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TRANSATLANTIC AFRICAN SOUND PRAXIS: COMMUNITARIAN PRACTICES, PEDAGOGIES AND RESEARCH

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This paper summarizes the exploration of sound praxis, a decolonial approach in South African universities inspired by the work of Brazilian educator and philosopher Paulo Freire. The paper discusses the history and development of sound praxis, focusing on articles and research by Samuel Araújo and the Ethnomusicology Laboratory of the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro. The concept of sound praxis integrates dialogue, participation, and collective authorship in research, challenging traditional academic norms. The abstract also highlights the collaboration between Brazilian and South African activists, educators, and researchers, as they seek to apply sound praxis in their respective contexts and explore the potential for transformative pedagogy and artistic practice.

Introduction

Among the reference points from which student and staff activism has taken its coordinates over the past half-decade in the ongoing quest for decolonial options in South African universities, the by-now classic critical social pedagogies and research paradigms associated with the Brazilian educator and philosopher Paulo Freire (1921-1997) have received renewed attention (if unevenly). Within music studies, transformative work in the Freirean tradition has been reported on for at least the past two decades, across the South Atlantic, in the work of Samuel Araújo and students and colleagues associated with the Ethnomusicology Laboratory of the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ). In particular, a generative notion of "sound praxis" has been developed, initially in collaboration with the Grupo Musicultura, a musical collective and action-research group founded by residents from Maré, Rio's second largest *favela* (slum), which adopts a participatory strategy based on Freire's notion of dialogic education and research.

In April 2022, several young activist-educator-researchers from three collectives from Rio de Janeiro associated with the Ethnomusicology Lab at UFRJ, the Research Group Dona Ivone Lara (GPEDIL), the African Diaspora Musicalities Research Group (GPEMUDA), and Cultural Resistance (*Resistência Cultural*), visited Johannesburg and surrounds to share experiences, approaches and methodologies with like-minded local colleagues, students and community activists. Two of the participants, Felipe de Sousa Carneiro (aka Nyl MC) and Andre dos Santos Junior (aka Pirigo DJ), are musicians who currently work professionally in the Brazilian rap and hip-hop scene, while another, Lucas Assis da Costa (aka Sukita), straddles performing rap with his studies as an instrumentalist advancing the *samba* and *choro* traditions. The other Brazilian participants are currently music and art teachers who focus on the relationships among music, education and research: Pedro Mendonça, Caroline Lima Souza de Lucena, Juliana Freire (Potiguara), and Renan Ribeiro Moutinho (short profiles of these participants appear in the appendix). They in turn interacted with postgraduate students and colleagues in the Wits School of Arts, several of whom are postgraduate students, colleagues and research associates working with Associate Professor Brett Pyper, and community-oriented music societies, schools and research collectives from around Gauteng province. This collaboratively authored paper summarises the notion of sound praxis and considers its relevance as a decolonial approach in the South(ern) African context, informed by the initial encounters of April 2022, and as the basis for an ongoing partnership that collaboratively explores how practice-based research can simultaneously transform and advance pedagogy and artistic practice in (South) Africa and Brazil.

Sound praxis revisited

Though developed in a Lusophone context, there is by now quite an extensive literature in English in which the consolidation of the notion of sound praxis can be traced. For brevity's sake, we focus on two early articles and a book chapter published between 2006 and 2010, which emerged from research activity that had taken place since at least 2004.[1] It is thus opportune to reflect on close to 20 years of this way of working in the Brazilian context, even as we explore its relevance to Southern African conditions today.

The first article, authored by Samuel Araújo and members of the Grupo Musicultura (2006), appeared in *Ethnomusicology*, the journal of the US-based Society for Ethnomusicology. Widely regarded as a, if not *the*, leading platform for scholarly exchange in its field, especially in North America, its content tends to serve as a global benchmark. It was thus significant that Araújo departed from the strong trend to-

wards publishing solo-authored articles in this field and co-produced this text with over twenty co-authors, something rarely seen in the humanities and social sciences by comparison with other disciplines.

