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# WE, THE OTHERS: CONSTRUCTION OF THE EXOTIC AND CONSUMPTION OF BRAZILIAN FASHION IN FRANCE[*]

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**RESUMO**

Esse artigo trata do consumo de produtos – especialmente de moda e vestuário – brasileiros na França como uma forma de consumo do exótico. Para tanto, parto de dez meses de pesquisa de campo na França, balizando os dados ali obtidos com experiência de pesquisa anterior, realizada no Brasil. O artigo discute, em primeiro lugar, o exotismo, temática que invariavelmente abre portas para um debate a respeito de identidades e alteridades. Em seguida, são examinadas algumas particularidades do "consumir o outro" presentes nos discursos franceses que versam sobre produtos brasileiros. Por fim, conclui-se que a construção de um exotismo à brasileira é situada, a um só tempo, no imaginário francês sobre o outro brasileiro e na própria produção brasileira de modas de vestir.
**Palavras-chave:** alteridade, consumo, exótico, moda.

**ABSTRACT**

This article discusses the consumption of Brazilian products – especially fashion and clothing – in France as a way of consuming the exotic. Drawing on ten months of fieldwork in France, I engage data collected there with my experience from previous research carried out in Brazil. Firstly, this article discusses exoticism, a topic that invariably broaches a debate about identity and alterity. Then, some particularities of "consuming the other" in French discourses about Brazilian products are analyzed. Finally, I conclude that the construction of Brazilian fashion as exoticism is simultaneously situated in the French imaginary about the Brazilian other and in the very Brazilian production of garment fashion.
**Keywords:** consumption, fashion, exoticism, alterity.

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## Introduction

In an 1871 letter to his friend and also poet Paul Demeny, Arthur Rimbaud penned the paradoxical statement "Je est un autre".[1] Even though the poet's identitary and existential questioning concerned his own individuality and compounded a reflection on artistic creation, it is nonetheless inspirational as a provocative inversion of the two constitutive poles of all identities. The exotic, focus of this paper, is a constant (re)definition of alterities and identities.

The particular case analyzed here relates to the construction of an exotic Brazil in national fashion gear and its reception by the French public. Such exoticization contains but spills over the field of fashion. Therefore, I will not refrain from mentioning other sectors (such as music or food) that are articulated with Brazilian fashion in France and are part of Brazil's tropical exoticism.

Even though French discourse on the Brazilian exotic prevails in this study, as a speech by them about us, Rimbaud's paradox is unavoidable. In contrast to European productions inspired by fascination with the *other*[2] such as Manet's "japonisms", this is a domestic construction of the exotic that, even though aimed at a European public, takes place within Brazil, in the local production of fashion wear. *Je est un autre* inasmuch as we construct ourselves as the *other* – even if for marketing reasons.

## Doing fieldwork in the fashion field

The emergence of a fashion field in Brazil is manifest not only in its garment industry's expressive figures,[3] but in the flourishing of large events receiving significant visibility in the national media during the last decade or so. In events such as the São Paulo Fashion Week, Fashion Rio, and many others based on different state capitals, Brazilian brands exhibit once or twice a year their luxury prêt-à-porter collections.

Here, as in most of the world,[4] the focus is in the development of luxury productions and prêt-à-porter.[5] Production in this sector involves not only the

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[1] May 15, 1871 letter to Paul Demeny. Digitally available at the French National Library (Oeuvres, [s. d.]).

[2] I chose to use italics for the term "other" when it refers to "the other", "the different", "the exotic". Even though this distinction is commonly indexed by the use of a capital "O" (the Other), as Burke (2004) has pointed out this procedure has a historical (and political) origin, namely, classic French theory about *L'Autre*, where "the others", whoever they are, have their particularities homogenized as a single, undifferentiated Other.

[3] According to the Brazilian Clothing Association (Abravest *apud* Tessari, 2001), this sector comprises around 18,000 companies and one million jobs.

[4] On the decline of haute couture and the emergence of new sectors and actors in the fashion field, see Veillon & Denoyelle (2000).

[5] I use the terms luxury prêt-à-porter and luxury productions because, even though they are not haute couture (which implies unique and exclusive models) but "ready-made" clothes, this is nonetheless a sector that: a) supplies clients from Brazil's upper and upper middle classes with expensive products which, depending on the type and material, are equivalent to those of many international prêt-à-porter brands; b) implies authorial creation since, even when the brand does not bear the name of the stylist (or group of stylists), his/her name is as broadcasted and famed as that of the brand itself; c) produces articles in small quantities, in contrast to the apparel industry at large; d) actively participates in the legitimating circuit of national fashion by seasonally presenting their production in major fashion events, where it gathers attention by both the press and fashion critics.

commercial and industrial aspects of the apparel industry, but a fashion system with respect to both the stage of creation (relying on research and investment in trends, with a focus on "authorial" production) and diffusion (by participating in seasonal fashion shows and permanent legitimating arenas such as specialized magazines and the words of fashion critics and journalists).

The Brazilian participation in international fashion fairs and events marks a specific moment in the process of constituting and legitimating a "Brazilian fashion" and a "Brazilian dressing style" in search of its own share in the global market. The diffusion and commercialization of national fashion abroad has been a constant presence in Brazil's specialized press during the last ten years. [6] It is precisely this branch of Brazilian fashion –luxury prêt-à-porter – that will, during the 90's, fight for a space in the international market. At that moment, Brazilian haute couture producers, precisely those directed to higher added-value consumer goods, were enjoying increasing prestige, and decided to expand their sales abroad. Young and well-established Brazilian stylists began to sell their creations in multi-brand stores in Hong Kong, Germany, Japan, United States, Italy, France, and England. Their collections also started being exhibited, even if sporadically, at catwalks in fashion weeks in Europe and the U.S.

