

Race, Gender & Sexuality in Production Studies

“Brazilian Telenovelas and Transnational Race-making through TV Production”

Jasmine Mitchell, *State University of New York at Old Westbury*

Considering production processes in Brazil reveals how the management of race, gender, and sexuality are part of larger transnational race-making projects. TV Globo, by far Brazil’s largest TV network and the fourth largest network in the world, exports images of Brazil and its racial ideologies around the globe. Telenovelas, serial melodramas, reach an average of 45 million viewers in Brazil, giving it a fifty-eight percent share of the television viewing audience (Ibope). Unlike the United States, which has a broader range of free and paid channels aimed at various niche audiences, Brazilian television, TV Globo, and the Brazilian telenovela are essentially synonymous.

As a result, Brazilian telenovelas are a unique site for analyzing the complex process of national and transnational race making. In telenovela development, writers, directors, producers, actors, and audiences negotiate social issues and meanings attached to gender, sexuality, class, and race. Importantly, each telenovela production is dynamic, with the scripts for later episodes written and filmed while the program airs; narrative and character development are, in part, contingent on public sentiment and audience reaction.

While seemingly inclusive, this discursive and responsive production process is seriously limited. Not a single TV Globo head writer or director is non-white. This is especially significant because new programs are often marketed based on the popularity or celebrity of a particular scriptwriter. Furthermore, Brazilian television stations employ a “star system” that binds actors to networks with permanent contracts, encouraging TV Globo to cast the same white faces, creating a cycle of marginalization of non-white actors.

Recently, cracks have begun to show in this cycle of white hegemony. In 2009, TV Globo’s Viver a Viva featured Taís Araújo playing the first black female protagonist in a primetime telenovela. In 2011, the telenovela, Insensato Coração featured a mixed-race female executive (played by Camila Pitanga) romantically involved with a black architect (played by Lázaro Ramos). Notably, the casting and acting of Ramos were critiqued in newspapers and social media, with some critics noting that he did not have the “look” of a leading man—undoubtedly a codeword for whiteness. The plots for these shows with novel casting and character choices did not engage with issues of racism, thus normalizing a colorblind experience that would be unlikely given Brazil’s racialized hierarchies. And despite these more inclusive casting choices for leading female roles, Afro-Brazilian actresses such as Araújo and Pitanga still have European features and, thus, conform to white beauty standards.

What could be catalyzing these changes? First, the growing Brazilian middle class want to see themselves reflected onscreen. Between 2003 and 2011, approximately forty million people,

known as class C, entered the middle class in Brazil. With fifty-three percent of class C being negros (black or Afro-Brazilian) and pardos (mixed-race), the commercial power of the non-white population has increased significantly. In 2012, Camila Pitanga was the most visible celebrity on television commercials; her popularity with the class C target market is critical to this success. As Pitanga's rise in fame coincides with increasing Afro-Brazilian mobilization, her celebrity and the casting of other Afro-Brazilian actors allow for the introduction of racial critiques into dominant spaces like the telenovelas of TV Globo. While the number of non-white actors onscreen rose from six percent in 1980 to twelve percent in 2014, this increase does still not come close to representing the Brazilian population, in which more than fifty percent identifies as non-white, according to the 2010 census.

The effects of this emerging trend will have serious impacts outside of Brazil and will generate future questions. As TV Globo exports these telenovelas and is beginning to co-produce productions for Spanish-speaking markets, already and tapping into other media economies, the overwhelming white dominance of casting, writing, and directing reverberates across national borders? Given that various Latin American telenovela producers such as Brazil, Venezuela, and Colombia share similar histories of portraying the nation as a racial democracy while centering whiteness, could any media diversity trends in Brazil be exported? How will transnational coproductions and adaptations be produced in negotiation with centering of whiteness and respectability politics and emerging Brazilian notions of national aesthetics? If TV Globo further penetrates both Latin American and U.S. markets, will the notion of Latinidad as a conveyor of transnational unifying cultural flows act in dialogue with larger transnational racializing projects privileging whiteness? Will categories such as race acquire new forms of significance and resonate in new ways across the body politic, or will anti-blackness propagate behind-the-scenes in white-dominated production meetings?