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Resenhas

Between desires: Carmen Miranda and the international circulation of performances

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Book Review

Balieiro, Fernando. *Carmen Miranda entre o desejo de duas nações: cultura de massas, performatividade e cumplicidade subversiva*. São Paulo: Annablume, 2018.

Such as people and ideas, performances also travel. In " *Carmen Miranda entre os desejos de duas nações: cultura de massas, performatividade e cumplicidade subversiva* ", Fernando Balieiro demonstrates that in no case is this truer than in Carmen Miranda's trajectory. Far from proposing a reading that reduces the entertainer to the great political, social, and economic processes and events of her time – the Vargas Era, the Good Neighbor Policy, etc. –, a mere reflection movement of the Real, Balieiro highlights the tensions, negotiations, complicities, and subversions that marked Carmen Miranda's trajectory. From the conditions of possibility for the existence of the "Pequena Notável" to her promotion to "Embaixatriz do Samba" (Ambassadress of Samba), Balieiro in a single move explains the nature of the interrelationship between structure and subjectivity, between geopolitics, gender, sexuality, and race, and, mainly, offers in the process an example of what it means to do Cultural Studies in Brazil. In his book, not only do performances travel, but the different ways in which they are decoded in their paths become constitutive of their effects on the social world.

The book stems from Balieiro's doctoral thesis defended in 2014, in the Sociology Graduate Program at the Federal University of São Carlos, and articulated postcolonial studies, decolonial perspectives and the queer theory under

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the auspices of Cultural Studies, without ever losing sight of the difficult theoretical exercise of intersectionality. Approaching Carmen Miranda through this prism allowed Balieiro to offer the displacement of some of the current interpretations in Brazilian Sociology that "*favor an intellectualist perspective on the construction of national identity*" (Balieiro, 2018: 25). After all, Carmen Miranda's inseparable trajectory from the emergence of modern mass media in Brazil reveals that, in a peripheral country whose literacy rate was extremely low, the written word was unlikely to have the centrality that we often grant for the construction of a "felt and lived" Brazilianness. The author argues that the incorporation of the popular into the emerging cultural goods market was more decisive for the construction of such a dimension of national identity, in a process that necessarily had to articulate gender and race.

This is the interest in Carmen Miranda, who embodied and stylized the figure of the Bahian woman. The Bahian women were something that the white elites in the early twentieth century tried to remove at all costs from the image of Brazil that they had for themselves and wanted to spread to the world. However, those street vendors, without whom the social landscape of the federal capital's urban world would be very different, could be consumed as a cultural asset as long as they were framed in a register of civility/whiteness. The same happened to samba. The first chapter of Balieiro's book, therefore, contextualizes Carmen's origin within the framework of the formation of a radio market and the consolidation of the Brazilian national identity.

The entry of samba in the spaces of white Rio elites – with the proviso that their lyrics and aesthetic expressions would move away from the slum and become civilized – placed Carmen in a perfect position for professional success; on the one hand, the singer transited through the universe of samba and popular artists, and on the other, she was endowed with the necessary attributes to be a face of the most generalized process of social change. At a time when the first figures of the "*emerging Brazilian* star system *were, in general, white and middle class*" (Balieiro, 2018: 36), "*Carmen Miranda's white appearance allowed her to fulfill a role, as the 'grande cartaz do rádio' (great radio poster)*", since

> she reconciled the desires of popular composers who saw their art works enter the elite spaces, with the recognition of the high strata of society that, although with some resistance, saw it as a music representative that became national through the modern means of communication at the time: the radio. As a radio icon, she came to be seen as a special artist by the federal government that relied on the modern means of communication to build national unity. (Balieiro, 2018: 96-97)

Here Carmen appears in the webs of the desire of a nation that wanted to imagine itself as white in its insertion into the modern world. Therefore, the national enthusiasm is not surprising when the *entertainer* was invited by Lee Shubert to work on Broadway, after this businessman attended one of her presentations at the Cassino da Urca, in 1939. By that time, Carmen Miranda had already consolidated herself as a star in the in the Brazilian cultural market. Her voice echoed throughout the country, and her face was also made known, either by the covers of magazines or the films that featured her: *Carnaval Cantado* (1932), *Hello, hello Brazil* (1935), *Students* (1935), *Hello, Hello, Carnaval* (1936) and *Banana da Terra* (1938) (Balieiro, 2018: 106). Balieiro points out that this

