

ESSAY | PEER REVIEWED

The Colonization of Brazil and its Influence on Music Therapy Practice in the 21st Century

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Abstract

Based on academic studies, the author presents her view on how the history of Brazil, which was a colony of Portugal, affects the social, economic, and cultural structure of the country in the 21st century. She presents racism and sexism as two structural axes of Brazilian society, permeated by prejudice and social tensions. She discusses how sexism and racism are the result of violence in Brazil's historical process. She argues how social movements and the government have been working on these issues through different actions, the creation of laws and programs that promote greater equity in a society marked by social inequality. When discussing music therapy, the author emphasizes the participation of Brazilian music therapists in cultural work and its impact not only on the health of users, but also on Brazilian society as a whole. The author discusses how ancestry is worked on and reinterpreted, both in the music therapy process and in Brazilian celebrations such as Carnival.

Keywords: structural racism; machismo; ancestry; decoloniality

Editorial Comment

Have we ever found ourselves in a situation where a patient feels embarrassed to talk to us about their experiences with music? What if racism were the reason for this? The author invites us to think about how skin color, gender, or social class are factors that could influence how we listen. The work of the great Brazilian educator Paulo Freire is offered as a key to addressing these questions.

Brazil's history is marked by violence, social disparity, and favoritism toward certain social classes. We observe a sad historical trajectory that, even in the 21st century, leaves its mark. Undoubtedly, there has been progress in social aspects, but it has been slow and accompanied by immense inequality (Gato, 2024).

Brazil is a country with individuals who have great wealth and an immense number of people living in poverty. The social discrepancy is clearly observed in neighborhoods of large cities: the rich living in luxury mansions and the poor living in shacks crammed together in places without basic sanitation, dominated by drug trafficking, police violence, underemployment, among other problems.

In 1500, the Portuguese landed on Brazilian soil, which had a lot of gold, among other riches, and Brazil then became a colony of Portugal (Santos et al., 2022). The native peoples were the first to be enslaved and catechized, but this did not bring the desired results. The colonizers then began to enslave people from different regions of Africa, who became the main labor force of the colony. Africans and their families were separated, sold, and distributed among slave owners. In this way, the Portuguese ensured the breakdown of these people's emotional and cultural ties, creating difficulties in communication between them, since they came from different regions of Africa. This strategy by the colonizers placed the enslaved in a very unfavorable position to defend themselves.

Brazil was the last country on the American continent to abolish slave labor. This only occurred in 1888, which cemented a culture permeated by prejudice and difficulties that are still reflected in 21st-century Brazil (Campos & Lima, 2024). Thus, we can affirm that there is structural racism in Brazil and that black people have greater difficulty in social advancement. We have one of the largest prison populations in the world, and some prisons have up to 70% of inmates who are black or brown (Mori, 2024). In Rio de Janeiro, eight out of ten prisoners caught in the act are black (Oito em cada..., 2020). Brazilian favelas, which have a high poverty rate, are also mostly populated by people of African descent. These and other data indicate that contemporary Brazil still bears the consequences of having been a colony that sustained itself through the slave labor of Africans and then freed them, leaving them without a livelihood.

The Brazilian people emerged from the miscegenation between white Europeans, black Africans, and native peoples. Miscegenation was generated, in part, by the violence of the colonizers (Tadei, 2002), but also by natural unions, especially among the wage workers who replaced slave labor.

It is common in Brazil to find families formed by marriages between black people, white people, and native people, especially between black people and white people. If, on the one hand, there is ethnic prejudice in Brazilian culture and a historical process that explains the country's striking social inequality, there is also genuine emotional and loving interaction between ethnic groups. Carnival is an example of a popular festival that unites the Brazilian people, regardless of social class or ethnicity. Samba could also symbolize this fraternization. It is a musical genre that originated in social spaces marked by inequality, with lyrics that generally portray the social misery and suffering of the poor, but which is embraced by Brazilians of all ethnicities and social classes. Samba is a symbol of Brazil that unifies us as a nation. It is clear, therefore, that there is a duality in the country: on the one hand, a history marked by violence and domination by white people, which explains the social inequality that still exists in the 21st century, and on the other, the fraternization of ethnic groups that is present in our culture.

