DIAGONAL
Journal of the Center for Iberian and Latin American Music
VOLUME 6 2010

Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha!

Carlos Palombini

In what follows I shall examine some documents concerning "Gargalhada", phonogram 108,077 (Brazilian Odeon), performed by self-designated *crioulo* Eduardo das Neves (1874–1919), which I shall consider in its relations to African American recording artist George W. Johnson's (1846–1914) "Laughing Song", the best-selling item of the early recording industry, before I conclude with some remarks on the narratives where such relations might fit. I first came into contact with "Gargalhada" in 1963 shortly before the death of my Italian great-grandfather, in whose collection it figured as an oddity amid operatic arias and German brass marches (his wife was of German ancestry).

> In this century of progress, in this calculating land
> the much talked-about picking up the kettle has had a great success.
> In this land of progress, in this calculating land
> the much talked-about picking up the kettle has had a great success.
>
> The priest picks up the captain's, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha!
> and the latter picks up his vicar's, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha!
> and the vicar picks up the ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha!
> Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha! Everyone picks up the kettle!
>
> The poor chap who only talks about the mass and the breviary
> wishes to climb and is picking up the vicar's kettle. (*Bis*)

Everyone picks up the kettle, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha!
The bishop picks up the vicar's, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha!
Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha! Everyone picks up! Everyone picks up! Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha!
Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha! Everyone picks up the kettle, my god! Everyone!

The bishop who goes round saying that Confirmation is his ideal
picks up the kettle by its bottom, precisely his cardinal's.
The bishop who travels everywhere saying that Confirmation is his ideal
picks up the kettle by its bottom, precisely the cardinal's.

Everyone picks up the kettle, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha!
The bishop picks up the captain's, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha!
Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha! Everyone picks up the kettle, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha!
Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha!

The vicar who spells the sacred law saying the thesis
is picking up the kettle of the bishop of the diocese.
The vicar who sustains the sacred law in a good thesis
is picking up the kettle of the bishop of the diocese.

Everyone picks up the kettle, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha!
The most powerful man, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha!
The soldier also picks up, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha!
the lieutenant's kettle, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha!
Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha! Ha, ha, ha, ha! Everyone picks up the kettle! Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha!

Already anachronistic in the mid sixties, the expression "to pick up the kettle" alludes to the lawyer José Gomes Pinheiro Machado who fought for the establishment and the consolidation of the Brazilian Republic, of which he became a senator, representing the state of Rio Grande do Sul from 1890 to his assassination

in 1915. In *O Rio de Janeiro do meu tempo* (1938), Luiz Edmundo describes his political role as the *éminence grise* of the Old Republic:

> In the beginning of the century Pinheiro Machado rules politics. And this he does as no one ever did. [...] He is the hobgoblin of the high thatches of politics. No one dares to contradict his ideas, his desires and even his capricious whims. The entire press is always licking the sole of his shoes.[1]

And this is precisely what the expression "to pick up someone's kettle" means: "to lick their boots"

Having listened to "Gargalhada" since I was six, I discovered two years ago that its music and laughter had been created and recorded by George W. Johnson in the beginning of the early age of commercial sound recordings, that is, from early in 1890[2] until around 1905, when its perceived racism made it unacceptable to listeners in the US.[3] Not only that, music and words had been copyrighted by Johnson under the title "The Laughing Song" in 1894.

Although Tim Brooks has recently unearthed much biographic information concerning Johnson,[4] very little is known about Neves, and contemporary research on him has tended to assert the primacy of ideology over biography.[5] Examination

---

[1] Luiz Edmundo (de Melo Pereira da Costa), *O Rio de Janeiro do meu tempo* (Rio de Janeiro, Imprensa Nacional, 1938): v. 3, 1065.

[2] See Tim Brooks, "George W. Johnson, the First Black Recording Artist", *Lost Sounds: Blacks and the Birth of the Recording Industry* (Urbana and Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 2004): 13–72, at 30.

