



“Vulgar Negroid Sambas’: Issues of National Identity, Race, and Gender in *That Night in Rio*, with Carmen Miranda.”

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Carmen Miranda, who died 55 years ago on August 5, was an icon of Hollywood during the glamour years but more importantly of her native Brazil. In this brief introduction to her 1941 film *That Night in Rio*, I wish to look at how she represented Brazil to the world through the lens of Hollywood and what this representation has to say about issues of national identity, race, and gender in her native country at a crucial juncture in its history.¹

Carmen Miranda was actually born in Portugal, on February 9, 1909. Desperate economic conditions compelled the family to emigrate to Rio the year after her birth. Her musical talent was evident early on, and despite the lack of any formal training, her voice and manner made a deep impression on the musicians, composers, and recording-industry people she came in contact with at her family’s boarding house.

Carmen’s devotion to samba came at a time when, under the regime of Getúlio Vargas (president 1930-45, 1951-54), a new ideology of national identity was forming, one that embraced blacks and mulattos as distinctive facets of Brazilian society and culture. The middle and upper classes were now ready for a white woman like Carmen to promote this national art form. In 1930 she signed a contract with RCA Victor and began her ascent to stardom. In that first year she recorded

¹ More extensive biographical information is available in Walter Aaron Clark, “Doing the Samba on Sunset Boulevard: Carmen Miranda and the Hollywoodization of Latin American Music,” in *From Tejano to Tango: Latin American Popular Music*, ed. Walter Aaron Clark (New York: Routledge, 2001): 252-76. That chapter focused on another of Miranda’s movies, *The Gang’s All Here*.

forty songs, and by the end of the decade she had recorded 281, with a variety of companies. Half of these were sambas, and the other half mostly Carnival marches, rumbas, and tangos.



Fig. 1: Getúlio Vargas.



Fig. 2: The *Bando da Lua*.

In 1934 she began working with a Rio group called the Bando da Lua (“Moon Gang”), an association that would last through her Hollywood years.

One of the major developments of this decade was her emergence as a film star. The most significant of her Brazilian films was the last, *Banana da terra* (1938). Set in Bahia, this film was a collaboration between her and the Bahian composer Dorival Caymmi (1914-2008).



Fig. 3: Dorival Caymmi.

Her star turn comes with Caymmi’s unforgettable “O que é que a Bahiana tem?” (“Oh, What Does a Bahian Girl Have?”). Caymmi’s lyrics clarify what the Bahian girl has that makes her so appealing: turban, earrings, skirt, sandals, and bracelets and other types of jewelry, all adorning a body in seductive movement. Here really was the birth of her Hollywood screen image.² But it is important to understand that this was Carmen’s creation, under the inspiration of Caymmi. The Bahian women themselves considered turbans and gaudy jewelry old-fashioned slave attire and rarely wore such things. Carmen had now assembled all the ingredients that would make her a Hollywood star. All that remained was to go north.

² This classic number can be viewed at <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ojo3I59Gn6c>>

In 1939 the Broadway impresario Lee Shubert visited Rio de Janeiro and immediately perceived Carmen’s potential and offered her a contract. Carmen was on her way—to Broadway, where she appeared with the Bando da Lua in *The Streets of Paris*. Vargas hoped she would foster greater ties between northern and southern hemispheres and serve as an Ambassadors of Brazil in the U.S. This could benefit Brazil economically by increasing its share of the American coffee market. She shared his vision and declared,

I shall concentrate all my efforts on one objective: to take advantage of this chance to promote Brazilian popular music in the same way I popularized samba in the countries on both sides of the River Plate. What I want is to show what Brazil really is and change the wrong ideas existing in the United States about our country.³

It is instructive to bear these words in mind when surveying the actual trajectory and impact of her career.

Carmen had the preternatural gift of being in the right place at the right time. Washington was in the midst of rehabilitating its Good Neighbor Policy towards Latin America, in an effort to compensate for overseas markets now closed by the Axis and war. This effort was put forth on several fronts, including cultural. Hollywood’s assistance was vital in this regard, because it was one of the chief means by which the U.S. could reach out to Latin American countries and win the hearts and minds of the populace and governments there, enlisting their aid economically and, all too soon, militarily. Hollywood was only too happy to comply, insofar as many of its overseas markets were no longer available, and it wanted to build on the substantial market Latin America represented, with over 4,000 movie theaters.

In 1940 the State Department set up an Office of the Coordinator for Inter-American Affairs, with Nelson Rockefeller as its head. John Hay Whitney was put in charge of the very important Motion Picture Section of this Office. Whitney and Rockefeller worked closely with Hollywood studios, especially 20th Century Fox, to

³ Cited in Martha Gil-Montero, *Brazilian Bombshell: The Biography of Carmen Miranda* (New York: Donald I. Fine), 67.

insure that there would be a steady stream of movies with Latin American themes that could be exported south in the hopes of warming up hemispheric relations. By war's end, Hollywood had produced no fewer than eighty-four such films. The greatest luminary in the cavalcade of Latin American screen talent such an effort demanded was Carmen Miranda.

