



Producing Brazilianess for Global Audiences: The case of *Sex and the City*¹

Produção de Brasilidades para Audiências Globais: O Caso de Sex and the City

Producir Brazilianess para audiencias mundiales: El caso de Sex and the City

Samantha Nogueira JOYCE²

Antonio C. LA PASTINA³

Abstract

This paper examines how the HBO series *Sex and the City* (SATC) portrayed “Brazilianess” during its six-season run. Although the program was recognized for its positive portrayal of female friendship and was usually praised for its association with female empowerment through story line, sexually explicit dialogue, and their successful careers we demonstrate how when it comes to Brazilianess and Brazilians, the program relied on stereotypical non-empowering and somewhat unrealistic portrayals. As Brazilian scholars and feminists we hope to question and explore the ways that Brazilianess, is portrayed in United States media more broadly and television specifically. We are focusing on Brazilianess in an attempt to move away from character specific analysis to question how Brazil as a nation and a culture, but also as a space where practices are performed, is produced in U.S. television shows such as SATC. Although research on the representation of Brazilians on Brazilian media is ample the same is not true when it comes to U.S. media. This essay seeks to begin to fill this gap.

Keywords: Brazilianess; Representation; *Sex and the City*; Stereotypes; Television; Feminism; Female empowerment.

Resumo

Este artigo examina como a série americana do canal HBO *Sex and the City* (SATC) retratou “brasilidade”, ao longo de suas seis temporadas. Embora o programa seja reconhecido por seu retrato positivo da amizade feminina e também elogiado por suas associações com o empoderamento feminino através de suas histórias, diálogo sexualmente explícito, e pelas mulheres bem-sucedidas profissionalmente que retrata, quando se trata de brasilidade e dos brasileiros, o programa contou com representações um tanto quanto irreais, estereotipadas e (des)empoderadas. Como pesquisadores brasileiros e feministas, pretendemos questionar os modos pelos quais a brasilidade é retratada na mídia americana de maneira geral e na televisão mais especificamente. Estamos nos concentrando em brasilidade em uma tentativa de nos afastarmos de uma análise específica de personagens para questionar como o Brasil, como uma nação e cultura, além de um espaço onde as práticas são realizadas, é reproduzido na

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2 Indiana University South Bend. E-mail: snjoyce@indiana.edu

3 Texas A&M University. E-mail: alapastina@tamu.edu



televisão norte-americana em *shows* como SATC. Embora a investigação sobre a representação dos brasileiros na mídia brasileira seja ampla, o mesmo não acontece quando se trata de mídia dos EUA. Esta pesquisa busca começar a preencher esta lacuna.

Palavras-chave: Brasilidade; Representação; *Sex and the City*; Estereótipos; Televisão; Feminismo; Empoderamento feminino.

Resumen

Este artículo examina cómo la serie de HBO *Sex and the City* (SATC) ha retratado “Brazilianess” durante sus seis temporadas. Aunque el programa fue conocido por su representación positiva de la amistad femenina que generalmente fue elogiada por su asociación con el empoderamiento de las mujeres a través de la línea de la historia, el diálogo sexualmente explícito, y sus éxitos en las carreras, demostramos cómo cuando se trata de *Brazilianess* y los brasileños, el programa se basó en representaciones estereotipadas, y un tanto irreales y no empoderadas. Como académicos y feministas brasileños esperamos cuestionar y explorar las formas en que *Brazilianess*, se retrata en los medios de comunicación de los Estados Unidos de manera más amplia y en la televisión más específicamente. Nos estamos centrando en *Brazilianess* en un intento de alejarnos de un análisis de un carácter específico para cuestionar cómo Brasil, como una nación y una cultura, sino también como un espacio donde prácticas son realizadas, se produce en la televisión de Estados Unidos y en programas como SATC. Aunque la investigación sobre la representación de los brasileños en los medios de comunicación de Brasil es amplia el mismo no es cierto cuando se trata de medios de comunicación estadounidenses. Este ensayo pretende comenzar a llenar este vacío.

Palabras clave: *Brazilianess*; Representación; *Sex and the City*; Estereotipos; Televisión; Feminismo; Empoderamiento femenino.

CARRIE: I got mugged! She took everything I got!

SAMANTHA: It’s called the Brazilian wax.

MIRANDA: Why didn’t you tell her to stop?

CARRIE: I tried. I feel like one of those hairless dogs! (...) I am totally bald, and might I add; freezing! (...) I am so aware of down there right now. You know, I feel like nothing but walking sex.

