



"Transnational Blackness": The Female Body and the Early Globalization of Brazilian Popular Music

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Chegou a hora dessa gente bronzeadada
Mostrar seu valor
Eu fui à penha fui pedir à padroeira para
Me ajudar
Salve o morro do vintém, pindura-saia,
Eu quero ver
Eu quero ver o tio sam tocar pandeiro
Para o mundo sambar

– “Brasil Pandeiro”, Assis Valente (1940)

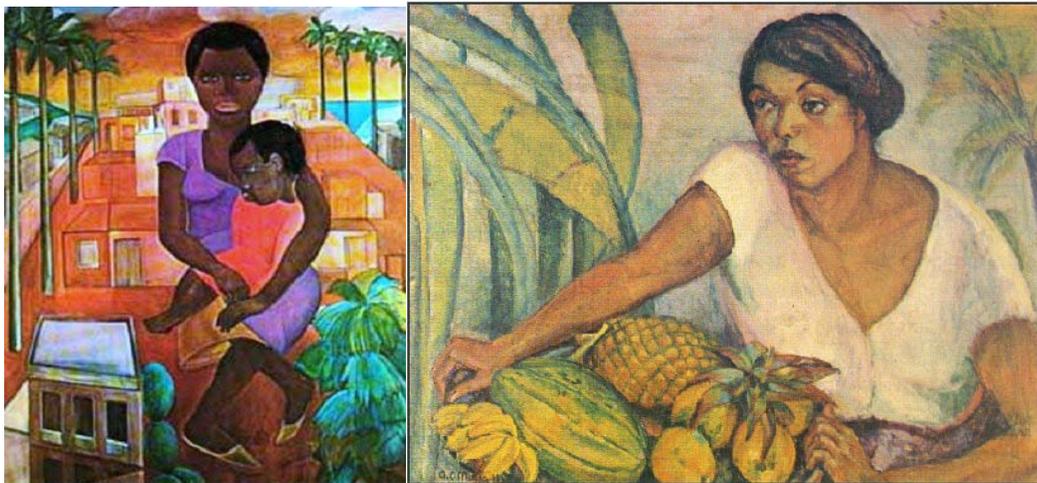


Fig. 1: “Mãe” by Lasar Segal and “Tropical” by Anita Malfatti.

Preamble

The audience waits quietly with expectation. The room is dark and one can hear a pin drop. Tun tun tun. Tun Tun. Three drummers caress and beat the long thin African drums draped in straw. Chica tun tun tun. Chica tun tun tun. The cascade of rhythms begins slowly, then escalate until she steps out and salutes the audience. Is Legba present yet? Has he given his permission? Or perhaps in this place they refer to him as Ellegua or Exu? He who opens all roads.

She begins to play her drum, situated in the midst of the others. Alfonse Cimber, Marc Parfait, and Wilfred Beauchamps, the three Haitian drummers, salute her. She is magnificent, dressed elegantly in the white. Her striking features, her long languid countenance, her tanned olive but not quite *black* features seems exotic--at least in this place, far from Rio de Janerio of the 1930s. She tilts her body to the beat, moving serpentine-like across the floor.

Oday Odayea. Oda. Her unique soprano voice seems oddly dissimilar to the Dionysian movements of her body, conjuring up a hypnotic mystical atmosphere. But we are far away from the churches, the temples and the Brazilian *terreiros*.

So went the performances of Elsie Houston, the classically-trained Brazilian soprano... in the of the Museum of Modern Art, in New York's iconic Rainbow Room, or in the French-owned Le Ruban Bleu at 4 E. 56th Street in the 1940s. In the United States, Houston decided to call her performance "voodoo incantations," and her goal was to enchant American audiences by performing popular music that combined elements of African diasporic traditions, including *Voudun*, *Candomblé*, *Umbanda*, and *Shangó* ceremonies that she had meticulously studied. We know Elsie Houston did not consider herself a popular performer like the Brazilian samba acts that entertained North American audiences during World War II, during the "Good Neighbor Policy," 1933-1947. Yet there was no doubt that like other Brazilian performers, she was in the United States because of the growing demand for Latin American cultural products that the policy engendered. Like many other Latin American female performers in the United States, she expressed her culture through

her voice and her body, two of the most important musical ‘instruments’ responsible for the propagation and globalization of African diasporic-inspired Brazilian popular music.

