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

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# Coda

The analyses in this study have shown that, in both Cuba and Brazil, the lyrics, auditive dimensions and performance of certain songs worked together to challenge the fixity of narrative, geographical, physical, hegemonic, melodic and discursive spaces that censorship sought to achieve and maintain, and thus amount to a strategy of sonic resistance. Crucially, this strategy is aimed not solely at circumventing or challenging censorship, but also at making its mechanisms perceptible for the song's audiences.

In Part 1 I analyzed the affectively diasporic experience of the different Sonic I's as one that could resonate between different geographically separated spaces, just like bodies can affect each other in ways that do not always imply physical contact. Affect, in this sense, implies a space of resonance that is not necessarily traversed by means of a chronological, linear movement through time and space. I related this to how a song's sonic and performative representation could be independent from the linear, chronological structure of its narration, creating the possibility of a narration that is also readable in its vertical structure, parallel to how, in music notation, the harmony of multiple simultaneous notes can be read as vertical chords. In the analyzed songs by Carlos Varela and Gilberto Gil the context of censorship manifested as a discursive construction of a national identity by the state authorities based on a strict separation between the inside and the outside of the national territory and of the officially legitimized discourse. Censorship, in this form, strives to secure the borders of a geographically identifiable territory and a rationally understandable discourse, whereas the subversive potential of the analyzed songs derives from sonic and affective characteristics that resonate vertically in spite of censorship's firm control over the horizontal bar.

The main focus of Part 2 was on how the analyzed songs, within their performance, presented ways of subverting different norms of musical performance, such as the separation between performer and audience or the neatness of musical harmony. I related this to the political contexts in late 1980s and early

1990s Cuba and 1970s Brazil as authoritarian systems that intended to establish a hegemony. In these contexts the marginality of the *cantautores* in question opened up the contingent possibility of subversion that any hegemonic system includes. I argued that it is not the mere fact of reaffirming one's marginality that subverts hegemony just like a performance of a subversive act is still a performance. Because censorship is related to the way in which a hegemonic system aims to maintain a certain harmony between the multiple elements that constitute it, I introduced the concept of *detuning* to show how a minimal distortion of the established harmony can subvert hegemony because it destabilizes its boundaries. It does this in the manner of an expanding and receding *membrane* rather than by establishing a clearly identifiable outside. Through my analyses of songs by Carlos Varela and Jards Macalé I argued that, in cases where censorship aims to secure hegemony within the singularity of its discourse, effective sonic subversion is based on a sonic *strabism* that renders audible multiple, simultaneous discourses.

In Part 3, I presented the strabism of sonic resistance as a way for marginalized musicians to render perceptible their experiences of *affective diaspora* and censorship. Precisely this strabism, which, in the analyzed songs by Telmary and Milton Nascimento, is created through technological or performative ways of subverting the coherence of the speaking voice, allows the musicians to express the impossibility to testify: the disorientating experience of affective diaspora becomes palpable through a multiplication of the speaking voice, whereas the stifling effects of censorship are made manifest in the enunciation of incomprehensible speech. These testimonies do not take the form of horizontal and logically structured narratives or singular, harmonious languages, as that would render their engagement with the restrictive characteristics of censorship observed in Part 1 and 2 invisible. Rather, I argue that these sonic testimonies *to* censorship require a strabistic mode of listening that is capable of reading the vertical, affective dimension of the songs and their performance. In such a mode, the message conveyed by *what* is being said is of lesser importance than the one conveyed by *how* it is expressed. Sonic resistance, then, can be located not just in the lyrics, but also in seemingly meaningless or accidental elements of songs and their performance, such as mumbling, stuttering or technological glitches.

The central factor that has connected my analyses of the Brazilian and

Cuban songs is their engagement with the strong presence and pressure of a centralizing regime (military in Brazil and Revolutionary in Cuba) attempting to consolidate a fixed discourse of national identity. Drawing this study to a close, however, it should be noted that in the present-day situation, the role of the state and the dominant politics are significantly different.

