



PRÁTICAS DE BRONZEAMENTO E TONS DE PELE: A BUSCA PELA IMAGEM DE BELEZA PERFEITA NAS LAJES DO RIO DE JANEIRO

Tanning practices and skin tones: a quest for the perfect beauty image on the rooftops of Rio de Janeiro

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RESUMO

Este artigo explora como práticas de bronzeamento promovem imagens associadas ao estilo de vida da favela no complexo cenário urbano do Rio de Janeiro. O estudo considera os métodos de Aby Warburg para analisar raízes étnicas, moradias urbanas, atividades de entretenimento, design de produto e ideais de beleza que cercam o consumo do biquíni de fita adesiva.

Palavras-chave: favela - práticas de bronzeamento - biquíni de fita adesiva

ABSTRACT:

This article explores how tanning practices promote images associated to slum lifestyle in the complex urban landscape of Rio de Janeiro. In order to do so, this study borrows Aby Warburg's methods to analyze ethnic roots, urban housing, entertainment activities, product design and beauty ideals that surround the consumption of the masking tape bikini.

Key words: image – slum - tanning practices - masking tape bikini

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Introduction: the masking tape bikini fever

Lying under a 40°C summer sun, a group of women lounged in chaises patiently waits for the perfect tan. Nevertheless, whoever believes that they are listening to soft waves and gazing at the ocean would be astonished to check the landscape. Far from Rio de Janeiro postcard beaches, their almost naked and totally shaved bodies are proudly exposed to tropical sun in the shadow of suburban slums. Funk hits cadence the quick steps of personal tanning experts, while watering clients' backs and buttocks. Instead of branded swimwear, the tanning clinic clients wear masking tape thongs, shaped by a personal tanning expert in order to guarantee perfect bikini tanning marks to show off at a real beach. This scene, commonly seen at Rio de Janeiro suburbs before summer season, was brought to light by Brazilian celebrity funk singer Anitta, in August 2017, during the release of single *Vai Malandra*. In such videoclip, Anitta is seen wearing a black masking tape bikini, surrounded by a crowd very similar to the suburban tanning clinics clientele. Apparently, the singer focuses on the body invading public spaces as a primary media, such as suggested by Pross (1971) in his *Media Theory*.

In the past few years, the Brazilian masking tape bikini —a procedure involving the customized shaping of a sticker thong and a small top made entirely of tape strips, both glued on the skin —has become the subject of substantial media attention and the rising star of the tanning business. The trend spread in 2017 carnival, adding fashion elements to pre-fab tape thongs, including Swarovski crystals and special shapes, also sold online through regular e-commerce. Street vendors, aesthetic professionals and even masking tape industrial producers saw it as a new market niche, offering ready to wear thongs as well as assistance services, including professionals who tutor customers to apply the product directly on the skin. This fad makes one wonder if undressing is actually the key element pursued by users, for the real goal is to obtain a tanning effect



that creates various patterns on the skin, similar to temporary tattoos or body painting, reminding us of indigenous beauty rituals.

That is why, borrowing Aby Warburg's (2012) *Mnemosyne Atlas* methods, this paper aims to explore how meanings are constituted by the movement of themes and styles between East and West, North and South, Now and Then, that is, by images which spread their essence in continuous spirals, generating an afterlife. The *Mnemosyne Atlas* is Warburg's attempt to map how images of great symbolic, intellectual, and emotional power emerge in Western antiquity and then reappear and are reanimated in the art and cosmology of later times and places. According to the German researcher, images express certain values that, once taken to distinct times and places, might disrupt historical continuity, as they are reorganized in a different context. This inconstant flux forms a kaleidoscope of images that assume layers of meanings depending on the context where they reappear. Re-actualizing Warburg's thinking within the current context of masking tape bikinis and the tanning business trends, this paper aims to study the impact of floating beauty images on Brazilian culture and society.

According to a research among beach fans and regular visitors to Rio de Janeiro shoreline, conducted by FARIA (2002, pp. 278-279), the skin tone acquired through solar exposure on seaside areas is a symbolic achievement. Users mention that a tanned skin indicates a rich lifestyle, where there is plenty of free time to enjoy life pleasures. As C.S., a 41 years old entrepreneur, states: *'I would rather go to the beach exclusively to have fun, without the commitment of frying under the sun just to get tanned. It is better to prepare the bikini tanning marks before and go to the beach just to do the catwalk'* (PITOMBO, 2018, p. B8).

