
Girls from Rio: Brazilian Identity from Bossa Nova to Funk

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Abstract

This article presents an analysis of Brazilian singer Anitta's 2022 song and music video 'Girl from Rio' in light of its dialogue with one of bossa nova's most famous songs 'Garota de Ipanema' (1962). I contend that, by reclaiming an aesthetics of excess that bossa nova aimed to eliminate from samba in the name of 'sophistication,' Anitta's song and music video in question bring to the fore racial, gender, and class issues that are at the core of Brazilian society.

Introduction

In 1965, 'Girl from Ipanema' (1964), recorded originally in Portuguese by singer Pery Ribeiro and later in English by bossa nova's icon João Gilberto's wife, Astrud Gilberto, won the Grammy Award for song of the year. The song depicts a stunning girl who mesmerizes the enunciator as she walks down Ipanema Beach in Rio de Janeiro. It became a kind of anthem in Brazilian popular music, associated with the city that most features in the imagination of a national identity, often linked to samba, soccer, and carnival. It was featured, for instance, in the opening ceremony of the 2016 Olympics, which Brazil hosted. In the occasion, Giselle Bündchen, the world-famous Brazilian top model, who is a girl from another Rio—the state of Rio Grande do Sul—, walked down a runway towards a singer who impersonated bossa nova idol Tom Jobim. As soon as Bündchen finished her walk, funk artist Ludmylla took over singing Cidinho and Doca's 1995 'Rap da felicidade' (Happiness Rap). Later on, rappers Carol Conká and then 12-year-old MC Sofia took the stage. The ceremony ended with Caetano Veloso, Gilberto Gil and Anitta singing, in bossa nova style, Ary



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Barroso’s ‘Isto aqui o que é?’ (1941, ‘And what is this?’), a song also recorded in 1998 by João Gilberto, and that celebrates Brazil as a country of resilient and happy people.

The same Anitta who enjoyed the prestige and acknowledgement that comes with sharing the stage with two of the most recognizably brilliant minds of Brazilian popular music (Veloso and Gil), portrays in a music video from 2021 a Rio that is altogether different from the one featured in Gilberto’s 1964 hit. Anitta’s trap song, ‘Girl from Rio,’ directly referencing João Gilberto’s ‘Girl from Ipanema,’ shows the Rio de Janeiro of the slums coming down from the hills to enjoy the beach. This Rio would be considered by 1960’s Bossa Nova’s middle and upper-class listeners, a far cry from the ‘sophistication’ with which bossa nova intended to infuse samba by mixing it with cool jazz.¹ Anitta’s Rio is also definitely less ‘polished’ than the one represented in the opening ceremony of the 2016 Olympics, which included a stylized favela recreated on the stage where Ludmylla sings.

As the fluidity of this dialogue between different discourses within Brazilian popular music suggests, identity is a process, a dynamic push-and-pull of individual and social forces, and

[m]usic, like identity, is both performance and story, [it] describes the social in the individual and the individual in the social, the mind in the body, and the body in the mind; identity, like music, is a matter of both ethics and aesthetics. . . . if music is a metaphor for identity, then, to echo Marx, the self is always an imagined self but can only be imagined as a particular organization of social, physical and material forces’ (Frith, ‘Music and Identity’ 109-10).

¹ As shown by Bryan McCann, “samba, as a coherent rhythm, dance, and musical genre, emerged from popular dance parties in the downtown Rio de Janeiro neighborhood of Cidade Nova during the 1910s. These parties were held primarily in the homes of several well-known *baianas*, Afro-Brazilian women who had migrated to Rio from the northeastern state of Bahia, around a small square known as Praça Onze de Julho (Eleventh July Plaza) or simply Praça Onze. In its earliest incarnations, samba drew heavily on both West African antecedents and existing local popular forms like the *lundu* and the *maxixe*, themselves blends of European and African instrumentation and rhythm” (“Samba and National Identity” 44).



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In this article, I explore how Anitta, in the music video for ‘Girl from Rio,’ challenges notions of social class, race, and gender represented in a national identity implied in popular music by bossa nova. These notions also speak to the sociopolitical context in which the song emerges. I argue that Anitta’s song and music video emphasize an ‘excess’ that is rejected in music by 1950s and 1960s bossa nova. To enter this debate regarding the history of Brazilian popular music in the terms that Anitta does in 2021 with this particular song and video is to inevitably respond concomitantly to the politics by the far-right in the 2020s, in its longing for a past that roughly overlaps with the rise of bossa nova, when the country was supposedly governed by ‘good morals’ and experienced (economic) progress.

By responding to these two different moments of Brazilian history through an engagement with the idea of taste in music, Anitta’s song and music video highlight race, gender, and class prejudices in Brazilian society, although not without contradictions. In this sense, I argue that Anitta’s performance in this particular song and music video puts on display, for both national and international audiences and both aesthetically and ethically, a particular version of the country that the Brazilian elite has historically wanted to suppress and that is reflected in some of its cultural production.

As we will see in the analysis that follows, Anitta’s song and music video recenter working class and black culture in Brazilian popular music’s history as it references 1950s bossa nova. Approaching Anitta’s work from an interdisciplinary perspective, my analysis draws from studies on music and/or Brazilian society in Ethnomusicology, Gender Studies, and Anthropology. My analysis thus seeks to provide a perspective in Area Studies that goes beyond traditional approaches in the field in question that merely describe other cultures and peoples within national boundaries. Grounded in Cultural Studies, this article aims to engage in what Susan Hodgett (2019) envisions as a “modernized, contextual, and multi/interdisciplinary Area Studies,” one that looks at Brazilian society, and Brazilian popular music by extension, as “both unique and global” (39).

With this goal in mind, I first look at the role of bossa nova in Brazilian popular music’s history in the debate regarding taste, as bossa nova masterminds intentionally

create music that is perceived as “sophisticated” and “elevated” in opposition to samba. I place this discussion in the context of Brazil’s race relations, particularly with respect to the pursuit of national identity in the twentieth century, a period marked by various dictatorial regimes in the country.

