

The Singing Voice and Racial Politics on the Brazilian Evangelical Music Scene

I. Introduction

In one of the most astonishing developments on the Brazilian music scene in a generation, hundreds of thousands of evangelical Protestants¹ have recently found their churches to be vibrating to a new sound, a genre they call “*Black music gospel*”.² Inspired by African American styles of music, thousands of Christian musicians across Brazil have for the last fifteen years been playing, with enormous energy and skill, religiously-themed soul, funk, Black gospel, R&B, gospel blues, and gospel rap.³ Sao Paulo, Brazil’s largest city, is now home to more than twenty major Black gospel choirs, over one hundred bands specializing in Black gospel, gospel blues, and Christian R & B, and at least two hundred Christian rap groups.⁴ These days, on any night, in any neighborhood of Sao Paulo, one is bound to hear a Black gospel soloist, quartet, choir, or rapper belting out the message of Christian salvation.

Over the past decade I have sought to understand whether this new musical phenomenon is stimulating Brazil’s evangelicals to think about Black identity in new ways. The question is important one. That evangelicals have been growing in influence in Brazilian society⁵ at the same time as debates about government policies on race have been proliferating⁶ make *evangelicos*’ racial attitudes a matter of intense political interest.⁷ The conventional scholarly view depicts Brazilian evangelicals as reflexive adherents of *democracia racial* (“racial democracy”), the classic Brazilian ideology that declares racial differences to be unimportant and strong racial identities to be unadvisable⁸. It is true that the traditional Christian ideals of the equality of all believers,

the primacy of the individual, distrust of the secular realm, and rejection of Afro-Brazilian spiritualities, tended to nurture skepticism among Brazilian evangelicals toward a too-warm embrace of “the Black cause”.⁹ Recent research, however, has suggested a more complex picture, in which at least some Brazilian evangelicals appear to be moving in the direction of open advocacy of Black racial self-esteem.¹⁰ In order to assess the potential of this emerging political trend, it is incumbent upon scholars to identify and analyze those ideological forces within Brazilian evangelicalism that seem to support Black identity. Where do they come from? How strong are they? To what extent are they complicating or moderating the religion’s dominant “racial democracy” position?

My focus on the Black gospel music trend as potentially one such force derives first and foremost from my sense music is, from an ethnographic point of view, utterly central to Brazilian evangelical culture.¹¹ Visit any evangelical church in Sao Paulo for a three hour service, and two of them are taken up by music. Listen to stories of religious conversion, and hear of being convinced by especially beautiful hymns. Accompany congregants through their days and hear them hum religious arias at home, in the street, on the bus, on the job. Follow them into their kitchens or laundry areas, and find their radios or CD-players playing their favorite gospel hymns. Talk to ministers and discover how intently churches pride themselves on their musicians, bands, and choirs.

The analytical challenge is to understand how religious music, focused as it is on the universal, non-racial or ethnic values of salvation and redemption, might be a vehicle of Black identity. Turning for guidance to works on the connections between music and collective identity, I found that this literature tends toward broad strokes, leaving under-specified how particular musical practices might actually stimulate particular notions or

sentiments of collective identity.¹² An important exception is Ingrid Morson's work on jazz musicians, which shows with unusual precision how routine practices of musical learning, reflection, training, interaction and rehearsal can generate specific aspects of ethno-racial consciousness.¹³ Following Morson's example, I undertook to compare how specific techniques of musical production and training among Sao Paulo's Black gospel musicians shaped their racial ideas and identity. Over the course of nine months of field work between 2003 and 2005, I sought to understand the spatial, bodily, and historical practices of Black gospel music, and their varying effects on Black consciousness. During this time I conducted one hundred and twenty interviews with Black Christian musicians, participant-observed in six evangelical congregations, and accompanied the performances, rehearsals, and backstage gatherings of six Black gospel and six gospel rap groups.¹⁴ In this paper I report on how these two sub-genres of the Black music scene position themselves in relation to the human voice, and the implications of this positioning for each sub-genre's racial politics.¹⁵ It is not surprising that in an intense Christian context such politics would be framed in theological terms; more surprising is that musicians feel more or less enthusiasm for Black theology partly in function of how their musical genre uses the human voice.

II. A visit to church

At the core of Black gospel music (as opposed to rap) is undoubtedly its style of singing that makes extraordinary physical demands on the vocal apparatus, and expresses emotion with extreme intensity.¹⁶ I have found that in the Brazilian evangelical context, these demands and intensity reinforce among Black gospel singers an essentialist style of racial thought, and lead to a still-evolving theology of race. Because the physical and

emotional intensity of Black gospel singing is so central to the analysis that follows, the reader needs to get a more textured, experiential feel for them, even if imperfectly. Let us then start with a visit to church.

We arrive at the Church of God in Christ on a hot sticky evening in September, after a twenty-minute subway ride from the center of Sao Paulo and another twenty-minute walk through Vila Matilde, a lower middle-class neighborhood of honking car-horns and blooming, buzzing stores. The church, in an old converted garage, is located on a quiet side street. The place is packed tonight, all two hundred members squeezed into ten long wooden pews. Five huge rotating fans are whooshing and clattering, men and women are already praying aloud, and teen-agers are chattering and giggling. One of the pastors is making rounds, shaking hands, and periodically emitting a huge, echoing belly laugh. On stage the musicians are warming up. The keyboardist rings out some notes, the guitarist thrums a new chord, the drummer makes his cymbals tremble and shimmer.

Pastor Sergio appears, face shining, sleeves rolled to the elbow, no tie, stained with sweat. His electrified baritone fills the hangar-like space with slow, steady cadences. “My beloved,” he bellows, “if you are here tonight, it is no accident! It is because God has a plan in your life!” His voice provokes, pleads, calls for more noise, for he knows that the louder his congregation, the more the Holy Spirit will be drawn to this place. “I can’t hear you!” he reprimands. “Is that how you sound in the house of God? Is that how you praise Jesus tonight?” The cajoling gets the faithful to erupt in riotous amens and hallelujahs. “When we know Jesus is here,” Sergio says, his pitch rising, “we can’t stay quiet! We must shout for joy!”

Then, all of a sudden, he is whispering, his left hand motioning for the church to quiet down too. He swivels and peers toward the back of the stage, his right hand shading his eyes like a captain looking for land. “Aaah, there you are! Our sister in the Lord!”

He is looking at Priscilla. A Black woman in her thirties, hair styled in a perm, upper arms encased tightly in beige silk sleeves, dressed in a calf-length Black skirt and white high heels, Priscilla is standing behind the musicians. Pastor Sergio prods her sweetly. “Come on, Priscilla, no need to be shy! Please! Come and bless us with your song.”

Priscilla emerges from the shadow in back, hesitantly, arrives at center stage and receives the microphone from Sergio.. “Amen, church?” Priscilla asks, her voice quivering slightly. “Amen!” yells Pastor Sergio as he grins and stands to the side.

“Amen!” The word rises from the congregation like a jet from a fountain.

“The peace of the Lord be with you.”

“And with you!”

Priscilla tightens her grip around the microphone, and brings it closer to her lips. There is a tiny tremble in her free hand. “I want to sing something for you tonight,.”

Her eyes are glistening. She is breathing heavily. Then, in a tentative tone, she asks, “How many of you . . . have ever felt . . . discouraged?”

“Yes, sister, yes, I have!” “Yes we have!” “Yes, yes!”

Now Priscilla’s tentativeness, we must understand, is very much a part of Black gospel style, a way of intensifying the song’s impact by displaying the singer’s mood as at first anxious and afraid, a mood to be transformed via the song into blazing self-confidence. Mahalia Jackson once summed up the formula this way: “Now gospel might

start sad – you down; but honey, you already know there’s hope; and time you finish, you have found the cure.”¹⁷ Or, as Isaac Freeman put it: “go slow, rise high, catch fire, sit down.”¹⁸

Priscilla is still in the “go slow” phase. She takes a deep breath and clenches her jaw. “Well, brothers and sisters, I want to sing a song for you tonight that has encouraged me when I was down, that lifted me up when I wasn’t sure what was left, that gave me hope when I felt doubt.”

“Halelujah!”

