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Stereotypes Across Cultures

Giovana Reis

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SOCIAL media, advertising campaigns, movies, and television series occupy a large portion of people's routines in the present time. These means of communication play an important role in manipulating and influencing viewers and users in various ways. As an example, we can observe stereotypes spread both by international media and by Brazilian media itself. Other countries usually see Brazil as a tropical paradise surrounded by rain forest and full of beautiful women, where people play soccer, dance samba, and get a tan. These stereotypes resulted in some problems, such as the objectification of Brazilian women, the trivialization of criminality and life in slums, and the discredit of Brazilian economy and music; which are now, respectively, focused on tourism to coastal locations and on funk or samba. Historically, Brazil's diversity is being neglected, minimized and generalized to Carnaval ¹ and football, which explore Brazilian cultural wealth in a limited way. Additionally, the history of Brazil is not thoroughly approached in schools abroad. Accordingly, as a Brazilian, I constantly notice how outsiders rely on what is reported via the media, which causes them to build an inaccurate perspective of Brazil.

¹Carnaval is the most famous holiday in Brazil and has become an event of huge proportions. It is a six-day party where crowds follow the trios elétricos (trucks equipped with a high power sound) through the city streets, dancing and singing. Rhythm, participation, and costumes vary from one region of Brazil to another. In the southeastern cities of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, huge organized parades are led by samba schools.

The outside world's false image of Brazil started in the early 1930s when Getúlio Vargas assumed the presidency. According to Gabriela Antunes, the author of *Brazil in Twenty-First Century Popular Media: Culture, Politics, and Nationalism on the World Stage*, "Not long ago, Brazil was commonly called 'the land of the future.'" (18). However, during the Vargas mandate, schools and the media were manipulated in order to restrict people from being aware of his rule, which persecuted, tortured, and killed hundreds of people.² This way, both Brazilians and foreigners did not know what was actually happening in the country that was falsely recognized as "the land of the future."

Additionally, even though Vargas's presidency was a fascist regime, Brazil joined the Allied forces (U.S., Britain, USSR, France) during World War II. Because Brazil entered the war in the anti-fascist side, they benefited from America's Good Neighbor Policy, which provided financial assistance and cultural exchange to Latin American countries. As a tribute to Brazil, Walt Disney created the cartoon *Aquarela do Brasil* (Watercolor of Brazil), which stereotyped both Brazilian culture and citizens in the character of Zé Carioca, also known as Joe Carioca. Moreover, Zé Carioca portrayed Brazilians as tricksters who enjoyed taking advantage of others; this inevitably led people from other countries to develop an inaccurate opinion of Brazil. As author Naomi Pueo Wood states, "Many of the same factors that have contributed to Brazil's success as a global actor are now creating new challenges for the nation as it takes on increasing responsibility as a global player. Economics, race, and national culture loom as especially important factors" (7). Even though the Good Neighbor policy transformed Brazil into one of the most desired tourist destinations, the rise of the stereotypical idea of a tropical paradise made it difficult for outsiders to recognize Brazil's true culture and diversity.

Nowadays the film industry plays a more influential role regarding Brazil's image internationally, because it reaches more people than cartoons did in the 1940s. This way, it is even harder for people to detach themselves from the idea of Brazil constructed by media. By analyzing the movies *Hulk*, *Fast Five*, *Rio*, and *The Twilight Saga: Breaking Dawn 1*, author Antunes concludes, "Brazil is still a synonym of Rio de Janeiro, portrayed by the international cultural industry as the backbone of Brazilian culture, a place of beautiful women (*Hulk*, *Fast Five*), where all people dance and celebrate (*Rio*, *Breaking Dawn 1*), and where criminal activities are committed by daylight (*Hulk*, *Fast Five*, *Rio*). The former capital is represented as if it were smaller than it actually is in at least two films (*Rio*, *Breaking Dawn 1*); in two others, traditional landmarks are complemented (*Fast Five*) or replaced (*Hulk*) by favelas." (32-33) Considering Antunes analysis of these four movies, it is possible to infer that Brazil's diversity is neglected by the American film industry in various aspects—most movies generalize and minimize Brazil to a single city, Rio de Janeiro; excluding São Paulo and Salvador, which are as diverse as Rio. Life in Rio is romanticized, movies do not show the seriousness of criminal problems³ and carnival is the only national tradition