While tracing the timeline between the rise of bossa nova in the twentieth century, and the emergence and spread of Brazilian funk, I highlight the connections between Brazil and the United States through music of African-descent, showing how these connections inform the push-and-pull of national identity construction through music in Brazil. Subsequently, I move on to the analysis of Anitta’s song and music video as products conceived to connect Brazilian identity with the “global” (namely, the U.S. market). I approach the song and the video as cultural tools of contestation of race, gender, and class relations in Brazil that respond, albeit not unproblematically, to the current political context of the country. My analysis ultimately seeks to offer a nuanced reading of “the messy complexity” (Hodgett 32) of Brazil and Brazilian people in terms of how national identity is negotiated in popular music in the twenty-first century in connection with cultural forces across time and space.

From Samba to Bossa Nova

‘Sophistication’ and ‘sophisticated’ are words commonly associated with bossa nova. And so are the ideas of ‘revolution’ and ‘evolution’ with respect to the history of samba, consolidated into a ‘cultural fact’ once opinion pieces on newspapers at the time when bossa nova emerged moved into academic critiques (Martins 38).² Rising at the end of the 1950s, a period when Brazil was overtaken by ideas of progress and modernity under the Juscelino Kubitschek administration (1956-1961), bossa nova sought to bring the spirit of modernization and invention to Brazilian popular music. Led by

² According to Henrique Martins, '[a]s modalizações e anáforas operadas ao longo da interlocução desancoraram a BN [bossa nova] das contradições e falta de rigor teórico metodológico presentes nas primeiras publicações tornando-a um *fato cultural* desvinculado de seu contexto histórico e dos interesses que atravessavam o objeto que se forjava' 'the modalizations and anaphors implemented throughout the interlocution untied the BN (bossa nova) from the contradictions and lack of theoretical and methodological rigor present in the first publications, turning it into a *cultural fact* decoupled from its historical contexts and from the interests that permeated the object that was being forged' (43). All translations in this article are mine, unless otherwise noted.

three figures that had training in classical music, João Gilberto, Tom Jobim, and Vinícius de Moraes, bossa nova emerged from the dialogue between samba, jazz, and, as argued by Bryan McCann, also blues ('Blues and Samba' 22). The perceived sophistication of the genre stems in part from its cerebral quality. As Erin Putnam notes,

[w]hen Jobim and Moraes began collaborating in the popular music sphere for the first time, they saw their creation as a highly structured, intellectual treatment of Brazil's musical aesthetic. In accordance with Kubitschek's vision for a modern Brazil, it was clear, defined, nearly geometric; Jobim himself is even quoted calling the genre 'industrial' (Reily 1996:6). Not only that, its lyrical content was deeply rooted in the sonic and literal word play of *poesia concreta*, which Moraes followed closely. Bossa nova was an intellectual playground of expression designed for Brazil's modern upper-middle class (12).

Socially, therefore, bossa nova's sophistication stemmed from its association with an urban, white upper-middle class, whose milieu was represented in the lyrics: the fancy bar, the beach, the Copacabana apartments. This was an environment altogether different from samba's roots. Samba, originally, was considered the lowest of the popular genres in Rio, characterized by vulgar dancing and not worthy of attention. In fact, it was persecuted and outright repressed (McCann, 'Samba and National Identity' 44). Nevertheless, as the genre became commercialized—the first song ever recorded in Brazil was Donga's samba *Pelo telefone* (1917)—it was mostly white singers who popularized it. In this market, black composers would sell their songs to these artists, quite often being robbed of their work. Partnerships were formed overtime to avoid both this kind of conflict as well as that which arose from some composers selling the same song to several artists at the same time (McCann, 'Samba and National Identity' 58).

The process of 'elevation' of samba into 'national art' can be exemplified by a polemic between Noel Rosa and Wilson Batista in the 1930s. When accused by Batista that he was not a legitimate *sambista*, Rosa recorded 'Feitiço da Vila' (1934), some lines from which, McCann notes, suggest that

Vila Isabel has 'transformed samba into a decent enchantment,' raising it from its humble origins. That elevation becomes possible because in Vila Isabel, 'the *bacharel* (one with an advanced degree) does not fear the *bamba*.' In the Vila, samba is the creation of both the intellectual and the *malandro*. The combination of erudite and popular culture yields national art. ('Samba and National Identity' 56).

In this way, samba went from persecuted degraded music to becoming *the* national rhythm, a process that was officially sponsored by Getúlio Vargas' Estado Novo (1937-1945). One important step in the latter direction was the sponsorship of samba schools, both by private institutions and by the government, which imposed regulations that included, among other measures, a stipulation that the sambas should address 'national themes' (McCann, 'Samba and National Identity' 60). Vargas cleverly used samba, particularly in the form of the subgenre *samba-exaltação* (exaltation samba), as a propaganda tool, both domestically and abroad. In Brazil, this music embodied the optimism about the nation's future that the administration sought to instill in the country's citizens. It was played on the radio and widely promoted. Abroad, samba became part of the government's strategies to project an image of a friendly Brazil, as an official presidential trip to Argentina and Uruguay in 1935 exemplifies, when Vargas took with him Carmen Miranda and the band Bando da Lua, among other artists (Tinhorão 299-300).

Part of the government's strategy for guaranteeing a positive image of the country through samba was to ban the figure of the so-called *malandro*³ from this music and to tightly control the content of samba lyrics (Paranhos 30). Especially through the work of the DIP (Departamento de Imprensa e Propaganda or Department of Press and Propaganda) from 1940 on, samba was expected to laud the greatness of the country and to promote the government's ideology of labor, according to which '[d]isciplined work was the rule by which social responsibility of citizens was measured, particularly for the popular classes' (Paranhos 30). Although this campaign was considerably successful, Adalberto Paranhos demonstrates in his article

³ The *malandro* character, which has been translated into English as a hustler, is a traditionally male figure belonging to the periphery of Rio de Janeiro and very much present in samba since the beginning of the twentieth century.



