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**Good Dances Make Good Neighbors:  
The U.S. Welcome Carmen Miranda\***

**Abstract:** This paper looks into issues of visibility in Carmen Miranda's image in tandem with some of the cultural and political aims established in Franklin D. Roosevelt's 1941 Message to Congress, "The Four Freedoms". Carmen Miranda's image of the stylized *baiana* (as constructed in Carmen's films in the United States) is tentatively set within the framework of Guy Debord's theory of the 'culture of spectacle'. The analysis explores the contribution of Carmen's *baiana* to the war effort, its mobilization of the public's gaze and sympathy for Latin American neighbors, and will ultimately shed light on the intricacies of culture, history and politics in the context of the Good Neighbor Policy.

My curiosity in the issue that I address in this paper was sparked by Franklin D. Roosevelt's Annual Message to Congress in 1941, titled "The Four Freedoms", in which Roosevelt extracted four particular freedoms from the Bill of Rights and put them forth as the most important in a time of war. I was intrigued about why these four freedoms were more important than others. Eventually, I realized that to answer this question I had to make this document dialogue with a particular political doctrine of the time, the Good Neighbor Policy (GNP) – a political and cultural enterprise carefully orchestrated by the U.S. government to

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\* An earlier version of this paper was written with Marcelo Penha for a presentation at the SUNY-Albany Conference "Cartographics: Bodies of Production, Migration, and Subjectivity", New York, in April 2000. Marcelo's part of the paper looked specifically at issues of sexuality.

guarantee the allegiance of the other American nations at the height of World War II. Indeed, I am particularly interested in the economic strain of this enterprise, a point emphasized by Ana López, who describes the Good Neighbor Policy as “an attempt to restore production, employment and prosperity to the domestic U.S. economy after the slump by expanding exports to, and investments in, Latin America” (1993: 67).

The GNP was in effect a corrective project that sought to replace the traditional U.S. interventions in its ‘backyard’ by respect for the backyard’s sovereignty. This implied naturally that these nations would be (finally) admitted as equals – that is, civilized, ‘grown-up’, nations. Accordingly, the GNP fostered the circulation in the U.S. and throughout Latin America of many media figures who, like Carmen Miranda eventually did, received the task of embodying and developing a renewed vision of ‘hemispheric solidarity’. They were in effect like cultural artifacts called in to amend history, as it were, in the sense that reciprocal cultural exchange now replaced U.S. imperialism.

The resonance of Roosevelt’s speech “The Four Freedoms” was powerful. Indeed, it took illustrator Norman Rockwell to give it a visual register in history and an everyday aura, an individual interpretation, as it were, when he painted the series of the same title, still considered nowadays one of Rockwell’s masterpieces.<sup>1</sup> As in the illustrations, the four freedoms Roosevelt brought into paramount evidence in ‘41 were, in this order, freedom of speech and expression; freedom of religion; freedom from want, and freedom from fear.

Whereas the first two freedoms clearly pose a differentiation in relation to the ‘others’ of American democracy and what was seen as the most threatening influences in the American continent – that is, Fascism and Nazism –, the second pair is, to my mind, the richest in analytical terms, because it comprises the domestic concerns that propelled the

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<sup>1</sup> Rockwell’s series appeared in *The Saturday Evening Post*, in 1943. The Office of War Information later issued individual posters of the series to raise patriotic enthusiasm and sell war bonds, which eventually resulted in \$130 million Dollars.

‘invention’ of the Good Neighbor Policy. ‘Want’ and ‘fear’ are the two principles on which this political doctrine is based and they are also particularly in evidence in the *spectacle* of Carmen Miranda’s image and performance in the U.S. media. How the ‘Brazilian bombshell’, as she was introduced to the U.S. public, neutralized both ‘want’ and ‘fear’ by means of spectacle is the focus of this paper. My suggestion, thus, is that we look at the GNP as an aesthetic enterprise, where questions of the gaze, representation and, above all, a specific project for the education of the public eye emerge throughout.