Priscilla is looking for a cure tonight. Out of her flow the first notes of “There’ll be Peace in the Valley” a dazzling hymn lifted from the Psalm that prophesies that peace awaits all God’s children.¹⁹ In English the lyric is:

Oh well, I’m tired and so weary

But I must go alone

Till the lord comes and calls, calls me away, oh yes

Well the morning's so bright

And the lamp is alight

And the night, night is as Black as the sea, oh yes

There will be peace in the valley for me, some day

There will be peace in the valley for me, oh Lord I pray

There'll be no sadness, no sorrow

No trouble, trouble I see

There will be peace in the valley for me, for me

Well the bear will be gentle

And the wolves will be tame

And the lion shall lay down by the lamb, oh yes

And the beasts from the wild

Shall be lit by a child

And I'll be changed, changed from this creature that I am, oh yes

There will be peace in the valley for me, some day²⁰

For the first few bars, we can hardly hear her. Then, in the middle of the first stanza, with a flick of her wrist, her voice rockets up an octave, and we suddenly hear her. There it stays for a bar, alerting us that this will be no quiet, passive rendition. Then comes a bolt of lightning. Chin pointed at the ceiling, hands rising and falling, knuckles whitening, Priscilla lengthens her throat, turns it into an echo chamber, and blows out an explosive gust of vibration into the garage's far corners.

Priscilla is belting.²¹ Few aspects of Black gospel singing are as spectacular as this particular use of the voice, this literal eruption of sound. "Belt," writes vocal analyst Barbara Jungr, "is a full-throttle sound and is very evident when singers seem on the edge of their voice and emotion: one can almost hear the physical effort employed to make the sound."²² Belting is an intensely physical activity, calling upon deep resources of voice and body, achieved by closing the vocal folds to an extreme degree of tightness, building up pressure against them by pushing air up from the diaphragm, then blasting them open with maximum possible force.²³ Researchers have noted that belting subjects the vocal folds to pressure levels higher and harder than any other kind of singing, even harder than operatic arias.²⁴ Some gospel singers compare belting to being caught in "a hurricane"²⁵ and Priscilla described it as a rush whooshing through her body. "It's hard to explain,"

she said, “It feels like a tsunami. I can feel it climbing up from my lungs, hitting the roof of my mouth.” Belting is extremely physical. Singing a belt requires the whole body, “a high degree of physical ‘anchoring’ ... to provide the physical support in the back, neck, spine, and torso to produce high sub-glottal pressure and ‘support’ loud and full vocal tone projection.”²⁶ It also requires the right vocal equipment. Few voices can withstand the rigors of belting for a long time; some specialists believe that when used nonstop for years, belting can literally shred the vocal cords.²⁷

Priscilla is belting now; but she is doing something else that is equally astonishing. The sung word “noite” – “night” – becomes for Priscilla “noyee-oyee-oyeeetcheee”, each zag and zig accompanied by a change in pitch. A trip up an octave on “havera” – “there will be” -- is rendered as “Haaaa-vee--eer –aah—aa—aa-- aaah” with each syllable shifting a pitch. The technique is called “melisma”.²⁸ In addition to great vocal agility, the singer of melismas must be able to hear the compositional elements of musical chords, and to disassemble and re-assemble them. All of this creates the effect of intense feeling. It is one thing to sing “there will be peace in the valley for me” in the usually measured, tonal way; it is something else altogether to ask a congregation to ride a sonic roller coaster with you, from peak to valley to peak, sweeping everyone along, as you sing “There wi—ii—ii—ii—ii – ii – ii -- ll be peace in the valley, for me”. And indeed, tonight, one stunning slide over three high pitches elicits from the pastor’s wife a shutting of eyes, a downward look, the silent mouthing of mysterious words. “When I listen to Priscilla sing,” Sergio said to me later, “it is like I am listening to the voice of God.”

Whether of God or nature, a storm is brewing inside Priscilla's vocal cords. We can tell the song is approaching a climax because her arms are moving jaggedly, her torso is swiveling from side to side, and when she belts "eu parei" ("I stopped"), her hand pounds each syllable against an invisible wall. She steps up the pace, alternating between heart-stopping belts and eye-widening melismas, one of which extends over no fewer than nine pitches. Priscilla's left hand opens as she declares her need that God prepare the valley for her, and departing from the text, she roars "Senhor!! Eu sei" ("Lord, I know") putting the "eu sei" to flight on a ten-pitch melisma. Then comes the downpour: Priscilla sings "nem a sombra" ("not even a shadow") by holding the "o" of "sombra" for a five-second long belt. As the seconds pass, Priscilla's tone becomes ragged; in the last two seconds it descends into hoarseness.

What is going on here? Priscilla is "growling."²⁹ Heard also in blues, jazz, rock and roll, punk and metal to convey intensity of emotion,³⁰ the growl in Black gospel conveys desperation or joy, the sense of being overcome by emotion and the power of the Holy Spirit.³¹ The best singers can shift at will, within a single note, between such guttural tones to vocal velvet and back again.³² But, like belting, repetitious growling places great stress on the vocal apparatus. Bachusky states that the "growl is not a natural sound, it's forced. It's the sound of friction and friction causes heat and eventually swelling."³³ Vocal therapists understand the draw of the technique is its intense expressivity. One conceded that "people who have the best growls are not concerned with what it does to their voice. They are intense and are willing to pay the price."³⁴

The end draws near. Once again Priscilla's voice rises a seemingly impossible octave. This voice will show us what it is like to be chained to the earth and bound for

damnation; yet to have one more chance to enter heaven. Now it is all improvised, all an overflow of the Holy Spirit. The vehemence in Priscilla's voice, its sudden shifts between whole and melismatic notes, between low and high registers, between purity and raspiness, all seem to attest to the presence in her body of a force stronger than she. For Priscilla is doing things she could not possibly do – she will say -- on her own. Now she clenches her fists, widens her eyes, and welcomes the drum to accentuate her climactic full-throttle belt. She descends one more time into hell, her voice suddenly gravel, as near death. It feels to me, listening to and watching her, that the only way her soul can possibly be saved is for her to survive this song. But then of course that is the whole point. If I did not think this, the song would not be having its intended effect, of enacting through the voice the very logic of Christian salvation. It is as if, through her singing, Priscilla has already begun to enter that valley, even as she leads us toward it. It is as if by singing her earthly bonds have fallen away, for her voice, linked to the earthly body, has become in our presence a channel to escape her body.

Then, all of a sudden, it is over. Priscilla wrinkles her brow into a pile of creases, and clamps her mouth shut. Then comes a beatific smile. She is drenched in sweat. So are we. People are standing, arms stretched out, shaking, weeping, praying, shouting, receiving the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Priscilla floats to the back of the stage, the picture now of tranquility, but the congregation is in a tumult, for everything now is different, we have heard the voice of God, which has convulsed us in a sonic drama of sin and redemption. Black gospel has done its work.

III. The racialization of Black vocal power and emotionality

I have described Priscilla's performance in detail to help the reader understand the role in Black gospel singing of extreme physicality and intense emotion. There can be no question that these aspects of the genre flood the senses of Black gospel singers. Every singer I interviewed spoke in one way or another of being overwhelmed with emotion when they sang, of having the sensation of an irresistible force traveling through the body, of feeling released temporarily from their worldly shells, even of flying. Yet it would be a mistake to think that they only *feel* this intense physicality and emotion. They also *wonder* about them; they *think* about them; they *interpret* them. How is it, they ask, that they are capable of such things?

In reflecting this question, Black gospel singers again and again framed their ideas in markedly *racial* terms. First, they claimed that Blacks predominated in the genre, both aesthetically and numerically. Second, they claimed that this predominance was due to their greater natural capacity to meet the genre's physical demands, and to a history that made them uniquely able to produce the emotional sounds the genre requires. And finally, as devout Christians seeking to understand the will of God in all things, they claimed that the preceding very clearly showed that God had entrusted to Black people the mission of using the unique power of their singing voices to bring humanity to salvation.

Both white and Black singers of Black gospel agreed: Blacks dominated the genre both aesthetically and numerically. All of my informants offered some version of the statement, given to me by Claudio, an accomplished Christian singer of soul and R&B: "I have to admit it, it is hard to avoid. If you hear two little girls singing in the

neighborhood, on the street, I'll tell you this: the Black girl will always best the white one. I'm not saying that whites can't develop their voices; they can. But there is just no two ways about it – for this kind of singing, Blacks' voices are better, they are prettier, they have better timbre, they are capable of going louder.” Duglass, another singer, provided the numerical analysis that I heard repeatedly in various forms. “In a really good choir in church, maybe you have a few whites. But they are not the lead singers. And they are always in a minority. You look around, and who are the artists who really stand out? Silvera, and Robson Nascimento, and Sergio Saas, and Daniel, and Ton Carfi. All Black! There is one or another white, but they really are rare. Good white singers are a small minority. So you have to wonder, why is this case?”