Given the extensive intermingling of cultures in Brazil and the multiple exchanges among peoples from across the American, African, European and Asian continents prior to the twentieth century, it is difficult to trace unbroken lines of musical influences from any part of the African continent to any Brazilian musical form. Moreover Houston did not only perform African-inspired popular musical forms. She researched and performed indigenous, European and African popular and folk forms. Her education and interests were eclectic. She studied voice in Germany, France and Argentina; performed with classical composer Heitor Villa Lobos, and researched Afro-Brazilian and indigenous forms in Brazil. She also published a book on popular Brazilian songs in 1930, long before she moved to the United States. Even in the U.S. she performed a diverse musical repertoire, yet became widely known for her “voodoo incantations,” a term that she employed.¹

As with many Brazilian performers who traveled abroad, Elsie Houston’s African diasporic connections were “imagined,” through voice and body, to paraphrase Benedict Anderson, and propagated through a tacit agreement between the performer and her North American audiences. Indeed, this agreement was possible from the late 1930s to the early 1950s in United States history, when the cultural forces of segregation clashed with its geopolitical need to forge political and economic alliances with Latin American nations, a region whose history had engendered a fundamentally different mode of social, economic and racial interactions. This cultural collision took place at a time when American radio, cinema and performance spaces began to bloom precisely as millions of immigrants from Europe were flocking to the Americas because of the war. Not coincidentally, Brazilian popular music entered the American media and the entertainment industry through the bodies and voices of Brazilian women who would create

¹ Elsie Houston (collector), *Chants populaires du Brésil* (Paris: Librairie Orientaliste Paul Guethner, 1930).

multicultural multi-ethnic performance uncommon in the United States prior to this time. The performances of Elsie Houston, Carmen and Aurora Miranda provide us with windows on to that complex world, and allows us to explore the role of Brazilian women in promoting, dialoguing with and transforming perceptions of race and nationality across borders.²

National perceptions are never forged in a vacuum. The influx of millions of Europeans, many of them Jews, fleeing fascism, racism and Anti-Semitism influenced how peoples all across the Americas saw themselves and how they viewed other nations, during a time of war. Well known European writers in exile often captivated the attention of readers through books, essays, and newspapers and other media including the radio. The ideas of Stefan Zweig, for example, helped promote idealistic images of Brazil as a racial paradise, largely because what he experienced in Brazil seem to be the antithesis of what he had witnessed in Austria. Zweig's perception of the benign nature of Brazilian slavery and the importance of Blacks to Brazilian history informed his view that Jews could live there without conflict. Afro-Brazilian culture fascinated him as well as other immigrants such as the painter Lasar Segall. Ironically many immigrants' views mirrored the views of Brazilian nationalists such as the writer Gilberto Freyre and painters such as Anita Malfatti and Emiliano Augusto Cavalcanti de Albuquerque Melo, both of whom painted various images of "mulatas." Zweig and Freyre wrote about, and artists painted "a Brazil" based on their own transnational experiences.³

Because of Brazil's historical and prolonged reliance on African labor, the African impact on society in general and on popular culture and music in particular

² This paper brings together and develops the ideas presented in chapter 5 and 6 in *White Face, Black Mask: Africaneity and the Early Social History of Popular Brazilian Music* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2009).