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‘Dissonant Voices under a Regime of Order-Unity: Popular Music and Work in the Estado Novo’ (2011) that many sambas of the time managed to question this ideology of labor in subtle ways.

Much like not all sambas were completely tamed by propaganda and control in the 1940s, one cannot talk about a single samba practice in the 1930s. As McCann shows, patriotic themes were already present prior to Getúlio Vargas’ policies, thanks to samba schools’ sponsorships by private interests. Alongside this patriotic view, coexisted Noel Rosa’s understanding of samba as elevated national art with an origin in the urban periphery, *sambas de roda* that suggested a mix of both urban and rural cultures, and leftist intellectuals who saw the ‘authentic’ samba in a *samba do morro* that was free from commercial interest (‘Samba and National Identity’ 62-63).

Elements of this history of samba all converge in the performance by Caetano, Gil, and Anitta at the 2016 Olympics opening ceremony. In that performance there coexists an image of an amazing country of ‘happy people,’ portrayed in a song originally sung by one of the main names of Brazilian music from the 1940s and later on recorded by one of the fathers of Bossa Nova, João Gilberto. In the sporting event in question, this same song is then performed by two icons of the Tropicália movement—the same ones that spoke of Brazil in terms of a monument of contradictions in the songs ‘Tropicália’ (1968) and ‘Parque industrial’ (1968) and that embraced bossa nova’s innovation. Sharing the stage with these two icons is funk singer and highly successful businesswoman, Anitta, whose ‘Girl from Rio’ confronts bossa nova’s aesthetics and its implicated social values, and whose career promotes a genre—funk—that has been, like samba, the target of much criticism and even persecution for its ‘lowness.’ Like the contradictions and ambiguities of this particular performance during the 2016 Olympics, ‘Girl from Rio’ exemplifies that a similar complexity exists in the career of funk artists like Anitta, whose music can stir up much needed conversations about race, gender, and class in Brazil, just as much as it can, in other instances, reinforce stereotypes and exploit identity politics in problematic ways. This complexity, in turn, demonstrates that, as Frith notes in the previously cited quote, identity is not a finished product, but rather a process of constant negotiations and disputes, as I hope to show in the analysis that follows.

From Bossa Nova to Funk and Trap

The ideas of modernization and sophistication associated with bossa nova also stem from its opposition to the boleros and *samba-canções* that dominated the radio up until then (Cesar 4). The latter came to be perceived as outdated music, dominated by melodrama. In contrast, bossa nova brings the conversational, contained singing and performance, reflecting the intimacy of Rio de Janeiro's Zona Sul apartments. 'Um banquinho e um violão' (a little stool and a guitar), as the well-known phrase associated with bossa nova goes, is all that is needed to sing and play this type of music.

Bossa nova, therefore, sought an aesthetic of contention, in opposition to the excess associated with samba. This perception of excess, however, had its roots in racist views of Afro-Brazilians, as Rafael do Nascimento Cesar (2022) astutely points out. For him, the perception that the path to innovation and modernization of Brazilian popular music led to a more 'elegant' and 'elaborate' form of expression through contention spoke directly to the

. . . sentidos configurados em uma gramática racial e de gênero presente em sambas e marchinhas. Substituir 'cabrocha', termo que designa a pessoa de origem mestiça, pelo racialmente indeterminado 'garota', e 'requebrado' por 'balanço' – tradução de *swing* para o português -, tem como justificativa a adequação semântica das letras a um público resistente a identificar-se com o tipo de repertório utilizado por compositores do passado ou em 'um terreiro de Vila Isabel'. Isso fica ainda mais nítido na mudança de 'mulata' para 'morena'. Consciente ou não, a utilização do verbo 'abrandar' para se referir a essa adaptação revela o intuito de conter o excesso de significados proveniente de um aspecto formador da experiência social brasileira – a colonização. (5-6)

. . . meanings established in a racial and gender grammar present in sambas and *marchinhas*. To replace 'cabrocha,' a term used to describe a 'mulatto girl'

with the racially indeterminate word ‘girl’, and ‘requebrado’ (a word akin to ‘twerking’ in English) with ‘balanço’ – the translation for the English word swing to Portuguese -, is justified by the semantic adaptation of lyrics to an audience that resists identifying with the kind of repertoire used by composers of the past or from a ‘terreiro de Vila Isabel’⁴. This is even more clear in the change from ‘mulata’ (mulatto girl) to ‘morena’ (brunette). Whether consciously or not, the use of the verb ‘to soften’ to refer to this adaptation reveals the intention to contain the excess of meaning that stem from a founding experience of the Brazilian social experience – colonization.

Nonetheless, Cesar argues, it is not that Bossa Nova did not approach the woman’s body with eroticism, as several of Vinícius de Moraes’ lyrics exemplify. It just did not do so with ‘racialized terms.’ Cesar invites us to play the interesting game of replacing some of the words in ‘Girl from Ipanema’ with these terms and see that, indeed, the ‘sophistication’ of bossa nova’s lyrical compositions was more about ‘cleaning up’ the association of a certain vocabulary and grammar with Afro-Brazilians than viewing the woman’s body from a non-eroticized perspective (6). Further evidence of this racial distancing, whether a conscious decision or not, resulted in the exclusion of Afro-Brazilian artists who were at the center of the innovations that led to the appearance of bossa nova. Such was the case, for instance, of Elza Soares and Alaíde Costa: ‘[e]nquanto a voz de Elza Soares era *negra demais para ser intimista*, a sua [de Alaíde] era *intimista demais para ser negra*’ ‘while Elza Soares’ voice was *too black to be intimate* [contained], hers [Alaíde’s] was *too intimate* [contained] *to be black*’ (Cesar, author’s emphasis, p. 16).