Singers of Black gospel responded with near unanimity: African ancestry, they claimed, bestowed a set of anatomical features –usually thought of as thick vocal chords, a wide vocal tract, capacious sinuses and other cranial resonators -- that permitted them to excel in the most physically demanding skills required by their genre, such as belting and growling. While acknowledging a role for training to “polish” their voices, they claimed that Blacks enjoyed a clear genetic advantage. Whites could of course train too, and even achieve excellent results, but would always face an uphill climb over the natural limitations of their vocal apparatuses.

Many of my informants insisted that Black vocal cords must be “thicker” than those of other races. “I think the Black has a certain kind of natural resistance or strength in his voice,” said Kedma, a singer in the Brasil para Cristo choir. “Not that it doesn't need to be polished through training. But the Black comes already with the right equipment.” Pastor Joilson, the choir's Black director, had similar ideas. “In order to sing like a

Black,” he said, “the vocal cords must be thicker. That is why Blacks sing more strongly.” Scooby, one of the directors of Raiz Coral, insisted that “the Black’s throat muscles are thicker, stronger, more numerous, more resistant than the white’s.” Others, meanwhile, argued that the Black vocal apparatus must have larger air passages than in that of whites. “In the throats of Blacks,” Priscilla asserted, “the openings where air passes are larger and broader than in the voice boxes of whites. The apertures are broader, so Blacks can sing louder, they can produce a broader range of sounds.” Several informants insisted that Blacks’ facial and nasal cavities were more capacious than those of whites, thus creating more resonance, and hence a richer tone. “It is a question of the nasal cavities,” said Simone, a soprano in Raiz Coral. “There is more room in ours for the sound, with more waves. This affects the timbre of the voice. That is why our timbre is prettier.”

Now Brazilian singers of Black gospel did not invent whole cloth these ideas about Black voices; they elaborated a set of preexisting ones. Physicalist ideas about Black singing voices circulate in Brazilian popular culture. I came across numerous everyday assertions, among both Blacks and whites, that Blacks were naturally endowed with awe-inspiring vocal cords. “The race that sings is the race that enchants” (*a raca que canta e a raca que encanta*) goes a common saying. “What God took away from up here He placed down here” goes another, meaning that God, remorseful for having bestowed upon Blacks a terribly aggravating hair type, sought to make amends by endowing them with super-human voices.

Black gospel singers were quick to seize upon the racio-genetic ideas of *fonoaudiologistas*, Brazil’s professional voice and speech therapists. Three quarters of the

singers I interviewed had at one time or another consulted or studied with a professional voice therapist, and reported having received from them well-prepared lectures on the physiological differences between Black and white vocal apparatuses. In contrast to the United States, where such professionals, and the research associated with them, have disavowed genetic accounts of racial difference in vocal capacity³⁵, in Brazil such ideas remain influential. Professional journals regularly touch upon the physiology of Black vocal timbre,³⁶ such as the recent review article that seeks “to clarify the causes of the vocal differentiation of singers of a race distinguished by the extreme beauty of their voices.”³⁷ Professional voice therapists in Brazil integrate into their curricula the claim that differences in Black and white singing are facts rooted in differences in cranial and laryngeal structures.³⁸ *Fonoaudiologista* Maria Alzim, for example, recently taught in her university-based course that “there is no way for a white person to want to have the vocal timbre of a Black.”³⁹

Now as I suggested earlier, the sounds of Black gospel are not just physical. From the dynamite of feeling that explodes in the belt, to the heart-rending swoop of the melisma, to the soul-piercing growl, Black gospel is pervaded with emotion. So again its artists face the question: Why should Black people be especially good at expressing emotion? Their answer -- that as a people they bring their suffering into every note they sing -- is familiar to US audiences, but in the Brazilian context is a striking departure from the myth of racial democracy, which denies the fact of deep Black suffering. Indeed, every statement about deep Black suffering is a Molotov cocktail thrown at the edifice of racial democracy.

Virtually all of my informants threw these cocktails, as gospel singer Celina did, when she said that “you can hear in the voice of the Black something different. When he sings, he sings with an emotion that’s different, that you can tell is his. The white can try to sing that way, but it is different. We sing with this emotion –because we have suffered much in the past, and still suffer, we went through slavery, and we are still discriminated against. So I think you hear all of that in the Black voice. We have a sadness that whites don’t know, but they hear it.” Priscilla herself told me that “as I have learned about our people’s history, I have concluded that God made us so that people can always hear a tear in our voices. I think that Blacks are the only ones who have this tear in their voices. This drop of pain in the voice. The Black, with this awful history, even today. . . we still suffer from these prejudices. So when we enter truly in the act of the Lord, we offer our voices to the Lord, and it is a voice full of pain. Of voice full of pain and broken, destroyed, ripped apart. It is a voice that expresses that brokenness. It was all of that history of pain behind everything that we sing. So that’s what I think that Black music has a tear in the voice a tear in the voice.”

Some of my informants drew direct causal links from collective history to specific forms of singing. An especially interesting claim was that North American slave owners, in contrast to their Brazilian counterparts, “banned drums.” Sergio Saas regularly expounded during rehearsals on how melismas were a way for slaves to be percussive in the absence of drums. “Brazilian Blacks,” he said, “never had to develop their vocal powers, they could just be mellow in their singing, because they put all their energy into playing instruments of percussion. But there [in the US] that was not possible, the masters prohibited drums. And so the Black there ended up putting into his voice all the

rhythmic skills and impressions brought from Africa, whereas we just put it into drumming. And since the voice is the center of this kind of singing, the Americans developed a clear advantage.”

But the melisma, according to these artists, had other roots too in the experience of slavery. “When you hear the melisma,” said Isabeh, the great Black gospel teacher and historian, “you hear the purest musical expression of emotion. Because it goes to the heart of music, it goes into this essence, its soul. It is the inner structure of music, all those pitches. The Black excels at that. Because the essence of music is emotion, and everything about the Black – his history, his suffering, surviving under slavery – comes out in the melisma. It is like a cry to the heavens, saying ‘This is what has happened! I am now free to say it all.’” Singing in the fields, Isabeh declared, “was a way for slaves to survive the hard work and beatings.” Priscilla said that “I learned that God gave us this voice because He knew what our history was going to be. God knew that we were going to need some kind of support, we were going to need some kind of resource to help us through.”

Part of Brazilian Black gospel singers’ consciousness of collective history comes through their acquaintance, via the music, with US history. They have in particular learned a good deal about their music’s connection to the civil rights movement. Every Black gospel teacher I met could talk about how Mahalia Jackson was a favorite of Martin Luther King’s, of how gospel songs inspired resistance to racism. “For those of you who don’t know,” Isabeh lectured at a weekend singing retreat, “Martin Luther King was a pastor who fought so that there could be equality for Blacks in the United States. And they could not have done this without their music, which they sang at marches.”

Joilson, lead pastor of a church in the poor northern neighborhood of Guarulhos, recently set aside a whole evening to immerse his church in Black music history. For several sets, the church's bands played Christian funk, soul and gospel. Then during three fifteen-minute intermissions, Joilson and his resident historian, Sidney, sat on three-legged stools in front of a packed church, lecturing about the historical context of the music in the 1960s. "This music didn't just appear out of thin air," said Joilson. "It was part of a movement, it was a way for American Blacks to fight for their rights."

Now at the end of the day, these singers are devout Christians, immersed in the world of Biblical interpretation, in the prophecies in the Old Testament, and in preparation for the Second Coming. These singers wish with all their hearts to grasp the will of God. "You can see and hear the gift that God has given specially to Black people," said Claudio, "that timbre of voices unparalleled. But why was it that God gave these vocal cords of the Black? I have reflected a lot about this all by myself. I have a commitment every early morning, which I do every day alone in my room from 1:30 to three in the morning. I remain alone with God, there in my room. I seek out reflections about what God has done, why God has done it, why God permitted it. The voice of Black people."

