

HIP-HOP FEMINIST POLITICS IN THE FILM ANTONIA

Jasmine Mitchell

Abstract: This paper examines anxieties surrounding gender, sexuality, race, and class in the film *Antônia* (2006). The paper analyzes how hip-hop is used as an instrument to challenge patriarchal standards. The study also demonstrates how the film represents the limitations and difficulties in undertaking feminist hip-hop politics. A narrative analysis of the film along with a brief background on hip-hop in Brazil shows how hip-hop presents a key device to confronting patriarchal authority and opening up spaces for marginalized women.

Keywords: hip-hop, film, gender, sexuality

Emerging from marginalized communities in São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, and other cities, Brazilian hip-hop is a significant cultural expression that both signifies and explores the anxieties and negotiations of race, class, gender, and sexuality. The film *Antônia* (2006) offers a space for women’s hip-hop, and acts as a potential counterpoint to masculinized hip-hop. A critical analysis of the film *Antônia* confronts the limitations, contradictions, and possibilities of their articulations of race, gender, and sexuality through the medium of hip-hop. This paper will look at how the film creates new articulations of subjectivities based on race, gender, and sexuality. By examining how race, gender, and sexuality are both embodied and performed in hip-hop, the paper proposes an approach to *Antônia* based on an intersectional framework. Situated within lived experiences, intersectionality brings in perspectives that argue that identity categories such as gender, race, class, and sexuality are mutually constituted and cannot be studied through an add-on approach (Crenshaw 1991). Research on gender must employ an intersectional perspective that analyzes gender as category that intersects with other categories such as race, sexuality, class, and nation. Therefore, the paper does not look at these categories as ranked hieratically, but rather sees these categories as interlocking.

Hip-hop emerged in Brazil in the early 1980s, primarily in São Paulo through break-dancing and graffiti, which are two of the four key components in hip-hop. Brazilian youth gathered by the São Bento metro station and the Galeria 24 de Março to dance, compete, listen to music, and exchange information. The introduction of the 1984 Hollywood film, *Beat Street* was pivotal to the popularization of hip-hop in Brazil (Alves, 2004, p. 34). Television, film, and radio were important mediums of communication for the dissemination of hip-hop in Brazil. These forms of communication and information, such as music video clips, record album covers, and stylized images of African-

American life in Spike Lee films soon found their way to the *periferia* (marginalized suburbs) (Alves, 2004, p. 35) and *favelas* of São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro. By the 1990s, MTV Brasil and other mediums of communication contributed to the mass distribution of hip-hop culture (Magaldi, 1999, p. 314). In particular, the increasing racial and political consciousness of United States hip-hop greatly influenced Brazilian hip-hop as well as broader concepts and cultures of black diasporic consciousness.

Given this tradition of hip-hop communication through film and video, *Antônia* can also be understood as part of transnational hip-hop discourse. The film assists in stressing the roles of race, gender, and sexuality in the formation of hip-hop identities in Brazil. The film is developed by 02 Filmes, the largest production house in Brazil, and Globo Filmes, the film branch of Brazil's largest television broadcasting company. The success of the film led to a spinoff of a television series produced by TV Globo and 02 Filmes. The mode of production of *Antônia* is telling as the film was financed and produced with a significant amount of support and distribution. However, this link between commercialism and hip-hop should not be read as a negation of a hip-hop aesthetic. Rather, the mode of production expresses how hip-hop has deeply shaped Brazilian popular culture and how hip-hop has become part of larger narrative traditions. Furthermore, hip-hop in the film enables a discourse around race, gender, sexuality, and class.

The film *Antônia* offers oppositional possibilities to racialized patriarchal standards through an urban female-centered urban and hip-hop aesthetic. While the hip-hop of artists such as Marcelo D2 and others broke through from the *periferias* to the mainstream, the film *Antônia* exhibits female hip-hop and hip-hop culture through cinema to broad audiences. While women in Brazil have held few prominent positions as composers or feature performers of hip-hop, the film *Antônia* offers a gendered perspective of what it might mean to insert women into hip-hop. Instead of the predominance of male voices, *Antônia* offers a cinematic space for women's voices through the medium of hip-hop. *Antônia* narrates the story of a group of four women in the *periferias* of São Paulo who attempt to make a living with hip-hop. In order to create and sustain an all-female hip-hop group, the women in *Antônia* must confront machismo and gender and sexual prejudices. Additionally, the film represents the day to day life in the *periferias* and depicts how violence and poverty impact the identities and values of the characters in the film. The production of *Antônia* both as art forms of cinema and as hip-hop constitutes an important space of struggle for the articulation of Brazilian woman of color cultural and representational politics.

