

Hip-Hop Brasileiro: Brazilian Youth and Alternative Black Consciousness Movements

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Brazilianists such as Hanchard, Skidmore, Telles, and Winant have centered much academic debate around the “lack” of Afro-Brazilian protest in twentieth century Brazil. Yet out of Brazilian *favelas* (or shantytowns), a race consciousness movement currently takes shape through Brazilian hip-hop. Through their selective sampling of American hip-hop culture, Brazilian rappers actively adopt a transnational youth culture, adapting it to local, Brazilian realities and disrupting national discourses on race. Indeed, I argue that Brazilian hip-hoppers constitute an alternative black consciousness movement not merely because they are marginalized youth nor because they situate a political race movement within the realm of popular culture, but rather because of the alternative, and more specifically, American-influenced, ideology they embrace and espouse.

Brazilian rappers begin by locating their consciousness raising outside of traditional politics and inside of leisure activities such as breakdancing, graffiti, and rap music. Of these, rap music most potently transmits their message of information, awareness, and protest. In songs entitled “The Periphery Continues Bleeding,” “Just Another Wake,” “Welcome to Hell,” and “Social Contrast,” rappers from São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, and Brasília poetically expound on some of Brazil’s greatest social injustices: lack of opportunity, crime, drugs, violence, police brutality, poverty, corruption, and discrimination. They recenter the periphery as a site of consciousness raising — giving voice to hundreds of favelas and suburbs which often remain unnamed on maps and in the Brazilian political agenda. MVBill (MV stands for *Mensageiro de Verdade* or Messenger of Truth) begins his song, “How to Survive in the Favela,” with a list of favelas in Rio. This kind of “naming” comes up often in rap songs and concerts and discursively constructs a larger sense of community among the youth of the periphery as well as a sense of national belonging. As MVBill likes to say, “We are marginalized, but we are not marginal.”

Brazilian rappers emphasize the importance of viewing hip-hop as a vehicle for expressing their own day-to-day reality. They identify the American rap group Public Enemy as their primary source of inspiration, but express strong sentiments against the current (what they think of as commercialized) state of rap in the United States. MVBill's DJ, DJTR criticizes not only American rap stars like 2Pac, Notorious B.I.G., and Coolio, but also Brazilian rappers who take their inspiration from these "misguided" role-models. As he explains, "[There are Brazilian rappers] transporting themselves to Los Angeles and to New York, wanting to be African-American. ... They think they have to drive around in a cool car. They think they have to drink American beer in a brown paper bag. Say that all women are prostitutes. I've met guys spacing out like this. And I say, 'man, it's like you are taking the hip-hop book, the history of hip-hop, and reading it upside down. You've got it all wrong. ... I don't care if Gangsta Rap is saying nonsense over there. I am Afro-Brazilian, and I have to fight for my ideals here in Brazil.'" DJTR emphasizes that Brazilian rappers can draw from the rhythms and the structure of American hip-hop and acknowledge the important role that the U.S. has played in rap's history, while at the same time returning rap to its more "pure" and political origins and discussing Brazilian realities. Thus while he connects himself to a larger, globalized hip-hop culture, he remains grounded in a local, and specifically Brazilian, context. And while their views on American rap are obviously controversial, based on limited access to information (especially English lyrics), they serve here to explain how Brazilian rappers position themselves within the larger hip-hop community.

While it is important to recognize that Brazilian rappers critically engage with their hip-hop ancestors and do not import American rap in its entirety, Brazilian hip-hop has been fundamentally influenced by American racial ideologies. In actively embracing a discourse on racial equality and rights, and in drawing on American sources of racial tension and activism for their own public discourse, Brazilian rappers hit two national nerves: First, they mark themselves as "un-Brazilian" in publicly (and aggressively) critiquing racial inequality. Second, they embrace

American ideas of racial consciousness, race as biologically or blood based, and a black/white dichotomy.

To illustrate my first point — that rappers publicly and aggressively address race issues, I examine lyrics from the group Racionais, The Rationals. Coming out of the periphery of São Paulo, this group has achieved national prominence and sold over half a million copies of their latest CD “Surviving in Hell.”

