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Black Ethnomusicology as Interdisciplinary Research

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Good morning.

I am truly delighted and honored to be a part of this groundbreaking conference, in which we focus our give attention to the voices of scholars and artists who look like us, and who are intentional about the performance, study, and memorialization of our music and music-making cultures.

I want to thank Prof. Pedro Fernando Acosta de Rosa for the invitation. I want thank Paulo Martins de França Arapuá for all your help and patience. It has been a joy to work with you both, and I hope and expect that this is just the beginning of our collaborations.

I call my presentation “Black Ethnomusicology as Interdisciplinary Research”

By interdisciplinary, I mean, crossing into other disciplines besides ethnomusicology. I am arguing that our research can be enhanced when we approach our ethnomusicological inquiry with an interdisciplinary framework.

This presentation, I aim to:

1. Tell you a bit more about my academic background and research orientation--my graduate study in preparation, or my work as a professor, and my work in the field today.
2. Surveying Black Ethnomusicology in the United States of America.

3. I want to introduce you all to my new book *The Platinum Age of Gospel* set to be released November 17, 2026. This will help to show how I understand the ethnomusicological study of gospel music to always, already be an interdisciplinary enterprise.
4. Surveying Black Gospel Music Studies
5. And then finally, I'll share some concluding thoughts.

1. Who I Am

[slide] Now, in case you can't tell, I am a black woman. I was born and raised in the United States of America, I'm also a singer, musician, and a songwriter. I am an ordained Christian minister, and I bring all of those aspects of myself to my study of black popular music, and especially gospel music—the music of black Christianity.

I grew up in Houston, Texas, where I was a singer and musician in my local church, where I played sang, played piano, I directed choirs.

And then I went to college and studied computer science. I worked in systems analysis for a while before enrolling in a master of divinity program at Yale Divinity School, and that's where I learned about ethnomusicology and began to envision a career in which I could study and teach gospel music.

My PhD is in African and African American studies with religion as my primary field and ethnomusicology as my secondary.

From there, I went on to teach at Yale University, Brown University, and at Harvard for 4 years. I was recently promoted to associate professor.

2. Surveying Black Ethnomusicology

I am a faculty member in the Music Department at Harvard, in the ethnomusicology program.

So what is ethnomusicology?

America's flagship academic organization dedicated to ethnomusicology, defines ethnomusicology in this way: "**Ethnomusicology is the study of music in its social and cultural contexts**. Ethnomusicologists examine music as a social process in order to understand what music is and what it means to its practitioners and audiences."[1]

I want to suggest that there are two ways to think of ethnomusicology. [slide] One way is to define ethnomusicology is by the type of music to be studied. And the other way is to define ethnomusicology by the research methods, and theoretical frameworks directing the study of music.

So if I'm defining ethnomusicology by the communities of music makers that I'm studying, then I would say that ethno is the study of musics and the music-making cultures that fall outside of the Western art music canon. In this case, the West is Europe and its wealthy child countries. That is, all the musics excluding, what we tend to call classical music in the United States, and any derivatives of European art music. And then the other way to define it is to think of ethnomusicology as the anthropological study of music and musical cultures.

Whereas musicology is the study of art music of the West, and historical study of music-making communities.

[1] "About SEM - Society for Ethnomusicology," accessed June 18, 2026, https://www.ethnomusicology.org/page/About_SEM.

In the United States today, there are many instances in which musicology and ethnomusicology are converging, or coming back together, in academia.

In the United States, Academic pursuits are largely shared and driven through gatherings of professional organizations such as SEM or the Society for Ethnomusicology and AMS The American Musicological Society. “The Society for Ethnomusicology was founded in 1955 to promote the research, study, and performance of music in all historical periods and cultural contexts.”[2] And AMS “The American Musicological Society was founded in 1934 as a non-profit organization to advance “‘research in the various fields of music as a branch of learning and scholarship.’”[3] SEM was a response to what was perceived to be a privileging of the study of Western art music, to the detriment of practically any other kinds of music.

I want to make clear that ethnomusicology as a field is relatively newer than musicology, and doctoral studies programs in African American, or African and Diasporic traditions are even newer in the United States. Black studies, have come in a variety of names over the years—including Afro-American Studies, Africana Studies, African and African American Studies, African and Diasporic Studies, Black Studies, and so on. These programs—especially at the elite and highly funded universities—resulted from student and faculty activism in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement. So only since the late 1960s have such programs existed in any significant numbers at predominantly white institutions.