[3] See Brooks, op. cit., 66.

[4] See Brooks, op. cit.

[5] See: Martha Abreu, "Eduardo das Neves (1874–1919): histórias de um crioulo malandro", in Denise Pini Rosalem da Fonseca (ed.), *Resistência e inclusão: história, cultura, educação e cidadania afro-descendentes* (Rio de Janeiro, Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio de Janeiro and Consulado Geral dos Estados Unidos, 2003): v. 1, 73–87; Uliana Dias Campos Ferlim, "A polifonia das modinhas: diversidade e tensões musicais no Rio de Janeiro na passagem do século XIX ao XX", Campinas, Universidade Estadual de Campinas, department of History, master's thesis, 2006, <libdigi.unicamp.br/document/?code=vtls000376567> (15 January 2010).

of the Casa Edison extant catalogues[6] nevertheless shows that "Gargalhada" appears in 1902, 1915, 1918, 1919, 1920, 1924 and 1926, its absence in 1913 and 1914 being explained by the fact that only supplements to these catalogues are accessible to us. However, because the label on the reverse side of my disc is the Brazilian Flag label celebrating the opening of the first record plant in South America late in 1912, and because Franceschi tells that this label was applied in the earlier half of 1913 to repressings of material recorded before 1912,[7] we know that "Gargalhada" was available in 1913.

Recording

So far as the dating of mechanical recordings is concerned, the *Discografia brasileira* provides estimates for entire series only, not for individual phonograms. Thus series 108,000 would have been recorded from 1907 to 1912, though estimates by other authors vary slightly. Within series 108,000, phonogram 108,077 occupies the eighth position amid a run of fifteen or sixteen recordings by Neves.[8] Now, the precise dates when events narrated in two of these songs took place are easily available: the warship *Aquidabã* (phonogram 108,079) exploded shortly before 11:00 pm on 21 January 1906; the "Rio stranglers" (phonogram 108,084) murdered two teenage boys in the night between 14 and 15 October 1906.[9] And

[6] Presented on CD-ROM by Humberto Franceschi in *A Casa Edison e seu tempo*, Rio de Janeiro, Sarapuí, 2002 (9 CDs).

[7] See: Humberto Franceschi, *A Casa Edison e seu tempo* (Rio de Janeiro, Sarapuí, 2002): 204; Franceschi, *Registro sonoro por meios mecânicos no Brasil* (Rio de Janeiro, Studio HMF, 1984): 75.

[8] This group of phonograms is dated as: from 1904–1912 by Ary Vasconcelos in *Panorama da música popular brasileira* (São Paulo, Martins, 1964): v. 1, 191; from 1906–1912 by Vasconcelos in *Panorama da música popular brasileira na* belle époque (Rio de Janeiro, Sant'Anna, 1977): 284; 1906–1909, id., ibid., p. 332; from 1907 by Ricardo Cravo Albin in "Eduardo das Neves", *Dicionário Cravo Albin da música popular brasileira* (Rio de Janeiro, Paracatu, 2006): 526 and 1032–33 (at 1032); from 1906 by Humberto Franceschi in a telephone interview with the author, 23 and 24 May, and 14 July, 2008.

[9] On this crime, see: Abílio Soares Pinheiro, *Os estranguladores do Rio ou o crime da Rua da Carioca* (Rio de Janeiro, Miotto); Orestes Barbosa, *Ban-ban-ban!* (Rio de Janeiro, Benjamim Costallat e

since Neves took pride in singing events as soon as they happened,[10] we can assume that this particular run was recorded no later than in mid 1907.

