

A Song of Redeeming Love

By Lydia Hall

People of all ages gather in the streets to mingle drums and souls. The connection between the members of Olodum, an Afro-Brazilian percussion band composed of over two hundred members, burns and ripples through their bodies, from the drums through their arms to the smiles across their faces. The incredible pounding shakes the foundations of Rio de Janeiro. People lean out from their homes, pile into the streets, press against the policemen holding them back from the American singer traipsing through the slums of Dona Marta.

When I heard Olodum and Michael Jackson together I was hooked. After a few hours of research into both the band and the singer with the song on repeat, I remembered that this wasn't the only protest song I was assigned to listen to for my Humanities of Latin America class. I shelved my obsession and finished the semester. But I couldn't shake the music from my mind.

In 1996 Michael Jackson took a trip to Brazil and filmed the music video for his single, "They Don't Care About Us," a pulsing anti-racism anthem that has since been used in Black Lives Matter protests. *Tell me what has become of my rights/Am I invisible 'cause you ignore me?* The burning sense of injustice that the song communicates scraped my senses raw. My view of the world was cracked like a coconut against concrete; awe and anger bled in together.

First, awe. The video opens with a helicopter shot rising towards Mount Corcovado and the statue of *Cristo Redentor*. Sunlight streams in from the east; morning. And with morning comes hope.

That Christ is the first image in the song is appropriate; the name "Olodum" stems from a Yoruba word meaning "Greatest God," honoring the Creator of all things good. Watching the

strong bodies hammering on their drums I wish that I could be there to feel the music rattle my prejudice right out of my bones. To be a part of the blending where genius is born. To praise the Greatest God. To join this musical redemption.

And then, anger. *All I wanna say is that/ They don't really care about us.* Sometimes I want to grab my friends by the shoulders, dig my fingers into them so they can feel the physical pressure of how much I love them and say, I care. I want you here, I need you here, stay. But I can't pretend I've never hurt someone. To my shame and chagrin, I've hurt everyone I've ever loved, people I'll never see again, and people I've never met. Too often we hurt each other without thinking, without caring. The sunrise that lights the face of Christ also lights Sugarloaf Mountain in the bay, named "sugarloaf" for that lucrative product of slavery.

As I listen to Michael's forceful voice, I am grateful for the mix of shame and determination that runs through me. Every humanities class increases my awareness of beauty, and my awareness of ugliness, but I have to believe that learning about and creating art is the way to humanity's redemption. I have to believe that this music can move all of us, as it moved me.

Once notorious for drug activity, Dona Marta's redemption began with the Olodum/Michael Jackson collaboration highlighting the slum's social inequity. The former shanty town is now a model for social development. A bronze statue of Jackson, installed there after the singer's death, seems to celebrate this shift; it captures a moment of triumph, arms spread wide, head tipped upward, exulting.

High above the rooftops, another pair of arms reaches outward. Simultaneously symbolizing the cross and the resurrection, *Cristo Redentor* waits to embrace the city with outstretched hands. To sing with us. To forgive us of our sins.

The urge to create beauty and meaning, to expose the intimate inner workings of our minds and hearts and spirits and bodies, is the essence of humanity (singular) and humanities (plural), yet it is also our deific birthright. Humanities are the divinity of mankind, the record of our inheritance from God. If God is fond of beetles and stars enough to make billions of them, he must be fond of us, his foolishly creative children. He must smile when we stomp our feet and clap our hands and raise our voices as one. He gave us this gift to create, and we have lived by it for as long as we have walked this green earth; leaving poems, music, statues, libraries, paintings, handprints, footprints behind for our children to follow. We will leave marks too, but we are those children. We have a responsibility to learn about Sugarloaf and *Cristo Redentor*, Michael Jackson and Olodum, the messy pieces of humankind's attempts at creation, our stumbling towards unity, our reckless divisions, our hopeful proclamations, our songs of redeeming love.

I hit repeat again and Michael's voice jumps from the speakers with a Portuguese chorus chanting behind him. We didn't make one kind of music; we made many. We mix, remix, add and subtract, cover and share. We turn up the music so loud we can't see our differences, only feel the drumbeat in our hearts thumping, pulsing, uniting us. *They don't really care about us*, but we can care about each other.