It did not take Hollywood long to notice her star quality, and her first appearance on the U. S. screen came in the 1940 musical *Down Argentine Way*.



Fig. 4: *Down Argentine Way*, movie poster.

Several movies would follow over the next decade:

The Good:

- *That Night in Rio* (1941)
- *Weekend in Havana* (1941)
- *Springtime in the Rockies* (1942)
- *The Gang's All Here* (1943)

The OK:

- *Down Argentine Way* (1940)
- *Doll Face* (1945)
- *Copacabana* (1947)
- *A Date with Judy* (1948)
- *Nancy Goes to Rio* (1950)

The Awful:

- *Scared Stiff* (1953) (with Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis; Miranda appears as The Enchilada Lady, selling Mexican food and doing a crude parody of herself [a parody of a parody!])

Carmen also recorded many of the selections from her films, and they appeared in sheet music. Harry Warren and Mack Gordon were the principal composer/lyricist team, though she also did arrangements of tunes supplied by Brazilian composers.



Fig. 5: *That Night in Rio*, movie poster.

Warren and Gordon provided the music for her second Hollywood musical, *That Night in Rio*. Carmen performs some memorable numbers in this film, as she did in *Down Argentine Way*, but *That Night in Rio* has the distinction of being the first in which she was given a speaking part, in Portuguese and also in stereotypically fractured English. In fact, she *was* still acquiring English at this time and is thus playing herself, something the audience was clearly expected to understand, but the movie exaggerates her difficulties for comic effect. In addition to Don Ameche, the film stars Alice Faye and Leonid Kinsky, who appeared in several of her films. Hermes Pan choreographed the dance routines.

The plot is complicated, dealing with an American nightclub entertainer, Larry Martin, who has been working in Rio de Janeiro delighting audiences with his impersonation of Baron Manual Duarte, a well-known investment banker and lothario who bears a striking resemblance to Larry. Both parts are played by Ameche; Faye plays the baron's wife Cecilia. A series of mistaken identities, love intrigues, and bad business deals leads to general hilarity, punctuated by Carmen's jealous rages, shoe-throwing temper tantrums, and song-and-dance routines in her trademark outfits, outrageous hats and all. In the end, all is set right, financially and romantically.



Fig. 6: Carmen Miranda and Don Ameche in *That Night in Rio*.

The songs composed for this and her other movies were intended to appeal to a U. S. audience that, at least as far as samba was concerned, was completely unsophisticated. *LA Weekly* certainly saw this many years later, when it remarked on “the pseudo-sambas of Tin Pan Alley tunesmiths Harry Warren and Mack Gordon, and [the replacement of] her soulful Portuguese lyrics with pidgin doggerel like ‘Chica Chica Boom Chick.’”⁴

In fact, internal documents from the movie’s production give us some genuine insight into the genesis of this number, which was one of the big hits from *That Night in Rio*.⁵ According to Gordon, he himself invented the scat-singing syllables “chica chica boom chic” simply to fix the rhythm of Warren’s melody in his head. Warren was taken with the words, though, and suggested they be used as the title. “It’s a perfect jungle chant!” exclaimed Gordon.⁶ Despite the song’s dubious association with the jungle, we must remember that the Brazilian embassy was shown the script and song texts in advance. Thus, it seems incredible that they acquiesced to the rest of the lyric:

Come on and sing the chica chica boom chic,
That crazy thing, the chica chica boom chic,
Brazilians found the chica chica boom chic,
They like the sound of chica chica boom chic,
It came down the Amazon,
From the jungles,
Where the natives greet everyone they meet
Beatin’ on a tom-tom⁷

⁴ Textual Excerpt: “Chica chica boom chic,” from *That Night in Rio*. 20th Century-Fox. Harry Warren, music; Mack Gordon, lyrics (recorded 1941; available on *The Brazilian Recordings, Anthology, and South American Way*). Review dated October 2, 1998.

⁵ These are located in Special Collections at the Margaret Herrick Library in Beverly Hills (MHL/SC).

⁶ Press file on *That Night in Rio*, in the General Collection at the Margaret Herrick Library (MHL/GC).

⁷ Lyrics from MHL/SC, MPAA Production Code Administration file on *That Night in Rio*.

The happy escapism of Miranda's Hollywood movies, and the kind of role in which she found herself frozen in every film, demanded that anything subtle, sophisticated, or reflective be completely expunged from her musical numbers. Carmen complained bitterly that she was never given an opportunity onscreen to sing slower, more lyrical songs. The studio executives believed that only her hyperactive numbers had any box-office appeal and that the subtleties of Brazilian popular music would be lost on American audiences.