Another set of changes paralleled these recent developments: a return[7] to national themes by part of the production and diffusion of fashion in Brazil.[8] In the chief national fashion events during 2004 and 2005, as well as in the choice of images and discourses about them broadcasted in the national media, there was a hyperbolic presence of Brazil. In the rhetoric of fashion producers and specialized press, such presence is substantiated in the "search for roots", "valuing our popular culture", "accenting our nature", in sum, making use of that which is most "authentically Brazilian". In the images of high fashion collections, abound references to flora and fauna, national and regional types, popular religiosity, historical patrimony, and tourism-luring landscapes.

Both movements – a greater international visibility and "Brazilianizing" of themes – dovetailed in a broad effort to diffuse Brazilian fashion in France during the last couple of years.[9] It is worth remarking that France is a central actor in the international fashion field. Even though from the mid-twentieth century on, fashion has been pulverized with the emergence of new producing and diffusing centers, [10] it has historically maintained considerable influence on Brazil – as Freyre (1997) himself had pointed out for all that is related to clothing. It is not by chance then that Paris has been the focus of such initiatives aimed at enhancing the visibility of Brazilian fashion.

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[6] Research in the fashion periodicals archives of the Hipólito da Costa Museum, Porto Alegre, Brazil, 2004-2005.

[7] I speak of a return because during the 1960's and 70's, national – and nationalist – themes have figured prominently in the emerging Brazilian fashion, especially in events funded by the French multinational Rhodia.

[8] As analyzed in a previous study (Leitão, 2006a).

[9] My research in the archives of French periodicals (*Vogue Paris*, *Elle France*, *L'Officiel*, *Votre Beauté*, *Femme en Ville*, *L'Expressmag*, *Madame Figaro*, *Printemps Magazine*, *Journal du Textile* and *Fashion Daily News*, among others) has indicated that the presence of Brazilian fashion in the French press, scant before 2001, increased significantly between 2004 and 2005.

[10] The relative abatement of French hegemony in the international fashion market stems from changes stretching back to the World War II and its aftermath (Veillon, 2001), when the United States and Italy emerged in the fashion scene (White, 2000).

Here I follow the trails of Brazilian fashion by means of data gathered during ten months of fieldwork in France, when I observed fashion events, apparel industry exhibits and fairs (with some Brazilian presence), as well as stores selling Brazilian products (especially clothes). As for the latter, I have focused on two of Paris's largest and most traditional department stores;[11] there, I observed the *coins*[12] selling Brazilian brands, besides two self-proclaimed "Brazilian" establishments selling only products made in Brazil and/or espousing a Brazilian theme.

In both stores as well as in the *coins* I have asked vendors about the products they sold, most coveted brands (when that was the case), and their clients. The thirteen French consumers interviewed, of which only four were men, were contacted within the stores and *coins* after they were done shopping. They were all young, with higher education. Their professional activities, even though diverse, showed their belonging to the middle and upper classes; [13] in a few cases, they were connected to the art world.

Beyond the store environment, but still within the circuit of Brazilian fashion in France, I carried out interviews with the distributor in Europe of a well-known jeans brand, as well as with two different distributors of other made-in-Brazil luxury prêt-à-porter brands. I have also conducted interviews with two French fashion consultants. Moreover, based on the presumed importance of the fashion press as one of the field's legitimating spheres, I have researched on the diffusion of Brazilian fashion in Paris in the periodicals archives of the city's fashion museum, the Musée Galliera.

In this study, data on France prevail as they are the most expressive with regards to consumption of the exotic. However, fieldwork in Brazil during 2005 and 2004 included observation of major events in the national high-fashion circuit, as well as interviews with Brazilian stylists and other professionals in the fashion sector. This was significant for unveiling aspects of the construction of the exotic below the Equator. The framing of Brazilian fashion as an exotic product takes place both here and there. It is precisely in the convergence between the two abovementioned moves – the quest for international visibility, and an understanding that the use of themes considered 'national' would render our fashion distinguishingly 'Brazilian' – that exoticism is deployed.

## Far away…

One of the earliest theoretical efforts to understand exoticism dates back from the early twentieth century: Segalen's posthumous *Essai sur l'exotisme* (Segalen, 1996). Exoticism is defined as an aesthetic of the diverse already in the book's subtitle; this

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[11] I refer to *Le Printemps* and *Les Galeries Lafayette*, even though I have carried out observations in *Le Bon Marché* and *BHV*.

[12] *Coin* is the exclusive space of a certain brand, commonly including its own vendors. This is a space that, even though small and usually not separated by walls from the rest of the store, has its own decoration working as a sort of symbolic staking-out delimitation. The *coin* is not the same as a sector in a department store. It is in fact located within a sector, for instance, the Brazilian jewelry *coin* that is part of the "luxury" sector of a store, or the Brazilian jeanswear *coin* that is part of the women's/sports sector of a department store.

[13] According to Raulin (2000), the consumer public of exotic products in France is usually young and of a medium to upper cultural and economic level. They live in large cities, typically in family nuclea made up of the couple and two children. Granted a few exceptions, however, the French consumers I interviewed diverged from the last element mentioned by Raulin, as most of them were single, no children, living alone or sharing the household with friends.

author proposes to think of it as an acknowledgement of the existence of the *other*. The *other* at stake is not only, nor necessarily, geographically distant. Throughout his work, Segalen seeks to establish a typology of exoticisms. The reiteration of this exercise could indicate to the reader its incompleteness, or the importance ascribed by the author to the identification and differentiation between types of exoticism.

In order to sift exoticism out of its exclusive geographic component – that is, to leave aside "the palm tree and the camel" (Segalen, 1996, p. 37) – the author propounds the existence of three kinds of exoticism. The first and better known is geographic exoticism, in which the distance vis-à-vis the *other* is spatially ascribed and frequently manifest in ethnic and cultural difference. The second is temporal or historical exoticism, whereby the exotic is situated at another historical moment, most typically an idealized past or future. The valorization of an idyllic past fits squarely in this category; but also utopias, for instance, are a kind of exoticizing attitude towards the future. Finally, the third type is the least developed by the author: sexual exoticism, in which difference dispenses with both spatial and temporal distance. Even at the same place and moment in time, estrangement refers to the difference between male and female.

