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ARTICLE



'To be a slut is to be free': women in favela funk, performances of racialised femininity, and celebrity media

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ABSTRACT

Rio de Janeiro's favela funk movement has been one of Brazil's most important contemporary cultural and musical expressions. Favela funk arose out of Rio's slums and combines diverse Brazilian and other beats from the African diaspora, and lyrics are performed with an aggressive, mocking tone, filled with sexual references. Poor women of colour in favela funk, also known as funkeiras, have been responsible for much of the celebrity media attention the movement enjoys, and with feminism's recent renewed popularity, the women have been more frequently confronted with questions of feminism, considering most of them perform songs about gendered relationships. This essay investigates how and why once some funkeiras begin to call themselves feminists, they tend to engage in a more palatable (meaning, white and middle class) version of their femininity. As their performances of femininity become more conforming, their positive visibility as feminists in celebrity media increases – a drastic change, considering that celebrity media often portrays funkeiras in demeaning and scornful ways. I conclude that celebrity culture and mainstream celebrity feminism push funkeiras into normative performances of femininity that, though not necessarily traditional, are infused with norms that privilege whiteness and middle-classness.

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The recent popularity of feminism among celebrities is not confined to countries in the Global North. In Brazil, that trend is also visible. One group of female artists who have been associated with this development are the funkeiras (favela funk female performers). The funkeiras are women in their twenties and thirties and are generally Afro-Brazilians or mestiças (of mixed races) (Lopes 2011, Moreira 2014). They perform songs about sex, relationships, and competition with men and other women. This essay centres on how Brazilian celebrity media covers these artists, who are at times portrayed as women whose performances of femininity are highly inappropriate and other times as bastions of contemporary feminism (Moreira 2014). Specifically, the analysis focuses on three artists: Tati Quebra Barraco (Tati 'House Breaker'), Valesca Popozuda (Valesca 'Big Trunk'), and MC Carol Bandida (MC Carol 'Bad Bitch'). These funkeiras possess different levels of public recognition, gained through hits such as 'Hot bitch', 'My pussy is the power', and 'My boyfriend is the biggest loser', respectively (Garcia 2005, Lopes 2011, Sodré 2015). They

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also represent distinct trends in celebrity media coverage, as well as a variety of career paths – like many female celebrities seeking to broaden their fanbase, they participated in Brazilian reality TV shows, such as *A Fazenda* (The Farm) and *Lucky Ladies*, that ranged in status and popularity.

Celebrity media coverage of funkeiras who do not conform to normative femininity tends to emphasise clothing choice and plastic surgery, and, at times, so-called controversial statements made by the women. By normative femininity I mean white, middle-class performances of femininity that entail self-control and respectability, especially in public spaces (Gerrard and Ball 2013). Accordingly, headlines such as ‘Again! Valesca Popozuda shows part of her breast in live show’ (De novo! 2012) or ‘Panties or underwear? Melancia performs showing half of her buttocks’ (Calcinha ou short? 2012) are unsurprisingly common in Brazilian celebrity news, and could easily refer to Tati, Valesca, or Carol, but also to many other artists not covered in this essay.

Funkeiras’ steady popularity in mainstream media has been attracting academia’s attention, though such studies are not as numerous as the ones dealing with favela funk in general (Lopes 2011, Moreira 2014, Gomes 2015). The question of whether these women are feminists or oppressed by favela funk permeates media and scholarly debates about their performances. A tendency among these studies is to suggest that feminism is at odds with femininity (Lockford 2004), and even more at odds with ‘inappropriate’, hyper-feminine performances, such as those of the funkeiras. Moreover, performances of unsuitable femininity are marginalised and regulated by (patriarchal) societies in general while also scrutinised by some feminists (Lockford 2004).

Brazilian studies examining favela funk from a gender perspective tend to concentrate on the idea that women in it are sexually objectified and, consequently, put in undignified positions they embrace by naively taking part in male domination (Oliveira 2007, Aragão 2011). Oliveira (2007) further states that even though favela funk is composed by poor people of colour looking for cultural legitimation, the sexism that traverses it is part of a ‘larger structure present in many societies’, even more so in economically disadvantaged groups (p. 941). Moreover, the tendency to accept white, middle class femininity as a universal analytical starting point, is very common in Brazilian feminist studies. The underlying assumption in Oliveira’s (2007) and Aragão’s (2011) work is that femininity is equally performed by, and similarly impacts all women (Moreira 2014); at the same time, Oliveira (2007) and Aragão (2011) suggest that a feminist performance, though never defined, is incongruent with femininity in general, but also with poverty and, given Brazil’s racial context, brownness and Blackness.

In this essay, I argue that analysing representations of funkeiras’ performances of femininity, which are the subject of both marginalisation and scrutiny by celebrity media and mainstream feminism, expands upon the discussion about femininity and feminism beyond the either/or approaches that permeate the debate. Ultimately, the present analysis indicates that celebrity feminism pushes women into normative performances of femininity that, though not necessarily traditional, are infused with norms that privilege whiteness and middle-classness. Consequently, those standards tend to exclude especially poor women of colour.