For instance, nearly all her movie numbers are in major keys, while in fact many of the sambas she made famous in Brazil in the 1930s are in minor keys and exhibit some poignant lyricism. Like so much Brazilian popular music, they convey *saudade*, a sort of wistful nostalgia. Melodically as well as textually, the numbers composed for her in the U. S. exhibit far less nuance, especially in their rhythm. Just compare "Chica chica boom chic" with the lilting lyricism and sinuous syncopations of the hauntingly beautiful "Coração" by Synval Silva, a black *sambista* from Rio who was a close friend of Miranda's.⁸

The case of Synval Silva brings up the issue of race, because as is well known, the samba was an Afro-Brazilian invention. Yet, throughout Miranda's Hollywood movies, there is a persistent suppression of the African presence in Latin America, with black characters almost completely absent, even as extras.

For example, *That Night in Rio* begins with a memorable song-and-dance number featuring Miranda and Ameche along with several chorus girls in Miranda-style garb. The setting is the hills of Rio during Carnival, and the samba number is clearly meant to establish the atmosphere. But the cast is totally devoid of a single dark-skinned person, despite the large Black population of Rio and its central presence in Carnival celebrations. The music is similarly whitened, absorbed into a lavish Hollywood arrangement with the heavy percussive quality and dense rhythmic layering of Afro-Brazilian Carnival samba largely expunged.

⁸ Available on *Carmen Miranda: The Brazilian Recordings* (Harlequin HQCD 33, 1993).



Fig. 7: Carmen Miranda in *That Night in Rio*.

This was, however, not merely a strategy for placating the racist sensibilities of white movie-goers in the U. S. Even in Brazil there were those who rejected Carmen’s representation of Brazilian identity. It’s true that there was a marked liberalization in racial attitudes in the 1920s and ’30s, especially as a result of the modernist movement, which embraced the various native and African elements in the country’s demography and culture. The centerpiece of this ideology was *mestiçagem*, a belief that the racial “melting-pot” was beneficial and not negative. As William Rowe and Vivian Schelling have pointed out, this became “a key feature of a populist programme of national integration” during the Vargas regime; nonetheless, there persisted “the widespread notion that Brazil’s racial problems were being resolved through ethnic integration, whose goal remained white civilization.” This would gradually eliminate the “unsightly barbarian elements—forms of social life and culture connected to blacks and other subaltern groups.”⁹ This is why the União Cultural Brasil - Estados Unidos wrote to Will H. Hays, President of the Motion

⁹ William Rowe and Vivian Schelling, *Memory and Modernity: Popular Culture in Latin America* (London: Verso, 1991), 42.

Pictures and Distributors of America on January 2, 1942 to remind him of the “great need for teaching the average American citizen the following facts about Brazil,” which included its size (largest in South America), language (Portuguese and not Spanish), urbanization (Sao Paulo is comparable to Chicago), and culture and science (as important as that of the US).¹⁰

Nonetheless, when Carmen returned to Brazil in 1941, some critics, in addition to accusing her of having been Americanized, still expressed the belief that “Brazil was not well served by a Portuguese who promoted ‘vulgar negroid sambas.’”¹¹ But Hollywood was at pains to try to avoid this reaction. American producers felt it necessary not to feature any aspects of Latin America—either in race relations, religion, poverty, or politics—that might be offensive to the middle classes and ruling elite. *That Night in Rio* makes every effort to show Brazil as a modern country, w/o poverty or unsightly minorities. One hastens to point out, however, that Carmen disapproved of racial and religious prejudice and was proud of her collaborations with people of various backgrounds.

In addition to the elements of national identity and race, another dimension of Carmen’s screen persona pertains to gender. Time and again, Carmen Miranda and other Latin actresses were described as “torrid.” Consider the case of Lupe Vélez, a Mexican actress of the 1930s and 40s, who starred as Carmelita in a seemingly endless succession of (now forgotten) “Mexican Spitfire” movies for RKO. The series came to an abrupt and tragic halt in 1944 when the actress took her own life.

According to Debra Nan Walters, the archetypal Latin female was

Non-Anglo-Saxon, sexually aggressive, unable to speak proper English, possessive, illogical, jealous, highly emotional, regarded as a sex object, temperamental, and hot-blooded [and] usually native to a tropical, exotic climate. Hot Tamale,” “Firecracker,” and “Wildcat” are some of the other names applied to her.¹²

¹⁰ Letter in the MHL/SC, MPAA Production Code Administration file on *That Night in Rio*.

¹¹ Gil-Montero, *Brazilian Bombshell*, 101.

¹² Debra Nan Walters, “Hollywood, World War II, and Latin America: The Hollywood Good Neighbor Policy as Personified by Carmen Miranda” (Master’s thesis, University of Southern California, 1978), 106.



