

# Afro-Brazilians and Television

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So what if a soap has a few blacks? I want to see a soap with half blacks- like Brazil.

Young man interviewed on National Public Radio (Costi (2004)

“City of God,” the 2003 film by director Fernando Meirelles that received four Oscar nominations, tells the tale of a young photographer who records terrible events in a Rio de Janeiro slum from the late 1960s to early 1980s. Since it features as actors many young Afro-Brazilians, U.S. viewers may assume that Brazilian television likewise reflects the Brazilian population. However, Brazilian television is only beginning to attend to the fact that almost half of Brazil’s 178 million people have African ancestry. Indeed, Brazil has “the world’s second-largest number of people of African descent” (Simpson 1993, 7).

As well as Africans, Brazilians’ heritage derives from native Indians, Europeans (primarily Portuguese) and Asians. Racial makeup is about 53% white, 22% mulatto, 12% mestizo, 11% African and 2% other. This ethnic melting pot yields a Brazilian people of tremendously varied skin color and appearance, but who share the same language (Portuguese) and a love for samba and soccer.

Brazil, a nation about as large (8,514,205 square kilometers) as the United States, covers half of South America and borders 9 of the other 11 South American countries. It accounts for more than half of South America’s population and GDP. Brazil has been called a country “under construction” where social mobility is possible.

It is also called “Belinda”- part Belgium, part India- because of its gross disparity in distribution of income (CIA, 2004), whereby the richest 20% control 70% of the wealth. Brazil “projects an image of tolerance and equality even though people with lighter skin continue to hold the bulk of the nation’s wealth” (Associated Press, 2004). That myth of equality “dispenses with racism by means of blanket denial. . . despite evidence of profound and widespread racial discrimination” (Simpson 1993, 8).

## History of Afro-Brazilians

Brazil was discovered by Cabral, a Portuguese navigator, in 1500. In 1532, Sao Paulo became the first permanent settlement. In the 1600s, sugar culture came into full flower in the Northeast, where the plantations supplied most of Europe's sugar. The native Indians could not do the back-breaking cane field work, so slaves were imported in large numbers by the Portuguese during the colonial period (1500-1822). Brazil gained independence from Portugal in 1822. In 1850, slave imports were abolished; in 1871, a law decreed gradual emancipation. Finally, in 1888, slavery was abolished. About 100 years later, a "small but increasingly vocal black movement [has] begun demanding benefits such as racial quotas for universities, contracts and employment" (Associated Press, 2004).

**Racial attitudes and relations.** A blonde, blue-eyed TV superstar named Xuxa had a six-year, well publicized relationship with Brazil's most famous black man, soccer star Pelé, in the 1980s. She was "able to endorse the myth of racial democracy in part by continually reminding the public of the symbolic coupling of black and white that her affair with Pelé represents" (Simpson 1993, 8). With ancestors from Austria, Poland, Italy, and Germany, Xuxa "is even whiter than the white of Portuguese" (Simpson 1993, 32).

In contrast to the U.S. hypodescent system (anyone with a black ancestor is black), Brazil "has no distinct and coherent 'black' category. . . [nor] substantial black middle class" (Kottak 1990, 62). Because more than 500 terms have been used to describe a person's physical characteristics, this "lack of precise boundaries impedes the emergence of their [non-whites'] social identities and any push for collective betterment of dark-skinned Brazilians" (Kottak 1990, 62).

Since to emphasize inequality is un-Brazilian, "an official ideology was invented . . . that . . . through miscegenation [Brazil] would eventually lose its racial differences and become a "racial democracy." (Simpson 1993, 32). However, the "wish to celebrate a mythical racial enlightenment

regularly outweighs the statistical and anecdotal evidence of widespread discrimination” (Simpson 1993, 33). People of color are supposed to use the service elevator, not drive after dark in certain neighborhoods and not answer job ads that use the coded expression “good appearance” (Simpson 1993, 34). Thus due to discrimination and poverty, “there are relatively fewer trained black actors than in the United States” (Kottak 1990, 62) and few blacks on television.

### **Television in Brazil**

Today, more than 90 % of Brazilian households have TV sets, which they watch more than citizens of most Third World countries; in Sao Paulo, 95% watch regularly (Simpson 1993, 43). Television was first seen in Brazil during the 1939 Rio de Janeiro exposition-- an experimental closed system set up with German equipment.

Television is, by far, the most pervasive communication medium in Brazil (Kottak 1990). It carries more than half the publicity and advertising investments in the country, totaling about \$3 billion per year (Projeto Intermeios, 2001). The main TV networks covering most of Brazil are, in order of the size of their audience: 1. Globo Network; 2. SBT – Brazilian System of Television (*Sistema Brasileiro de Televisão*); 3. Bandeirantes Network; 4. Record Network; and 5. *Rede TV!*

**Globo network.** On April 26, 1965, at exactly 11 a.m., the newsman Robert Marinho, owner of a Rio newspaper, launched Globo TV (channel 4) one year after the armed forces had taken over Brazil’s government. Marinho died in 2003 at the age of 98.