In Cuba, Raul Castro assumed state leadership in 2008. Since then, he has implemented some important changes in the Cuban economic system, such as, in 2012, allowing citizens to have private companies instead of all being employees of the state (Meléndez). Also, negotiations with the Obama administration in the U.S. have led to a significant relief of the travel and export prohibitions put in place in the early 1960s. The new system, in which the Cuban political system is still socialist in ideology but also inserts itself in a practical way in the global capitalist market, is often compared to the Chinese model (Roque Cabello). As in China, in spite of new economic freedoms, artists, bloggers and musicians who criticize the authorities or the Cuban political system are still under threat of punishment and incarceration. A pertinent example is Gorki Águila, the lead singer of the rock band *Porno Para Ricardo*, whose extremely provocative lyrics have caused him to be repeatedly imprisoned.<sup>79</sup>

In recent years there have also been cases of arrests of artists who expressed less overt forms of criticism than *Porno Para Ricardo*. Consider, for example, the incarceration of performance artist Tania Bruguera after she planned to stage her project “El sussurro de Tatlin,” ‘Tatlin’s Whisper’ on the Plaza de la Revolución in Havana, where Castro’s speeches are traditionally held.<sup>80</sup> The performance artwork, consisting of a microphone on a stand, a white dove and

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79 The website [freemuse.org](http://freemuse.org) reports that Gorki has been imprisoned or arrested at least 6 times since 2003 ([Freemuse.org](http://freemuse.org)). For an idea of the extent to which *Porno Para Ricardo*’s lyrics are not only critical about political issues but outright provocations of the regime, consider the refrain of the song “El coma andante,” ‘The Walking Coma,’ released in 2006, the year when Fidel Castro started to disappear from view for long periods due to his repeated hospitalizations for intestinal cancer (*El Mundo Internacional*). In the song, the Sonic I sings in a harsh voice: “no comas tanta pinga comandante,” ‘don’t talk so much shit, commander.’

80 The artwork’s allusion to Tatlin’s tower, the monument to the Third International that was planned for Petrograd after the Russian Revolution but never built, suggests a whisper that was never pronounced, implicitly referring to the persistence of censorship in Cuba.

two people in military outfits flanking the stand, allows for one-minute speeches by people from the audience or passers-by. Its obvious reference to the setting of Castro's speeches already caused the work to be scorned by the authorities upon its first staging in the arts center of Havana in 2009, especially since some people had used their minute of speech to request freedom of expression and democracy. Bruguera's plan to install the same artwork at the Plaza de la Revolución in 2014, however, led to her incarceration, which was widely commented on in the international press (Hoby).

In Brazil, Dilma Rousseff's left-wing *Partido dos Trabalhadores* (Worker's Party) is currently facing nation-wide protests because of the country's economic decline and the bad working conditions, as well as major corruption scandals at a time when Brazil is struggling to prepare itself to host the 2016 Olympics (*The Guardian*, August 2015). Apart from creating uproar about the excessive investments made to build stadiums around the country as Brazil is facing economic problems, the preparations for the Olympics and for the soccer World Cup in 2014 have also given more visibility to more profound, long-term social problems, especially poverty and violence. The forced eviction of people from favelas situated close to (future) stadiums has drawn global attention to these issues and to Brazil's inability to reduce the extreme gap between rich and poor (*The Guardian*, June 2015).

Thus, the differences between the present-day contexts and those framing the analyses in this study are obvious: Cuba is no longer closed off to the capitalist world as hermetically as before, and Brazil has a democratic government. However, lingering similarities are not difficult to find: Cuba still has a socialist system, an authoritarian leader who was not democratically elected and an active censorship system, while in Brazil the wish to be a significant player in a globalized world economy (as one of the BRIC countries) has led to an effort to erase marginalized groups from public life. What I do see as important shifts are, in Cuba, the diminishing visibility of the political authorities in everyday life and, in Brazil, the growing willingness of people to engage in public protest. In Cuba, Raul Castro does not have the same overwhelming presence as his older brother Fidel did. He does not deliver the same hours-long speeches and he is less dominantly present in the media. Although measures of control and punishment

are still taken to protect the political system, there is a less openly pronounced discourse legitimizing these measures than before. In Brazil, public speeches by Rousseff are often met with people taking to the streets banging pots and pans, which caused her to skip her 1<sup>st</sup> of May speech in 2015 (Galvao).

