

**Carmen Miranda and Cultural Exchange**  
**In the Era of the New State and the Good Neighbor**

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## Contents

1. Introduction 3
2. History of Samba 4
3. Vargas and the Nationalist Project 7
4. Miranda Makes It on Broadway 10
5. American Perceptions of Latin America 17
6. Cultural Exchange Through The Good Neighbor Policy 22
7. Miranda Hits Hollywood 32
8. Conclusion 41

## 1. Introduction

Samba enjoys a special place in Brazilian culture, where it reigns as national favorite in a country of diverse musical traditions. The upbeat rhythm, lyrical references to Brazilian life and love, and quick-stepping, hip-shaking dance draw crowds to samba clubs and musical performances. Samba has also gained an international audience – or dance partner – over the course of the twentieth century. But the rhythm was not always well-known abroad, or even considered a national music of Brazil. A two-fold change occurred in the years just before, during, and just after World War II – a period that coincided, not coincidentally, with the first reign of Brazilian dictator Getúlio Vargas, the southward look of President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s Good Neighbor Policy, and the international performing career of the iconic singer, dancer, and actress Carmen Miranda.

Miranda was born in Portugal in 1909 and moved to Brazil as an infant. She grew up in a poor neighborhood of Rio de Janeiro, which was then the capital. Her father was a barber, and as a teenager, she joined her mother at work as a hat maker. She was discovered and began her musical career in 1929, quickly gaining fame and popularity as a samba singer and appearing in Brazilian movies. In 1939 she moved to the United States and led a successful career on Broadway and in Hollywood. Miranda fully embraced her country and always considered her Brazilian identity an important part of her life and career as a self-proclaimed cultural ambassador in and outside of Brazil.

Miranda played a double role in the cultural sphere of the Americas over the course of her career. First, she was an integral player in the popularization of samba in Brazil, bringing black culture to national popularity. Arriving on Broadway and in Hollywood with a splash, she soon contributed to the popularization of Latin American

culture in the United States, bringing Brazilian culture to the international spotlight. In both roles, Miranda's career serves political interests – of national unity and pride for Getúlio Vargas in Brazil, and of cultural exchange between North and South America for Franklin D. Roosevelt in the United States.

## **2. History of Samba**

The nation-wide popularization of samba that took place in Brazil could hardly have been predicted at the beginning of the twentieth century. The process involved the navigation of complex racial and class-based distinctions and prejudices. As dance ethnographer and Brazilian culture scholar Barbara Browning puts it, “samba narrates a story of racial contact, conflict, and resistance.”<sup>1</sup> The musical style originated with Afro-Brazilian slave populations, and is a descendant of West African rhythms practiced by slaves from Angola and the Congo. These rhythms often accompanied religious ceremonies, which also featured dancing. One such dance became known as the *umbigada*, a term for one of the most recognizable features of the dance: “a blow struck with the belly button” used as a gesture by the central dancer to call the next dancer forward from a circle of spectators.<sup>2</sup> In the years following Brazil's slave emancipation in 1888, samba was still technically outlawed, and musicians – especially black musicians, in the largely unequal society – could be stopped by police on the street simply for being seen with an instrument.<sup>3</sup> During the first decade of the twentieth century, such laws

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<sup>1</sup> Barbara Browning, *Samba: Resistance in Motion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 2.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>3</sup> André Diniz, *Almanaque do Samba* (Rio de Janeiro: Jorge Zahar Editora Ltda, 2006), 29. All quotations are translated by the author from Portuguese to English, unless otherwise indicated.

began to be phased out or less rigorously enforced. Samba rhythms and dances were performed clandestinely in poor, mostly black neighborhoods. There was a strong and vibrant culture of underground samba. Particularly identified with the northeastern city of Salvador de Bahia, where black culture has traditionally thrived, *rodas de samba*, or samba circles, served as gathering places for musicians and community members. Bahian *tias*, literally “aunts,” were women who were important community figures and who traditionally organized and hosted these events.

A sizable contingent of white artists also attended these events as did middle- and upper class white men, often surreptitiously because of samba’s low-class reputation, and samba became increasingly part of a national consciousness of black and lower class culture. Many of the best-known samba musicians of the early twentieth century met each other and honed their art among friends, fans, and critics at *casas de tias* (aunts’ houses). The first samba to be played on Brazilian radio stations was *Pelo Telefone* (Over the Phone) by the singer Donga, who released the song in 1916. Even with radio as a powerful mechanism for the spread of samba across the country, samba’s association with the lower classes and with blacks kept it from being fully appropriated or accepted by the white middle class and elite.

During the 1930s, the transformation of samba from a popular expression to a national art became a project spearheaded by performers whose efforts to draw larger audiences were staunchly supported by the Vargas administration. When samba needed a new image to become mainstream in Brazil, Miranda became the embodiment of samba in its nationally acceptable form. She came from a poor family and sang traditionally black music, but was white, and could thus be identified with the country’s ruling classes.

Although she fully embraced her humble social origins as part of her adopted Brazilian identity, she could still be associated with both Europe because of her Portuguese background. “This double, almost entrepreneurial, exploitation,” Latin American scholar Darién J. Davis writes, “allowed her to play a crucial role in bringing Brazilians of all ethnicities together through music.”<sup>4</sup> The lyrics of the songs she became famous for discussed elements of the everyday life of working-class people, and also praised the beauty, diversity, and rich culture of Brazil in such a way that all Brazilians could relate to it.

A new form of samba came to be popular during the 1930s, the *samba exaltação*, characterized by its enthusiastic praise of Brazilian landscape, culture, and people. In perfect tandem, Vargas worked to create a unified sense of nationalist pride while popular music began to praise everything national. Vargas charged all Brazilians to work toward “instilling love of the land, respect for the traditions and the unshakable belief in the great destiny of Brazil.”<sup>5</sup> One of Miranda’s songs about Brazil, for example, was titled “Onde o Ceu é Mais Azul” (Where the Sky is Bluer); in the famous “Aquarela do Brasil” (Watercolor of Brazil) she sang in praise of “*meu brasil brasileiro*” – “my Brazilian Brazil,” infatuated and full of admiration for the nation. In her book *Carmen Miranda Foi a Washington* (Carmen Miranda Went to Washington), Ana Rita Mendonça writes that during this period, samba changed. “It took on different themes, arrangements, and

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<sup>4</sup> Darién J. Davis, “Racial Parity and National Humor: Exploring Brazilian Samba from Noel Rosa to Carmen Miranda,” in *Latin American Popular Culture: An Introduction*, ed. H. Beezley and Linda A Curcio-Nagy (Wilmington, Delaware: SR Books, 2000), 184.

<sup>4</sup> Carmen Nava, “Lessons in Patriotism and Good Citizenship: National Identity and Nationalism in Public Schools During the Vargas Administration,” *Luso-Brazilian Review* 35, no. 1 (1998): 44.

representatives, all co-opted by the government machine,” Mendonça writes.<sup>6</sup> Samba did become seen as a national music through which Brazil could express its unique culture and traditions. A certain “vogue”<sup>7</sup> for Afro-Brazilian culture developed during this period, although its popularity should not be equated with unconditional acceptance. Over the course of the next decade, as the rhythms of samba began to reach the United States, Miranda again provided just the right image and persona to make the introduction.

### **3. Vargas and the Nationalist Project**

Brazilian songwriter Dorival Caymmi recalled the late 1930s as a time when there were “two names known throughout all of Brazil: Getúlio Vargas and Carmen Miranda.”<sup>8</sup> Vargas ascended to power in Brazil in 1930 with a military coup, looking to diversify the economy and regain national, rather than foreign, control of natural resources and industries. Brazil’s First Republic (1889-1930) had operated with the principle of extreme local autonomy, reforming the social and economic systems that had existed during the highly centralized monarchy that reigned for Brazil’s first three hundred years. Vargas’ Constitution of 1937, issued rather than voted upon, declared the New State and established Vargas as “the supreme authority” of the newly centralized and authoritarian government.<sup>9</sup> His agenda was carried out by means of various federal agencies, including

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<sup>6</sup> Ana Rita Mendonça, Carmen Miranda Foi a Washington (Rio de Janeiro: Editora Record, 1999), 52. All quotations are translated by the author from Portuguese to English, unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>7</sup> Fredrick B. Pike, F.D.R.’s Good Neighbor Policy (Austin:University of Texas Press, 1995), 93.