SAMANTHA: That’s the thing about the Brazilian. It makes you do crazy things. You have to be very careful whom you invite to Brazil. (*Sex and Another City* ...)

How was “Brazilianess” portrayed in the HBO series⁴*Sex and the City*? Although the program was recognized for its positive portrayal of female friendship and was usually praised for its association with female empowerment through story line, sexually explicit dialogue, and their successful careers (MERCK, 2004, p. 52), when it comes to *Brazilianess* and Brazilians,

4 The show is now in syndication on networks such as TBS, The CW, WGN, and many other local stations in the USA. It also airs in Canada, Germany, Brazil, the UK, Ireland, Poland, Netherlands, Belgium, Finland, Spain, Portugal, Israel, Bulgaria, and many other countries.



Sex and the City (SATC) relied on stereotypical non-empowering and somewhat unrealistic portrayals, such as exotic, overtly sexual, or a distant far away land, perfect for a secret getaway. As Brazilian scholars and feminists we argue that the narrative, in SATC perpetrates a narrow, disempowering and stereotypical image of Brazil, and hope to question and explore the ways that Brazilianess, is portrayed in United States media more broadly and television specifically. We are focusing on Brazilianess in an attempt to move away from character specific analysis to question how Brazil as a nation and a culture, but also as a space where practices are performed, is produced in U.S. television shows such as SATC.

Television programs are “discursive sites,” places of struggle over symbolic meanings, with a central role in cultural politics (GRAY, 1995, XIV), therefore an interesting place to try to understand how U.S. media, with its global reach, produce and reproduce images of other cultures and bodies, in this case Brazilians. Although research on the representation of Brazilians on Brazilian media is ample, (HERALD, 1988; MELO, 1988; LA PASTINA, 2003; SANTOS, 2004; FERNANDES, 2004; ARAUJO, 2000 ; JOYCE, 2012) the same is not true when it comes to U.S. media. This essay seeks to begin to fill this gap.

Brazil/Brazilians in the U.S. media

Periodically, Brazil or Brazilian(s) will enter a U.S. television show. It might be through the son of a corrupt Brazilian businessman who commits a crime while in the US like it happened in *Murder One* in the mid-1990s, or as in the 2006 season opener for ‘*CSI Miami*’ which was set in Rio de Janeiro, where a brutal drug dealer spoke Spanish and where the American cops Horatio and Delco flew to Brazil bearing arms. The duo also invaded a ‘favela’ (a slum) and killed local heroin dealers, supposedly doing the job that the corrupt local police would not do. In both cases the Brazilians spoke Spanish and often had Spanish heritage surnames.

In 2002, an episode of ‘*The Simpsons*’ titled ‘Blame it on Lisa’ steered controversy with Brazilian officials for its portrayal of Brazil. In the episode, all men were bisexuals, fearsome monkeys roamed the streets, and tourists were kidnapped by taxi drivers and mugged by children. Rio de Janeiro’s tourist board did not see the funny side of the show and decided to sue the producers and Fox who had to issue an apology. Rio’s officials claimed that ‘*The Simpsons*’ damaged the city’s international image and lost tourism revenues. In March 2014, *The Simpsons* went back to Brazil, this time Homer is asked to referee World Cup games. In a convoluted story about his attempt to impress his daughter Lisa they get involved with gangsters and Homer is only saved from losing his life by the fact that Marge had switched seats with the gangster’s mother on the plane, so she could watch premium HBO. The power of the mother figure, the rampant crime and bribing and the deforestation of the Amazon all play a role in the show.

Representations of Brazil and Brazilians in the U.S. media, however, have a longer



history. Beginning in the early 20th century articles on aspects of Brazil as a nation could be found on magazines such as National Geographic. These articles focused on the natural and indigenous aspects of that nation. During the Good Neighbor policy years, which started in 1936, that U.S. media proactively began to include images of Latin American in an attempt to build a hemisphere wide partnership against the German led Axis. It is during this time that one of the most enduring constructions of Brazilian femininity and culture emerged. Carmen Miranda, who, during the late 1930s and 1940s was the highest paid female actress in Hollywood, entered, with her *balangandãs*, tutti-frutti hat and exposed midriff, the minds of many US media producers and consumers as the iconic representation of Latin-Brazilian gender norms and cultural attitudes.

The residual power and presence of Carmen Miranda's image can be found in the number of times her iconic dress code appeared in cartoons and movies to express a relaxed sense of freedom, exotic otherness, and light hearted eroticism. A cursory Google search of Carmen Miranda in cartoons will find images of Bugs Bunny, Garfield, Mickey Mouse and Bart Simpson among others, in Miranda's turban, bracelets and accelerated singing and over exaggerated sensual dancing.