60% dos jovens de periferia sem antecedencias criminais já sofreram violencia policiais
a cada 4 pessoas morta pela policia três são negros
na universidade brasileiras apenas 2% dos alunos são negros
a cada 4 horas um jovem negro morre violentamente em SP
aqui quem fala é Primo Preto mais um sobrevivente

60% of youth in the periphery without criminal records have already suffered police violence
in every 4 people killed by the police, 3 are black
in Brazilian Universities, only 2% of students are black
every 4 hours, a young black person dies violently in São Paulo
speaking here is “Primo Preto” Cousin Black, another survivor

Set within a Brazilian context of “racial democracy” where any discussion of race has historically been considered “un-Brazilian,” rappers disrupt the desired silence around issues of race. Brazilian rap groups often write lyrics which overtly address race consciousness, racial identity, and racism, popularizing expressions such as “4P” “poder para o povo preto” (“power for the black people”) and “preto tipo A” (literally “class A black”). “Preto tipo A” has become quite common among youth, gaining popularity as Racionais gained additional exposure after winning prestigious Brazilian MTV awards in the summer of 1998. “Preto tipo A” is commonly defined as a black who is “conscious,” “places value in being black,” “who fights for his rights,” and “who deserves respect.” In their song, “Chapter 4, 3rd verse,” Racionais criticize a “preto tipo A” who “sold out” and began trying to fit into white culture ... a familiar theme among rappers. In an article “O rap sai do gueto” (“Rap comes out of the ghetto) in the mainstream magazine, “Época,” the term “preto tipo A” is translated in a side bar entitled “The voice of the

brothers.” It becomes clear that rap has not completely left the “gueto,” however, as the reporters completely misinterpret the term, translating “preto tipo A” as “aquele que virou mauricinho” (“that one who turns into a white prep”) — a far cry from the guy who takes pride in being black. Lending perhaps even more insight into mainstream impressions of rap, the line most often cited to suggest Racionais and Brazilian rap are racist comes from this section of the song and discusses whiteness — not blackness. The line reads: “Mas começou a colar com os branquinhos do shopping; Ai já era e, mano, outra vida, outra click.” (“But he began to hang out with the little white guys of the shopping mall. So then that was it, another life, another click.”). This is a line that is also used often by rap fans in their day-to-day life, a catchy phrase that describes the “selling out” they think too common among their peers.

There is much I could say here about the different reactions to and interpretations of rap: from white, middle class youth to black, favela youth to the media, to adults and parents. It is also interesting to note that Racionais, as the leading rap group in Brazil, gets criticized both for talking “only about blacks” and for this particular line about whiteness. My main point here is to highlight the ways in which rap goes against the grain to introduce a more open discussion of race that reaches beyond the rap fans who buy t-shirts with the phrase “preto tipo A” printed across the front. Even as white-middle class society (the targeted audience of Globo’s weekly magazine) is misinformed about key rap expressions and even as cries of “racism” are championed, Brazilian rappers promote new discussions of race in Brazil.

In addition to discussing race in “Un-Brazilian” ways, the Brazilian hip-hop movement openly challenges dominant discourses on Brazilian race relations. Here I come back to DJTR whose nickname, “*teste de raça*,” or “race test or experiment,” references both his black mother and white father and his lighter skin and African facial features. He likes this nickname as it actively promotes a discussion of race and the ideology of *embranquecimento* or whitening. As he knowledgeably explains, “At the turn of the century, Brazilian diplomats attended this annual convention in Geneva. At this convention, they discussed one topic only : The whitening

of Brazil. The genocide of the black people in Brazil. And one of the alternatives was what we are participating in: make the people involuntarily contribute to the whitening of Brazil. [And so] for them racially I am white. In the racial system I am a white citizen because I am the result of what they want.” Yet DJTR is not quite the result of “what they want,” as he poses a direct challenge to this process through his self-identification and opposing views of racial mixture. Rewriting Brazilian history and ideology, he confidently asserts: “Even though my father is white, I am completely descended from Afro-Brazilians. Whatever race crosses with black, you are Afro-something.”