What brings the three types together is that all represent an attitude and a gaze towards the diverse, the *other*, that do not suppress distance entirely. Almost always an idealization, exoticism assumes that the *other* may be to some extent imagined. For Segalen, exoticism and a deep knowledge of the diverse reality cannot coexist. And even though demonstrating its non-exclusivity, he declares geographic exoticism the most common, above all in its tropical version – given that "there is very little polar exoticism" (Segalen, 1996, p. 33). Allied to distance, the *other* will be the least known, and that which will steer most curiosity.

As both a way of seeing and an attitude towards the *others*, exoticism is, in contrast to racism, a positivation of the *other*. Its customs, life styles, values, and production are not only worthy of esteem, but of coveting. It is through this that the characteristics of that which is diverse becomes positive. But even though a celebration of the *other*, exoticism might not be so far off from its supposed opposite: ethnocentrism. Ranging from suspicion to hostility, the latter rejects all cultural forms that are different from one's own. In this regard, ethnocentrism and exoticism are drawn closer together. Even if different in content – one valuing, the other repealing –, both attitudes are less a statement about the *other* than about oneself.

More than a devaluation of the *other*, ethnocentrism means to take one's own culture as the absolute parameter of value when comparing with different cultures. Similarly, exoticism values not what is properly the *other*, but an ideal operating as a critique of the culture of reference (Todorov, 2005, p. 305). In Panoff's words, exoticism, at least in its classic version, is an outlet for "refusing the daily routine of the bourgeoisie's cloistered world" by exchanging it for a desired freedom imaginatively situated at an *other* which is regarded as its radical opposite (Panoff, 1986, p.19; my translation). In this sense, consumption of the exotic is not only about consuming products from elsewhere; it about constantly establishing through and from them differences between I and the *other*; in this case, between France and Brazil.

In the contemporary world, physical distances between different peoples are being to some extent shortened. The circulation of people and above all information means, as Price (2001) has suggested, that provided the wherewithal is available, anyone can have access to consumer goods from anywhere. The concrete experience of the exotic is no longer the same lived by Segalen (1996). After all, it has long been

since Paris's Jardin d'Acclimatation provided its public with the estrangement of seeing Amerindian and African "natives" caged side-by-side with parrots and giraffes.

Going farther than Price,[14] Raulin (2000) asserts that today exoticism is no longer synonymous with elitism. A sign of distinction in the past, the consumption of exotic products has been democratized. It has become accessible to any citizen experiencing the daily life of big metropolises. But its popularization does not mean its demise. It might be that precisely because, in the streets of New York and London today, a Vietnamese cab driver may take a Hindu nuclear physicist as a passenger, that some contrasts are established defining what it is and what it is not to be the *other*, what it is and what it is not to be exotic. In the world of the exotic and exoticized Brazilian fashion, such contrast involves the use of cultural and national stereotypes that, as light and shadow effects, define and substantiate that which is identical and that which is different.

One of the representations French consumers associate with Brazilian products is that they are a materialization or emblem of a certain Brazilian type or character. Brazil's fashion, seen as joyful, fun, creative, energetic, "outside and beyond any European classification, of good or bad taste", would reflect the Brazilian people, correspondingly characterized as "informal", "joyful", "free", and "creative". Also in the specialized French press, Brazilian fashion garment is regarded as an image of the country and its "tropical and happy" people, "of a kind of gaiety to be found nowhere else in the world".[15]

Along with a joyful and festive spirit, for French eyes another aspect of what it is to be Brazilian involves a characteristic informality. Such informality is perceived as reflecting the country's social relations. It explains our fashion expertise, as in Brazil "people are always wearing jeans and T-shirts".[16]

In the treatment granted to Brazilian fashion in France, both in its diffusion and consumption, most characteristic traits attributed to Brazil and Brazilians are positive. In common daily situations, these same aspects may entail both positive and negative perceptions. For instance, in interviews, when I was seeking precisely to learn and understand more about representations of Brazil and its people, my interlocutors (the same who spoke of joyfulness, festiveness, and informality) used to demonstrate surprise about my punctuality (the opposite of informality?), for them atypical of a Brazilian.

Even the world-famous Brazilian top model Gisele Bündchen is regarded as embodying Brazilian qualities. Contrasting Gisele with the aesthetics prevailing in the fashion world during the last decade or so, known as "heroïne-chich",[17] a French fashion magazine underlined that "now everybody gives in to this sexy, healthy, and tanned girl, who always looks like she's having fun".[18] Brazilian fashion presents itself and is received abroad along the same parameters as Gisele is – both are charming because they are fun, young, and informal.

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[14] I should be noted that this refers to the art market studied by Raulin, clearly more elite than the consumption of other kinds of exotic products.

[15] *L'Expressmag*, March 21st, 2005.

[16] *Le Monde*, August 7th, 2004.

[17] This common term in fashion makes reference to models whose appearance is compared to that of drug addicts: extremely lean, fair-skinned, dark eyes. An oft-cited example is Kate Moss, who, beyond her physical aspect, intermitted her famed career with occasional problems with the law due to drug use, as well as various stays in rehabilitation clinics.

[18] *Elle France*, February 14th, 2005.

In interviews, talking about the *other*'s particularities would always lead my interlocutors to enumerate traits that, when considered with reference to France, would mean the opposite. These are of course generalizations and stereotypes about both. As Burke (2004, p. 157) has remarked, "stereotypes often appear as an inversion of the spectator's self-image." In this sense, the definition of Brazil was beaconed by the definition of its imagined opposite, the European. According to the French fashion consultant I interviewed, Brazilian fashion is especially exotic and captivating because "we, in all these [European] countries, are more serious and conformists, whereas there [in Brazil], it's the sun. The sun of nature, which is your nature, and that of your fashion."