Excess is certainly a word that can be associated with Brazilian funk, genre on which Anitta’s career has been primarily based, and with trap or Trap BR, subgenre of rap overlapped with ‘Girl from Ipanema’ in ‘Girl from Rio.’ Funk’s sensual dances, reproducing movements from sexual intercourse, the amount of skin shown (by women), and the lyrics that vary between alluding to sex or just plain explicitly describing it—such as in the case of the subgenre funk *putaria*, for instance—have made Brazilian funk the target of much criticism and moral panic. This reaction is not

⁴ The expression refers to a place of worship (*terreiro*) in Candomblé (an Afro-Brazilian religion) in the neighborhood of Vila Isabel, in Rio de Janeiro, considered the cradle of samba.

anything new but the sociopolitical context that motivates it in the twenty-first century has new contours. In the 1990s, the media contributed to both spreading moral panic about Rio de Janeiro’s funk and propelling it to the national stage (Freire Filho and Herschmann 233). The context back then was characterized by

... a polarization over proposals of public security for the country. The growth of marginalization and exclusion; the social commotion produced by massacres such as those of Carandiru, Candelária, and Vigário Geral—as well as the challenging presence of narcotraffickers in the ‘pockets of misery’—and the ever more spectacular crimes (especially kidnappings) shown by the media were some of the elements that make up the scenario where the question of public security has been seen in a rather ‘immediatist’ and often radical way.

Still, middle class youth embraced funk, and the genre exploded in the early 2000s. About a decade later, Anitta came into the picture, quickly ascending to fame and attaining international recognition as she ventured into more mainstream genres in the U.S., such as reggaeton and trap, in collaboration with Spanish-speaking, as well as Anglophone artists. As of the writing of this article, Anitta has won four Latin American Music Awards and has been nominated eight times to the Latin Grammy Award. She also won eight MTV Europe Music Awards and has broken records on Spotify achieving up to one billion streams for her 2022 album *Versions of Me*. Nevertheless, she never abandoned funk, adding more pop elements to it and playing a major role in funk’s international spread (Lopez and Bori p. 56). Her latest album, *Funk Generation* (2024) has had somewhat mixed reviews, although critics seem to agree that the album celebrates Brazilian funk roots and pushes boundaries in several of the tracks (Maia; Sherman).

If on the one hand, funk has exponentially grown in popularity in Brazil and has gained some recognition abroad, on the other hand, the history of discrimination and persecution that genres like samba and maxixe⁵ were a target of repeated itself with

⁵ “. . . like maxixe, early samba was often considered the lowest of the many popular genres in Rio, the easiest to play and the most amenable to vulgar displays on the dance floor, and therefore the least worth of sophisticated musical embellishment. And both genres, in different periods, were



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funk at the end of the 2010s. In 2017, a proposal by a civil citizen for criminalizing funk gathered more than 21,000 signatures, enough support for it to be taken up for consideration by the senate (Machado). Although the proposal was not approved, it exposed the long-standing racism and prejudice against music of Afro-Brazilian origins in the country. Attempts to control cultural production by a certain segment of the population did not end there and one of them was actually successful at the local level in April 2024, when the deputy chamber of the city of Campinas in the state of São Paulo approved a bill that calls for an education program whose goal is to ‘orientar pais, responsáveis e alunos e capacitar os professores sobre os malefícios das músicas com letras que façam apologia ao crime ou ao uso de drogas’ ‘guide parents, guardians, and students and to educate teachers about the dangers of songs with lyrics that promote crime and drug use’ (Molina). The bill has been nicknamed the ‘anti-funk’ bill and thus perceived as another attempt to ban the genre.

Whether due to its relationship with sex or the drug and crime world, attempts to control or simply criminalize funk suggest the continuation of a quest to ‘clean’ Brazilian popular music from excess, regardless of whether this quest is aesthetically motivated, such as in the case of bossa nova, or politically driven. These latest attempts at criminalization came in the context of the far-right president Jair Bolsonaro’s administration (2019-2022). A previously obscure figure in Brazilian politics, Bolsonaro emerged in the heels of the highly controversial impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff, promising to wipe corruption out of Brazil. He ran his campaign on an agenda fueled by violent speech against every single portion of the population that is not hegemonic, making horrendous declarations about Afro-Brazilians, women, the LGBTQ+ community, indigenous people, people with disabilities, you name it. This agenda was then put into practice during his administration: Amnesty International highlighted 32 government actions taken during Bolsonaro’s first 1,000 days in power that led to ‘serious human rights violations’ (‘Werneck and Rosa’). Much like elsewhere, the ascension of the far-right to the highest office of the nation emboldened an elite that had already been unhappy about the rise of the lowest economic classes in Brazil and their ability to occupy spaces—such as malls, airports, etc.—that had been within their reach. These changes

subject to repressive measures by authorities cracking down on the disorder of the downtown dance scene” (MacCann, “Samba and National Identity” 44).

in Brazilian socioeconomic daily life were possible to these citizens' increased purchasing power during the presidency of Luís Inácio Lula da Silva (2003-2006, 2007-2011, and 2023-present) (Oliven and Pinheiro-Machado 53). It is in this context that Anitta's 'Girl from Rio' and its music video were released; a context that makes her engagement with bossa nova via trap even more of a political gesture, as my analysis will show.