The essay first discusses the diverse ways normative white femininity plays a disciplining role, especially as it relates to issues of class and race in the Brazilian context. Next, it contextualises favela funk and its contentious relationship with corporate media, to then

examine the *funkeiras* as celebrities. Lastly, it examines celebrity media coverage of *funkeiras* focusing mostly on Grupo Globo's popular celebrity website *Ego*. Three recurring themes emerged out of the analysis: body-shaming, shaming clothing choice, and praised makeover. The analysis section ends with a brief exploration of how MC Carol might challenge celebrity news coverage while offering new feminist possibilities. The essay concludes that feminist discourses are accepted in celebrity media as long as the woman who identifies as feminist also fits into standards of normative white femininity.

Disciplining femininity

The debate over femininity and its place in feminism is not new. Feminists from second and third waves tend to diverge on questions of femininity and expressions of sexuality, though these positions tend to ignore differences within feminist movements of the same generation (Snyder 2008). In mainstream celebrity feminism, from Miley Cyrus to Beyoncé, these conversations revolve around which displays of femininity are feminist, or simple reproductions of patriarchal norms (Weidhase 2015, Brady 2016). For Lockford (2004), femininity is characterised by 'performative displays, enactments, or activities that are often called into suspicion by some mainstream feminist scholars and activists because they potentially promote the social expectation that women are feminine' (p. 3). In fact, Hoskin (2017) contends that 'the feminist history of anti-feminine rhetoric can still be evidenced in current Western feminist theories and pedagogies' (p. 96). As a result, feminist theory tends to 'overlook the intricacies of how femininity and masculinity interact within systems of domination' (Hoskin 2017, p. 96). Performances of femininity that meet social expectations are not readily available to all who identify as women – there are proper and correct ways to enact femininity.

Contemporary notions of normative femininity promote the idea of 'natural beauty', which in turn condemn performative excesses. These performative excesses include too much makeup, stiletto hills, tight clothes, heavy drinking, loudness, as well as publicly discussing sexual desires (Gerrard and Ball 2013). Gerrard and Ball (2013) note that this shift, present especially in the media, could be considered feminist since it implies that women are 'naturally' beautiful. Nevertheless, they call attention to the danger of essentialising (white, middle class) femininity, as if 'naturalness' in this context did not entail any type of social location, performance, repetition, and practice.

Normative femininity is also a condition that needs constant management (Tincknell 2011). Consequently, women are pushed into perpetually remaking themselves in order to be perfectly, but *not* hyper, feminine. Other elements of what Hoskin (2017) characterises as 'femmephobia' entail 'understandings of hyper-femininity as "without dignity" or "self-respect," ... and makeovers that include the gentrification of "appropriate" feminine expressions' (p. 103). Propriety, then, is an important aspect of adequate performances of femininity. This entails control over one's body, including 'the language used to refer to bodily activities and processes, which together constitute bodily decorum' (Arthurs and Grimshaw 1999, p. 137). This lack of bodily decorum in performances of femininity is especially condemnable in public.

In celebrity media, the common use of 'widespread scorn and derision' is gendered and classed, according to Williamson (2010, p. 118). In this context, mockery works to discipline white female celebrities from working class backgrounds whose popularity is at

times framed as undeserved because they lack 'real' talent, given hegemonic ideas about meritocracy in the United States and in the U.K. (Williamson 2010, p. 120). Similar to Williamson's (2010) analysis, *funkeiras* too are often scorned for, among other things, lacking any 'real' talent (Safatle 2015). Williamson's analysis, however, de-emphasises the racial dimension of this 'failed' femininity. As much as class matters in constructions of femininity in favela funk, race plays perhaps an even more vital role in it. Indeed, femininity is not race-neutral, as feminist analyses make it seem (Deliofsky 2008).

Normative white femininity is 'the white capitalist patriarchal compulsion to adopt styles and attitudes consistent with an imposed white feminine aesthetic. This compulsion is a central element in the reproduction of whiteness and white femininity' (Deliofsky 2008, p. 50). European colonialism and imperialism play a foundational role in the conflation of femininity with whiteness (Collins 2004). In this context, white women through their enactment of white normative femininity have become the guardians of morality and virtuosity. As a matter of fact, 'to be truly feminine is, in many ways, to be white' (Markowitz, S., 2001. *Pelvic Politics: Sexual Dimorphism and Racial Difference*, Signs, (26) 2, 389-414). Relatedly, standards of feminine beauty are undeniably related to race (Deliofsky 2008). Even though all white women may have access to white femininity, not all of them (working class, queer) 'are granted "full" membership', and importantly, 'racially marginalized women are relegated outside the boundaries of white femininity' (Deliofsky 2008, p. 56). Ultimately, normative white femininity prescribes standards of behaviour and appearance for *all* women, though only some women – those who are white, heterosexual, and middle- and upper-class – are able to properly perform them.

Black and brown women have long endured regulation 'through the racialising and sexualising imperialist gaze' (Ringrose and Walkerdine 2008). As a result, they 'represent and signify the exotic/erotic but not the beautiful' (Deliofsky 2008, p. 55). Black women especially have been targeted with limiting and damaging images (Collins 1990, 2009). In order to address the 'the specific violence of representational imagery depicting Black women', Bailey (2013) coined the term *misogynoir* (p. 341). While *misogynoir* was conceptualised with U.S. Black women in mind, Bailey (2013) herself has welcomed analyses of problematic images of Black women from different parts of the globe. Black women in Brazil, thus, face similar, but specific, displays of *misogynoir* in their representation given the country's history of colonial, white supremacist patriarchy.