<sup>8</sup> Simone Pereira De Sá, Baiana Internacional: As Mediações Culturais de Carmen Miranda (Rio de Janeiro: Museu da Imagem e do Som Editorial, 2002), 99. All quotations are translated by the author from Portuguese to English, unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>9</sup> Nava, 39-40.

a Department of Press and Propaganda (Departamento de Imprensa e Propaganda – DIP), which played an important role in Miranda’s career. The Constitution allowed for censorship of the press, radio, and cinema as well as close control of all other facets of social and political life.

Vargas proposed a new, “authentic” form of nationalism. “The discourse alludes to the existence of a latent ‘national soul’ which could not be realized until the current liberal-political climate was displaced,” writes Latin American historian Carmen Nava in an article about the way that Vargas’ promotion of national identity even took hold of Brazilian public schools.<sup>10</sup> Vargas’ New State administration constructed and promoted a very specific form of Brazilian nationalism. “We assert that the nation should not be understood as an entity of unsure and imprecise substance. The nation has a specific content. It is a moral, political, and economic reality,” Minister of Education Gustavo Capanema said, summing up the administration’s view.<sup>11</sup> “National values were purposefully emotionalized and then institutionalized,” explains Nava, through popular culture, national holidays, school curriculums, and other social means. Music, both civic and popular, was especially seen as a promising vehicle for “for the formation of a national sentiment.”<sup>12</sup> Through promotion, endorsement, and financial sponsorship, Vargas and his Department of Press and Propaganda helped propel samba— even to the exclusion of other fairly popular musical forms in Brazil – to national prominence. Vargas’ project of creating a cohesive national identity and musicians’ goals of reaching broader audiences were well-aligned, even if the musicians did not adhere to any

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<sup>10</sup> Nava, 41.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 45.



particular political ideology. What both wanted was to bridge the country's class-based and racial divides, and especially to gain the support of the middle class.

That support was garnered, in part, through direct appeal that was found in the music itself. Samba has a history as a clever and sophisticated form of expression, with lyrics that frequently and traditionally include puns, sarcasm, social commentary, and popular references. Browning mentions one example of a song that uses Yoruba and Portuguese-language terms to make puns that juxtapose religious and bawdy content.<sup>13</sup> While *samba exaltação* is generally seen as a much more superficial genre, many of the songs that Miranda sang in Portuguese did carry cultural and personal meaning. Some of Miranda's lyrics call upon the richer and educated classes to accept samba, despite its lower-class origins. Songs like *Deixe Esse Povo Falar* (Let These People Speak), and *Minha Embaixada Chegou* (My Embassy Has Arrived) present samba as a voice for marginalized communities. Miranda tackled race regularly in her music, but in a non-confrontational way, more a suggestion in favor of the acceptance of blacks in Brazilian national culture than a political move to claim Brazilian national culture *for* blacks. Miranda became an intermediary in Brazil, presenting a white face for black popular culture. Later, she would serve a similar role in the United States, making Latin American culture seem approachable and acceptable to American audiences. Neither country was "ready" for a total image of nonwhite popular culture.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, some white elites in Brazil still considered Miranda outrageous, a "white woman with money who put on black costumes and promoted black music."<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Browning, 27.

<sup>14</sup> Davis, 196.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 197.

Miranda designed her image to reflect the cultural heritage of her music, adopting the popular image of the *baiana* woman, including the first instance of her signature fruit-laden headdress, for the first time in the Brazilian film *Banana da Terra* (1939) [Banana of the Land].<sup>16</sup> In the film, she sang a song called “O Que é que a Baiana Tem?” [“What is it That the Baiana’s Got?”], and her lyrics as well as her costume answered the question: gold jewelry, baubles, and intricate platform sandals, and “grace like none other.”<sup>17</sup> Her elaborate hats piled with tropical fruits made reference to Brazil’s fertile soil and agriculture-based economy; perhaps her days as a hat maker had been the source of inspiration. Dressing in long, full skirts and matching turbans, Miranda evoked the image of a *baiana*, the Afro-Brazilian woman of Salvador da Bahia – producing an appearance not unlike that of one of the *tias* who originally hosted samba gatherings. As such, she adopted “one of the most recognizable national types,” according to Davis, with a sense of humor that seemed to suggest her full awareness of the role as an act. “She injected sensuality, wit, playfulness, humor, and satire,” into the role, Davis adds.<sup>18</sup> It was, in a way, a “nationalization” of black culture at a time when blacks were largely underrepresented in the performing arts (as well as in virtually all cultural, political, and social institutions).

#### **4. Miranda Makes It on Broadway**

Miranda caught the ear and eye of Lee Shubert one night in 1939, when he attended one of her performances at the Casino Urca in Rio de Janeiro. The Shubert brothers – Lee, Jacob, and Sam – owned hundreds of theaters in the United States,

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<sup>16</sup> De Sá, 97.

<sup>17</sup> Carmen Miranda, “O que é que a baiana tem?” *O que é que a baiana tem?* Disc Medi.

<sup>18</sup> Davis, 187.

including several on Broadway. As the story goes, Shubert was prodded into action by the actress Sonja Henie, who was traveling with him at the time. But biographer Ruy Castro reports that Shubert's trip to Rio was far from accidental; Shubert had heard of Miranda from a friend who insisted that Miranda could be a star in the U.S.<sup>19</sup> Upon meeting Miranda post-performance, Shubert arranged a dinner over which the two discussed a potential role for Miranda in an upcoming Broadway musical, *The Streets of Paris* (1939). After several days of deliberation, the two settled on a contract. Shubert would have control over Miranda's performances outside of *The Streets of Paris* and also take a fifty-percent cut of any outside pay, and Miranda would be accompanied by her own Brazilian musicians, the *Banda da Lua* [Band of the Moon] with whom she was used to performing. Shubert agreed to pay the salaries of three of the six musicians, and Miranda would pay the others.<sup>20</sup>

With her costumes and band members, whose passage had been sponsored by the Vargas administration, Miranda set off to show Brazil to the United States. She departed in the early summer of 1939 to much fanfare and celebration in the country that she would only return to on two occasions over the course of the rest of her life. She praised samba, sometimes also known as the *batucada*, in her final performance before sailing away and vowed to "leave the whole world with an appreciation of the *batucada*," as she sang *Adeus, Batucada* [Good bye, batucada]. Perhaps fittingly, she traveled north on a ship that was part of the United States' Good Neighbor Fleet, the S.S. Uruguay (the other two ships were the Argentina and the Brazil).

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<sup>19</sup> Ruy Castro, *Carmen: Uma Biografia* (Sao Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2005), 183. All quotations are translated by the author from Portuguese to English, unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>20</sup> De Sá, 125.

Miranda had been seen as a singing, dancing representative of Brazil to other countries even before her career in the United States. Nicknamed the “*embaixadora do samba*,” or ambassador of samba, she represented her favorite style and her country on tour in Argentina in 1933. But now she had the opportunity to represent Brazil in one of the world’s superpowers, the one with perhaps the greatest cultural hegemonic power. Emphasizing the singular nature and inherently political implications of cultural exchange to the countries involved, Mendonça calls Miranda’s arrival in the United States the biggest event in U.S.-Latin American relations since the opening of the Panama Canal.<sup>21</sup>

Over the course of her first months spent in the United States, Miranda gained increasing fame and attention. Her musical role in *The Streets of Paris*, which premiered in June 1939, was a hit with critics and audiences alike, who seemed to like her “exotic” persona even more than her vocal talents. Despite a general critical disdain for the show as a whole (“the vagabonds of Paris should feel at home... since *The Streets of Paris* are knee-deep in comedians we need not complain very seriously about the lack of songwriters and artists”<sup>22</sup>), Miranda stood out among a cast of acclaimed performers. In newspaper articles from this period she is described as “peppery,”<sup>23</sup> a “hot number,”<sup>24</sup> “exotic,”<sup>25</sup> and radiating “heat that will tax the Broadhurst [Theater] air-conditioning

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<sup>21</sup> Mendonça, 60.