Because of these changes, the conditions under which present-day *cantautores* write and perform their music provide space for more explicitly expressed criticism (albeit less so in Cuba than in Brazil). What has not changed, however, is music's role as a medium through which marginalized voices can make themselves heard by invoking alternative discourses, including from the past. An example is Brazilian rapper Criolo's song "Cálice," an *a capella* tribute to Gilberto Gil's and Chico Buarque's 1973 song of the same name – referred to in Movement 8 – that the rapper improvised at a little street stand, with the video instantly becoming a Youtube hit in 2010. Criolo's version, which maintains the melodic, metric and lyric structure of the original, adapts the lyrics to refer to contemporary problems on the fringes of Brazilian society. Criolo, who grew up in a *favela* in São Paulo, is often seen as a voice speaking from these fringes, something he also emphasizes in his lyrics and his performance (Neff). Also worth mentioning here is the fact that Criolo's "Cálice" has become one of the anthems often sung and played at the recent Brazilian protests (Rossenblum).

Where Gil and Buarque's song alluded to the military regime's censorship as a blood-filled chalice or *cálice* from which the Sonic I refused to drink, Criolo's Sonic I pleads with his father to take the *biqueira* away from him, using a word that in street language refers to the place where drugs are being sold. This version therefore revolves around present-day Brazilian problems such as poverty, violence, drug trafficking and racism:

#### Cálice    Chalice / Shut up

Como ir pro trabalho sem levar um tiro	How to go to work without getting shot
Voltar pra casa sem levar um tiro	Return home without getting shot
Se as três da matina tem alguém que frita	If someone is high at three in the morning
E é capaz de tudo pra manter sua brisa	And will do anything to uphold his oblivion

Os saraus tiveram que invadir os botecos	the jam sessions had to invade the bars
Pois biblioteca não era lugar de poesia	because the library was no place for poetry
Biblioteca tinha que ter silêncio,	Libraries had to have silence
E uma gente que se acha assim muito sabida	And people who think they are wise like this

Há preconceito com o nordestino	there are prejudices about the <i>nordestino</i>
Há preconceito com o homem negro	there are prejudices about the black man
Há preconceito com o analfabeto	there are prejudices about the illiterate
Mais não há preconceito se um dos três for rico, pai.	but father, there is no prejudice if one of those three were rich.

A ditadura segue meu amigo Milton	The dictatorship follows my friend Milton
A repressão segue meu amigo Chico	The repression follows my friend Chico
Me chamam Criolo e o meu berço é o rap	They call me Criolo and rap is my cradle
Mas não existe fronteira pra minha poesia, pai.	But father, there are no borders to my poetry

Afasta de mim a biqueira, pai	Father, take this <i>biqueira</i> away from me
Afasta de mim as biate, pai	Father, take the bitch away from me
Afasta de mim a coqueine, pai	Father, take the cocaine away from me
Pois na quebrada escorre sangue, pai	Because blood flows in the outskirts, father.

An important difference between the original version and Criolo's remake is that the challenge to institutionalized and state-coordinated censorship in the 1973 version of the song has been replaced by the claim that the problems of the marginalized neighborhoods of the present day can only be represented by non-official forms of expression such as Criolo's conception of poetry as disturbing the silence required by the elite frequenting "the libraries." Now, the plea to the father is not to lift the silence imposed on the Sonic 1, as was the case in Gil and Buarque's version, but to take away the problems caused by drug- and prostitution-related violence.

The silence required in libraries by "people who think they are wise" because they read books is contrasted with the streetwise poetry that finds its place in noisy locales, such as bars, where the spontaneity of poetic expression that can

rescue people from their “oblivion” is represented by the *saraus*, jam sessions that include not only music but also dance and poetry. In the next stanza, the Sonic I emphasizes that *nordestinos* (people from Brazil’s poor North-East region) but also people of color and those who are illiterate suffer from prejudices that can only be escaped by becoming rich.

Significantly, the song also insists that the past still influences the present through the Sonic I’s references, in the present tense, to “the dictatorship” and “the repression” that follow his friends Milton [Nascimento] and Chico [Buarque]. The allusion to these musicians from a different generation is not only historical, but functions to indicate that the friends of the Sonic I who share his harsh reality of living in suburbs where one can get shot while going to work are being silenced just like these musicians were, only in a different manner.

