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11

Racial Parity and National Humor: Exploring Brazilian Samba from Noel Rosa to Carmen Miranda, 1930–1939

Darién J. Davis

Technological advances in the twentieth century made the commodification of popular cultural traditions possible. In the case of Brazil, the commodification of samba (the music, the dance, and its connection to the great spectacle, Carnival) became inseparable from Brazilian identity. To the elites, such popular music forms were clearly associated with the lower classes and with people of color—those whom just a few decades earlier they had labeled uncivilized and premodern. The commodification of popular forms such as the samba allowed the creation of a national culture that presumably overcame racism. In the case of samba, a musical form central to the idea of Afro-Brazilianness was filtered through and mediated by representatives of the white middle class, performers who appropriated the music of poor people of color. The music and the lyrics remained linked to blacks, the original composers, but these artists were only tangentially recognized by white society. Darién Davis describes the emergence of Carmen Miranda as official negotiator between the samba tradition of poor blacks and mulattoes and white elite and middle-class consumers as the populist Vargas regime sought to create a national culture.

Brazil is not and never has been a racial democracy. Yet students of Brazilian history and culture cannot but marvel at the many cultural creations forged as a result of the melding (unequal, to be sure) of the three major civilizations on which Brazilian culture is based: the Luso-Portuguese, the African, and the Tupi-Guaraní. Late-nineteenth-century images of slaves and masters gave way to twentieth-century national representations that downplayed racial conflict and promoted an idealization that defended the status quo.¹ Still inadequately examined are the ideological and hegemonic

Source: *Latin America Popular Culture* (Delaware Scholar Resources 2001)

Although Miranda adamantly proclaimed herself apolitical, she enthusiastically promoted Brazilian popular music through a personal campaign that thrust her into the limelight, drawing praise from her nationalist-minded fans and criticism from others who believed she was a fraud. Indeed, her relationship with the Vargas regime was not incidental. Often called the "Smiling Dictator," a rubric bestowed on her by the journalist Cesar Ladeira, Miranda's position as representative and promoter of Brazilian popular music throughout South America received the support of Getúlio Vargas, the more important dictator of the time and someone she knew personally. Miranda's rise to national attention and ascent as the "Queen of Popular Music" in some respects paralleled Vargas's own emergence as a populist politician and "Father of the Poor."

The Vargas nationalist campaign promoted economic and cultural integration and a sense of a national family. This would be the basis of a new Brazil that he as paterfamilias would direct. Carmen Miranda soon became the matriarch of popular music and a crucial element in Vargas's vision of the new Brazil. Thus, with the support of many other artists and intellectuals, Vargas began a national integration policy that sought to forge a greater sense of national identity among the all too independent states of Brazil. Reforms included the creation of a federal bureaucracy, denying states the right to negotiate treaties, banning all foreign languages, and controlling immigration. Vargas also created a state media system and, through the Department of Press and Propaganda (DIP), maintained a sense of national order within which celebration of *brasilidade* could occur.

To promote national culture, Vargas sought out local talent he could rely on to represent Brazil and its national interests in various cultural forums, both at home and abroad. Recognizing the powerful force that music played in the lives of millions of Brazilians, Vargas established several national forums for the promotion of Brazilian popular music. He created the Brazilian Popular Music Day, supported the DIP's efforts in the weekly national music program *A Hora do Brasil*, and mandated under local *carioca* authorities that patriotic themes be a requirement for participation in Rio's Carnival, an event that was quickly becoming a national celebration despite its *carioca* venue. Satire and parody were encouraged, particularly around themes that criticized what the regime saw as unpatriotic.

Carmen Miranda, the talented yet sequacious "Remarkable Little Girl," fighting for national notoriety and a chance to interpret Brazilian popular music, became a natural Vargas ally. Like many Brazilian artists and musicians, she was influenced by the growing nationalism that urged Brazilians to promote their national culture. But Carmen Miranda was not Brazilian in the formal sense. She was born in Portugal and maintained a Portuguese passport for most of her life.⁹ Yet she became the embodiment of Brazilian popular music and an ambassador of black popular rhythms and forms such as

the *batucada* and the samba both within and outside of her adopted country. Miranda's personal commitment to Brazilian popular music at a time when many of the middle and upper classes shunned the would-be genre is well documented, and her emphatic declaration, "I never sing if I'm not absolutely identified with the spirit of the music and the lyrics," indicated that she was more politically compromised than she publicly admitted.¹⁰

Vargas, who had been Miranda's neighbor when they both lived in Catete, had appeared with her during the Day of Brazilian Popular Music in 1939. The local press, which was largely censored, particularly after the creation of the Estado Novo (New State) in 1937, had already baptized Miranda the "Queen of Samba" after she won a series of popular music competitions. The DIP, responsible for the Vargas regime's propaganda and censorship, played a significant role in promoting her performances abroad, and in 1939 it became Miranda's sponsor in the United States.¹¹

Miranda's commitment to *brasilidade* was never ideological. She harbored a personal commitment based on her desire to prove her own Brazilian-ness and to be recognized not as a Portuguese immigrant but as a native Brazilian. She gravitated to musical forms and rhythms that were part of her life experience, the forms and rhythms of the black and mulatto musicians who surrounded her, and the songs and music that pervaded the lower and lower-middle classes of Rio de Janeiro. After her travels throughout Brazil she appropriated the role of the *bahiana*, one of the most recognized national types and the only female icon that rivaled the male prototypes such as the *malandro* (dandy), the *gaúcho* (cowboy), and the *jagunço* (gunman). Clearly conscious of the power dynamics inherent in her appropriation of the *bahiana* role, she never sang or performed her music in a straightforward manner. She injected sensuality, wit, playfulness, humor, and satire into the captivating songs written for her.