<sup>22</sup> Brooks Atkinson, “‘The Streets of Paris’ Moves to Broadway – Paul Robeson in ‘The Emperor Jones,’” New York Times, 20 June 1939, 29.

<sup>23</sup> Mark Baron, “Broadway Has New Toast in Brazilian Star,” Washington Post, 2 July 1939, sec A, 3.

<sup>24</sup> Alice Hughes, “Carmen Miranda Makes Hit With New York Reporters,” Washington Post, 27 May 1939, 11.

<sup>25</sup> Ida Jean Kain, “Your Figure, Madame!” Washington Post, 19 August 1939, 9.

plant.”<sup>26</sup> One review calls Miranda’s act “too little of a good thing,” expressing a wish that she and her band – described as “six guitarists and gourd thumpers” – had more stage time than their three musical numbers. The article calls Miranda “Señorita Miranda,” using Spanish, not Portuguese, and notes that she “sings as she sways her hips, but not brazenly as so many singers of exotic songs do.”<sup>27</sup> Her best-known song from the show was “The South American Way,” a rumba in which she sings of dancing and romancing in the tropics.

Miranda and her band also appeared at the Brazilian pavilion at the New York World’s Fair, which coincided with her arrival. Though occupied with rehearsals and performances for *The Streets of Paris*, she visited frequently and even performed at the fair, “associating her image,” as one scholar writes, “with diplomatic efforts to reveal [her] country to the United States.”<sup>28</sup> The theme of the fair was “The World of Tomorrow,” with displays presenting the projected greatness of countries around the world in the distant year of 2039. At the U.S. pavilion, the spirit of Democracy was shown to have triumphantly taken over the world. Brazil’s pavilion was designed to look like the Ministry of Education building in Rio de Janeiro, and meant to convey both tradition and modernity with typical food dishes, cabaret performances, typical costumes of the *baiana* and *vaquero* [cowboy of the interior states], popular music, and, of course, Carmen Miranda.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Atkinson, 29.

<sup>27</sup> Robert Mantle Burns, “Señorita with Three Songs Is Broadway Hit,” Chicago Daily Tribune, 2 July 1939, sec D, 2.

<sup>28</sup> De Sá, 122.

<sup>29</sup> Mendonça, 80.

Miranda appeared in one other Broadway musical, *Sons o' Fun*, beginning in 1941. Though cast in a principal role, this show made less of an impact on Miranda's career – it was a “typical” Olsen & Johnson revue, which to some viewers meant that the musical numbers “had no coherence besides madness.”<sup>30</sup>

Public commentary focused on Miranda's movement, physicality, and image rather than her musical talent or acting skill. “She posed ‘cheese cake’ for the cameramen – meaning pictures with the knees crossed and ample hosiery on display,” a female *Washington Post* reporter wrote when Miranda arrived in the New York.<sup>31</sup> Descending from the ship, she smiled for photographs and executed a few dance steps, taking the time to “shake her skirt and roll her little eyes.”<sup>32</sup> Towards the end of the summer, the *Washington Post* devoted an entire article to Miranda's “athletic,” “oo-la-la” figure.<sup>33</sup>

Browning explains that, “Samba is a dance that generally attracts attention for its frenetic exuberance,” and indeed, audiences and critics alike found Miranda's dancing and gestures as appealing as her songs. Browning continues, “[Samba] is also known as a national dance and has contributed to a world image of Brazil as a country of exaggerated elation, in which joyous movement is considered meaningful in and of itself.”<sup>34</sup> In his 2008 book *Dancing Across Borders*, Anthony Shay, a choreographer and folk dance specialist, sums Miranda's song-and-dance routines as “frenetic and febrile renditions” of samba.<sup>35</sup> “She rolls her eyes and swings her hips with such expressive élan,” the

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<sup>30</sup> Castro, *Carmen*, 323.

<sup>31</sup> Hughes, 11.

<sup>32</sup> Mendonça, 67.

<sup>33</sup> Kain, 9.

<sup>34</sup> Browning, 15.

<sup>35</sup> Anthony Shay, *Dancing Across Borders: The American Fascination with Exotic Dance Forms* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc. 2008), 179.

*Washington Post*'s Mark Barron wrote of her Broadway appearance. Later in the same article: "while singing she moves her hips and hands and eyes in such a way that it is almost a dance – anyway, it is a routine both international and understandable to all."<sup>36</sup> Another article claimed that she "sings with her fingers, her eyes, her hips."<sup>37</sup> Miranda's gestures contributed to her own stylization of the samba, an interpretation and presentation, according to Mendonça, not necessarily a part of the conventional Brazilian form.<sup>38</sup>

Shubert is said to have predicted that Miranda would do more for relations between the United States and South America than any diplomats of her era.<sup>39</sup> Note the conflation of South American countries; Miranda has been made out to represent an entire continent. She is often referred to as "La Miranda" in writing from her time, despite the fact that the article "la" is Spanish, not Portuguese. This kind of error was not uncommon. Graham Stuart, a Stanford University political scientist, wrote in 1942 of "the limitless ignorance of the North American in regard to the twenty different republics to the south." He continues, "Numerous incidents are related indicating our abysmal ignorance of the size, character, and even language of Brazil."<sup>40</sup>

In keeping with the limited or selective understanding of his time, "Shubert dealt his favorite version of Latin America to North Americans... From that [opening] night on Broadway onward, a few months away from World War II, Carmen Miranda became the

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<sup>36</sup> Baron, 3.

<sup>37</sup> M.F.L., "So This Is Paris," Wall Street Journal, 21 June 1939, 11.

<sup>38</sup> Mendonça, 72.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>40</sup> Graham Stuart, "Implementing the Good Neighbor Policy," World Affairs, 105, no. 3 (1942): 212.

South American Way for North Americans.”<sup>41</sup> Mendonça describes the “habitual North-American inability to distinguish between Latin American rhythms” when she notes that Miranda often was given Hispanic rhythms or Spanish lyrics to sing. A magazine listed rumba as Miranda’s favorite dance.<sup>42</sup> “Thank you, North America,” Miranda said in English to an audience after her last Broadway performance. “There’s more rumba bands and dancers in New York than in Brazil.”<sup>43</sup>

Despite her international move, there was continuity to Miranda’s career. She brought costumes with her from Brazil and continued to perform in similar outfits.<sup>44</sup> Many Brazilians followed her career as closely as they could from afar, and Miranda also kept up with news from home. Albums that Miranda had recorded in Brazil were quickly imported to the United States, and Brazilian audiences awaited the arrival of films and albums that she released in the U.S.

Her image was larger than life, associated with romance, drama, and song. She became “the Latin American version of Bizet’s Carmen,” Mendonça writes. Soon turbans, sandals, and baubles were incorporated into U.S. fashion, much to President Vargas’ satisfaction.<sup>45</sup> Miranda appeared in night clubs, movies, musicals, on the radio, and on her own album covers. Imitation of her style and allusions to her image proliferated in American popular culture. Other actresses, including Betty Grable, Joan Bennet, and Judy Garland, wore outfits “a la Miranda,” both in films and in public appearances. The teenage Mickey Rooney performed a comical impersonation of one of

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<sup>41</sup> Mendonça, 73.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 94.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 96.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 77.



Miranda's characters in *Babes on Broadway* (1941) – a rendition that biographer and cultural historian Clive Hirschorn calls “quite breathtakingly accurate.”<sup>46</sup>

## 5. American Perceptions of Latin America

By the 1930s, varying perspectives – “some flattering, some decidedly unflattering”<sup>47</sup> – of Latin American culture abounded in the United States, though popular culture and media certainly shaped the landscape of opinions. Over a decade before, Rudolph Valentino's film career and dancing roles of the early 1920s created an image of Latin sex appeal as well as the perception of flamboyancy, homosexuality, and uncouthness in the male dancing figure.<sup>48</sup> Valentino was known for dancing the tango, but in the early part of the century (and even today), Latin dances had the tendency to become generic in the United States, perceived as generally Latin or South American rather than culture- or country-specific. The fact that Valentino himself was not actually Latin American at all, but Italian, mattered little to his audiences' perception. By the time of Miranda's arrival, Fred Astaire and the Hollywood musical had made dancing “safe” for American men by presenting decisively heterosexual and masculine dancing characters: the suitor, the soldier. But something else was needed to make Latin culture equally “safe.”