In contrast to the French, the Brazilian way represents, according to a Parisian consumer, "the new, because it's a much more creative [fashion], totally exotic because it's different from everything we have here, [which is] very monotonous, mass-produced, industrial, always the same." To such contrastive oppositions, always referring to pairs of opposites such as new versus old, joy versus monotony, exuberance versus restraint, is added the contrast between handcrafted and industrial. Even in its most refined and luxurious genre, Brazilian fashion has to somehow echo such images of manual labor. According to the European distributor of various luxury prêt-à-porter Brazilian brands, this is their differential competitive edge. To her,

> industry already has enough, it's not interested. It has to show what Brazil is good about, what are its roots […] Even in the up-market what Brazil sells is the artisanal, made by manual labor. To be successful in Europe, the Brazilian stylist has to work this way, with Brazilian roots, clothes with an exclusive and very Brazilian, hand-made touch. These popular roots command high prices, at least 300, 500 Euros. These are the ones on the top; that's what has to be shown.

Indeed, the fashion sector of the two boutiques selling exclusively Brazilian products in Paris includes handcraft. They sell accessories, trinkets and bijous made with seeds, clay beads and Brazilian stones that, according to one vendor, are the most sought-after products. In these smaller stores, jeans, T-shirts, and beach gear make up an important share of their sales. Many of these made-in-Brazil articles are customized with embroidery and paintings.

A French client of one of these told me that when she shops for clothes (especially *capoeira* pants and shirts), she seeks precisely that which "has the Brazilian touch, which was visibly hand-made from natural or crude fabric, and ornamented with paintings". The association of Brazilian and handcrafted products may be differentially conceived. First, it is worth highlighting the imbrications with an image of Brazil itself as the tropical earthly paradise, land of exuberant nature. It is certainly by exploring these same aspects that a major Brazilian cosmetics brand has been able to enhance its share in the international market at breakneck speeds.

Finally, it could be that popular imagery still entertains a certain dichotomy between an industrialized Europe and a "primitive" New World, or at least one not yet tainted (if industrialization is not necessarily understood as positive) by progress and its consequences. In this case, both kinds of exoticism mix: the one valuing the geographically distanced *other*, and the one fantasizing an imagined past.

**... Yet so close.**

Even though consumption of the exotic involves representations of an exotic *other* idealized in its general outlines, it does assume a contact and overlapping between different worlds. The exotic is not the absolute unknown; it emerges from the tension between known and unknown, familiar and distant. Whatever is too strange or absolutely unknown will hardly be the target of exoticism. The elaboration of representations about the *other* requires minimal signs from which to unfold.

The consumption of Brazilian fashion products by the French shoppers I have interviewed manifest both a desire to imagine the *other*, and to get to know it. To consume the exotic means to have access to it, not only as an object but as an experience. It is not surprising then that sellers at Brazilian products stores remarked the constant need to "tell the story, explain" or "speak about where the articles came from", and to tell "how is it like in Brazil, how's everything, the fashion, the people, life, [because] they feel like getting to know it a little better".

These vendors, usually Brazilians themselves, would speak comfortably about the country. Among themselves, they would even joke at what they referred to as "lecture on the *fita do Bonfim*",[19] "lecture on Seô Jorgê",[20] and so forth. The same was not true of the Brazilian products *coins* in the large department stores. There, sellers were mostly French, who seemed to resent their lack of "Brazil capital"; they even shot the breeze with me a few times about "things Brazilian". Of all *coins* I have observed, one commercializing a well-know brand of Brazilian jewelry was particularly eager to spend time talking about Brazil – thus allowing me to stay longer within the shop space. As I was prodded to tell "a little more" about my country, I was not only granted access to the sellers but I could also just hang out there, observing the back and forth of their clients.

During interviews with French consumers, I noticed that their knowledge of Brazil was not limited to what was told them by sellers. All consumers I interviewed aligned consumption of Brazilian fashion with that of other Brazil-related products. Their interest was described as larger than fashion; it was for Brazilian culture itself. They consumed Brazilian music (and information about it), photograph books, tourism guides, handcraft decoration, services related to the country, and even some foodstuffs.

Of the thirteen consumers I interviewed, two had taken courses on "Brazilian capoeira", and one of them was a *brésilien* language beginner. Moreover, as my fieldwork took place during the Year of Brazil in France, all consumers interviewed had been to at least one of its events (expositions, exhibits, music concerts, parties, fashion shows).

French media addressing Brazilian fashion is also a vehicle for broadcasting information that lends shape and color to the *other* and its consumption goods. It is said, for instance, that in Brazil, the heaven of talismans,

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[19] Translator's note: *Fita do Bonfim* is a colored wish-ribbon to be worn around the wrist, where it reads 'Souvenir from Senhor do Bonfim, Bahia' – a reference to the Senhor do Bonfim Church in Salvador, Bahia State, where the ribbon is sold or distributed to visitors.

[20] Seu Jorge is a Brazilian singer that was quite popular in France during 2005. (Translator's note: The phonetic markers stressing the final syllables in the informant's statement are a graphic representation of the stereotypical way Brazilians mimic the French accent.)

> Afro-Brazilians wear necklaces showing the colors of their deities (among which the popular Iemanjá, blue goddess of the sea); Catholics in the Northeast wearing roll scapulars […] around their necks; many acknowledge the protective power of a *figa* shaped like a clenched fist […].[21]

Even though questionable in their content, words take on an explanatory, almost didactic form. They provide "stories to think about and tell", as a consumer of Brazilian sandals and cosmetics once told me. The "story to…" mode was also present in the words of another French consumer, interviewed after having purchased a jacket designed by a well-known Brazilian stylist for which she paid well into three digits. She defined her interest in Brazilian fashion as another instance of her taste for

> […] exotic products in general [because] they have a history you can read about, find it out. If you buy something from an unknown country, you'll want to learn more about it, how they live, how it was made. You're buying all this. This discovery brings the satisfaction of having dug for something with a history […] which you can pass on afterwards.