> Carmen Miranda's trip abroad took on the appearance of a diplomatic expedition in the cultural area, being even more recognized as an "Embaixatriz do Samba" (ambassadress of samba) which coincided with the Estado Novo period, which deepened her interest and support for a cultural policy that valued national unity. [...] When she migrates to the United States she assumes the *status* of a national representative, with the endorsement and support of the federal government. (Balieiro, 2018: 106)

Once in the USA, Carmen would find herself in a unique position again, this time in the webs of another nation's desire. Carmen's trip to the northern country took place amidst the broader context of the Good-Neighbor Policy when more than ever there were frequent representations of Latin America and its peoples, and the Bahian woman that Carmen had "sophisticated" in Brazil would be read in the USA within the framework of a previous stereotype. Although with some new contours that were in tune with the geopolitical scenario, in addition to the "*well-known formula of the woman with dark hair and doubtful rationality and emphasized sexuality*" (Balieiro, 2018: 107), the Latin-American remained a subordinate representation. The fact displeased the Brazilian elites. If in Brazil Carmen Miranda embodied a popular figure that could be consumed despite its black origins, Carmen, as the "*Brazilian Bombshell*"[2], embodied in the USA the Latina, a sexuality "in-between", white enough to be consumed by white men as a transitory relationship, as stated by Priscilla Peña Ovalle (2011).

So far, it might seem that the reading offered by Balieiro reconstructs a Carmen whose subjectivity is far from central. It should now be made clear that the author's position could not be more opposite. Starting from feminist criticism to studies in International Relations, which affirms the inseparability

[2] Carmen Miranda was thus nicknamed by Earl Wilson, from *Daily News*, which became a consolidated nickname. (Balieiro, 2018: 167)

between gender and geopolitical processes, Balieiro seeks to contextualize Carmen in time and space without emphasizing domination, but rather what he calls "creative complicity" or "subversive complicity" in the trajectory of the entertainer. The closure of the investigation on Carmen regarding the bonds of domination "*refers to interpretations that reduce her to a Hollywood production or an adaptation to the governmental interests of the Vargas Government, leaving aside the complexity of the icon that remains a living reference until today, a target of the most distinct receptions and reappropriations at different times in history.*" (Balieiro, 2018: 134). It is in this sense that the second chapter of the book explores the conditions of possibility of Carmen's experience in the USA, particularly in Hollywood, and how Carmen had a particular appeal among the female and homosexual public of that country.

This attention is important for Balieiro, as the issue of subversion in Carmen Miranda seems to have two fundamental dimensions. On the one hand, there is the most evident issue of adhesions – Carmen having dyed her hair black for the purpose of personifying the stereotype, for example – and negotiations – the exaggeration in her performances, her deliberately ill-spoken English, with numerous double meanings, etc. – at stake. Practices that manifested "*certain complicity with* [the hegemonic speeches], *as expected*" (Balieiro, 2018: 146), and displaced coloniality through parody. On the other hand, faithful to the lessons of wisdom from Cultural Studies, Balieiro highlights an extra dimension that was equally determinant for this subversive complicity: its receptions. In addition to the desires of both countries where Carmen had worked, other conflicting desires generated alternative readings of her performances, subversive readings in nature. This will be discussed later.

In fact, this affirmation on Carmen Miranda's "agency" is not strange to works that have dealt with the subject. This is because, as Balieiro shows, Carmen Miranda's subordinate representation in North America received negative readings among Brazilian critics at the time, which highlighted a rupture between Carmen Miranda in Brazil and her performance in the USA. According to the author, these readings of Carmen's international career inserted a register in the discussion about the entertainer and her work that would remain in the national academic critical fortune that followed, since the latter saw itself in the position of reacting to it. In contrast, these works emphasized Carmen Miranda's "agency" virtues. However, Balieiro demonstrates that this bibliography loses interest in the singer's later career after her presence in the cinema declined when the Good-Neighbor Policy ended. This later phase is subject of more intense scrutiny by American academic production, which in turn paid attention to the exaggeration and *camp* of Carmen's performances. The originality of Balieiro's endeavor is in the combination of both these intellectual concerns and the exploration of the mechanisms that Carmen adopted, often

deliberately, both in Brazil and in the USA, to displace the stereotypes and the place that was offered to her:

> Such emphasis on the creative agency so addressed by the Brazilian literature on Carmen Miranda is little explored regarding her North American phase, and only through the North American bibliography is it possible to access important aspects of her agency in her international career. If the North American bibliography adds little to the negotiations and racial tensions that the re-elaboration of the national identity went through in the figure of the 'Ambassadress of Samba', the Brazilian one – very centered on the rupture between her performances in Brazil and the United States – can do no more than sketch certain elements of displacement and negotiations of her international career. (Balieiro, 2018: 96-97)

This creative complicity in the Brazilian and North American contexts is discussed in the following two chapters. In the North American case, as has been said, the symbolic system classified her as Latin American, a position that Carmen took in ways that were far from being non-problematic. It is necessary to insist that Carmen had "*active participation in her self-production process as a commodity.*" (Balieiro, 2018: 155) This means that despite the political and cultural strength of the context, "*the experience that Carmen brought from the Brazilian entertainment market*" allowed elements that apparently disqualified her to "*not reduce her to an object*" (Balieiro, 2018: 174), and Carmen to have a great cultural impact in the United States, despite this subordinate representation. Her colorful props, turbans, necklaces, and the ways she matched them immediately affected fashion. "*Macy's used the name Carmen in its advertising campaign in 1939, and Teller created mannequins with poses and faces inspired by the Brazilian entertainer*" (Balieiro, 2018: 162). Carmen's skills in negotiating with representations combined stereotype with glamor, "*generating prestige over something that would diminish her.*" (Balieiro, 2018: 163) Nevertheless, the glamour and exoticism that Carmen Miranda's performed and managed Tropicalism brought to the figure of the Latin-American woman was unable to survive the end of the Good-Neighbor Policy, and

> progressively, Carmen Miranda's musical numbers stopped being new and she started to act as a supporting actress, instead of the main entertainer. [...] In the course of the narratives, she definitely became the Latin American woman excluded from the love search that was relationally structured between the male rationality and initiative and female ingenuity and passivity. (Balieiro, 2018: 196)

The fourth chapter turns to the Brazilian case, and carries out both a theoretical reading on the colonial process of racialization of sex and sexualization of race (Brah, 2006) while paying attention to the concrete social events and their actors, who enabled the emergence of Carmen's Bahian woman and the update and creation of a "national woman". The *Baianas* were important figures in the Afro-Brazilian social universe, and as has been discussed, particularly in Rio de Janeiro. Balieiro points out that several leadership positions in a specific public sphere were held by these women who worked in the private spheres as washerwomen, grocers, etc., positions that were decisive for the history of Afro-Brazilian cultural expressions (Balieiro, 2018: 227). Their houses became ludic and religious centers, such as that of "tia" Ciata, considered "*a fundamental space for the creation of samba, previously understood as a communal production that hosted parties and religious ceremonies, in the same meeting*" (Balieiro, 2018: 228). However, this was not the Baiana incarnated by Carmen Miranda, who had to undergo a transition to exist:

> From the passage of the Baiana figure, the social leader of Afro-Brazilian groups, to her incorporation into the mass culture, there are fundamental changes that constitute her; she becomes the *mulata*, with a history of representations in national hegemonic narratives. Sensuality and love went through a central feature that unites gender and race; the Baiana, accessible since the narrative of *O Cortiço* – by the same author Aloísio de Azevedo, who incorporated the Baiana in the magazine theater in 1890 – in the figure of Rita Baiana, a mixed-race woman, who was (and is) described by many through a paradoxical procedure that makes her fleeting and deceptive love and seduction an illusion, as in the lyrics Carmen sang about Bahia. (Balieiro, 2018: 240)

This transmutation of the Bahian woman in the incorporation into the modern means of mass communication, with the involved articulation of gender and race, proved to be a key aspect to the formulation of the Brazilian national identity. From the whitening and reframing of her black, subordinate origins, the Bahian now being performed created a space for the emergence of the figure of the national woman, and for the establishment of the "*morena*" as a comprehensive category of this nationality. "*Carmen's 'national brunette' made it possible to merge popular culture and whiteness in one person, coinciding with the promises of national unity and racial harmony in the political sphere of that context*." (Balieiro, 2018: 220) As in the United States, with and against the context Carmen established performances that became constitutive of her effects on the social world, less than mere reflections of it.