³ Stefan Zweig, *Brazil: a Land of the Future* Lowel A. Bangerter trans (Riverside, California: Ariadne Press, 2000). See also Darién J. Davis, *Avoiding the Dark: Race, Nation and National Culture in Modern Brazil* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate International/Center for Research in Ethnic Studies, 2000). Freyre studied and lived in the United States before penning the classic, *The Masters and the Slaves* (1933). Both Malfatti and Di Cavalcanti lived and traveled in Paris.

seemed evident. European immigrants and refugees from World War II were also entering Brazil at precisely the same time that performers such as Houston and the Miranda sisters would take Brazilian popular culture global. Brazilians, Portuguese, Africans and other nationalities and ethnicities had blended cultural influences over time, but popular music depended largely on the will and creativity of Afro-Brazilians, not because all of the influences were African, but because many of them were, and because since colonial times popular musical creation and performance had been the purview of the poor, largely dominated by Blacks.

To perform popular music in the first three decades of the twentieth century—regardless of the race or ethnicity of the performer, whether abroad or at home, assumed a given dialogue and recognition of African, Afro-Brazilian or African diasporic connection. Afro-Brazilian male musicians such as Pixinguinha and the Oito Batutes, De Chocolat, Duque and other had already made musical connections in Paris prior to the 1930s. With the coming of World War II, the destination, gender and race of the Brazilian musical exports would change. The United States' military-cultural complex summoned the talent of exotic Latin American women to enhance cultural understanding between the two nations. It is also not surprising that audiences viewed women such as Houston and the Mirandas as exotic. The female Brazilian body and voice (aided by male producers and musicians) became international commodities. Elsie Houston, Carmen Miranda and Aurora Miranda performances that highlighted the musical and cultural connection to African diasporic traditions became their most important representations of Latin America or Latin-ness in general and Brazilian-ness in particular.

The Enigma of Elsie Houston

Elsie Houston had traversed the Caribbean and the Atlantic several times before taking up residence on Park Avenue in the early 1940s to begin her series of performances that reflected her deep modernist commitment to Brazilian folk and popular expressions. She was both researcher and performer, not unlike Zora Neale

Hurston, Katherine Dunham, and Josephine Baker, all African American women committed to international travel, research and creative expression. The fact that she performed in the United States in private clubs frequented by the intellectual *avant garde* of the 1930s and 1940s, at inter-American concerts and events such as the Inter-American Day in Los Angeles, and in venues such as National Orchestra in Washington, attests to her connections and her visibility at a crucial time for Brazilian-North American relations.⁴



Fig. 2: Elsie Houston.

Ironically, it was Elsie Houston who questioned why Americans did not celebrate their African roots like Brazilians.⁵ Despite the perils and stigma of segregation, Houston affirmed the centrality of African-ness to Brazilian popular music—in ways that we take for granted today. She used her voice and body to display, incorporate and celebrate what I am calling trans-national blackness. Because of their national circumstances both Josephine Baker and Katherine Duncan identified as black or African American. Because Elsie Houston was Brazilian-her relationship to her blackness may have been similar to the other women, but there

⁴ The Gull City Press offers extensive primary and secondary sources on Elsie Houston's life. See: <http://home.comcast.net/~gullcity/elsiehouston/Houston.html>.

⁵ Cited in Darién J. Davis, *White Face, Black Mask: Africaneity and the Early Social History of Popular Brazilian Music* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2009). xv.

were also significant differences, in large measure because she was, to paraphrase Carl Degler, “neither black nor white.”⁶ Houston’s personal history aside, North Americans read her as an exotic *mulata*, that is to say a *type* of black illustrating the complicated and multiple dialogues and cross-national gazings that illustrates “the syncretic complexity of black expressive cultures.”⁷

