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### Martha ABREU, *Da senzala ao palco. Canções escravas e racismo nas Américas, 1870-1930*

Marc A. Hertzman

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# Martha ABREU, *Da senzala ao palco.* *Canções escravas e racismo nas* *Américas, 1870-1930*

Marc A. Hertzman

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## REFERENCES

Martha ABREU, *Da senzala ao palco. Canções escravas e racismo nas Américas, 1870-1930*, Campinas, Editora da Unicamp, 2017, eISBN: 978-85-268-1396-0, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7476/9788526813960>, R\$ 14,00 BRL.

- 1 During the nineteenth century, writes Ronald Radano, “Black musical forms produced a kind of valuative loss for whites by giving material form to that which lay beyond their grasp.”<sup>1</sup> As European visitors and others commented on the prevalence of Black musical forms in the U.S. south—and as blackface minstrelsy became a vehicle for depicting slave culture—Black music came to represent something that even masters could not fully own. This genie slipping out of the bottle hardly represented an end to exploitation for slaves or their descendants. Rather, the invention of “American” Black music helped spawn new opportunities for avarice while churning Black commodities onto a new sea of consumer capitalism that arose after the Civil War. “Black music exposed the limitations and incompleteness of white southern life, a loss that whites seemed to seek to remedy through black musical consumption.”<sup>2</sup> Black music became a cultural category and even an organizing principle for the nation, but it would still be white barons, now as consumers, executives and producers, who held the levers of capital.
- 2 In *Da senzala ao palco. Canções escravas e racismo nas Américas, 1870-1930*, Martha Abreu provides a sparkling, and meticulously and exhaustively researched, account of how this process looks when “America” is understood in hemispheric terms. By centering Brazil and still paying close attention to the United States, Abreu charts new waters in

the scholarship on race and music. The book crowns years of labor researching and writing, processes that became “interwoven” (p. 33) with the passage of landmark Brazilian laws meant to address slavery’s long legacies of inequality, including Decree 3.551 (2000), which provides for the recognition and protection of music and other cultural forms, many pioneered by people of African descent; Law 10.639 (2003), which mandates the inclusion of Afro-Brazilian and African history in educational curricula; and the 2012 Supreme Court decision that cemented a long struggle to implement Affirmative Action policies. For the past two decades, as she painstakingly pieced together the book, Abreu was involved with on-the-ground manifestations related to these and companion cultural and political projects. The product is not only an innovative piece of scholarship, but one informed by and engaged with current events.

- 3 Published in digital format, the book makes great use of new technology and the rich visual and sonic archives that Abreu has combed for years. The medium allows the author to share a bounty of audio clips. The payoff is evident when, for example, Abreu compares Scott Joplin’s “The Entertainer” (1902) and Ernesto Nazareth’s “Odeon” (1910) (p. 202). Listening to the two while immersed in the book is an incredible experience, and the similarity that Abreu identifies is remarkable. The book also displays amazing images, though there is a glut of sheet music displaying ugly racial caricature, much of which seems to repeat the same racist tropes and might otherwise be minimized. While Abreu warns the reader ahead of time about the images, some of the sound clips merit more discussion, especially “All Coons Look Alike to Me,” which, with no prior warning, smacks the listener with the n-word (p. 171).
- 4 One of the loudest objections to Affirmative Action in Brazil suggested that the new laws would bring U.S.-style racism and racial categories. Though specious on several levels, the argument gained currency inside and outside the academy, channeling a complex mixture of anti-imperialism and racial myopia that continues to strike a chord in many. Against that backdrop it is all the more impressive that Abreu has pulled off a remarkable achievement: writing a history of Brazilian music that is at once transnational and comparative, while also deeply attuned to national and local realities.
- 5 The book is organized in two parts, the first dedicated to how “musicians and the public in Brazil became acquainted with slave songs from the United States and participated in the ‘Black Atlantic,’ animating North-South cultural transits, but also South-North” (p. 29). By delivering on that promise Abreu makes one of her most important contributions. Paul Gilroy’s *Black Atlantic*, foundational as it remains, all but leaves out the Southern Hemisphere.<sup>3</sup> Abreu reminds us of this point by repeatedly using the phrase “South of the Equator Too” to punctuate rich descriptions of previously unknown histories. In some cases, the words are followed or preceded by somewhat unsurprising observations. But often, they deliver pithy critiques of U.S.- and Euro-centric academies, such as the one conveyed in a not-so-subtle section heading: “The Atlantic Is Black South of the Equator Too.”
- 6 Part Two focuses more exclusively on Brazil but remains attentive to intriguing transnational flows. The narrative revolves around three comparisons: Musical representations of two elderly “passive” Black figures, Pai João and Uncle Tom; the multi-talented stage performers Eduardo das Neves and Bert Williams; and the renowned writers W.E.B. Du Bois and Coelho Netto. Rejecting the false notion that comparative and transnational analysis cannot coexist, Abreu places her cases