Hollywood films from even before World War I presented popular misconceptions of Brazil as behind the times and frequently confused Hispanic and

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<sup>46</sup> Clive Hirschorn, *The Hollywood Musical* (New York: Crown Publishing, Inc, 1981), 201.

<sup>47</sup> Pike, 111.

<sup>48</sup> Shay, 176.

Lusophone cultures.<sup>49</sup> Racist notions that had led European colonizers to claim that people in the tropics were lazy and unproductive persisted with the perception of the “eternal siesta” keeping Latin America from managing its own affairs. A 1940s survey found that Americans chose words like “dark-skinned,” “emotional,” “religious,” “backward,” “lazy,” “ignorant,” and “suspicious” to describe Latin Americans.<sup>50</sup> Stereotypes about Latin America led its people to be seen as primitive, passionate, intuitive, relaxed, infantile, and feminine compared to the United States’ representation as civilized, controlled, rational, calculating, mature, and masculine.<sup>51</sup>

A somewhat competing stereotype about Brazilians was “the impression that Brazilians were a congenial, gentle, endearing people... warm, lovable, [and] nonthreatening,” according to Latin American scholar Joseph A. Page. Noting that this stereotype continues into the present day, Page cites the “public personae of attractive figures” from Brazilian history and popular culture: soccer star Pelé, the fictional millionaire character in *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*, and of course, the endearing Carmen Miranda, whose perceived friendliness and outgoing personalities were taken as a Latin American norm.<sup>52</sup> Latin American cultures were seen as “primitive,” which made them appealing to the imagination though still inferior. U.S. Americans “could not doubt that although the Latins might be hopelessly backward in the ways of capitalism, they had mastered the art of forming warm human relationships,” Latin American scholar Fredrick

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<sup>49</sup> Mendonça, 90.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 89.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 61.

<sup>52</sup> Joseph A. Page, *The Brazilians* (United States: Da Capo Press, 1995), 229.

B. Pike writes. “It began to seem that ‘primitive’ Latins, all along, might have been onto the secret of the good life.”<sup>53</sup>

We can see these limiting perspectives both in the roles that Miranda played and the way that her performances were discussed critically. A consistent exoticism limits critics’ descriptions of Miranda to those that liken her to nature (“the South American songbird”<sup>54</sup>) and those that emphasize her sexuality (“when Carmen sings her saucy songs she is at her best”<sup>55</sup> and “the singer and dancer was known for her sultry gyrations to Latin rhythms”<sup>56</sup>).

Many articles from her first months in the United States noted Miranda’s limited English. The popular claim, and one she seems to have propagated herself, is that she spoke only twenty words of English upon her arrival, “money,” “men,” and “kiss me” among the most frequently quoted. She delivered heavily accented lines in all of her film roles as well as in interviews, even after years of living in the United States. Her roles over the course of a fourteen-year career in the U.S. were remarkably static. A 1944 *New York Times* review of *Greenwich Village* (1944), her seventh film in the United States, described Miranda as parading “extravagant costumes” and displaying “the same Latin behavior she’s always had.”<sup>57</sup>

Critics displayed both ignorance and indifference of Latin American diversity and Miranda’s specific background. This is especially evident in discussions relating to

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<sup>53</sup> Pike, 87.

<sup>54</sup> Hedda Hopper, “Hedda Hopper’s Hollywood,” *Los Angeles Times*, 21 July 1939, A11.

<sup>55</sup> Will Davidson, “Saucy Carmen Miranda a Pleasing Entertainer,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 31 August 1947, E3.

<sup>56</sup> “Actress Carmen Miranda Dies After Finishing Film,” *Hartford Courant*, 6 August 1955, 4.

<sup>57</sup> Mendonça, 106.

language. “She sings in, well, call it Portuguese, but speaks with the universal language with her body. Knows only four English words – yes, maybe, and how much!” Hedda Hopper wrote in her infamous gossip column for the *Los Angeles Times* in 1939.<sup>58</sup> There seems to be consensus among reporters: “We suppose she sings in Portuguese but it really doesn’t matter,” a *Wall Street Journal* reporter noted after seeing *The Streets of Paris*.<sup>59</sup> Even in her later career, the lyrics of her songs written and performed in the U.S. were made up of nonsense words or meaningless syllables. Sure crowd-pleasers included “The Lady in the Tutti-Frutti Hat,” “I-Yi-Yi-Yi Like You Very Much,” “Chica Chica Boom Chic,” and “Cha Bomm Pa Pa.”

Despite her “inclusion” in mainstream films over the course of her Hollywood career, Miranda always ended up paired with a Latino partner or in “neutral” musical numbers.<sup>60</sup> In films, her characters provided comic relief. She played nightclub singers, whose roles and importance were limited to the stage, or a troublesome but ultimately ridiculous “other woman,” as in *Springtime on the Rockies*. She might be presented as a sensual figure (“with Carmen Miranda in mind, Yankee movie addicts might see Latinas as ideal partners with whom to shack up for a night,” Pike writes<sup>61</sup>), but never a serious love interest. There is a familiar and discomfiting narrative underlying Miranda’s life story. “Discovered” when foreigners arrived in her native country, she was brought to the United States and put on display. Her inclusion in the worlds of Broadway and Hollywood was limited to essentially one role, with Spanish-sounding names, broken

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<sup>58</sup> Hopper, sec A, 11.

<sup>59</sup> M.F.L., 11.

<sup>60</sup> Mendonça, 97.

<sup>61</sup> Pike, 112.

English, wriggling hips, and sufficient success to encourage studios to try for another just like it.

The combination of music, dance and Latin American culture that Miranda represented in the United States was certainly an eyebrow-raising package to her American audiences – appealing but perhaps forbidden. Anthony Shay writes of the way that Latin dance is generally perceived in the United States:

Americans for over a century have regarded, and continue to regard, Latin dance genres such as tango, salsa, mambo and samba as sexy, deliciously dangerous forms of choreographic expression, reflecting the dangerous and exotic types of Latinos who dance them.<sup>62</sup>

Latin dance and music has continued to evolve over time, with cross-cultural influences and innovation over time. There are multiple variations of samba as of rumba, tango, bachata, and other forms. In contrast, traditional Asian dance forms are generally seen as spiritual, timeless, “high” art to be admired and perfected. The Hispanic and African cultures present in Latin dance, Shay continues, are “ambivalently regarded by many mainstream Americans as sexual.”<sup>63</sup>

Miranda briefly returned to Brazil in 1940 after about a year in the United States. She was greeted by the Department of Press and Propaganda, which threw a banquet in her honor, and crowds of fans at a celebratory reception in Rio. At her first performance, for an elite public at the Urca Casino, Miranda was not well received. Samba was still not a favorite of the Brazilian elite class, and as Miranda knew, this class had never been the population driving her popularity in Brazil. While the press, heavily controlled by the government, reported “general applause,” her audience was put off by her English

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<sup>62</sup> Shay, 169.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 172.

greeting (“Good night, people”), English lyrics, and untraditional interpretations of Brazilian songs. Her band no longer sounded like a Brazilian samba band. Her songs included rhythms not native to Brazil.

The Brazilian public wondered whether she had lost her roots. But new songs that she recorded during her stay in Brazil seemed to be direct appeals for acceptance and understanding: “Voltei pro Morro” [I Returned to the Hills (of Brazil)], “Disseram que Voltei Americanizada” [They Said I Returned Americanized], “Disso é Que Eu Gosto” [This is What I Like].<sup>64</sup> Briefly back among audiences who could understand her Portuguese lyrics, words mattered once again.