The idea behind the GNP was in effect no novelty. It had emerged for the first time in Roosevelt’s Inaugural Address, in 1933, with the Depression already thriving – hence also the stress on fear and want.<sup>2</sup> Yet, the GNP did not prove to be useful until the late 1930s, when it became a real political doctrine. Spurred by the threat of war, it was then specifically delimited to Latin America and came as a follow-up to previous U.S. elaborations of continental foreign policy from the Monroe Doctrine (1823) and Manifest Destiny (1845) to Pan-Americanism.<sup>3</sup> The GNP was in many aspects the corollary of Pan-Americanism, as in theory it signaled a moment of ‘transference of power’ from the center to the peripheries. It seemed to confirm that Latin America had accomplished the process of progressive reform and reached the desired state of development, so that now it could deal as an equal with the big (good) neighbor of the North. But in fact, what the GNP, and the “freedoms” Roosevelt’s

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<sup>2</sup> In 1933, F. D. Roosevelt defined the GNP as follows: “In the field of world policy I would dedicate this Nation to the policy of the good neighbor – the neighbor who resolutely respects himself and, because he does so, respects the rights of others – the neighbor who respects his obligations and respects the sanctity of his agreements in and with a world of neighbors” (Polenberg, 2000: 42). At the same time, the 7th International Conference of American States, meeting in Montevideo, managed to put the economy in the agenda, to every minister’s satisfaction. The struggle between economics and culture in inter-American institutions had a long story. For instance, the Bureau of American Republics, founded in 1890, was based on commercial interests only (early in the twentieth century it gave way to the so-called Pan American Union).

<sup>3</sup> Woodrow Wilson’s “Speech on Latin America”, two decades before the GNP was conceived as such, defined pan-americanism as follows: “One of the chief objects of my administration will be to cultivate the friendship and deserve the confidence of our sister republics of Central and South America, and to promote in every proper and honorable way the interests which are common to the peoples of the two continents” (Laqueur and Rubin, 1990: 148).

discourse mobilizes, also evinces is the effort to justify two fundamental political enterprises in time of war: new political alliances and trade with new markets, for the GNP also came largely as an answer to Japan's grip on China and Germany's rise in Europe, which had deprived the U.S. of a substantial parcel of its markets (Gellman, 1979: 47).

Despite this economic root, the GNP seemed to stand on its own in the genealogy of U.S. foreign policy towards Latin America because of its emphasis on culture; this time there was an awareness that economic relations alone could not sustain the desired 'hemispheric solidarity', which meant that besides the articulation of economic production, 'hemispheric understanding', that is, new knowledge about Latin America, had to be produced. In a similar vein, a new image of the continent for public consumption had to be invented. It was believed that the promotion of political stability in Latin America depended on a more positive image of each national identity and that both economic stability and a sense of friendship and loyalty for neighboring countries would create resistance against the infiltration of Nazi ideology. Accordingly, the stereotypical images under siege were that of the Yankee imperialist, on the one hand, and the Latin American gangster, on the other. Joy and friendliness were essential components in the whole enterprise – after all, despite the threat to national security and the general atmosphere of fear, the U.S., as the whole continent, was a region in peace and this was the feeling that had to be conveyed to its people.

To ensure the truthfulness of its programmes, the GNP relied heavily on the new media – film and photography in particular – and it also drew on “radio tours, film production and exhibition, art exhibits, musical and theatrical performances; as well as diplomatic ‘visits’ by journalists and artists” (Benamou, 1997: 36). These more ‘popular’ forms of contact and representation were followed closely, and complemented by, the construction of scientific knowledge (Gellman, 1979: 144). In this sense, the GNP can also be taken as an extension of

the representational machines of the U.S. empire, as Stephen Greenblatt called the “processes [...] that produce and circulate representations constitutive of cultural difference, aiming primarily at knowledge production” (qtd. in Salvatore, 1999: 72).<sup>4</sup>

Taken to the United States to sing and dance on Broadway and, later, to perform in Hollywood musicals, Carmen Miranda and her *samba*, symbols of an authentic Brazilian identity, became important instruments in the construction of joy and friendliness. In this sense, the GNP fits Guy Debord’s definition of the culture of spectacle: “[W]hat the spectacle expresses is the total practice of one particular economic and social formation; it is, so to speak, that formation’s *agenda*” (1995: 15). As Debord further claims, the image is not too demanding on sensory experience; even if it entertains sight, it demands less thoughtful activity, so that spectacle, dressed up as entertainment and leisure, is not necessarily as neutral as it appears to be. The effect of spectacle on the spectator tends to be alienation, passivity and submission to the needs created by the spectacle: “[T]he more he [the spectator] contemplates, the less he lives; the more readily he recognizes his own needs in the images of need proposed by the dominant system” (*id.*, 23).