Movies such as *Women on Top* (2000) with Penelope Cruz, presented a Brazilian woman that was innocent, genuine and extremely sexy. Her body becomes a major asset in her rise as a food show host. Her best friend is a transgender woman from Brazil. She left Brazil and moved to San Francisco to escape her jealous, macho, husband who cannot deal with her need to be the one doing the driving and who has to be on top when they make love because of her motion sickness. The abundance of exotic portrayals, the magical realism and the erotic and sexual charge of the Brazilian women in the movie maintains a tradition of limiting representations of Brazilianess to a limited range of possibilities. The bodies here are representing an idea of Brazil and Brazilianess that is erotically charged, sensual, mystical and exotic.

Sex and the City (SATC)

SATC was a highly successful program both in the United States and globally. It received numerous awards throughout the time it aired, such as the Emmy for Outstanding Comedy Series in 2001 (the first cable show ever to receive this award), two Golden Globes in 2002, for Best Television Musical/Comedy (Sarah Jessica Parker); The Screen Actors Guild for Outstanding performance by an Ensemble in a Comedy Series, as well as another three Emmys, for casting, Costuming, and Outstanding Directing for a Comedy series are just a few of them (AKASS, K. & MCCABE, J., 2004, p.5). The fact that SATC was nominated for nine Emmys in 2001 is not simply recognition that it was promoted and watched as 'quality' TV in the US broadcasting context and in international markets. The numerous awards and the popularity of



the program lend credibility to SATC and to the ideas disseminated by it (BIGNELL, 2004, p. 169). Examining the various ways that ‘Brazilianess’ was explored is all the more evident because like many other popular TV programs, It is not hard to notice that the social roles of men and women often end up dictated by the same stories that merely represent them (COSTA, 2000, p.11).

The present analysis of SATC revealed that the four main characters’ sexuality is juxtaposed and empowered by that of Brazilian women and/or Brazilianess. While SATC was praised for female empowerment, freedom of choice, friendship, and frank sex talks, it relegated Brazilianess to be a sex spice to enhance the flavor of a white upper class women, consumed and then to be quickly forgotten.

Sex and the City is a site of depictions of femininity and sexuality, which discursively presents a set of interests, problems and desires that may sometimes be incoherent and contradictory but nevertheless construct an identity for the feminine and for the women who ‘buy into it’. The program is a medium through which ideological meanings of femininity are passed on (BIGNELL, 2004, p. 165). But what exactly is being passed on about Brazilianess, and Brazilian femininity and sexuality through SATC in instances such as the two episodes in which the ‘Brazilian Wax’ becomes a central element in the narrative?

The purpose of this paper is not to advocate for one absolute truthful way of representing Brazilian culture, but it stems from the premise that “although there is no absolute truth, no truth apart from representation and dissemination, there are still contingent, qualified, perspectival truths in which communities are invested” (SHOHAT&ALLEN, 1994, p. 179). Poststructuralist theory argues we live and dwell within language and representation, and have no direct access to the “real” but [images] that represent marginalized cultures in a realistic mode. Consequently, programs like SATC, even when not claiming to represent specific incidents, still implicitly make factual claims. Thus, critics are right to draw attention to the complacent ignorance of Hollywood portrayals of [Native Americans] or any other social, cultural or ethnic group they misrepresent (SHOHAT&ALLEN, 1994, p. 179). Although realism is a theoretical impossibility (p. 182) there are better and more complex ways of representing social groups.

One of the dangers of representing a stereotypical version of Brazilianess is that while being portrayed and disseminated by a culturally empowered discursive site, these instances of representation share the semiotic principle that something is “standing for” something else, or that some person or group speaks on behalf of some other persons or groups. While the American women in SATC are multilayered (have jobs, apartments, and friends), the Brazilian women in the show are presented un-problematically as sexual objects. SATC is a show produced in the U.S. and thus, the sensitivity around the Brazilian stereotypes and distortions



arises from the powerlessness of marginalized groups to control their own representation⁵. The success of a program like SATC both domestically and globally expand the complexity of such representations since they become not only part of U.S. understandings of Brazilianess, but are inserted in global constructions of Brazilianess grounded on U.S. media texts.