## **6. Cultural Exchange Through The Good Neighbor Policy**

At times Miranda’s role as “ambassador” approached the literal. She often opened her Hollywood home to receive important Brazilian guests as well as Latinos hosted by Fox studios. In February of 1940, less than a year after she had first set foot in New York, she was invited to the Democratic Party banquet in honor of President Roosevelt and performed at a White House reception. Many could see the way Miranda quickly became something of a political pawn. Maxwell Jay Rice, a vice president of Pan Am, called her a shining glory mixed with a lot of political propaganda.<sup>65</sup> A 1940 headline from the *Philadelphia Record* declared, “Carmen Miranda is the Good Neighbor Policy in Person.”<sup>66</sup>

The Good Neighbor Policy in practice had arrived on the international scene only a few years before Miranda’s U.S. debut. While historians debate the exact origins of the

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<sup>64</sup> Mendonça, 126-27.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

phrase and political perspective of the “good neighbor,” most attribute the policy in its most recognizable and solidified form to President Roosevelt’s administration. In his 1933 inaugural address, Roosevelt expressed the need for the United States to work deliberately to build positive relations with the other countries of the Americas. At a conference in Montevideo in December of the same year, eighteen Latin American countries and the United States signed the Montevideo Convention on the Rights and Duties of States, establishing international law criteria for statehood. It was here that Roosevelt and Secretary of State Cordell Hull, who worked to build warm, personal relationships with Latin American officials,<sup>67</sup> announced the Good Neighbor Policy to an international audience. The term “good neighbor” was adopted from a 1928 speech by President Herbert Hoover.

The policy looked to strengthen relations on economic, political, and cultural fronts. It included two significant changes to past U.S. protocol in Latin America: nonintervention – the United States would not deploy armed forces to advance policy objectives in Latin America – and noninterference – the United States would not attempt to influence the domestic politics of Latin American countries.<sup>68</sup> New regulations were put in place to manage existing U.S. military intervention in Caribbean countries, with plans for mutual defense consultations rather than U.S.-dictated policy if the need arose. Treaties increased trade between the North and South continents of the Americas.

A history of sometimes meddlesome involvement of the United States in Latin American affairs can be traced at least as far back as the first half of the nineteenth

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<sup>67</sup> Bryce Wood, The Making of the Good Neighbor Policy (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961), 304.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 159.

century. In 1823 the Monroe Doctrine was instituted with the goal of protecting the Western Hemisphere from European interests. By 1876, the term “banana republic” came to be used for Latin American countries in which U.S. fruit companies, transportation, and communication had taken hold of foreign infrastructure and economy. The banana, so closely associated with Miranda’s performances over half a century later, became the symbol of a global economic strategy carried to fruition by the United States. In a 1904 speech to Congress President Theodore Roosevelt announced that the world demanded “the intervention of a civilized nation,” effectively declaring the United States guardians of all other countries. By the 1930s, economic depression plagued the U.S. and had spread throughout Latin America. Six Latin American countries, including Brazil, experienced military or extra-constitutional government changes toward more conservative, authoritarian regimes.<sup>69</sup> Interestingly, the Good Neighbor Policy promised noninterference regardless of the neighbor countries’ forms of government. “In other words,” Wood explains, “a Latin American state could be looked upon as a Good Neighbor regardless of its form of government or the civic liberties its citizens possessed.”<sup>70</sup>

The United States’ adoption of the Good Neighbor Policy after over half a century of reliance on force for political influence could be seen as a “sign that this country was coming of age as an imperial world power,” as the country seemed to realize that a new style of leadership was called for.<sup>71</sup> In a 1942 article, Graham Stuart, a Stanford University political scientist, wrote that “a short decade ago the United States was

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<sup>69</sup> Fred Fejes, Imperialism, Media, and the Good Neighbor (New Jersey: Ablex Publishing, 1986), 31.

<sup>70</sup> Wood, 160.

<sup>71</sup> Fejes, 76.



suspected, disliked, and feared from the Rio Grande to the Straits of Magellan.” He continues, “Unfortunately, the citizen of the United States had not the slightest conception of this unfriendly attitude.”<sup>72</sup> The idealistic plan was generally supported, as the American public felt that the Western Hemisphere could provide “an ideal laboratory to make the experiment of intelligent and fair international cooperation.”<sup>73</sup>

The Good Neighbor policy counted on reciprocity between Western Hemisphere countries to go along with the United States’ renouncement of the power of force, the idea that Washington could work to please Latin American countries and the opposite would also occur. “A major assumption underlying this conception of inter-American relations was the mutuality and harmony of interests among the American states,” Fejes explains.<sup>74</sup> In keeping with the policy, eleven Latin American countries quickly broke off diplomatic relations with the Axis powers in response to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941. Stuart’s account of the policy is full of optimistic praise: “Territorial aggression has been repudiated and abolished.... Justice and fair dealing no longer end at the national frontier.”<sup>75</sup>

But the Good Neighbor Policy was more than treaties and trade agreements. Besides economic interests, there was the question of security: the United States needed to keep South American countries on its side of the war. “A more serious threat to the sympathetic understanding between the United States and Latin America has been the

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<sup>72</sup> Stuart, 211.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 215.

<sup>74</sup> Fejes, 68.

<sup>75</sup> Stuart, 214-215.

sinister propaganda of the Nazi organization in South America,” Stuart explained.<sup>76</sup> The policy had huge cultural implications for all countries involved. Stuart writes:

The fundamental requirement [to maintain the spirit of cooperation] is better understanding, an effective solidarity of mind and spirit as well as material interests. For lack of a better term this has been called cultural relations. In reality it includes every medium of communication and every facility for closer acquaintanceship.<sup>77</sup>

International travel by steamship and airplane was improved, and the U.S. turned to various forms of media to secure the cultural allegiance of Latin America. Roosevelt’s administration competed with Germany to produce films, publications, radio programs, and other forms of mass communication directed at the Latin American public.

Geographic proximity would not necessarily be enough to secure Latin American allegiance during the war. “It soon became apparent,” Fejes writes, “that United States hemispheric hegemony were being threatened.”<sup>78</sup> In 1933 Nazi Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels issued a secret directive “detailing plans for an extensive propaganda campaign aimed at the Americas.”<sup>79</sup> By March 1937, Nazi influence was strong enough in Latin America for Nazi-dominated German communities in Latin America to publicly celebrate the “Day of the German People” with swastikas and pro-Nazi demonstrations.<sup>80</sup>

Newspapers and magazines published by the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs abounded in Brazil and other countries. In Brazil alone, four hundred twenty-two such publications could be found.<sup>81</sup> Mendonça calls the efforts “a massive attack of

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<sup>76</sup> Stuart, 213.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 214-5.

<sup>78</sup> Fejes, 66.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

<sup>81</sup> Mendonça, 84.

Yankee communication.”<sup>82</sup> Weekly film specials were produced in the United States for Latin American viewers, often featuring advice and information about health, U.S. culture, and the evils of the Axis powers. Publications often emphasized wartime commonalities, like the implementation of food rations throughout the Americas, or happy coexistence: Mexican workers in the United States, Brazilian soldiers training with American regiments.<sup>83</sup> Events in Latin America were deliberately included in American news reports, and Brazil’s Department of Press and Advertising was notified whenever Brazil was mentioned. Roosevelt’s administration also began to use shortwave radio broadcasting to reach Latin American listeners, working with private, commercial broadcasting companies.

In Brazil, Vargas was also taking careful control of communication. His *Hora do Brasil* [Brazil Hour] radio show allowed him to reach out to the public regularly. When CBS produced a special called *Miss Miranda Day* in the United States, the show was broadcast during *Hora do Brasil* so that her countrymen and women could hear her latest sambas.<sup>84</sup>

Before the Good Neighbor Policy, the American government had rarely promoted or even supported cultural exchange between the North and South American continents. But even in the Policy’s earliest formulations, cultural and educational exchange (some students and professors were able to take advantage of government-sponsored excursions to foreign universities) began to be seen as “an instrument of foreign policy,” perhaps

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 84.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 88.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 79.

even of equal importance to trade agreements and military declarations.<sup>85</sup> Music and film were produced with the intention of educating different populations about one other – with careful attention to what messages were being sent, of course. Stuart describes “films depicting our [American] national parks, our army and navy, our agricultural developments... Hollywood is now producing historical films such as *Juarez* [1939] and [*The Life of Simon*] *Bolívar* [1942], and has eliminated the sensational, highly colored Mexican bandit and Argentinian gigolo type.”<sup>86</sup> Media emphasized a common heritage, mutual interests, and distinct identity for the Americas, in contrast to Europe and Asia.<sup>87</sup>

A series of new departments and government organizations were established to carry out the government’s cultural projects. In 1938 the State Department established its Division of Cultural Relations to oversee educational and cultural exchange, and an Interdepartmental Committee on the Cooperation with the American Republics was set up to coordinate government-based cultural projects in Latin America. With the outbreak of war, the Division of Cultural Relations was expanded, and the Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs, which also fell under the supervision of the State Department, was established. Headed by businessman and politician Nelson Rockefeller, the office lasted from 1940-46, essentially long enough to assure the United States’ wartime interests in Latin America. Rockefeller, a longtime patron of the arts, traveled many times to Latin America for the arts as well as for business. The Office of the Coordinator sponsored archaeology, painting, dance, and artistic tours through Latin American. In 1941, Rockefeller’s interest in Lincoln Kirstein’s American Ballet Caravan

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<sup>85</sup> Fejes, 72.