The act of "digging" and consuming information on or associated to products resonates with the consumer of the exotic defined by Campbell (2005) as 'craft consumer'. According to the author, this is not the consumer of artisanal products (even though at times this may also be a favorite choice), but the subject for whom the act of consuming is artisanal, involving nuances of creative elaboration that turn commodities into personalized objects. Even when goods themselves are the result of industrial mass production, consumption may involve detailed and well-researched choices – "digging" – as a kind of learning substantiated in the search for further information.

Even though the cultural construction of narratives and ideologies about products takes place in all societies, as suggested by Appadurai (1990, p. 48) "[…] such stories acquire new, intense and glaring qualities when distances […] between production, distribution and consumption are wide." Given the distance between consumers and producers in the intercultural circulation of consumer goods, information and knowledge circulate as much as goods themselves. This information, which Appadurai calls "mythologies", may turn out to be as appealing and consumable as objects themselves.

Campbell's reference to the hand-crafted denotes basically a process of appropriation in which new meanings are attached to objects. In this case, besides "digging" and consuming information and "mythologies", the trajectory of the exotic object itself may be prone to the craft consumer's actions. Distant from its original context, the exotic product becomes malleable, so new uses and meanings are attributed to it in the process of information search and idealization. No doubt, such particularity opens the way to accusations of de-contextualization and distortion of "true meaning". But, as will be shown below, even we, the *others*, do not seem so concerned about finding such presumably – and pretentiously – true meanings, wherever (well-kept) they are.

Alongside the desire to "know more", another element in the consumption of Brazilian fashion as an exotic product is the appeal to the senses. In descriptions of

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[21] *L'Expressmag*, March 21, 2005.

Brazilian fashion in France, access to the *other* is expedited by means of almost pedagogic information, but also by suggesting that it is necessary not only to get to know the unknown, but to feel what has never been felt before. Dealing with the consumption of exotic foods in both Germany and France, Régnier (2004) has argued that one of the particularities of exoticism is precisely sensorial experience.

Even though a piece of garment does not have a direct and immediate import on such sensorial experience, it is frequently deployed in its descriptions. Brazilian fashion is defined by consumers as spicy, delicious, chromatic,[22] hot, and other adjectives pertaining to the senses. In the press, news and editorials addressing Brazilian fashion mention "[…] the homage to senses and colors, […] samba rhythm, […] the hot sands of Copacabana",[23] and place it amidst the "well-seasoned sweets and devilish rhythms".[24]

The deployment of sensorial experience, as well as of picturesque information on Brazil, may be seen as potential fodder for "dream material" to be employed in what Campbell (2001) calls the modern consumer's imaginative pleasure. According to this author, "the fundamental activity of consumption [is] not the selection, purchasing, and use of products, but the quest for the imaginative pleasure enabled by the product's image" (Campbell, 2001, p. 130). If in Campbell's work such mental operation is evoked to account for the urge for novelty and for consuming what is new, if the new product brings along the promise of a new, unknown, and potentially more enjoyable imaginative experience, it can be argued that such experience is intensified in the case of the exotic product. Even though the exotic entails a minimal threshold of knowledge in order for it to be intelligible, it will always retain a level of mystery.

The imagined experience of the unknown by means of the consumption of Brazilian fashion may take consumers to places never visited before. Through made in Brazil products, one consumes not only objects, but small fragments of a distant country imaged with curiosity. A good example of "to be where one has never been before" is the current use of emblematic Brazilian landscapes – our memory places (Nora, 1992) – in publicity pictures for products, fashion editorials, and even stamped on pieces of garment.

## Words and authenticities

The use of Brazilian words in French texts and speeches about Brazil's fashion is quite common. In the French press, at times such linguistic recourse is employed without any translation or explanation, as in terms such as "tudo bem" (it's all right), "bumbum" (buttocks), "entre na dança" (join the dance). Perhaps deployed for their sonorousness, these terms evoke the exotic product's curious and unknown elements.

I underline here the way these terms sound both because they denote both exoticism's appeal to the senses (to hear what one has never heard before may cause enjoyable estrangement), and due to some comments by consumers I interviewed. It is not surprising that auditory sensations, when detached from meanings, may cause estrangement. Just as some French words (or in any other language unknown to the

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[22] Leprun's (1990) reflections on the parallels between exoticism and colors evokes the common use of words, places, animals or exotic products in the French (but not only) names given to different hues: "jade green", "camel", "palm green", or the curious "Maori brown".
[23] *Vogue Paris*, June/July 2005.
[24] *Femme en Ville*, Septembre 2004.

listener) may cause Brazilians reactions of surprise mixed with curiosity, it is easy to understand why terms such as “andiroba” (crabwood), “bonitinha” (cute), “cupuaçu” (copoasu), “abrasileirado” (Brazilianized) or “maracujá” (passion fruit) – to mention a few I hear from them – are really heard as a tongue twister.

The same strategy may lend itself to curious uses from the perspective of a Brazilian, for instance, when a French women’s magazine used the word “mailhade”[25] for “malhada” (well-shaped body), or “acachados”[26] to refer to “cacheados” (curly) as being the typical Brazilian hair. Another constant is the mixture of languages, as in a report story supposed to teach tips about “girl from Ipanema” make-up, with a “bossa nova air”, entitled “Chica Tropical” (tropical *chica*).[27] Hispanics or Lusos, we are often conflated as Latin-Americans, as in the case of our Brazilian bombshell Carmen Miranda, who embodied the whole of Latin America without even having to get changed between a weekend in Havana and a night in Rio.

Even though such blunders do not always compromise the exotic product, the most successful deployment of the *brésilien* language seems to be related to the “desire to know a little more”. More common is to use words in Portuguese accompanied by their translations. As Verdier (1979) has remarked, the use of a foreign language to refer to exoticism and exotic products endows both the spoken object and speaking subject with certain sophistication and erudition. Indeed, according to some consumers and sellers, to use words mastering their meaning and avoiding errors demonstrates such qualities.