Offspring

We now know when "Gargalhada" was recorded and when it was sold. But there is still something we need to take into account. The same music and/or a similar laughter appeared in other recordings too, among which:

- "Febre amarela", phonogram Odeon 40,493 (1904–1907), with Geraldo Magalhães (same music, similar laughter), on the 1913 catalogue;
- "A vacina obrigatória", phonogram Odeon 40,169 (1904–1907), with Mário Pinheiro (same music, no laughter), on the 1915, 1918 and 1919 catalogues;
- "A risada", phonogram Odeon 40,631 (1904–1907), with Edmundo André (different music, similar laughter), on the 1913 and 1918 catalogues;
- "As eleições de Piancó", phonogram Odeon 108,760 (1907–1912), with Eduardo das Neves (different music, similar laughter), on the 1913 and 1918 catalogues;

Since we know the number of phonograms in each particular series and since we have an estimate for the period in which these series were recorded, we can roughly estimate the year when each recording was made. Thus, "Febre amarela" —

Miccolis, 1923): 97–102; Edigar de Alencar, *O carnaval carioca através da música* (Rio de Janeiro, Francisco Alves, INL and MEC, 1979): v. 3, 100; Valêncio Xavier, "Os estranguladores da Fé em Deus: os crimes de Rocca e Carletto", *Crimes à moda antiga* (São Paulo, Publifolha): 6–25; Uliana Dias Campos Ferlim, "A polifonia das modinhas: diversidade e tensões musicais no Rio de Janeiro na passagem do século XIX ao XX", Campinas, Universidade Estadual de Campinas, department of History, master's thesis, 2006, <libdigi.unicamp.br/document/?code=vtls000376567> (15 January 2010), pp 76–77; and Ana Gomes Porto, "Novelas sangrentas: literatura de crime no Brasil (1870–1920)", Campinas, Unicamp, Universidade Estadual de Campinas, department of History, doctoral dissertation, 2009, <libdigi.unicamp.br/document/?code=000436292> (16 January 2010), pp 176–202.

[10] Eduardo das Neves, *Mysterios do violão: grandioso e extraordinario repertorio de modinhas brasileiras* (Rio de Janeiro, Quaresma): 4; Ary Vasconcelos, *Panorama da música popular brasileira* (São Paulo, Martins, 1964): v. 1, 45; José Ramos Tinhorão, *Música popular: os sons que vêm da rua* (Rio de Janeiro, Edições Tinhorão, 1976): 40–41.

phonogram 40,493 in a series that was probably recorded between 1904 and 1907 and runs from 40,000 to 40,777 — would have been recorded in 1906, "A vacina obrigatória" in 1904, "A risada" in 1907 and "As eleições de Piancó" in 1912. Combining all this information, we infer that the music and/or laughter that "Gargalhada" appropriated to itself were available from Casa Edison under various guises for the entire first quarter of the twentieth century, as shown in the table below (where the first row from top to bottom represents "A gargalhada" or "Gargalhada", the second "Febre amarela", the third "A vacina obrigatória", the fourth "A risada" and the fifth "As eleições de Piancó").

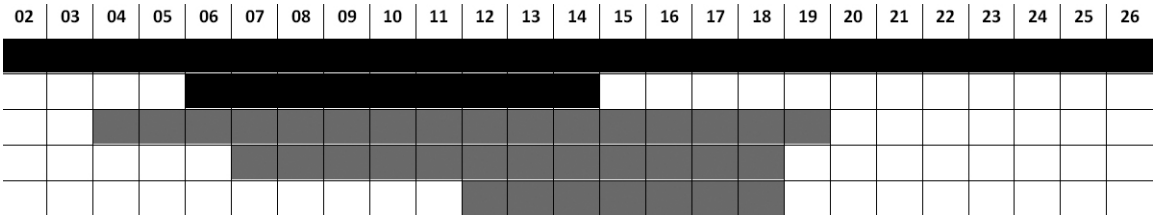

Table 1: Brazilian recordings featuring the *gargalhada* (1902-1926).