<sup>86</sup> Stuart, 215.

<sup>87</sup> Fejes, 77.

prompted a State Department “goodwill” tour of Latin America for thirty-six dancers and eleven staff members of the company. Ballet Caravan traveled for four months, performing in Venezuela, Uruguay, Argentina, Chile, Bolivia, Peru, Ecuador, Colombia, and Brazil. The Office of the Coordinator also implemented programs to teach English, set up American schools, and improve rural education in Latin American countries.

The cultural aspects of the Good Neighbor Policy can be seen as the products of an expansion of some of President Roosevelt’s New Deal policies. Visual artists, writers, and performers were supported by his administration under such policies as the Federal Art Project, Federal Music Project, Federal Writer’s Projects, and Federal Theatre Project, which all fell under the purview of the Works Progress Administration (WPA).<sup>88</sup> Katherine Dunham, who saw herself as both an anthropologist and a dancer, received WPA grants for her work in the late 1930s, and explored dances from South America and the Caribbean. In *Carnival of Rhythm* (1941), a short film depicting Dunham’s company, she interprets the rhythms and stylizations of samba. One of the first black dancers to be taken seriously in the concert dance and musical arenas, Dunham sings in Portuguese and English in the opening number, and limits her dancing to gestures and small movements similar to the ones that Miranda performed.

Latin American governments and citizens generally saw the Good Neighbor Policy in a positive light, and it was widely applauded by the press. Despite earlier efforts by Coolidge and Hoover, the Roosevelt administration was given most of the praise and credit for improved intercontinental relations.<sup>89</sup> In Brazil, a fairly positive history with the U.S. made for an especially strong interaction. “Many Brazilians seemed to feel a kinship

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<sup>88</sup> Fejes, 77.

<sup>89</sup> Wood, 134.

with the United States in a similar isolation from the Spanish American countries,” Wood writes.<sup>90</sup> Extra cooperation suggests an especially close Brazil-United States connection. “Since early in the twentieth century, the United States had cultivated a special relationship with Brazil that amounted, according to some observers, to an unofficial alliance,” Pike writes.<sup>91</sup> In 1939 the Roosevelt administration set up beneficial trade agreements during Brazilian foreign minister Oswaldo Aranha’s visit to Washington, DC. By 1940 Brazil’s economy was closely tied to that of the United States, with all of its coffee industries “controlled or dependent upon United States markets,” according to Stuart. During the war, Brazil provided raw materials for U.S. production and hosted the U.S. military on international bases. There was a lingering concern that Brazil would switch to a trade agreement with Germany, and media studies scholar Fred Fejes suggests that Brazil, with its nationalist government and Vargas’ fascist leanings, was seen as “particularly vulnerable to Nazi blandishments.”<sup>92</sup> But Pike argues that, “There was no question, though, that Vargas and Aranha far and away preferred doing business with the United States, if only the United States would make it sufficiently worth their while.”<sup>93</sup>

Within the United States, the Good Neighbor Policy received bipartisan and public support. “Ever attentive to the changing winds of public opinion, FDR on the whole discovered considerable public support for his opening towards Latin Americans,” Pike writes, noting that this support would not have been possible with the country’s

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 300.

<sup>91</sup> Pike, 239.

<sup>92</sup> Fejes, 70.

<sup>93</sup> Pike, 239.

limited exposure to Latin American culture prior to the 1930s.<sup>94</sup> A 1940 poll showed that eighty-four percent of Americans were interested in learning more about Latin America.<sup>95</sup>

The entertainment industry ushered in a flood of Latin American musicians, actors, and dancers looking for – and finding – work in the United States. Focusing on film, the Motion Picture Society of the Americas was established to employ Latin American actors, supervise the film representations of “neighbor” countries, and encourage American actors and studios to work in Latin America. Some ambitious projects never panned out – such as a film to be directed by Orson Welles in Brazil. But others were major successes: Walt Disney’s Zé Carioca character, a parrot (Zé is a popular Brazilian nickname and *carioca* is the term for someone from Rio de Janeiro) became popular in Brazil and in the United States with the cartoon films *Saludos, Amigos* (1942) and *The Three Caballeros* (1944), the latter of which featured the voices of both Miranda and her sister Aurora. Movie theaters were supplemented by government agencies, hotels, and other official buildings as places to see documentary shorts from the United States in Latin America.<sup>96</sup>

The Motion Picture Society wanted to emphasize similarities in the Western hemisphere in order to strengthen cultural ties during the war. “Differences might be more picturesque,” the society explained, “but similarities are more important [in order to secure] mutual understanding.”<sup>97</sup> When differences were drawn out, they were differences between the United States and Latin America – not between Latin American countries. Although Wood suggests “a shift in the attitudes of North Americans away

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 114.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 134.

<sup>96</sup> Mendonça, 88.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 90.

from feelings of superiority, or at least away from public expression of them,”<sup>98</sup> depictions of Latin American countries and characters in U.S.-produced film of the era certainly continued to present limited, incorrect, and even condescending views of Central and South American neighbors.

The Brazilian committee in the Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs, working with Vargas’ Department of Press and Propaganda, advocated for depictions of Brazil that emphasized its European heritage, modernity, and wealth rather than images of the country as black, poor, and dirty. The Department went so far as to refuse to approve films that showed too many black faces, not wanting Americans to think that there were more blacks than whites in Brazil. The Brazilian ambassador to the United States suggested that 20<sup>th</sup>-Century Fox remove both scenes in Spanish and scenes with blacks from Carmen Miranda’s second film, *That Night in Rio* (1941), seeing them as equally misrepresentative.<sup>99</sup>

## 7. Miranda Hits Hollywood

Relegated to the sideline as Miranda’s popularity exploded, Lee Shubert struggled to keep rights to his discovery’s name and image.<sup>100</sup> Miranda employed Hollywood manager George Frank to begin contract negotiations, and in 1942 20<sup>th</sup> Century-Fox paid sixty thousand dollars to Shubert to end her contract.<sup>101</sup> She finished her *Sons o’Fun* tour and began filming *Springtime in the Rockies* (1942) with Fox.

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<sup>98</sup> Wood, 307.

<sup>99</sup> Mendonça, 89.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>101</sup> Castro, Carmen, 329.



She had stolen the show in her first film, *Down Argentine Way* (1940) “despite the fact (or maybe because of it) that she had nothing whatsoever to do with the plot,” Clive Hirschorn writes in his seven-decade record of the Hollywood musical genre.<sup>102</sup> Other notable “specialty” performers appeared as well, including the dancing Nicholas Brothers. Miranda also shone in her second film, *That Night in Rio* (1941), which Hirschorn calls “the quintessential Fox war-time musical – an over-blown, over-dressed, over-produced and thoroughly irresistible cornucopia of escapist ingredients.”<sup>103</sup> In *That Night in Rio*, Miranda Sang *Chica Chica Boom Chic* and *I-Yi-Yi-Yi-Yi (I Like You Very Much)*. Her musicians, the Banda da Lua, also appeared.

20<sup>th</sup> Century-Fox brought “another tuneful and colourful excursion into Latin America – Hollywood style” to the big screen in 1941, with *Weekend in Havana*, in which Miranda played a nightclub entertainer (“her usual role on such occasions”).<sup>104</sup> *Springtime in the Rockies* (1942) was reviewed by the *Chicago Daily Tribune* as “senseless, but eye intriguing... The basic plot is splashed over with songs and dances and the mouthings and eye and hand work of Carmen Miranda, who sure would be up a tree if she ever had to sing in the dark.”<sup>105</sup>

As Hollywood took on the task of distracting Americans from the war, presenting patriotic themes, and entertaining those making sacrifices at home and abroad, Miranda participated in the war effort in her own right, selling war bonds, visiting veteran hospitals, and performing at training grounds and factories. Several of her films were

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<sup>102</sup> Hirschorn, 178.

