

A Discontented Audience:
Television and Contemporary Ideologies within
Brazilian Society

by

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Television has been called “the most powerful entity in contemporary Brazilian society” (Simpson, 1993, p. 63). With almost 40 million households owning a TV, Brazil has one of the biggest television audiences in the world and only one dominant broadcasting network: the Rede Globo (*Hã-jee Glõbu*) (Machado-Borges, 2003, p. 6). While soccer and the news are major contributing factors to the popularity of television in Brazil, the television *novela*¹ is one of the most broadcast and watched genres (Machado-Borges, 2003, p. 6). Due to airing time and high production investments, the *novela* has become a national source of entertainment, awareness, cultural affirmation, and a common topic in conversation or debate across age, class, and gender lines (Brittos & Bolaño, 2000; Kottak, 1990; La Patina et. al., 2004; Machado-Borges, 2003; Mattelart & Mattelart, 1990). But even though Globo’s *novelas* have long been integrated into Brazilian homes and have even served as a point of national pride (Kottak, 1990, p. 38), a major part of Brazilian society is misrepresented and made invisible within this television world. In the *novelas*, Brazil looks like a nation filled with wealthy, white families when in fact the majority of Brazil’s population is either black or mixed race and living in poverty or close to the poverty level (Araújo, 2000). Brazilian television appears to represent a northern European nation rather than the multi-cultural society it is situated within. Ironically, however, there are more Japanese, black, and mixed race people on television in Denmark than on the Rede Globo (Araújo, 2000, p. 40).

My sociological inquiry, therefore, begins here. What has allowed this “formula” of whiteness to dominate television in a nation where “white” actually reflects so little of the population? My investigation is one that attempts to look at television not as a dominant force either positively or negatively effecting society, but rather as part of a complex process in the evolution of dominant ideologies within the greater society. In considering

¹ Brazilian soap opera, also referred to by scholars as a telenovela

the theories on television, my focus lies with scholars such as Fiske (1987), Hall (1973), and Gitlin (1982), who see audiences as playing an active part in interpreting, preserving, and challenging the dominant ideologies reproduced on television.

The popularity and format of the Rede Globo's *novelas* make them an especially provocative genre for examining the complex relationship between audiences and television producers. In this study I have chosen to look at the Rede Globo's most recently completed prime-time *novela*, *Viver a Vida* ("Living Life"). This *novela* is especially significant because it marks the first time in Globo television history that a black woman was cast as the leading protagonist within a prime-time *novela*.² Through my own textual analysis of *Viver a Vida* as well as the incorporation of online reactions from viewers and major Brazilian magazines responding to the most dramatic and pivotal scenes within this 2009-2010 *novela*, I investigate how certain hegemonic ideologies are challenged and reproduced by both producers who try to appeal to a broad, diverse audience as well as consumers of the *novela* who constitute a very large portion of Brazilian society. My study, therefore, attempts to use *Viver a Vida* and the dialogue it provoked as a window to understanding contemporary ideals of race and gender within Brazilian society.

The first section of my analysis confirms Gitlin's (1982) theory by showing how dominant ideologies are incorporated into television texts in subtle and/or complex ways so that they appeal to a mass audience. This section also speaks to Fiske's (1987) and Hall's (1973) theories through examining some of the polysemic qualities within *Viver a Vida*'s scenes and showing the multiple ways in which audiences can draw connections with its messages. The second half of my analysis shifts the focus to one of the most controversial and pivotal scenes within *Viver a Vida* and the reactions it generated within Brazilian society. I demonstrate how through their low ratings and negative public commentary in

² The articles from national magazines and the online comments that I examine for my study brought out this fact.

response to having the black actress Taís Araújo play out the central role of Helena in *Viver a Vida*, audiences were the driving force behind the reproduction of “anti-black” ideologies and the promotion of the white ideal of success and beauty on Brazilian television. With this section of my study, I challenge the assumption that the ultimate control lies with the media network and cultural elites as the promoters of hegemonic ideologies. Instead I show how the producers of *Viver a Vida* actually tried to disrupt the hegemonic tradition placing whiteness at the top of a racial hierarchy on television, but were forced to abandon this reformist effort by the will of a powerful “mainstream” audience.