We are adopting a textual analysis approach to investigate SATC. In this approach, in addition to the characters and storylines we closely examine the dialogues, recognizing that “meaning is a social production, and as such is embedded in issues of power” (ACOSTA-ALZURU, 2003, p. 278). “Unlike content analysis, the text is not the end in textual analysis; it is the means by which we study a signification process, a representation of reality” (p.278). Inspired by Campbell’s (1991) research, we combine the British cultural studies tradition and the American Cultural Studies perspective regarding television programs as culture and interpreting them as a cultural anthropologist who understands television programs as rich storehouses of stories and meanings (p. 16-17).

All the episodes of the series were examined for this analysis and although a more obvious ‘Brazilianess storyline’ was evoked in about nine different episodes, the ethnic-sexual subtext of Latin-Brazilianess was present throughout SATC, especially, but not only, in the theme song that opened each episode weekly. According to American composer Douglas J. Cuomo, who created de song, the producers asked him for a ‘sexy’ song. In his website, the composer says that is the reason why he opted for a Latin flavored lounge music.

A primitive paradise

The present research is not overtly focused on individual representations in that the individual character, rather than larger social categories (race, class, gender, nation, sexual orientation), remains the point of reference. The focus on Brazilianess and away from the individual is done because the character examination misses the ways in which social institutions and cultural practices, as opposed to individuals, can be misrepresented without a single character being stereotyped (SHOHAT & ALLEN, 1994, p. 201). This is why the Brazilian character Maria (played by Brazilian actress Sonia Braga) will not be the only focus of the analysis. The other reason is that, due to its central role in a two-part episode, ‘the Brazilian wax’ - a practice, not an individual - becomes an important character in itself. The shift away from the individual character is further justified because the social institutions and cultural practices of a people can be denigrated without individual stereotypes entering into question (SHOHAT&ALLEN, 1994, p. 201-202).

5 Although Brazilian Globo television plays an important role when it comes to representing Brazilian culture throughout the Globe with its home made telenovelas, it is still difficult to compete with images disseminated by American award winning productions, such as Sex and the City.



The first time the word 'Brazil' was uttered in SATC, was in season one's (episode 5) 'The power of the female sex'. Carrie (Sarah Jessica Parker) sees herself in a rut, desperate to get away from all her problems, and her bills. That's when she meets a French architect, Gilles with whom she has a beautiful fairy tale affair that lasted a couple of days. The reason for such a short affair (we learn, through Carrie's voice over) is because Gilles was just "passing through New York in his way to Brazil to supervise the construction of a new hotel". In this incident, 'Brazil' is evoked as an exotic place, a tourist destination, where Carrie's equally exotic (French) boyfriend is going to disappear to in just a few hours. Gilles invites Carrie to leave New York go on a trip with him and she sighs wishfully, "I thought you were going to Brazil for six months", and Gilles responds that he is indeed. After a long "hummm" from Carrie, she soon realizes that flying off to mysterious and foreign Brazil is a foolish dream. She ironically replies: "I might take you up on that just offer just to save in rent". By the end of the episode, Gilles takes off to Brazil and Carrie is left to face reality in New York City (KOHAN, &SEIDELMAN, 1998). As hooks (1992) points out, the white West has sustained a romantic fantasy of the "primitive" and the concrete search for a real primitive paradise, whether that location be a country or a body, a dark continent or dark flesh, perceived as the perfect embodiment of that possibility (p. 27). This same idea will be evoked again on later episodes of the program.

After that first appearance in season one, 'Brazil' is not mentioned again until season's two episode "La Douler Exquisite". Although equally brief, the second time the country is mentioned, it carries the same overtone as before: Brazil is a foreign, far away country, almost a made up place; a certainly unrealistic place for a "real life" New Yorker or for a 'real long distance relationship' to exist. In this episode, Carrie discovers that her boyfriend, Big, might be moving to Paris for a few months. Although very distraught by the news, Carrie's friends convince her that she can have a NY-Paris romance with him, since lots of couples do it. After all, Paris is not just romantic, it is also the fashion capitol of the world, and fashion is after all, the fifth main character of the show (BRUZZI&GIBSON, 2004). Although she is trying to accept the news, Carrie is still very upset with her boyfriend Big and yells: "Go to Paris! But what happens to us next year, when you decide you just have to go to Brazil?" (LEWY&KING, 1998). Here Paris, the capital of France, talked as a fashion forward cosmopolitan capital among the four characters, is juxtaposed against Brazil, a country that is voiced as a far-flung exotic and possibly unsavory destination. Here not words, but tone of language and body express the gap between the two possible destinations.