Narratives

I do not need to tell you how excited I was when I discovered that, for a quarter of a century, Brazilians bought coon song for *lundum*, that archetype of Afro-Brazilian authenticity. But does my finding contribute to undermine the increasingly untenable nationalist/miscegenationist paradigm? Not a whit, since it could easily be argued that "Gargalhada" is either a mislabelled product or a bad *lundum*, one that shows the pernicious effects the culture industry has exerted upon otherwise authentic Brazilian popular music. Could my finding then play into the hands of the rising populist pan-African diasporic model? Very likely, yes. To escape both traps, I shall resort to an idea presented by Gerard Béhague in 2002.

Appropriation

In "Bridging South America and the United States in Black Music Research" Béhague states that:

> Although there may indeed be some commonalities across multiracial societies in the Americas, there are certain fundamental differences, such as the concept of hypodescent (the one-drop rule) as the main racial line of demarcation in the United States versus the more fluid notion of miscegenation applied in very subtle ways throughout the Latin continent. The main result of these differences is a much more pronounced sense of ambiguity of self-racial identity in Latin America. The obvious consequences of such ambiguity is the blurring boundaries and borders of musical traditions, which has meant a much deeper integration (and sometimes even appropriation) of Afro-American musics in Latin-American contexts.[11]

Although this may seem quite evident, it seems to me that its implications have not yet been fully grasped. Recognition of miscegenation as an instrument of white

[11] Gerard Béhague, "Bridging South America and the United States in Black Music Research", Black Music Research Journal 22 (1): 1–11, 2002.

(whatever this may mean) domination does not entail the possibility or desirability of the eradication of such mystique from history, since the culture of miscegenation (miscegenation as culture) has exerted and continues to exert its power on people of all colours.

Appropiracy

According to Ingebord Harer, "Kerry Mills' 'At a Georgia Camp Meeting', translated into German, became one of the most popular pieces in Germany and Austria, presumably contributing to the dissemination of cakewalk (music) in the German-speaking countries."[12] Mill's cakewalk was translated into Brazilian Portuguese too, as evinced by the following phonograms:

- "Cake walk", phonogram Odeon 40,057 (1904–1907), with Banda da Casa Edison;
- "At a Georgia Camp Meeting", phonogram Odeon 40,115 (1904–1907), with Banda do Corpo de Bombeiros;
- "Cake walk", phonogram Odeon 40,210 (1904–1907), with Artur Camilo (piano);
- "Cake walk", phonogram Odeon 10,015 (1907–1913), with Banda da Casa Edison;
- "O mulato de arrelia", phonogram Victor 98,720 (1908–1912), with J.G. Leonardo (voice) and band.

What do we notice then? When "The Laughing Song" becomes "Gargalhada", a song in which a black man makes fun of himself according to white stereotypes (that is, a coon song), becomes a song in which a *crioulo* makes fun of the mostly white upper classes (and this is termed, with or without reason, a *lundum*). When "At a Georgia Camp Meeting" becomes "O mulato de arrelia", a genre in which black slaves mocked the behaviour of their white owners (that is, a cakewalk) becomes a song in

[12] Ingeborg Harer, "Ragtime", in Mellonee V. Burnim and Portia K. Maultsby (eds), *African American Music: An Introduction* (New York and London, Routledge): 127–144, at 140.

which a black or white singer impersonates the bravado of a black suburbanite in the Europeanized capital of the nation. And we can only imagine what precisely the singing of "The Laughing Song" meant to George Washington Johnson or that of "Gargalhada" to Eduardo das Neves in personal, subjective ways.

Circulation

Further along this line of reasoning, my German great-grandmother listened to what when she heard — if she ever did — "At a Georgia Camp Meeting" translated into German on disc? And what did my Italian great-grandfather hear when he played "Gargalhada" on his Victrola? A ferocious satire on fellow politicians (as I should like to believe)? An expression of black pride (as some recent Brazilian and North American literature would like us to)? The echo of some distant Neapolitan song, which the sirocco might have blown northeast from Africa? Perhaps these images from Luchino Visconti's *Death in Venice* [01:31:23–01:33:54] might argue in favour of the latter hypothesis.