In the 1930s, song festivals or modest concerts were the major forums for displaying popular music to the growing middle classes, although more and more records were beginning to propagate the talents of popular greats such as Mario Reis, Francisco "Chico" Alves, and Carmen Miranda. Of course, public performances abounded in *favelas* and in public spaces such as Praça Onze. Yet few of the *favelados* received national recognition, although the musical productions associated with Rio's Carnival quickly gained national fame. Indeed, only a handful of performers, including Miranda, Francisco Alves, Stefana de Macedo, and Gastão Formenti, dominated the radio stations and the attention of the press. The most popular interpreters of samba emerged from song festivals or concerts such as Noite Brasileira, Tarde da Alma Brasileira, and Tarde do Folklore Brasileiro. All were organized in the major theaters in Rio.¹² As early as 1933, Carmen Miranda was certainly at the top of the list. Only a few performers, those well received at the festivals, went on to perform for the radio stations.

First discovered in 1929, when Josué de Barros took her to a Radio Sociedade song festival at the age of twenty, Carmen Miranda was destined to become the major female radio star, rivaling RCA's Chico Alves. Within a year Miranda became so successful that she was the first singer to receive a contract from a radio station, Radio Mayrick Viegá, and she performed with unprecedented regularity for other radio stations. In 1934, listeners elected her the "Rainha do Broadcasting Carioca" (Queen of Carioca Broadcasting) in a competition held by the newspaper *A Hora*. Only a year earlier she had traveled to Argentina as the "Ambassador do Samba," after winning another national competition, the Concurso Nação-Untisal.¹³

Miranda showcased the writing talents of almost every major composer of the 1930s. Her performance, a perfect reflection of an age of national optimism, joviality, and pride in Brazil, brought her praise from many quarters. Through her raw talent and vivacious will, she won the hearts of the middle and popular classes that Vargas had so diligently courted. However, because of her use of the popular idiom and the attention she received, she was to meet with widespread criticism from the elite accustomed to promoting European and Euro-Brazilian culture. As José Ramos Tinhorão reports in his *História social da música popular brasileira*, while the elite and upper-middle class still looked to Europe, the culture of the urban masses was about to explode nationally, and Miranda would play a significant role.¹⁴ With reason, she was known as the "Remarkable Little Girl," practically an upstart, who had taken black music and was promoting it as Brazilian.

Race and Humor in Miranda's Performance

Despite the overwhelming importance of Africans and their descendants, prior to the 1930s, Brazilian nationhood was largely a white construction. In the 1920s modernist writers began to change that perception, and by the 1930s blacks were celebrated, although rhetorically, as a crucial link in the construction of "Brazilian race." Writers such as Gilberto Freyre constructed what they deemed a viable and stable myth in a time of national turbulence, an activity that struck Emilia Viotti da Costa as a "Proustian search for a lost past."¹⁵

Whereas sexuality played a crucial role in Freyre's construction and rendition of nationhood and blackness,¹⁶ Miranda's evocation of Brazilian sexuality, and of black mulatto sensuality in particular, was balanced with humor. That blacks and mulattoes appeared in Miranda's songs is no surprise. This was popular music, after all. More compelling was the voice that Miranda, a white woman, assumed as a performer and recording artist. It was a voice that chronicled life among blacks, mulattoes, and the popular classes. This was partly due to the fact that many of Miranda's writers were black or mulatto (for example, Assis Valente, Synval Silva, Pixinguinha, Dorival Caymmi). At

the same time, she had no compunction about assuming the *favelada's* or the mulatta's poetic voice or becoming the storyteller or the satirist of the popular classes.

Carmen succeeded in becoming a "Brazilian singer" largely through the use of humor and folklore and by presenting stereotypical images familiar to a national audiences of blacks and mulattoes. On a few occasions she lent her satirical style to social criticism in a manner atypical of her time. Her passion for the popular vernacular often led people to call her vulgar. That "vulgarity," however, allowed her to break racial taboos and defy gender roles that sought to confine women. By singing comedic and satirical samba tunes rather than ballads (*canções*) or folksongs (*folk-lore*), Carmen presented the popular language, rhythm, and aesthetic qualities of a music with mostly African influences. Although much of the black culture content emerged in picturesque form, she clearly encouraged the celebration of popular culture songs such as "Disso e que eu gosto" (That's what I like).¹⁷

The celebration of popular music by a nationally known artist, coupled with official state support, helped expand the audience for samba. Miranda's role can be likened to that of a crossover artist who succeeds in acquiring a wider audience for her music when she becomes more mainstream. But Miranda was no crossover. She was a bridge between the national and the popular. Part of the success of her performance lay in its subversive, satirical quality. On the one hand, many of the songs that she recorded explicitly called for a recognition of the legitimacy of popular music and thus represented an implicit criticism of bourgeois cultural values. She never begged audiences to value popular music but rather demanded it in humorous ways, or more accurately aggressively claimed authority very often associated with humor.¹⁸ On the other hand, her role as an agent in "gentrifying" popular music is undeniable. She served as a middle-class vehicle between the mostly black and mulatto *favelados* and the nation. In an unconventional publication based on personal interviews and conversations with Carmen Miranda, Dulce Damasceno de Brito, a journalist and friend of Miranda's, displayed her own (middle-class?) prejudice toward popular music when she wrote, "Her special style gave popular music something that it lacked: class."¹⁹