A sex spice

The next time Brazil/Brazilianess was evoked in SATC it took center stage in a two-part episode in season 3 ("Escape form New York" and more prominently in "Sex and Another



City”), this time in the form of the ‘Brazilian wax’ (COLES&BICKS, 2000). The four girl friends (Carrie, Miranda, Samantha and Charlotte) are in Los Angeles and Carrie is surprised with the ‘Brazilian wax’ when she had been expecting a ‘regular’ bikini wax. But what exactly is the ‘Brazilian Wax’? The term is said to have originated in the United States in 1994, when the J. Sisters—seven Brazilian sisters whose names start with a “J”— began to offer their signature bikini wax at their beauty salon in New York City (Radulovic n.d.). Although the J sisters indeed offer their signature bikini wax, nobody bothered to ask whether the procedure was indeed worthy of being baptized by SATC as “The Brazilian...” The sisters are said to have learned the technique from their aunt’s beauty salon in a small town in Espirito Santo, Brazil— “a country where small bathing suits require a minimized bikini line” (“Wax Job” 2000). Although not present in the text of the program, the idea that the culturally ultra small Brazilian bikinis require such a wax was incorporated by the American Media in general, and more specifically, by SATC. Based on these assumptions, “I couldn’t help but wonder”: just how small would these bikinis be? The criticism here is not about the practice per se (the waxing of all pubic hair), but the equating of a practice to a whole culture. In an online article about the ‘Brazilian Wax’, the practice is suggested as an option for women heading for a “tropical paradise” (PEIXOTO, 2001, p. 118).

Interestingly, the Brazilian wax narrative enters SATC when the characters are away from New York. It is in Los Angeles that Carrie decides to get a bikini wax. After all, “LA is the land of perpetual sun and perpetual sunbathing; which also makes it the land of perpetual bikini wax.” After her visit to the Salon, Carrie shares her terrifying experience with friends Samantha and Miranda. “I got mugged! She took everything I got!” and Samantha calmly replies: “It’s called the Brazilian wax.” In this case, Brazilianess, and more specifically, Brazilian women, are portrayed in an objectified sexual way, contrary to the usual representation of the four American white women in the show; where customarily, “to a certain degree, a role reversal is enacted, where women become subjects and men become the objects with their own to-be-looked-at-ness (AKASS&MCCABE, 2004, p. 7). Sadly, when it came to representing Brazilian women there was no reversal, as they represent sex and nothing else. But it is also important to note that Carrie uses the word mugged. Here there is a conflation between images of sexuality and danger and criminality, which is often another trope used to represent Brazil in many U.S. cultural products, such as the CSI Miami episode briefly described earlier.

Miranda asks Carrie why she did not tell the beautician to stop. But why should she have said something, after all an American wax usually represents the removal of pubic hair from the bikini area. But according to the program, to a Brazilian waxer - in this case “Alicia” - it was implicit, being the ‘Brazilian’ that she is, that waxing means the complete removal of all pubic hair. Later, the procedure is clearly described as something unnatural, foreign and wild.



Something that highly successful white, upper-class American women would not take part of, unless they were trying to liven up their sexual life with an “ethnic” spice. The disapproval overtone is clear in Miranda’s reaction when she tells Carrie and Samantha “Ooooh, I would have killed her.” Carrie responds by saying that she tried to warn Alicia that that was not the kind of wax she wanted, and that now [she] “felt like a hairless dog.”

Although Carrie is growing increasingly intrigued by her new ‘sexiness’, and Miranda is still disapproving of it, from this point on, the program repeatedly associates the procedure, and its result, with increased sexual attractiveness and sexuality. Carrie claims that she is “so aware of down there right now. I feel like nothing but walking sex”. And Samantha replies matter-of-factly, “that’s the thing about the Brazilian. It makes you do crazy things. You have to be very careful who you invite to Brazil”, and Miranda shouts that “she is officially RSVPing no” and leaves to meet her New Yorker friend Lew, to “bitch about LA”. Samantha suggests that Miranda “take[s] him to Brazil. I hear it is very popular” (COLES&BICKS, 2000). Throughout the dialogue and during the episode, the background music is the traditional Brazilian Samba.

Later on the show, Carrie meets Keith Travers, an ‘insider’ from Los Angeles and he takes her on an eccentric date: real estate hunting. They go to Lorenzo Lamas’s property and Carrie feels very attracted to Keith, whom she just met and would not normally have sex with, but thanks to her new sexual spice, feels free to be wild and unconventional: “And there, in a South American living room, my Brazilian made me kiss him” (COLES&BICKS, 2000). This is a seminal point in the construction of a sexualized Brazilianess we are discussing in this article. By claiming that “her Brazilian” made her do it, she jokingly displaces the blame, while allowing for the sexy spiciness granted by her brushing with Brazilianess to allow her to become sexually free and empowered. By embodying but blaming the Other (HOOKS, 1992) in her, Carrie is able to act irrationally with no room for guilt.