Poor women of colour's performances of gender and sexuality in Brazil have been historically conceived as both improper and at times desired (Côrrea 1996). Specifically, foundational discourses about race and gender in the country concurrently celebrate and condemn women of colour: on the one hand, the sexual violence enslaved Black women endured at the hands of white masters in colonial times is romanticised as a necessary element of Brazilian miscegenation; on the other hand, Black women were held morally responsible for the demise of the white family (Rezende and Lima 2004). Therefore, Black women have become 'anti-muses' (Carneiro 2011) whose femininity was defined by contrast to and approximation with that of white women (Côrrea 1996).

In the early twentieth century Brazil, the idea of different races peacefully coming together to form a national, unified Brazilian identity became particularly important for the still-pervasive notion that the country is a racial democracy (Windsor 2007). A related development of the perception that Brazil is a racial paradise is the popular opinion that inequities stem from class, and not race (Rezende and Lima 2004, Windsor 2007). In this

context, public mentions to racial oppression are uncommon – and frowned upon – in comparison to references to class. In fact, the intersection of race and class takes on a particular discursive shape in Brazil: Lopes (2011) contends that though mentions of race are rare, they are frequently present in references to social and economic hierarchy of particular neighbourhoods. For instance, allusions to favelas, from those who live there to the cultural expressions that come out of such areas, denote both classed and raced meanings. As a result, misogynoir against funkieras is often wrapped in classism.

Contextualising favela funk

Favela funk is a cultural movement and a musical genre developed inside Rio de Janeiro's favelas that has enjoyed varying degrees of popularity and condemnation over the years (Sá 2007, Lopes 2011). As a cultural movement, favela funk has established its own vernacular (Moreira 2014), specific clothing and hairstyles (Mizrahi 2007), as well as particular ways to produce and perform music (Lopes 2011). As a musical genre, favela funk is made of an assortment of indigenous and imported sounds, including samba and Miami Bass (Sá 2007). Mainstream media began noticing favela funk in the late 1980s, but it was in the 1990s that the associations between funk, favelas, crime, and immoral behaviours became more pronounced (Laignier 2008, Facina 2009, Lopes 2011). With the rise of violence in Rio, especially drug and territory-related conflicts, favelas were under intense mainstream media scrutiny. Lopes (2011) notes that, between the late 1990s and the early 2000s, funk parties inside favelas were facing accusations that ranged from crime propaganda to child prostitution. At the time, Rio de Janeiro's security forces began to actively repress funk parties inside favelas – always with the support of local and national media (Facina 2009, Medrado and Souza 2016).

The relationship between favela funk and mainstream media is marked by contradictions. Since the late 1990s, Brazilian media has been committed to portraying favela funk artists and partygoers as 'the cause of several social ills' (Lopes 2011, p. 41). At that time, favela funk was represented as the 'new musical trend' when consumed by middle-class and wealthy youths of Rio's south side (Lopes 2011, p. 49). Lopes (2011) contends that in reports glamorising favela funk as the hottest beat in town, its favela origins were either glanced over or completely erased. This sanitised version of favela funk has been monetised by Brazil's culture industry, hence signalling that favela funk is accepted only when consumed by white, middle and upper class youths (Medrado and Souza 2016).

Favela funk went through a significant change in the early 2000s, both as musical genre and cultural movement. Beats became more aggressive while sex, romantic conquest, and assertiveness in tone saturated lyrics and dance moves. The popular tunes about casual sex propelled a wave of criticisms from mainstream media, government officials, and intellectuals, usually targeting favela funk's supposed moral corruption (Freire Filho and Herschmann 2003). Freire Filho and Herschmann (2003) point out that these critiques were rooted in anxieties over a possible 'transgressive mix' of different classes and races, given that middle and upper class young people frequented favela funk parties inside slums (Freire Filho and Herschmann 2003, p. 63). It was during these times of warnings against favela funk's supposed immorality that women became protagonists of a section of the movement called funk putaria, or dirty funk (Lopes 2011). What was once a male-only exchange about sexual courtship and conquest became a sex-war when

women began to respond to songs performed by men with similar aggressiveness and mockery (Freire Filho and Herschmann 2003, Lopes 2011). Funkeiras' overly sexual performances simultaneously contributed to funk's increased popularity and rising disapproval – so much so that mainstream media's moralistic rants were often about gender relations (Freire Filho and Herschmann 2003, Tiburi 2011). All three funkeiras who are the subject of this essay, Tati Quebra Barraco, Valesca Popozuda, and MC Carol, have been targeted with both criticism and praise from media, though in varying degrees. The analysis below illustrates the racialised and classed nature of celebrity media coverage and criticism of performances of femininity.

Funkeiras on celebrity news: mocking 'bad' femininity, praising 'classy' feminism

Women's popularity in favela funk has generated both criticism and conversations about gender in Brazilian media and academia. In media, one of the early expressions of these discussions is Denise Garcia's 2005 documentary *Sou Feia Mas Tô na Moda (I'm Ugly But Trendy)*, a reference to Tati Quebra Barraco's popular song of the same name. The film explores dirty funk and the prominent role of women in it, as well as the common disapproval funkeiras received at the time, namely that songs in which they openly and aggressively demand sex are degrading to all women. Around the same period, corporate media began to explore funkeiras' identification as feminists, such as in a 2006 interview in which the City of God MC, Deize Tigrona, is quoted as saying, 'We make our music for fun. I'm not a feminist and I don't even have power to be that' (Fernandes and Granato 2006). Since then, the status of funkeiras as possible feminists have been in and out of focus in celebrity media, with interest in the matter peaking between 2013 and 2016 (Moreira 2014, 2017, Gomes 2015).