Given such spiritual reflection, it should not surprise us that questions about God's intention with regard to Black vocal anatomy and history have stimulated Biblical interpretation.⁴⁰ The key premise is that Black gospel singing has unique evangelizing power, the ability to melt listeners' mental armor, to cut through their thick emotional defenses, and open up their souls for an inflow of Holy Spirit. "When I sing with all that force," said Priscilla, "that sound rips open the heart and lets in the pure spirit. I tell you,

it tears the body in two.” The Black voice thus performs a world-historical, spiritual act: it brings listeners to God. Thus the core of this Black musical theology: God chose Black peoples’ singing voices to be His instruments in the evangelization of the world. In this conception national difference become secondary to a deeper commonality of Black voice unified in the mind of God.

Several of my informants insisted that this theological vision was supported by references to Ethiopia in the Old Testament. I heard this version for the first time from Sergio Saas on stage, at the Pedra Viva church. As he ended a set, sweat streaming, he opened his Bible to the book of Isaiah. “My friends” he said, “the eighteenth chapter of Isaiah speaks of a people from a land beyond the rivers, in Ethiopia, a people tall and sturdy and fearsome and of glossy skin. Then comes the prophecy! Listen to the seventh verse of the eighteenth chapter: ‘In that time shall a gift be brought unto the Lord of hosts by a people tall and of glossy skin, and from a people terrible from their beginning onward; a nation that is sturdy and treadeth down, whose land the rivers divide, to the place of the name of the lord of hosts.’ Do you see? It is a prophecy. The Black race is fulfilling the prophecy! It began with the Americans, because they followed Jesus before we did. They filled their churches with praise before we did. But now we are doing it too. Now is our moment, now it is our turn, Brazilians! Through our song, our voices in song, we are delivering souls to the Lord. Because Black music is the most powerful music in the world.”

I heard this view numerous times. “Don’t you see?” the Black gospel music promoter named Ferrisbeck asked me. “It is a gift that Black people have that they offer to the Lord. That is the prophecy. People of glossy skin from the place where the two

rivers divide— that is us, Black people, from Ethiopia. God endowed Black people with a special ability: when we sing, when we open up and let ourselves sing and realize the gift God gave us, then we give God back that gift, as it is stated in Isaiah – that we would bring gifts unto the Lord. . . . But it was only in the United States that our race first perfected that power, the one we see with Blacks in your country.” Later, visiting Sergio and Daniel in Sergio’s home, I was curious to follow up this theological line of thought. “God was pleased,” said Daniel, “that American Blacks turned to Him. So He anointed them with the Holy Spirit. In the United States, Blacks gathered in their churches, and they started influencing all the music of the world. So that the prophecy is being fulfilled.”

But if God endowed Black people with a physical apparatus capable of creating powerful sounds, their history of suffering was also part of His design. For it was this history -- in a disturbing, paradoxical view -- that ensured that Blacks’ singing voices would have the pathos needed to touch the deepest parts of listeners’ souls. Priscilla’s words echo those of other informants. “I think that it all happened for a reason,” she explained. “Not that God planned that we would be enslaved. That is the evil of man, that is sin. That is free will. Yet God is all-powerful, He sees and uses to the benefit of all everything, He uses the benefit in everything. And God needed the tears we shed, He needed the tear in our voices. He needs our brokenness. He needs the sadness in our voices. He needs this because this feeling of brokenness, when we sing, touches the hearts of listeners. So you see Black people are part of dream of God for humankind. Our voices are His instrument to reach people, it is through us that God will save the world. That is our anointing.”

But what about the details, like why did all this start among North American Blacks, and only recently arrive among Afro-Brazilians? The theological imagination is ready for the question. First, they said, North American Blacks were more serious about their Christianity than were Brazilians. Michael, a director of choirs for the Church of God in Christ, was emphatic in this view, insisting that in the US the stronger slave family formed a natural basis for Christianity.

My informants stipulated that the reason the anointing began to shower down on Brazil only recently is not only that Brazilians are only now finding Christ, but that they are now making up for a growing deficit in North American Blacks. Sergio articulated this argument. “The cloud of God’s anointing,” he said, “is passing from the United States to Brazil. We are starting to fill the churches, we are fulfilling the prophecy, we are offering the present to the Lord of all of these souls converted by the power of our music. Blacks in the US no longer lead the world. You look up North and what do you see? Spiritual cooling. And as the spirit cools in the United States, it will heat up here. That is why we are learning to sing like Blacks in your country.”

IV. Gospel rap and the theology of voice

I have to this point argued that singers of Black gospel are stimulated by their relationship to singing to develop a theology of Black voice. The reader may object that, if Brazilian culture has robust popular racial ideas about Black voice, and evangelical Christians are inclined to think in Biblical terms in any case, then theologies of Black voice must exist in all or most Christian-themed musics, not just Black gospel. A closer examination of gospel rap can address this objection. This genre’s relationship to voice is

profoundly different from that of Black gospel, and so, I will suggest, leads to a significantly different stance toward the relationship between God and voice.

Let me start with the obvious point that rap is mainly spoken, not sung. Put differently, rap is based on short, not elongated syllables, on staccato articulation, not sustained pitches and tones.⁴¹ All of the rappers I knew made this distinction. Most of them had worked with melodic samples, and some were experimenting with adding melodic backup; but they all agreed that what they did with their voices while rapping was fundamentally different from what melodic singers did. “In rap,” said T.H., a young Black gospel rapper from Pirituba, “you don’t have to force your voice, like you do when you are singing. You can just relax and do what you normally do with your voice when you talk, just faster. You don’t have to put a note out there and hold it.” He demonstrated by holding a note for a few seconds.

See? That’s singing. To do that well, you need a voice. But for rap you don’t really need such a good voice. All you have to do is write your lyrics and speak them! Because rap is spoken; it is not sung, it doesn’t require you to push yourself too much like that.

Marylede, a Black gospel rap artist from Tiradentes, agreed.

To do rap, you don’t really have to refine the instrument of your voice, I mean the vocal chords. You practice saying the words clearly, but whatever your voice is gonna do, it’s gonna do. Some rappers sound pretty, some don’t. But they really don’t worry about that. There are a lot of rappers who just start rapping, they don’t have anything special in their voice, because all they care about is getting their message out. I’d say most rappers are like that. Rap doesn’t make the same

demands on the voice that soul music does, or R and B. Most people can put down a base and rap to it – you don't need to work on the voice.

Rappers' everyday practices showed that they did not think of their voices as “singing voices”, but rather as extensions of their everyday speaking voices. They rarely took voice lessons. They did not do “warmups” before shows in a way that would mark their rapping voice as something different and apart, by getting their vocal chords specially lubricated and elastic. They rarely did anything to protect or improve their voices, such as drinking hot teas or lemon or honey.

This relation to the voice had ideological consequences for gospel rappers. To begin with, in Brazil, in contrast to the United States, everyday speech patterns tend *not* to be racially marked. And since rappers thought about their rapping voices as speaking voices, they tended not to hear their rapping voices as embodying much by way of “Blackness”. Pastor Ton's views are typical. “You cannot tell the difference between a Black and a white voice when you hear them speaking. Not here in Brazil. Not in Portuguese! I defy you to do it. Turn away, and you can't tell. Maybe you can in the US but not here. Singing, maybe, but not speaking. So I'll tell you this: there's no way you can distinguish a Black voice from a white voice that is rapping. Listen to any CD, and I defy you to try and determine the race of the person who is rapping, if you don't look at their photo.” Marylede's views are similar. “When I am listening to a singer, I'm able to tell that it is the voice of a Black person. But I cannot tell when I am listening to rap. Maybe some can, but I can't. With rap there is no difference. . . maybe because it's an easier thing to do, it's more relaxed, it's more the natural voice of the person. I think you can only start to tell when you hear the resistance or the voice that comes through in

singing, but in rapping, I don't think you can tell." Here too, then, the absence of a distinct "Black sound" in Brazilian rap obviated the need to presume or seek out an organic basis of such a sound.

More generally, since rappers pretty much took their voices for granted – if their rapping voice was just an extension of their speaking voice, why pay much attention? -- they had no real "vocal puzzle" to solve. They had no pressing reason to ask themselves "why does my voice sound this way?" And without the goad of this question, they had little incentive to read or think much about their vocal apparatuses, even less to mull over their voices' organic basis. For example, I never met a beat boxer -- a skill requiring the imitation of the electronic sounds of turntables and musical instruments – who reflected on the organic bases of beat boxing. In general, most of the rappers I spent time with worked on their delivery, rather than on their tone or sound. They rehearsed the movement of air through their articulatory organs in a percussive way: tongue, lips, teeth and cheeks –not on the vibrations of vocal chords themselves.