Her increasing satisfaction with her new ‘self’ can also be seen in the more ironic and accepting ways in which the girls refer to her “Brazilian”. Later at a coffee shop, Samantha shows the girls a fake Fendi bag she bought. She says that you cannot tell it is a fake, unless you pull out the lining. Carrie laughs and says that “[I] don’t have that luxury, since my insides are on the outside now”. And later, as Charlotte (Kristin Davis) arrives in LA, she asks the girls what she should do. Samantha says that “the first thing [she] will need is a bikini wax” and Miranda quickly suggests that “she should see Alicia”, as once again, samba music fades up (COLES&BICKS, 2000). In the next scene, as Charlotte’s legs are being held up towards the ceiling by Alicia, the camera zooms in on her face, to reveal a very puzzled expression.

Later that night, as the four friends are at a restaurant, having cocktails and talking about real relationships and fake handbags, Charlotte yells that her unsuccessful marriage is a “fake Fendi” because they look perfect from the outside but are fake on the inside: they have been



married for a month and have never had sex. Samantha then suggests that not all is lost in this wasp (sexless) love affair, since “he’s never seen Brazil”. And all the girls agree with a unanimous “Oooooooh” and as Carrie points out “a second honeymoon in South America, that will do the trick” (COLES&BICKS, 2000). In this case, Brazilianess is once again evoked like an ethnic commodity and “within commodity culture, ethnicity becomes a spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture (HOOKS, 1992, p. 21).

The same spice that can save a dull white couple, later leads Carrie to act wild and “native” as she describes it. She wakes up in what she believes is Keith’s bed and the two talk about her ‘Brazilian’. Keith looks under the cover and tells Carrie: “I like what you have going on down there”. And Carrie replies: “that would be a whole lot of nothing.” And they both laugh. Carrie asks him if he never worked and at this moment Carrie Fisher, the real owner of the house walks in on them and says, “I told you, no prostitutes”, in a reference to the ‘Brazilian’ Carrie (COLES&BICKS, 2000). Later on the episode, Carrie tells Samantha, “apparently, in LA, house sitters are somebody and New York writers are prostitutes.” Samantha says jokingly that she is at least a high-class escort and Carrie replies: “frankly I blame[s] it on Rio!”(COLES &BICKS, 2000).

By the end of the episode, Carrie is able to become civilized again, as she explains that the four women “had left LA a little lighter. Some of us had lost our hair and others a little dignity.” Carrie also realizes that in New York, she was “starting to feel like myself again, and the rest of me would grow back, eventually”, as she scratches her crotch (COLES&BICKS, 2000). As the ethnic spice was gradually digested, so was her bold and “excessive” (Brazilian) sexual appetite.

As Peixoto (2001) points out, “in promoting the Brazilian wax trend, [SATC and the U.S.] media failed to question whether the procedure was, in fact, espoused by a majority of Brazilian women” (p. 121). She later adds that, although she,

was born and raised in Rio de Janeiro and visit the country regularly (at least once a year), I had never heard of the Brazilian wax procedure until it became popular in the United States a few years ago. Growing up in Brazil, my friends and I did go to beauty salons for a regular bikini wax, not a Brazilian wax. In searching the Web sites of Brazilian beauty salons, I have found that some do offer a more extensive bikini wax (referred to as “virilha cavada”, or deeper bikini line)—for women who wear smaller bikinis. However, few bikinis are small enough to require the complete removal of hair. According to Pello Menos Depilation Institute, which has 13 clinics in Rio de Janeiro, the complete removal of pubic and anal hair is referred to in Brazil by its scientific name, “tricotomia” (. . .) a procedure that is usually performed on pregnant women right before they give birth (. . .) and because the Brazilian wax procedure requires specialized training, it is not offered by many Brazilian salons (PEIXOTO, 2001, p.121).



Peixoto (2001), also points out that the ‘Brazilian wax’ is an example of the ‘commodification of Others’ as described by feminist theorist bell hooks (1992): “The commodification of Others has been so successful because it is a delight, more intense, more satisfying than normal ways of doing and feeling” (p. 21). The ‘Brazilian wax’ that was promoted by SATC subsequently “builds on and helps reinforce the social construction of Brazilian women as exotic, sensual, and sexual (PEIXOTO, 2001, p. 124).