As funkeiras rose to fame, their coverage on celebrity media has significantly expanded. Even though mainstream media has a fundamental role in the public perception of favela funk (Freire Filho and Herschmann 2003, Facina 2009, Lopes 2011), very few studies have been dedicated to the representation of funkeiras in media. When research focuses on media representation, women in favela funk – and consequently performances of racialised femininity – are usually left out (Facina 2009, Lopes 2011). To examine this trend and help close this research gap, I selected *Ego*, a celebrity news outlet that belonged to media conglomerate Grupo Globo (Blankfeld 2015), and which was connected to one of Brazil's most accessed websites (Silva 2013), for two reasons: first, as a way to ensure consistency of style in coverage, given that celebrity media outlets vary in form and tone; second, as a way to measure each woman's celebrity status – the more they appear on the website, the more recognised they are. Moreover, even though *Ego* was rebranded in 2017 as 'Celebidades' (Portal 'Ego' encerra 2017), its success is a manifestation of the prosperous expansion of celebrity news to online platforms (Turner 2010).

Articles were selected after I performed archival searches on *Ego* using the three artists' stage names as keywords, as well as possible variations in spelling (i.e. 'Valeska Popozuda'). Unsurprisingly, Valesca Popozuda, who is a light-skinned mixed-race funkeiras and possesses the highest status among the three artists, not only has a celebrity profile on *Ego*, but her name also generated substantially more page results than the

other two artists: 82 pages, containing 10 articles each, starting in November 2011, as of May 2016. Upon typing 'Valeska Popozuda', a misspelled version of the funkeira stage name, seven more pages generated results starting in August 2008. Black funkeira Tati Quebra Barraco has an *Ego* celebrity profile too, and her search results generated only four pages, despite her longer music career. MC Carol, who like Tati is also Afro-Brazilian, is the only artist among the three who did not have a celebrity profile on *Ego* as of May 2016, and did not return more than two page results. However, MC Carol has been covered by more progressive-leaning news sources, such as the Brazilian version of *El País* and Rio-based newspaper *O Dia*, regarding feminism, race, class, and fat-shaming in intriguing ways that might signal a new trend in the relationship between favela funk, feminism, and media. Because the present essay focuses on chronological changes in coverage tied into the careers of the three funkeiras, an eight-year period, from 2008 to 2016 was selected as the unit of analysis. This date range has been selected because 2008 is the beginning of *Ego's* coverage of funkeiras, and 2016 is when the so-called 'feminist trend' in favela funk reached its peak (Moreira 2014, 2017, Gomes 2015). Having access to the original *Ego* online articles allowed for the examination of not only the stories' main text, but also photos, captions, and 'related news' suggestions.

Selected stories include interviews with the funkeiras, photo shoots, and coverage of unusual, exclusive events. These articles have in common the fact that they provide commentary beyond factual information. Accordingly, stories were chosen after textual examination suggested salient, recurring themes. According to Bedor and Tajima (2011) 'a theme is more than a descriptive categorization of elements within a narrative; it ... enables readers to recognize the characteristics of a subject that might involve value judgments' (p. 8). These themes were then organised into three categories: body shaming, mocking clothing choice, and praised makeovers. Regularly, shaming is accompanied by mockery, especially when funkeiras are quoted reaffirming their body types and clothing choices. In these instances, the artists are ridiculed for diverse reasons, such as wanting to impersonate/pose as an internationally known figure, suggesting they are attractive/good looking, or implying men want them despite not fitting into traditional beauty standards. Though slightly distinct, these two categories are intertwined. The third category, praised makeover, applies mostly but not solely to Valesca Popozuda, who has significantly toned down her performances of hyper-femininity, fitting into more traditional standards of beauty instead. Finally, the following analysis also includes a section that investigates new possibilities for funkeiras in mainstream celebrity feminism, based mostly on the scarce coverage of MC Carol.

By analysing celebrity media coverage of the above-mentioned funkeiras, this essay has a twofold intention: first, to demonstrate how femininity, when marked by non-normativity, is the target of heavy scrutiny and mockery in celebrity media; second, to argue that celebrity media, whether intentionally or not, endorses normative performances of white femininity in the figure of the properly feminine feminist celebrity.

Body-shaming: 'it looks like somebody is taking a break from that diet'

Celebrity news overflows with different degrees of body-shaming, usually connected with fat-shaming (Bedor and Tajima 2011). But when it comes to funkeiras, body-shaming takes on a specific form: it not only involves degrading women for being supposedly overweight,

but it also focuses on perceived exaggerated bodily features, such as large breasts, thighs, and buttocks, sometimes in connection with excessive plastic surgery. Tati Quebra Barraco and Valesca Popozuda are among the *funkeiras* who have been mocked for their lack of embarrassment in admitting to so many procedures.