The article begins by considering "non-hegemonic traditions" of music scholarship with reference to individual Brazilian scholars "largely unknown to ethnomusicologists around the world," several of whom worked as composers and in the public sphere (Araújo et al. 2006, 287). Mention is also made of institutions that have played an important role in the consolidation of what is now called ethnomusicology in Brazil, not least of which is the UFRJ, which emerges as a point of reference across multiple macropolitical shifts in Brazilian history and society since as early as 1846.[2]

It is against this background that the authors focus, rather, on a then-emerging type of scholarship that opened "an unprecedented dialogue" with "the people we work with" as researchers. In the terms of the authors, this approach brings with it "entirely new issues and directions" that centre on "moving the field [of ethnomusicology] to consider *the sharing of its time and investment* in seemingly prosaic but, in fact, intellectually challenging and politically explosive directions" (Araújo et al. 2006, 289, emphasis added). Most of these "prosaic" issues relate to the day-to-day struggles of socioeconomically marginalised communities, notably those of Indigenous and African descent, in Rio's *favela*s.

Much of the 2006 article is devoted to a theoretical reflection on the relative lack of attention to conflict and violence in ethnomusicology to date, and an assertion of its centrality to understanding the conditions framing and informing musical practice in the subaltern urban contexts with which the authors are concerned. While that aspect of the article also invites comparison with the contemporary Southern African situation, as does another major theme regarding the validity of the distinction between applied and scientific research, here we focus on what the authors of the article characterise as the "new forms of relations between communities and the researchers they study." These forms enable "the opening of a possibility of a new kind of knowledge about social forms such as music" (Araújo et al. 2006, 291). Though not yet described in terms of the Freirean elaboration of praxis, but rather as "dialogic ethnographies of sound practices," the article invokes Freire's concept of dialogic research as a key point of reference, laying the groundwork for a more explicit naming and theorising in subsequent publications.

That position is fully articulated in a solo-authored article by Araújo (2008), emerging from his participation in the first meeting of what became the International Council for Traditional Music's (ICTM) Applied Ethnomusicology Study Group. Declaring a decisive move from scientific "neutrality" to an explicitly ethnomusicological "praxis," Araújo positions the new approach anticipated in the 2006 article against the established ('traditional,' 'classical') "modes" of "face to face" research. These characterisations are worth quoting at some length, beginning with what he calls the "modern" and later the "colonial "approach to ethnography:

> The researcher in this case is usually an individual tied in some way to an academic institution, equipped with academically oriented theories, methods and research categories. He or she defines 1) research focuses and goals, as well as 2) the nature of the data to be "collected," after a period of "immersion" in "another" cultural reference system, 3) "collects" the necessary data, with, to some extent, native collaboration, 4) "translates" the data (i.e., through comparisons with his/her own cultural referents), something which is eventually done with native help, and, finally 5) interpret[s] these data in the [most coherent possible] manner, generating a textual form to be published under the researcher's exclusive authorship. (Araújo 2008, 14–15)

Araújo then compares the approach described above with the kind of texts associated with the critical, reflexive turn taken by anthropology since the late 1980s and in ethnomusicology since the 1990s, which he later characterises as "post-colonial":

> Contrastingly, one might place a reflexive mode (or "post-modern" if you may) in which the researcher is still an individual who 1) defines his/her initial focuses and goals, but all the other subsequent steps will present differences to some degree in comparison with the previous outline. He/she will 2) define and redefine the nature of the data to be collected through a persistent dialogue, negotiation and approximation with his/her "chosen society," 3) "collect" and "translate" data with systematic native help, and finally 4) interpret them with native collaboration (collaborative editing) aimed at a publication still to be authored by the researcher his or herself, despite the fact that native voices are granted greater credit and growing complexity as compared to conventional ethnographies, as well as a relative space to diverge from or even to contradict the credited author. (Araújo 2008, 15)