The film utilizes female hip-hop artists rather than professional actresses for the film. This use of female musicians allows for an added sense of identification with the narrative that allows the film's audiences to follow the struggle of the group Antônia in a mixture of fiction and semi-biography. Therefore, as the group Antônia proves that they belong in a hip-hop community even when they are expected to fail or when their active participation is resisted, the audience follows along a story not just of the particular group of Antônia, but of an image of female hip-hop in Brazil. In the end, the group Antônia cements their legitimacy with a series of crowded energetic concerts. The idea of an all-female hip-hop group such as Antônia challenges social expectations demanding that women act out their apparent gendered identities or remain relegated to private space outside of the public sphere. However, the social effectiveness of Antônia is not the eventual success of the group itself, but of the exhibition and surpassing of the challenges faced playing in a male-dominated field. As the members of the fictional group Antônia also continued to have actual successful musical careers, the film connects audience and music fans to the female hip-hop artists through the idea of semi-biographical experiences and the relevance of the artists personal backgrounds to a hip-hop identity. Furthermore, the inclusion of the famous rapper Thaíde in the role of the group's promoter adds to a sensibility of authenticity to the film and to the notion of a hip-hop aesthetic grounded in lived experiences. This section of the paper will analyze the film narrative of *Antônia*.

The film opens with panoramic views over the rooftops of the *favela* and gradually zooms in to focus on the four women of Antonio walking up the hill of the favela. As the camera follows the four women, a female voice narrates the need to express the story of Antônia and to retell the history of the group. This female voice positions the woman as a subjective narrator who calls memories of the hip-hop group Antônia. The audience later learns that this narrator is Barbarah who serves as a guide to tell the collective group story of Antônia and to recount individual struggles of Preta, Mayah, and Lena. This female narrative voice signals to the audience that the film will be told from a woman's point of view in order to retell a collective story. This introduction to the film situates the narrative as a lens into the personal journeys of the group. As the female voice recounts a nostalgic longing for the group's past and begins to retell the history, the audience is also led to the past to follow the group Antônia along its successes and obstacles.

In the beginning of *Antônia*, the film shows the four women as backup singers and dancers for an all-male hip-hop group's concert. The women here are confined to supportive roles and after the show, the all-male chatter of the

male hip-hop group demonstrates that the women have no artistic involvement as composers or performers. Yet, the women demonstrate both the initiative and desire to break into the dominant masculine public sphere of hip-hop and are granted the request to open for one of the all-male group's shows. It is here that the women form Antônia and begin to see themselves as a collective group of artists rather than as an assortment of backup singers. In resistance to the male domination of hip-hop, the creation of the group Antônia and the subsequent opening act performance opens avenues for the presence of women in hip-hop.

However, even within Antônia's first performance as an opening act, it is clear that the group will have to struggle to be seen as more than just objects of desire. During the group's first performance, male audience members interrupt the group's singing with requests for the women's phone numbers. Subsequently, Lena's and Preta's husbands start a fight as a jealous response to this external threat to control over their wives sexuality. Thereby a fight over the power to express desire is a struggle over sexual domination and the idea of women as property. These public displays of desire and objectification demonstrate that Antônia will have to struggle to be taken seriously and to break down the Brazilian hip-hop arena as a masculine space in which women can only take part in as bystanders. Despite the interruptions to the show, the women continue performing and present themselves as a force to be recognized and reckoned with. By virtue of their authoritative stance, their presence on the stage as a challenge to men as the sole representatives of hip-hop, and lyrics that explicitly celebrate and stress their identities as women, the women's initial performance demands insertion into this male-dominated performative space. In the film, the audience's attitude shifts from indifference or objectification to an enthusiastic cheering and chanting for Antônia. It is also notable that the majority of the audience appears to be young men. Therefore, the film alludes to the potential of crossover appeal across genders in Brazilian hip-hop. This ability to appeal to male audiences in the film implies that the message of an all-female hip-hop group can also be understood, consumed, and appreciated by men as well as women.