Valesca Popozuda has had her fair share of plastic surgery-related body-shaming. The *funkeira*, who is the former lead singer of all-female group Gaiola das Popozudas, became popular for performing the song 'Now that I'm a whore' (Lopes 2011) in the late 2000s – one of the group's many songs suggesting that becoming a 'whore' is a legitimate way to celebrate being single, or to leave an abusive relationship (Moreira 2014). Similarly, Valesca has been recognised for flaunting a muscular body type while performing sexually provocative dance moves, and wearing equally audacious clothing (Moreira 2017). *Ego* started featuring deriding stories about Valesca around that same time. In 2010, the *funkeira* added 550 ml of silicone to each buttock, and *Ego* covered the event with a few different stories. One of them, published in August 2010, states that Valesca's 'big trunk' was taken to a whole new level, and that after adding the 550 ml of silicone, her buttocks looked 'huuuuge' (Veja o resultado 2010). In fact, Valesca's *derrière* used to be a constant source of mockery in *Ego* stories. For two years in a row, 2012 and 2013, Valesca was part of Rio's worldwide famous carnival parade. In both occasions, the website published stories about Valesca's 'bizarre' buttocks, in reference to her implants. According to a February 2012 story, 'Valesca, who has silicone implants in her 'big trunk', showed problems in its 'bodywork"', comparing Valesca's body to an automobile whose body has been damaged. Three photos illustrate the story; two of them, placed on the top of the story, show the back of Valesca's almost-bare body while dancing, her blond hair in a ponytail. She is wearing a red, sparkly thong that covers very little of her buttocks, which in turn look like they were captured in motion (Valesca Popozuda exhibe bumbum bizarro 2012). Valesca's buttocks have also been referred to as 'deformed' and 'super creepy' (Bizarrice pouca é bobagem! 2012).

The representation of Valesca's buttocks as 'bizarre' and 'huge' is reminiscent of the colonial fixation with the supposed 'overstated' bodily features and 'easy' sexuality of Black women and *mestiças*, fixation which has been sanctioned by medical and religious discourses that classified those bodies as 'uncivilised' and 'out of control' (Soihet 2003). In celebrity media, this racist and sexist legacy takes shape in the form of discourses around 'natural beauty': at the end of the day, only certain bodies – white, slim or the 'right' kind of curvy, composed – can be naturally beautiful. These bodily transgressions are in turn met with mockery.

Tati Quebra Barraco is known for not only having had many plastic surgery procedures, but also for being openly proud of it (Confira os famosos que já fizeram 2012). The *funkeira* has maintained a relatively stable presence in celebrity media for a little over 10 years. Native of the famous City of God, the Afro-Brazilian MC is known for her in-your-face performance style, infused with high doses of mockery (Fernandes and Granato 2006). Tati's songs, such as 'Hot bitch', 'Whore's reputation', and 'The rights are equal', tend to poke fun at men for thinking that they control women's sexuality, as well as at women for being faithful to men, or for fighting with other women over them. In 2015, Tati hosted the reality TV show *Lucky Ladies* in which five other younger *funkeiras*, including MC Carol, received assistance for improving their careers (Barg 2015). Still, Tati is not treated as an A-list celebrity in *Ego*, and even though her performances are often

associated with sexual empowerment (Moreira 2017), she is certainly not portrayed as a feminist.

Not surprisingly, *Ego's* coverage of Tati tends towards mockery when the topic is plastic surgery and praise when the subject is the funkeira's weight loss. Since the funkeira lost weight in 2014, *Ego's* reporting has been more positive, which also coincides with when she claimed to be on a break from the routine of plastic surgeries. It is not unusual, then, to find *Ego* stories of commendation over the funkeira's weight loss, with the word 'slim' constantly present in the headlines of her stories (Santos 2015). However, losing weight did not make the scrutiny over her form completely go away. In a July 2014 story, the headline reads: 'Is the diet over? Tati Quebra Barraco posts photo drinking'. The story reproduces an Instagram photo originally posted by the singer in which she is posing with a friend while holding a clear plastic cup that looks like it has beer in it: 'It looks like the funkeira Tati Quebra Barraco decided to take a break from her rigorous diet' (Acabou a dieta? 2014). Choosing to consume alcohol over dieting is framed as a bad choice, especially for a curvy woman who is supposed to commit to losing weight.

MC Carol, the least popular among the three artists analysed in this essay, is also the one with the least coverage on *Ego*. Known as 'Niterói's Bad Bitch', MC Carol became a celebrity after her participation in FOX Life's reality TV show *Lucky Ladies*, hosted by Tati Quebra Barraco (Sodré 2015). Carol is also recognised for her unapologetic performances of non-normative femininity, which include embracing her looks as a large woman, openly talking about her Blackness in interviews and social media posts, as well as publicly declaring herself a feminist (Novaes 2015). The MC is notably larger than the other two women, and like Tati, she is Black. In one of the few stories featuring the artist published on 8 June 2015, the headline reads, 'MC Carol assures you: "some men only like big stuff"'. The story suggests that, though unlikely to be true, readers will have to take the MC's word for it when she suggests some men are attracted to women who are considered fat by Brazilian standards (Tecidio 2015). The picture illustrating the article shows MC Carol sitting with her bare legs open next to a slim white woman interviewer whose legs are also undressed, but properly crossed, with her upper body slanted forward as though to protect her exposed legs. The image reinforces the contrast between normative and unruly performances of femininity. Indeed, the story is in line with *Ego's* tendency to engage in misogynoir by disparaging celebrities whose femininities are clearly marked by Blackness and lower-classness. In this context, MC Carol's statement of confidence in her large, Black body is rebellious (Moreira 2017), despite the story's scornful tone.