Exoticism alone was not enough to garner Houston contracts. Although audiences in night clubs, cabarets, concert halls and in other *avant garde* forums in the United States appreciated Houston’s unique talents, this appeal did not translate into wider popular appeal on the radio. Nor did it win her offers from Hollywood, where white [or whiter] Brazilians benefitted from Hollywood’s racial codes. To ascribe Houston’s economic woes and lack of opportunities only to race, however, overlooks the often precarious employment situation of talented performers of many backgrounds in New York during the war. In a letter to her husband Kurt Weill, Austrian singer and actress Lotte Lenya, complained about the conditions under which many performers worked--from the noise from the audience to the uncertainty of employment. At the same time, she marveled that that Houston, with whom she socialized, was “...the biggest and surest success every night,” but “hadn’t received a single offer... to perform “anywhere else.”⁸

Even in Brazil Elsie Houston was not well-known despite her research, her connection to other *modernist* artists such as Mário de Andrade, or her marriage to the French poet Benjamin Péret, who spent a great deal of time in Brazil. Unlike many of the previously unknown modernist intellectuals who became famous in Paris before returning home for national acclaim, Houston’s trans-national experiences did not lead to similar national acclaim. Her move to the United States

⁶ Carl Degler, *Neither Black nor White: Slavery and Race Relations in the United States and Brazil* (The MacMillan Company, New York: 1971).

⁷ Paul Gilroy, “Sounds Authentic: Black Music, Ethnicity, and the Challenge of a “Changing” Same,” *Black Music Research Journal*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (Autumn, 1991): 111-136.

⁸ Lotte Lenya to Kurt Weill, April 26, 1938, *Speak Low* (When You Speak Love: The Letters of Kurt Weill and Lotte Lenya (eds. Lys Symonette and Kim Kowalke (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press), 255.

was hardly noticed in the Brazilian press, and her eclectic performance of *avant garde* dance and music, opera, as well as popular music made it difficult for the Brazilian and the North American press to categorize her. Moreover, Houston was not a part of the samba craze that took the media and the nation by storm. Nor could her performances be easily integrated into the pageantry of carnival, although she performed in the short documentary film *Carnival in Brazil* (1942).⁹

Elsie Houston's signature performance was her "voodoo dance" ---her dialogue with African drums, Haitian drummers, and the mystery that white and middle class audiences associated with blackness. For Americans Houston was enchanting, mysterious and exotic. It is tempting to attribute her exoticism exclusively to her mulata-ness or to the fact that she was light-skinned, almost "white." But what of Josephine Baker, who captivated Paris and the globe but not the United States? "*Santo de casa não faz milagre.*" (No one is a prophet in his own country). Houston's allure was also related to her musical choices, her evocation of Afro-Brazilian forms, cloaked in foreign, Latin American forms (rather than African American) at a time when the image of Latin America had ceased to be threatening.

Houston's Brazilian counterparts provide similar gendered stories, despite the different forums in which they unfolded. Carmen and Aurora Miranda captivated audiences at home in popular multi-ethnic forums as well as in exclusive more middle class and white forums---but they took the popular rhythm, aesthetic, and language with them, gentrifying and adjusting themselves every so slightly as the audiences changed. Still even in Hollywood, the Mirandas utilized their bodies and their voices to celebrate Brazilian culture and Brazil's communal or national blackness to which they believed they had a legitimate organic claim.

The Miranda Sisters

The work on Carmen Miranda is more widely known than that of Elsie Houston or her sister Aurora Miranda, but examining the performance of the

⁹ To view Houston's performance see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p5E8i6RXGMA>.

Mirandas through the struggles and lens of Houston's performance provides us with an interesting reading of transnational blackness.¹⁰ What role did these two "white" Brazilian women play in transnational blackness?

Independent of their "race" and their Portuguese heritage both sisters considered themselves and their performances as part of a Brazilian multiethnic racial tradition. Given their socioeconomic status and their life in the poor neighborhoods of urban Rio de Janeiro at the beginning of the twentieth century, the Miranda sisters grew up in an environment that was arguably more Afrocentric than Elsie Houston, who studied in Europe and Argentina and did field research throughout Brazil. Thus "white" performers such as Carmen Miranda and Aurora Miranda were, what I am calling, "cultural mulatas," which in the United States was read as another type of blackness or at the very least vaguely connected to blackness. Because they were "white" they enjoyed privileges and opportunities unavailable to American women such as Lena Horne and Dorothy Dandridge and even Elsie Houston. On the other hand because they were foreigners, Latin American women, Hollywood limited their creative production to repeatedly project specific marketable and consumable non-threatening images.