Besides imparting sophistication and distinction to the consumer, “native” words may also perform as a certificate of authenticity. Even when denoting the same piece of clothing, the string bikini will garner new charm if referred to as “fio dental”. Also in order to reinforce authenticity, the phrase “from Brazil” is often attached to the product, as if establishing a “denomination of controlled origin”. As Raulin has suggested, for an exotic product to be authentic it should carry some kind of “[…] stamp from its author, its region, its time, that is, from its precedence, and more generally its origin” (Raulin, 2000, p. 22; my translation). It is therefore common to find an assertion that that is a genuine product, emblematic of such and such place of origin.

There is no doubt that some products of Brazilian fashion are more easily attachable to the image of the country. It is the case of those related to sensuality and eroticism (Leitão, 2006b), as well as the already mentioned handcraft and natural products. The association with nature has, in the case of Brazil, been wrought by a greater emphasis on ecologically-engaged products, so popular these days. However, it is when shown in connection to the Amazon rainforest that the product is definitely granted an authenticity stamp.

The case of a Brazilian sports-shoes brand is typical in this regard. My first contact with it took place at a department store in Paris. The sector dedicated to its shoes was highlighted with a small plaque where it read: ‘the authentically Brazilian sneakers’. Given that that brand was entirely unknown to me, I started asking around both consumers and sellers in France what they knew about it. I heard long stories about how it was produced in the Amazon using ecologically-farmed cotton and organic rubber from the great rainforest. Besides the raw materials, according to some

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[25] *Votré Beauté*, April 2005.
[26] *Vogue Paris*, n. 859, August 2005.
[27] *Printemps Magazine*, n. 18, April 2005. (Translator’s note: ‘Chica’, the Spanish word for girl, is not part of the Portuguese vocabulary.)

consumers the mode of production itself was unique, as each worker would receive not only a "minimal", but a "fair" pay.

The narrative went on to explain that those shoes, which had never been commercialized in Brazil but only sold in refined and fashionable boutiques in Paris, had been conceived by French entrepreneurs. While sightseeing in the Amazon forest, they realized that the region's potential has not yet been "correctly" explored – by the way, a quite "civilizing" myth – and then proceeded to put their ideas into practice. It is worth noticing that in Brazil I heard similar narratives even from Brazilians seduced by the tennis shoes' rising popularity, along with expressions of resentment such as "it is my dream of consumption; such a pity it is not sold here".

As all arresting plots, this one also took an unexpected turn. Many months later, the foundational myth being already well-established, I heard from people from the shoe industry in the Brazilian southernmost state of Rio Grande do Sul that such shoes were not produced in the Amazon at all. Far from that: the mysterious sneakers were manufactured in Rio Grande do Sul itself, more precisely in the center of the regional shoe industry in Novo Hamburgo.[28]

It is not surprising that such association between the "authentically Brazilian" product and the Amazon had been established. The rainforest is known in France as Brazil's emblem along with Rio de Janeiro and Bahia, making up a triangular symbolic geography of the nation.[29] Novo Hamburgo, even though one of the country's major shoes export cities, is hardly a symbol of the authentically Brazilian.

The connections between these sneakers' material components, apparently similar to those of any other canvas sports shoes with rubber soles, and Brazil are not immediate. The mythology surrounding this product is made out of a combination between traits appropriately considered as "Brazilian" by the consumer publics, besides others attributed to it by marketing. Its Amazon origins were not only part of narratives of consumers and the French fashion press, but also of specialized publications targeting fashion professionals.[30]

In this sense, it is paramount to highlight the fact that the "Brazilianness" of other Brazilian garment and fashion products broadcasted and consumed in France is not necessarily related to their material properties. Many times, the adjective "Brazilian" pertains not to the articles themselves, but to the meanings stamped on them by the constructed and disseminated discourses about it. The sneakers' authenticity therefore does not lay in the intrinsic properties of ecologically-produced cotton fibers, but in their successful association with appropriate words and images.

Another good example is Brazilian beach fashion, regarded in France as too eroticized and revealing of the body, in spite of its occasional adaptation[31] for exports. Even after being reshaped in order to please the European consumer, the bikini never loses its Brazilian aura; even though its material properties are changed, representations subsist.

Moreover, during observations carried out at large textile fairs in 2005 in Paris, numerous elements employed by brands of various nationalities were presented to me

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[28] This case brings to mind Rabine's (2002) mention of JCPenny's authentic African brand, whose clothes were produced in Pakistan or in the U.S., by Indian immigrants.

[29] As I have shown in another occasion (Leitão, 2006a).

[30] For instance, the *Journal du Textile* or the *Fashion Daily News*, in contrast to magazines such as *Elle*, *Vogue* or *L'Officiel*, are directed not to consumers but to producers and other professionals in the sector.

[31] According to interviews with a Brazilian stylist (São Paulo, June 2005) and with the owner of a brand of Brazilian bikinis (Paris, March 2006).

(in Brazil and then in France) as "very Brazilian" or "translators of Brazilianness". Handcrafted necklaces mixing wood, seeds and cloth, *fuxico* [32] garments, crochet bijous were some of the products being sold at the time in Belgium, Spain, Italy, Norway, and Sweden, which were described during my fieldwork in Brazil as a "return to the national" by Brazilian producers.

This prompts reflection on how even in Brazil associations are established between the country and some elements that, if it were not for the "authentically Brazilian" label, could be seen as common manifestation of non-nationalized broader trends. The desire to "do it very Brazilian", as will be seen below, has been indeed very present in recent Brazilian fashion.

It seems however that virtually any type of product could be framed as potentially "Brazilian", as is the case with ecologic shoes and crochet necklaces. As many authors who have reflected on consumption (Douglas & Isherwood, 2004; Miller, 2002) have argued, even though the fruit of human imagination and craft, goods do not come out of the pipeline carrying ready-made cultural meanings. Meanings are not intrinsic to objects, much less are entirely constituted during production. The bikini is not "naturally" sexy, the *fuxico* is not necessarily part of the "Brazilian popular tradition", and ecologic sneakers are only made in the Amazon if so we are led to believe.