'Underwear or shorts?': shaming clothing choice

Another very common inclination in *Ego* stories about funkeiras is questioning clothing/style choice, with a focus on 'bad taste' and inappropriate or revealing outfits. In an August 2008 photo shoot, Valesca poses dressed like what is supposed to be a Barbie doll, wearing a hot pink dress with printed white bows that shows a generous amount of cleavage and legs. Valesca looks racially ambiguous in the photo: her brown skin contrasts with her strawberry blonde hair and vibrant blue coloured contacts. The funkeira is sitting down in a child-like pose, using her left arm for support while her right hand holds the dress' skirt. The caption of the photo reads, 'Valesca [sic] Popozuda takes another step towards stardom. The lead singer of Gaiola das Popozudas had a chance to make an old

dream come true and became Barbie for a day. The oversized buttocks were hidden. The result is in the above picture' (Mendonça 2008). Below the caption, another headline under 'related stories' reads: 'Silicone implants, daring attitude, oversized bodies! Check out other famous (or aspiring to be famous) women who will do anything to be become a celebrity!' (Mendonça 2008). The underlying sarcasm in the story serves three purposes: to mock Valesca's supposed celebrity status, to shame her body size, especially in comparison to the body proportions of Barbie dolls, and to emphasise her seemingly questionable taste in clothing. Concurrently, this example underscores the tendency in celebrity media to openly embrace 'class prejudice that is concealed behind sexism' (Williamson 2010, p. 118), but the obsession with Valesca's body shape is, again, an demonstration of the close relationship between class prejudice racism.

Tati Quebra Barraco became popular for her assertive on-stage enactments of femininity. Her performances rely on ferocious hand gestures, instead of the common twerking, hats and pants, instead of just skirts, and a good measure of swearing (Moreira 2017). Tati seems to be constantly rebranding her career. In 2011, *Ego* posted a photo shoot of the funkeira with the headline 'Sexy! Check out Tati Quebra Barraco's photo shoot'. In one of the pictures, which shows Tati from the hips up wearing a short silver sequin dress and a diamond chain, the caption suggests, 'the makeover included differentiated hairstyling and makeup' (Sensual! 2011). The term 'differentiated' was not chosen by chance. Just a few weeks before Tati's photo shoot, the word went viral when news outlets interviewed an older white woman about São Paulo's government plan to build a metro station in her upper class neighbourhood. She opposed the metro station, suggesting it would attract 'druggies, beggars, these *differentiated* people' (Psicóloga nega 2011, my italics). As previously stated, direct mentions to race in articulation with class are not common in Brazilian public discourse. Instead, such allusions are replaced by geographical references, such as those of specific neighbourhoods. Therefore, in this particular context, 'differentiated' is simultaneously classist and racist, in that poor people of colour are the ones who should be kept away from white, upper class areas. Given that Tati is Black and from a working class background, *Ego's* subtle use of sarcasm expressed through particular word choice suggests a brand of misogynoir that is specific to the Brazilian context.

Praised makeover: the new Valesca Popozuda as feminist icon

Celebrity media praises transformations of bodies and/or looks only in certain contexts. Perceived exaggeration, for instance, tends to be subtly condemned in *Ego*. When it comes to funkeiras, it is clear that the commendation does not apply to too many plastic surgeries, hair extensions, or coloured contact lenses. Thus, makeovers are only complimented if the outcome is aligned with standards of normative white femininity.

Valesca's makeover and subsequent mainstream success attests to the privilege of being racially ambiguous (Calafell 2007), which in turn granted her the ability to approximate her appearance and performance to that of normative white femininity. In August 2013, Valesca began her solo career with the release of a female competition themed single called 'Kiss on the shoulder', followed by a pompous music video. That, along with a noticeable change in looks and the fact that she started to embrace feminist talking points (such as gender equality, sexual freedom, and gender violence), turned the funkeira into an A-list celebrity (Souza 2014). Like Valesca, Tati Quebra Barraco, who is decidedly Black, has gone through a few rebranding processes and makeovers during her career (and *Ego* has reported on at least three of those).

Both are known for embracing female empowerment in their performances (Moreira 2017). Still, Tati does not have the same visibility and fame as Valesca.

Valesca's 2013 career move, thus, placed her on a different level in comparison to other D-list celebrities, including many other *funkeiras* (Moreira 2014). It was around the same time that she was more prominently introduced as a 'feminist icon'. In an October 2013 story, the opening paragraph starts with following:

Valesca Popozuda is really investing in becoming a new woman. After opening up her closet to *Ego*—estimated in R\$ 300K [about US\$90K]—, the singer released a song accompanied by a photo shoot, a chic look, and an engaged discourse in favour of women. The new single is called 'It Is Yet to Be Born A Man Who Bosses Me Around' (Popozuda Lança Música 2013).

Later in the story, the *funkeira* is quoted saying, 'I'm a feminist, but I'm feminine. I take care of my house, of my son . . . I like to feel sexy. I'm also super romantic. Still, I fight for women's rights' (Popozuda Lança Música 2013). Valesca understands feminism and femininity as though they are at odds with each other, which is a cliché in anti-feminist discourses in Brazil (Gomes 2015), but also a common view in feminist theory (Lockford 2004, Hoskin 2017). Regardless, Valesca embraces the discourse of women's rights and, in the following year of 2014, when she continues to physically change and display social mobility through consumption, that sort of statement about femininity disappears from her references to feminism.

