

ESSAY | PEER REVIEWED

Negro Canto: Art and Music Therapy as a Way of Confronting Racism

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Abstract

In this paper, we explore how art and music therapy serve as instruments of resistance and confrontation against racism, focusing on the experiences of Black women. As Black people, we observe the loneliness and challenges of being in predominantly white academic and professional spaces, where our skin color always arrives first. Based on these experiences, we analyze how art, performance, and music therapy can serve as strategies for resistance, affirmation, and emancipation of socially marginalized identities. The performance “Negro Canto,” inspired by Elza Soares, Conceição Evaristo, and Lélia Gonzalez, is presented as a political act that transforms individual pain into social denunciation, confronting violence and silencing. Thus, more than a denunciation, this article advocates for a decolonial and emancipatory music therapy that values the life experiences of marginalized populations, reinforcing the need for practices that use music to reconstruct narratives, strengthen identities, and promote social justice.

Keywords: music therapy; racism; feminism; decoloniality

Editorial Comment

From the heart of their own experiences, Mirandah and Junio ask us about the responses we give to the presence of racism in the field of music therapy training and practice. Their experiences are those of alienation, injustice, and violence. But, in addition to helping us bring some uncomfortable issues to light, they remind us of the immense power of voice, shouting and singing, dance and music, when shared with others. Thank you!

Introduction

On the avenue, I left there
My black skin and my voice
On the avenue, I left there
My speech, my opinion
My home, my loneliness
I threw them from the third floor

I fell flat on my face and got rid of the rest of that life
On the avenue that's tough to the end
Woman from the end of the world
I am, I will sing until the end.¹

Throughout our academic career, music has opened doors for us. Through it, we have explored possibilities for access and entry into places that are uncommon for Black people in Brazil. Music as a tool for expression, as a possibility to share our stories, as an emancipatory tool in the arts or in health promotion, has been our path in music therapy, understanding its transformative potential in care and in building bonds, but our presence in these spaces has always been crossed by an unavoidable reality: our skin always arrived before us.

The first author, a Black woman, is a singer, dancer, actress, children's music educator, and music therapist. She is currently pursuing a master's degree in music therapy at the Federal University of Minas Gerais (UFMG). The second author, a Black, gay man and practitioner of Candomblé, is a musician, music therapist, and master's student in Health Promotion and Violence Prevention at the UFMG School of Medicine. The authors understand their artistic and academic trajectories not only as a professional path, but as a way of existing in the world. Our voices, their bodies in motion, and our commitments to art, music education, and music therapy are expressions of our identities and our struggles for spaces where bodies like ours, historically marginalized, can be seen and heard.

Brazilian music therapy is not much different from other countries, with a majority of white people, both as references in literature, as teachers, and as students in training courses. The experience of often being the only racially conscious Black woman in the class, or the only Black gay man engaged in a reflection on diversity in these spaces, highlights our intellectual and emotional loneliness, making us clearly observe the weight of occupying an environment where bodies like ours are the exception.

We write, therefore, moved by this concern: the need to question and reframe colonized spaces that have historically marginalized us. The academic experience has never been just about absorbing knowledge, but about affirming existence. Every discussion, every glance that crossed us, even before our words were heard, was a reminder of the challenge of being and remaining.

We see art and music therapy as powerful tools for confronting racism. Music, especially singing, carries the memories, struggles, and resistance of black people. It resonates as an act of affirmation and belonging, breaking historical silences and creating spaces for listening and welcoming. According to Michele Mara Domingos and Rosemyriam Cunha

¹ Mulher do Fim do Mundo (Woman from the End of the World) is the title track of Elza Soares' album, composed by Alice Coutinho and Rômulo Fróes, released on [October 3, 2015](https://doi.org/10.15845/voices.v25i3.4567), by the Circus label.

(2021), in addition to these facts, it can be observed that historically, music has always been present in the lives of Black people. In music therapy, we see the possibility of reconstructing narratives, giving voice to silenced pains, and, at the same time, strengthening identities. Using art as a means of resistance is, for us, more than an aesthetic or professional choice; it is a vital necessity. It is through art that we reaffirm our presence, our histories, and our struggles, opening paths for other Black voices to echo.