It is in this sense that I take the GNP as a politics of spectacle and consider how it aimed not only at promoting and solidifying new economic relations, but also at distracting people from the fears of war and the ‘reasons of state’.<sup>5</sup> The state was the ultimate provider of this spectacle through its apparatuses for the control and production of culture, in particular the State Department of the Office for the Coordination of Inter-American Affairs (the OCIAA),<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Stephen Greenblatt, *Marvellous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

<sup>5</sup> I would like to acknowledge a debt in the idea for this essay. My inspiration for looking into the GNP as a politics of spectacle derived from my reading of Maria Irene Ramalho de Sousa Santos’s essay titled “The Transparent Eyeball and Other American Spectacles” (Inaugural Conference), in *Proceedings of the Meeting of the European Association for American Studies*, Lisbon, 3-6 April 1998. Santos’s essay centers on the role of spectacle in American culture and politics in general, even though it does not look into the Good Neighbor Policy itself.

<sup>6</sup> The Office came later to be renamed ‘OIAA’.

headed by Nelson Rockefeller. Despite the fact that Debord's argument is inimical to theories of audience reaction, I think it does fit the particular case of the instrumentalization of the image and performance of Carmen Miranda by the Good Neighbor project.

When Carmen Miranda arrived in the U.S., she was already a star in Brazil. She arrived in the States in 1939, after a contact in Brazil with Broadway agent Lee Schubert, who saw her performing in the Casino da Urca, in Rio, and realized her potential for the revival of Broadway shows. When Carmen left Rio to shine on Broadway's musical *The Streets of Paris* she was not yet connected with any official policy, but neither was she an anonymous figure anymore. She herself was also aware that she would embody the image of Brazil in the States, as Brazilian dictator Getúlio Vargas soon spotted out the true essence of the GNP, its articulation of spectacle, marketing and business: he asked Carmen to take a few packages of coffee with her. Via *samba*, Carmen would sell not only the image of Brazil, but also, in a two-in-one mode, *samba* would help make way for the consumption of Brazilian products.

In fact, the exportation of a new image of Brazil had begun before, as Vargas's government had reengineered the politics of spectacle of *Carnival* to turn it into the spectacle of the nation. Following Gilberto Freyre's teachings on the centrality of Negro culture in Brazil,<sup>7</sup> the dictatorship, at pains with inventing a national culture, appropriated Carnival as the mythical emblem of national egalitarianism, a time of fusion and conciliation of racial and class differences. Accordingly, the state required the normalization of *samba* schools in 1934 and began regulating *samba* lyrics, Carnival themes and the selection of the national types to figure in the parade, such as the *baiana*.

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<sup>7</sup> See *Casa Grande e Senzala* (1933).

## Carmen in the U.S.

But the ‘translocation’ of Carmen from Brazil to the U.S. would not occur without important visual changes. Once Carmen set foot in the U.S. and started making success on Broadway, she began to sell far more than coffee. At the same time, the *samba* rhythms and the *baiana* image she took along with her were divested of the Brazilian state ideology of Carnival: when *samba* became the “biggest dance craze of 1942” in the U.S. (Gellman, 1979: 170), no one seemed to care about the fact that this music was blessed by a totalitarian regime. In a similar fashion, coffee was abandoned in favor of the *banana*.<sup>8</sup> In Carmen’s singing and dancing, and later also in her acting, she conflated marketing with spectacle; in her image and performance, marketing turned into economic spectacle, although gender was a precious assistant as well, for sensuality was as much a part of the *baiana* costume she adopted – and adapted –, as was the fruit she came to be associated with.<sup>9</sup>

Although Brazilian coffee sales fared fairly well in the U.S., the association of Carmen with images of fruit instead of coffee, and with the banana in particular, confirmed how hard it was to get rid of the old stereotypes. As Marina Warner (1998) has shown, the humorous potential of the banana had always had imperialist connections; it derived in the first place from the exoticism of the fruit (a symbol of the plenitude of the tropics), but also from colonial exploitation. The imposition of the symbol of the banana was the first extension to which Carmen’s image was submitted.

Originally, fruit filled ~~in~~ the basket that the *baiana* carried in her arms or her head. But in Carmen’s image, the basket became a fashion object when it was conflated with her

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<sup>8</sup> In effect, one of the last films Carmen starred in Brazil was a very popular musical, directed by João de Barro and produced by an American, Wallace Downey, called *Banana da Terra* (1939), in which she used the *baiana* costume for the first time and sang the popular song “O que é que a baiana tem?”