Thus while rappers believed that some people had a talent for rapping, it was not one that resided primarily in the timbre of the voice, but in the skill of rapid articulation. Yet this was a skill, they were convinced, that most anyone who applied himself could acquire. Rappers thus had a remarkably open, democratic sense about their art. I found, for example, that I was often called on by my rapper friends to take a go at rhyming, even beat-boxing. Rappers seemed to feel that since everyone knew how to speak, everyone was a potential rapper. (Significantly, none of my Black gospel singing friends ever challenged me to sing.) In Samuel's case, it was a matter of simply being friends with a band leader who needed a rapper. Though he loved rap, he had never rhymed or written

before. “Now I have never sung rap before,” he explained, “and Claudio was in need of a rapper and so he just comes up to me and says, ‘You are going to rap for us’. Not because I already had a track record, but just because he needed somebody!” As Rodrigo summed up the view: “If you can speak, if you can talk, you can rap”.

In addition, for rappers, “voice” has a meaning different from the singing voice: the verbally communicated *message*. “The voice of rap is the message,” said Adimilson, a Black gospel rapper for the group Genesis. “It is not just our voices, our voice-boxes, it is what we want people to understand.” The gold standard of rap is whether its “voice”, its verbally delivered message, has integrity, is “true”, whether it really conforms to the experience of the rapper. While it is common for young people to offer a routine etymology of “rap” as “rhythm and poetry”, for most of my informants, it was the “poetry” that drew them and continued to hold them fast. Naturally, a good rap is about what one has lived, but also what one has made of the experience, through reflection and the careful crafting of language.

Indeed, the young rappers I got to know were in love with language, and wanted to use it in subtle, sophisticated ways. They thought a great deal about the content of what they wanted to communicate in their message, even more than about the flow and form with which they delivered it. They took pride in reading – newspapers and books and magazines -- frequently during interviews taking out a text they had been reading in order to drive home a point. They also prided themselves on their intimate relationship with paper and pens: many carried around fat notebooks filled with lyrics they were working on, crafting, trying to get “right”. Some said they could write a rap in a few days, but some prided themselves on tinkering with rhymes for months. Invariably a rapper would

break out his written lyrics during an interview. I sat with one young rapper for a full two hours going over lyrics, as he carefully explained their symbolism to me. Other rappers proudly dictated lyrics to me so that I could record them and publish them. When they wanted to show their admiration for a rapper, they would speak of how “smart” he was, how “well-read”, the fact that “he walks with a book under his arm.” Some spent hours listening to their favorite artists in order to memorize lyrics, or write them down. Indeed, the ethos of “the message” was present in the very names: “Messenger of the Truth”; “The Rational MCs”, “The Preachers of the Ghetto”, “The Preacher Luo”. As Luo said: “Without the message, rap would not exist”.

To get a sense of just how important to the genre “message” was, I asked all of the rappers I got to know which was more important: the message or the sound of the voice. While all said that both were important, they also all said that, for them, the sound was mainly a vehicle for the message, a means to the end of getting the message across. They all said that the process of creating a rap began with the lyric, that is, sitting with a piece of paper and a pen or pencil, and writing. “The beat, the sound are important,” said Adimilson, “but it all starts when you sit down and express yourself through words. You want someone to hear and understand those words, and the rhythm is really just a way to do that.” “I think that lyrics, at the end of the day, are more important than the sound of the voice,” said Cassio, lead MC of the Preachers of the Ghetto. He added, “You can attract kids with the sound, but if that were the most important thing, then rap would cease being rap. The sound is there as a vehicle, as a way to get the message across. It is not the other way round!” Samuel, expressed this view when he was distinguishing rap

from hip hop. “Hip-hop,” he explained patiently, “is a kind of a culture or art, while rap is a way to express your ideas.”

Now the centrality of “message” in rap aesthetics runs counter to the notion that any racial group can claim superiority in the genre. For what matters is not which racial group’s experience is being conveyed, but that it be conveyed truthfully. This draws an interesting contrast to Black gospel, in which lyrics are all very similar, and so in which contrasts in quality are necessarily about the sound of the voice. The ultimate criterion of quality and value in rap, meanwhile, is the sincerity of expression of the message, more than the sound. While racist accounts of musical ability abound in Brazil, no gospel rapper I met could muster a racist account of why someone might be skilled at expressing his or her own ideas. While rappers did not deny ethno-genetic-musical endowment with reference to sung music, this idea was simply not relevant to how they experienced, thought about and evaluated their own musical genre. Naldo, a white rapper of the Christian rap group Profetas MCs, made this point when he said that “Sure, a Black can write a lyric that’s better about racial discrimination, because he’s closer to that and so he can write it with greater perfection. But a white guy can write a rap that’s just as good about the difficulty that he’s passing through. As long as he’s writing about something that he is living through. That’s all that he needs to do. I don’t agree that a Black can write a better rap than a white just because he’s Black!”

The third feature of rap’s relation to voice is its individualism. This may strike some readers as surprising. Given how strongly rap is associated with particular, jointly experienced places and classes and ethnicities, it may seem to some, at first glance, a preeminently “collective” art form. Certainly rap can and does communicate many

collective sentiments. And yet, what I found in the field was that rappers were extremely concerned to get across their *uniqueness* and *individuality*. To the extent that rap is about message, freedom, and creativity, it really is not that surprising that rappers would feel that they had only fully realized the art form's potentialities when they had expressed what was entirely unique about themselves. Rhymes tend to be long, as rappers explore, in their own ways, the ins and outs of a question. In this connection, it is striking that rappers are loathe to criticize each other's work, largely because this would be tantamount to questioning each other's claim to unique individuality. "It is not up to me," said gospel rapper E-Beille, "to second-guess the lyrics of someone else; look, they wrote them, that's what is important. Each rhyme has its own value." I sat in the small house of Tina as she read out loud her most recent lyrics, to an audience of three experienced rappers. A silence ensued as each thought about what they had heard. Finally, concurrence: "that'll work". Never did I witness a rapper openly question or tinker with the lyrics of another. "Each rapper is unique," said Luo, "and we must respect each ones efforts."

The ethos of individuality was so strong in rap that it easily trumped race. This became clear when I asked Samuel whether he felt he was expressing his race through his rap. Had actually expected him to say "yes", since he had expressed a very strong pride in himself as a Black man. Yet when it came to rap, his uniqueness trumped everything else. "No," he replied, "not my race, not my color. My ideas. In rap I express my ideas." Samuel denied that rapping "gave voice" to his "Black soul". "I believe I'm giving voice to my own soul, not my 'Black' soul," he said. "I think each person expresses their own soul. And each person has their own way of rapping. I don't think I rap as I do because

I'm Black. . . I have the gift; as a white you could have the gift as well. It is not a question of color." Again and again, gospel rappers insisted, as did Rodrigo, of Pregadores do Gueto, on the specificity of each rapper's message: "I can't say," he said, "that MV Bill [a dark Black] raps better than the Racionais [mixed group], or the Racionais better than Marcelo D2 [white], because each sings in their own style. I just don't see this thing about Blacks rapping better than whites. It's not there."

Throughout the preceding the attentive reader will have detected an experience that distinguishes gospel rappers from singers of Black gospel: their awareness that their genre is chock full of white rapping voices of the highest quality. This knowledge of their art form's demographics influenced every conversation I had with rappers: for in contrast with Black gospellers, who can count the number of excellent white gospel voices on one hand (nay, two fingers), gospel rappers acknowledge that really good white rapping voices are as numerous as Black ones. This made it hard to sustain in their minds a claim that Black rappers dominated the field. "We can see," said Cris, "that in Brazilian rap, a lot of whites rap even better than many Blacks. . . I've seen whites who rap really well and better than many Blacks, and vice versa." Or hear Pastor Ton: "There are whites who rap great, and there are Blacks, who rap terribly. God gives a gift to both whites and Blacks and then it's up to them to develop their gift." Preto knew that "you can see whites singing rap just as well as Blacks," and Black Rodrigo, for whom the "white raps just as well – you can hear them all the time." Or, finally, Leandro, who declared that "I know lots of rappers on CDs and in shows who are white and they are great. So it has nothing to do with color."