While Houston and the Miranda sisters played a significant role in re-inventing themselves in formulaic ways, the Miranda sisters helped to draw on Afro-Brazilian traditions to articulate a "Latin aesthetic," a term I am using to denote people who American audience read as "exotic white" or even "non-white" before the massive immigration of the late 1950s and 1960s. All three women were exotic "mulatas" who were able to fraternize with whites because of their foreign-ness.

Both Miranda sisters had grown-up in Rio de Janeiro, the city that André Filho called *a cidade maravilhosa*, a marvelous city, and which was at the heart of Brazil's popular music industry in the 1930s and 1940s. At that time Rio de Janeiro had been a magnet for migrants from across Brazil and particularly from the northeastern state of Bahia, a region which would give *cariocas*, the inhabitants of

¹⁰ I have treated Carmen Miranda's life and performance elsewhere. For a list of these works see <http://community.middlebury.edu/~davis/publications.html>.

Rio de Janeiro, a host of rhythms, symbols, and cultural products that would inspire Brazilian composers and performers as they created a Brazilian popular music tradition.¹¹

In her documentary *Bananas is My Business*, Helena Soldberg documents how Carmen Miranda co-opted the *Bahiana*, an Afro-Bahian symbol associated with the poor street women selling their wares in the northeastern city of Salvador, to present to *cariocas*, North Americans, and then the world. Carmen's signature song and performance in the United States quickly became Dorival Caymmi's 1939 "O que é que a Bahian tem?" (What does the Bahiana have?), but Carmen Miranda was hardly unique in impersonating the Bahiana. Araci Cortes, used the figure in the *teatro de revista*, Elsie Houston performed her as well, but Carmen made her jovial, fun-loving, sensual and non-threatening Bahiana a ubiquitous global icon. Carmen's performance and celebration of the Bahiana became important because of the desires and visions of mostly white North American audiences who were not accustomed to seeing black female images in integrated scenes on the silver screen. Indeed, Carmen became the Bahiana, and through her Carmen claimed her Africaneity and reaffirmed her Brazilian-ness but she also performed other African diasporic tunes such as the rumba, a genre that was becoming part of the Latin repertoire of many musicians in the United States.¹²

¹¹ André Filho, "Cidade maravilhosa," (1934).

¹² Helena Soldberg, *Carmen Miranda; Bananas is My Business* (1996).



Fig. 3: Carmen Miranda

A Note on Aurora Miranda

Aurora Miranda also personified the Bahiana in Disney's *The Three Caballeros*, which created an animated set to represent a Bahia where the streets and buildings pulse as the inhabitants dance and sing. Hollywood's gentrified (but still exotic) Bahain women were extensions of "Good Neighbor Policy." In turn, their bodies—jovial and sensual were extensions of their voices---or vice versa. Either way, the performing women were part of the gendered colonial rhetoric of empire that authors such as Ella Shohat have analyzed in other parts of the world. Yet these women exerted their own power and celebrated their Brazilian-ness and their connection to blackness in a country bent on artificial segregation.¹³

¹³ This is not to say that Brazil has not reproduced its own racial hierarchies from colonialism. Indeed Brazilian historical social dynamics history has promoted de facto racial segregation even if not de jure as in the United States. See Ella Shohat, "Gender and the Culture of Empire: Towards a



Fig. 4: Aurora Miranda

Tensions between Aurora's desire to assert her own individual style and the U.S. market's attempt to pigeon hole her is seen vividly in the press junket article that described her as an "exotic dancer," a label that would be insulting to her in Brazil and which contradicted Aurora's own interviews which downplayed her dancing abilities. How else would American audience view her? She was not a "race dancer," the term that was used for black performers. Nor could she be described as a "dancer," that is to say a white dancer.

