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Review/Reseña

Alexander Dent, *River of Tears: Country Music, Memory, and Modernity in Brazil*. Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2009.

A Country Critique of Brazilian Modernity

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When Alexander Dent arrived in Brazil in 1998, he was unaware of the existence of the rural genres that are the focus of this book (14). He had listened to *bossa nova*, MPB, *Tropicália*, death metal, *forró*, and techno, among other genres, but not *música caipira* and *música sertaneja*, the two genres under discussion here (16). Many readers may approach this book with a similar state of knowledge of the rural music of central-southern Brazil. For them and for experienced scholars of Brazilian music alike, this book has much to offer that is new on the level of content and interpretation. It investigates widely-held preconceptions of rural music: that rural lifestyles are disappearing, that the music is listened to primarily

by rural migrants to large cities, and that since Brazilian country sounds so much like U.S. country there is little to learn about Brazilian culture from it. All will need to be rethought in the light of Dent's work.

In the Introduction, Dent presents an analysis of rural performativity in the context of neoliberalism and the politics of culture since the redemocratization of Brazil after 1985. Rural public culture in the central-southern region prioritizes the *caboclo* racial identity (a mixture of Indian and Portuguese) and rodeo, in contrast to the more commonly-encountered images of Brazil (in North America, at least) that emphasize the African-derived elements of its racial mixture and such institutions as carnival, samba, soccer, and *capoeira* (9). Rural musical duos formed by brothers emphasize male emotional vulnerability in contrast to the macho *malandro* portrayed in samba (10). Dent uses Michael Herzfeld's term "cultural intimacy" to point to the embarrassment that rural music can provoke when men sing about the pain of love, or when nostalgia for the rural past is expressed so forcefully in a country whose 20th-century trajectory emphasized progress so much (12). He explains the difference between *música caipira*, the more traditional genre that features male vocal duos singing in parallel thirds and sixths accompanied by viola caipira (with five double-course steel strings) and six-string guitar, and *música sertaneja*, which keeps the male vocal duo and harmony and adds occasional solo vocal passages and a full band accompaniment reminiscent of Nashville country. He notes that *música sertaneja* "is currently as much an upper-class music as it is a working-class one" (19). Each genre has a different take on the changes in Brazilian life since 1985. *Música sertaneja* fans think their modernized country sound is just right for cowboys who use the Internet and sell their cattle by the pound in dollars (21). *Música caipira* fans yearn for connectedness to nature and lament the loss of "precapitalist caipira sociality" (21). Included in the *música caipira* category is solo music for viola caipira. Dent's ethnography included a wide range of participants in the rural musical field. From his base in Campinas, a city of one million in São Paulo state, he worked in smaller towns and in the city of São Paulo with musicians, music industry people, fans, scholars, and others, and studied viola caipira (24, 90).

In chapter 1 Dent explains that the “river of tears” metaphor in his title is drawn from Angelino de Oliveira’s canonical song “A Tristeza do Jeca,” or “The Sadness of Armadillo Joe,” in which the narrator’s tears of longing for an unrecoverable past “slowly flow away / Like water, t’ the sea.” Here and throughout Dent tries to preserve the elisions and other features of caipira speech in translations that often kick things up a poetic notch from the literal. He argues that songs like this portray a “split subjectivity” (57) that is “longing for completion back then, off *there*” (29), and that rural performativity highlights “the stark divide between and ideal there [the country] and a debased here [the city], couched in some embarrassment over wanting to return to ‘there’” (41). His discussion of the poetics of rural performativity emphasizes how poetic utterances “lamine” categories of meaning including gender, time, orientation to change, race, and social relations (45). The concept of lamination returns throughout the book to remind the reader that rural performativity is about much more than rural spaces. He links rural performativity with the increased popularity of rodeo (47-49), where both music and bull riding produces *emoção*, which he translates as “emotion”; it can also signify “excitement.”