> Carmen's talent went far beyond the vocal technical aspects of a singer, and her ability to group signs and balance tensions can already be seen in her Brazilian career. Much more than a reflection of a particular sociopolitical context, it is a sophisticated artistic elaboration, present in her agency. She captured and incorporated what was constituted as the national between the modern and the popular, in the complexity that this meant [...] (Balieiro, 2018: 223).

The social strength of these performances also derived from their subversive dimensions. We affirmed that the "subversive complicity" discussed by Balieiro involves Carmen's personal attributes and practices, as well as her receptions. In line with the proposal to articulate the North American and Brazilian academic productions about Carmen Miranda's trajectory, the fifth chapter explores the parodies, self-parodies, and exaggerations that her performances mobilized, especially after the decline of her position in the North American cultural market. At that time, the professional possibilities for the *entertainer* became increasingly limited to the stereotype of the Latin American woman. Balieiro states, however, that this new position allowed Carmen Miranda to distance herself from the role she played, detaching it from herself. To work on the theme, Balieiro adopts here the Queer Theory, particularly Butler, who "*finds in parody a means of subversion of identity norms, when it exposes the social arbitrariness of what is naturalized through speeches and practices*." (Balieiro, 2018: 264) In her presentations, Carmen exaggerated

> the image she built in her *persona* in the United States: she took off her turban to supposedly show that she was not bald, or that she really had hair under her turbans, and thus showed off her blond hair which then said to be dyed – and therefore fake – and then took off her platform shoes with very high heels to show her diminutive stature. She came down from the stage distributing bananas and singing the song in which she said she made money from bananas, with the comical ending when she said if she lost her job, she would have no problems, she could eat the turban. (Balieiro, 2018: 135)

However, there was never any guarantee that the public's perception would accompany the displacements of these performances, and in fact, "*the parodistic displacement, the laugh of the parody depends on a context and a reception in which subversive confusions can be fostered*" (Butler apud Balieiro, 2018: 262)

> Reception via mass culture opens up to several senses, and the very widespread initial perception was that she was an authentically South

> American entertainer. There is also no evidence that at the beginning of her career Carmen Miranda was self-parodying in order to displace the senses from the stereotype in which she was circumscribed. Rather, she commercially mobilized that stereotype until the moment she saw her *persona* and characters relatively sold out commercially. (Balieiro, 2018: 273)

The need for a reception for the work of transforming the parodistic material into subversion is the theme of the last chapter. Here, Balieiro explores more closely the appropriations and uses that subaltern groups have made of Carmen's performances, despite the desires of both nations. During the Second World War, the American armed forces found in entertainment an important resource for the success of their military efforts, and activities that elevated the spirit of the troops and instilled patriotic values and the submission of individuality to the nation were enacted. There were several presentations to troops in the USA and abroad, most of them performed by the soldiers themselves. In the absence of women, they were the ones who "*played them on stage*." (Balieiro, 2018: 289). This type of performance was not only extremely current but also encouraged by the military through publications such as *Blueprint Specials*, which often depicted men dressed as women for purposes they considered humorous. Balieiro points out, from Berubé, that although the contrast between male bodies and women's clothing was aimed at reinforcing the heterosexual and masculine norm, this opening created a "*temporary refuge where gay soldiers could loosen their hair to entertain their companions*" (Bérubé apud Balieiro, 2018: 290). In addition, "*the relations between actors and spectators produced readings of such interpretations as* drag *performances while suggesting homosexual meanings to the narratives.*" (Balieiro, 2018: 290)