I recently heard from a young woman with a white father and a black mother who preferred to define herself as black. She would, in principle, be a brown woman, but she learned that brown was once interpreted as something dirty. She said, "I'm not dirty!" Note that the weight of prejudice is great for this young woman.

This directly reflects our historical process, in which children of white and black parents

were considered disqualified citizens, as if they were the fruit of pure blood that had been “tainted.” Father José Maurício, for example, is considered the leading composer of the colonial period, between the late 18th century and the early decades of the 19th century. However, he suffered a lot of prejudice that prevented him from developing a full career because he was “mulatto,” that is, he was the child of a black person and a white person (Vaccari, 2020). His recognition as an accomplished musician was compromised by the color of his skin! The same happened to Ernesto Nazareth, among many other great Brazilian artists.

This historical legacy also contributes to the perception of the absence of the right to frequent certain social spaces that we still observe in some people from disadvantaged social classes. For example, the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro has a historic building constructed in the 19th century, where I work, and often offers free concerts. I heard the following from a black person who became part of our extension project: “I worked for many years nearby and always wanted to enter this building. I looked at it and really wanted to go in... I never did it.” For many, these spaces of high culture are not for poor people, most of whom are black and brown.

When it comes to education, poverty is often linked to (and frequently associated with) the issue of racism. Brazilian public education offers everything from early childhood education to higher education, but there is still a certain disbelief that this can really be a path to social empowerment (Saviani, 2008). Countless families send their children to school with the main objective of feeding them, which would not be possible if they stayed at home. On the other hand, there are children who stop going to school in order to work and help their families financially. It is common for adolescents and young people from regions where drug trafficking is prevalent to drop out of school to work in the drug trade. This reflects a disbelief that education can really change the life of a poor individual, which fuels social misery that requires young people, including children, to seek work to ensure their survival and that of their families. There are several government programs (Brazil, 2023; Brazil, 2024) that help low-income families and have contributed to a decrease in school dropout rates, but this is still a major challenge for the country.

In public universities, the quota law for higher education (Brazil, 2012), in force for over 10 years, has guaranteed access to a population that previously could not reach higher education, equalizing rights between social groups, especially black people, brown people, and indigenous peoples. It is important to emphasize that Brazilian indigenous peoples are in a situation of extreme vulnerability, with their lands invaded and destroyed by the mining and logging industries, among others. Many barbaric crimes are committed against indigenous peoples. There are government agencies to defend and protect them, but unfortunately, they do not impose themselves sufficiently on powerful companies that see the financial potential of the forest and indigenous lands.

In this structural context, in addition to racism, we can also characterize machismo as an element that defines the social construction of Brazil. Since colonization, women have been treated within a patriarchal view, that is, as the property of men (Biroli, 2018). They served to provide comfort and sexual pleasure. This was true not only for enslaved and indigenous women, but also for white women, who were expected to obey their husbands and bear their children. These women had their lives defined by their fathers and, later, by their husbands (Priore, 2004).

On the American continent, Brazil stands out as one of the countries with the highest rate of femicide (Roichman, 2020). The deaths are generally caused by the women’s partners or ex-partners. In addition, we have a high rate of rape and domestic violence. Most of these women flee domestic violence and threats from their partners/husbands, taking their children with them. Others are abandoned by men who refuse to take responsibility for supporting their children. They are called “single mothers.”

Although Brazilian law requires fathers to support their minor children, regardless of the

couple's civil status, many women are afraid to demand child support, because they are threatened by their ex-husbands/partners. Many laws and government programs have been implemented to protect these women and improve their conditions. For example, the Maria da Penha Law (Brazil, 2006) marked a significant advance in curbing violence against women. Maria da Penha suffered, along with her daughters, a great deal of domestic violence. She did not go to the police station for fear of suffering more violence from her partner in return.