<sup>103</sup> Hirschorn, 186.

<sup>104</sup> Hirschorn, 198.

<sup>105</sup> Mae Tinée, “All the Usual Ingredients in Musical Film,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 11 December 1942, 30.

among the many directed at soldiers: *Four Jills in a Jeep* (1944), *Sing With the Stars* (1942), and *Something for the Boys* (1944).<sup>106</sup> After the war she was honored by the armed forces at Madison Square Garden.

Miranda was second-billed in *The Gang's All Here* (1943), a predictable, flashy musical in which she played a nightclub singer whose role in the “gang” is mostly one of comic relief. In one scene, the nightclub stage is transformed into a supposed tropical island for the song “Brazil,” with sixty women in bathing suit costumes moving in eye-catching formations, waving with giant bananas. The overall affect is one of wince-inducing camp, from Miranda’s entrance on an ox-pulled cart to the appearance of giant strawberries to add to the on-stage fruit salad.

By 1943 Miranda was one of the highest paid women in America, earning over \$200,000 each year. Her first top-starring role came in 1944, but *Greenwich Village* did not manage to bring the box office numbers that Fox and Miranda had expected from the Technicolor musical. She was also top-starred in *Something for the Boys*, which featured her musical numbers “Samba Boogie” and “Boom Brachee.”<sup>107</sup> Two years later, Miranda and costars floundered “hopelessly in the mire of mediocrity provided by scenarists” for *If I’m Lucky* (1946), which Hirschorn calls “a colourless piece of arrant nonsense, entirely bereft of convincing performances and without a single good tune.”<sup>108</sup> Especially considering Miranda’s popularity, it seems that 20<sup>th</sup> Century-Fox could have written films more attuned to Miranda’s real-life background. But while other studios made films specifically about her home country – *Brazil* (Republic Pictures, 1944), which did feature

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<sup>106</sup> Mendonça, 86.

<sup>107</sup> Hirschorn, 249.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 272.

Miranda's sister Aurora Miranda as a specialty dancer, and *The Thrill of Brazil* (Columbia, 1946), for example – Fox seemed to feel no need to tailor Carmen Miranda's roles.

Miranda received mixed reviews for all of her films, both in Brazil as well and the United States. Critics and audiences were entertained but rarely surprised by her costumes, characters, and routines. A *Chicago Daily Tribune* preview of an upcoming four-week performance at the Chez Peree night club predicted “the sort of entertainment that should be classified as pleasant rather than great. This is no disparagement of Miss Miranda's ability,” the 1947 article continued. “How many people do you know who are really pleasant associates?”<sup>109</sup>

The end of World War II shifted attention away from the Good Neighbor Policy, as U.S. attention turned to rebuilding war-torn Europe. Trade with European countries was resumed, and Latin America fell out of the sharp focus it had experienced during the war. In popular culture too, attention turned eastward rather than southward. “Rio de Janeiro and Havana were replaced by Paris as preferred romantic settings for musical films,”<sup>110</sup> Mendonça writes. On the other hand, Shay views the postwar period as a time when Americans started to see their lives as bland and, with a heightened international awareness, pushed themselves to explore exotic identities.<sup>111</sup>

The end of the war also marked the end of Hollywood's Golden Age. Beginning in 1948, anti-cartel laws broke up large movie theater chains, and competition from the television industry threatened the big screen. Miranda appeared on television programs

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<sup>109</sup> Davidson, sec E, 3.

<sup>110</sup> Mendonça, 106.

<sup>111</sup> Shay, 175.

like the popular *Milton Berle Show*. She performed more frequently in casinos and nightclubs, becoming the highest-paid entertainer in the United States in 1951.

With twelve films under her tutti-frutti hat after her first seven years in the United States, Miranda's career lost momentum toward the end of the war. Though she continued to appear in movies, her stardom was static. She remained internationally famous, but Miranda's parts continued to be limited to musical numbers as the roles of romantic heroines were all reserved for not simply American, but younger actresses. At the age of 34 years old, Miranda had already been labeled "aging" by the Brazilian press and treated as such in the United States.<sup>112</sup>

Although the Good Neighbor Policy was no longer a priority for American government or the entertainment industry, Miranda still hoped to be seen as a cultural ambassador. In several instances she told fans or interviewers about a desire to move beyond the comic, generically Latina role that she had, by now, perfected. Photographer Ted Allan noticed that she seemed to want to change her well-established image, "exchange the exotic for pure Hollywood glamour."<sup>113</sup> Shooting glamour shots of Miranda, Allan saw a largely unrealized potential to diversify her image. Miranda understood that her image was essentially a brand, a set personality that could bring in box office sales for years if she stuck to a limited persona, but she wanted more.<sup>114</sup> But Fox and other studios were unwilling to make changes to a successful mold. While Miranda was rumored to have added a "slight snub" to her nose by means of plastic surgery and regularly dyed her hair lighter shades, she was never cast in any role that did

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<sup>112</sup> Mendonça, 146.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 108-09.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

less than emphasize her foreignness. “The stereotype of the *bahiana* proved its irreversibility,” Mendonça writes.<sup>115</sup> As Miranda liked to winkingly tell her audiences, Hollywood insisted that “bananas is my business.” One of her songs, “I Make My Money With Bananas,” can be seen as an explicit complaint against typecasting,<sup>116</sup> although one review simply described it as “something of an explanation of her act.”<sup>117</sup> Miranda decided to leave 20<sup>th</sup>-Century Fox, seeking greater artistic freedom and opportunities. With the start of her free-lance career, Miranda hoped to travel in Europe and Brazil.

Despite her newfound independence, her first film away from Fox ultimately reiterated her familiar screen persona: “a Latin-American spitfire.”<sup>118</sup> Mendonça describes *Copacabana* (United Artists, 1947) as a “reminder of good neighbor and internal [Brazilian] propaganda.”<sup>119</sup> Miranda actually played two roles in the movie, donning a blonde wig and veil to impersonate a French chanteuse when not appearing in her familiar fruit hat and bright dress. Box office sales were disappointing.

*A Date With Judy* (MGM, 1948) provided the opportunity for Miranda to shine again in a supporting role (fourth billed). She sang *Cuanto La Gusta* (with Spanish lyrics) and in one scene – “unquestionably, the best in the show,” according to Hirschorn – teaches the leading man Wallace Beery how to rumba.<sup>120</sup> But Hirschorn describes her last film, *Scared Stiff* (1953), as a “sorry business.”<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 112.

<sup>117</sup> Davidson, sec E, 3.

<sup>118</sup> Hirschorn, 283.

<sup>119</sup> Mendonça, 147.

<sup>120</sup> Hirschorn, 295.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid., 336.

Her films were met with a mixture of pride and shame in Brazil, where audiences could easily see the egregious errors and cross-cultural conflation that ran rampant in films meant to depict Latin America. Despite “technical advisors” on hand to assist with regional details on movie sets, reviewers found that the American film industry seemed to “think everything is Cuba.”<sup>122</sup> Some Brazilian critics wrote that her comic talent was wasted on stereotype-entrenched American films. Her characters were only barely representative of her country. She always seemed to be playing the same role in every film, wearing a version of the same outfit, and bearing another vaguely Latina name: Rosita, Dorita, Chiquita, Chita, Querida, and Carmen. *Cinearte*, a Brazilian film magazine, described Miranda’s typical role as “an exaggerated and explosive Latina, the way Americans like.” Her characters alternated between the explosively emotional and the pathetically naïve, while her sensuality was either comically heightened or completely eliminated. Long after her English had improved considerably, producers at Fox had insisted that she keep up her exaggerated accent and grammatical errors, both on the screen and publicly.<sup>123</sup>

Brazilian audiences complained that her music was not Brazilian – she recorded rumbas, congas, foxtrots, and other rhythms. Many Brazilians, clearly aware of the stereotypes that Miranda came to regularly represent, did not want to be associated with what they considered to be “Negroid” depictions of samba.<sup>124</sup> Brazilian film writer Irineu Machado Soares told a *New York Herald Tribune* reporter that, “Cultured and modern people like Brazilians and Argentines cannot accept films in which their characterizations

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<sup>122</sup> Mendonça, 133.