<sup>9</sup> Gender certainly played heavily in Carmen’s image as spectacle; for a deeper view on the subject, one that centers on Carmen’s agency also, see Ana López’s “Are All Latins From Manhattan?” (1993: 67-80).

turbans, a fusion that was best represented in the ‘tutti-frutti hat’, as she eventually introduced herself in a Hollywood film of 1947, *That Night In Rio: ‘The lady with the tutti-frutti hat’*. Also worth mentioning is the fact that Carmen’s turbans created a fashion among U.S. ‘ladies’. This conversion was, of course, totally disconnected from the poor women selling fruit in the streets of Bahia, from whom the costume had originally sprung. The glamour American women found in Carmen’s image was also light-years away from the banana plantation workers, for that matter.

Indeed, the spectacularization of the *baiana* costume involved an exaggeration of visual aspects such as the use of loud colors and heavy accessories – as, for instance, Carmen’s high-heeled shoes (the so-called ‘footstools’), which the *baianas* most certainly did not use. Carmen’s sensuality was also enhanced by the lace-trimmed skirts and sleeves, the generous low cuts and blouses that left her belly exposed; to this she would add (very) heavy colorful necklaces and bracelets, an adaptation from creole folklore, the slave women’s ‘*balangandās*’, a collection of ornaments and amulets worn either hanging from the neck or around the waist, which was very typical in the *baianas*. The changes evince what I call the *aestheticization* of the Latin American other, if not of business itself, in Carmen’s exotic, exuberant – and spectacular – image, if we compare her to the original *baiana*, or the banana plantation worker who was indeed who kept the Good Neighbor Policy going on the ground. The contrasts between scarcity and plenty, beauty and hardness, artifice and simplicity, pleasure and labor are only too obvious. But perhaps the most fundamental difference in relation to the original image of the *baiana* was race: Carmen was white, which certainly accounted much for the sympathy and identification of the U.S. onlooker.



### **Freedom from want & freedom from fear**

If, on the one hand, Carmen's tutti-frutti hat refashioned the symbol of the horn of plenty that kept 'want' at bay, on the other, the joy and humor of her performances neutralized 'fear'. But Carmen's association with fruit inevitably calls to mind the safe-conduct given to U.S. corporations in Latin America. One could hardly find a better capitalist embodiment of plenty in the period than the United Fruit Company, the largest agricultural enterprise in the world, which had become a corporation in 1899 and managed plants all over Latin America, from Cuba, Jamaica, Guatemala, Honduras and Costa Rica, to Panama and Colombia.<sup>10</sup>

Want and fear were deeply entangled. If Carmen was drafted into the role of cheering up not only the troops but the whole war-threatened population, consumerism was part and parcel of the consolation and distraction. The construction of Carmen's image and its relation to the parallel role of the corporate companies that traded Latin American fruit fits precisely one of Debord's catch-phrases concerning the culture of the spectacle: "The spectacle," he argues "is *capital* accumulated to the point where it becomes image" (1995: 24). The public consumed not only the fruit produced and distributed by the United Fruit Company (in whose logo Carmen was to remain until our own days), but the image itself and so internalized a different representation of the neighboring Latin American countries – or so it was expected. As Helena Solberg comments, Carmen was Brazil's raw-material exported to the U.S. market – spectacle was the process of the transformation of the image itself, as the

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<sup>10</sup> In 1943, the Company followed the cultural orientation of the GNP, when it opened its own 'office of propaganda', which issued pamphlets on Central America's commercial products (Black, 1988: 77-8). The United Fruit Company's office of propaganda was called the Middle American Information Bureau and it had the official aim of fostering public awareness of the region and encouraging "knowledge and mutual understanding." In other words, it reinforced the marketing orientation of other 'cultural policies' of the OIAA, in tandem with promoting consumption, of course.

U.S. public eye turned Carmen's image into a new meaning that sought to accommodate a redefinition of the Latin American other.<sup>11</sup>

But was there a redefinition indeed? What the public enjoyed and consumed was joy, the entertainment Carmen created both by means of her *samba* and by her comic performances – but what made Americans laugh was her wildness, her impulsiveness, and also simply her poor use of English (Garcia: n.d.). New – fanciful – clothes covered the old stereotype. However, this was what the public consumed: the image of friendly, non-frightening, docile Latin American neighbors.

The translocality of Carmen, the *baiana* and *samba* had moreover allowed for yet another fundamental step in the cultural project of the GNP: the harmonization of tropical rhythms with 'American-style' show biz. The culmination of Carmen's film cycle with Twentieth-Century Fox was the musical *The Gang's All Here* (1943), in which she introduced a new dance, the '*Uncle Sam-ba*' (Black, 1988: 70).<sup>12</sup> Carmen's body performed so successfully the desired image of the Latin American neighbor that she quickly came to accumulate the identity of other American regions, from Cuba and Argentina to Mexico. This accruing of different identities, all of them 'exotic', can also explain the accruing of styles, colors, fruits, to the *baiana* image.<sup>13</sup> For a while, she remained the authorized image of *Latinidad* in the U.S. She was also referred to in the U.S. press as "The Good Neighbor Policy in person."<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> 'Carmen Miranda' is still selling nowadays, as her family is in the process of legalizing a clothes brand bearing her name. See André Luiz Barros (1999).