The tanned skin tone achieved the highest rank of positiveness in the hierarchy of beach colors, as a synonym of beauty and health. It is considered a sign of distinction that divides the ones who are able to spend leisure time at the beach and the ones who



cannot afford such pleasure. It is also indicative of financial prestige, hence the most valuable public space in terms of real state in Rio de Janeiro is precisely the South Zone beach shoreline. In order to visit the South Zone beaches regularly, one should live nearby and have enough free time, an equation not commonly associated with lower income suburban workers. Moreover, it is a way to reaffirm rights over one's own body, as well as idle time.

Immortal images of a good-looking body

The good-looking body has always been a relevant investment and an object of cultural capital in Brazil. Cultural fingerprints can be traced using Warburg's methodology as we observe the images that circulate among native Brazilians regarding ideal beauty and sun exposure. For instance, as VIERTLER (1999, p. 199) observes, beauty is not seen as a natural virtue among the High Xingu indigenous nation. On the contrary, it is a consequence of a long process of social interaction and careful following of strict rules, mediated by the group of relatives and friends of the individual. Women walk around almost naked, exception made to the female small thong called *uluri*³. Therefore, they consider absolutely important to remove body hair systematically, including eyebrows, eyelashes, armpits and groin (VIERTLER, 1999, p. 167). Considering such context, the contemporary tanning beauty ritual – which also includes previous waxing - is not something unusual in a land where beauty has always been a social construction. Fashion works as a secondary media which extends the body awareness.

Curiously, on the opposite direction of the perfect tanning myth, the indigenous ideal of beauty includes whitening the skin to the maximum, so that youngsters are confined for long periods in order to maintain their skin untanned (VIERTLER, 1999, p. 167). This attitude is also common among the Bororos, who consider dark skin ugly and

³ The *uluri* consists of a band worn around the waist that has a small piece of bark or shell attached, sitting on the pubis, just above the genitals. A long thin cord leads from this bark or shell through the labia of the vagina, under the buttocks, to reappear as a kind of protruding tail in the rear.





associated with work conditions outdoors. Therefore, one might conclude that the habit of tanning under the sun defies indigenous ideals of beauty and makes such practice closer to cultural external factors, such as media influence, while showing the skin completely is not under any moral discussions, for it has been an everyday habit for native Brazilians since immemorial times. However, critical views of the current tanning practice and its potential repercussions are notably absent from media coverage and academic attention, including aspects related to health issues that might apply as a consequence of excessive unprotected sun exposure.

Older nations, such as the ancient Marajoara culture that inhabited the Amazon river shores, considered thongs especially important to cover female genitals. Highly skilled ceramic artists, these natives created outstanding ceramic thongs with exclusive techniques and decorative excellence. Marajoara thongs found in archeological sites show a triangular shape, a slightly round surface and curved sides, with small holes used to pass fine strings in order to suspend the thong on top of the hips. According to PROUS and LIMA (2011, p. 233), archeologists consider these thongs as elite women exclusive attires and probable ancestors of current bikini thongs. However, it was in Rio de Janeiro that the bikini culture and the beachwear lifestyle grew. Beaches such as Leblon, Ipanema and Copacabana have been immortalized in music, films and soap operas, creating the local fashion myth based on the southern region of the city. Movie stars, bathing sirens, athletic beauties and successful designers have all played their part in the evolution of seaside looks. *'Here, the bikini represents a part of the whole, an almost naked synecdoche for Brazilian beauty'* (VILLAÇA, 2005, p. 196). Nevertheless, it looks like never before has the tanning business or the city suburban landscape been involved, particularly concerning the slums housing habits and complexes, also known as *favela*.

Beauty images in the suburban landscape





Favela is the term Brazilians use to identify slums or squatter settlements, which are not restricted to Brazilian territory, but are also seen in other Latin American countries, such as Venezuela, Peru, Colombia and Mexico⁴. These areas originated from the migration of indigenous people, slave descendants, outcasts and other lower income migrants that came to live on the hills of major cities, creating a mestizo lifestyle in areas that became villages within cities, with their own rules for every aspect of daily life – including fashion (LOPES, 2008; WILLIAMS, 2009; KERTZER, 2014). The Brazilian masking tape bikini tanning practice is especially predominant among these suburban inhabitants, due to the particular shape and agglutination of slum buildings. Regardless of shape, age or weight, groups of women that cannot afford to go to the beach - due to time management, distance, financial conditions or simply embarrassment for not showing the *right* tanning marks - gather to perfect their looks on urban concrete settings, with no pool, lake or ocean nearby. The habit opened opportunity for a new business venture: tanning clinics established on slum rooftops.