Brazil's history is marked by a racist structure that perpetuates violence in its various forms against the Black population. According to Abdias do Nascimento, José Genoino, and Ari Kffuri (1984), although Brazil is often portrayed as a racial democracy, the reality reveals a country deeply marked by structural racism. Racial inequality and poverty feed off each other, perpetuating social exclusion. The struggles for abolition and for the republic did not guarantee full citizenship for the black population, allowing the remnants of slavery to continue to influence social relations. As a result, authoritarian practices, arbitrariness, and the violation of rights remain more present in Brazilian society than democratic values (Nascimento et al., 1984).

Regarding possibilities for addressing racism in Brazil, Djamila Ribeiro (2019) proposes that a structural approach is necessary, one that takes into account the historical perspective, as it is important to understand the connection between slavery and racism, as well as its consequences over time. According to the author, this system has always favored the white population economically, while the black population, treated as merchandise, has been deprived of fundamental rights and excluded from the distribution of wealth.

Lélia Gonzalez (2020) discusses how racism and sexism structure Brazilian society, denying black women basic rights and relegating them to spaces of subordination. Her concept of "Amefricanidade" allows us to think of black identity not only as a colonial imposition, but also as a space for resistance and creation. In this way, we see that violence is perpetuated in an intersectional manner. According to Carla Akotirene (2019), reading reality from the perspective of intersectionalities is a tool that can aid in understanding race relations in conjunction with other markers such as gender, sexuality, class, and other social markers, for a broader social analysis.

In the music therapy context, Andressa Arndt, Rosemyriam Cunha, and Sheila Volpi (2016) inform us how Social and Community Music Therapy, since it's an approach that uses music as a tool to promote social cohesion, strengthens community ties and collective well-being, and differs from individual interventions by focusing on broader social contexts, seeks to impact entire communities through shared musical experiences in an active process based on culture and aspects of everyday life. This perspective emphasizes the importance of practices centered on human relations, group dynamics, and democratic action, promoting social inclusion and expanding the possibilities for individuals to express themselves and participate in society (Arndt et al., 2016).

When discussing art and music therapy, we must mention Nise da Silveira and Dona Ivone Lara. To situate the magnitude of these figures in Brazilian history, it is crucial to briefly present their pioneering roles at the intersection of art, mental health, and culture. Nise da Silveira, a revolutionary psychiatrist, challenged traditional and inhumane psychiatric treatment in Brazil, replacing aggressive methods with art-centered therapies, such as painting and modeling, to restore the subjectivity and dignity of her patients. It was at her institution that singer, songwriter, nurse, and occupational therapist Dona Ivone Lara played a key role. As one of the first Black women to excel in male-dominated fields, she applied her knowledge of music and health to create emancipatory practices, using samba and singing as therapeutic tools. Together, these women not only transformed mental health care in Brazil but also symbolize resistance and innovation in their respective fields, as Manuella Ferreira (2023) points out.

As a renowned Brazilian psychiatrist, Nise da Silveira was a pioneer in introducing

therapeutic approaches that integrated art and science, directly influencing areas such as music therapy. Her humanized methodology, which prioritized the creative expression of patients, paved the way for therapeutic practices that use art as a means of promoting mental health. By valuing patients' creativity, Nise paved the way for practices that use art as a means of promoting mental health (Ferreira, 2023). We believe that the recognition of Dona Ivone Lara as one of the pioneers of music therapy in Brazil, as well as a symbol of female and Black resistance in art and health, still lacks the attention it deserves.

Art has always been our place of resistance, expression, and confrontation. If singing paved the way for our trajectory in music and music therapy, it was in performance that the first author found the synthesis of all this: a visceral way of giving body and voice to her experiences and concerns. Based on an analysis of the performance “Negro Canto – até o fim” (Black Song – Until the End), written by the first author of this work and inspired by the interpretive power of Elza Soares, we will discuss possibilities for emancipatory actions based on artistic expression and music therapy.

Performance Negro Canto: até o fim

The National Musicotherapy Meeting² is an event that has established itself as an essential space for discussing and strengthening the presence of Black professionals in music therapy, addressing the intersections between race, culture, and health. In its 4th edition, held on November 28, 29, and 30, 2024, together with the 3rd Minas Gerais Music Therapy Forum, the event's central theme was “Decolonial Crossings – Ethnic-Racial Diversity, Health Promotion, and Music Therapy,” proposing reflections on the impacts of structural racism in music therapy practice, the need to decolonize training and care, as well as the role of music as a tool for resistance and health promotion.