In general, victims were assisted by male police officers, who were often as sexist as their husbands and did not take measures to ensure women's safety. Maria da Penha's husband shot her during an episode of violence, leaving her paraplegic. That was when she decided to go to the police station and start a movement that resulted in the law that has been protecting many women. The creation of women's police stations was also important because it ensured specialized and sensitive care for abused women. The democratic process we are experiencing, sometimes at a slower pace, sometimes at a faster pace, as well as social and feminist movements, have brought about significant changes to give Brazilian women greater autonomy and leadership, but we still have a long way to go.

Decoloniality (Reis, 2022) has been widely discussed in recent years in Brazil, provoking reflection and change in various areas such as education, health, and law, among others. It is a way to resist and deconstruct patterns, perspectives, and concepts imposed on subalternized peoples whose countries were built through the exploitation of disadvantaged social groups.

We understand that with the current social and economic organization, there will always be human beings in more unfavorable situations than others, whether in societies or globally, but poverty and exclusion should not be natural. In fact, such disparity is a way of feeding mechanisms of power, in which there are the "successful" and the "failed" and/or underdeveloped, a strategy that has proven to be detrimental to everyone.

We believe that the concept of diversity is fundamental to charting a promising path that will favor more equitable human interactions in different contexts. It is based on the recognition and respect for the most diverse human situations and characteristics, whether economic, social, racial, gender, disability, or disorder, etc., preventing them from leading to vulnerability or social risk. Historical contextualization is fundamental to understanding Brazilian social inequality and, consequently, to changing it. Genuine recognition of human diversity also requires criteria of social justice (Alvares & Amarante, 2016).

Paulo Freire brought a new understanding of the education of people in socially disadvantaged situations and is recognized worldwide for his work. He proposes an ethical education in which respect for others and their cultural background is the foundation, characterized by dialogue and the development of social awareness. In the preface to Paulo Freire's book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 2012), Fiori offers an enlightening reflection on the author's work:

Paulo Freire is a thinker committed to life: he does not think about ideas, he thinks about existence. He is also an educator: his thinking exists in a pedagogy in which the totalizing effort of human praxis seeks, in its interiority, to retotalize itself as a "practice of freedom." (...) He necessarily postulates a "pedagogy of the oppressed." Not pedagogy for him, but of him. The paths to liberation are those of the oppressed who liberate themselves: they are not things to be rescued, but subjects who must responsibly configure themselves. Liberating education is incompatible with a pedagogy that, consciously or mystified, has been a practice of domination. The practice of freedom will only find adequate expression in a pedagogy in which the oppressed are able to reflexively discover and conquer themselves as subjects of their own historical destiny. (2012, p. 11)

Freire (2011) proposes a pedagogy built with the learner and that seeks their autonomy. The perception and understanding of differences as something inherent in human nature and the recognition of a historical social trajectory based on human exploitation require spaces for social transformation that enable the creation of symmetrical relationships. For the author, listening is an essential aspect of education (as well as therapy). For this listening to truly take place, it is essential to understand diversity:

Accepting and respecting difference is one of those virtues without which listening cannot take place. If I discriminate against the poor boy or girl, the black girl or boy, the Indian boy, the rich girl; if I discriminate against women, peasant women, female workers, I obviously cannot listen to them, and if I do not listen to them, I cannot talk *to* them, but *rather talk down to* them. Above all, I forbid myself to understand them. If I feel superior to someone who is different, no matter who they are, I refuse *to listen to them*. The person who is different is not *someone* who deserves respect, *they are this or that*, mistreatable or despicable. If the structure of my thinking is the only correct, irreproachable one, I cannot *listen* to those who think and express themselves in a way other than mine. Nor do I listen to those who speak or write outside the standards of dominant grammar. And how can we be open to ways of being, thinking, and valuing that we consider too strange and exotic, from another culture? (Freire, 2011, p.118)

Paulo Freire's thinking has been a reference not only for education but also for the health sector in Brazil. In Mental Health (Amarante & Costa, 2012), we have a strong cultural movement with carnival groups, musical bands, theater, among others, based on a Freirian dialogical construction with people in psychological distress. This work has contributed significantly not only to the deconstruction of prejudices related to madness and the improvement of services, but also to the construction of a more democratic society that welcomes human differences.

