

Made in Brazil: Jeans and Identity Export to the Global Fantasy Market

Date : December 20, 2008

*Szilvia Simai-Mesquita,
Institute of Advanced Studies, University of Sao Paulo, Brazil*

The research "Made in Brazil: Jeans and Identity Export to the Global Fantasy Market", explores how the representation of Brazilian-ness today can be understood through the visibilities of a new identity construction which is driven by a desire for emancipation but which is subject to a neo-colonial concern for a favourable image abroad as a prerequisite for further foreign investment in the country. This ambiguous position is analysed in a recent working paper focusing on the process of fantasy construction for export.

In this recent paper I argued that (i) the construction of images of Brazilian-ness is a very complex and ambiguous process containing a large amount of fetishism and determined by post-colonial mimicry; (ii) cultural fetishism contributes to the materialization of the Brazilian national imaginary. Through the Brazilian samba-jeans fetish various national imaginaries can be studied; (iii) finally, the importance of the exploitation of Brazilian exoticism in these existing fantasies were discussed and considered whether the samba-jeans myth was part of a bigger political–economic process and whether it contributes to the glamorization of misery for global marketing purposes.

Three image-contributing fantasies – (i) the tropical, (ii) the post-colonial female and her body, and (iii) the samba and the carnivalesque – were explored in the research paper and it was argued that the fetishistic power of these fantasies drive people to perceive Brazilian samba jeans not in their 'thing-ness' but in their fantasized state of fabricated representation of Brazilian-ness abroad, which feeds the myth and popularity of these jeans and creates a longing for them.

The opening question from which the analysis sets out was an etymology inspired interdisciplinary exploration of the name Brazil. Through this initial analysis it is uncovered that Brazil has a history of intrinsic mimesis, born out of mimicry and carrying this weight in its own name. The word 'Brazil' is a corruption of the European name for the Malaysian sapang tree, from whose reddish wood was drawn an extract not unlike saffron, but which tints less and has no flavour. When this was discovered and trafficked from the tropical South this corresponding part of the New World metonymically assumed an alien name, the nominally transferred referential for the whole territory. According to this view, Pau Brasil, 'Brazil-wood', was the first notable item to be exported from this land but was also a designator of the land itself and ultimately of its identity by carrying the name of the first exported object in the name of its own identity. Thus Brazilian-ness also has a complex symbolic sphere in analysis. This nominal condemnation of the colonial rulers, the eye of the outside world, understandably became the dominant perspective and intrinsic for the invention of Brazil's self-image throughout its history. Pau Brasil was also a powerful cultural movement in twentieth-century Brazil. The Brazilian poet Oswald de Andrade (1890–1954) initiated the Poesia Pau Brasil (Brazil-wood Poetry) in 1925 when he published his famous 'Brazil-wood Manifesto'. Brazil-wood was his intended symbol for Brazilian culture as an international commodity in its own

right; his Brazil-wood Poetry was conceived of as an export product, as something to combat the historical imitation of European models.

The end of colonialism, resistance, modernization contributed to the development of the modern Brazilian national exotic or Creole identity: the one who felt sympathy for his or her own cultural exoticism and heritage, the one who put an emphasis on the new ideology of multiracial Brazil, but who at the same time desired to attain socio-economic prestige and the imagined cultural sophistication of the former European colonizers. This struggle of ambiguity and auto-contradiction drove Brazilians to initiate the creation of an exoticized image of their own Brazilian-ness. This psycho-social process has become a political and economic strategy during the last few decades and has formed itself into a national strategy. Visual materials of Brazilian Samba Jeans used in my research provided ideological insight into this Brazilian strategy and national imaginary.

The first strategic Brazilian Samba Jeans myth contributing fantasy explored in my working paper was the tropical fantasy. I found that fantasized images of the tropical in Brazilian jeans catalogues are overwhelming. These images include bright sunshine, beautiful beaches, tropical paradise and fruits. Such powerful tropical fantasies are used by many prestigious Brazilian jeans companies. As Picture 1 clearly shows, the Sawary Jeans catalogue used eight pictures and attached the parts to one another on its opening page. These pictures are lacking in variety and repeat common images of the tropical. These include green, tropical forests; tropical beaches, palm trees and Mediterranean-style architecture. These pictures are then repeated on the following pages, where young women appear wearing various Sawary jeans placed on the pictures introduced on the opening page. In fact, the idea comes through clearly; the tropical images appear far more in the catalogue than any of the jeans models, which clearly reinforces the idea that Sawary is selling a

tropical fantasy rather than jeans as things in themselves. Similar images can be found in the brochure of the Samba-Jeans Company, showing the beach at Rio de Janeiro (Picture 2).