Just as the U.S. media invented new categories for the Mirandas and their exotic performances of "white women performing Negro dances," different version of a middle or upper class family connections obscured their humble beginnings. With or without the Miranda sisters' approval, the American media helped to reshape their past, creating myths of their own, recasting their past in a more acceptable light. Publicity materials for the Mirandas reported, for example, that their father João Miranda was a prosperous businessman, without any references to their humble beginnings. In another account, writers reported that the sisters came

Feminist Ethnography of the Cinema," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* Vol. 13 (1-3), pp. 45-84. See Press kit for *Tell It to A Star*, Lincoln Center, Library for Performing Arts, New York, New York. For the reference to coffee growing family see "Disney's Musketeers of Mirth Romp in the "Three Caballeros" microfilm copy Lincoln Center Library of the Performing Arts Reel " ZAN *REEL195 n.c. 1153, 1154.

from a family of coffee growers, a profession that would have resonance with North Americans who understood Brazil as a coffee-growing region.¹⁴

Carmen Miranda's image seemed connected with every Latin American-themed production in Hollywood. Brazil garnered a great deal of attention in the most important cities in the United States through radio programs, concerts, talks, literary and academic productions. Carmen Miranda was in high demand, but she had an exclusive film contract with Twentieth Century Fox. Thus, when Walt Disney required a Bahiana for a segment in *The Three Caballeros*, he turned to the second best option: Aurora.

Aurora played another version of the Afro-Brazilian woman that her sister had perfected for American audiences. For her part, Aurora's Bahiana continued the Brazilian tradition of mythologizing Bahia as a magical place of music and merriment, quite removed from the social and political reality. This experience allowed Disney to promise that he would give audiences "something special" in his new production in which Aurora "kisses the air"---because it was a pioneering production with actors performing alone and adding the animated characters afterwards.¹⁵

Called *Você já foi a Bahia?* in Brazil, Disney's *The Three Caballeros* featured Aurora and the Bando da Lua performing Ary Barroso's tune "Os Quindins de Ya Ya" (Yaya's Coconut Cakes). Aurora took center stage in an extravagant song and dance routine through the animated streets of Salvador, Bahia. Through groundbreaking film technology, Aurora danced, sang, and played with Donald Duck and Zé (Joe) Carioca, the Brazilian character invented in the previous Disney film *Saludos Amigos*.¹⁶

¹⁴ Press kit for *Tell It to A Star*, Lincoln Center, Library for Performing Arts, New York, New York.

¹⁵ "Of Local Origin," *New York Times* May 30, 1944, p. 25. Thomas Pryor, "By Way of Report: Fox to Experiment With 'The Fighting Lady'--- Aurora Miranda Kisses the Air," *New York Times* September 24, 1944, p. X3. "The Screen," *New York Times* November 20, 1944, p. 25.

¹⁶ *Saludos Amigos* (1943), *The Three Caballeros* (1944).

Of all Carmen and Aurora Miranda's films, *The Three Caballeros* is probably the most familiar to American audiences today. The film, which features themes of U.S. and Latin American guys chasing Latin American beauties replete with sexual innuendo and double entendres, also provided cultural lessons (and stereotypes) about various locations in Latin America. It helped that Disney issued promotional dolls of the animated characters and that noted crooners such as Bing Crosby made their own recordings of musical numbers from the screenplay such as "Bahía" and "Você já foi a Bahia?" The technological innovations made headlines in the major magazines including *Popular Science*, which attempted to explain the new technology to the layman.¹⁷

Although Aurora and Carmen Miranda were drawing on the same Brazilian traditions for their performances, utilizing the songs of the same composers, and embodying the same of Afro-Brazilian woman, Aurora attempted to distinguish herself from her sister. The press kit about the film attempted to affirm that difference in the title "Noted South American Star Sings in *The Three Caballeros*," claimed that "(t)he number one heart throb south of the border differs radically from her explosive and dynamic sister Carmen Miranda. Aurora is sentimental where Carmen is cataclysmic. Aurora is petite and diminutive, while Carmen is statuesque." Clearly Aurora understood three important lessons about the dynamics of performing in the United States. First, there was only room for one Carmen Miranda, and secondly that homogenizing forces were at work in the market for South American musical themes, and she wanted to ensure that audiences recognized the differences.