Taken together, it comes as little surprise that gospel rappers have not developed a strong interest in ideas about the essential, genetic, or inherited character of their voices, nor about any divine accounts of these. In contrast to singers of Black gospel, gospel rappers are skeptical of the notion that Black ancestry confers special physical or vocal capacities. They talk instead about rap's vocal skills as acquired through learning and practice⁴², but not as one bestowed upon a whole racial group. While conceding that Blacks might have a genetic predisposition to sing melodically, the non-melodic art of rap is for them a racially level playing field. Of the twenty gospel rappers I interviewed who identified themselves as Black, only two spoke of vocal competence as racially specialized. The Black rapper Samuel's views were more typical:

Listen, John, I think that a person, once you have the gift, it doesn't matter what your color is. It doesn't matter if you are white or if you're Black. The gift is the ability to express yourself, the ability to express your ideas so that people can understand them. What you want, what you think, what you are planning for the future, that is the gift. And that belongs not just to Blacks, but to whites too. As long as a person has the gift of knowing how to transmit his ideas to an audience, the guy is rapping well, whether he's Black or white.

Little wonder that I heard from no gospel rapper any of the theological reflections on divinity and Black voice I heard from singers of Black gospel.

V. Voice consciousness and collective racial politics

I have suggested that a contrast in ideas about Black voice and its role in divine design exists between artists of Black gospel and gospel rap. Let me now suggest some implications this contrast may have for Black identity struggle in Brazil. I found that

artists of Black gospel tended to be more enthusiastic about collective Black projects than were gospel rappers. Among the forty Black gospel artists, thirty expressed agreement with one or more of the following: the need to develop a Black Christian theology, including searching for Africans in the Bible; the desirability of creating a church with Black leadership; the importance of getting the church to teach Black history and nurture Black self-esteem; the value of knowing something about the history of Black music, and especially its connection to Black diasporic suffering and oppression. Black gospel artists all say these ideas derive from their music. “If I had not discovered how to sing Black,” says Sergio, “I would have no interest in these things. It is God’s will that I fight for my people, and He has given me this music to do so.”

The phrase “expressed agreement” fails to convey the intensity many of these artists felt toward these ideas. Isabeh created a study group on the interconnections between Christianity, Blackness, and music; other Black gospel singers created day-long workshops on the connections between music, social history, slave resistance, and the civil rights movement. Ferrisbeck devoted his website to “Blacks in the Bible” and “Black heroes”, including Zumbi, Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela, Malcolm X and Bob Marley; Black gospel musicians in the Bread is Life Church hosted educational forums on racism in Brazilian society, “Blacks in the church” and on projects to buy from Black-owned businesses; Sergio Mello, a singer of gospel blues who built his church around a Black choir, used the pulpit to proclaim the fight against racism, the valorization of *beleza negra* (Black beauty), support for Black entrepreneurs, and nurturance of Black leadership. Daniel was even interested in forming a Black church. “We need to have our own churches,” he explained, “so that we can develop our gifts on our own, and then

fulfill the prophecy of Isaiah.” David Ramos, Black gospel composer, now divides his time composing songs about Blacks in the Bible, leading a small church devoted to building Black ministry, and traveling to Black churches in the United States. His dream? “To build from the bottom a true Brazilian Black church, one that really is by and for Blacks.”

A very different set of attitudes prevails among gospel rappers. The ones I got to know all said they were proud to be Black as individuals, but fairly uninterested in promoting collective Black causes. They expressed sentiments ranging from puzzlement to skepticism when asked to comment on a Black Christian theology, creating a church with mainly Black leadership, or working inside the church to teach Black history. None of their rhymes dealt with Blackness, Black rights, or the fight against racism. While they sometimes referred to themselves in those rhymes as “*preto e pobre*” (“Black and poor”), I scoured in vain dozens of gospel rhymes for language that went beyond this phrase, such as calls for racial justice or self-esteem, or references to Blacks in the Bible. When Sergio Melo invited gospel rappers to write rhymes about these topics, they all turned him down. A major factor in gospel rappers’ low level of interest in collective struggle certainly was the fact that their relationship to voice had created no incentive to think racially about their core musical practice. As the gospel rapper Preto put the matter, “Thos musicians of R& B and soul, they are thinkling about voice as a creation of God, Blac voice and all of that. But when you rap, you really don’t have a reason to think about this. We are more concerned with the here and now.”

VI. Conclusion

I have argued in this paper that paying attention to how Brazilian Black musical genres understand, construct, and interact with voice has consequences for how their practitioners imagine racial identity. I have contended, more specifically, that Black gospel's deep linkage to the extreme physical and emotional voice plays directly into prevailing images of the Black voice in popular and elite Brazilian culture, leading to complex ideas about the role of Blacks in eschatological history. I have argued that the centrality in Black gospel of a vocal apparatus capable of producing powerful and emotional sounds unleashes a train of thought that eventuates in claims about the divine anointing of Black people to evangelize the world. In contrast, gospel rap, by stipulating no special physical endowment to excel in their art, and sharing their genre with artists of all racial self-identifications, have little reason to cultivate a theology of special anointing of Blacks by God. These contrasting modes of thought, in turn, appear to undergird fairly different sets of racial politics. Among singers of Black gospel, string ethno-essentialist thought seems to stimulate strong interest in such things as pursuing Black theology, interest in Africans in the Bible, and even the development of Black leadership in church. In contrast, the lack in gospel rap of a practical role for specifically Black voice appears to lead in a rather different direction ideologically, with little or no interest among gospel rappers in ethno-racial politics, Black theology or the formation of a Black church.

The analysis set forth in this paper has three main implications. First, this paper complicates writing that celebrates music's strengthening of collective identity. Rather than assume that music always accomplishes such strengthening, I have argued in this paper that a key force for variation in this regard are ideas about the body-music nexus, here in the form of the human voice. The identity politics of a musical genre may thus

emerge not as a direct mirror of its producers' race, but from its imaginary of corporeality, as ideas about the importance or irrelevance of body to a musical genre will strengthen or weaken its power to generate ethno-racial sentiment.

Second, by showing that Black gospel music has a stimulating effect on the development of a politicized racial consciousness (while gospel rap does not), this paper suggests that we must be more skeptical than ever of claims that evangelical Protestants in Brazil are hostile to collective Black projects. This is extremely important in the current period, as Brazilians strive to understand the role of evangelicals in debates about race. Yet at the same time, the paper has alerted us to the existence of substantial ideological variation among evangelical Protestants in this regard, a variation due at least in part to different musical traditions.

Some part of the political implications of this variation emerged in a conversation I had with Sergio Mello, the pastor of the Church of God in Christ church where Priscilla sang at the start of this article. Sergio had, he explained to me, tried to convince several gospel rappers to use black pride language in their rhymes, but they had turned him down flat. He remarked to me that he was frustrated by this outcome. "I don't understand it," he said. "They are supposed to be the great rebels. They are supposed to cry out with their voices." I suggested to him that one difference between their genre of music and his was that their had little use for the idea of a special role for the Black voice. Sergio thought about this carefully. "Hmmm." He finally said. "Maybe what we need to is to have more rap and black gospel together the church. They can pick up some of our negritude, and we can pick up some of their rebelliousness." As I was leaving the field, Sergio had started to incorporate more rap into services. It may be too soon to know were this will

lead ideologically. After all, the conceptions of Black voice in the two genres are deeply different. The positive step here is that a new conversation of voices has begun.

¹ I use the term “evangelical Protestant” to refer to churches and their members that embrace the mission of active, daily evangelization, and approve as normal and desirable the experience of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. See Jean-Paul Bastian, J-P, “The New Religious Economy of Latin America”, *Social Compass*, vol. 53, no. 1 (2006): 65-80.

² The English-language phrase “Black music gospel” is often used in Sao Paulo because of its origins in and ongoing cultural influence from the United States. Eduardo, V. and Ulba, S., “Black Music Gospel no Brasil: Eles Dao o Tom”, *Palco Gospel*, November, 2004: 34-42; Marcia Pinheiro, M., “Producao Musical: A Periferia do Meio Evangelico,” *Anais do V Congresso Latinoamericano da Associação Internacional para o Estudo da Música Popular*, 2004.

³ Marcia Pinheiro, “O proselitismo evangélico: musicalidade e imagem,” *Cadernos de Antropologia e Imagem*, vol. 7, no. 2, 1998: 57-67.

⁴ These figures are based on systematic field interviews with musicians, ministers and music promoters in Sao Paulo between 2003-2005. There is also a significant commercial side to the movement. Christian music industry analysts estimate that total sales of *Black music gospel* CDs in 2004 amounted to about half a million units in Sao Paulo alone.