Setting itself off against both of the above approaches, in what may be taken to be the key argument of the article, Araújo posits "a third and progressively expanding mode" of "intensely participatory" musical ethnography (presumably de- or counter-colonial), in which:

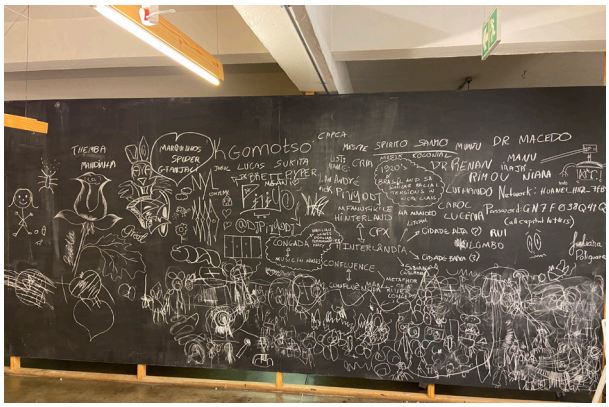
> both native and academic researchers…negotiate from the start the research focuses and goals, as well as 2) the nature of the data to be gathered, 3) the type of reflection they require, highlighting community demands which may be potentially met with the research results, in which 4) natives will both gather and interpret the data, resulting in diffusion through collective authorship in various academic and non-academic contexts[.] 5) [N]on-academic natives and academics of different social origins develop reflections on the dialoguing process that permeates the research, and finally 6) new focuses arisen in this reflection open new research interests and suggest new forms of diffusion beyond the conventional ones. (Araújo 2008, 15)

The third article that explicates the essential features of sound praxis as developed at and in association with the UFRJ was again co-authored (or at least co-signed – see below) by Samuel Araújo with Musicultura (2010). Elaborating on their earlier analysis of the relationships among music, politics and violence in Brazil, they offer a definition of sound praxis in their work, arguing for:

> a simultaneously political and epistemological approach, integrating horizontal modes of knowledge production, individual or collective action, and public policy making and implementation revolving around sound praxis, conceptualized as:
>
> "*Articulation between verbal and non-verbal discourses, actions and policies concerning sound*, presenting themselves, oftentimes in subtle or imperceptible ways, in the daily life of individuals (amateur or professional musicians, non-musicians, cultural agents, entrepreneurs, legislators), collectives (collectives of musicians, fans, professionally related social positions) and institutions (enterprises, unions, governmental agencies or NGOs, community councils, schools)." (Araújo and Grupo Musicultura 2010, 219–220, emphasis added)

In short, sound praxis draws on Freirean educational philosophy, itself embedded in traditions of Marxian critical theory, especially Antonio Gramsci's theorisation of praxis, to posit new, "horizontal" (non-hierarchical) relationships among ethnographers, the communities traditionally "researched" and the spheres of social and political action. As Araújo puts it in his most recent publication on this topic,

this both grounds and problematises: "a new ethnomusicological praxis based on the assumption that we openly engage with our interlocutors' existential and political struggles, while highlighting the potentials of and challenges to notions of dialogue and participation in the course of such initiatives" (Araújo 2021, 71).



This understanding of sound praxis challenges several enduring normative features of academic life around the globe, not least of which is the individual expertise ascribed to researchers, who historically are assumed to be removed from the communities they write about, and who are relatively passive in relation to the research enterprise. This is moreover tied to predominantly textual forms of solo authorship that are expected to be the key outcomes of the research. Araújo and his co-authors are trenchant in critiquing these norms in their call for "not allowing stable theorizations in the course of part-time interactions aimed at individual authorships in search of academic authority" (2008, 28).

The approach summarised above evidently envisages a new form of collective, activist research that goes beyond conventional scholarly protocols and even more deliberate attempts at sustained collaboration with communities beyond academia. The norm of research being practised within the frame of a "self-reproductive" scholarly practice (Araújo and Grupo Musicultura 2006, 290) can here be understood in a double sense, referring both to how particular disciplines reproduce themselves and to how these "modes" produce and maintain individual academic authorships and careers. It is this individualising, inherently appropriative inclination that the authors are probably referring to when they describe "a world largely shaped by commodity forms, some of which materialized in the authority of certain academic discourses" (Araújo 2008, 14).