However, it is notable that the women's initiative is not enough to propel the group to success, but that an outside male surrogate is needed to help the women organize and be successful. Therefore, the film implies that female hip-hop artists might need a male interlocutor to navigate through male dominated structures and mechanisms of the entertainment industry. The need to have a male music promoter already connected to the music business also speaks to networks of male privilege. The group of women who constitute Antônia have

neither the financial or personal access and knowledge to overcome these gendered barriers and to fully assert their own agency. However, the women of Antônia are not helpless in the process of self-making and success. It is clear after the group decides to work with Marcelo that this decision is a collective group choice and not an imposition. As the all-male hip-hop group commands that Antônia decide between them or Marcelo, the women must choose to eschew notions of loyalty or adherence to male control in favor of Antônia's own opportunities. Therefore, the group Antônia is not manipulated by Marcelo, but rather sees Marcelo as a collaborator in the implementation of a strategy towards success. Furthermore, Marcelo acts as an encouraging supporter of the group's talent and pushes for the women to strive not for what they actually see in their day to day lives, but rather for what they hope for and dream. Therefore, Marcelo as an external promoter of the group works not just to overcome gender barriers, but also encourages the women to see beyond the *periferias*. Yet, the group Antônia is also not relegated to a subordinate position in the partnership as the women in the group also demands a contact with Marcelo. Although Marcelo assists in the booking of concerts, the group Antônia maintains authorship and control over their music.

However, while the music promoter refines the musical performances, the group Antônia still asserts control over their artistry. Furthermore, while the women adopt a more glamorous look, their physical appearances are not overtly sexualized. Unlike many Brazilian hip-hop videos, the camera never lingers on specific body parts nor does it enforce a male gaze. The group, especially the character of Mayah, challenges the idea of feminine self-fashioning as tied solely to attract male desire. The group's adoption of spike heels, tank tops, and particularly Mayah's miniskirts and stomach baring tops, could operate to code them as spectacles of male desire. While men, particularly in the audience and in the all-male hip-hop groups may flirt or express desire for the women, these displays are not taken seriously by the women. Attractiveness and feminine self-fashioning are not used as sexual lures. Instead the image the group projects, particularly Mayah, is a different signification. The group's self-conscious control over their fashion and self-images encourages seeing the uses of high heels and miniskirts as less indices of objectification than signs of their own pleasure in their bodies and/or the use of fashion as part of the staged performances of the group.

Despite the group's assertion of independence, the politics of desire and control are still quite prevalent in the gendered relationships in the film. For example, when Preta chooses to leave her husband and move with Barbrah and her brother, it is clear that Preta sees her relationship with her husband as

a choice not as a duty. Preta is able to choose to leave her husband in part due her network of female relationships. The other members of Antônia are shown helping her to move and Barbarah offers her apartment to Preta and her daughter. Therefore, the film shows that economic and emotional independence is also related to female networks of support. Although, Hermano continuously attempts to reconcile with Preta despite his lack of responsibility to her or to his daughter, Preta insists on preserving her own integrity and chooses to live within a feminine network rather than an unsatisfying relationship. Furthermore, Hermano argues that he is not the only one being unfaithful due to Antônia's professional involvement with Marcelo. Hermano constructs the idea of another male figure that provides an avenue for self-support as an act of betrayal. An issue of class comes in as Hermano refers to Marcelo as a “playboy” and that Preta has left Hermano in trade of the benefits of success and money. Hermano is obviously threatened by the prospect of Antônia's success and Preta's attainment of full independence through the hip-hop group.

However, female solidarity is not taken as a given in the film. When a jealous Preta sees Mayah talking with her husband, her initial response is to cut off all ties with Mayah. The way that Preta insults and attacks Mayah is deeply gendered and sexualized as Preta derides Mayah as a whore, but is less upset with her own ex-husband. While Mayah was innocent of Preta's accusations, the rage directed towards Mayah suggests an uneasiness with the desirability of Mayah and thereby, puts aside the culpability of Hermano. Mayah's subsequent castigation and exclusion from the group demonstrates the sexual and gender politics at hand within internal conflicts. Later in the film as the group Antônia falls part, the reconciliation of Mayah and Preta is key to putting the group back together. Achieving this solidarity becomes possible for the group Antônia because Preta learns to redirect rage at imposed limitations away from the arena of gender in favor of gender solidarity and communal values.