<sup>123</sup> Castro, *Carmen*, 316.

<sup>124</sup> Mendonça, 133-4.

are totally absurd.”<sup>125</sup> In response to floods of opinions, Brazilian magazines organized their Letters to the Editor as either “for” or “against” Miranda’s most recent big screen appearances.

Latin American media scholar Simone Pereira de Sá identifies an important contradiction in regards to perception and reception of Miranda in Brazil.

As her success grew, the discomfort that some Brazilians felt with the image of Brazil that the singer presented in her international films and shows also grew. This is intriguing because, in the end, wasn’t this the same image constructed here in Brazil by the singer, with the help of various partners, throughout the 1930s? Was there some rupture between the “kingdom of samba, of happiness and of the *mulata*” construed by many hands in the 1930s... and the image of sensuality and tropical delight that Carmen Miranda internationalized?<sup>126</sup>

Page, writing in 1995, suggests that the mixed feelings from Brazilian fans are typical. “Recognition abroad is a highly priced commodity in an underdeveloped country like Brazil, even though Brazilians at times have a tendency to depreciate compatriots who have prospered in foreign lands.”<sup>127</sup> Miranda was criticized for her lack of support for Brazilian cinema and made no more films in Brazil after her arrival in the United States. Her American movies were nevertheless by far the most popular foreign films in Brazil.

Miranda was interviewed on Brazilian radio in 1953, for the first time in thirteen years. She took the opportunity to again express her love for the country of samba. The next year, a summer trip to Brazil was delayed until December on account of Miranda’s poor health. By this time, Miranda had fallen into alcoholism, which naturally affected her overall health and career. While in Brazil, rumors abounded about her illness, which

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 134.

<sup>126</sup> De Sá, 135.

<sup>127</sup> Page, 410.

seemed to be a complication of heart disease. There were some days when she did not leave her hotel, and her nightclub appearances were few.

In Brazil, Miranda found herself once again defending her overseas career. “Those antics that I performed in the movies were only for Americans to see,” she said of her movie roles.<sup>128</sup> Her public soon regained its love for the Brazilian Bombshell, reassured of her affection for the country. After four months in Brazil, Miranda returned to the United States, expressing a hope that she would eventually return to live in Brazil, or at least visit again in the near future.<sup>129</sup> But this was not to be. Miranda died of a heart attack in Los Angeles on August 5, 1955, at the age of forty-six, just after an appearance on the *Jimmy Durante Show*. Miranda had suffered a minor heart attack on the show, broadcast after her death, before a second, fatal attack at her home.<sup>130</sup>

Brazil entered a period of mourning, with constant news bulletins and official condolences from political figures and organizations. Her body arrived for burial in Rio de Janeiro a week after her death. The plane was met by news reporters and radio broadcasters, crowds of fans, and the “samba drums and cymbals”<sup>131</sup> of the military police band. Her coffin was open for viewing at the Town Hall and Miranda’s adoring public insisted on carrying her Brazilian flag-draped coffin to the cemetery to lay her in her final resting place. “One could sense the end of an era,” Mendonça writes.<sup>132</sup> Demands for official government homage were answered with streets named in her

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<sup>128</sup> Mendonça, 156.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, 158.

<sup>130</sup> Walter Ames, “Carmen Miranda’s Last Role Proves Distressing; New Pilot for Joan,” *Los Angeles Times*, 14 October 1955, 32.

<sup>131</sup> Reuters, “Samba Dirges Mark Carmen Miranda Rite,” *Washington Post*, 14 August 1955, A18.

<sup>132</sup> Mendonça, 163.



honor, and Miranda's husband, David Sebastian, helped to organize a foundation for heart disease and the Carmen Miranda Museum in Rio. Sebastian was granted the *Ordem do Cruzeiro do Sul* [Order of the Southern Cross] in recognition of his donation of Miranda's costumes to a 1957 exhibit.<sup>133</sup>

## 8. Conclusion

Miranda's legacy has always been controversial, as was her career. Wildly popular but also harshly critiqued, Miranda's career was always one that involved building bridges between different populations and cultures. At times, these roles converged in the context of common political and popular interests. At others, the competing expectations of her different audiences were impossible to satisfy.

Miranda's career helped propel samba to its position of national importance in Brazil, and her music is part of the soundtrack of an era. Two months after Miranda's death, however, she was referred to as a "national embarrassment" by a Brazilian daily publication, the *Diario de Noticias*. "Abroad, thanks to samba, we're judged as a nation of primitives, of sensual mestizos," the article complained.<sup>134</sup> Clearly, Vargas' vision of national unity had done little to eliminate racism in his country.

In a 2009 article entitled "Ela Nos Tornou Mais Brasileiros" [She Made Us More Brazilian], journalist Ruy Castro sought to reclaim the popularity of Miranda's career.<sup>135</sup> Responding to those who would draw on Miranda's Portuguese birth as a reason why she might be unfit to represent Brazil, he writes, "The Portuguese, as much as they liked

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<sup>133</sup> Ibid., 167.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid., 166-67.

<sup>135</sup> Ruy Castro, "Ela Nos Tornou Mais Brasileiros," *Jornal do Comercio*, Rio de Janeiro, 9 February 2009.

Carmen, always saw her as Brazilian. Brazilians did, too, except for half a dozen spiteful writers in the 1940s and 1950s.”<sup>136</sup> Despite the criticism that she received, Castro argues that Mirandas’s songs sung in Portuguese finally allowed everyday Brazilians of the 1930s to hear their own lives, interests, and troubles described in popular lyrics.

Further complicating Miranda’s legacy were the shifting tides in Brazilian popular music. The era of *samba exaltação* came to a close in Brazil even as Miranda filmed her last movies in the United States. Music from the 1930s and 1940s was outdated, associated with an older generation of musicians, and inextricably linked to the nationalism of the military dictatorship. The music that launched Miranda’s career in Brazil in the 1930s sounded “archaic,” while her American tunes “seemed ridiculous,” by the 1960s.<sup>137</sup> The popular Brazilian singer and songwriter Caetano Veloso published an article in the *New York Times* in 1991 explaining that, for his generation, which entered adolescence at the end of Miranda’s career in the 1950s and adulthood during the military dictatorship, “Carmen Miranda was, first, a cause for both pride and shame, and later, a symbol that inspired the merciless gaze we began to cast upon ourselves.”

Veloso believes that Miranda’s “universal” readability accounted for her huge success but was also her ball and chain, as “self-parody became her inescapable prison.” Today, it is difficult to watch Miranda in films like *The Gang’s All Here* without shuddering. “We were more inclined to see Carmen Miranda’s grotesqueness instead of her grace,” Veloso admits. Nevertheless, Miranda’s success and impact on Brazilian

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<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

<sup>137</sup> Caetano Veloso, “Caricature and Conqueror, Pride and Shame,” *New York Times*, 20 October 1991.

culture and the perception of Brazil abroad is undeniable: “Carmen had become one of the formative personalities of postwar American life.”<sup>138</sup>

In the 1960s, musicians including Veloso, Gal Costa, and Elza Soares founded a musical movement called Tropicalismo. As for the movement’s treatment of Miranda, “we discovered that she was both our caricature and our X-ray, and we began to take notice of her destiny.”<sup>139</sup> Veloso’s song *Tropicália*, which launched the Tropicalism movement, mentions Miranda and also winks at her singing style: “Carmen Miranda-da-da-da dada.”

Miranda is remembered as the woman who “brought music from the relatively high hills of Rio to the absurd height of skyscrapers.”<sup>140</sup> Her timing and ability to fuse cultural influences made her a key element to political plays in Brazil and in the U.S. But while she is still the subject of study, songs, and debate in Brazil, in the United States she is best known for a role that she turned down.

In 1944 Miranda declined to sing a jingle for the United Fruit Company. The company changed the intended name of its character from Carmen Banana to Chiquita Banana, however, and an icon was born. Today, the company is called Chiquita Brands International and still uses a logo reminiscent of Miranda singing a samba with fruit piled high on her head.

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<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

<sup>140</sup> Mendonça, 121.

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