In chapter 2 Dent explores the multiple significances of the duo of brothers that is central to both música caipira and música sertaneja. Using the Bakhtinian concept of the chronotope, he shows how the harmonized voices of brothers unite “the past (time) and the countryside (space) by way of kinship” to provide “one of the central means through which to criticize a degraded present in light of an idealized past” (59). The brother form contains hierarchical aspects, in which one brother sings the lead vocal part, plays guitar (in sertaneja) or viola (in caipira), writes most of the songs, and makes most of the business decisions, and egalitarian ones, in which the singing voices blend together, the brothers have the same clothes and grooming, their instruments are a matching set, and they either have or choose names that are similar, the way twins are often named in Brazil (Liu and Leu, Tónico and Tinoco, for instance; 73-80). His comparison of rural genres and death metal demonstrates the utility of the chronotope concept: While “metal’s space is that of the apocalypse itself: a ruined present with

all expectations foreclosed”, “rural genres propose the absolute necessity of recollecting oneself as rural, culled from an ideal past, rich with the blood of brothers” (80).

In chapter 3 Dent shows how rural music’s ideology, defined as “the conscious understanding of how music functions as a communicative practice and the sense of what social purposes that communicative practice fulfills” (84), distinguishes it from other Brazilian genres in terms of the fundamental concept of mixture. Rural music shares in the ideology that “elevates music over other forms of public culture as fundamental to Brazilian self-understanding and self-projection” (86). But it contests the notion that the mixture most characteristic of Brazil is the mixing that produced “the exuberance of samba” (96). “Rural music” in the central-southern region, by contrast, “de-emphasizes Africa and focuses on Indians and the Portuguese as it turns the results of racial mixture from exuberance into grief” (97). In a passage that will be especially useful to scholars working with other genres, Dent identifies two approaches to change: in *música caipira*, “traditionalism proposes that certain musical genres must remain intact” and “strictly police boundaries via adherence to musical codes” (101). In *música sertaneja*, what Dent calls “mutationism” argues that “the genius of Brazil’s approach to musical genre lies in flouting slavish adherence to boundaries” (102). The two approaches are mutually constitutive. “Mutationism,” Dent argues, “...requires the idea of genre as a fixed entity against which to cast its ostensibly revolutionary permissiveness” (103). The chapter ends with a comparison of borrowing in MPB (knowingly, from a wide array of genres) and *música sertaneja* (literally, from a smaller number of genres, especially U.S. country songs) (104-5).

In chapter 4 Dent shows how *música caipira* and *música sertaneja* occupy very different spaces at a major rodeo. *Caipira* is marginalized as the musical accompaniment for a cowboy cooking contest, while *sertaneja* is the headliner: “[m]úsica caipira, with its explicitly traditionalist bent, attracted far smaller crowds and was relegated almost entirely to folkloric sidelines, while its commercial offshoot, música sertaneja, packed the central arena” (113). He follows this with an analysis of genre and the

discourse that surrounds it. Each genre needs the other to define itself. “Música caipira keeps the gap between antecedent and present-tense performances small, underscoring the importance of fidelity to what came before” (116). “Música sertaneja, by contrast, enlarges such gaps, striving for what its performers and fans describe as a rural ‘modernity’” (116). Contrasting generic features are summarized in a table (120-1). This is followed by an explanation of the caipira dialect of Portuguese, which was stigmatized as a sign of ignorance until Cornélio Pires, who first recorded música caipira in 1929, began promoting it. The dialect is not free of such stigma today. Dent notes that música sertaneja became the label for all central-southern rural music in the 1950s until the rise of modern sertaneja in the 1980s.

In chapter 5 Dent argues that “rural migrants are not now, nor were they ever, the sole pillar of rural music’s circulation and popularity” (160). In support of this argument he offers a critical discussion of discourses about rural identity that readers coming from ethnomusicology will find timely, given the current questioning of the centrality of identity to ethnomusicological writing.¹ Dent retells the origin story for recorded caipira music involving Pires and notes that a “calculated blindness” (145) results in the omission from the story of the mediated nature of the music (it had to be changed in order to circulate on recordings), the economic context (people had to have some money in order to consume the records), the regionalist context (people wanted to consume a musical product of São Paulo, not Rio de Janeiro), the global context (recording local music was a common practice in many places), and the fact that Pires himself was not a peasant.