The event was not limited to theoretical debate, but also served as a space for practical and emotional exchanges. Speakers and professionals from different regions of the country participated, sharing through roundtable discussions and artistic presentations that brought to life the decolonial and anti-racist concepts proposed in this edition. The experience of the National Musicotherapy Meeting, by promoting listening and visibility of Black voices, consolidates itself as a strong pillar in the construction of a more inclusive and socially responsible music therapy, encouraging the formation of new leaders and the strengthening of mutual support networks.

It was at this event that the performance “Negro Canto – até o fim” (Black Song – until the end) took place. The first author brought to the stage a cry, a direct confrontation with the structural racism that Black bodies face on a daily basis. The text, loaded with experiences and urgencies, resonated as a denunciation and a demand. Conceição Evaristo (2008, p. 13), in “Poemas da recordação e outros movimentos” (Poems of Remembrance and Other Movements) illustrates well what we go through in our daily lives: “Every morning I wake up from dreams and cherish between my fingernails and flesh a very sharp pain.” What was silenced gained a voice, what was discarded claimed existence. As Lélia Gonzalez rightly pointed out, the trash spoke—and with the strength it carries within itself (Gonzalez, 2018).

The performance addressed racism, violence, and oppression experienced by Black women, bringing across how these forms of violence can be confronted through art, music, and music therapy, based on practices of resistance and emancipation. Influenced by women such as Lélia Gonzalez, Conceição Evaristo, Elza Soares, and many others, the first

² <https://www.youtube.com/live/6emwCiddiWg?si=FOnJPAWYmXEB1jRS> (performance at 1:12:27).

author constructs a narrative that intertwines literature, music, and the trajectories of these women with her own experience, reflecting on the nature of racism as a profound and incessant intersection.

The performance is based on the account of a real event suffered by the first author, using a song and original texts and quotes from Conceição Evaristo (2008) and Lélia Gonzalez (2020), also bringing memories of experienced and naturalized violence, questioning how racism can be denied by those who perpetrate it. Inspired by *Escrivência*, a term coined by writer Conceição Evaristo (2020) to describe writing that emerges from the lived experiences of Black people, we present this narrative as a way of giving voice to experiences of oppression and resistance that have been historically silenced; questioning the racism of a white, rich, and privileged woman who denies her racism through superficial and empty discourse, ignoring the real violence suffered by Black women in their daily lives.

The phrase spoken in the performance: “she slapped me three times on the head, pushed me, and said it was affection,” illustrates the normalization of racial violence, disguised under the mask of paternalistic concern, which, instead of protecting, subjugates and denies the autonomy of the Black female body. How could a white, wealthy woman, secure in her privileges, admit her racist stance? The system, which insists on saying that a Black woman’s body does not belong to her, silences those who dare to question it. But there, in that performative moment, there was no silencing. Her art shouted. And after the words came the song. “Mulher do fim do mundo” (Woman from the End of the World) (2015), composed by Alice Coutinho and Romulo Fróes, became known through the interpretation of singer Elza Soares, an icon of Brazilian music and a reference for Black feminism in art. The song echoed as an outcome and reaffirmation, like a rite of transformation, a final word spoken not as a request, but as an affirmation: I am here, and you will hear me, whether you want to or not.

In this context, the performance emerged as an artistic and political response to the theme of the National Musicotherapy Meeting, combining words and song to expose the contradictions of racism, the symbolic and concrete violence that Black bodies face, and the power of art as a means of confrontation. The performance text brought to the stage experiences of exclusion, silencing, and resistance, questioning the structures that sustain racism. “Can trash talk? Trash will talk, and it’s cool” (Gonzalez, 2018). In a powerful, empowered way, and now aware of the power carried by ancestry, the performance becomes an act of vindication, where the denial of our existence was confronted by our undeniable presence. The trash spoke, the subordinate spoke, and spoke with their own voice (Gonzalez, 2018; Ribeiro, 2017; Spivak, 2010).

The performance ends with content that is intertwined with music therapy. At this moment, music takes on the task of reframing the content. Violence is combated with song, a song of denunciation and affirmation, like a cry of resistance and permanence. Based on the song “Mulher do Fim do Mundo” (Woman from the End of the World) (2015), the strength of Black women in the face of violence and oppression was evoked, reframing the song as a space for resistance. Music, like artistic performance, becomes an act of struggle against the power structures that seek to silence the voices of the oppressed, particularly the voices of Black women. It proposes to confront the mechanisms that bring pain and silencing, echoing the central message of the event: the need to occupy, reframe, and transform spaces through art and music therapy.