My research of television in Brazil, therefore, serves to 1) exemplify the polysemic qualities of television texts which make them open to multiple readings by a wide, diverse audience; 2) support and extend recent critiques debunking Brazil’s long-proclaimed myth of “racial democracy”; and 3) demonstrate how audiences are active agents in the reproduction of dominant ideologies on television. In examining audiences’ reactions, however, I also show how subordinate (ideological) groups were able find agency by using the content within *Viver a Vida* and the (mainstream) comments within online forums to challenge and protest against dominant ideologies and spark a public debate.

The Rede Globo and Its *Novela*: Brazil’s Genre

A 2010 *Reader’s Digest* survey asked individuals from fifteen different countries what they would rather give up: TV, cell phones, or the Web. While responses from eleven of these countries showed that the TV would be the first thing to go, Brazilians claimed that they would drop the internet or their cell phone before giving up their TV. In fact, among these fifteen nations, Brazil was shown to be the country with the lowest percentage of individuals who would be willing to give up television (15%), followed by Canada with over

double the amount (37%) ("Which Would You Give Up," 2010). In Brazil, the hum of the television can be heard as you stroll down central streets, passing bars, bakeries, and restaurants. Even in the small convenience store on the outskirts of town, you are likely to see and hear the same sounds and images projected on millions of television screens across Brazil—all tuned into the same network.

Launched in 1965 by Roberto Marinho, the Rede Globo has grown to be the largest television network in Latin America and the fourth largest in the world (Brittos & Bolaño, 2000; Mattelart & Mattelart, 1990, p. 19, p. 24). The Rede Globo was originally funded by the US *Time Life* organization, but in 1969 the military government (which controlled Brazil from 1964-1985) decided to nationalize the network and use it to strengthen and promote national identity (Machado-Borges, 2003, p. 29; Mattelart & Mattelart, 1990, p. 22, p. 26). With the support of the government, the Rede Globo quickly became the hegemony of Brazilian television and continued to hold this TV monopoly even after the end of the military's rule (La Patina et. al., 2004, p. 264; Machado-Borges, 2003; Mattelart & Mattelart, 1990).

Today there exist other stations Brazilian homes are able to receive for free. These channels, however, have weaker signals and lack the variety and quality of the Rede Globo's programming. Within this one channel, audiences are given all of the classic television genres such as games shows, talk shows, children's programs etc, and Globo is unarguably deemed the best source of news, sports, and *novelas* (Brittos & Bolaño, 2000; La Pastina et al., 2004; Machado-Borges, 2003; Mattelart & Mattelart, 1990). The Rede Globo is also always the network to host broadcasted important events including major political debates, The World Cup, and Carnival in Rio de Janeiro. With "the *telenovela*, soccer, and Carnival" as "Brazil's most reliable cultural unifiers" (Kottak, 1990, p. 37), the Rede Globo continues to be strongly linked to Brazilian national identity (Brittos & Bolaño,

2000; Kottak, 1990; La Pastina et al., 2004; Machado-Borges, 2003; Mattelart & Mattelart, 1990).

While the national news and sports are considered extremely important in Brazil, the shows that receive the most attention and touch on the widest range of social topics are, without question, the Rede Globo's *novelas* (La Pastina et al., 2004; Machado-Borges, 2003; Mattelart & Mattelart, 1990). Although the military regime censored and controlled much of the Rede Globo's content during their rule, today the *novelas* are decided and influenced by many groups such as advertisers, writers, various interest groups, and the general public (Brittos & Bolaño, 2000; La Patina et. al., 2004; Machado-Borges, 2003; Mattelart & Mattelart, 1990). While every *novela* has an extremely well-known main writer who is responsible "for the success or failure of the novela," Machado-Borges (2003) explains that "an intrinsic relationship" is developed between audiences and the writer as viewers play an active role in the development of the *novela* (p. 50). The *novela*, therefore is an "open work" in which writers use polls taken by Globo, IBOPE ³, and public reactions in order to change and "correct it" (Mattelart & Mattelart, 1990, p. 43). These polls and other forms of audience feed back through mediums such as the internet are so influential in the production of the *novela* that writers have even been known to "give a leading role to a secondary character because of the public reaction" (Machado-Borges, 2003, p. 50).

