

Rhythms of Resistance: Afro-Brazilian and African-American music

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The Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, in her lecture *"The Danger of a Single Story,"* warns against the dangers of reducing cultures and individuals to narrow, stereotypical narratives that overlook their depth and diversity. In the Americas, the history of the Black population is marked by oppression, slavery, and erasure. However, oppression is complex, shaped by historical, cultural, and systemic factors. Understanding these histories requires a critical perspective to avoid generalizations and recognize the diversity of Black experiences.

This paper explores the marginalization of samba and funk in Brazil, as well as blues and rap in the United States. These genres emerged as forms of resistance, reflecting the struggles of Black communities, yet they were often dismissed by mainstream society as crude or inappropriate. Over time, they gained recognition, influencing global music and shaping cultural identities. By examining the social and political struggles surrounding these genres, we highlight how Black artistic expression has been both marginalized and appropriated. Ultimately, this discussion highlights the resilience of Black communities in reclaiming and redefining their cultural contributions despite systemic barriers using both historical and modern-day lenses. Historically, the emergence of music genres with African roots served as a channel for communication, cultural preservation, and identity expression. After the Civil War (1861–1865) and the abolition of slavery in 1865, many African Americans continued to work under precarious conditions, and while working, they used singing as a source of comfort. These songs were repetitive, with simple lyrics that reflected pain, love, injustice, and hope. From this tradition, blues emerged, with its first records and recordings appearing in the early 20th century. In 1912, musician and composer W.C. Handy published *"Memphis Blues,"* considered one of the first written blues pieces. This musical style also contributed to the creation of jazz, which became a symbol of African American creativity and sophistication. Jazz incorporated syncopations and polyrhythms from African traditions, challenging conventional Western rhythmic structures. Moreover, jazz created opportunities for African American musicians, breaking racial barriers in music and challenging institutional racism.

Likewise, in Brazil, the implementation of Afro music in our society is similar. Just like the blues, samba, which comes from African roots, also represents the pain, anguish and protests coming from peripheral regions. For an extended period, samba circles were regarded as a form of vagrancy by society, a stigma that led to the persecution of samba and its practitioners. A clear illustration of this prejudice is the case of the renowned sambista João da Baiana, who faced multiple confrontations with the police in Rio de Janeiro, which even went as far as to confiscate his instruments — the pandeiro and tiracolo — during parties, highlighting the deeply ingrained discrimination in society. The integration of samba into other musical genres, coupled with the reinterpretation of works by prominent Black composers by young white musicians, and the rise of movements such as MPB (Música Popular Brasileira) and Bossa Nova, were pivotal in distancing samba from the favelas and peripheral areas, elevating it to the status of national heritage and a cultural emblem of Brazil on the international stage. However, this process did not put an end to the efforts to criminalize Black cultural expressions. In 1922, the musical group “Os Oito Batutas,” a landmark in MPB, embarked on the first international tour by a Black popular music group, which, through the lens of the Rio de Janeiro press, was seen as “degrading to the image of Brazilian society internationally” (DINIZ, 2022, p. 19). In the 1920s, Black people and those of mixed heritage were still perceived as significant obstacles to the country’s economic and social progress. This marginalization persisted until the late 1980s, with the emergence of hip hop, rap and, particularly, funk, which continued to face resistance and stigmatization, reflecting the ongoing presence of prejudice and the exclusion of Black cultural expressions.

In the U.S, rap music emerged in the 1970s as part of hip-hop culture. Throughout its evolution, it has been a dominant form of resistance, challenging systemic racism and social injustice. Early rap groups like Public Enemy and N.W.A. laid the foundation for protest through music. Today, artists such as Kendrick Lamar, J. Cole, and Lil Baby use rap to address contemporary struggles, from police brutality to economic inequality. Kendrick Lamar’s *Alright* became an anthem of the Black Lives Matter movement, reflecting the resilience of Black communities against oppression. Likewise, J. Cole’s *Be Free* and Lil Baby’s *The Bigger Picture* directly respond to racial violence, showing how rap remains a platform for activism and awareness. With rap’s influence, it continues to face systematic

marginalization. Rappers are frequently scrutinized and criminalized, with their lyrics used as evidence against them in legal cases, reinforcing racial biases in the justice system. Moreover, mainstream media often dismisses rap as violent or dangerous, while corporations profit from its commercial appeal without addressing the real struggles it represents. Despite these barriers, rap remains a powerful symbol of resistance, showing how Black artistic expression reflects struggle and redefines societal narratives. Black artistic expression has long served as a means of resistance, identity, and cultural preservation, despite facing systemic barriers and marginalization. From blues and jazz in the United States to samba and funk in Brazil, these genres have challenged racial and social hierarchies while shaping national and global identities. The historical and contemporary struggles surrounding these musical forms highlight the persistence of prejudice and appropriation, yet they also showcase the resilience of Black communities in reclaiming their narratives. By recognizing the significance of these genres beyond entertainment, we gain a deeper understanding of how Black cultural contributions continue to redefine and influence society, resisting erasure and affirming their place in history.