Fig. 8: Lupe Vélez.

In many ways, Lupe Vélez was to Carmen Miranda what John the Baptist was to Jesus. She paved the way and actively participated in creating a stereotype of the Latin female that Carmen then took to outrageous, even campy, heights (or depths). Words like savage, torrid, primitive, barbaric, fiery, tempestuous, and volatile came to be used in an almost unconscious, offhand, and yet very revealing way in U.S. press notices about Carmen’s films. They reflect a certain ambivalence, that is that she is a threatening presence sexually, but her mangling of English and her comic outfits somehow diminish the danger.

The Los Angeles *Herald Examiner* (October 24, 1941) described Miranda as “outfitted in smart, barbaric colors, waving articulate hips and rollicking through the most fun of her Hollywood career.” Washington, D.C.’s *Evening Star* (November 7, 1941) entitled its review of *That Night in Rio* “Torrid Carmen Miranda Brightens New Musical” and observed:

The way of progress is indicated clearly. All the boys need to do to improve their contributions . . . is to teach this torrid tamale from South America more and more

broken English until she has a vocabulary larger than those of the other members of Mr. Zanuck's musical stock company. [Emphasis added]

Variety (March 7, 1941) found that "Carmen Miranda . . . chants and dances and wears her bizarre attire with a savage grace which spread excitement around her in widening ripples to color every scene she plays. The *Hollywood Reporter* (March 7, 1941) said of this same film, "[Miranda's] performance in English is . . . vivid, fiery and tempestuous." All of this formed a much less flattering image of Latin America than what audiences and critics in the southern hemisphere were comfortable with.

Carmen's own feelings about her role as a representative of Latin American culture in general and Brazilian music in particular are somewhat contradictory. On the one hand, she was pleased to be a symbol of Latin America and the "proof" that that symbol provided of amity between the northern and southern hemispheres. But she was vehement in rejecting the notion that she was a "Latinoamericana":

I detest this expression, as it is so generalized. I like to be called a Brazilian, not from South America or Latin America for I have nothing to do with the descendants of Spain. After all, we Brazilians are the only citizens of Latin America that speak Portuguese, and we really are different.¹³

I think it would be a mistake to allow these serious concerns to prevent us from enjoying her movies. The truth is that we can still find meaning, significance—and yes entertainment—in them outside the highly political context in which they emerged, whether of Brazilian nationalism under Vargas and his regime of racial reconciliation or of the Good Neighbor Policy in the midst of world war.

This is why Miranda revivals have taken place at periodic intervals since her death. There has been a steady stream of parodies of her, as well as tons of kitsch merchandise. Jerry Lewis did this imitation of her in *Scared Stiff*.

¹³ Dulce Damasceno de Brito, *O ABC de Carmen Miranda* (São Paulo: Companhia Editora Nacional), 61.



Fig. 9: Jerry Lewis in *Scared Stiff*.



Fig. 10: Bugs Bunny as Carmen Miranda.

Bugs Bunny also did one for Looney Toons, memorialized in all kinds of knick-knacks.

Carmen’s tutti-frutti hat from *The Gang’s All Here* of 1943 inspired the United Fruit Co.’s Chiquita Banana logo the following year. In the 1960s, *tropicália* film makers in Brazil were fascinated and deeply influenced by her Hollywood movies. The 1990s witnessed another resurgence of Miranda-mania, especially as a result of the brilliant 1994 documentary *Banana Is My Business*.



Fig. 11: Chiquita Banana wearing Carmen's tutti-frutti hat.

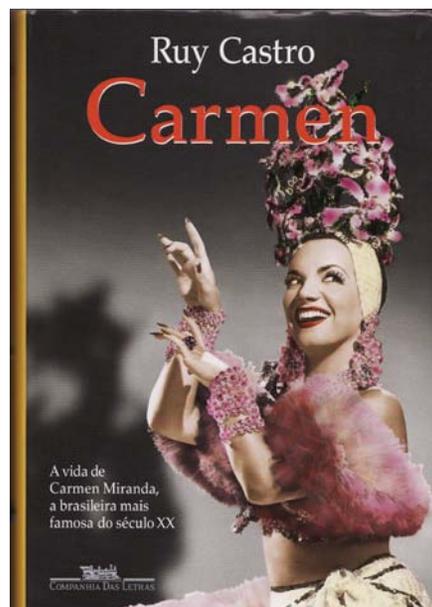


Fig. 12: Ruy Castro. *Carmen: uma Biografia* (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2005).

A recent major biography, in Portuguese, by Brazilian journalist Ruy Castro is ongoing proof of her relevance. Succeeding generations will almost certainly continue to find much in her art that is compelling, meaningful, and joyous. To assert anything less would be to diminish her stature as the creative genius she truly was.