'Body image, including appearance orientation and appearance evaluation, may be associated with tanning attitudes. Individuals who are more oriented toward their appearance may be more worried about appearance-related issues (...)' (GILLEN and MARKEY, 2012, p. 75). This is particularly significant in Rio de Janeiro, whose topography full of mountains and valleys, surrounded by the sea, contributes to the distribution of lower income inhabitants' houses on top of hills and very close to one another. This distribution makes room for side by side three store houses or small buildings, which share walls and social areas. They are so close to each other that every rooftop almost touches the neighbor ones, creating floating squares that locals call *laje*.

⁴ It is mandatory to notice that there are differences among favelas and their local beauty practices in different Latin American countries. As TV series and *narco corrido* music spread the word, there was a quick rise of bandit beauty creating general stereotypes of slum inhabitants, which disregard local peculiarities. Soap operas produced by Latin American television networks (specially Televisa, Caracol and Telemundo) as well as Netflix streaming series helped move the engines, mostly thanks to actress Kate del Castillo and her alleged relationship with Mexican drug lord El Chapo Guzmán. This paper refers specifically to Brazil and particularly to Rio de Janeiro slums.



This is a gathering space, where social events, such as barbecues and birthday celebrations, happen frequently. It also houses colorful laundry, plastic pools, plants and domestic animals, as a suspended yard. The topography of Rio means that some of its *favelas* are settled close to upscale neighborhoods, making these rooftops extremely visible to higher social circles individuals and private becomes public. Therefore, as SANCHES (2015) understands, we might notice that the individual body is linked to the social body through urban landscape, making appearance a key factor in social inclusion.

Image movements: the influencer role

Anitta's videoclip caught intense media attention immediately after its release, mainly because it was filmed in real favela premises in Rio de Janeiro. Its language is anchored in image symbolisms through gesture, casting and costume, as if that action in itself would empower users that mimic it. Its legitimacy comes not only from using *favela language*, but also from showing a sense of belonging and consequently acquiring the authority to talk about it. Such tone is also reinforced by the image of notorious local entrepreneur Erika Bronze, who runs the most famous rooftop tanning space, where the videoclip was shot. This is not only a specific beauty celebrity, but a *selected beauty image*. It seems to evidence a strong link between images of elite beach practices and slum lifestyle, in a process known as inter-class cordiality through what KERTZER (2014) defines as *favelization*, that is, the use of *favela* images to add *ghetto glamour* to products and services. On the rooftop of *favelas*, far from the beach, Brazilian elite goes the other way around and mingles with locals, in order to get a tan without social judgement. This trend shows how Instagram icons, city landscape and beauty issues are undeniably spun together under Rio de Janeiro torrid sun.

In between these worlds, one thing can be heard in both, creating a bridge and, consequently, a bond: music. Brazilian communities were shown on international music





videos creating an imaginary about them, as film and television also did. Michael Jackson's *They Don't Really Care About Us* and Snoop Dogg's *Beautiful* did that more than a decade ago. Therefore, *favelas* became a public space consistently invading urban aesthetics of higher income classes, such as suggested by VILLAÇA (2005), particularly through music. *Funk carioca*, the musical rhythm produced and consumed in the *favelas*, caught the eyes of elite youngsters stating suburbia values in lyrics and funk singers' appearance. Celebrities such as Waleska Popozuda, Tati Quebra Barraco and Jojo Todinho helped spread the funk movement among upscale consumers, but it was Anitta and her social media network that actually made the masking tape bikini a powerful image among women of all social status. Her posts included backstage videoclip scenes as well as beauty tips which enticed women to try the same tanning technique.