On the first day I met DJTR, I asked what race he identified with. As he responded that “in his opinion he was black,” MV Bill launched into an explanation ending in DJTR’s defining moment of racial identification: “You’ll see how the racism we suffer here is different than what goes on in the US. There it is a racism of race; here it is a discrimination of skin, skin color. The darker your skin, the greater the discrimination against you. For example, he is the son of a black. He has black blood, and in the US, he would be considered black, from what we understand. Not here. Once we were going to give a concert in Botafogo [a wealthier neighborhood in Rio]. I’m going to tell this story. Everyone on the bus right. In the back of the bus, just blacks. Black, like my skin color or like Marquinho’s — *só negão* [just big black guys]. We were all sitting, everyone quiet. Then a police car comes, pulls the bus over, makes them open the back doors of the bus. He gets on, searches everyone. When the cop went up to DJTR and said “you’re excused,” he said, “You’re not going to search me too? I am with them.” The Military Police officer turned yellow, blue, green, he turned every shade of the rainbow. He was humiliated, right?” At this point, DJTR jumps in to add, “I had been reading Malcolm X at the time.” MVBill continues, “He was humiliated, understand? This is discrimination. And if he hadn’t searched him, what would have happened? If DJTR was an ignorant guy, if he weren’t conscious, if he hadn’t known the culture of Hip-Hop, not just the music but the culture...what would he have thought? ‘I’m superior to them.’”

Coming from a racial system which judges people primarily on the color of their skin — doling out discrimination along a color continuum, Brazilian rappers eagerly embrace the fixed dichotomy of American race relations. When gradations of color turn the Brazilian lower classes against each other in the absence of an overt discourse of racism, the hip-hop movement seeks to create unity through a black/white distinction they see as a more honest description of racism in Brazil. “Assuming one’s blackness” is a common theme of Brazilian rap songs. As MVBill sings in one of his songs, “Blacks thinking themselves brown, mixed, white, *marrom bom bom* (“brown bonbon”); Sucking up to Playboys that appear on television; Listen up black on the outside, white on the inside; I speak the truth...”

These direct confrontations to the Brazilian racial system are increasing. I have met other male rappers and rap fans who identified as Black — eschewing the safe middle-ground of “*moreno*” and the possibility of claiming a more privileged racial position. While admitting that the color of his skin could be defined as the “profile” of Brazilian society, DJ Poindexter points to “blood” and not skin color as the true basis of race. He eloquently outlines his reasons for identifying as black: “I think it’s time for us to give value to our people because our people deserve it. We have to thank them — they were the ones who invented math, medicine, and metallurgy — everything, right? The first people to exist on this world were black. So let’s value our people — their worth is already so low — black people are considered garbage already. So, if I consider myself white, well, I’m helping the system to step down harder on top of us. I am disrespecting my own family. No, let’s change that. Negritude.”

In conclusion, I would like to emphasize the ways in which the Brazilian Hip-Hop Movement speaks directly to current academic debates on race relations in Brazil. Guimaraes has proposed that “For the African Brazilian population, those who call themselves *negros* (Blacks), anti-racism must mean first the admission of race; that is, a perception of themselves — the racialized others — as the racialized ‘we.’” Examining the lives and the lyrics of Brazilian rappers, we must at least agree that despite a prevalent myth of racial democracy, such a

racialized conception — a racial consciousness — is possible in Brazil. And regardless of their actual or eventual power to effect political change, we must recognize that their position outside and against the traditional political system affords Brazilian rappers a certain freedom to critique Brazilian racism and push the boundaries of Brazilian discourses on race.

However, we must also realize the important limitations of this “outsider” position — including limited access to political and economic resources, and further marginalization by dominant society. In their appropriation of American black and white race ideologies, rappers tread on Brazilian pride in their nation’s history of race relations — which Brazilians have long considered superior to America’s history of race tension and conflict. Based in a population already politically, economically, and racially marginalized, hip-hop runs a risk Florestan Fernandes predicted 20 years ago: “Open and radical non-conformity is ‘institutionally’ banished from the legal order. ‘Racist Negroes’ see themselves, therefore, condemned to impotence.” But as their music continues to blast from neighborhood radio stations and boomboxes, Brazilian hip-hop gives voice, hope, and a sense of self to thousands of black youth of Brazil’s periphery.

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