Sonic resistance: Diaspora, marginality and censorship in Cuban and Brazilian popular music

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Citation for published version (APA):
In this study I argue that popular music can testify to experiences of censorship, marginality and diaspora in spite of the difficulties that giving account of these experiences imply. Focusing primarily on Cuba in the late 1980s and Brazil in the early 1970s where censors obliged musicians to reaffirm, through their music, a hegemonic image of a national identity, the songs I analyze resist censorship through iconic forms of expression, which I will approach through their narrative, auditive and expressive characteristics. The musicians whose songs I analyze, consisting of Gilberto Gil (Tropicália), Jards Macalé (marginais) and Milton Nascimento (Clube da Esquina) in Brazil and Carlos Varela (topos generation) and Telmary Diaz (Interactivo project) in Cuba, are dealing with what I call affective diaspora, an experience of alienation from the homeland that does not require physical separation from it. I connect this experience of a blurring of the border between inside and outside to the way these musicians circumvent censorship by questioning, from a marginal perspective, the parameters of its operation. Their strategy of destabilizing the separation between inside and outside of hegemony, of the homeland and of legitimized speech or musical harmony is what I call detuning. To approach and do justice to these detuned musical narratives, I propose a strabistic way of listening that, like cross-eyed vision, is capable of reading the decentered testimony of these songs as also testifying to censorship itself.
Sonic Resistance

Diaspora, Marginality and Censorship in Cuban and Brazilian Popular Music
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Design Cover & Lay-out:
Pepijn van der Linden / Toek Design: www.toekdesign.nl

Cover Image:
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Printed by Ipskamp Printing: www.ipskampprinting.nl
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It has taken me more than six years to come to the final version of this dissertation. More than six years of squeezing the maximum of productivity out of the always too short weekends in between sales targets and something of a social life. Small islands of time that were pervaded by the linear time of the world outside where things always appeared to be moving forward at a much faster pace. For this reason the process of writing was not just a journey through time, but also through space. And space not only in the metaphorical sense of the word. I also refer to the multiple places where the writing somehow had to be done. Bars, offices, trains, planes, dining tables, beds, in different cities and countries, or somewhere in between, places that still appear before my mental eye when reading the parts of my theses that were written there. And with the evocation of these different places come the memories of the people associated with them, whom I want to thank for the different ways in which they affected the body in becoming of this dissertation.

The office is inextricably connected to the three people who have guided me through the process of preparing, writing, rewriting, rewriting and finishing the dissertation. It all started in a virtual space, mainly on Skype, when I started having brainstorm sessions with Cornelia about the possible focus of my research. Throughout the years her presence has continued to be a primarily virtual one due to physical distance, but our sessions have always been productively challenging. In spite of the sometimes frustrating difficulty of putting our intuitions to words (the sonic has many ways of resisting language) I remember our conversations as moments of inspiration that resulted in the discovery of some very important insights, the hidden sidetracks to my dominant lines of thought.

The physical office space, the one that consists of actual tables, chairs and fluorescent lighting, where the sometimes romantic idea of doing academic research meets the reality of plain and simple disciplined labor, is the space inhabited by Esther. She has been the most present person throughout the entire process, reading god knows how many versions of the same Movements yet never
Acknowledgements

missing the smallest details that had to be taken out, corrected or emphasized. I admit to having some moments of being disheartened at seeing how the result of months of writing and suffering can be sent back within a few hours – colored red almost completely – and at the same time I know I have also tested her patience on various occasions with my overly ambitious writing. “You don’t need to be Agamben” she repeatedly said, putting my feet back on the ground. Finally I realized that only discipline can turn work into craftsmanship. I don’t know whether I got close to that stage – at least there was less and less red towards the end – but if I have learned something from Esther, she has been teaching it by example. With her pragmatism and enthusiasm she helped me overcome every inevitable moment of writer’s block, which in Academia occurs every three paragraphs. Especially in my situation where the writing had to be done in short and scarce time slots, her very quick responses were a major help, not to mention the mental support and encouragement which became more and more important in the final stages. In short, I simply could not have done it without her.

And then there is this in between space where the office door opens up to the rest of the world. That space belongs to Mieke, whom I knew as the embodiment of ASCA before I came to Amsterdam but who proved to be so much more than that. She showed me that the true value of academic research lies not in one’s capacity to drift off into philosophical meanderings, but precisely in “bringing it home” if I speak in musical terms. I was some months into my process when I had my first meeting with her, discussing my first part, and where I had expected her to focus on the theoretical content of my writing – which she did with such ease, pinpointing the truly important subjects in my blur of ideas – she mainly encouraged me to find my own voice in my writing. “If you refer to these authors looking for a voice, then why don’t I hear yours?” My writing has never been the same since that remark. Suddenly I felt I did not have to fill pages with seriousness, that I was allowed to improvise, to play, to embrace the moments when my analyses did not resonate harmoniously with the theory at hand. The office could also be a lighter place; a door had been opened to something beyond it.