Globo ranks as the world’s fourth largest commercial network, after its three U.S. counterparts--ABC, CBS, and NBC (Straubhaar 1984). Today, Globo employs more than 8,000 people. The network has its own authors, directors, actors, journalists, producers, musicians, taylor, engineers, and all kinds of technicians and

specialists. Annually Globo can produce more than 5,000 hours of programs--telenovelas, mini-series, specials, comedies, musicals, event coverage, variety programs, reality shows, game shows (in general with celebrities) and several news programs. It is by far the largest producer of original TV programs in the world (*A Historia d Rede Globo, 2004*).

Globo's network of 113 TV stations means programs can be seen in 99.84 % of Brazil's 5,043 cities. Roberto Marinho's empire also includes GloboNews (24-hour cable), Globo Radio, *O Globo* (a newspaper), *Extra* (a newspaper); Globo Records, Editora Globo (Globo publishing house books and magazines), globo.com.br (an internet provider) and the Roberto Marinho Foundation.

**Telenovelas.** The Brazilian telenovela, which differs from Western soap operas, is the centerpiece of Brazilian prime time television; like novels, they have a beginning and end. Telenovelas had their origins in the popular *folhetim* (radio novels). The Brazilian National Radio station aired 116 such novelas 1943-1945. At first, the texts were adapted from other sources; later, special writer/producer teams created original novelas (Andrade, 2000).

In 1963, SP Excelsior TV broadcast live "*2-5499 Ocupado*," the first daily Brazilian telenovela (Fernandes, 1982). From then on, the genre developed into the most popular media product in Brazil. In Brazil, the telenovela acquired specific attributes different from other Latin American forms of the genre.

First, topics tend to involve current issues, such as the gap between rich and poor, the environment, alcohol/drug addiction, or political problems. Ortiz, Borelli, and Ramos (1988) recount that in the 1960s and 1970s, many telenovela authors had

communist affiliations, but because of media censorship, they had no other outlets of expression Today, telenovela themes, conflicts, and emotions reflect modern points of view (Sodre 1991).

Second, the audience includes not only housewives, but also husbands and children. Watching is a family affair—for families from all walks of society: men and women, young and old, people from different social classes and different cultural levels (Andrade, 2000). Watching telenovelas every night has become a national ritual (Melo, 1988). Faithful viewers seem to need their daily TV fix.

Third, because of its pervasiveness, the genre can shape public opinion as well as influence lifestyles and behavior (Pimentel & Queiroz, 1989). Various studies indicate that telenovelas' varied themes (sociological, political, ecological, ethical) have exerted strong impacts on Brazilians (Melo 1988), given Brazil's effective TV system that can reach the entire nation.

Fourth, the telenovela genre attracts the best writers, producers, directors, song writers, composers, and singers, who relishes the chance to participate in the next Globo hit. Each Globo telenovela has its own set of songs, many times written and composed specifically for that story (Fernandes, 1982). Even specific characters have their own musical themes, which allow the audience to identify which character is on the screen. Audiences are rewarded with Brazil's best talent every night.

Fifth, Brazilian telenovelas constantly vary the settings of their stories. Stories play out in the rich Southern regions or in the poorest inland of the Northeast; in cosmopolitan Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo; or the Amazon rain forest.

Some Brazilian telenovelas have even been shot on location Japan, Italy, Portugal, and France. Along with showing these different places in Brazil, Globo telenovelas portray local customs as well as idiomatic linguistic expressions. Globo telenovelas are a travelogue that enhance a sense of national solidarity.

### **Racial Issues and the Media**

**Research studies.** A 1988 analysis of images of blacks in advertising looked at 203 TV ads and ads in mainstream magazines including *Veja* and *Manchete*. Blacks appeared in only 9, and 3 of those were government campaigns for military recruitment or measles vaccinations. In the remaining 6, blacks were either presented in crowds, disassociated from the products advertised, or shown *no seu lugar* (in their place)-- as entertainers or manual laborers (Simpson 1993, 38).

Other studies have found Afro-Brazilians to be portrayed by and large as service persons or outlaws. Even in TV commercials, they are either absent or in stereotyped roles (Subervi-Vélez & Oliveira, 1991).

The effects of stereotypes have been studied in young people aged 7 to 18. The group, half of them black, were asked to attribute specific characteristics to either blacks or whites. The terms "stupid," "ugly," "thief," and pig were linked to blacks, while "pretty," "doctor," and "rich" were attributed almost exclusively to whites (Simpson 1993, 38).

The media are one source of stereotypes. "As long as stereotypes make it easy to bring to mind evidence that supports them and difficult to bring to mind evidence that undermines them, people will cling to erroneous beliefs" (Snyder, 1988, p. 267).