²Azevedo, Reinaldo. "Os mortos da ditadura: mito e realidade." VEJA. February 23, 2017. <https://veja.abril.com.br/blog/reinaldo/os-mortos-da-ditadura-mito-e-realidade/>

³According to the Institute of Public Security (ISP), there is an average of 19 deaths a day

represented, portray as a year-long celebration. These inferences are supported by the perceptions of Brazilian interviewee Giulia Carvalho ⁴ "Hollywood influences the spread of an idealized image of Brazil, but I do not think this is intentional, I think there are specific and restricted conceptions of each country. [Hollywood producers] idealize each country according to their bias. But the same happens to [Brazilians] when we go to the United States: we expect to see Americans patriots and yellow school buses, for example. But, yes, I think international media contributes almost 100[percent] to spread misconceptions about Brazil."

Even movies produced by Brazilians contribute to the spread of misconceptions about the country's culture, such as *Rio*, directed by Carlos Saldanha. *Rio*'s plot is based on a *carnavalesco* ⁵ and depicts an extremely happy Rio de Janeiro, where the streets are full of loud people and women dancing, wearing bikinis. In addition this movie portrays "Brazilians, including police officers and even criminals. . . as warm-hearted but incompetent" (Antunes 24), and the city is represented as "a place with neither traffic jams nor pollution, where macaws, toucans, and other critically endangered species fly freely in the skies" (Antunes 25). Even though animations are supposed to be magical, the movie has the name of a world famous city, and therefore the portrayed image of Brazil is problematic since it reinforces a forged idea of Brazil's culture and citizens. Carnival parades are another simple example of how *Rio* inaccurately depicts Brazilian life. Unlike the movie, Carnival parades are shut down almost every year because of the rainy February weather, which damages the floats and sometimes causes accidents during the celebrations. Rio de Janeiro's beaches are also portrayed as safe and clean places, but robberies happen regularly and pollution is a very serious problem in some areas.

Simultaneously, the Brazilian music industry has been creating stereotypes for a long time. During the 1930s, at the same time Walt Disney developed the cartoon character *Zé Carioca*, singer Carmen Miranda ⁶ became internationally famous due to her dancing songs and exotic costumes, which were intended to represent Brazil. However Miranda's portrayal of "Baianas" ⁷ was entirely socially constructed, considering she was a white woman wearing a fruit turban and colorful dresses. Much later, towards the end of the 1950s, the "Bossa Nova" music genre emerged and brought "Garota de Ipanema" ("The Girl from Ipanema") to the world's spotlight. Until the present time, this was a leading song representing Brazil. However Bossa Nova is poorly explored, especially by the film industry, which praises only "Garota de Ipanema" and ignores all the other songs from the genre. This is a problem because Bossa Nova carries

in Rio de Janeiro.

⁴Giulia Carvalho is a Brazilian citizen who lived in Australia for one year during high school. Now, she is living in Brazil in her freshman year at Casper Libero college studying Radio, Television and Internet.

⁵Portuguese adjective referring to Carnival.

⁶Carmen Miranda, nicknamed "The Brazilian Bombshell," was a Portuguese-born Brazilian samba singer. She was popular from the 1930s to the 1950s.

⁷Black and mestizo women from Bahia (Northeast of Brazil), who traditionally dress long skirt, lace dress, turban, flip flops, necklaces, and earrings.

a lot of Brazilian culture. During the dictatorial period, Bossa Nova's songs protested against the military government and, thus, played an important social role. Singer Chico Buarque, for instance, wrote the song "Cálice," which was an analogy to loss of the freedom of speech and the hundreds killed in Brazil during the dictatorship. Additionally Brazilian funk is currently on the top charts around the world; however what is concerning about that international reputation is mainly how funk music videos portray sexism and criminality in Brazil. Usually funk songs are about men talking rudely about women, who appear wearing short clothes and twerking, some videos even exalt the use of weapons to confront officers. These depiction problems emerged from the combination of two factors— the first is international industries focusing only on samba, funk or "Garota de Ipanema," effectively ignoring the majority of Brazilian music genres. The second factor is that this limited perspective results in a stereotypical view of Brazil, since the Brazilian music industry itself portrays an inaccurate representation of the country. Furthermore, the Brazilian music industry uses advertisement campaigns which contribute to the spread of a fake image. When Brazil hosted the 2014 World Cup, the idea of "the land of football" became even stronger due to stereotyped songs launched in connection with popular advertisements, "Less than a month from the start of the World Cup, most of the international ads show a colorful and festive Brazil, tailor-made for tourists. In the official Fifa clip, singers Pitbull, Jennifer Lopez, and Claudia Leitte sing the song "We Are One" surrounded by an overdose of Brazilianness: beaches, samba, electric trios, and capoeiristas make up the four minutes of video (Montenegro)." The intention of hiding the truth in order to spread an attractive image of the country, as Vargas did in the past, is noticeable. Since the 1930s, Brazil has been through serious social, cultural, and political problems. Although often not reported abroad, Brazil is the tenth most unequal country in the world, and it is one of the most homophobic and racist countries . In 2013, ⁸ Brazilians went to the streets to protest against the 2014 World Cup being hosted in the country. Citizens complained about the rise of taxes, which were used to build new stadiums that would not be useful after hosting the event. Moreover, the government was accused of being negligent to the lower class, since many people had to leave their houses to give space to construction.