Miranda's early domination of the recording industry with such classics as "Se o samba e moda" (1930), "Táí o para você gostar de mim" (1930), and "Moleque indigesto" (1933) guaranteed her a place in early Brazilian films such as *Voz do Carnaval* (1933), *Alô, Alô Brasil* (1935), and *Alô, Alô Carnaval* (1936). Although the incipient patriotism that her songs promoted marked her as a product of the Vargas era, her representation of the voices of blacks and mulattoes linked her to the cultural populism of the modernists. She was so popular that composing giants such as Pixinguinha²⁰ and others of the Velha Guarda wrote compositions for her, as did young and coming artists such as the Bahian Dorival Caymmi, who provided her with much of

the inspiration for the *bahiana* image that she later took to Broadway and Hollywood.²¹

Her hymns to the Brazilian nation and Brazilian culture include such playful renditions as "Minha terra tem palmeiras," written by João Barro and Albert Ribeiro. Her rendition of Amado Regis's samba "O samba e o tango" juxtaposed the rhythms of the Brazilian samba with those of the Argentine tango.²² Despite the explicit message of national pride, both songs defy the solemnity associated with die-hard nationalists who presented Brazil in ultra-idealistic imagery. "O samba e o tango" is essentially a playful nationalist battle between Brazil and Argentina in which Brazil prevails, while "Minha terra tem palmeiras," a *marcha*, presents Brazil as a land of rum, rhythm, fruit, blondes, and chocolate *morenas*, where one can "cut loose." The satire is found not only in explicit references in the lyrics but also in Carmen's own playful performance style and in the samba and *marcha* rhythms, which sometimes lend themselves to celebratory humor, mockery, or surprise.

"Eu gosto da minha terra" (I like my country), by R. Montenegro, which Carmen recorded with the Victor Orchestra in August 1930, lauds Brazilian civilization and the Brazilian "race" that resulted in so many beauties and pleasures:

Of this so beautiful Brazil
I am a daughter, I live happily.
I am proud of the race
Of pure people of my country.
Look at my gaze
(For) it says that I am Brazilian,
And my samba reveals
That I am a child of this country.

I am Brazilian, I have a magical charm.
I like samba,
I was born for this.
The foxtrot does not compare
With our samba; that is a rare jewel.
I know how to say better than anyone
All the beauty that the samba has.
I am Brazilian, I live happily.
I like the things of my country.

I like my country and I always want to live here
To see the very beautiful Southern Cross
From the skies of the land where I was born.
Abroad, out of tune,
Samba loses its value.
Yes! I'll remain in my land.²³

"Eu gosto da minha terra" is compelling because of its unequivocal faith in Brazil. The ultrapatriotic message given a playful execution became a

Miranda trademark evident in other songs, such as "Terra morena," which proclaims that "God is Brazilian," and "Nova descoberta," which describes Cabral's love affair with Brazil.²⁴ Such exaggerations made Brazilians feel good about their nation and was a vital part of Carmen's humor that endeared her to her public.

In the first stanza of "I Like My Country," a somewhat trivial title (instead of "I Love My Country") that keeps solemnity to a minimum, the singer hails the Brazilian landscapes and applauds, in the tradition of racial democracy, a sense of a cosmic Brazilian race to which she belongs. The second stanza reinforces an appreciation for popular culture, such as the samba, and a rejection of foreign influences, much as did the nationalist-minded *antropófagos* of the modernists of the 1920s.²⁵ Finally, she rejects exile or going abroad, to remain in her national home. Sung by a woman born in Portugal who maintained her Portuguese passport, this song is an affirmation of Miranda's own sense of *brasilidade*—an issue Miranda would grapple with all her life.

According to Damasceno de Brito, Miranda considered herself Brazilian. "I was born in Portugal. But I consider myself Brazilian. I am more carioca, a sambista from the favela, more carnavalesca than a singer of fados."²⁶ That Carmen considered herself "carnavalesque" underscores her vision of herself within the satirical Brazilian musical genre. Nonetheless, Brazilians were saddened when they found out that she was born in Portugal and not in Brazil, an issue that would later provide critics with reason to disown her.²⁷ On the other hand, the fact that she was Portuguese and chose to celebrate her Brazilian identity was manipulated to promote Brazil's encompassing sense of racial democracy. Indeed, Vargas's anti-immigrant tactics, which increased during World War II, all but forced immigrants with strong foreign identities to embrace Brazil. Thus, Carmen's evocation of a Brazilian race connected her once again with Gilberto Freyre and other theorists of racial democracy while downplaying her foreign birth.²⁸

The adaptation of the Portuguese to the tropics, a crucial element of Brazilian racial democracy that endowed the Portuguese with a propensity to mix peacefully with other cultures, was emphasized in Paulo Barbosa and Vicente Paiva's 1935 hit, "Salada portuguesa" (Portuguese salad):

My green path
Once came from Portugal.
Come, my people, let's celebrate Carnival.
Manuel joins the parade, and so does Maria.
During the three days of merriment
Pierre and Colombina, Father John and black Mina too.
Grandfather already told me:
In Brazil there is happiness.
Carnival has existed
Since the days of Cabral.²⁹

This simple carnival tune acknowledges a Brazilian greatness independent of the Portuguese, without mentioning the indigenous populations. It was a Portuguese mariner, Cabral, the first Portuguese to land in Brazil, in 1500, who according to this song first perceived the "Brazilian joy" in this somewhat anachronistic melody. According to Edigar de Alencar, the song was accepted as a carnival entry precisely because it gave Brazilians the opportunity to present themselves in more favorable terms than the Portuguese, yet it also allowed immigrant families such as Carmen's to affirm a Brazilian-Portuguese connection.³⁰

Nonconfrontational, frivolous musical compositions proliferated in the 1930s, owing in part to the DIP's censorship machine and in part to the general tendency toward national celebration. However, many musicians insisted on social commentary and criticism within this broader frame of national pride. Carmen Miranda was among them. Her status as the "Ambassador of Brazilian Popular Music" afforded her an opportunity to comment on social relations and to address the nation didactically. Her "carnavalesque" aesthetic elicited laughter but challenged authority (within limits).