Now we see a return to the joint study or the pairing and partnering of musicology and ethnomusicology in graduate programs. At some schools, students can graduate with a degree in musicology and ethnomusicology, or study in a program that is both musicology and ethnomusicology. Additionally, when you attend AMS and SEM, society for other musicology, or the American Musicological Society, which are the

[2] “About SEM - Society for Ethnomusicology.”
[3] “History,” *AMS*, n.d., accessed June 18, 2026, https://www.amsmusicology.org/history/.

flagship conferences and professional organizations for ethnomusicology and musicology respectively, you will likely see the same faces, at these conferences.

Further, more and more graduate students are thinking about ethnomusicology, as a broader category, engaging in interdisciplinary work and mixing research methods.

First and foremost, the artist-scholar is much more accepted in ethnomusicology and musicology than just 5 or 10 years ago. Acceptance of research that includes performance is a great recent development in the academy.

Second, Musicology privileges historical methods such as archival research and interviews. Ethnomusicology, on the other hand, tends to include participant observation or ethnography, that is actually observing, and when possible, m participating in the music making and the culture.

In recent years, it is not unusual to see overlap such that a musicologist may engage in participant observation, or an ethnomusicologist may engage in archival research or data analysis.

I take very seriously the work of interdisciplinarity or the power of interdisciplinary enter disciplinary no matter the research question, but especially in the study of black religious music.

I want to encourage you to think, about interdisciplinary approaches to doing research and positioning your writing in a way that shows your dexterity, or your ability to handle more than one academic field as you apply for faculty or research positions. In my case, with my latest book, which will be out November 17, 2026 I have engaged in a range of research methods.

So let me say a bit about my new book.

3. My Book—The Platinum Age of Gospel

[slide] Do you know who this man is This man is? This is the legendary Kirk Franklin he is a globally recognized gospel artist and within the United states he is a black popular music celebrity he is a living legend in gospel music and he helped codify urban gospel choir and small ensemble sounds and aesthetics in the 1990s. Prior to Kirk Franklin's rise to preeminence, gospel music could just as easily look like **[slide]** the O'Neal twins singing with the choir in a church clapping their hands swaying side to side and declaring the goodness of Jesus. In the 1990s Kirk Franklin and his colleagues ensured that gospel music could just as easily look like **[slide]** a group of young people in casual hip hop attire doing hip hop dance moves, singing and even rapping about the coming of a revolution. the patterns and the aesthetics that Kirk Franklin established are still being followed today and we see this with artists such as Tye Tribbett Deitrick Haddon and James Fortune just to name a few the work of Kirk Franklin and his colleagues during the 20 year period of 1993 to 2013 was so successful and distinct from what came before in previous eras of gospel music that I have named this the platinum age of gospel

While I am part of the ethnomusicology faculty within Harvard's Department of Music, my research straddles musicology and ethnomusicology. This is evident in my first book, *The Platinum Age of Gospel: The Years When Crossover Music Changed Everything*. My book is available for preorder practically everywhere you get your books, with a scheduled release in November 17 of this year. . My book uses ethnographic and historical methodologies to critically examine Black American gospel music during a period which I have identified and named *the platinum age of gospel* (1993-2013). This classification references the striking increase in marketing and distribution of gospel music to mainstream Black popular music and white Christian music audiences. The increased commercialization resulted in a significant spike in Platinum-certified gospel album sales. (The Recording Industry Association of America

applies the Platinum certification to albums or singles with at least 1 million units sold.) The commercial expansion of gospel impacted the ways in which highly successful national gospel artists performed their piety for both mainstream audiences and church-going gospel enthusiasts.

Ultimately, this book tells the story of how the gospel industry, as well as the influential Black megachurch community, shaped their sound, practices, and beliefs based on secular society, particularly market forces driven by capitalism, commercialism, and hip-hop culture. The book documents significant cultural changes and theological shifts among African American Christians at the turn of the new millennium.

The platinum age has two defining characteristics. The first is the extraordinary commercial success achieved by numerous gospel artists, which in turn is reflected in the voluminous number of Platinum-certified record sales of their artistry. During the platinum age, a significant number of national gospel artists aligned not only their music and lyrics with popular culture, but also their rhetoric, fashion, and dance moves. This action was taken to attract audiences who might not necessarily go to Black churches or to churches at all.

Second, leaders at Pentecostal megachurches ushered in a new Pentecostal theology that worked to reconcile traditional holiness doctrines of sanctification with participation in secular activities and environments. Beyond the increased commercialization of gospel music in the platinum age, gospel artists were responding to this significant theological shift that the leaders of prominent Black churches espoused and embodied. Further, gospel artists were leaning into “raunch culture” (a term coined by journalist Ariel Levy to describe the proclivity in turn-of-the-twenty-first-century American popular culture to emphasize sex and sexuality).