⁵ Flavio Pierucci, “Religiao como solvente,” *Novos estudos*, vol. 75 (2006)

⁶ S. Martins, et al., “Paving Paradise: The Road from ‘Racial Democracy’ to Affirmative Action in Brazil,” *Journal of Black Studies*, vol. 34, no. 6, 2004: 787-816; C. Bevilacqua, “Entre o previsível e o contingente: etnografia do processo de decisao sobre uma politica de acao afirmativa,” *Revista de Antropologia*, vol. 48, no. 1, 2005; Reginald Daniels, *Race and Multiraciality in Brazil and the United States: Converging Paths?* (Penn. State University Press, University Park, 2006); Edward Telles, *Race in Another America* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2004).

⁷ See, for example, Marcos Oliveira, *A Religiao Mais Negra do Brasil* (Mundo Cristao, Sao Paulo, 2004).

⁸ On the myth of racial democracy, see, *inter alia*, Robin Sheriff, *Dreaming Equality* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2001)

⁹ Regina Novaes, *O Negro Evangelico* (Instituto de Estudos da Religião, Rio de Janeiro, 1985); Paul Freston, “Pentecostalism in Latin America: Characteristics and controversies,” *Social Compass*, vol. 45, no. 3, 1998: 335-358; Andrew Corten, and Ruth

Marshall-Fratani, *Between Babel and Pentecost : transnational Pentecostalism in Africa and Latin America* (Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 2001); V. Pedde, "Etnia, Religião e Política : Relações e deslocamento de fronteiras," NAYA, 2002; Reginaldo Prandi, "O Brasil com axe: candomble e umbanda no mercado religioso," *Estudos Avancados* , vol.18, no. 52, 2004; Flavio Pierucci, "Religiao como solvente," *Novos estudos*, vol. 7, 2006; J. Carvalho, "As Artes Sagradas Afro-Brasileiras" <http://www.unb.br/ics/dan/Serie381empdf.pdf>, 2006; B. Reinhardt, "Guerra santa": Encarando o espelho neopentecostal: o Movimento Contra a Intolerância Religiosa como uma nova reflexividade política do candomblé de Salvador." VII Reuniao Antropologica do Mercosul, 2007.

¹⁰ John Burdick, "What is the Color of the Holy Spirit? Pentecostalism and Black Identity in Brazil" *Latin American Research Review*, vol. 34, no. 2, 1000: 109-131; John Collins, "X Marks the Future of Brazil': Protestant Ethics and Bedeviling Mixtures in a Brazilian Cultural Heritage Center," in Andrew Shryock, ed., *Off Stage/On Display: Intimacy and Ethnography in the Age of Public Culture* (Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2004), 191-224; Stephen Selka, "Ethnoreligious Identity Politics in Bahia, Brazil," *Latin American Perspectives*, vol. 32, no. 1, 2005: 72-94; R. Aquino, "Protestantismo e Relacoes Raciais: O Caso da Igreja Internacional da Graca de Deus," VII Reuniao Antropologica do Mercosul, 2007.

¹¹ As it is for evangelical culture internationally. See for example, J. N. Corbitt, J. N., *The Sound of the Harvest* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998); M. Harris, *The Rise of Gospel Blues*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992); Ezra Chitando, *Singing Culture: A Study of Gospel Music in Zimbabwe* (Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 2002)

¹² Martin Stokes, ed., *Ethnicity, Identity and Music: The Musical Construction of Place* (Berg Publishers, 1997); George Lipsitz, *Dangerous Crossroads* (London: Verso, 1994); Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

¹³ Ingrid Morson, *Saying Something* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

¹⁴ For the purposes of this paper, "Black gospel" refers to Christian-themed music built around the human voice singing in a style referred to in Brazil as "canto Black", or "Black singing". This includes belting, twang, melisma, and rapid timbral shifts. For musicological analysis of Black singing style, see Pearl Williams-Jones, "Afro American Gospel Music: A Crystallization of the Black Aesthetic," *Ethnomusicology* (Sept 1975); and Barb Jungr, "Vocal expression in the blues and gospel ," in Allen F. Moore, ed., *The Cambridge companion to blues and gospel music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.) "Gospel rap" refers to Christian-themed rap sung by baptized members of Protestant denominations. Gospel rappers tended to be poorer than Black gospel singers: the former earned on average under three minimum salaries; while the latter earned more than three minimum salaries.

¹⁵ My data here is based on interviews with forty Black gospel singers, and twenty gospel rappers. All these artists identified themselves as *negro* (“Black”).

¹⁶ Pearl Williams-Jones, “Afro-American Gospel Music”, *Ethnomusicology* (Sept 1975), 380.

¹⁷ Lorraine Goreau, *Just Mahalia, Baby* (Waco: Word, 1975), 109. The shift in tone from timidity to triumph is illustrated in most major gospel hymns, such as Karen Clark’s “We Are Not Ashamed”, Kirk Franklin’s “Something ‘Bout the Name of Jesus”, or Brazilian Sergio Saas’ “Eu irei para Jerusalem” and “Jesus Meu Guia E”.

¹⁸ Glenn Hinson, *Fire in My Bones: Transcendence and the Holy Spirit in African American Gospel* (University Park: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), 275.

¹⁹ Thomas Dorsey, the “father of Black gospel” (Jerma Jackson, *Singing in My Soul: Black Gospel Music in a Secular Age* [University of North Carolina Press, 2004], 53-54), wrote the song in 1937 for Mahalia Jackson. On the song’s history, see Lindsey Terry, *Stories Behind 50 Southern Gospel Favorites* (Kregel, 2005). The song was eventually performed in dozens of recordings by major US stars, including Sam Cooke, Clara Ward, Take Six, Elvis Presley, Johnny Cash, and Loretta Lynn. When Aretha Franklin heard Clara Ward sing it at a funeral, “that [was] when I wanted to become a singer”. (Peter Guralnick, *Sweet Soul Music*, 1986: 335; also see Robert Darden, *People Get Ready!* 2005: 247). The song was recorded in Brazil in the 1990s by Feliciano Amaral, The Trio Mensageiros do Rei, Adilson Lopes, and Jaqueline Ribas, and thereby entered into the short list of songs on which singers of Black gospel try out their vocal chords.

²⁰In Portuguese, the song has been translated as follows:

Estou cansado e sem forças, pois tenho que avançar
Até que Deus me chame para seu lar
E ali tudo brilha e o cordeiro é a luz
Onde as noites são claras, são claras sem par

Sei que algum dia no vale só haverá a paz
Só haverá paz no vale para mim eu sei

{Não haverá tristeza, nem perdas, nem lutas no vale}
Só haverá paz no vale para mim eu sei

Lá o urso é manso e o lobo também
O cordeiro e o leão se dão bem
Crianças conduzem as feras com amor

Onde a terra se encherá oh sim dessa paz

Sei que algum dia no vale só haverá a paz
Só haverá paz no vale para mim eu sei

{Não haverá tristeza, nem perdas, nem lutas no vale}
Só haverá paz no vale para mim eu sei

²¹ Burnim, 157. The belt originated, in part, in vaudeville, where loud twangy voices were valued because they could be heard above brass instruments. It also began in outdoor camp meetings and revival meetings, where it has been referred to as “rising high”, “shouting”, “catching fire”, and “singing hard”. In the 1920s, the belt was increasingly valued for its ability to rise above loud jazz bands. Bessie Smith was described “as being so commanding and loud she didn’t need a microphone even in a big hall.” But the belt also comes from the church, originating in outdoor camp meetings and shouts, and the revival meetings designed to generate spiritual responses. There it has been referred to as “rising high”, “shouting”, “catching fire”, and “singing hard”.

²¹ John Storm Roberts, *Black Music of Two Worlds* (NY: Praeger, 1972), 171-172. See also Robert Darden, *People Get Ready!* (New York: Continuum 2004), 215-218

²² Jungr, 107.

²³ Richard Miller, in *Solutions for Singers* (Oxford 2004), 152.

²⁴ Jungr, 106; see also Gilyeane Kayes, *Singing and the Actor* (London, 2000). Estill notes that “belting requires much harder work than opera because it involves not only the vocal folds, but also the *extrinsic vocalis* muscles.” Note 34 in Craig, who says that belting can lead to “muscle tension, swelling, polyps and nodules on the larynx”.

