritans, he argued, into the Protestant work ethic. The United States wanted to foist “a tyrannical ideal of liberty” on the world, an ideal that was in reality characterized by open borders and markets in Latin America while the United States protected its own ones. “Reforms, yes, privatization, sure,” Jabor quipped, but he counseled Brazilians to keep “one eye on the cat, the other on the fish that is frying” (making a reference to the samba musician Zeca Pagodinho’s song “Velho ditado”).

Brazilians voted to keep Cardoso in office in October 1998. Meanwhile, major financial crises in Asia and Russia had begun to affect Mexico and Chile. The International Monetary Fund viewed Brazil’s stability as crucial to stopping the further spread of the crisis. Late in the year the IMF presented Brazil with a \$41.5 billion loan package aimed at averting financial collapse; not surprisingly, it stipulated additional fiscal and administrative reforms to reduce government spending. In these first few months of my field research, anxiety was heightened as Brazil allowed its currency to

float rather than continue artificially pegging it to the dollar. The fear of hyperinflation returned, but the loans stabilized Brazil's economy and inflation remained under control, allowing for modest economic growth as the decade came to a close. Cardoso's tenure, which ended 1 January 2003, marks a turning point in postdictatorship Brazil.

Brazil in the 1990s was thus consolidating into an "actually existing neoliberalism" (Gledhill 2004) that, rather than simply confirming the blunt transformational power of market-oriented policies, was "embedded" within a specific context that bore its own inherited political, institutional, economic, and cultural legacies (Brenner and Theodore 2002, 351). The "MPB: Engagement or alienation?" debate of late 1998 revealed different generations of artists thinking about making music under exciting new circumstances. Tropes of freedom, choice, and self-management could have a powerful effect among the consuming classes in a newly democratized nation. How did "the passions and the stakes of global connection" produce creative frictions (Tsing 2005, 269) and inspiration for Brazilian musicians in this period of national emergence? Could they finally be Brazilian and universal?

I surely heard songs written by Brazilian composers as a youth in New Jersey without necessarily taking note of it, if only because bossa nova and samba were incorporated into the jazz repertory that my parents enjoyed. Later, when I was a student at Berklee College of Music, I found the compositions of Luiz Bonfá and Tom Jobim in the *Real Book*, that is, the fake-book of lead sheets popular among students of jazz. Yet it wasn't until I began performing in New York City after college that I took a closer look at those bossa nova standards and grew increasingly interested in Brazilian music. At the time I was using the 1972 Fender Stratocaster electric guitar I had bought some years earlier when I played in rock bands—a prized instrument, but not well suited to the rhythmic subtleties characteristic of the bossa nova style, exemplified by João Gilberto's "stuttering guitar" patterns on the acoustic nylon-stringed classical instrument, the *violão*. As my knowledge of Brazilian music history deepened, I learned how electric guitars had in fact scandalized MPB musicians and audiences back in the late 1960s, when Caetano Veloso and the rock band Os Mutantes introduced them into the televised national song contests, and how they nevertheless quickly became an integral part of Brazilian popular music thereafter, while never really losing their association with foreign rock.

I first traveled to Brazil in January 1995 during graduate school at New York University. In Salvador da Bahia I heard samba, jazz, samba-reggae, *farró*, and *axé* music. In Recife I heard Chico Science; the *mangue beat* scene that he and his collaborator Fred Zero Quatro inaugurated in that city—a fusion of primarily rock, hip-hop, and traditional genres from the Brazilian Northeast—was in full bloom. My last stop was Rio de Janeiro, where I stayed in the home of two journalists who worked for the media conglomerate Globo Network, and who lived a block away from its headquarters on a quiet street bordering the steep, forested slope stretching up the mountain that supports the Christ Redeemer statue, directly beneath the so-called Armpit of Christ.

In Rio I saw Jorge Ben Jor perform on Ipanema Beach. In the 1960s Jorge (then known as just Jorge Ben) combined samba with rock, soul, jazz, and pop in hits like “Mas que nada” (roughly, No way; 1963), which Sergio Mendes would make popular in the United States in his 1966 version and then reinterpret forty years later with the Black Eyed Peas, and “País tropical” (Tropical country), which Marcos Suzano and Paulinho Moska would reinterpret on the latter’s *Móbile* of 1999 (examined in chapter 5 of this book). This was my introduction to the South Zone of Rio de Janeiro. Among the most memorable experiences of this trip was my visit to the public rehearsal space (the *quadra*) of Brazil’s oldest samba school, the legendary Mangueira (officially, GRES Estação Primeira da Mangueira), in the working-class North Zone of the city. Back in New York I had begun playing *caixa* (the samba snare drum) with Manhattan Samba, a percussion ensemble directed by Ivo Araújo, a Rio native. At Mangueira, during one of the hot weeks leading up to carnival, I first heard the swing of the massive drum corps inside that deafening, exhilarating, and intensely proud concrete enclosure decorated in the school’s official colors of pink and green. Class was not the only thing that separated this part of Rio from the South Zone: while the residents of the Jardim Botânico neighborhood where I was staying are typically light-skinned, the inhabitants of the Morro da Mangueira—the hillside favela after which this samba school is named—tend to be of darker complexion.