As the democratic process advances, new laws require the inclusion of topics related to human rights and Afro-Brazilian and indigenous cultures in elementary and higher education programs. We believe that these changes not only demonstrate recognition of the violence committed against these groups, but will also bring visibility to social groups that have been historically discredited, contributing to the emergence of a new social consciousness. This will also drive research and the production of knowledge that reflects the reality of historically neglected and oppressed groups.

What, then, would be the impact of this history on Brazilian music therapy? What could be the contribution of music therapists in transforming a violent and socially unjust historical process? We do not have research that gives us the number of black, brown, and white music therapists or female music therapists, but we know that it is a significant group. I believe that music therapy could contribute in different ways to the development of our country.

First, we need to be careful about the training of music therapists and reflect on existing theories, techniques, approaches, and methods. The contribution of foreign authors is undoubtedly very important for the training of Brazilian music therapists, but it is essential to contextualize the content presented from other social realities. We need to think about how cultural, social, and economic differences affect the understanding, or even the effectiveness, of a theory and clinical practice from another cultural and social context.

But how does Brazilian culture influence and give our music therapy its own characteristics? Brazilian music is greatly influenced by Africa, which brought dances and rhythms to Brazil that were different from those found in Europe and Brazil, with the indigenous peoples. To better illustrate this point, it is important to bring up a little of the history of lundu, considered the grandfather of samba, which is a musical genre that emerged after the second half of the 18th century, based on choreographic and musical

elements from the various social strata of colonial Brazil.

According to Sandroni (2001), in lundu, all participants, including the musicians, form a circle and actively accompany the dance and music with clapping and singing. The dance includes the umbigada, which is a choreographic gesture consisting of the collision of bellies, or navels. The umbigada was a striking feature of the dances brought by enslaved Africans, being considered by the Portuguese an indecent, sexually provocative gesture and an affront to good manners.

As the lands were dominated by the Portuguese, the lundu was banned in Brazil, but gradually became the first form of expression originating among black people to be accepted by the white society of the colony. At the end of the 19th century and into the 20th, lundu gave way to maxixe and then to samba. It is important to note that Ernesto Nazareth (Instituto Moreira Salles) composed many maxixes whose rhythm and dance were discriminated against, as was Nazareth himself, who, as we have already mentioned, suffered much prejudice for being a “mulatto” musician. Samba also had a history marked by prejudice. As Brazilian democracy evolved and social movements became increasingly stronger, we saw a decrease in cultural prejudice, but there are still many tensions.

How important is a historical understanding of Brazilian music for discussing music therapy in our country in the 21st century? According to Rosas (2023), music “should be understood as a cultural element, historically situated in the social context, in the personal and collective universe of each individual, as well as loaded with meanings and symbolic connotations” (p.154). It is essential to understand the ancestry of our music, developed in a scenario marked by the violence inherent in colonization. The domination of a people inevitably generates conflicts, revolts, prejudices, and invisibility. Black people and indigenous peoples were treated as hyper-sexualized (indecent in the eyes of the Portuguese), lazy, mischievous, devotees of demonic religions, among other forms of violence that mark our history. Therefore, when working with music therapy, we bring our ancestry to our sessions, which manifests itself consciously and unconsciously in our interactions with our clients. Ancestry directly influences the work of the music therapist because we dance and sway with our clients. There is a “musical communion” characteristic of Brazilian culture, even if it involves tensions. The client, for example, may be ashamed to present the music they like, thinking that the music therapist will consider it inferior because it comes from a disadvantaged social environment. We can say that, symbolically, the “umbigada,” seen in the colony as a violation of good behavior, is welcome, as Brazil is slowly freeing itself from the shackles of prejudice stemming from the colonization process, thus following a path of recognition and appreciation of our ancestry. The thinking of Paulo Freire (2012), as already discussed, is fundamental, as he focused on the invisibility of the oppressed, proposing work that promotes a dialogical and symmetrical dynamic.