²⁵ Hinson, 292

²⁶ Jungr, 106

²⁷ The vocal strain makes many classic voice teachers nervous. When Mahalia Jackson took classical voice lessons in the early 30s, her teacher criticized her belting: “You’ve got possibilities,” he is reported to have told her, “but you, young woman, you’ve got to stop that hollering.” (see Mellonnee Burnim 1985, 154.) Cheeks voice “was lacerated from is twelve years on the road with the Nightingales and some say he just about sang himself to death, impervious to the warnings of doctors, until his voice – never a refined instrument in the best of times – began to sound like gravel in a tin bucket. His was the rawest of gospel’s baritones – moving and painful in its evocation of the roughest side of the mountain” (See Viv Broughton, *Too Close to Heaven* (London 1996), 85-87)

²⁸ Mahalia Jackson helped establish the style in the 30s. See Wilfrid Mellers, *Angels of the night* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), 13. She could, in the words of one listener, “stretch out syllables, and spontaneously add soaring, sometimes breathtaking trills, woops, glissandos, and moans.” See John Storm Roberts, *Black Music of Two Worlds* (NY: Praeger, 1972), 171-172. See also Robert Darden, *People Get Ready!* (New York: Continuum 2004), 215-218. In the 1950s, the melisma became known as “surge singing”, or “running” the song. See Barb Jungr 2002: 104. On the use of the melisma in the blues, and its indebtedness to the services of churches, see Charles Keil, *Urban Blues*, 124. In the 60s and 70s the melisma penetrated and partly defined soul music.

²⁹ The history of “raspiness” as a vocal signature for gospel singing is traced in Paul Oliver, *Songsters and Saints: Vocal Traditions on Race Records* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 199-228. Also see Robert Darnden, *People Get Ready*, 143. Basically, the story is that itinerant “jack-leg preachers” became important in the early decades of the 20th century, and their constant routine of outdoor, street-corner singing and exposure to the elements created a rough vocal sound that “became both the accepted norm and a much-admired standard among gospel singers of succeeding generations.” The intense growls of preaching also spilled over into the singing when preaching-singing became common in Black churches.

³⁰ On the “growl” in blues, see Samuel A. Floyd, *The Power of Black Music* (NY: Oxford, 1995), 80-81; Richard Middleton, *Voicing the Popular* (Routledge, 2006), 46-47, Ronald Radano, *Lying Up a Nation*; also see Charles Keil’s analysis of Bobby Bland’s hoarseness in , *Urban Blues* (Chicago, 1966), 124. For the incorporation of blues-style “raspiness” in death metal, see Harris Berger, *Metal, Rock and Jazz* (Hanover: Wesleyan U Press, 1999), 167.

³¹ Simon Frith suggests that sounds like the growl communicate intense emotion because they appear to be beyond the conscious control of the singer. See Frith, *Performing Rites*, 192.

³² Karen Clark-Sheard shifts from sparkling aria to “hollow, stylized growl” and back again. See Ramsey 2004, 209, 206. “I watched how she had a raspy sound,” one woman said, watching a Black gospel singer on tape, “then she went into a real smooth, melodic type thing. Then she went right back into it”. Gospel singers routinely “[slide] from smooth, ‘sweet’ singing to ... ‘coarse raspiness’”. See Hinson 2000: 267, 269, 279. The “coarse” voice can because of this sometimes gain status in gospel, as it does in blues and jazz. See Harold Courlander, *Negro Folk Music* (NY: Columbia, 1963), 23, and Pearl Williams-Jones, “Afro American Gospel Music: A Crystallization of the Black Aesthetic,” *Ethnomusicology* (Sept 1975). Still, the reader needs to remember that the key aesthetic pattern in Black gospel is not the continuously coarse voice but the alternation between coarseness and mellifluousness.

³³ http://www.superstarliveentertainment.com/html/vocal_damage.html (accessed 6/21/06). Another voice instructor argues that growling is “destructive to the membranes

that comprise your vocal folds.

<http://forums.televisionwithoutpity.com/index.php?showtopic=3123991&st=105>

(accessed 6/21/06) Melissiah, and Australian singer, declares that “growling may eventually lead to permanent damage”.

<http://www.howtosing.com.au/pages/singfaqs4.htm> (accessed 6/21/06)

³⁴ <http://www.nzmusic.com/topic.cfm?i=7814&start=1&l=1&#post138178> (accessed 6/21/06)

³⁵ Nina Sun Eidsheim, “Constructing Difference: Vocal Pedagogue and Timbre”, paper presented to the Society for American Music, 2006; *Idem.*, “The Taxonomy of Vocal Timbre and the Construction of race,” paper presented to the Conference on Music, Performance, and Racial Imagination, 2005. The contrast between Brazil and the US in this regard raises profound questions about hemispheric differences in racial and scientific cultures that I can only hint at here. The last time ideas about the bodily basis of Black voice enjoyed widespread scientific legitimacy in the United States was in the years before WWII, in Milton Metfessel’s dissection of the “Negro voice” with his phonophotography in the 1920s. See Ronald Radano and Philip Bohlman, eds., *Music and the Racial Imagination* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 22. Since WWII, both Blacks and whites in the US have publically distanced themselves from the notion that Blacks possess physiologically distinctive vocal chords, placing such ideas in the same category as suggesting natural Black talent as basketball players or dancers. See, for example, Howard Winant, *The World is a Ghetto* (Basic Books, 2001), 172. The discourse of science in the US is that African-American and “white” singers do not differ in vocal capacity, that it is all a matter of culture, exposure, training. See, for example, Corey JP, Gungor A, Nelson R, Liu X, Fredberg J. “Normative standards for nasal cross-sectional areas by race as measured by acoustic rhinometry.” *Otolaryngol Head Neck Surg.* 1998;119:389-393; Steve An Xue and Jianping G. Hao, “Normative standards for vocal tract dimensions by race as measured by acoustic pharyngometry.(differences in vocal tract diameters).” *Journal of Voice* 20.3 (Sept 2006): p391(10). Richard Miller’s writings on this topic are especially emphatic. “Fibrotic/stroboscopic observations,” he reports, “reveal no racially classifiable features of uniform laryngeal construction.” There are no differences with regard to “vocal tract proportions, dimensions of the pharyngeal wall, shapes of the pyriform sinuses, or epiglottic activity.” The conclusion: “‘Black sound’ is culturally, not racially, generated.” (Miller reference 2004: 220). Philip Tagg has also roundly rejected the “racist hypothesis” of “physiological connections between the color of people’s skin and the sort of music they make.” See his “Open Letter about ‘Black Music’, ‘Afro-American Music’ and ‘European Music’”

<http://www.tagg.org/articles/opelet.html>. Julianna Sabol, professor of voice at Syracuse University, notes that in the US there is now very little research that directly investigates the role of racial difference to explain singing voice qualities. “It would be difficult to get such research funded,” she said (personal communication). Nor have I been able to find evidence of a serious public claim among African American singers about capability deriving from racially-defined nature. Amanda Carnie (personal communication), African American cantor at St Daniel’s Catholic Church in Syracuse, reports she has never heard

an African American friend or colleague speak in these terms, and was surprised to hear that Afro-Brazilian singers do so.

³⁶ I.e., Débora Martins Cattoni, Patrícia de Castro Camargo et al., “Cantores Negros e Brancos: Comparacao entre Tipologia Facial, Ajustes do Trato Vocal, e a Voz” at <http://www.pucsp.br/laborvox/docs.pdf> ; Jade Coelho, “Expressoes da voz do negro na musicalidade” <http://www.pucsp.br/laborvox/downloads/atividades/mostra/Programa.pdf>

³⁷ Silvia Maria Rebelo Pinho, “A Voz do Negro,” In: S. M. R. Pinho. (Org.). *Tópicos em Voz*. Rio de Janeiro, 2001, 89-96.

³⁸ <http://forum.cifraclub.terra.com.br/forum/1/79194/> (Feb 23, 2005)

³⁹ “Não há como uma pessoa branca querer ter o timbre da voz do negro” <http://www.revelacaoonline.uniube.br/a2002/campus/semi15.html>

⁴⁰ Significantly, a similar set of reflections has not developed in the United States. Why this is the case is a complex question that must await future research.

⁴¹ A fine linguistic analysis of rap remains Tricia Rose, *Black Noise* (Wesleyan University Press, 1994)

⁴² DJ Joilson, of Pregadores do Gueto, said: “I do not think that anybody who sings in this style feels more Black. you don’t feel that blood running more in your veins, no. I think this is just something that you acquire when you’re little like I did growing up listening to it, it is just something that I always liked. But it’s not because I got to know a group of gospel rap, that the blood is going to run more in my veins, not think that all blood runs the same way.”