That summer (winter in Brazil), I returned for an intensive Portuguese course at the University of São Paulo, and the following summer I visited again to begin formulating a dissertation topic. I first explored the music scene in Salvador, where I attended rehearsals and performances of groups such as Timbalada, Olodum, Ara Ketu, and Bragadá. I joined Margareth

Menezes's band atop a *trio elétrico*—an enormous moving truck with a stage on top and walls of speakers on the side. I had an interest in music production practices, which grew out of my undergraduate degree in that area, so I visited the studio of the axé music star Daniela Mercury while she was recording the album *Feijão com arroz* (Rice and beans). At the main recording facility in Bahia at the time, Estúdio WR, I observed a session of the group Gera Samba, who had popularized the 1996 song “É o Tchan” (It's the tchan), one of the biggest hits of the late 1990s in Brazil. This form of radio- and dance-oriented light samba, I later learned, inspired some anxiety among those who preferred a more rootsy, community-centered ideal of the genre, particularly middle-class listeners.

I again finished this trip in Rio de Janeiro, where the audio engineer Beto Santana took me to Companhia dos Técnicos, the country's principal samba studio and a place where many of the giants of MPB recorded. Later I would write about the recording of the annual carnival samba album at this facility, an intense experience that contrasted markedly with the setting I describe in this book (see Moehn 2005). I came to learn that Rio de Janeiro hosted several of Brazil's so-called international-level recording studios, and that the city, especially with the presence of the Globo Network, was still the media capital of the country. It boasted five major studios fully booked with banner clients and several medium-sized studios, as well as a growing number of computer-based recording facilities, and it remained a magnet for musicians. I decided I would conduct my field research in Rio.

Meanwhile, New York City hosted a five-day Brazilian Music Festival in 1997 with concerts at Central Park SummerStage, Avery Fisher Hall, and the Beacon Theater. (Lincoln Center also produced a series of Brazilian popular music concerts in July of that year.) “Brazilian music seems to hold endless bounties,” the pop music critic Jon Pareles wrote of these concerts (1997). “Carnivals keep traditional songs, dances, and symbols alive, while local and regional pride hold homogenization at bay.” There were “as many local rhythms” as there were “birds in the rain forest.” The best Brazilian songwriters, Pareles proposed, “merge folklore and innovation, politics and entertainment, literary ambitions with graceful melody,” and there was “a lot more talent awaiting export.” Moreover, there were lessons to be learned about “the uses of folklore” in, for example, the way the singer-songwriter Lenine and the percussionist Marcos Suzano, who performed on SummerStage, together “conjured kinetic rhythms usually built by drum choirs” with only guitar and percussion.

Interestingly, not only do Pareles's comments demonstrate how Brazilian pop musicians were received abroad, his language mirrors the way the musicians themselves often talked about their work—as a kind of plentiful fount of brilliant eclecticism in a globalized world seemingly threatened by homogenization. Indeed, local versus global, traditional versus modern, diversity versus homogeneity—these were precisely the dynamics of “world music” that preoccupied many ethnomusicologists as the millennium came to a close. A tropical abundance, meanwhile, is a trope that dates back to the first Portuguese to land in Brazil, when the Crown's official scribe, Pero Vaz de Caminha, famously wrote of “an incalculably vast forest of rich foliage” in his letter to King Manuel I of Portugal in the year 1500 (1999, 53).

I returned to Brazil in 1998 and lived in Rio de Janeiro from August through July 1999, during which time I conducted many of the interviews and much of the participant observation for this book. I was skeptical of fears that global pop music was following a path of increasing homogenization as subjects struggled to maintain agency and difference in the face of the apparent cultural imperialism of, mainly, the United States. “To us,” one Brazilian recording engineer told me in New York City in September 1997, “rock 'n' roll is world music” (Sólon do Valle, informal conversation). As I continued my research, however, I came to appreciate the music scene in Rio not simply as a case study useful for engaging in debates over, for example, national versus cosmopolitan sentiments, but rather as a vibrant setting contoured by local histories and discourses about global phenomena and problems, and suffused with the resilient sounds of genres such as samba and *choro*, as well as rock, funk, and hip-hop. Follow-up interviews after my initial fieldwork helped me to frame this book as a study of a specific period in Brazilian popular music.