This Rio image has, in fact, historically been seen in Brazilian culture as a symbol of optimism. Although Rio de Janeiro is among the most dangerous cities in the world, its charm and its reputation abroad are still powerful. According to Nicholas Brown the apolitical image of Rio de Janeiro has been culturally constructed since the 1950s, through associated images of 'pretty girls, beaches and the scenic backdrop of a postcard Rio de Janeiro' (Brown, 2003 :124). The tropical fantasy provides a path to an illusionary state of satisfaction (Freud, 1961) and through this attraction and appeal this psychological power can be used in favourable image creation for marketing (in this case, specifically export) purposes. Thus, as Freud (1927) argued, a fetishist is able simultaneously to believe in his or her displaced desire or fantasy and to recognize that it is not real but fantasy. However, this does not reduce the power of the fantasy of the displaced desire over the individual. The tropical fantasy works exactly for this reason: through its psycho-power people have constructed the image of Brazilian samba jeans and worked it into a fetish. The second fantasy explored was the postcolonial female body fantasy. The imaginaries of this fantasy include the sadomasochist fantasy, which comes directly from the historical imaginary on female passivity and developed into a common obsession among Brazilian males, namely that females like being beaten on their bottom as well as from the practice of bottom-oriented samba dancing and also from recent derogative stereotypes formed on the basis of perceptions of Brazilian immigrants abroad. All these developed an exaggerated interest in, and the mass fantasy that sex appeal is focused on, the bottom. In fact, the most common way of centring attention on the bottom involves concentrating all or any decorations present on the jeans on that body part. This can be observed in the picture below (Picture 3).

Material World

A Global Hub for Thinking About Things

~~The last Brazilian samba jeans myth contributing fantasy explored was the Samba and Carnavalesque Imaginary. In my research I found that the image and history of samba culture and the carnivalesque gives a sensation of rebelliousness, a dissenter or non-conformist illusionary feeling to youth which can be seen on the following model. (Picture 4).~~

The conclusion of my paper was that it would be naïve to think that these fantasies are constructed just for the sake of enjoyment and that there are no political and economic consequences. This complex and ambiguous fantasy market and jeans trade in and outside Brazil is a serious and complex identity industry linking politics, fantasy and economics. Thus the phenomenon of Brazilian samba jeans is a political, psychoanalytical and economic notion. I also noted in my research paper that there is one element in this representation that is problematic, and that is the use of the socially peripheral or semi-peripheral condition of the people who are fantasized through Brazilian samba jeans.

The fantasies presented in my research, namely the tropical, post-colonial women and carnivalesque samba, are all related to socially peripheral groups of people. The protagonists of these fantasies are from the global south (tropical), Creole or immigrant women (post-colonial women), and slave descendants (carnavalesque samba). The exploitation of their disadvantage as an aesthetical representation becomes problematic for two main reasons. If aesthetic representation does not have ideological limits it will mean that any peripheral or semi-peripheral condition can be represented aesthetically and therefore enjoyed. If the Creole woman or the misery of the Amazon is to be aesthetically represented, then it is at some level enjoyed. At this point samba jeans become problematic and subject to critique because the protagonists of fantasies constructing their sex appeal, who make them into a myth, would not necessarily agree on such a representation. Furthermore, these images are used for marketing purposes, which means that somebody can make a profit from them. On the grounds of these points, I suggest, the export of Brazilian samba-jeans remains problematic.

References:

- Brown, N. (2003). Bossaposbossa: Or, Postmodernism as Semi-Peripheral Symptom. *The New Centennial Review* 3.2 (Summer) 117-159.
- Freud, S. (1927). *Fetishism*. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol 22. London: Hogarth Press.
- Freud, S. (1961). *Civilization and its Discontents*, New York: W. W. Norton & Company.