Brazilian funk is part of what Simone Pereira de Sá calls peripheric-pop music (*música pop-periférica*), a constellation of genres in Brazilian popular music that are typically viewed as 'commercial,' 'alienated,' 'of low quality,' and that are connected with working-class people from the periphery of large urban centers, or from the countryside. Other genres that fit into this category are, for instance, electronic *forró* from the Northeast, *tecnobrega* from the northern state of Pará, and *sertanejo*, originating from the interior of the state of São Paulo. Sá defines peripheric-pop music in opposition to the genre known as MPB (Brazilian Popular Music), generally regarded as 'modern,' 'sophisticated,' with elaborate lyrics and oftentimes politically engaged, such as in the case of the 1970s protest music. Bossa nova belongs to this latter group (*Música pop-periférica brasileira*, 'Pop(ular) e periférica'). Sá further defines the term peripheric-pop music, noting that by peripheric she does not mean belonging to a specific geography, but rather being fluid and relational in symbolic terms: '[t]rata-se, antes, de um uso estratégico [do termo], que percebe alianças provisórias e instáveis entre locais físicos e simbólicos, buscando apontar pra os atravessamentos, ambiguidades e, sobretudo, pluralidades de encenação do popular' 'it is rather a strategic use [of the term], which acknowledges temporary and unstable alliances between physical and symbolic spaces, aiming to highlight intersections, ambiguities and, above all, multiple ways of enacting the popular' ('Pop(ular) e periférica para quem?').

Sá further notes that it is necessary to recognize that the umbrella term peripheric-pop music does not refer to a homogeneous group of musical genres and that it is necessary to keep in mind the 'contradições e ambivalências que envolvem a sua presença e circulação no sistema midiático' 'contradictions and ambivalences that its presence and its circulation in the media ecosystem entail' ('Pop(ular) e periférica para quem?'). Similarly complex is the term 'pop,' which Sá uses as a 'termo

aglutinador de um campo de tensões, valores, disputas simbólicas, estimulando a reflexão em torno das dimensões estéticas, políticas, culturais e mercadológicas das manifestações culturais populares' 'an aggregating term for an arena of tensions, values, symbolic disputes, stimulating reflections around aesthetic, political, cultural, and market dimensions of popular culture manifestations.' (*Música pop-periférica brasileira*, 'Pop(ular) e periférica para quem?').

Complexity is also a characteristic of Trap BR, a subgenre of rap that evolves from a web of international and national relations among various genres and subgenres. As Tamiris Coutinho shows in her study of Brazilian trap, while U.S. trap emerges in the context of the Atlanta trap houses⁶, Brazilian trap borrows U.S. trap only in terms of sound initially, due to the language barrier. Later, the subgenre in question starts to borrow elements from other Brazilian genres, such as funk, a fusion that contributed to the popularization of Trap BR. As it evolved, Brazilian trap self-configured as a subgenre of rap perceived as a non-authentic musical form due to its relationship with the market and its lyrics focused on 'festas, romances, uso recreativo de drogas e exaltação de itens de marcas de luxo' 'parties, romantic relationships, recreational drug uses, and the exaltation of luxury brand goods' (120). Coutinho notes that, however, trap songs also focus on questions pertaining to identity, community, social inequality, and racism, for instance. (120). It is important to keep in mind, Tamiris notes, that Brazilian trap rappers are not oblivious to racism and classism in Brazilian society. These issues are expressed in their music in their own language, which includes the language of ostentation. 'Showing off' branded clothing and other consumer goods is a way to express that black and poor people also deserve the joy and the comfort that consumption can afford them (122).

It is from this fluid, dynamic, and complex perspective that I approach the analysis of Anitta's song and music video 'Girl from Rio:' neither revolutionizing critique disassociated from its commercial value and neoliberal 'philosophy,' nor a product of an alienated music industry with no valuable critique to social reality. I will analyze the song and the music video as situated within the disputes around taste in music and the social implications of these disputes in Brazilian lyric-musical discourse

⁶ Houses in the Atlanta area used to sell drugs.

(Costa 2012). I will consider 'Girl from Rio' as also a response to a position in the political discourse that attempts to control the excess of peripheral bodies and, by extension, of their cultural production. At the same time, it is necessary to consider this song and video as a performance within a certain narrative that Anitta as an artist—and all the structure around her in terms of production—has constructed for herself, not without contradictions, as Sá demonstrates in her analysis of Anitta's song and music video 'Vai, malandra!:' a 'slippery, contradictory, and ambivalent performance' that

nos remete novamente ao roteiro da diva malandra, ao encenar a *malandragem*⁷ no feminino, por meio de uma posição ambígua, que tal como o mito não subverte as regras do sistema, mas atua nos interstícios, tentando equilibrar-se entre o afeto—e *pink money*—da comunidade LGBTQ+ e a sua base de fãs conservadores, por exemplo; ou ampliando a visibilidade do funk para o *mainstream* a partir de negociações com a estética do pop. (*Música pop-periférica brasileira*, 'Vai, malandra!')

references again the script of the *malandra* diva, in that [this performance] enacts *malandragem* in the feminine, through an ambiguous position, which like the myth [of *malandragem*] does not subvert the rules of the system, but rather operates in the interstices, trying to keep the balance between the affection—and the pink money—of the LGBTQ+ community and her base of conservative fans, for instance; or broadening funk's visibility through negotiations with pop aesthetics.

In this way, my reading of 'Girl from Rio' proposes that the song and the music video challenge hegemonic views of a Brazil that attempt to 'contain' its cultural image nationally and abroad in terms of race, gender, and class on the one hand, while on

⁷ Sá notes that Anitta astutely recuperates the *malandro* character, now as female rather than male, in a song and music video that closes her so-called CheckMate project. In this project, she launches four music videos of songs that are collaborations with Spanish- and English-speaking artists, including Poo Bear (the bossa nova "Will I See You"), Alesso (the electro-pop "Is That for Me"), J. Balvin (the reggaeton ballad "Downtown"), and finally, Maejor, with whom she records the funk "Vai, malandra!" (*Música pop-periférica brasileira*, "Vai, malandra!")