Unlike soap operas in the United States, Brazilian *novelas* feature all the best actors and have the highest production costs, with newer *novelas* budgeting around twenty million US dollars (Brittos & Bolaño, 2005, p. 190; Machado-Borges, 2003, p. 58). Each *novela* lasts approximately seven months, airing six days a week (Monday-Saturday) with one hour long episodes called chapters (*capítulos*). With this format, the viewer can get to know the characters and follow the developing plot on an almost daily basis but then also

³ Brazilian Institute of Public Opinion and Statistics (*Instituto Brasileiro de Opinião Pública e Estatística*)

watch it come to a definitive end after seven months (or 180-200 chapters) when all of the story's themes and plot strings are finally tied together.

Broadcasting time is another factor that distinguishes the Brazilian *novela* from soap operas in the US, with the two most important high-budget *novelas* airing in the evenings. The "seven o'clock *novela*" comes on before the national news, which is then immediately followed by the "prime-time" *novela* at around nine o'clock. This strategy helps to attract a wide variety of audiences and also allows the *novela* to easily become "an integral part of the daily routine" (La Pastina et. al., 2004, p. 264; Brittos & Bolaño, 2005). With this capturing format and quality, the *novelas* have become a Brazilian cultural product and national export, successfully reaching audiences from practically all social spheres (Kottak, 1990, p. 45).

As the Globo *novela* gained popularity, the commercial industry began using a strategy called product placement or "merchandising" to promote products within the genre's plots and scenes (Brittos & Bolaño, 2005, p. 190; La Pastina et al., 2004, p. 266; Machado-Borges, 2003, p. 56-59; Mattelart & Mattelart, 1990, p. 47). Machado-Borges (2003) explains that this marketing approach "complicates the distinction between reality and fiction, encouraging people to acquire things that are shown within a fictive frame" (p. 57) and transforming the *novela* into a space where audiences can discover "where it's at" in terms of products and new fashion trends (Almeida, 2000; La Pastina et al, 2003).

The Rede Globo in partnership with national and international social interest groups has utilized a similar strategy to address social issues and promote "pro-social" themes within the *novelas* (La Pastina et al, 2004). In the mid-1990s "social merchandizing" began as a way to gain attention and funding from "writers, producers, nongovernmental groups and the news media" who saw this tactic "as a viable means of promoting social change" (p. 267). *Novela* writers often develop plot lines that tackle

various problems pertaining to sexual health, drug abuse, discrimination etc. According to La Pastina et al. (2004), "social merchandizing" has turned the *novela* into "a forum for the discussion of Brazilian reality" (p. 266). By developing and choosing pro-social themes "through homegrown production and local input" (p. 277), La Pastina et al. claims that Globo's *novelas* are able to "achieve greater [social merchandizing] effectiveness" as they are "shaped and reshaped" by audiences and interest groups (p. 274).

The level of "realism" that the Rede Globo *novela* seems to deliver has been recognized by scholars as a distinctive quality of Brazil's telenovelas in comparison with the rest of Latin America (Brittos and Bolaño, 2005, p. 197; La Pastina et al, 2004, p. 263; Machado-Borges, 2003, p. 40). Globo's *novelas* are known to have a "clear temporal and spatial contextualization," as they are often situated in distinct cities and locations that are recognizable to the viewer (La Pastina et al, 2004, p. 263). Brittos and Bolaño (2005) claim that the *novelas* develop a "realistic" and "natural" appearance through connecting story lines with other parts of the world by showing culturally and nationally distinctive sceneries and social interactions from a particular region (p. 195).⁴ This international connection, however, is always tied back to the main story line situated within a popular location in Brazil in order for the *novela* to maintain a strong "*identidade brasileira*" (Brazilian identity) (Brittos and Bolaño, 2005, p. 196). Brittos and Bolaño (2005) say that this spatial strategy as well as the incorporation of historical and political facts and references within the *novelas* allows the viewer to feel "*mais próximo da vida 'real'*" ("closer to 'real' life"). But although Globo's *novelas* have been called "*novelas verdade*" ("truth novels") (p. 197), studies comparing *novela* representations with the reality in Brazil reveal that "Brazil in the telenovela" represents a middle and upper-middleclass urban world in which very few Brazilians actually live (Machado-Borges, 2003, p. 42). The *novelas* not only misrepresent

⁴ I observed this during my time in Brazil. Families commented on the quality and realism of the *novelas'* depictions of foreign places, although I personally found the reality of the representations to be questionable.

demographical realities through under representations of race, class, and age groups (children and the elderly), they also “exaggerate certain aspects of the Brazilian reality” within depictions of neighborhoods and social groups (Machado-Borges, 2003, p. 43-45).