"Sahe da toca Brasil," a poignant example of her social critique style, managed to be nonconfrontational while stressing the need for Brazilians, particularly white Brazilians, to change their attitude toward blacks. At the same time, the song also seems to criticize the *favela* dwellers for being complacent. Miranda and her musicians and writers wrapped their poignant lyrics in a rumba tune, in a manner that might seem contradictory. The song begins with a solemn pulsating instrumental before becoming a dance tune rumba that implores its listeners to "Sahe da toca Brasil. Teu lugar não é aí" (Get up from your burrows, Brazil. That's no place for you), implying a greater place to be conquered. The song chronicles the ascent of national music from the slave quarters to the salons, imploring all Brazilians to understand the significance of that change:

Brazil, which used to be a slave quarter
Danced in the macumba, striking its feet on the ground.
It is good not to ever forget that
The dance is now in the ballroom.

Brazil, leave the favela [the past]!
The skyscraper is what matters [modernity].
It's too sad that many good people
Loving you so much, do not understand you.

Brazil of the two avenues
of Copacabana Beach and of the asphalt,
To your people bright and strong
No one ever has sung to very loudly.³¹

Stanza two laments that many people do not understand that it is time to change, while stanza three claims that no other country has "sung to" or cel-

ebrated "a tua gente branca e forte." The double meaning of "branca e forte"—bright and strong, white and strong—provided a surreptitious venue for social criticism with sarcasm, a venue often employed by Carmen.

Race relations became more explicitly the subject of Miranda's 1939 recording of "Preto e branco" (Black and white). Technically a dialogue-like duet with Almirante (A; Carmen is C), "Preto e branco" offers a humorous look at race relations in Brazil while at the same time criticizing Brazil's aversion to blackness:

- C: They say that those whites of today are angry at all blacks.
A: What is good is black: Black is the Diamond [Brazilian soccer player], and coffee. . .
C: Black is the gaze of Mary, the wife of St. Joseph. . .
A: Black is the ink we write with that gives value to the paper. . .
C: Black is carbon that makes fire and passes through the chimney. . .
A: To give work to men. . .
C: And black was St. Benedict, in whom whites have so much faith. . .
A: And the mouth of the night is black, like a black man from Guinea.
C: The snow is sometimes more black than any black woman you'll see.
Black is the hair of the virgin. . .
A: And the beard of St. Miguel. . .
C: The feathers of the goose are black.
A: Love pains are also.
C: Only whites don't want to be black.
A: The mulattoes don't want to either.
But black's consolation, let anyone say it,
Is that God made him white.
C: Where was that?
A: On the soles of his feet.
C: Very good!³²

Audiences hearing the sardonic humor of "Preto e branco," which might have caused them unease at the outset, got a catharsis with the last verse, which diffuses any tension: God also made blacks white, but in a particularly unnoticeable and humorous place.

Humor, particularly caricature, often has as its victims those who are laughed at by the comic performer or observer, and Brazilian racial humor often came at the expense of blacks. While Carmen unconditionally renounced racism and her racial satire often carried humorous social commentary, her songs often reinforced stereotypes prevalent in the 1930s. "O nego no samba," for example, recorded by Carmen Miranda with the Victor Brasileira Orquestra in December 1929 and released in May 1930, underscores the natural ability of blacks to dance and the whites' difficulty in acquiring these "Brazilian talents":

Black samba
Sways the hip.
Black samba
Has *parati* [a type of rum].
Black samba, oh, oh,
Always on the beat.
Black samba, my sweetheart,
Makes me crazy.

In samba, whites break into pieces.
In samba, a good black has a swell time.
In samba, whites don't have a chance, my good friend
For samba—blacks are born to do it.³³

This samba affords the singer an omniscient vision that she enjoys and celebrates with her listeners, all the while reinforcing the exoticism and the voyeuristic nature of white-black cultural interactions.

In the 1935 release of the *marcha* "Mulatinho bamba" (Smart little mulatto), Miranda reinforced similar qualities of the mulatto, only now with more sensual undertones and an emphasis on his physical beauty:

Mulatinho bamba,
Oh mulatto, my little mulatto bamba,
How you distinguish yourself when you samba.

In the circle he's a revelation,
When he stamps his feet
My heart begins to beat,
And he knows how to perform a step
Dancing with elegance
To the rhythm.

He doesn't walk around armed with a knife
Nor with a kerchief on his chest
Nor a straw hat.
A fine mulatto, he is well-dressed.
He has gestures and attitudes
Of a congressman.