The sexy latina

Shohat & Allen (1994) determined that in Hollywood films “Latina women call up the heat” (p. 196). An examination of SATC allows for the same assertion to be made in regards to television. The next instance Brazilianess plays a role in the program is in a three-episode plot in season 4 (Defining Moments, What’s Sex Got to do With it, and Ghost Town). During these episodes, Samantha finds herself involved in a lesbian relationship with a Brazilian artist (Maria), played by Brazilian actress Sonia Braga⁶. What these episodes share in common with the ones that portrayed the ‘Brazilian wax’, is, narratively, the sexy ‘Brazilian spice’ subtext and production wise, the fact that Brazilian music is heard throughout the scenes.

The audience learns about Maria in one of Carrie’s voice overs in the beginning of the episode: “That night we went to Charlotte’s gallery for the opening of an exhibit by Maria Diega Reyes, the Brazilian artist”. A few minutes later we see Maria being congratulated by a woman “It’s all stunning, I am so proud of you, *chica*”. For any Brazilian, both the artist’s name and the use of the word *chica* rings odd. Her name, and the expression *chica*, reveal a common mistake when it comes to representing Brazilian culture and Brazilians in the U.S. media: the name and expression are of Spanish origin, not Portuguese, the actual Brazilian language (COULTER&BICKS, 2001). But as with other minority groups, this mistake has more to do with “the complacent ignorance of Hollywood portrayals” than with stereotypes (Shohat & Allen, 1994, p. 179).

When Samantha goes to Maria’s loft to buy some of her art, they two women end up painting a picture together and their hands touch. Samantha asks Maria (an out of the closet lesbian) if they need to talk about that: “I am not the relationship type and I have done the girl thing. It was really nice ... for the guy. Can we be friends?”. Samantha makes it clear that she is not a lesbian, but that would soon change (COULTER&BICKS, 2001). During a dinner with Carrie, Big, and Maria, Samantha tells Big to leave Carrie alone, because she is fragile and also her best friend, and Big has hurt her in the past. Samantha leaves the table, followed by Maria,

6 Sonia Braga is one of the most recognized Brazilian actresses in the United States. She’s appeared in many television productions as well as in Hollywood movies: from the *Bill Cosby Show*, *CSI*, *Law and Order*, *The George Lopez Show*, *Brothers and Sisters*, to *The Kiss of the Spider Woman*, and finally, *Sex and the City*, just to mention a few.



who at this point is obviously in love with Samantha: “I lied, I cannot just be your friend. What I saw back there... you are magnificent, and how do you say ... you kick ass, and I see where this is going, and you don’t do relationships, and it would be very bad for me . . . You are really something!” Samantha seems distraught with the possibility of seeing her new Brazilian friend leave and decides to kiss her (on the mouth), as we hear Carrie’s voice over: “Right then and there, Samantha decided to let down her boundaries and open herself to the possibility of a relationship with a woman” (COULTER&BICKS, 2001).

While discussing Lesbianism in *Sex and the City*, Merck (1995) discovered that “it emerges as a lifestyle choice to be dispensed with like last year’s fashion (p. 8). Curiously, the choice made by Samantha, to ‘try out’ lesbianism, was partly motivated by a exotic Other: a sexy, seductive, dark skinned Brazilian woman. The fact that Samantha would never have agreed to (a) a relationship, and (b) a love affair with a woman, but does so with a Brazilian woman, demonstrates hooks’ (1992) commodification of Otherness (p. 21).

Through her relationship with the Brazilian Maria, Samantha demonstrates her unconventional behavior (having a relationship, and furthermore, with a woman), one that up until that point in the series was her longest relationship. When she announces to her friends, “[Maria and I are] having a relationship. Yes, Ladies, I’m a lesbian,” Carrie’s first words of response are ‘wait a second! You are having a relationship? ... “How does that work? You go to bed one night and decide you are lesbian?” Samantha tries to explain by saying that “Maria is an incredible woman; she has passion and intelligence and ...” as Carrie replies “a vagina?” (HENRY, 2004, p. 79). The dialogue illustrates that just as Carrie’s Brazilian had lead her into going to bed with a complete stranger while in LA, Samantha’s Brazilian lead her into bed with a woman. In bell hooks, (1992, p. 21) terms, she “eats the Other” and even manages to have the mysterious female ejaculation – the ultimate form of pleasure and something that Samantha (who has had hundreds of sexual encounters) had never before experienced. In one notable scene, during sex, Maria ejaculates on Samantha’s face. Female ejaculation is relatively unheard of outside lesbian magazines and feminist sex guides – let alone visually depicted in popular culture – (HENRY, 2004, p. 79).