Thinking About Television: A Review of the Literature

The question of what effect television has on society has been an interest to intellectuals ever since the new technology integrated itself into the homes of millions. In the scholarly discussion of television, there are those who see the medium as a useful and positive addition to society, some who criticize and fear its effects on future generations, and others who see television as part of a complex process in which dominant ideologies are reproduced and shaped as audiences actively engage with content.

Much of the early scholarly literature surrounding television portrays the medium as a negative addition to society that promotes passivity and isolation while destroying the quality of thought (Adorno, 1954; Arnheim, 1935; Cater, 1975; Comstock, 1978; Lull, 1988; Novak, 1975; Postman, 1986). While many of these scholars acknowledge the potential of television technology to be used as a communicative and educational tool, they warn that it has instead become a “one-way flow” of entertainment creating an idle society (Arnheim, 1935; Cater, 1975; Comstock, 1978; Lull, 1988; Novak, 1975). Postman (1986) claims that television has pushed the written word to the periphery of our culture and is responsible for destroying the “seriousness, clarity, and above all, value of public discourse” (p. 29).

In considering the literature examining television’s role within Brazilian society, however, many of the findings seem to contradict these earlier theories of television as a social ill. Scholars seem to agree that television has in fact made a hugely positive impact on the nation in both social and political ways (Brittos & Bolaño, 2005; Goldfarb, 2002; Kottak, 1990; La Pastina, 2004; Machado-Borges, 2003). In a study looking at the Rede

Globo's national and local impact on Brazilian society, Kottak (1990) concludes that viewers in Brazil are not "passive victims" (p. 192). His findings demonstrate that television watching "*expresses and fuels* hunger for contacts and information" (italics in original text) (p. 189). Instead of replacing and limiting print-based learning, television viewing in Kottak's study was actually positively correlated with reading and literacy rates (p. 189). Contrary to the literature which points to television as limiting individual activeness (Cater, 1975; Comstock, 1978; Lull, 1988), Kottak's (1990) findings also show that within rural communities television stimulates social interaction as community members gather in social spaces or houses to watch certain programs. According to Kottak (1990), television in Brazil serves as a "gateway" to knowledge of the world and informs national culture. The positive influence of television within Brazilian society has been noted by other scholars who point to the Rede Globo's educational campaigns and "social merchandizing" achievements (Brittos & Bolaño, 2005; La Pastina, 2004; Machado-Borges, 2003; Mattelart & Mattelart, 1990). Because of the network's link to promoting liberal ideas within Brazil, the Rede Globo has also been said to have played a "crucial role" in the overthrow of the military dictatorship and realignment with a liberal government in 1985 (Brittos & Bolaño, 2000, p. 108; Goldfarb, 2002, p. 201).

Although the Rede Globo has been praised for its liberalizing and educational impact and seems to contradict the theories that link television to a deterioration of society, many scholars criticize TV Globo's under- and mal-representations of Afro-Brazilians and the lower classes, especially within the *novelas* (Araújo, 2000; Castilho Santana, 2009; Da Silva, 2007; Machado-Borges, 2003; Mattelart and Mattelart, 1990; Reichann Simpson, 1993). Some of the first black characters to appear on the Rede Globo's *novelas* were in fact not even black. Brazilian *novela* directors copied the United States' cinematic use of blackface and imposed white actors to act out black stereotypes. Araújo (2000) gives the