Positive coverage referencing and praising Valesca's new look coincides with her more openly feminist discourse. In a story celebrating the singer's birthday, it is possible to notice that *Ego* compliments the singer for changing her performance of femininity, which is now closer to the ideal white, middle class standard: 'When it comes to curves, Valesca Big Trunk wants to be less muscular and curvy, showcasing a more sophisticated image: a true queen!' (Valesca Popozuda completa 36 anos 2014). Being muscular and curvy was a popular trend among *funkeiras*, and women who embraced this trend of supposedly exaggerated features were often targeted with mainstream media criticism for not looking properly feminine (Moreira 2014). The alignment of sophistication, normative white femininity, and mainstream feminist discourse is also visible in a February 2014 *Ego* story in which Valesca attends the São Paulo Fashion Week holding an expensive Chanel bag, both elements that mark upper-classness. In the last paragraph, the article quotes Valesca on 'being considered a feminist icon': 'A lot [of women] don't have the courage to speak their minds, but I inspire them . . . ' (Pereira 2014). Côrrea (1996) argues that *mestiças* in Brazil must 'whiten' their physical characteristics in order for their femininity to get closer to the white norm – which in turn grants them a better social position (p. 45). Valesca's feminist makeover is a prime of example of this.

Perhaps Valesca's most visible turn happened in an interview to one of Grupo Globo's weekly magazines, in which she more clearly adopts mainstream feminist discourses. The story also reinforces the connections this essay proposes, namely that the reproduction of such discourse happened in tandem with a makeover that puts Valesca closer to the white, middle class feminine norm. With the title 'Valesca Popozuda: "to be a slut is to be free"', the April 2014 interview opens with:

After Simone de Beauvoir, Betty Friedan, and Naomi Wolf, Valesca Popozuda. Since 'Kiss on the shoulder', her big early 2014 hit, the *funkeira* from Rio started to talk about feminism in her interviews and has embraced a campaign on sexual violence against women . . . the

feminist phase is also a 'slimmer' phase—considering her tights used to be bigger than Giselle Bündchen's waist (Oliveira 2014).

The photo illustrating the story shows Valesca posing naked from the waist up, holding a sign that says '#Eu Não Mereço Ser Estuprada' (I Don't Deserve to Be Raped). The hashtag was part of a campaign launched by a Brazilian journalist and editor of feminist magazine *AzMina* on social media, after a national poll reported that 65% of interviewees agreed with the statement 'A woman showing too much skin deserves to be assaulted', percentage which was subsequently corrected to 26% (IPEA divulga correção 2014). Later in the interview, the reporter mentions Valesca's choice to be São Paulo's SlutWalk symbol of sexual freedom, asking her what does it mean to be a slut, to which the singer replies, 'to be a slut is to be free', using one of the march's slogans in Brazil (Mazenotti 2011, Oliveira 2014). Investigating Valesca's changes in discourse and appearance is very important to understand mainstream celebrity feminism in Brazil – and perhaps, globally: after all, what kind of female celebrity has the ability and credibility to claim mainstream feminism?

New feminist possibilities?

In *Ego's* stories, Valesca Popozuda went from being tacky, tasteless, and overly sexual to a 'true queen': a new, slimmer and classy look along with a feminist discourse. Among the elements that may have favoured Valesca is that she is racially ambiguous. Unlike Tati Quebra Barraco and MC Carol, who are undeniably Black, Valesca is a relatively light-skinned mestiça. That, along with her blonde hair and blue coloured contacts, increased her chances of getting closer to the white European beauty standard, enabling her process of 'sophistication'. Calafell (2007) contends that certain marginalised bodies, especially of racially indistinct folks, tend to benefit from performances of ambiguity, i.e. enacting 'whiteness and Otherness simultaneously' (p. 90) as 'a vehicle for survival' (p. 91). Like Calafell, I understand Valesca's performance as not just a way to survive, but to be accepted by mainstream media.

Ego's stories suggesting that Valesca Popozuda's performance of femininity has improved do not go unchallenged. Valesca's rags-to-riches story continues to be an integral part of her celebrity image. Unlike other successful funk performers who have distanced themselves from the movement, Valesca proudly embraces her identity as a funkeira and her humble favela origins (Moreira 2014). The fact that she is recognised as a feminist symbol is also not without contestation (Gomes 2015). Thus, her popularity is important because she does indeed make feminism visible in a context in which this is rarely the case, i.e. Brazilian celebrity news. It is important to point out, though, that this opportunity is not granted or available to every outspoken funkeira.

Mainstream celebrity feminism is tied to a certain enactment of sophisticated, proper femininity – unlike the performances of funkeiras, who swear too much, who are excessively sexual, and whose discourses of empowerment are not in line with mainstream feminism. Tati Quebra Barraco, for instance, has been performing songs that could be considered empowering to women since the mid-2000s (Moreira 2017). She was the first well known funkeira to respond to the 2000s hit 'A little slap doesn't hurt', and she has been singing these tunes for at least a decade now. Yet, Tati is

neither as popular as Valesca, nor is she considered a ‘feminist icon’ in celebrity media.

MC Carol has been outspoken on diverse feminist issues, also speaking out against the racism and classism directed at her. She is not, however, considered a ‘true queen’ on celebrity media, suggesting that engaging in feminist discourse is not enough for celebrities to be publicly recognised as feminists, especially if they are poor women of colour. In fact, MC Carol expresses distaste for being called a ‘diva’ or a ‘queen’, common terms used for white women in Brazilian celebrity media; she would rather be referred to as a ‘bad bitch’ (Moreira 2015).

