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**Review by Elizabeth Coonrad Martinez**

***Samba Dreamers*, by Kathleen de Azevedo. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2006.**

Kathleen de Azevedo's novel *Samba Dreamers* features a character who fits the original description cited by Charles Mann, from a Spanish chronicle, of tall Amazon warrior women. But this character was raised in Los Angeles and is the daughter of Carmen Socorro (an obvious fictitious Carmen Miranda with a last name that evokes a cry for help). As the novel opens, Rosea Socorro has just been released from jail and wants to take revenge on everything connected to the system that turned her mother into a caricature, and led to her suicide. She crosses paths with Joe Silva, the prototypical contemporary immigrant, minimalized culturally by U.S. society: He arrives in Los Angeles, works as a dishwasher; other characters think he sneaked across the border, think he speaks Spanish, they call him Mexican. These all are ideas similarly portrayed ironically in the recent film *A Day Without a Mexican*. This character could be Salvadoran or from any other nation, but for U.S. society, they are a meaningless group.

Joe Silva, however, is Brazilian. He arrived on a plane, having fled his country after imprisonment and torture in the 1970s era of a despotic regime. Like other immigrants, he finds work through others who have been in the same straits, and residence in a rundown apartment that accepts newcomers before they have money. The novel aptly paints the picture of the anonymous immigrant. But de Azevedo takes them from one-dimensional stereotypes to three-dimensional beings, revealing the angst, terror, and complexity of people seen by society only as a problem.

Silva eventually finds a job as a driver/tour guide of Hollywood homes, a business where drivers are to dress as Hollywood figures and tell stories (lies) as they drive. He is required to play a Desi Arnaz character, to tell people he is Cuban, and that he used to play in Desi's band. Tourists believe him because they want to believe life is like TV and the movies. When he departs from the script and relates the ugly actions against Latin American nations by two movie stars, the tourists get angry. One yells, "our country is not like that," and tells Silva he knows he's not Cuban either, otherwise he would have seen him on one of the "I Love Lucy" shows. Silva asks the angry tourist where he thinks he's from, and he responds, "you're all Mexicans. Don't think I don't know that."

*Samba Dreamers* suggests that U.S. Americans do not even desire to know or learn more about Latin Americans. Even the waitress Silva romances, Sherri, keeps trying to speak to him in Spanish, even after he has said he is Brazilian. On a date she uses the Spanish pronunciation of Joe; and then says, "sí, isn't that the word for yes?" When he corrects her with *sim*, she doesn't listen. Finally he says, "I don't speak Spanish; I speak Portuguese." "Oh," she responds.

"Really? Why?" Silva wants her to understand, he implores her to see him truly for who he is. But he feels drawn to her, and his descriptions of women often suggest his feelings about them: Sherri's sunglasses are not dark, sexy ones like he has admired on some women, but instead "pink and round and innocent like two antacid tablets." She is quickly pregnant, they marry and have twins, and for the next two years he struggles to fit into U.S.--or LA--society, without success. He longs to reveal

his inner pain, but Sherri can only fathom life on the surface. She exists behind her own sadness of having lost a sister, low self-esteem, and no real expectations from life. When she sees the long scar on his back, she jokes about him being involved in a Latin knife fight; it never occurs to her that he was tortured. This novel is somewhat reminiscent of Demetria Martinez's novel, *Mother Tongue* (1994), in which a Salvadoran refugee works as a dishwasher in Albuquerque, and the young Chicana who falls in love with him does not understand that he is suffering from the effects of torture.

Silva is also attracted to Rosea Socorro, but she is the wild offspring of American manipulation and will never find a place for herself. He is the immigrant who tries to establish a life in the U.S., raise his sons, and be an American husband. But he cannot make it either.

Although not complex in language, this novel, which alternates various characters' first-person accounts, is somewhat disturbing. In fact, it serves as the antithesis to the Hollywood "happy" plot. *Samba Dreamers* depicts the naivete of U.S. society, and a need for greater understanding of the diversity of Latin Americans. De Azevedo makes Brazilian language visible, adapting several phrases and words into the narrative, which are only at times translated (but she provides a glossary). She explores culture through this vocabulary, and calls attention to stereotypes.

Epigraphs at the beginning of each chapter, except for the few that take place in Brazil, are taken from the 1643 diary of one Carlos Manoel Teixeira da Cunha, about a failed expedition into the Amazon. Since some characters are anthropologists, de Azevedo weaves a continuous thread of Western perspective, which is far from Brazilian reality.

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