alongside one another while also tracing connections and imagining “possible dialogues” (p. 660) among them. As I have written elsewhere, I do not agree with everything that Abreu says about Neves, whose skillful entrepreneurship and clever deployment of multiple masculine imageries challenged the sensibilities of cultural and economic gatekeepers in subtle ways. But that in no way precludes appreciation for the incredible scholarship on display in this book. Building on her earlier work on Neves, which, disagreements notwithstanding, was fundamental to my own, Abreu smashes through the quaint confines of nationally bounded works and considers Neves alongside Williams, whose own entrepreneurship and performance make him at once a singular figure and a perfect foil for Neves. Born in the same year (1874), both men became stars around the same time and in music industries that both fetishized Black music and marginalized Black musicians. Further, Abreu shows, while Williams played for audiences whose own wealth and status dwarfed that of the crowds to whom Neves generally performed, both men found ways to overcome uneven playing fields and even “laugh at” the “difficult racial situations” they faced (p. 653). “If the musical choices of Black musicians in the Americas was varied,” Abreu writes, “the available paths and the challenges they confronted do not appear to have been much different” (p. 654).

- 7 That said, the comparison invites further research and conversation. If each man—and Black musicians throughout the Americas—lived in societies shaped by “deep continuities with the slave past”, what difference, if any, did it make that that past was almost a quarter-century “more past” in the U.S., where slavery ended in 1865, than in Brazil, where it lasted until 1888? Louis Chude-Sokei, with whom Abreu dialogues, describes how “multiple black othernesses... have often gotten lost in the seemingly overwhelming and justifiably influential context of the African American social world and its epic struggle for recognition against a recalcitrant and reluctant American racism.”<sup>4</sup> Williams’s West-Indian roots (he was born in Nassau) are an example of the kind of “Black otherness” that often elude scholars and that, after further consideration, might illustrate important differences between Williams and Neves. Regardless, by putting the two together as Abreu has done, *Da senzala ao palco* forges new ground and provides a baseline for all future studies.
- 8 If the comparison of Neves and Williams seems almost intuitive, the pairing in the final chapter, which matches a Black intellectual (Du Bois) and a white author (Coelho), is anything but. By considering the two together, Abreu unsettles a number of preconceptions, while avoiding falling back on a false equivalence. The two men came from and occupied different places in society and took interest in Black music for unique reasons. The fact that they agreed about Black music’s centrality to unique national projects suggests why many of our frames for understanding race in either country can seem “insufficient” (p. 703). Urging scholars to move beyond the “classic racial polarities between the two countries—the valorization of racial mixture in Brazil vs. segregationism in the U.S.” (pp. 703-704), Abreu provides an especially instructive frame for American Studies scholars and U.S. historians, who for too long have overlooked Neves and others who plied their trade and lived their lives in other Americas.

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## NOTES

1. Ronald Radano, "On Ownership and Value," *Black Music Research Journal*, 2010, Vol. 30, No. 2, p. 367.
  2. *Ibid.*
  3. Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic. Modernity and Double Consciousness*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1993.
  4. Louis Chude-Sokei, *The Last "Darky". Bert Williams, Black-on-Black Minstrelsy, and the African Diaspora*, Durham, N.C., Duke University Press, 2006, p. 15.
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