Despite these representations, some researchers argue that stereotypes are changing in the present time, We argue that Carnaval and football rituals, at least in their commercialized, manufactured forms that global audiences see, no longer have the popular potency within Brazil that they once did, and that they are losing the local and global relevance they once had as symbols of Brazil (Kath and Knijnik 872). In Kath and Knijnik's opinion, media and technological developments in communication brought new perspectives from Brazil's culture, such as political information, that are replacing old stereotypes. Political scandals due to widespread corruption in the country resulted in marches that "manifest a deeper crisis of representation or state legitimacy; a sentiment that

⁸Information provided by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE). Public institutions, such as schools and hospitals, did not have enough funds to pay teachers and doctors to provide students and patients with adequate infrastructure.

the state is not adequately representing the popular will" (Kath and Knijnik 873); this undoubtedly shocked people from different countries. In 2019, during presidential elections in Brazil, the "EleNÃO" ("NotHim") campaign, emerged in social media against the candidate Jair Bolsonaro and reached international artists, such as Stephen Fry, Dua Lipa, and Madonna .⁹ However, even though Bolsonaro's online campaign reached a lot of people, the old stereotypes remain ingrained in people's minds and are bigger than individual political issues. The two rounds of these elections were reported extensively abroad, due to the similarity between Bolsonaro's biased speech and Trump's public statements. In Carvalho's words, "I don't think stereotypes are changing nowadays, and I think it's going to take long for the media to start changing. Actually, it is in our hands. The future of the audiovisual industry depends on what we, students of audiovisual, are going to do. Prejudice is very ingrained in people's mind and now we are in charge to change this reality." Old stereotypes about Brazil are still present in the 21st-century, especially among younger generations; which is troubling since they are the generation that will lead the future world.

It is possible to infer that people are still stuck in a utopian vision of Brazil, but this erroneous perspective must change. It is time for different layers of Brazilian culture to be studied and highlighted abroad. In order to understand historical Brazilian social beliefs, schools should add more information about the natural wealth of Brazil, which is important to the world's economy because of the abundance of petroleum and farmland. Additionally, as Brazil is both a victim of and a contributor to the rise of stereotypes, the Brazilian music industry should invest in portraying the real roots of Brazilian culture. Folkloric and June celebration traditions would be perfect for this endeavour because they approach different regions' gastronomy, dressing, and accents. The world also needs to pay attention to Brazil's issues instead of viewing the country through stereotypes, because nowadays Brazil is everything but a paradise.

Because of the increasing influence of old stereotypes in people's opinions, Brazilians are generalized as uncommitted people, whose lives are about drinking, dancing, and playing soccer. From the perspective of an insider, however, I think Brazilians should be recognized as brave and persevering people for not giving up on their country and the population's rights even though they are busy fighting corruption, crime, and ingrained prejudice. It is not a problem for Brazilians to be considered warm-hearted, because it is true; however, this judgment should not be applied exclusively for festive environments. Since the dictatorship, Brazilians have remained optimistic and hopeful that together the country can go further push barriers in hopes of achieving a prosperous and peaceful society. There is a lot of "behind the scenes" content that, if released, would change the world's perspective on Brazil and what it stands for.

⁹Madonna used her Instagram stories to protest against Jair Bolsonaro using. In her stories, she emphasized the campaign EleNÃO and asked for the end of fascism. entertaining, political information usually does not attract as many people as movies, music, and social media.