

# Book Review

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**Bishop-Sánchez, Kathryn.** *Creating Carmen Miranda: Race, Camp, and Transnational Stardom.* Vanderbilt UP, 2016.

In this volume, Kathryn Bishop-Sánchez has accomplished the challenging but rewarding task of analyzing one of the twentieth century's most popular culture icons. This is a real feat, given Carmen Miranda's place in the popular imaginary. Bishop-Sánchez tackles this task brilliantly through the lens of Miranda as a cultural sign, providing a rigorous study of how the latter has served as a constructed and embodied media icon. In this impressive book, Bishop-Sánchez examines Miranda's rise to stardom with a focus on a transnational culture of spectacle. As the title indicates, the main theoretical framework is race and camp, but the scope of the book goes beyond these to offer a complex study on performance, media history, and gender. The book's main objective is to provide an in-depth analysis of Miranda's "creation, interpretation, and imitation" (2). Its innovation lies in the careful analysis of the performative "production history and conceptualization" (3) that surrounds the creation of a Brazilian star who came to stand for Pan-American "unity" and was for a time the highest paid woman in Hollywood. Bishop-Sánchez also articulates an original notion of Miranda's "performative wink."

In meticulous archival research, Bishop-Sánchez examines Miranda's role in radio, theater, cinema, and the media industries surrounding the construction of stardom. These include magazines, television, and fashion. The study expertly demonstrates how "Miranda's on- and offstage and screen personae created a multilayered matrix" (5). Applying a relevant range of theory and criticism, the book includes John Ellis's notions of stardom, Fernando Ortiz's theory of transculturation, and Homi Bhabha's "hybridity," to name just a few. The book's analyses are grounded in a history of international relations—specifically between the United States and Latin America—focusing on the Good Neighbor Policy, the cultural diplomatic role Miranda played in Getúlio Vargas's regime, and the project of Brazil's modernization.

The book is divided into six clear chapters that cover interrelated facets of Miranda as a star. Chapter one, “Brazilian Stardom: From Radio to Casino and the Creation of the Baiana,” carefully traces Miranda’s trajectory in Brazil and how her adoption of the *baiana* costume reflects Brazilian performance. Bishop-Sánchez relates the origins and the cultural role of the *baiana* in the Brazilian imaginary, and how that iconic image contains a multitude of histories ranging from colonization and slavery, to gender, class, and race politics. The chapter offers a productive discussion of authenticity and the double-bind of cultural appropriation. The chapter also embeds the history of casinos in Rio and of drag queens in carnival. Chapter two, “Performing Race: Miranda and Afro-Brazilianness on the Carioca Stage of the 1930s,” presents the ramifications of race in Miranda’s early performances, and the intersections of race and culture. The chapter offers an important history of the myth of racial democracy, and early civil-rights movements as manifest in “performance strategies” of the Brazilian stage. Chapter three, “Staging the Exotic: The Instant Success of the Brazilian Bombshell,” examines Miranda’s arrival in the United States in 1939, and focuses on the star’s early Broadway stage presence. The chapter emphasizes the importance of the exotic element in marketing and establishing Miranda’s persona, and it examines the crucial role of stereotypes and language (body language, gestures, and linguistic accent) in the media construction of the icon.

The conflation of Latin American national cultures is also discussed. Chapter four, “Marketing Miranda: Stardom, Fashion, and Gossip in the Media,” discusses the “interconnectedness between [...] cinema and consumer culture” in Hollywood (100), and it offers an analysis of the commodification of stars and the celebrity system, carefully studying Miranda’s exotic role. Several films are analyzed, as well as Miranda’s costumes, and the importance of celebrity gossip in the construction of stardom. Chapter five, “Camp Carmen: The Icon on the Screen,” offers an in-depth study of the intricacies of camp as artifice in relation to performativity. Bishop-Sánchez develops the “performative wink” concept in a discussion of Miranda’s ambivalence and gender in relation to staged camp. Chapter six, “Imitating Miranda: Playing with Camp, Drag, and Gender Norms,” examines how Miranda’s imitations have further consolidated her status as an icon, and how her performances have “exploded the gender divide” (171). It also analyzes Miranda in cartoons. The book’s conclusion continues the discussion of Miranda as part of a cultural memory—a proposition discussed throughout the

book—addressing the star’s legacy. The book reiterates how Miranda was “the epitome of the modern female celebrity,” and how she helped push “the boundaries of conventions” (206), covering Miranda’s inspiration to the Tropicália movement, contemporary performance, literature, and cinema.

The book’s main strength is its eloquent study of media industries. Bishop-Sánchez offers an excellent analysis of media history that encompasses music, cinema, print-media, marketing, and television. The inclusion of theater, performance art, fashion, and literature adds to the force of the study, revealing networks of media in the age of technical reproducibility. One of the main (and impeccably presented) arguments pertains to transnational cultural exchange through media. The book shows how Miranda’s construction as an icon engages in transnational socio-politics, as well as the crucial role of performance and media in the cultural history of the Americas.

This volume further solidifies Bishop-Sánchez’s place as an expert on performance, gender, and race studies. It echoes concepts present in *Performing Brazil: Essays on Culture, Identity, and the Performing Arts* (which Bishop-Sánchez co-edited with Severino Albuquerque), a fact that points to a cohesive line of intellectual inquiry. This is a remarkable work, and it is a contribution to multiple fields. It is both fascinating and a pleasure to read. Bishop-Sánchez’s careful analyses resonate with our contemporary celebrity culture, bringing into question issues rarely discussed openly in the media, and they also splendidly attest to Miranda’s impact.

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