It is thus necessary to resume the mythologies accompanying consumer goods, identified by Appadurai as being of three types:[33] those produced by their distributors and retailers; those produced by their consumers or potential consumers; and that produced by their producers. I believe that the construction of Brazilian products' exoticism takes place at the intersection between these three spheres. It is clear however that the marketing sphere is particularly worthy of consideration as far as the production and dissemination of such mythologies are concerned. Even in Brazil, fashion journalism, important in legitimating good (or bad) taste, is also vital for the (re)establishment of links between certain characteristics of the products and Brazilianness.

Discourses by legitimating spheres, such as specialized press and fashion criticism, are to a great extent responsible for transferring cultural meanings to consumer goods. By classifying, selecting and naming, such agencies help, according to McCracken (2003), to endow goods with certain properties and qualities from the social imaginary. Operating by means of effective words and images, they function as what Baudrillard (1996) has called, with reference to marketing, "prophetic word". By deploying such "prophetic words", fashion critics define not only what is consumable or not, but also describes, classify and name for the reader (who had not been by the catwalk) that which had been presented. It is through this mediation by the fashion press that a pair of Bermuda shorts stamped with palm trees which could otherwise be thought of as Hawaiian is successfully cast as "very Brazilian".

As McCracken (2003) has pointed out, the effectiveness of such transfer of meaning lies in the articulation between consumer goods (and some of their objective qualities) and the social representations attributed to them. Therefore, this transfer process is only fulfilled when such discourse is apprehended by the reader/consumer

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[32] Artisanal patchwork technique in which small pieces of fabric, usually of different textures and colors, are shaped like "little bags" and then sown together to make up various types of decoration (cushions, rugs) and apparel (blouses, handbags, vests).

[33] It is possible to notice a strict transposition of Appadurai's typology to the analysis of ethnographic data by Skoggard (1988) on the consumption, in Northern Africa, of sports shoes made in Taiwan.

who, sharing some of the cultural representations at stake, is the final author in this process.

## Consuming the *other*

I have been arguing here that the French interest for Brazilian fashion stems to a great extent from its perception as an exotic product. Even though the Year of Brazil in France has lent exceptional visibility to "things Brazilian", such interest is part of a broader attraction for the exotic – not necessarily the Brazilian exotic – by French fashion and its consuming publics.

The history of French fashion shows that the abundance of exotic inspirations is not new.[34] The best-known fashion designer to bring in exotic flavors was Paul Poiret who, in 1901 while working for Worth, proposed a kimono dress. A few years later, now in his own high couture *maison*, Poiret produced articles such as a beige silk tunic adorned with colored embroidery called 'Cairo' (Deslandres, 1981, p. 50) and an Ispahan coat inspired in Pakistani caftans. His influences were not always sought in the offshore exotic. After a visit to Eastern Europe, Poiret designed dresses modeled after traditional attire from Poland and Russia.

Another well-known fashion celebrity to make wide use of exotic themes in his creations is Yves Saint-Laurent. In the 1960's, he presented in Europe *bambara* dresses, hair styles decorated with gazelle bones, and *saharienne* jackets. In all cases when the *other* has been deployed in French high couture, it appears only as reference or inspiration. As Nowinski (2006, p. 5; my translation) has noted, even though the themes are exotic, that is, belonging to other cultures or other times, they are always marked by what she calls "Occidentality": the permanence of "codes, automatisms, Occidental reflexes […] in the designer's technical and even aesthetical culture".

In other words, even if the inspirations are foreign, the production and producers were not. Granted, sometimes fabric or materials were imported from elsewhere; but they were only raw material[35] to be crafted within the *maisons*, and therefore within the limits of the European fashion circuit. There, to return to Rimbaud's paradox, *je* was not *un autre*.

Theretofore, the *other* is a mere provider of raw material (fabric, dyes, or ideas) for Europe's creation of exoticisms. Those who have access to the *other* are, above all, the creators. Poiret in fashion and Flaubert in literature, for instance, have made innumerous inspirational journeys to foreign lands.

Contemporarily, this system of exotic inspiration and European production coexists with a new development in fashion: imports to Europe of fashion (many times luxury) creations from other parts of the globe. If previously in high fashion European creators traveled to Asia, Africa and the Americas, today it is the local creations that circulate. New African fashion stylists export to Europe (Berlonquin, 2006) or split their

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[34] See Bourde's (1991) work for a more detailed outline of the waves of exoticism in Europe in different areas (plastic arts, literature, clothing, and food) and time periods.

[35] This is typical of the fashion field, and perhaps of literature. During that same period, the exotic inspired European novelists to dream of Salammbôs and Salomes without reading, a few exceptions granted, the literary production of other places. In other areas such as food and ornamental objects, this does not apply. The plastic arts, one might say somehow daringly, works along the same lines of the first two. In the early 1900's the foreign arts were considered less as an art in itself than as an ornamental piece. Exoticism in the arts appeared as Oriental or tropical inspirations in European paintings.

time between Parisian and Senegalese ateliers. The waves of *Asian-chic* (Leshkowich, 2003) reverberate worldwide, spreading boutiques inspired by Hong Kong's Shanghai Tang.

The French consumers interviewed also purchased exotic (clothes and other) products from elsewhere than Brazil. However, the topic "exotic products from elsewhere" was only included among my standard questions after it was mentioned by a consumer. This Parisian from Slavic ancestry described herself as "in love with young African designers", and mentioned a story with which I eventually came across again in the fashion milieu: one of these "young African designers" sponsored by a well-known French philosopher had the peculiarity of burying the articles before selling.

In the French clothing fairs I visited, such interest for the exotic could be seen for instance in the site reserved for the exposition of fashion trends. There was a sector named Primitiveland (the other two making up this theme park-like atmosphere were Waterland and Wonderland). Primitiveland included a broad mix of African, tropical and Asian elements, in stamps, colors, ornaments, and the scenario itself, which was of course filled with plants. Alongside it, explanatory texts spoke of "tribal territories" and "ancestral rites", "raw art", "nature of origins", which were translated in fashion as a mixture of natural materials and tones and live and bright colors, the "presence of shapes such as *boubous*[36] and *sarouels*",[37] and accessories such as necklaces and bracelets handcrafted from natural, preferably organic, raw materials.

