CHAPTER 29

Black Evangelicalism and Music in Brazil

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Introduction

For the better part of the last century, the reigning ideology of race in Brazil, known as *democracia racial*, has declared that Brazilian slavery was easy-going and cordial, that inequality in Brazil is due not to racial, but to economic discrimination, and that Black racial politics do not really belong in Brazilian society. The last 30 years have seen unprecedented challenges to this ideology, as a growing number of activists and intellectuals have argued that Brazilian slavery was in fact terribly dehumanizing, that much of Brazil’s brutal social inequality is in fact due to racism, and that Black racial politics are indeed essential to forging genuine racial justice in Brazil (see Hordge-Freeman 2015; Da Costa 2014).

It is still widely assumed that Evangelical Christians have little or nothing to say that is relevant to these debates. Race, racism, and racial identity are, it is believed, simply outside the purview of Evangelicals’ main preoccupation, that of saving souls and being saved. Yet there is reason to be skeptical of this assumption. Anthropologist Steve Selka found in questionnaires administered in the early 2000s that Evangelicals in Bahia were as critical of racism as were non-Evangelicals (Selka 2009). Sales Augusto dos Santos noted that many of the Black movement activists he interviewed in the 2000s developed their anti-racist views inside of their churches (Santos 2011). André Cicalo, writing of students at the State University of Rio de Janeiro in the mid-2000s, reported that a majority of activist Black students were Evangelicals (Cicalo 2013). My own research, meanwhile, has shown repeatedly that Evangelical theology sustains the principles of anti-racism (Burdick 2013). It thus seems quite clear that we need to take a closer look at the racial ideas of a religious movement that currently represents about a quarter of all Brazilians, of which about half self-identify as non-white.

In this connection it is relevant to note the growth over the past generation of *música evangélica black*, Christian music played in styles associated with people of African descent. Breaking with European and white North American traditions of church music, thousands of Black Christian artists currently play religiously-themed Black gospel, gospel rap, and gospel samba (Pinheiro 2009). Upon closer inspection, and at odds with the notion that Evangelicals
have little of substance to say about racial identity, these genres are strikingly associated with distinctive attitudes toward Black identity and Black politics. For reasons of space, I will focus here on singers of Black gospel.

To be trained as a Black gospel singer in Brazil means listening to and watching North American Black choirs, and mastering the details of North American Black musical history. Based in this training, Brazilian Black gospel singers develop an elaborate race-sensitive historical consciousness. In a year of ethnographic research, I heard these singers repeat, in detail, the following narrative: over the centuries of slavery, they explained to me, enslaved Africans brought to the New World a love for percussion, inherited from African musical styles. In Brazil, Catholic masters allowed their slaves to continue playing their drums, while in North America, Protestant masters banned them. Consequently, North American slaves, eager to satisfy their drive for percussion, developed great skill in complex percussive vocal repertoire, such as the melisma and belting. “That is why,” expounded choir director Manuel during a rehearsal, “we Brazilians never developed our voices like negros did in America. Here we just played drums, never had a reason to refine and train our voices.” This picture of North American racial vocal history is connected to a vision of Black gospel music as rooted in the brutal conditions of racial inequality. Brazil’s slaves, in this view, were obliged to play their drums at night, and began to worship demons. In contrast, North American slaves intoned their passion for God in a mix of the guttural percussive style they inherited from Africa and the melodic sounds they heard wafting over from their masters’ churches. Slaves’ singing was, according to this version of history, a way for them to cope with the terrors of the system: “Singing in the North American cotton fields,” the director of a Black choir declared, “was a way for slaves to survive hard work and beatings.”

The next chapter of this oral narrative has North American slaves combining their vocal skills with their knowledge of the Bible to create that jewel of world music, the spirituals: “The slaves placed indirect messages about escape in the spirituals,” a voice director explained, “because they were very persecuted. [...] What they usually sang about was oppression and sadness.” And what were Brazilian slaves doing in the meantime? Inventing samba, of course! (For Black gospel musicians, samba is closely associated with the urban world of bars, dancing, Carnaval, the erotic mulata—a world, in short, at odds with the church.) Finally, in the twentieth century, according to these singers, Black gospel music played a key role in the US civil rights struggle. “For those of you who don’t know,” one instructor lectured a Black choir-in-training, “Martin Luther King was a pastor. That’s right! A pastor who fought so that there could be equality in the United States. They could not have done this without their