A concept akin to stereotypes is that of schema. Axelrod's (1973) idea of schema—simplified mental maps that people use to process complex details—explains why stereotypes persist: they're useful and parsimonious. Graber (1988, p. 127) elaborates on Axelrod's (1973) schema theory of information processing thus: People “distill information into true or false meanings. . .people tend to store conclusions drawn from evidence, rather than the evidence itself.” If new information matches a previous schema (“dark-skinned Brazilians work as maids”), it is stored; if it doesn't match it, it may pass by (“dark-skinned Brazilians are well educated”).

**Globo telenovelas: new directions.** In the 1980s, actors started demanding “more, better and different kinds of parts (but without much obvious success)” (Kottak 1990, 61). Since Kottak made that assessment more than 10 years ago, some changes have occurred, especially at Globo. From the late 1990s on, telenovelas have been more conscious about the need to portray the Brazilian society as it is: a mix of different groups. First efforts began in the early 1990s.

*“De Corpo e Alma”* (1992 Globo), for example, turned interviewees' stereotypes on their heads (Silva & Silva, 1993). The story includes relationships between a white judge and a black judge; a white mother and a black mother; a white boy and a black boy. The central story involves an incident where two new-born babies have been mistakenly switched at the hospital.

When the truth comes to light seven years later, both mothers' reactions show the difference between them. The audience's final view of these binary relationships had leaned towards supporting the black mother, the black judge and the black child. These black characters presented qualities their white counterpart characters did not

possess: reliability, sincerity, ethics, professionalism, sensitivity to others' feelings, and responsibility.

In March 1994, Globo launched "*A Próxima Vitima*" (*The Next Victim*), the 8 p.m. telenovela, about a rich, intellectual black family that had a slow-witted white maid. On top of the change in racial positions traditionally seen in the media, the white maid had yet another strong characteristic: it was tremendously hard for her to learn and understand things, while all the members of the black family were intelligent and bright.

In July 1994, Globo launched "*Pátria Minha*" (*My Homeland*). This 8 p.m. telenovela had a secondary drama whereby a white rich man accuses his black doorman of stealing his wife's jewels. But the real thief had been his wife herself. This conflict caused a lot of talk and disapproval from society (Silva 1995).

After the turn of the millennium, even greater strides were made. In February 2001, Globo launched "*Porto dos Milagres*" (*Port of Miracles*) another 8 PM telenovela that would explore one of the popular African religions in Brazil. The main story took place in a fishing village in Bahia, the Brazilian state with the strongest African heritage. The main male character, a fisherman, was Euro-Brazilian and Afro-Brazilian. An adherent of an African religion, he falls in love with someone his complete opposite: a blonde, blue-eyed Catholic girl.

As the drama develops, people are informed about the concepts and rites of the African religion as well as the origins of that religion. At the end, the Afro-Brazilian fisherman and the blonde girl get married. She ends up accepting his religion, but still keeps hers. This belief in two religions is common in Brazil. Most importantly is the fact that the telenovela "*Porto dos Milagres*" gives recognition to the African religion

as truly credible. It confirms the melting of African and Brazilian culture as it also shows that whites (Euro-Brazilians) as well as blacks (Afro-Brazilians) believe in African religions.

In June 2001, about five months after the launching of “*Port of Miracles*,” Globo launched “*A Padroeira*” (*The Patroness Lady - 2001*), another telenovela strongly based on religious concepts—in this case, Catholicism. It brought to life the story of *Nossa Senhora da Aparecida*, Our Lady Aparecida’s, first astonishing miracles in the inland area of the state of São Paulo. The story affirmed the legend of the appearance of the black Our Lady in 1717 in Brazil. (Today the site has a cathedral, the largest in Brazil, which draws multitudes of visitors; its parking lot has room for 400 tour buses.) This Globo 6 PM telenovela showed that Catholics as well as followers of the African religions believe in and worship the Brazilian black Our Lady.

In 2003, Globo launched “*Mulheres Apaixonadas*” (*Passionate Women*). This 8 PM telenovela showed no black—only white--service people. In addition, it portrayed a black woman as a medical doctor, an important character in one of the central plots. Her mother is a black singer and her father is a white musician. In this same telenovela, two female school teachers are housemates: a black woman and a white woman. The white woman is an alcoholic. The black woman, always sober, helps in the other’s rehabilitation.

In January 2004, Globo launched a telenovela wherein the main character, a black woman, falls in love with a white man--whose fiancée, a pretty white woman, has negative characteristics.

**Other programming.** In addition, the hosts of “*Fantastic Life Show*,” the highly rated, two-hour Globo Sunday night extravaganza, have been since 1997 Caucasian Pedro Bial and Afro-Brazilian Gloria Maria. Humor programs, as well as children’s programs, also present Afro-Brazilians.

As for commercials, producers have realized that all the groups do consume, and have increased different groups’ presence in ads. If more than 85 million Afro-Brazilians “started speaking with their pocketbooks, they would be hard to ignore” (Associated Press 2004).

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