Aurora's performance in *Three Caballeros* merits further analysis. As a performer Aurora dialogues with Afro-Brazilian themes in her own way. From the beginning of her number, she incarnates the Bahiana, moving her hips from side to side ever so gracefully, and shakes her shoulders as she sings and sells her *quindins*, a word of Bantu origin. One close-up focuses on her feet as she raises her heels and bounces back and forth on tiptoes during the refrain of the song—in a manner

¹⁷ Press Kit for *The Three Caballeros* microfilm copy Lincoln Center Library of the Performing Arts.

typical although not identical to the sambas of the time. Essential to Aurora's number is her interplay with Donald Duck, with whom she is flirting, and the green and yellow *malandro* parrot Zé Carioca, Donald's animated Brazilian guide. The scene culminates in cornucopia of musical styles and forms, including elements of the *capoeira*, an Afro-Brazilian martial arts form and dance, as the streets of Salvador continue to pulse to the hypnotic sound of drums and voices.

This performance, like many of the performances of Carmen Miranda and Elsie Huston features a communal event following a call and response pattern typical although not unique to many African American musical forms. Like the "voodoo incantations," it ends with a catharsis: a kiss, a symbol of love and understanding between the Brazilian and the American. Disney's musical segment on Brazil would have been incomplete without a woman, black or white, well versed in the Afro-diasporic traditions of Rio de Janeiro and the mystique surrounding Bahia.

Conclusion: The Body Politics

The American cultural production machine during World War II allowed foreign female performers to make inroads into many elite circles. For their part, the Miranda sisters and Elsie Houston worked with black, white and mulatto musicians in Brazil. In the United States, Houston continued to work with them, even through they were not always Brazilian, as the case of the Haitian drummers in her "voodoo incantations" illustrate. The Miranda sisters and Carmen Miranda participated in productions with peoples of all backgrounds, and performed with white and "Latin American" musicians.¹⁸

Prior to the 1960s Brazilian performers in the United State mostly resided in the United States temporarily or were travelers who flew in from Brazil for special performances. How could they not cross borders without bringing the deep African

¹⁸ Irving Cummings, *Down Argentine Way* (1940). Although Carmen appeared in films where African American performers such as Fayard and Howard Nicholas had their own numbers, I have not been able to find any cases of Carmen Miranda performing with a black musician in the United States.

diasporic traditions, which enchanted the world? While there was no Brazilian community to speak of at the time, elsewhere what I have called the proto-resident community occupied a liminal space in the segregated U.S. prior to the 1960s.¹⁹ Thus Brazilian blackness often appeared as '*negritude mascarada*', although it was never publicly articulated in the American media as such, *but* the performers, who in Brazil were white or non-black, spoke openly and frequently about the Afro-Brazilian and African influences and importance to Brazilian culture. Elsie Houston, Carmen and Aurora Miranda were only three examples. Given their interest in popular music and their desire to perform, all three women shared a certain Brazilian *welthanshauung* that understood the importance of Afro-Brazilian culture to *brasilidade* or *Brazilian-ness*. In their performances Brazilian embodied that cultural understanding in their individual preferences, in their gestures, ways of dancing, posturing, instrumentation, and in the language that used and what they themes the sung.