Because of this dear mulatto
I remain at the window
All day,
When he walks by on the sidewalk
He seems like a Clark Gable
In chains.³⁴

Here it is important to pay attention to the poetic voice, which is that of a (probably) black or mulatta woman from the popular classes. Despite the rhetoric of racial democracy, the unwritten social norms considered interracial romance or marriage a taboo. Blacks were better off with blacks, mulattoes with mulattoes, and whites with whites. Nonetheless, in this song Carmen

Miranda, the white performer, once again assumes the role of a voyeur who is seduced by the beauty and elegance of a mulatto. Moreover, the third stanza offers a positive image of a mulatto, who implicitly denounces the *malandro* by refusing to carry a knife. Such positive appraisals were fully in step with the Vargas regime, notorious for its condemnation of antisocial behavior among the popular classes.

The narrative voice in the 1934 "A voltar do samba" (Coming back from the samba) further indicates the necessity of white performers appropriating the voice of mulattoes or mulattas in order to sing their story.

Returning home from the samba
Oh, God, I feel so tired
After returning from the *batucada*
That I participated in at Praça Onze.
I won a bronze harlequin.

My sandal heel broke
And I lost my mulatto there on the pavement.

I'm not interested in knowing. . . .
Someone came to tell me
That he found you grieving
With tears in your eyes, crying.
Cry, mulatto, my pleasure comes from seeing you suffer
So that you know how much I loved you
And how I suffered to forget you.

You were my friend
And I don't know why
I met you in the circle dancing
With a tambourine in your hand, keeping the beat.
Now, mulatto, for you I will not do anything disrespectful
I'm going for revenge and. . . .³⁵

Carmen's appropriation of the voice of a *favelada*, most likely a mulatta, is itself satire. Only in this populist dynamic could she lecture her audience without bringing ridicule on herself.

Miranda's rendition of the problems of the poor and the working classes was not altogether inappropriate. Her father was a barber, and she herself worked in a hat shop before being discovered. It is likely that she did not see her performance and recordings of popular music as appropriation but considered them part of her own experience. Moreover, her presentations of black terms, images, and rhythms were not always within a racially hegemonic context. Miranda inserted herself within a broader context as an interpreter of the popular aesthetic. Her speaking as a *favelada* aids her in expressing the view from the *morro*.

"Recenseamento," recorded in 1939, has a reference to a 1940 census describing the poverty in the *morro*, yet it emphasizes the role of music and celebration in making life worthwhile, a matter of national pride:

I obey everything that is law
 Afterward I became quiet and sad.
 My brown-skinned boy is Brazilian, he's a rifleman,
 He's one of those who go out with a flag on his battalion.

Our house is nothing great
 But we live in poverty without owing one cent.
 We have a tambourine, a *cutca*, and a *tamborim*,
 A reco-reco and a small guitar and a big one too.³⁶

Others, such as "O imperador do samba,"³⁷ "Gente bamba,"³⁸ and "Deixe esse povo falar,"³⁹ underscore the importance of respect for popular music and the importance of music to the national soul. "O imperador do samba," for example, begins by asking the audience for silence, respect, and order because the emperor and the empress are about to enter. The double meaning is clear: Carnival is fantasy, but an emperor is an emperor and deserves respect. At the same time, the solemn mood of this samba gives it a seriousness that calls for respect. This theme is repeated in a more upbeat manner in songs such as "Minha embaixada chegou," recorded in 1939.⁴⁰ Roberto da Matta has written extensively on Carnival's role in subverting the social order.⁴¹ Unfortunately, within a wider social context, the benefactors of the humor and satire germane to Brazilian Carnival are the upper and middle classes, who are mostly white.

Not all of the compositions of this period that make reference to blacks or mulattoes are altogether stereotypical. "A preta do Acarajé," first recorded as a duet with Dorival Caymmi and Miranda (1939), presents elements of the Bahian folklore in nonstereotypical terms. It describes a scene at ten o'clock on the streets of Salvador while also emphasizing the hard work that blacks often endured to produce something pleasurable for consumption: "Todo mundo gosta de acarajé" (Everyone likes *acarajé*) but "ninguém quer saber o trabalho que dá" (No one wants to know how much work it takes).⁴² Nonetheless, taken as a whole, images of blacks, even in popular music, remained relatively static during World War II. Interestingly, it is this image of the *Bahiana*, the most folkloric black female icon in Brazil, that Miranda adopted in 1939 and was to catapult her to stardom in the United States.

Neither Brazil nor the United States was ready for images of the black popular masses to grace important national media such as radio and film. Indeed, Orson Welles's film of Carnival celebrations in Rio that depicted black youth dancing and celebrating was never released because, according to Welles, the Hollywood studio executives never even listened to the music, believing that "he [was] just shooting a lot of jigaboos jumping up and down."⁴³ Thus, the artificial black *Bahiana* with a white face who was dressed like an overgrown fruit remained the image of Brazil. Miranda was not deceiving herself, however. She was quite aware that her act was all in fun. Despite modern multicultural sensibilities, which might criticize her ignorance or

nonchalance about the repercussions of her actions, her musical career was responsible for showcasing the talents of many composers and musicians who might not have had other venues.

When Carmen Miranda left for the United States, in 1939, her farewell song was "Adeus batucada," written by Sinval Silva, a composer and also her chauffeur.⁴⁴ The *batucada*, as Mario de Andrade reports, "was a popular synonym for the samba in the 1920s and 1930s."⁴⁵ That an ode to samba became a metaphor for her farewell to Brazil was not coincidental. After Miranda left Brazil, her musical performance changed dramatically. Although she left as an ambassador of Brazil, she ended up playing and singing more rumbas, congas, and other Spanish-speaking hybrid styles than Brazilian forms. She may have honored the samba, as the lyrics say, but it was mostly in private.