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the other hand, continuing to build on Anitta’s narrative of a self-made woman who, as Sá describes, prides herself in ‘taking the culture’ of the periphery to mainstream spaces (*Música pop-periférica brasileira*, ‘Vai, malandra!’). This narrative, in turn, problematically engages with what Sarah Banet-Weiser calls popular feminism, which ‘. . . recognizes gender inequalities—though it finds mainly neoliberal solutions to address these inequalities’ and is ‘intimately connected to cultural economies, where to be ‘empowered’ is to be a better *economic* subject, not necessarily a better feminist subject’ (154-55). In the next section, I will dive into how containment and excess are represented in the music video and the song and how they respond to the backlash against certain segments of society both aesthetically and politically. I will then make some final considerations about the place of the particular song and performance analyzed here in light of Sá’s and Banet-Weiser’s ideas.

A tale of two Rios

The music video of ‘Girl from Rio’ opens with a 1950s vintage-looking Anita singing in front of a pastel image of a 1950s Rio de Janeiro that looks like a postcard from that era. The postcard-like background depicts the famous Sugar Loaf Mountain with its tramway, as Anitta appears to sit on the famous black and white tiles that adorn the sidewalk of Rio de Janeiro’s most famous beaches. This Rio is relatively ‘contained’ when compared to the ‘other’ Rio present in the video. From the clothes that Anitta wears to the way she interacts with the men who court her, everything in the introductory Rio seems, at least initially, meticulously ‘prim and proper,’ in contrast with the second Rio, where everything is excess. Both Rios are performances that, I argue, tell stories of race, class, and gender relations across time, using as a reference the history of Brazilian Popular Music.

The first aspect that calls attention in the music video is the way that Anitta and the other characters in these stories are dressed. In the opening scene she wears a stylized bathing suit that is modest and covers most of her body, including her arms. Her hair, which appears in a different color, red, is carefully done in 1950s style, not a single strand misplaced. She wears fancy jewelry and a hat that suggest a mid- to upper-class status, but her cat-eye sunglasses are the centerpiece of her accessories, so much so that there is a close-up of her straightening them up. The sunglasses are important

because they contrast with the ones that she wears in the second storyline: an oversized pair with a green frame whose shape references the Oakley Juliet model, the preferred one by Brazilian trap rappers, as shown by Coutinho (148). Whereas 1950s Anitta wears the sunglasses only briefly, contemporary Anitta wears hers for nearly the entire time, making the second storyline markedly situated in the Trap BR scene, with its emphasis on the accessory in question. This same Anitta, unlike the first one, wears a cut-out revealing bathing suit and flaunts her buttock as she takes off her mini-shorts and lies down to sunbathe, exposing her stretch marks. This gesture recalls the polemic music video of her song 'Vai, malandra,'⁸ which is referenced in the lyrics as we will see later in this analysis.

Another stark contrast between the two scenes is the presence of other people at the beach, their bodies, and how they interact with one another. Whereas in the 1950s beach Anitta is the only woman, courted by a number of men that seem to come out of nowhere, in the contemporary Rio, she is surrounded by many other people, who arrive on a bus with her. Although the second narrative features images of her more often than of the others, she is not the only person at the center of nearly every shot, like in the first scene. Similarly, these people appear to be her community, made up by men and women, rather than strangers, another possible contrasting reference to 'Girl from Ipanema,' which features men who observe this girl pass by. Unlike Anitta's perfect silhouette and the sculpted bodies of the men that surround her in the first storyline, the 'other' Rio is filled with bodies of all sizes and types. Similarly, if in the first narrative, Anitta and the men move in a choreographed way, while in the second narrative, everything is made to appear more spontaneous, improvised, and chaotic. People dance, barbecue, eat, play sports, swim, tan, flirt, kiss passionately, fight. In this beach, bodies of all sizes circulate freely with much confidence: guys with six-packs abdomens, heavier men, women with 'big curves' and stretch marks, as well as women with athletic bodies. In a sequence of full shots that show individual women posing for the camera, the accompaniment of the lyrics describing 'hot girls' suggests that the last person showed in these shots, a male who flirts with the camera, could

⁸ In this music video, there is a close-up of Anitta's buttock as she sits on a motorcycle wearing mini shorts that reveal stretch marks. At the time when the video was released, there was much debate on social media about whether the choice to show an "imperfect" body could be seen as a feminist gesture.



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be a member of the LGBTQ+ community. In this way, ‘girls from Rio’ are portrayed as diverse in their skin color, body type, and potentially also their sexuality. This is, thus, clearly a segment of the population with their ‘excesses’ that the conservative elite of 2020s Brazil would not want to show to the world.

In terms of social class, the second beach is clearly working-class, displaying an excess that is absent from the first beach presented in the video in many ways. The scenes were actually shot at Piscinão de Ramos, an artificial beach frequented by Rio’s lower-income citizens. There are coolers being taken out of the bus in which the people arrive, close-ups of large chunks of meat being cooked in improvised grills, and of beer foaming out of a can that has just been opened. There are also full shots of Anitta eating food piled up high on a plate placed on her lap; several close-ups of women’s buttocks, and of women—including Anitta—applying a homemade solution to bleach their body hair, a cheap and common practice in beach environments frequented by the working class. There are also close-ups of passionate kisses being exchanged, with tongues sticking out of one’s mouth and into someone else’s mouth. Bodies also move in ‘excessive’ ways as they dance and interact, especially in the case of Anitta, when she follows men go by, inverting the male gaze over the Girl from Ipanema, now a female gaze directed at the boys from Rio. In the first storyline, in contrast, Anitta is driven by a chauffeur, instead of arriving by bus. She is surrounded by men who elegantly dance ‘modest’ choreographies with her and who look at her more adoringly than with the lust we see in the other scene. A hyperreal filter adds to the intensity and sense of excess that is conveyed by the images and that sharply contrasts with the soft filter applied to the scenes that take place in the 1950s, romanticizing them.

The difference in filters not only conveys the contrast between excess and containment, present and past, but also between falsehood and truth. The narrative constructed in the music video presents this ‘prim and proper’ Rio as essentially fake. As Anitta sings to the tune of ‘Girl from Ipanema’ lines that certainly clash with the containment of bossa nova lyrics, speaking of ‘hot girls’ that ‘don’t look like models’ and have ‘big curves,’ two men move away two panels that make up the postcard landscape of the initial scene, to reveal what is portrayed in the video as the ‘real Rio.’