I argue in *White Face, Black Mask: Africaniety and the Early Social History of Popular Music in Brazil* that Miranda and others utilized a "black mask," in the phenomenological sense. The American press (and most audiences) 'read' their performances as exotic. Were they accustomed to seeing similar movements and listening to similar rhythms in white bodies? Reviews of Carmen Miranda's performance in the Broadway review *The Streets of Paris* illustrate the importance of body—the hips, the arms, the feet, the eyes communicated in ways that many American had never seen. Descriptions of Elsie Houston were similar. These women were "dark" or "tan," and "shining with a personality." They were "tropical" and "wicked around the eyes."²⁰

¹⁹ See "Before We Called This Place Home: Precursors of the Brazilian Community in the United States" in *Becoming Brazuca: Brazilian Immigration to the United States* (David Rockefeller Center Series on Latin American Studies) Edited by Clémence Jouët-Pastré and Leticia J. Braga. (Harvard University Press, 2008), 25-56.

²⁰ Hebert Drake, "The Theaters," *New York Post*, June 10, 1939, 16. "Before We Called This Place Home: Precursors of the Brazilian Community in the United States" in *Becoming Brazuca: Brazilian Immigration to the United States* (David Rockefeller Center Series on Latin American Studies) Edited by Clémence Jouët-Pastré and Leticia J. Braga. (Harvard University Press, 2008), 39.

Ironically in Brazil and in the United States, the public often considered women involved in music to be easy or uncouth. For women, the act of publicly performing necessarily meant traversing gender boundaries. Some women took advantage of these stereotypes and indulged audiences with provocative images. Others resisted the stereotypes and made painstaking efforts to show that they were “descent girls.” Carmen and Aurora Miranda traveled the latter path at least in public. They made appearances at public performances together or with chaperones, for example, and they rarely frequented Rio’s downtown Bohemian night scene. This still did not win them the approval of many of the elite at home, yet they garnered accolades from international audiences in search of entertainment and with an appreciation of the exotic.²¹

Was the cross-national performances of Brazilian women a trans-national version of what W. E. B. Dubois called “double consciousness”? Maybe.²² To a certain extent all trans-national peoples must adjust to the different national codes. As performers, Houston and the Mirandas were drawing upon their own knowledge and cultural experience and utilizing the options available to them while performing within the cultural spaces in which they found themselves. The hybridity of Brazilian performance was manifest abroad not only in music and performance, but also in their multiple attempts to communicate *brasilidade* to global audiences.²³

Elsie Houston defied easy categorization as a interlocutor and suppository of trans-national diasporic black culture, despite the fact, or perhaps because of the fact that she was classically trained soprano, had “an American background,” and spoke and was married to a Frenchman.²⁴ Scholars have often cast Carmen Miranda’s (and by extension Aurora’s) performance as a practice beyond ‘pra

²¹ Joubert de Cavalho, recorded interview, Museu da Imagem e do Som, Rio de Janeiro May 10, 1972.

²² See W. E. B. Dubois, *The Soul of Black Folks* (New York, Avenel, NJ: Gramercy Books; 1994), 5.

²³ Ironically, despite their contributions the careers of all three performers was cut short by life-changing circumstances. Aurora married and gave up her career to dedicate her life to her family. Elsie Houston took her life in 1944. Carmen Miranda died of heart failure and exhaustion in 1954.

²⁴ “Voodoo and Black Magic Feature Coffee Concert,” *New Amsterdam Starr News*, May 31, 1941, p. 20.

americano ver,” (for Americans to see) that is to say a stereotypical non-threatening performances to please American audiences. In this essay, I have reaffirmed that Carmen’s performance along with that of her sisters was problematic and stereotypical on the one hand, but by comparing her performance to her sister’s and to Elsie Houston, I have also recast it as part of a cross-diasporic dialogue during an era of segregation and new immigration. I also recognize the role of pioneering female performers to the construction of Latinidad in general and what would later be called ‘Latin’ music in particular—as a sensual, hybrid construction that emerged as a result of changing market and cultural forces.