Her journey north occurred precisely at the moment when she had made the appropriation of a black musical icon complete. Her musical partnership with Caymmi had allowed her to discover and tailor the *Bahiana* to her own fruttu taste until her death in 1955. Indeed, Carmen's personal style and charisma and her sense of humor were often considered as outrageous as her outfits, partly because she was a white woman with money who put on black costumes and promoted black music.⁴⁶ No wonder some in the Brazilian elite resented her. Remarkably, it was the popular classes that continued to support her throughout the 1940s and early 1950s.

Despite her stereotypical representations, Miranda had showcased images and styles from the popular classes. She exploited humor to preach to both black and white Brazilians about race and nationhood in a nonconfrontational manner precisely at a time when the myth of racial democracy was most powerful. The Brazilian system certainly allowed her to rise on the coattails of black and mulatto entertainers and composers, and Vargas's nationalist-minded regime assured her of contracts and an audience. Yet she also served as a conduit through which many lesser-known musicians could present their talents. Brazilian white racial hegemony, like hegemony elsewhere, provided a set of rules that defined the perimeters of human opportunity, and Vargas's focus on nation to the exclusion of race further marginalized many emerging black voices. Performers and artists implicated in the system must certainly be examined on an individual basis. Carmen Miranda, the musician, performer, entertainer, and satirist with a host of competing motivations, certainly deserves more attention.

Notes

1. Emilia Viotti da Costa, *The Brazilian Empire: Myths and Histories* (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1985), 137.

2. Defining black music is a difficult proposition, for it is not necessarily determined by such recognizable stylistic traits as African rhythms or structures. Peter Wade argues that black music is defined within the context of power relations, and thus

"blackness" is partly determined by a given community's perceptions. Peter Wade, "Black Music and Cultural Syncretism in Colombia," in *Slavery and Beyond: The African Impact on Latin America and the Caribbean* (Wilmington, Del.: SR Books, 1995), 121-46.

3. Franz Fanon, *Black Face, White Mask* (New York: Grove Press, 1967).

4. According to some estimates, 50 percent of the population was illiterate. Rosemary Thorp, *Progress, Poverty, and Exclusion: An Economic History of Latin America in the 20th Century* (Washington, D.C.: InterAmerican Development Bank, 1998), 354.

5. Michael L. Conniff, *Urban Politics in Brazil; The Rise of Populism, 1925-1945* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1981).

6. The New Song Movement was a leftist-motivated Latin American renaissance that aimed to create compositions that were socially meaningful, and that employed Latin American popular rhythms and musical forms in an effort to celebrate local or national traditions. Musicians such as Silvio Rodríguez and Pablo Milanés in Cuba, Chico Buarque in Brazil, and Violeta Parra in Chile are considered pioneers of the movement.

7. Sigmund Freud, "Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud* (London: Hogarth Press, 1960), VII:221.

8. *Ibid.*, 220.

9. Carmen Miranda requested a Brazilian passport in 1948, but Brazilian authorities did not grant her one until 1953 so that she could complete a European tour to showcase her music.

10. Carmen Miranda's statement is quoted in Martha Gil Montero, *The Brazilian Bombshell: The Biography of Carmen Miranda* (New York: Donald I. Fine, 1989), 31.

11. Abel Cardoso Junior, *Carmen Miranda, a cantora do Brasil* (São Paulo: Símbolo S.A. Indústrias Gráficas, 1978), 97-100; Gil Montero, *Brazilian Bombshell*, 72.

12. Cardoso Junior, *Carmen*, 19-20.

13. *Ibid.*

14. José Ramos Tinhorão, *Historia social da música popular brasileira* (Lisbon: Editorial Caminho, 1990), 207.

15. Viotti da Costa, *The Brazilian Empire*, 244.

16. See for example, Jeffrey Needell, "Identity, Race, Gender and Modernity in the Origins of Gilberto Freyre's Oeuvre," *American Historical Review* 100, no. 1 (February 1995): 51-77.

17. Recorded on September 6, 1940.

18. See, for example, J. D. Flugel, "Humor and Laughter," in *Handbook of Social Psychology* (1954), 2:709-16. See also Freud, "Jokes," 200.

19. Dulce Damasceno de Brito, introduction, *O ABC de Carmen Miranda* (São Paulo: Companhia Editora Nacional, 1986). In the original Portuguese quotation, "Sua bossa especial deu a música popular algo que lhe faltava: classe," de Brito inadvertently creates a pun with the use of *classe* (class). The popular class had no class, and it takes someone from the middle class to give their music "class."

20. Alfred da Rocha Vianna, Jr. (1898-1970), better known as Pixiguinha, was one of Brazil's most inspirational and sought-after composers, arrangers, and instrumental performers of the 1930s. He and his orchestra the Velha Guarda (Old Guard) provided the background music for many artists of the era.

21. Carmen starred in the Brazilian film *Banana da Terra* as the Bahiana for the first time in February 1939. That same month she recorded the smash hit, "O qué é qué a Bahiana tem," with Dorival Caymmi.

22. *Carmen Miranda: The Brazilian Fireball*, World Record Club, recording no. SH114, side 1, track 5.

23. *Carmen Miranda*, Series Revivendo Músicas, Comercio de Discos, XCD 5719, track 8.

24. Arlindo Marques and Roberto Roberti, "Nova descoberta," released in 1935. Joubert de Carvalho, "Terra morena," released in 1936.

25. The *antropófagos*, led by intellectuals such as Mario and Oswald de Andrade from São Paulo, called for the devouring of all foreign influences in order to create a unique Brazilian nation.