On Communitarianism

Many considerations arise from the summary given above, but we are compelled to be selective in a paper of this scope. Since the intention of our emerging collaboration is to practise sound praxis approaches in our respective contexts and compare experiences, it is still relatively early to present "outcomes." What we focus on here is the way in which thinking about research as a more collective, participatory and "horizontal" process led us, during the initial encounters of April 2022, to gravitate towards a term that our Brazilian participants often used, "communitarian." This became significant enough for us to use it in the title of our closing colloquium.

Working across language boundaries, at a basic level, this came across as a direct translation out of Portuguese of the adjectival form of the noun "community," with "communitarian" being used as an alternative adjectival form to "communal." However, since Araújo himself had used the term in his 2008 article (14), as our interactions developed, and the South African participants came to adopt the term, it led Professor Pyper to inquire directly of Professor Araújo as to the significance of the term in Brazil. That exchange is quoted here to document and advance our study group's engagement with the concept:

> BP: Your use of the term "communitarian" (on p.14) is one that I've noticed is used extensively by Pedro and the other researchers who visited us in Johannesburg. So much so that it's become a keyword for our ongoing collaboration…This term makes perfect sense in English, though it seems like a literal translation of a Portuguese word. I'd be interested to know whether you intend it that way, in which

> case I'd appreciate knowing the source word and its connotations in Portuguese. Or, does "communitarian" refer to any specific philosophy or theorization, such as the communitarianist tradition of political philosophy?"
>
> SA: *Comunidade* (adj., *comunitária*) is how a certain trend of post-1988 Constitution public administration documents started to name the working-class residential areas historically known as *favela*s (slums). Even though *comunidade* became a term of widespread use among residents and this terminological change was accompanied by a number of partial reforms to mitigate the hardships of being largely underserved by state policies and considered as some sort of security problem and social disease for a century, *favela* is still the term preferred by a number of local political militants as a way of signalling little has changed after 1988. Then I use communitarian on the basis of what is of common use derived simultaneously from a "sanitizing," state-induced terminology and a certain fact-based self-perception that everyday life is actually lived through a communitarian praxis.

It emerges from this discussion, then, that the term "communitarian" in the recent Brazilian history recounted by Araújo prioritises the experiences and predicaments of people living in *favela*s. The politics of naming sites of subaltern, mostly black, residence in Rio invites comparison with the shifting use of the term "township" in South Africa, with comparable sensitivity to the sociohistorical overtones of its use.

Conclusion

The sound praxis exchange initiated in 2022 was remarkable for the ease with which its mostly young or early-career researchers from Brazil and South Africa established a rapport and a commitment to advancing their collaboration. Ongoing online meetings of the study group have already led to joint conference presentations (like the present one) and plans to pursue regular study group sessions, joint research on "race" relations and the arts, and when funding permits, physical exchanges between students and academics from our institutions, co-authorship and publication of articles and books, and translation of articles of shared interest from Portuguese to English and vice-versa. In the future, we envisage joint teaching and exploring joint postgraduate courses. More immediately, we are also keen to pursue audiovisual co-productions between artists and researchers and counter-(contra) colonial education material. Much doubtless remains to be learnt about the affordances and limitations of a sound praxis approach in our respective contexts, which we look forward to reporting on at future conferences.

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Notes

1 Subsequent publications that are highly relevant to this discussion and merit further reading include Araújo and Cambria (2013), Cambria, Fonseca & Guazina (2016), Araújo (2019) and Araújo (2021).

2 A comparative account of the provenance of African music studies in Southern Africa, in the work of individuals as well as institutions, will be pursued as the Sound Praxis Exchange study group continues its dialogues.