Samantha tells Carrie that her Brazilian, “has ten dicks” (as she waves her fingers in the air) and that with Maria she is getting an education: “not only do I know everything there is to know about the glorious *buceta*; that’s Portuguese for pussy, the most important thing is that Maria has taught me to connect during sex. It’s not just some animal act; it’s about two people making love.” It took a Brazilian woman to teach Samantha everything there was to know about sex, pleasure, relationships and women, as we learn through Carrie’s voice over (COULTER&BICKS, 2001). The episode reflects what bell hooks calls the search for the ultimate individual pleasure, such as the one voiced by Michael Foucault: one that is so intense,



you might not recover from: It is precisely that longing for the pleasure that has led the white west to sustain a romantic fantasy of and with the “primitive” through a body (the dark flesh) or a foreign country (HOOKS, 1992, p. 27).

While Third Wave Feminists have celebrated those aspects of Second Wave thought that focus on a woman’s right to pleasure, others insist that sexuality is primarily a site of oppression and danger to women (HENRY, 2004, p. 75), and SATC is a perfect example of this. The show is empowering to the four white women, as the characters are multilayered, independent, upper class career women who enjoy sex. “These women are proud and protective of their individual accomplishments” (NELSON, 2004, p. 94). Furthermore, the white women in SATC “if they so chose, can work, talk, and have sex “like men” while still maintaining all the privileges associated with being an attractive woman” (GERHARD, 2005, p. 37). But when it comes to Brazilians, they are basically depicted as “nothing but walking sex” (COLES & BICKS, 2000).

Conclusions

The representation of Brazilianess in the American media is a subject that is relatively unexplored. This textual analysis of the HBO series *Sex and the City* offered a glimpse to a few of the ways Brazilianess is produced. The program was chosen for various reasons: the introduction of the ‘Brazilian wax’ into the popular lexicon was one of them, but also because “in its combination of frank sex talk and best girlfriends, SATC became one of the most watched and discussed television series in recent memory” (GERHARD, 2005, p. 37).

This study has revealed that Brazilianess, as seen through the lenses of American television producers and writers is a narrow adjective that reproduces warned out stereotypes of tropical nationals and women: ‘a primitive paradise’, ‘a sex spice’ and ‘the sexy Latina.’ These limited depictions of what it means to be Brazilian can be described as what Shohat & Allen (1994) expressed as sharing a “burden of representation”: or the semiotic principle that something is “standing for” something else, or that some person or group is speaking on behalf of some other persons or groups (p. 183).

As far back as 1966, it has been proposed that the “television fantasy world does more than provide entertainment: it structures a belief in what is possible in the real world (SHAYON, p.24). Thus, according to SATC, Brazil is ‘a primitive paradise’, sustaining the white west’s romantic fantasy of the “primitive” and the concrete search for a real primitive paradise where a continent or dark flesh is the perfect embodiment of that possibility (HOOKS, 1992, p. 27).

In the United States commodity culture, Brazilianess is also a ‘sex spice’ that can be bought, consumed and disregarded once it has been tasted and digested: A seasoning to spice up the bland dish of mainstream white culture. The idea of Brazilianess as an ethnic good thrives because the commodification of Others is a delight, more intense, more satisfying than normal



ways of doing and feeling. People who are non-white are often seen as being more sexual, worldly, and sensual in popular culture. Desires for or fantasies about the Other are exploited by consumer society in a way that preserves, rather than challenges, the status quo. After being commodified and consumed, the Other is forgotten. (HOOKS, 1992, p. 21). This was the case with the 'sexy Latina' (Maria) and with 'the Brazilian wax'.

In *Sex and the City*, the 'Brazilian wax' was used as a way to make the white women feel sexy, wild, and irrational. By removing their body hair – supposedly like Brazilian women do – their North-American counterparts were able to buy the fantasy of acquiring the socially constructed sexuality of Brazilianess. And these women's sexual partners could also enjoy their own fantasies of consuming the Other (PEIXOTO, 2001, p. 125).

Finally, as Peixoto (2001) discovered, it is noteworthy that the so-called 'Brazilian wax' became popular (or at least known) in Brazil after it was promoted by the U.S. media. This would lead to the conclusion that the American media created a fantasy of Otherness, commodified it, and then sold it back to not just the local public and those around the world who watched the show, but also to Brazilian women as well -thereby creating a self-fulfilling prophecy (p. 129).

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