Building on this idea of a false narrative—'pra inglês ver,'⁹ as the Brazilian saying goes—that would have been weaved into songs like 'Girl from Ipanema,' of a contained, clean, 'sanitized' Rio, hints of excess from the contemporary Brazil 'spill' onto its 1950s rendition as the narrative progresses so as to suggest that this containment was always a contested one. There are subtle changes in the 1950s Rio scenes, particularly with respect to Anitta's body movements, and how she interacts with the men. At the beginning, she dances with four men, only one of whom is black. With the white men, she dances a few steps of ballroom dancing that resembles possibly a waltz. When the black man gets near her, however, there is much more body contact and the movements reference genres like samba, maxixe, or funk and trap themselves, with the two dance partners bringing their hips forward towards each other. Right here, the music video anticipates the 'real Rio,' inhabited by many more non-white men and women, suggesting a reclaiming of the African roots of samba that were deemed excessive as the genre was incorporated into bossa nova. As Anitta dances with these men, she sings the introductory lines to the tune of 'Girl from Ipanema:' 'Hot girls, where I'm from/We don't look like models/Tan lines, big curves/And the energy glows/You'll be falling in love with the girl from Rio.' Right at the end of these lines and immediately before the two panels open to reveal the 'real Rio,' Anitta winks as she looks directly at the camera. This wink, which is repeated at the end of the music video, signals to the viewer the playful cannibalization of 'Girl from Ipanema' to pave a different path in Brazilian popular music, as she attempts to conquer the American market not with 'sophistication,' as bossa nova did, but with peripheric-pop music. The cheekiness of the wink is complemented by one of the ad-libs inserted in the lyrics that, in Portuguese, like a message hidden from the 'gringos,' spells out her intention to enter the U.S. market and her knowledge of how it works: 'Vai, malandra! Gringo canta, todo mundo canta' 'Go, *malandra*! [If] gringos sing it, everyone will sing it.' This ad-lib references the previously mentioned song 'Vai, malandra!,' in which Anitta incorporates a female version of the *malandro* figure, closing her CheckMate project with the song in question. For Sá, in the context of the project,

⁹ Literally "for Englishmen to see," used in the sense of "to keep up appearances."

‘Vai, malandra!’ torna-se um título irresistivelmente sugestivo para o videoclipe que encerra o projeto CheckMate, no qual Anitta ‘retorna’ ao funk e ao território das favelas cariocas, depois de habitar diferentes cenários nos vídeos anteriores ao projeto. E a cantora faz jus ao título de Malandra, por subverter sutilmente—e não sem ambivalências e contradições—as narrativas essencialistas sobre as periferias, sobre o lugar da mulher e do funk no universo da música pop’ (*Música pop-periférica brasileira*, ‘Os feats de Anitta’).

‘Vai, malandra!’ becomes an irresistibly suggestive title for the music video that closes the CheckMate project, in which Anitta ‘returns’ to funk and to Rio de Janeiro slums after inhabiting different spaces in the previous music videos of the project. And the singer does justice to the title of *Malandra*, for subtly subverting—and not without ambivalence and contradiction—essentialist narratives about the periphery, about the place of women and of funk in the universe of pop music.

It seems to me that Anitta utilizes a similar strategy in ‘Girl from Rio’: the *malandra* of her previous song is actually inside the ‘prim and proper’ girl that sings to the tune of ‘Girl from Ipanema’ at the beginning. She winks at us so as to say: ‘I know this fancy Rio is a narrative that excludes others. Let me show you a version of Rio that does not feature in it and that has always existed. And I don’t deny I am seeking to make money in the process. Why shouldn’t I?’

The deconstruction of the ‘clean’ Brazil of the 1950s continues as her interactions with the men change. First, the number of men increases significantly, with them lining up or surrounding her while holding red hearts, suggestive of their romantic intentions. But unlike the girl from Ipanema, who is observed by men, the male gaze here is turned around figuratively: the men pursuing 1950s Anitta also gaze at her, lovingly, but she is the one in control, ‘testing’ them out and discarding them as she sees fit, as she sings ‘I just had to leave another lover/‘cuz they couldn’t handle my persona.’ The men, rather than the girl, are now the sort of faceless object to be ‘consumed,’ so to speak. This is a gesture that mirrors the attitude of the contemporary Anitta from the other narrative, who ‘eats the men up’ with her gaze, removing her sunglasses to take a better look as *they* pass by. It is suggested, in both storylines, that,



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unlike the gentlemen in 'Girl from Ipanema,' she is not just platonically contemplating a romantic relationship. In the 1950s plot, she goes from man to man, simply discarding them and never finding anyone in particular to stay with. In the narrative that takes place in contemporary Brazil, she is not there for platonic love. She is there for kissing and admiring their figure. She ends both storylines in the same position, sitting on the 'fake' and on the 'real' beach by herself, a scene to which I will return below.

Excess continues to seep into the 1950s scene not just in terms of the number of men who court her, in what could be a reference to Madonna's iconic music video for the song 'Material Girl' (1985), in which she is in the middle of several men distributed up and down a flight of stairs. As the story progresses, the men also move closer and closer to Anitta, no longer holding the hearts in a lovingly manner, but rather seeming as if they are morphing into the people that we see on the other beach in terms of their behavior. It is almost as if they get curious about this girl that looks like she is one thing (the girl from Ipanema), but who is actually another, more interesting one (the girl from Rio). Symbolically, when the camera zooms into Anitta's image at the end of this scene, she is surrounded by black men, with the white men excluded from the frame, a gesture that can be read as a reclaiming of the racial origins of samba. Indeed, Anitta's demeanor also changes as she pulls the men's faces for a kiss and incorporates a dance move that consists of spreading her legs while sitting down, referencing dance moves from funk and trap.

