

## ***River of Tears: Country Music, Memory, and Modernity in Brazil* by Alexander Sebastian Dent**

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*River of Tears: Country Music, Memory, and Modernity in Brazil* is an ethnography of late 20<sup>th</sup> to early 21<sup>st</sup> century Central-Southern Brazilian rural music and culture. Since 1998, the George Washington University anthropologist Alexander Sebastian Dent has studied rural music forms from the state of São Paulo, which includes *música sertaneja* (backlands music), a commercialized rural form, and *música caipira* (hick music), a more traditional form. Despite country music's popularity within Brazil, until now it has received little scholarly attention. *River of Tears* explores tensions and exchanges between *música sertaneja* and *música caipira* and the genre's broader cultural implications as Brazil transitioned from dictatorship to a period of neoliberal reform. In the course of political transformations, country music practitioners have engaged in a back and forth between modernity and an imagined romantic past; their music mediates neoliberal experience and challenges hegemonic ideologies of national identity. Dent argues that in addition to challenging durable notions of Brazilian national identity expressed in genres such as samba, country music reflects anxieties about modernity and urban migration. Scholars of Brazilian popular culture will find the text useful for better understanding rural and urban Brazil; non-Brazilianists will be interested in Dent's careful analysis of genre as well as the interplay between popular culture and neoliberalism.

Throughout the ethnography, Dent treats Brazilian neoliberalism as a phenomenon characterized by combined emphasis on change and continuity. Intriguingly, he posits that commercial transnationalism has affected rural public culture by eliciting both an outward creative projection and inward absorption (Dent 2009, 238). The five-chapter book examines Brazilian country music practitioners as they define themselves in terms of their rural origins while critiquing an inevitable urban life. In the context of the overall argument, chapters three and four offer the most powerful scholarly contributions.

Chapter three, “Mixture, Sadness, and Intimacy in the Brazilian Musical Field,” engages literature addressing Brazilian musical ideology, which upholds the nationalist notion of Brazil as a social mixture (racially, culturally, etc.): “Music offers a kind of rationalization for social life, as aspects of social life come to make musical sense” (85). Dent demonstrates that rural music shares some aspects of this nationalist music ideology, but argues that country music practitioners manage and reflect on the national preoccupation with mixture in ways that are often more earnest and “intimate” than one finds in MPB (popular Brazilian music). The result is that country music disrupts mainstream conceptions of *brasilidade* (Brazilian-ness). Significantly, country music lacks the ironic distancing that often attends “mixture”—sometimes described as “cultural cannibalism”—characteristic of some 20<sup>th</sup> century Brazilian art and MPB subgenres such as 1960s *tropicália*. Country music also challenges gender norms: while samba lyrics frequently bemoan the loss of a woman they do so in an upbeat tempo allowing for the preservation of stoic masculinity. In contrast, rural music is melancholy, expressively putting men’s delicate sensitivity on public display (women are almost never singers in Brazilian country music) as they mourn the loss of women and country life.

The fourth chapter of *River of Tears*, “Hick Dialogics: Experiencing the Play of Rural Genres,” takes up a key aspect of performance theory in order to develop its argument. Dent analyzes the exchange between *música sertaneja* and *música caipira*, and in so doing argues that we must reevaluate Richard Bauman’s conception of genre as an orienting framework for a communicative event’s production and reception (Bauman 2001). According to Dent, Bauman’s definition of genre is incomplete and prevents us from fully assessing a performance’s impact. Dent posits that culture producers’ genre boundary play tells us that what a genre is *not* is just as important as what it *is* (cf. Bauman 2001; Dent 2009, 114). Although *música sertaneja* and *música caipira* both belong to the broader category of Brazilian country music, Dent demonstrates that at times the producers of each will position themselves in opposition or alliance with each other. Such inter-generic activity means that practitioners sometimes aim to resemble other musical genres and sometimes try to create distance. In so doing they constantly monitor what is going on at a genre’s boundaries to determine the success of a communicative event or performance. Dent finds that negotiating generic boundaries is crucial to how the two rural genres have developed as they engage different aspects of social life like race and social class. One suspects that genre boundaries are monitored with varying degrees of vigilance in different “fields of cultural production” (Bourdieu

1993a, 1993b) because there are different social consequences at stake in genre boundary play. For example, knowing when to talk like a hick/caipira can be a powerful means for commenting on modernity.

The book's other chapters examine country music practices—how Brazilians “sing the countryside into existence” (Dent 40), the popular brother *dupla* (twosome) performance form, circulation, evocation of “natural” emotions, as well as transnational music exchange—and how these practices negotiate neoliberalism with nostalgia for an imagined Brazilian country past and the presumed ill effects of urbanization. In sum, Dent finds in country music production a simultaneous international outreach and a modernizing of the rural sound that manages to preserve a sense of loss for the past and the countryside.

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