The word *biqueira*, with which Criolo replaces “cálice,” is interesting in this respect, since, in Brazilian Portuguese, it can also refer to a bag that is placed over an animal’s snout (*bico*) to prevent it from eating. While this allusion is easily associated with the Sonic I’s request not to be silenced, as in the original version of the song, it also suggests something else: the bag placed over the mouth of the Sonic I not only prevents him from speaking, but also prevents him from ingesting, signaling that, as a rapper whose poetry represents the poor and their blood that “flows in the outskirts,” he should not partake of the rich people’s Brazil.

With these observations in mind, the lines “rap is my cradle / but father, there are no borders to my poetry” can be placed in their proper perspective. The fact that the Sonic I, who, through these lines, identifies himself with the rapper Criolo, mentions an absence of borders to his poetry recalls the blurring of separations between geographical spaces that I have recognized as an important characteristic of affective diaspora throughout this study. In this particular song, however, the boundaries evoked are the literal boundaries that separate the Brazilian *favelas* and their violent reality from the supposedly peaceful or “silent” day-to-day life of the cities in which they are exclusively included. These same boundaries are seen to apply at a discursive level, with the archive of “the libraries” not accepting the poetry that represents the voices of the poor. Criolo, in claiming that his poetry does not have boundaries, suggests that the “rich” Brazilian society that wishes to keep marginality invisible is like the logocentric

ensorship of language, alluded to by the image of the libraries, the “silence” of which can be disturbed or detuned by a poetry that does not abide to the limitations imposed on it.

Significantly, just as in my earlier analyses, music here refers to marginality while also enunciating from a marginalized position in order to subvert the mechanisms that are trying to inhibit the expression of certain ideas and problems. This strategy is not only revived in contemporary Brazil. In present-day Cuba, the members of the rap-group Los Aldeanos (The Villagers) also emphasize their marginal status as politically critical rappers and make it part of their performance. Marginality, in the case of Los Aldeanos, is expressed in their band name, which evokes associations with the periphery, the “other” (usually poorer) space from an urban point of view.

The lyrics of Los Aldeanos songs are critical towards the Cuban regime in a very explicit way, contrasting with the subtle, metaphorical and sonic forms of expression developed in the face of censorship analyzed throughout this study. The explicitly critical character of Los Aldeanos’s lyrics, but also those of other Cuban rap-artists such as El Crítico or El Primario y Julito and the aforementioned punk-rock group Porno Para Ricardo, does not signal that censorship has been lifted. All of these artists are dealing with restrictions when it comes to giving performances or appearing on radio and television, and all have been or are imprisoned. The role of the internet in the diffusion of their songs, Youtube in particular, is key for the visibility they manage to have in spite of their marginal and policed status. Maybe it is this escape from anonymity that makes their lyrics more explicitly critical than those of Varela and Telmary were in the past, because having visibility outside Cuba can at least dissuade the authorities from imposing certain punishments or from incarceration. It is also possible that it has to do with the slight loosening of censorship in Cuba in the last years, but these are questions that cannot be answered within the scope of this Coda.

What is clear is that music continues to play an important role in subverting political or ideological mechanisms of repression and, in certain contexts, attracts censorship because of this. This is the case not just in Cuba, but also in Russia, where members of the feminist punk-rock band Pussy Riot were incarcerated; in China, where the recent detainment of rap-group IN3 is only one

of many examples; in Turkey, where the critical Kurdish Grup Yorum has been repeatedly jailed; and in many other countries. At [www.freemuse.org](http://www.freemuse.org) cases of musical censorship around the world are monitored and reported, with the long list of contemporary cases giving an idea of the prevalence of music censorship and rendering the analysis I have conducted of how it works and how it might be circumvented, countered or exposed relevant also in today's world.

Present-day cases of censorship underscore my point about the relevance of looking not just at what is expressed (or not) in a song's lyrics but also at its sonic dimensions because such cases are seldom exclusively related to what is sung. In the case of Pussy Riot, for example, their repression is also based on their identity as feminists and their violation of religious norms, while for Grup Yorum it is their Kurdish background that makes them controversial as public figures. Los Aldeanos not only express criticism of the Cuban regime through their lyrics, but also through their flamboyant performances, while the marginality expressed by Criolo not only resonates with the Brazilian protesters because it refers to life in the favelas, but also because it touches on a sense of discontent with the Brazilian elite on a national scale. Thus, as I have argued throughout this study, music's potential subversive force does not only lie on the narrative level, but also in what it transmits on the sonic level – performatively, affectively.