26. Damasceno de Brito, *O ABC*, 69.

27. Quoted in Cardoso Junior, *Carmen*, 101, 177-78.

28. Gilberto Freyre's 1933 work *Casa grande e senzala* is often cited as one of the principal texts that founded the notion of Brazil as a racial democracy. However, intellectuals such as the abolitionist Joaquim Nabuco had already begun to compare Brazil to other slave economies in idyllic terms.

29. Edigar de Alencar, *O carnaval carioca através da música* (Rio de Janeiro: Francisco Alves, 1985), 246.

30. *Ibid.*

31. *Carmen Miranda: The Brazilian Recordings*, Harlequin, recording no. 1XYP, song no. 19. "Sahe da toca Brasil" was written by Joubert de Carvalho and was recorded in 1938.

32. The original recording of May 2, 1939, can be found on the remastered compact disk *Carmen Miranda: The Brazilian Recordings*, by Augusto Vassuer-Marques and Porto Luis Peixoto, Harlequin, recording no. 1XYP, song no. 10. "Preto e branco" was also recorded by Aracy Cortes in 1930.

33. *Carmen Miranda*, Series Revivendo Músicas, Comercio de Discos, XCD 5719, track 18.

34. Written and composed by Ary Barboso-Kid Pepe with the Victor band Diabo do Céu.

35. *Carmen Miranda*, Series Revivendo Músicas, Comercio de Discos, XCD 5719, track 13.

36. *Carmen Miranda: The Brazilian Recordings*, Harlequin Recording No. 1XYP, song no. 13.

37. Waldem M. Da Silva, 1937.

38. Sivalva Silva, 1937.

39. Arlindo Marques, Jr., and Roberto Roberts, 1935.

40. *Carmen Miranda: The Brazilian Recordings*, Harlequin, recording no. 1XYP, song no. 12. This song was written by Assis Valente and probably recorded in 1939.

41. Roberto da Matta, *Carnavais, malandros e heróis: Para uma sociologia da dilema brasileiro* (Rio de Janeiro: Zahar Editores, 1980).

42. Almir Chediak, *Songbook: Doryval Caymmi* (Rio de Janeiro: Lumiar Editora, 1994), 48. The original recording can be found on the remastered compact disk *Carmen Miranda: The Brazilian Recordings*, Harlequin, recording no. 1XYP.

43. Orson Welles, *It's All True* (Paramount Pictures, 1994). This film is a posthumous product that brings together two unreleased short films (one from Mexico) and documentary footage from Welles's filming expedition in Brazil.

44. Gil Montero, *Brazilian Bombshell*, 33.

45. Mario de Andrade, *Dicionário Musical Brasileiro* (Belo Horizonte: Editora Italiana Limitada, 1989), 53.

46. With few exceptions, Carmen was ever predisposed to satire and even to self-parody, which added a sense of wonder and electricity to her work. She was able to

play with her own recordings. In the 1940 recording of "Ginga ginga" (written with Juracy de Araujo-Gomes Filho), for example, Carmen played with the rhythm of "O qué é qué a Bahiana tem," as if to remind the viewers of the black roots of Brazilian popular music, but in a tongue-in-cheek way.

Suggested Readings

- Conniff, Michael. *Urban Politics in Brazil: The Rise of Populism, 1925–1945*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1981.
- Gil Montero, Martha. *The Brazilian Bombshell: The Biography of Carmen Miranda*. New York: Donald I. Fine, 1989.
- Guillermoprieto, Alma. *Samba*. New York: Vintage Books, 1990.
- Haberly, David T. *Three Sad Races: Racial Identity and National Consciousness in Brazilian Literature*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983.
- Schneider, Ronald M. *Brazil: Culture and Politics in a New Industrial Powerhouse*. Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1996.
- Schreiner, Claus. *Música popular brasileira: A History of Popular Music and the People of Brazil*. New York: Marion Boyars, 1993.
- Shaw, Lisa. *History of the Brazilian Samba*. New York: Ashgate, 1999.

Sights

- Carmen Miranda: Bananas Is My Business*. 1995. Directed by Helena Solberg (Facets Multimedia).
- Samba da Criação do Mundo*. 1978. Directed by Vera de Figueiredo, (Cinema Guild).
- Black Orpheus*. 1958. Directed by Marcel Camus (Facets Multimedia).
- Quilombo*. 1984. Directed by Carlos Diegues (Facets Multimedia).
- Bahia: Africa in the America*. 1988 (UCMEC).
- Spirit of Samba: Black Music of Brazil*. 1982. Directed by Richard Bedford (Facets Multimedia).

Sounds

- Hot Music from Cuba, 1907–1936*. 1993. Harlequin compact disk no. 23.
- Danzón, The Original Soundtrack*. 1992. DRG Records.

12

Oil, Race, and Calypso in Trinidad and Tobago, 1909–1990

Graham E. L. Holton

All political issues, such as defining national identity, rest in a gray area open to negotiation, susceptible to alternative voices. Historically, ruling elites have attempted, with varying degrees of success, to control the process and the terms of such re-creations, either by ignoring or by suppressing the counter-rhetoric of subordination produced by the lower classes. Political satire has long been a means by which marginalized groups, such as black workers in Trinidad and Tobago, have resisted elites' control of cultural discourse along with real socioeconomic oppression. Rooted in African musical traditions of spontaneous rhyming, calypso became home to a vibrant and powerful satire that, despite commodification and global popularity, has proved to be a powerful tool of protest. Graham Holton chronicles the development of calypso as a political counter to the economic exploitation of domestic workers by international oil interests and the local elite, and demonstrates how the music provided an alternative view of national identity.