From that starting point on, influenced by Anitta's performance, it looks like Brazilian tape bikini tanning kept being promoted by consumer capitalism. Popular magazines, Youtubers' tutorials and Instagram digital influencers' accounts showed the practice as a way for women to increase their attractiveness and sexuality. *Favela* music, language and fashion became popular among the middle-classes through online tutorials that showed the common citizen how to customize his own masking tape bikini. As tanning fans started to actively produce content, the procedure itself became a professional activity, opening a new market all over the country. These tutorials, made by tanning clinic experts as well as regular users and fans, spread the information on a large scale and more personalized level, shared by social media networked contacts, which also fostered user engagement.

When looking at Rio de Janeiro through the lens of fashion, one inevitably finds a variety and fragmented city. Groups are formed out of their preferences for certain styles of clothing and accessories. And these predilections for certain foods, books and music come together in the Brazilian cultural imaginary, even as the media emphasizes the differences among tribes. (VILLAÇA, 2005, p. 196)





Considering that masking tapes were originally designed for another purpose, there was a lack of colors and prints in the market. New patterns followed, provoking designers to create masking tapes in different shapes, such as hearts, stars and flowers, in order to create customized body tan marks for the season. The trend reached its peak during carnival, when the masking tape bikinis, as well as the tanning marks, were used as costumes, creating an appetite for new designs. The skin became a blank screen for erratic images.

As this sort of attire is sold everywhere, from street stalls to massive e-commerce, it gives birth to a new consumer behavior that flirts with *favela aesthetics* through leisure, music and streaming, understanding the tanned body as an investment (GOLDENBERG, 2002; VILLAÇA, 2005; GILLEN and MARKEY, 2012). As a consequence of Instagram posts and Youtube beauty tutorials, *favela tanning* became a tropical way to spice up beauty rituals and *ghetto* symbols. Centered in undressing a perfect body, tanned body images seem to represent a strong link between slum lifestyle and elite summer trends.

Final considerations: a never-ending image journey

After Anitta's videoclip release, the perfect bikini tanning marks to show off at a real beach are no longer made of textiles. Instead, such summer fever is made of masking tapes which come in different colors and sizes. As a result, the restless search for the novelty that orbits the phenomenon of the projected body, that is, which body format and skin tone is socially authorized to circulate as a desired one, is actually anchored in previous images which it engulfs. Technology amplifies such potential as it spreads the original idea in full speed.

It is clear that nobody is at the tanning clinic simply to relax. The perfectly tanned body, without unexpected or unwanted marks, is the only one that, even with minimum clothes, is considered decently dressed. And that takes a huge effort. Therefore, each individual assumes the responsibility for the failure or success of his



own body in a system that eventually punishes the ones that do not achieve common goals. This leads to what SANCHES (2015) calls project-body, a pattern artificially generated and transformed into an ideal image, fueling the magic of appearance. As individuals start to show their own taste and values, the ideal Brazilian beauty tends to eliminate flaws: it assimilates, resembles, incorporates and transform images in order to create one single and powerful ready-to-wear image, made of the previous ones: a perfectly tanned body, showing the precise skin tone and fabricated bikini marks on the right spots.

Apparently, the trickle up effect is mainly due to the impact that slum inhabitants' particular leisure habits and cosmetic practices have on higher social circles, installing skin shade awareness and a symbolic relevance of exercising, sunbathing and applying cosmetics to a certain extent and under unspoken rules. As much as this summer fever is made of masking tapes which come in different colors and sizes, one observes that it is also the consequence of Instagram posts and reposts, music influencers and Brazilian ethnic backgrounds, in a wave of floating images.

These images and their command to enjoy present driving forces. Initially, the powerful presence of new elements, such as perfectly tanned body marks, constitute images of joy, disguising and covering daily absences that would otherwise be extremely tough. However, as GILLEN and MARKEY (2012, p. 81) research concludes, no matter if *'tanned individuals are typically seen as more attractive than individuals without tans, positive social consequences must be weighed against potential negative health outcomes'*. Presently, social networks accounts show few concerns about health issues provoked by sun exposure, photoaging and the use of glues that were not originally tested to be applied on human skin. This lack of interest on unsafe aspects of the practice might require further investigations on potential effects for public health in the long run, for the risks associated with UV exposure are also significant. Consequently, reconstructing and showing off tanned skin images might



result in mixed feelings about *favelization* as time passes by and health issues eventually emerge in all social circles involved in the practice, offering scholars an opportunity for further studies.

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