The notion of *drag* mobilized here does not correspond to that of degradation of the feminine but concerns the most widespread process of production of gender from which Balieiro mobilizes his interpretation. Butler points out that this is "*the space of ambiguity of the* drag *interpretation that denounces the imitative structure of gender and, consequently, of identity*" (Balieiro, 2018: 148). In the studied context, the disruptive readings of these *drag* performances showed sensitivity, which made Carmen a recurring interpretation among the male homosexual audience of the period. That is the *camp*: "Camp *is, above all, an aesthetic experience, the victory of style over content, aesthetics over morality, and irony over tragedy. If tragedy is an experience of overinvolvement, the camp comedy is an experience of underinvolvement and, above all, displacement*" (Balieiro, 2018: 297)

This does not mean that the *camp* elements found in Carmen Miranda were limited to their appropriation by the homosexual public, but Balieiro identifies

an analogical convergence between them, from different social experiences. "*Carmen Miranda did not address her interpretations to a homosexual audience, but she bet on parodies, exaggerations, displacements, as strategies to deal with the stereotype in which she was circumscribed, materializing it as an antiessentialist camp strategy.*" (Balieiro, 2018: 307) Thus, from Halperin, *camp* here is shown as a literary genre, and one can recognize the novelty of Balieiro's endeavor in the way that, in this chapter, the link between sexuality and race was approached in order to apprehend the dissonances generated in the hegemonic speeches.

To this end, the author argues that Carmen's *camp* posture precedes her stay in the United States and has roots in the entertainer's association with the carnivalesque aesthetic of popular theaters. Such aesthetics is understood in its Bakhtinian conception, which is not "*reduced to a rite that is materialized annually, but to a language that permeates popular culture*" (Balieiro, 2018: 328), with the particularity of the Brazilian case having met "*during the twentieth century with the African diasporic culture*" (Balieiro, 2018: 316) According to Balieiro, this combination ends up resembling the American homosexual *camp* of the period that, not by mere coincidence, qualified Carmen Miranda as "*the most camp of the early 40s*" (Balieiro, 2018: 294). The reasons for this were never evident, and Balieiro's contribution here lies in revealing the social constraints that allowed such aesthetic displacements: if in the USA those had emerged from the experiences of subaltern sexuality, in Brazil, it was the racial issue that became decisive. Returning to Robert Stam, Balieiro recalls that "*critics hostile to Carmen Miranda*" have always stressed "*the dark side of her performance*" (Stam apud Balieiro, 2018: 330), and that the entertainer had a debt with the Afro-Brazilian universe a debt that was "*multidimensional, related to her body language and movements, with her samba steps, with the use of her voice as an instrument, with her percussive approach to singing lyrics (as in blues) and with her ability to improvise.*" (Stam apud Balieiro, 2018: 330-331)

It becomes understandable how the stereotype of the Latin American, "*proper to the hegemonic and conservative discourses marked by 'coloniality', could be reappropriated by subordinate subjects in a heteronormative logic*" (Balieiro, 2018: 294) The use of humor, parodies, and complicity with the public were thus brought to the United States where they provided Carmen Miranda the "*devices to deal with a new symbolic universe in which she resignified, parodied and reversed situations that subordinated her, providing it with a camp aesthetic, or, rather, demonstrating similarities and encounters between the camp and the Brazilian carnival.*" (Balieiro, 2018: 331)

The way of approaching the performances in Balieiro's book, in an intersection with Carmen's travels and appropriations, allowed for more multifaceted results about the relationships between structure and subjectivity, and between global and local. Carmen Miranda and her performances are neither purely

dominated by the power matrices in which they are included, nor are the virtues of her agency celebrated in order to transcend social contexts. There has never been any guarantee that the status of "Embaixatriz do Samba" or "Brazilian Bombshell" would necessarily be reflected in unilateral adhering to national political interests or coloniality, nor that the insertion of blackness and popular in the project of modern Brazil happened without their codification in a model of "difference that makes no difference" (Hall, 2009). This difficult problem, involving a certain "international circulation of performances", required an approach that displaced certain trends in the area of Sociology of Culture and took them to other places, and this reason alone would be enough to justify its reading and relevance for Brazilian Social Sciences.

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