Calypso—popular satirical ballads from the West Indies—evolved from the oppression, exploitation, and racism of the former British colony of Trinidad and Tobago. Roaring Lion, one of the great singer-songwriters of twentieth-century calypso, considered calypsonians to be oral historians: "The whole history of Trinidad is in calypso voices," he said. Mighty Chalkdust, another lyricist, described the calypsonian as "a font of public opinion. He is the mouthpiece of the people."¹ While some calypsos were sung for entertainment, others were intensely political, attacking the colonial government and the British companies, especially those that exploited the colony's oil reserves.

This study examines the oil industry's impact on the development of calypsos in Trinidad. The oil companies, by taking away workers' dignity and human rights, gave calypso singers their material: segregation, racism, and insufferable work conditions. The industry gave steel bands used oil drums,

f the racial democracy that emerged as a nationalist ideology in the when racial "exceptionalism" was still acutely visible in popular and culture.

The 1930 Vargas revolution institutionalized a nationalism that placed *brasilidade* (Brazilianess) above racial, ethnic, and class identifications. At the time, musical and artistic expressions of the popular classes that bore black influences caught the attention of the major radio stations in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, which were bent on marketing "national culture" to the growing urban people. Discrimination, prejudice, and fear of the largely black and mulatto popular classes ensured that black music would not be distorted in its original form.² Moreover, within the dominant culture's major mode of communication, black music and musicians would receive national attention largely through white interpreters and sponsors or, to borrow an idea from Franz Fanon, through the utilization of white masks.³

Into this context stepped Carmen Miranda, not yet in platform shoes or the multi-frutti hat that would become her Hollywood trademark in the 1940s. Her ascent to the center of Brazilian popular culture, particularly from 1939, provides us with a perfect opportunity to examine the relationship between racial representation and Brazilian popular music. The nationalist rhetoric of Getúlio Vargas's government (1930–1945) attempted to nationalize "the popular." To do so, the administration required an image, one that could be applauded by the upper, middle, and popular classes. Less than fifty years after the abolition of slavery (in 1888), that face would naturally be one of a white person: Carmen Miranda, born in Portugal but raised in Brazil. In addition, as a national performer, Miranda showcased popular musical rhythms with lyrics that spoke of poverty, the importance of work, and patriotism. More important, Miranda's personal charisma and charm, combined with her ability to inject humor, satire, criticism, and laughter into her musical creations, drew fans from both the popular sectors and the growing middle class in a nonconfrontational manner. Long before Carmen Miranda set foot on American soil, in 1939, she had already learned how to navigate the complex music industry of radio and live performances. Showcasing some of the most creative aspects of popular music to a quickly expanding national audience, she soon became a household name. Her use of parody, satire, and exaggeration of black and other popular rhythms were central to Carmen's musical repertoire. Through her unique character and personality, she was able to utilize the creations of the mostly black popular classes, identifying with them because of her humble beginnings. She was also able to exploit the technology of the urban elite and the state because she was able to. This double, almost entrepreneurial, exploitation allowed her to play a central role in bringing Brazilians of all ethnicities together through music. The problems besetting a historical analysis of racial prejudice in a social context that rhetorically celebrates the absence of such racism are exacerbated in

underdeveloped societies such as Brazil's, where millions of citizens have little or no access to the means of communication. The increasing number of radio stations and newspapers in the 1920s increased contact between regions while promoting knowledge about national events within Brazil. By the 1930s, radio had become the principal instrument of mass communication for a population that was largely illiterate.⁴ The absence of members of the popular classes, particularly black and mulatto professionals, in the communication industries is a further indication of institutionalized racism.

Not coincidentally, the nationalization of black culture occurred at a time when Rio de Janeiro's Carnival, the Brazilian celebration that represents the inversion of identity *par excellence*, underwent significant transformation and emerged as a federal production with nationalist criteria for participation. But Carnival was already a deeply divided activity, celebrated both in the *favelas* and in the grand salons behind closed doors. Creating an official Carnival and promoting an official *música popular brasileira* (Brazilian popular music) offended the taste of many members of the elite, who maintained considerable influence over industries. Thus, Vargas's nationalism would rely on what Michael L. Conniff has called the "populist-authoritarian counterpoint," an ideology that, in its more progressive phase, appealed to the masses but that ultimately depended on a strong moralistic bourgeois pattern of organization.⁵

Music, Humor, and the Nationalist Climate of the 1930s

Music and politics have been closely intertwined for centuries. Music has been employed to celebrate and promote, as in the case of national anthems, but also to denounce, as the New Song Movement of the 1960s and 1970s demonstrated.⁶ Some musicians have willingly lent their services to political causes with which they identify, others are content to find a forum for self-expression. Humor has played a crucial role in musical performance, particularly in popular music that attempts to appeal to a mass audience. Composers and interpreters have relied on caricature and exaggeration to engage their audiences, sometimes resorting to parody, sarcasm, and irony to generate what Freud called "comic pleasure."⁷

Culturally determined, comic pleasure depends on the relationship of the performer to the audience as well as on such external factors as the political climate. Although Freud insisted that audiences enjoy comedy most when personal feelings are not involved, much humor results from ridicule.⁸ Within the nationalist (and often censored) climate of Brazil in the 1930s, political ridicule of the Vargas regime was almost nonexistent. Nonetheless, musicians found all manner of ways to laugh about the national character even as they celebrated nationhood. Lyrics and musical scores provided the framework for performances, but successful execution depended on the personal style and voice of singers such as Carmen Miranda.