Brazilian music therapy works with culture in a way that illustrates the principles defended by Freire (2012) and can be understood as a path of cultural healing for our ancestry marked by European domination and violence. Brazilian music therapy stands out for its involvement in cultural actions/movements in favor of human diversity. For example, we have Carnival blocks formed by users, family members, health professionals, among others, who parade during the Carnival season. Music therapists are professionals with a strong presence in these movements, expanding their clinical practice to act in social spaces, usually public ones. These movements/actions have brought about significant changes, since issues related to mental illness/health, disability, and social exclusion are presented and shared with a broader group.

In addition, such movements allow excluded people to take center stage and play an active role in their transformation. For example, sambas are composed and performed by users, and the design and production of costumes, banners, and shirts for the carnival block are done by artists from diverse backgrounds. They present their stories and dramas,

sensitizing and educating a diverse audience that generally has no contact with this population. The empowerment of the individual is fostered and inspires those who desire change in their own lives. The audience is often amazed by the beauty and power of the performances, which promote reflection on what is madness, what is disability, and what is democracy in the treatment of human diversity.

We give prominence to those who have been made invisible, and thus, what has historically been devalued, prohibited, distorted, and violated finds a path to appreciation, belonging, and social recognition. Regardless of whether we work with Creative Music Therapy (Nordoff & Robbins, 1977), with various improvisation techniques, or with other music therapy methods, we work, above all, with our musical ancestry, bringing perspectives of transformation and healing to a history marked by violence.

The concept of diversity, linked to Freirean thought, is fundamental to the training of Brazilian music therapists. It is not possible to separate diversity in Brazil from our history written by colonization. Diversity is a broad and dense concept that helps us understand the subtlety and complexity of situations of vulnerability and, in music therapy, offers the possibility of changing it. Music therapists make music together with their clients, working based on what the clients bring to the table, and this enables a dynamic capable of producing a reframing of ancestry, which can be shared openly and respectfully.

In the Bachelor's Degree in Music Therapy at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, where I work, we take care to study the themes present in Brazilian popular music and reflect on how women and people of African descent are portrayed. What do we learn from this? It is important to make this critical reflection because music is so present in our daily lives that we are not always aware of what we hear or sing.

Chico Buarque (Abreu, 2022), a great composer of Brazilian popular music, known for his deep understanding of the female soul, his fight against dictatorship, and his constant involvement in initiatives in favor of Brazilian democracy, was criticized by the feminist movement.

In 1967, at the request of Nara Leão, he composed a song that expressed the suffering of a woman in her marriage. He created *Com açúcar, com afeto* (*With Sugar, With Affection*), which describes a typical situation of Brazilian machismo. The song tells the story of a woman who makes her husband his favorite dessert in an attempt to keep him at home by her side, but her husband decides to go out and spend the day alone in bars, looking at other women, and comes home late. He asks his wife for forgiveness, who promptly forgives him, kisses him, and serves dinner.

Chico decided to retire this song, that is, to no longer sing it in response to the request of feminists. He said that when he composed the song, he did not have the awareness he has today about machismo. However, there is controversy surrounding Chico's decision. Many people recommend that the song continue to be sung because it is a critique of Brazilian machismo.

Com açúcar, com afeto was composed almost 60 years ago, but there are many songs composed today, especially country and funk music, that portray violence against women and are often brought by our clients to music therapy sessions. I believe that these are moments that open up opportunities for us to work on cultural issues that directly affect the lives of Brazilian women and men. After all, machismo affects not only women, but also the very formation of male identity. For example, macho men cannot feel fear, they need to be strong and take the initiative to solve all problems. Always! This is violence imposed on men, because it is not consistent with human nature. Fear, doubt, and weakness are inherent in any person!