This book argues that there is something fundamentally different about gospel’s platinum age—in terms of not only the sound of the music, but also the look, the lyrics,

the marketing thrust, and perhaps most importantly, the impact and aftermath. The resulting music was great for dancing in clubs, but not as helpful for congregational singing or for understanding what Christianity meant and how to faithfully practice it. Some music conflated romantic love with devotion to Christ, while other songs presented catchy tunes with incomplete theological ideas. Further, the political theology—particularly attention to the plight of Black people and the work of Christ to deliver from racial oppression, was all but abandoned.

The book's primary contributions to the study of Black gospel music are threefold. First, the book defines and documents *the platinum age of gospel* and critically analyzes the transformations of gospel performance that characterize the period. Second, it proffers two theoretical frameworks for critically analyzing and historicizing the music and theological changes among Pentecostals which propelled the platinum age: 1) *the recalibration of piety*; and 2) *the performance of relevance*, or an artist's self-representation as relatable to a target audience beyond the artist's normative fan base—in this case, beyond Black American churchgoers.

Third, this book defines the gospel music hybridization cycle and explains how the platinum age saw a disruption in this cycle. Most gospel music scholars agree that gospel music innovation has generally happened in a cycle of rejection of the new, and then acceptance once the new becomes old. Such scholars may also argue that what we see during the platinum age is no different. This book makes clear that the cycle of rejection followed by acceptance is more complicated than previously thought, and that the cycle of rejection then acceptance is accelerated and at times altogether circumvented in the platinum age. Further, now more than ten years since the conclusion of the platinum age, one can see the vast impact of this period of hyper-commercialization and crossover on both the industry and local churches after 2013.

4. Black Gospel Music Studies

I see my work as unique because I am a faculty member and a researcher rooted in ethnomusicological inquiry. At the same time unlike most of my peers, I'm not only a musician and singer, but I am also a historian of the religious culture of black American Christianity.

So, what makes me unique among my peers in musicology and ethnomusicology who study gospel is that I have studied Black Christianity in depth, in a way that I in general, my peers have not.

Now, let me also say the study of gospel music is a burgeoning, a very exciting research area in black popular music studies right now within, or within the world of ethnic musicology and musicology.

We have quite a few scholars who have been studying and publishing related to gospel music and black gospel music, and who are also performers. This includes musicologists like Braxton Shelley and Cory Hunter.

But it also includes ethnomusicologists, such as myself, Alicia Lola Jones, Birgitta Johnson, and Ambre Drumgoole. And a great number of us have also studied and have religion master’s degrees, including Braxton Shelley, Alicia Lola Jones, and Corey Hunter.

but studying in a PhD program in Black studies and religion, where religion was my primary field, sets me apart.

I believe that my book makes a significant contribution because of the interdisciplinary nature of my research methods. My research is fully ethnomusicology and fully Black Church studies.

5. Conclusion

I want to offer some concluding thoughts.

We have gathered at this conference to celebrate the tide turning in the study of Black music in Brazil. As we do so, I want to remind us that even in the United States of America, which is often understood as a kind of promised land in which black people have access to more resources in the academy, that the academic study of black music is relatively new.

Scholars who have paid a heavy price to pave the way for the work that we do here in the U.S.,

In Brazil, as you all chart new pathways for the study of black music and the communities that make the music I want to encourage in your pioneering journey. You your paths be easier than our predecessors her in the United States Universities. Scholars such as Eileen Southern, Portia Maultsby, Guy Ramsey, Emmett Price, Mellonee Burnim, Horace Maxile, and Tammy Kernodle have made significant inroads in studying Black American music in particular.

In the study of gospel music it is also relatively new to have such a large cohort of scholars who are writing books, and serving on faculty at some of the most prestigious universities in the academy today.

I want to encourage those of you who are still in grad programs or early in your career to think of your work as an interdisciplinary enterprise.

Do this, because we are moving toward a merging musicology and ethnomusicology. Having the ability to think and work in both areas, and even in fields outside of music provide the flexibility to endure any further consolidation in the fields as you look for jobs.

Also, and finally, do this because it helps you to better understand the communities that you're studying, especially if you're studying religious music. If you are studying religious music and not taking seriously the religious practice and the religious belief system, then your research will be stifled.

So with that, I will conclude by saying that I'm honored to be here, honored to be a part the work of legacy building the legacy of Black Ethnomusicology here in the United States, but also in partnership with you as you do this groundbreaking work in Brazil.

Thank you.