On feminist issues, fat-shaming and gender relations seem to be common themes in MC Carol’s stories. The funkeira often suggests that she is happy with her body, and in many of her interviews, she refers to herself as an attractive woman – even when her comments are met with underlying scorn. One story suggests that Carol’s self-esteem is ‘so elevated that the MC posts sexy pictures on social media, with messages such as “I’m hot, I’m happy, I’m sexy”’ (Moreira 2015, Tecidio 2015). Furthermore, because she became popular with a song called ‘My boyfriend is the biggest loser’, in which she describes a man who is a ‘loser’ for washing her underwear, MC Carol is often asked about these lyrics in interviews. In 2015, she stated that her boyfriend is not a loser for cooking and cleaning and that ‘men have to be less machistas, and share the house chores’ with women (Moreira 2015).

MC Carol also openly talks about her Blackness, which as stated before is not a common topic among funkeiras, especially in articulation with gender (Lopes 2011, Moreira 2014). In March 2016, for instance, she was a guest artist in São Paulo’s music festival Lollapalooza, where she performed with Karol Conka, a rising Black female rapper. After the event, she commented, ‘Brazil is a very prejudiced country, not only with racial issues, but with everything. Here, everything has established standards. To see two Black women singing together opens people’s minds, and that’s great!’ (Pasin 2016). Thus, MC Carol’s discourse can be considered feminist in many ways, yet she is not as visible as Valesca Popozuda. Ultimately, what gives Valesca the upper hand is not necessarily her feminist discourse; it is her renovated performance of normative white femininity. In this case, feminism and toned-down performances of femininity are intertwined, which ultimately weakens feminism’s ability to push the boundaries of normative gender performances (Hoskin 2017).

Conclusion

In a 2014 opinion article, U.S. author Roxane Gay notes that feminism is becoming a popular topic among celebrities engaged in a ‘rebranding’ of the word ‘feminist’ (Gay 2014). The writer notes that feminism is ‘more easily embrace[d] ... when delivered in the right package’, which includes a certain type of beauty, youth, and fame (Gay 2014). Though women from favela funk are not on the same celebrity category as the stars Gay mentions in her piece, the packaged ‘fame-inism’ she references seems to be spreading to the Global South. This makes perfect sense, given that globalisation does not provide an equal flow of information among several locations.

Hollywood and music industry celebrities were already famous and mostly conforming to traditional beauty standards when they claimed to be feminists or engaged in feminist discourse. Nevertheless, the present global feminist hype is not available to all female artists who might employ feminist discourses. As hip-hop feminists Durham *et al.* (2013)

assert, 'There are often serious reprisals for people of color, and women of color in particular, when we freely express sexual agency and desire' (p. 725).

In Brazil, mainstream feminism is still influenced by foundational discourses about racial democracy, which have long stalled intersectional conversations around gender, class, and race. As Brazilian Black feminist Carneiro (2003) suggests, feminism's white and Western origins established hegemonic understandings of feminism based solely on gender inequities, disregarding the diverse lived experiences of poor women of colour. The solution, then, is to 'turn feminism black' (Carneiro 2003, p. 118). Funkeiras 'perform the everyday struggles of women from the favelas (Moreira 2017, p. 186). Their perspectives are essential to challenge mainstream feminism and to 'refuse easy and essentialist political stances about what is right or wrong and who or what gets to be called feminist' (Durham *et al.* 2013, p. 723).

As the analysis of the three funkeiras show, one might be relatively popular and have a perceived feminist discourse, but what determines the possibility of becoming a feminist celebrity is an appropriate performance of femininity that is close to the white, middle-class feminine norm. Accordingly, femininity, like feminism, is not monolithic because certain performances are inevitably perceived differently based on class, race, body size, and other cultural markers (Deliovsky 2008, Hoskin 2017, Moreira 2017). The question is, can Brazilian celebrities who perform femininity that is not in line with norms of whiteness and middle-classness be considered feminists? Or yet, can those celebrities be part of the present global wave of 'fame-inism' if their performances of femininity are non-conforming? Is celebrity media the platform for such conversations, given how much they promote and perpetuate limiting standards of femininity, while shaming non-conforming women?

Many feminists warn against 'choice feminism', which is usually tied to discourses of sexual liberation (Brady 2016). More than simply advocating for choice as a way to express femininity and sexuality in capitalist societies, or even acceptance of difference, this essay sheds light on the concealed connections between proper femininity and mainstream celebrity feminist discourse, ultimately defying the notion that all famous women can be outspoken feminists. As a global celebrity phenomenon, feminism certainly gains a distinct visibility in this context. What does feminism *lose*, however? If mainstream feminism is tied to performances of normative white femininity, it can potentially evade the subversive ability of women like the funkeiras to push boundaries and problematise normative performances of gender, especially as they intersect with race, class, and sexuality. Furthermore, celebrity media's and mainstream feminism's tendency to value white, middle-class femininity suggests that the meanings of feminism need to be constantly re-evaluated, taking into consideration marginalised women's transgressive gender performances (Moreira 2017). Ultimately, feminism's current popularity presents an opportunity for the movement to rethink its meanings not only as inclusive of marginalised women, but as being potentially affected and transformed by the experiences of poor women of colour from the Global South.

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