Michele Mara Domingos and Rosemyriam Cunha (2021) refer to Elza Soares in their work, “The feelings that black women express in music therapy activities,” highlighting that the songs she performs present motivation and reflection on racial identity and the struggle of Black people, in addition to contributing to black female empowerment. When performing her songs, she declares: “On the avenue, I left my black skin and my voice” (Coutinho & Froes, 2015), which reflects the freedom and power of Black women to assert

themselves, both in a social and artistic context. Through her music, Elza Soares not only exalts her own identity but also adds to the chorus of voices of many Black women, highlighting the importance of their presence and contribution to Brazilian culture, bringing with her a powerful expression of collective identity and resistance.

Art and Music Therapy as Emancipatory Strategies

In view of the performance analyzed above, it is possible to confront racial and gender violence by understanding art and music therapy as a strategy for survival and affirmation of identities. Discussing how art and music can be political and therapeutic devices for Black bodies traversed by their intersectionalities. In this sense, it is not only necessary to problematize, but also to offer paths of resistance that can be incorporated into the practice of music therapy in search of emancipatory and health-promoting actions for the Black population.

As Sue Baines (2013) points out, emancipatory practices in music therapy are based on valuing diversity and confronting the violence imposed by oppressive systems. By recognizing that music is a means of expression, identity, and resistance, this approach seeks to create therapeutic spaces where historically invisible subjects can reframe their experiences and strengthen their autonomy. To this end, this approach breaks with Eurocentric and colonial paradigms, adopting strategies that engage with the sociocultural realities of each individual and promoting actions that challenge structural inequalities. Thus, the practice is not limited to the traditional clinic, but expands into the social, political, and community fields, becoming an instrument of transformation and justice (Baines, 2013).

According to Kezia Paz (2022), music, like other art forms, can represent human freedom and creativity and is therefore a fundamental right. Furthermore, it should be seen not only as a right but also as an essential and desirable activity in people's lives. The proposal is to understand music not only as a record or reflection of society, but as a critical and reflective practice, capable of promoting processes of mutual education between interacting subjects, from a perspective of solidarity (Santos apud Paz, 2022).

Sandra Lynn Curtis' *Feminist Music Therapy* (1996) analyzes how feminist theories applied to music therapy can promote gender equality and empower women, especially within therapeutic contexts. The author proposes that music therapy, by focusing on women's experiences and needs, can be a tool for empowerment, helping women to express themselves and deal with social, emotional, and identity issues.

Candice Lanell Bain, Patrick Grzanka, and Barbara J. Crowe (2016) argue that music therapy, when informed by queer theory, can become a powerful tool for combating structural oppression and creating safe spaces for self-affirmation and identity development for LGBTQIA+ people. The authors further suggest that practices that break with normative models and invite music therapists to rethink their approaches, bringing them more in line with the principles of social justice and diversity, can go beyond issues of gender and sexuality and thus promote an emancipatory music therapy practice for all people (Bain et al., 2016).

Final Considerations

By integrating concepts of decoloniality, music therapy, and *Escrevivência*, the proposal discussed here reinforces the urgency of creating spaces for listening and promoting health for historically marginalized bodies, such as Black and female bodies, where music can be used as a tool for social transformation, a means of expression, and a political act of existence and (re)existence.

Beyond the concepts of music therapy and decoloniality, this work is anchored in the perspective of *Escrevivência*, understanding that, unlike a simple autobiography, *Escrevivência* becomes a political and collective act, transforming individual pain into a social denunciation. Enabling an emancipatory and health-promoting music therapy practice.

We cannot remain silent in the face of inequalities, violence, and threats to people's rights and lives. It is necessary to establish a responsible existence and music therapy. Attentive, vigilant, and denunciatory when necessary. We believe that for this to happen, music therapists must be involved in their practices, in the inclusion of topics on racial and gender violence in the training of music therapists, as well as in the search for the consolidation of public policies that are effectively committed to confronting and preventing violence and promoting health.

About the Authors

Líz Mirandah: multidisciplinary artist, singer, actress, and performer dedicated to creative expression, ancestry, and emotional sensitivity. Music Therapy specialist at CENSUPEG and master's student in Music Therapy at UFMG, she uses voice, body, and visual elements to build narratives that explore identity, belonging, and ancestry. She performs on various stages and cultural projects, actively participating in shows, workshops, and artistic collaborations. Her work reflects a commitment to representation, art as healing, and social transformation.

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