A similar 'contamination' of bossa nova by trap is suggested by the juxtaposition between excess and containment that extends to how image and sound are paired up. Initially clearly separated, with the tune to 'Girl from Ipanema' playing during scenes that take place in the 1950s, and the trap beat serving as the soundtrack for the contemporary scenes, bossa nova and trap start to mix, with the trap beat being played during the vintage storyline, particularly in the scenes when the dynamic between Anitta and the men changes, as described above. There are a couple of moments when the juxtaposition is reversed, however. First, around time stamp 1:16, when Anitta is watching the men go by, inverting the male gaze from Gilberto's original song ('Olha que coisa mais linda/Mais cheia de graça/É ela menina que vem

e que passa/Num doce balanço a caminho do mar'¹⁰). The second time occurs at the very end of the video, when Anitta sits on the beach in the exact same position as the Anitta from the 1950s and the full shot of her in the present cuts to a full shot of her in the past, when she winks at the camera, as I mentioned before. These two changes in the juxtaposition are significant, for they function as a kind of 'see what I did there?' in that Anitta cannibalizes¹¹ a song about the male gaze that objectifies the girl from Ipanema and that epitomizes bossa nova's entry into the U.S. market by 'sophisticating' samba through the incorporation of American jazz, with all the racial, class, and gender implications of this process. The result of this cannibalization is a song that flips the male gaze over while attempting to enter the U.S. market by 'demoralizing' bossa nova through the incorporation of American trap. As a result, many of the racial, class, and gender dynamics implied by bossa nova and openly exposed by the far-right in the early 2020s are questioned here.

Final thoughts

While I agree with previous analyses of this music video and song that Anitta capitalizes on problematic U.S. views of Latines to enter the U.S. market (Moreira, 'Rhetoric of Authentic Hybridity,' 41) and that digital fatigue takes away the power of the song's and video's original message when it comes to foreign audiences (Goldschmidt 514), I contend that a reading of these two cultural products from the perspective of the history of Brazilian popular music and the recent national

¹⁰ Literally, "look what a pretty thing/So full of grace/It's her, the girl who come and passes by/in a sweet sway walking towards the ocean." In the English version: "Tall and tan and young and lovely/The girl from Ipanema goes walking/And when she passes/Each one she passes goes "ah" ("Girl from Ipanema").

¹¹ The term was established by modernist Brazilian writers of the 1920s, who promoted the idea of cultural cannibalization: a mixing of cultural references so as to create something original, truly Brazilian, in opposition to European literary models of the time. This concept is revisited in music by the Tropicália movement in the 1960s, led by Caetano Velos and Gilberto Gil. In this instance, cultural cannibalism took the form of incorporating, among other seemingly opposites, foreign and national cultural references in response to disputes around the incorporation of rock into Brazilian popular music as a symbol of Yankee imperialism. Veloso and Gil proposed to mix not only rock and national rhythms such as samba, but also other styles such as rumba, cumbia, and the beat of Afro-Brazilian religious music as an antidote to what they perceived as authoritarian essentialism in popular music promoted by the Brazilian Left.

challenges to democracy that Brazil has faced can illuminate other aspects of Anitta's social critique that should not be ignored. As shown in my analysis, Anitta's 'Girl from Rio' and its music video bring to the fore aspects of Brazilian identity that the Brazilian elite of the 1950s and many far-right supporters of 2020s Brazil wish to hide or simply eliminate. These aspects comprise gender, race, and social class issues that reflect disputes around who Brazil is as a country versus the image that conservative-leaning forces have historically attempted to construct.

At the same time, it is important to note that, as pointed out in the previously quoted lines by Simon Frith, music is 'both performance and story' and that it is as performance that we should understand Anitta's song and music video in question. It does not escape me the fact that Anitta promotes body positivity here while admittedly having gone through several plastic surgery and other procedures that aim to sculpt her body and her face, thus surrendering to what Naomi Wolf calls beauty pornography:

In a crossover of imagery in the 1980s, the conventions of high-class pornography photography, such as *Playboy's*, began to be used generally to sell products to women. This made the beauty thinking that followed crucially different from all that had preceded it. Seeing a face anticipating orgasm, even if it is staged, is a powerful sell: In the absence of other sexual images, many women came to believe that they must have that face, that body, to achieve that ecstasy. (Wolf 135).

Beauty pornography also comes to play in other aspects of Anitta's work, such as the music video for the song 'Envolver' (2022), which has elements of soft porn. Unlike Anitta, who has fit a certain profile (light-skinned brown) and has taken steps to eliminate any possibility of showing curves that are 'too big' for the music industry, many other Brazilian *funkeiras* and rappers, of darker complexion and bigger curves have not attained her level of success.

Another point of contention is the fact that a song and music video such as 'Girl from Ipanema,' made for the U.S. market, feeds Anitta's narrative of success of a girl who came from Honório Gurgel and is now 'making it,' representing *favela* in the world



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stage (Sá, *Música pop-periférica brasileira*, ‘Anitta no(s) Rock in Rio’). As Sá pointed out in her analysis of ‘Vai, malandra!,’ ‘. . . é preciso reconhecer que Anitta se tornou uma mediadora fundamental, levando o funk para espaços de visibilidade muito importantes internacionalmente. Porém sem esquecer da multiplicidade de vozes e performances do funk não representadas pela performance de Anitta. . .’¹² (*Música pop-periférica brasileira*, ‘Vai, malandra!’). In sum, and once again in agreement with Sá’s astute assessment about Anitta’s work, the song and music video analyzed here are part of a career and a ‘narrative of self’ informed by other elements beyond the music per se and that is ultimately, complex: neither completely disengaged from nor independent of socioeconomic issues, for better or for worse.

¹² ‘. . . it is necessary to recognize that Anitta became a fundamental [cultural] mediator, bringing visibility to funk in internationally important spaces. However, we must not forget the multiplicity of funk voices and performances that are not represented by Anitta’s performance.’



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