In the French press, the bias toward ethnically-inspired fashion is also present, and obviously not only limited to Brazilian fashion. One finds for instance reference to "Ethnic Magic: total look or subtle touches, all fashion tribes ornament themselves according to ethnic codes",[38] or to "indigenous styles" where "one does not have to be called Pocahontas to be seduced by this ethno-chic looks".[39]

In terms of the attraction for the exotic and access to it, a major difference seems to lay not only in the fact that now its production may take place in loco, but, as Raulin (2000) has pointed, in its popularization. If previously the consumer of exotic products was necessarily a member of the aristocracy or upper bourgeoisie, today, even though still linked to some economic and cultural elite, he or she may be a member of the European middle classes. Consumption of the exotic is still associated with sophistication, but its diffusion and spread are beyond question.

## To become *other*

As I have highlighted from this article's outset, local production of the Brazilian exotic follows pari passu Brazilian fashion's efforts to enhance its international visibility and its return to national themes (two intermingled movements). There is no doubt therefore that such effort, inspired by the realization that the exotic is part of various contemporary modern trends, aims at drawing the attention of international fashion to Brazil's production of fashion garment.

When creating Brazilian exoticism, Brazil's fashion typically resorts to elements culturally associated with authenticity and tradition. Stereotypes as reinforcement of the

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[36] Loose and long tunic worn in Africa, a French distortion of the Wolof word *mbubb*.
[37] Traditional North African pants, with bouffant legs and low seat.
[38] *Vogue Paris*, n. 855, March 2005.
[39] *L'Officie*l, n. 894, April 2005.

eroticized Brazilian body, a national character influenced by an exuberant nature, a certain authentic Brazilian popular culture[40], to mention just a few, are examples of such elements. At the same time, such stereotypes are linked to new representations, such as that Brazil has the potential to become an important producer of "ethic" and exotic fashion, as well as goods geared toward ethnic, ecological, and socially engaged consumption.

The association between Brazilian fashion and exotic products is not only seen when our fashion crosses national borders. Discourses about searching for roots and turning to national traditions speak precisely to the desire for constructing something that could be authentic and typical. In the words of a contemporary São Paulo stylist, "enough of copying, we should make what is Brazilian, that's what is cool".

However, to make "what is Brazilian" often means to construct authenticities hinging on parameters that bend toward the picturesque, the "touristic". Traditions are reinvented in this Brazilian fashion which wants itself to be national by means of models akin to those unveiled by Hobsbawn (2006), where continuities are established with a historical past (that serves current purposes) in which new elements are perceived as being there since the very beginning.

Brazil's exoticism, elaborated through reinventing the nation and its characteristic traits, is not regarded as such only by the Europeans' gaze. Also in Brazil, "Brazilian exoticism is the future", as spelled out by a stylist showing his collections at major events of Brazilian high fashion. Even though exoticization is clearly perceived by fashion producers as a strategy that yields good results, it should never be felt as an artifice. One speaks of "escaping stereotypes and *papagaiadas* [ridiculous and exaggerated exhibition]" even while deploying them. Furthermore, the insistence on marking the country's exotic differences is made positive as a strategy endowed with "the best of intentions", vital in the effort of "not being a colonized who only copies from here and there".

The discourse of return to Brazilian traditions is at once extremely marketable and regarded by both Brazilian stylists and fashion critics as the way toward developing a national and autonomous fashion, even when it is based on European parameters and views of the country. Such procedure is, in the words of a Brazilian stylist commenting on the use of Carmen Miranda's images by a beach fashion brand, "a great insight".

## Final Considerations

During the last few decades, the high fashion circuit gained momentum in Brazil, creating around it a series of specialized events and receiving praise from the fashion press and the public in general – not only its consumers, but so many other Brazilians who, even though lacking the wherewithal to consume it, nonetheless recognize its legitimacy. More recently, an effort has become visible toward enhancing the international visibility of Brazilian brands and designers. Simultaneously, national themes are brought into luxury prêt-à-porter creations as a mechanism to frame Brazilian fashion as "authentically Brazilian".

Between these two movements lies "exoticism as the house's special", in which Brazilian fashion garments are associated with exotic products. In France, especially

[40] In a previous work (Leitão & Pinheiro-Machado, 2006) I have analyzed aspects of the appropriation of Brazilian popular culture by the country's high fashion and luxury consumption.

during the last couple of years, its marketing is intense, and revealing of the exoticization process involved. Endowed with typical characteristics of exoticism such as the charting of essentialized differences between I and the *other*, appeal to the senses and search for authenticity, the Brazilian product joins a poll of exotic consumer goods which are highly valued in the fashion market, especially in France.

As I have tried to show, the taste for exotic products draws on two elements. On the one hand, a certain degree of consumption sophistication and distinction endures, even though transformed by the popularization of consumption of the exotic. To consume the *other*, even though keeping it at a distance, implies acquiring some, even if limited, knowledge about it. On the other hand, for the various reasons suggested here, the exotic product seems to be particularly apt at stirring the imagination, allowing the consumer to experience through it, even if only imaginatively, little-known landscapes, peoples, worlds and words.

If to consume Brazilian fashion in France is to consume an imagined Brazil, the same holds true for its production and consumption in Brazil. By nationalizing it in order to internationalize it, the (re)invention of national traditions vests the country's high fashion with habiliments of an exotic Brazil. This reinvention of the country should however be taken less as an accusation than as a springboard for reflection on Brazilian – and French – imaginaries on Brazil. On the other hand, it is worth recalling that Brazil's high fashion public is to a great extent elite; moreover, this is a field that historically has been (and still is) hinged on predominantly European parameters of taste and elegance. That is perhaps why it is possible to remain "quite Brazilian" and, at the same time, to see oneself as *un autre.*

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