Dent engages with Brazilian as well as North American scholarship. This section has an extended discussion of work by Antônio Cândido, José de Souza Martins, Waldenyr Caldas, and José Ramos Tinhorão. This chapter complicates discussions of rural music and identity by showing how things that are assumed to be true about rural music are the product of discourse (160).

¹ See Timothy Rice, “Disciplining *Ethnomusicology*: A Call for a New Approach.” *Ethnomusicology* 54/2, 2010: 318-325, and responses to it.

In chapter 6 Dent analyzes the circulation of rural music in the market. He identifies consumption- and production-centered views of the market (giving people what they want vs. dictating mass tastes; 164-5). He shows how rural music was marginalized after samba was established as the national music during the Vargas era, and how regional styles benefited from the new emphasis on domestically-produced music and economic reforms after 1985. He criticizes the way an emphasis on sales statistics creates a “deliberately flattened notion of musicality” (172). The chapter closes with an interview with a producer-songwriter and a discussion of the importance of independently-produced CDs to the circulation of rural music.

In chapter 7 Dent describes, in the book’s the most extended ethnographic narrative, a performance by Zé Mulato and Cassiano at a rural restaurant/club. Dent shows how both inscribing practices, which explicitly address memory through “lyrics, intersong banter” (189) and other discourses, and incorporating practices (bodily participation through listening, singing, and other activities) serve to “fashion historical consciousness simultaneously” (189). This chapter has the most detailed examination of music in terms of viola and guitar tunings and song tempos. But despite repeated references throughout the book to vocal harmony and viola playing (e.g., the instrument should sound “like ‘sobbing’” [28]), there are no transcriptions of vocal or viola lines. In chapter 8 Dent explores música sertaneja’s “international outreach” and “modernization” to create a “country cosmopolitanism.” He draws on performance examples by Edson and Hudson, Renato Teixeira, and Zezé di Camargo and Luciano to show how cosmopolitanism is created in two steps: “the inwardly focused collecting of bits and pieces from cultural contexts deemed ‘different’” (213) that are then presented outward as “a simultaneously coherent and deliberately conflicted whole” (213). This chapter explains why música sertaneja stresses romantic love more than it does the nostalgia for rural spaces that is prominent in música caipira. Both involve a form of disempowerment. “Rurality here emphasizes the radical disempowerment that strong emotions bring about” (222).

The conclusion argues for the significance of the “country critique”

in the neoliberal period as an antidote to “progress hunger” (242). Brazilian rural performativity is important because it keeps two arguments in a productive tension: “...it argues for the necessity of bringing the past forward into the present,” and “obsessively ruminates on the *impossibility* of the past’s presence in the here and now” (243-4). This is illustrated by an account of the combination in one performance of two versions of the song “Pagode em Brasília,” a recorded caipira version by Tião Carreiro and Pardinho and a live sertaneja one by Chitãozinho and Xororó.

This book addresses important questions about Brazilian music and culture in terms that will be useful to scholars working in linguistic anthropology, cultural studies, Brazilian studies, ethnomusicology, and popular music. Dent has managed skillfully the transformation of a dissertation into a monograph by addressing his text to multiple audiences in several disciplines. It is difficult, in this situation, to find the right amount of musical detail. For some readers there may be too much. I wanted more: if singing and viola playing can resonate meaningfully on so many levels, tell us how. What makes a viola sound like sobbing in música caipira? If the expressiveness of the vocal part depends on the perfection of the singing in thirds and sixths, show us how that perfection is achieved. It doesn’t need to be done in notation. It could be done with an audio file on the book’s website and detailed commentary without excluding those who do not read notation.

Dent’s extended theoretical arguments rest on a solid ethnographic foundation. In clear, well-structured prose, *River of Tears* makes a significant contribution to scholarly conversations on Brazilian rural music, rural performativity, and expressive culture in the context of neoliberalism.