The inscription of patriarchy and compulsory heterosexuality are significant barriers to the group Antônia. This compulsory heterosexuality enables is activated through Lena's and Preta's husbands who resent the closeness and intimacy of the female friendships. The women in the group are so close that their partners feel threatened and jealous. The women in the group Antônia struggle to resist this domination through their friendship. The film engages the tensions manifested between men and women precisely because the women of Antônia resist men's attempts to enact patriarchal power. When Lena becomes pregnant, her husband at first encourages her to abort the child. Yet, when it is obvious that Lena would like to keep the child, he insists that she

leave the hip-hop group Antônia if he will support her decision. Lena's husband justifies his control over her through the control over her body and her desire to have the child. Lena eventually feels compelled to leave the group as her husband insists on solely allowing him to support her. Therefore, the film attests to Lena's description of the ongoing argument she had with her husband because she would not give up her singing and solely allow him to support her. However, Lena's husband resents Lena's independence with the group Antônia, but his control over her extends to her cutting off of social relationships with her family and friends and her confinement to the private space of the apartment. By not allowing Lena to participate in the group, Lena's husband demonstrates a view of women as possession.

The representation of the punishing effects of machismo is illustrated literally by the confined narrow space of the apartment. The argument scenes between Lena and her husband all take place within a tightly constricted space where Lena is often talked to against a wall with her husband in front of her. This restriction of space and body movement reflects the constrained conditions in which Lena lives. When Lena eventually decides to take action and leave the house, her husband almost hits her, but ends up banging his own fist against the wall. This fist punching points more to Lena's husband's frustration at not being able to physically control her and thereby, not assert a masculinity tied to the social control of women. The conflict between Lena and her husband is left unresolved in the film, and thereby leaves open the possibility of reconciliation, the overcoming of machismo, and the eventual acceptance of Lena's involvement in the group. The film therefore suggests that it is not just women who need to assert independence, but men must also learn to construct a male identity that is not related to patriarchal standards. The film expresses ambivalence about investing in the patriarchal power generated through the women's relationships with men, or through their adherence to traditional gender roles. The film *Antônia* demonstrate that while the female hip-hop artists do not reject their desirability or dynamics of heterosexual relationships, the women also assert their own interprets and express dissatisfaction with unequal male-female relationships. The women express their own agency and self-determination through their presence as performers. What emerges from their performance and participation in hip-hop is the demonstration of the capacity of the women to define their own identities and life outcomes.

This structure of heteronormative patriarchal standards also comes into play with Barbarah and her gay brother Duda. After a homophobic physical attack on Duda and his boyfriend leaves Duda temporarily physically helpless and his boyfriend dead, Barbarah must support Duda physically and

emotionally. As Duda will not speak about the beating and former friends refuse to help or associate with him, the film speaks to a politics of shaming and a policing of masculinity and sexuality. However, this policing is also obviously present in heterosexual desire. When Duda's attacker approaches Barbarah and Preta on a separate night, he asks if they are the rap girls and if they would wiggle their hips for him. The conflation of female hip-hop performance with images of sexy dancing demonstrates that the group Antônia still confronts certain expectations of feminine performativity. When Barbarah and Preta dismiss the boy and do not comply with his advances, he insults Barbarah as a freak along with her gay brother, Duda. The boy's insults suggest that certain performances of masculinity and femininity being deemed normal only if they adhere to patriarchal heteronormative standards. Homosexuality and resistance to sexual advances are constructed as an inversion of heterosexual patriarchy, and therefore as outside social norms. The idea of compulsory heterosexuality justifies men to dominate women and to control women's behavior through men's access to patriarchal power.