Time for a shift to another dynamic space of sales and numbers, innovation and competition, set-backs and victories, chasing and being chased – my life from
Mondays to Thursdays as a salesperson at SecureLink. Their understanding for the fact that I was always only partly dedicated because of my research, and their consistent encouragement of this other life I believe they could never completely make sense of was unexpected at first, and simply overwhelming in the final stage. Although their world seems so incompatible with academia, some of these colleagues have unknowingly taught me some important characteristics. I wish to thank them anyway: Marco for showing me that sales is about people and about having fun, and also for emphasizing the importance of never taking yourself too seriously. I am grateful to Peter for never accepting an apparent truth at first sight, to Manon for precision, to Jos for teaching me that every apparent roadblock is an invitation to come up with a better plan, to Dennis for patience, to Jeroen for perseverance, and the list goes on. A special thank you goes to Ingeborg and Jos for being helping hands in the background during my period of absence while finishing my PhD. I also wish to thank Yuri Bobbert for teaching me by example how academic research and sales can also go hand in hand.

Time and space will need to be compressed in order not to fill too many pages. It is impossible not to mention the people and places that are left, but impossible to express all my gratitude in few words. Leiden, Rio de Janeiro, Florianópolis and Recife were the places where the foundation was laid for part of what fills these pages. Thanks to Marilene for reintroducing me to the language of my forefathers and making it speak to me, to Nanne for making it sing, to Luz Rodríguez, Italo Moriconi, Wim van der Meer and Susana Scramim for making me rediscover my love for research, to Santuza, Paulo Britto, Fred Coelho, Daniel Vieira and Bruno Miranda for introducing me to the less-known aspects of Brazilian music, but also to Lola, Matias and my friend Marcio for making me feel protected and loved in a place so far away.

In Amsterdam, life at the office was a place of inspiration, challenge and mutual support thanks to the many people I got to know there and whom I hope will not disappear from view: Irene, Simon, Alejandra, Uzma, Peyman, Nur, Hanneke, Asli, Lara, Niall, Marie, Pepita, Melle, Aylin, Birkan, Pedram, Astrid, Irina and Blandine. At moments of struggle with bucratic or professional issues, Hotze Mulder, Christoph Lindner and, of course, Eloë and Jantine have always royally offered me their support, for which I am very grateful.
Even closer to home there are some important people who helped me develop some crucial thoughts, probably without knowing it. Morning coffee and evening drinks were the general contexts of so many fruitful and fun conversations with all these lovely people I am so proud to call my friends: Arnold, Simche, Simone, Magdalena, Carolina, Raúl, Hieke, Luís, Roxana, Nina, Anna, Julio, Jussara, Karel, Steve, Zizika, Bobby, John, Pepijn, Jurriaan, Siad, Kieran, Theyla, Lu, Elco, Paulien and Taco. More than thoughts and conversations, these are the people I shared the most important moments with: the moments spent in silence or in music – if there is indeed a difference between the two.

Home is never confined to a single place, especially when that home is Cuba. The island of Cuba that became the place of my other family through endless talks on the balcony with Orestes, Ivette and Frank, the coffee and conversations with abuela Gladys and her endless curiosity about everything, my marvel at abuelo Bernal’s talent to release reality from its straightjacket of simple facts, listening to bisabuela Nena whose century of accumulated memories were spread out before her like the rice grains she sorted by hand every morning, following the gaze of abuelo Próspero and the way it rested on his loved ones in the living room, and sharing laughter and songs with the family in Cuba’s east: tía Olga, abuela Amanda, tía Chela and tío Koqui, tía Dania and tío Felín, and all the children and grandchildren who both light up and tear down the place. Manzanillo, the town and the house, the Cuban Macondo of Marcelo who still lived there in the 1950s and who never got to see it again.

Havana: the noise, the traffic, the waves that beat against the Malecón, the place where music on the streets is not the same as the songs that people sing behind closed doors. The place where Conchita taught me that music could also be poetry and poetry was nothing more than daily reality, where Joaquin Borges showed me that attentive listening could also compensate for vision, and were Elieser surprised me about how close intellect can be to folly as he and his stray dogs climbed the big pile of books he had made at the center of his book store – a place where the prohibited books had once been so neatly separated from the obligatory ones before his term in prison. But also Havana’s presence through jam sessions with Ulises on our balcony in Barcelona, through the poetry I was introduced to by José Felix at his place in Barceloneta, through Denis’ musings...
over cigarettes and tambor de boniato in Stockholm, and through the endless and sometimes surreal stories Dayron would tell us his living room in Zürich.

And then finally there is the home where you hang your hat, here in the Netherlands. The place where my travels began in their imaginary form, through photographs and documentaries, before I had set foot outside Europe. Where I discovered Surinam through the stories my mother and my aunts would tell me, and where the travels went as far back as Madeira, the island of my ancestors, during the traditional Christmas dinners with my grandfather’s recipe of carne vinho d’alhos. It is a place of protection, which I owe to the inexhaustible care and love I continue to receive from my father, my mother and my big little sister. A place where Raymond has helped me realize that things that are never lost can still be found again. But this home has also become a place of arrival since Ivette left her island to join me on the other side of the Atlantic. And with that arrival it is also the starting point of a new journey, who knows where it will take us.

Pages fill up with words of thanks and yet I cannot find the words to thank you for your care, your confidence in me, your words of stimulation, your intelligence of knowing when to tell me to relax for a while or when to give me the necessary kick in the butt, and not in the least your superhuman patience in my final days of febrile and constant writing. Should you in time make peace with this dissertation and should you decide to read it, you might notice that the analyses, as they progress, also resonate vertically with another story, one that is not so far from our own hardships and victories. It is not there in an obvious way, it does not speak out loud, but it whispers in a space between the lines, and that is the space I am dedicating to you.

Amsterdam, March 20th 2016