The prejudices and beliefs expressed in song lyrics open doors for the music therapy process. We can, for example, through the appreciation or performance of a song with sexist or racist content brought by a member of the group, propose a discussion based on some questions: how does what is said in the song impact your self-esteem, your perception

of yourself and others? How does music impact your identity as a man or woman? Does the song represent, in any way, your family life and the values that were passed on to you? How does this impact who you are, your life, and your current relationships? What would you like to be different? What can be done to change it? We can also use improvisation, creation, appreciation, and musical dramatization as means to work on the beliefs and feelings that arise from the discussion. It is important to observe the group dynamics and take advantage of what the songs, whether existing or created in the music therapy process itself, provoke in the members, giving them opportunities for personal expression, which results in efficient group dynamics.

There are new laws, such as Law No. 11,645 (Brazil, 2008), which requires the inclusion of topics related to human rights and Afro-Brazilian and indigenous cultures in elementary and high school curricula. We believe that these changes will bring visibility to social groups that have been historically overlooked, contributing to the emergence of a new social consciousness. This will also drive research and the production of knowledge that reflects the reality of these people.

Foreign authors undoubtedly enrich our education, but we need knowledge production that reflects our reality. In music therapy, we need to develop more and more research in this area. How does being characterized as a descendant of dominated and marginalized peoples affect individuals' lives? How does the socioeconomic context contribute to a person's illness, especially in the face of immense social inequality? What should we consider when starting a music therapy process with this person?

However, despite the importance of working with Brazilian music, as discussed earlier, we believe that we can also expand our practice by using music that is not Brazilian. Musical art is the essence of music therapy, and in addition to our music, we can use music that is more distant from Brazilian culture, bringing other paths to the therapeutic process. For example, the issues addressed can also be worked on in the Bonny Method of Guided Imagery and Music (GIM), which uses recorded classical music (Bonny & Savary, 1990). It is important to mention that Dr. Helen Bonny stated that GIM does not necessarily need to be done with the music she chose, but that she only presented what she researched and worked on in her clinic in a profound and efficient way. She never denied the possibility of using different music in GIM programs! However, I believe that the programs developed by her and other music therapists who were/are her followers allow us to dive deep into the client's inner world. This brings us new music therapy tracks that can contribute to our work.

Unfortunately, we are experiencing a growing rise in totalitarian thinking in our political landscape, both nationally and internationally. This clearly affects the development of our democracy, which already faces great challenges in light of our historical legacy. With the return of this mentality, we clearly see an increase in violence against women, indigenous people, black people, gay people, transgender people, bisexuals, among many others... We suffer deeply from the reversal of the achievements we have made in the area of mental health. We see the number of poor people growing, while a small group gets richer every day, creating major obstacles to our democracy and the full social development of the country. But the struggle continues! We continue to talk about decoloniality and seek new proposals and actions, within what is currently possible in our country. For example, the Music Therapy Association of the State of Rio de Janeiro (AMTRJ) held a meeting with black music therapists in celebration of Black Awareness Day, where they were able to talk about racism in work relationships and even in therapeutic relationships.

Tensions arise, for example, when the music therapist is the head of a department and the client does not address her because she is black and considers that a white person would be the boss. Unfortunately, this type of conflict is not a surprise, but an expected scenario that results from our historical legacy, permeated by prejudices that are changing very slowly, with advances and setbacks. It is important that these events take place and

that we become increasingly aware of these issues that have brought so much suffering and social discredit to the Brazilian people.

We believe that it is mainly through the affectionate musical relationships we establish in our sessions, or in our cultural work with the community, that we will contribute to the healing of an ancestry marked by pain, but which is also expressed through affection and an immense wealth of customs that define Brazil.

At the 2025 Carnival (Ribeiro & Costa, 2025), many samba schools in Rio de Janeiro praised Afro-Brazilian religions, demonstrating their importance and how much they have been persecuted by groups antagonistic to democracy. The strength of our ancestry shone in Brazil and around the world, and white, black, brown, indigenous, heterosexual, gay, transgender, rich, and poor Brazilians sang and danced together, showing the strength of our mixed culture. This is the Brazil we want!

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