<sup>12</sup> Carmen's Hollywood films include *Down Argentine Way* (1940), *That Night In Rio* (1941), *Weekend in Havana* (1941), *Springtime in the Rockies* (1942), *The Gang's All Here* (1943) and *Copacabana* (1947).

<sup>13</sup> For an analysis of the roles Carmen played in film, where she was made to incorporate these other Latin American identities, see Ana López (1993: 67-80) and also Allen L. Woll (1977).

<sup>14</sup> See *The Philadelphia Record* (14.2.1940).

## **Conclusion**

No matter how spectacular the performances were to get, power relations among these ‘good neighbors’ were not, however, to change dramatically, nor would their representations – or their stereotypes. This seems a fair conclusion when one looks at opinion polls of the time indicating the reception of the ongoing project of ‘gaze indoctrination’ led by Good Neighbor projects, and compare it with alternative image making projects that were left in the drawer. For instance, the Rockefeller Office conceived of a completely different image for the Latino woman than that embodied by Carmen Miranda: ‘*Pan-Americana*’, described as “a noble female figure,” who should bear a torch and a cross, in a fusion of the Virgin Mary and the Goddess of Liberty (qtd. in Black, 1988: 69). So, maybe Carmen’s success was an unexpected outcome for the OIAA itself; but it eventually fitted the make-up project in full. One way or another, the fact was that the Pan-Americana, or the ‘Virgin Liberty’, was forgotten.

As for the success of ‘good neighborism,’ the U.S. public’s views on Latin Americans did not change much. A poll conducted in December 1940 offered respondents a choice of 19 adjectives to qualify Central and South Americans: 80% of those interviewed picked “dark-skinned”; 40 to 50% came next with “quick-tempered,” “emotional,” “religious,” “backward,” “lazy,” ignorant,” and “suspicious”; at the bottom, chosen by 5%, were terms such as “efficient,” whereas only 16% chose “progressive,” “generous,” “brave,” “honest,” intelligent,” and “shrewd,” exactly in this order (*Id.*, 61).<sup>15</sup>

The only concrete thing the GNP seems indeed to have attained was the end of U.S. military interventions and occupations. As a counterbalance, however, this was also the decade of the huge financial loans that indebted Latin American nations – the so-called

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<sup>15</sup> According to Black, the poll was conducted by the Office of Public Opinion Research.

‘political loans’ (Gellman, 1979: 162).<sup>16</sup> In any case, as we also know, as the 1940s faded and other ‘wars’ emerged, Roosevelt’s 1933 definition of the ‘good neighbor’ recovered all its generality and Asian and European ‘neighbors’ eventually became the new favorites and the new priorities.

The Office of Inter-American Affairs itself proved to be a ‘wartime agency’ when it was officially closed in 1946. Coincidentally or not, Carmen’s own career accompanied the decline of the GNP and the next decade witnessed her death (in 1955).

As in any spectacle, the performances had come to an end.

In the following decade, U.S. intervention in Latin America would again become the rule except that it now evaded the spotlight, in most cases reduced to backstage maneuvers starred by secondary actors – low-profile CIA agents. That was precisely the case of the coup in Guatemala, in 1954, aimed at defending U.S. interests regarding, no more, no less, than the United Fruit Company.<sup>17</sup>

Were Truman or Eisenhower to retrieve Roosevelt’s famous “Four Freedoms” speech, the original hierarchy would have to be significantly redefined: *freedom from want* became the real new priority; *freedom of religion* might come next; finally, *freedom of speech and expression* and *freedom from fear* would be at the bottom, no doubt.

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<sup>16</sup> That is, the political conditioning of commercial relations that eventually created other forms of dependence.

<sup>17</sup> Democratically elected President Jacobo Arbenz, a socialist, dared to challenge American business interests when he allowed the expropriation of land owned by the United Fruit Company. The dictator who displaced Arbenz, Colonel Carlos Castillo Armas, had not only received military training in Kansas, but his coup counted on the support of the U.S. One of Armas’s first actions as President was the restoration of land to the United Fruit Company.

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