Furthermore, when the women dismiss the boy, he threatens that he will attack them just as he did Duda. The boy therefore, suggests that the only way to deal with these threats to patriarchal heteronormativity is through the infliction of violence as punishment. However, when Barbarah realizes that the boy is the actual attacker of her brother, she assaults him with what appear to be an uncontrollable rage. This rage kills the boy and Barbarah is later charged with manslaughter. Barbarah's attack and her imposing figure over the smaller boy undermine gender stereotypes. Throughout the film, Barbarah is seen practicing martial arts and this physical capacity and training comes to bear on her quick killing of the boy. Furthermore, Barbarah's lyrics in Antônia's performances that warn others to not interfere with her all code Barbarah as tough. Barbarah's toughness shows that masculine characteristics are not biologically defined but rather are part of a performance and therefore are not applicable to any one gender. In this context, Barbarah's female body can be read as subversive in that it is simultaneously excessive in its capacity for violence. By visual appearance and according to male desire, her body is coded as feminine. However, the coding of her body as abnormal based on the boy's reference to freak places Barbarah's body as potentially androgynous or set to masculine aesthetics.

The film posits the women as gender outlaws in their resistance to prescribed gender norms and relationships. This resistance can be characterized in the repetition of Antônia's songs and performances that stress the concept of *luta*. The repeated references to *luta* in Antônia's lyrics represent

the idea that women and men need to be inspired to challenge social conditions and structures that limit opportunities. This idea of *luta* is clearly seen through Antônia's resistance to gender norms and their articulation of an aesthetic and politics of resistance. The emphasis on *luta* is constructed as not a constraint but rather as a self-motivated determination to reach beyond given conditions. The concept advances the idea of personal and collective agency in breaking down barriers to achieve larger goal and dreams. However, while the idea of *luta* clearly has a gender component in the way in which Antônia uses it, the idea of *luta* does not necessarily just apply to gender. It is possible to see class and racial components that emphasize poverty in the discourse of *luta* as well.

While the film does not explicitly deal with race, there are racial connotations within the film. First and foremost, the lead singer's name is Preta. This adoption of an often stigmatized term as a means of self-identity points to a rearticulation of racial politics. The adoption of the name Preta refutes the idea that Afro-Brazilian is merely a phenotype or shade of blackness, but rather embraces a racial term as a signifier of Afro-Brazilian identity and attitude that places blackness as a source of pride. Furthermore, in Barbarah's lyrics, she refers to herself as “Índia, africana, européia, miscigenada/Mas não confunda pois eu não sou leviana.” Barbarah's self-reference attempts to recenter the legacy of *mestiçagem* as a source of pride that represents Brazilian identity but also as a site of resistance and empowerment in the articulation of a feminine discourse that demands to be taken seriously. Barbarah uses the idea of *mestiçagem* strategically to assert her own identity as part of the Brazilian nation but also demands a voice in the nation. This reference implies that the idea of *mestiçagem* should be taken out of larger patriarchal structures and reinvented as a potential source of agency.

The film Antônia offers an alternative model to Brazilian hip-hop through the incorporation of female voices and gender-conscious discourses. The consideration of how Afro-Brazilian women are represented in Brazilian popular culture demonstrates relationships to patriarchy and feminism, *mestiçagem* and racial consciousnesses. However, within hip-hop, contradictions relating to race, gender, and sexuality come into play that challenges the idea of a united homogenous bloc unit. The paper exposes how the film Antônia challenges certain cultural and social norms, but also how certain norms, especially in regards to gender, are often reinscribed or distorted. The various discourses towards race, gender, and sexuality demonstrate that cultural identity is often multifaceted and often shifting or contradictory. The film demonstrates the ambivalences and difficulties in grappling with shifting gender roles and the expression of feminist politics. However, the film envisions the potential in

which patriarchal authority can be diminished. Hip-hop, because of its inherently subversive nature and history, represents a possible space for the manifestation of feminist politics that can present alternatives to gender, race, class, and sexuality standards.

References Cited

ALVES, César *Pergunte a quem conhece Thaíde*. São Paulo: Labortexto, 2004.

CRENSHAW, Kimberle, 1991. “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color.” *Stanford Law Review* 43, 1991: 1241-99.

MAGDALI, Cristina. “Adopting Imports: New Images and Alliances in Brazilian Popular Music of the 1990s”. *Popular Music* 18.3, 1999: 309-329.