example of Rede Globo's 1969 *A cabana do Pai Tomás* (*Father Tom's Cabin*) in which the white actor Sérgio Cardoso plays a black character that combines the United States' Uncle Tom stereotype with the Brazilian mythic figure of "the old Pai João (Father John)" (p. 94). Even as the Rede Globo began to incorporate real black actors and actresses into the *novelas*, the characters often fit the black Brazilian stereotypes of the *empregada doméstica* (the female domestic worker), the *mulata sedutora* (the seducing, mixed-race sexualized Brazilian female), the *malandro carioca* (the black, well-dressed "hustler" from Rio de Janeiro) and the classic, extremely loving *mãe negra* (traditional black mother or "mammy" figure) (Araújo, 2000, p. 97). Globo's *novelas*, Araújo (2000) claims, are responsible for reinforcing these racist myths and stereotypes within the Brazilian collective memory. The *novelas'* depictions and story lines, he argues, also preserve the myth of "racial democracy" in Brazil through showing whites and blacks peacefully living together and sexually intermingling. But in this "racially democratic" Globo world there clearly exists a racialized social hierarchy in which blacks achieve social mobility through their interracial marriages and sexual relations with whites (Araújo, 2000, p. 102).

Poverty is a scene rarely depicted on the *novelas*, but when it does appear, it usually embodies all of the negative stereotypes that marginalized communities must constantly fight against. After the success of Fernando Meirelles' film, *Cidade de Deus* (City of God), Brazilian television writers began producing mini-series and *novelas* such as *TV Cidade dos Homens* (City of Men) and *Vidas Opostas* (Opposite Lives), based within Rio de Janeiro's *favelas* (poor communities located on the periphery and hill sides surrounding the city that are notoriously linked with drugs and violence) (Castilho, 2009, p. 1). Rede Globo's most recent *novela* following this theme, *Duas Caras*, was one in which the writer's supposed intentions were to "demystify the idea that the *favelas* are only filled with gangsters" (p. 2). In his analysis of *Duas Caras*, however, Castilho (2009) notes that

stereotypical characters such as the dancing *morena sambista* (the mixed-race samba dancer), dressed in promiscuous clothing, and the shirtless “beach bum” selling beer on the beach, were shown as common members of the *favela* community (p. 8). On top of this, Castilho argues that economic conditions within the *favelas* were significantly underplayed in *Duas Caras*. The characters in the *novela* were shown as having plenty of food and clothing as well as good relationships with their middle-class employers, when many who live in these communities do not have these luxuries or job opportunities that “Globo’s world” depicts (p. 9).

The white image of success, power, intelligence, and ideal beauty dominates Brazilian television. Integral to the perpetuation of this white ideal was Xuxa (shoo-sha): a blond haired, blue eyed Brazilian woman who remains one of the most influential icons in the history of Globo television (Simpson, 1993). Xuxa was the host of one of Brazil’s most watched programs throughout most of the 80s and 90s, “Xou da Xuxa” (Xuxa Show). This children’s show consisted of games, cartoons, songs, guest appearances, and a cast of eight blond adolescent girls (*Paquitas*) who were seen as “mini-Xuxas”. According to Simpson (1993), the replication of “Xuxa’s fair skin, blond hair, and blue eyes” with the *Paquitas* and “the many products connected to the ‘Xou’” were powerful reinforcements of the “racial hierarchy of desirability” within “the age of mass media” (Simpson, 1993, p. 37).

Simpson (1993) also explains how “Xou da Xuxa” made Xuxa “the embodiment of the ideal woman,” both seducing and domestic (p. 7). As a nationally recognized sex-symbol prior to her television career with Globo, Simpson (1993) describes how “skillful handling” by “Xou da Xuxa’s” producers, combined Xuxa’s “erotic dimension” with “domestic, caretaking...expressions of femininity” in ways that successfully “reassured the public that Xuxa’s glamour girl—sex symbol role would not be sacrificed to the role of mother figure” (Simpson, 1993, p. 52). Producers distanced Xuxa from “the maternal role”

by making her “a child herself” both “innocent” and “vulnerable” (p. 56), which also served “to promote and sanction permissiveness and lack of restraint” (p. 54). Xuxa embraced this child-like persona while maintaining her “sexual rapport” on the show through scantily clad costumes and bold flirtations with young boys and fathers in the audience (p. 52-53). Although Xuxa clearly promoted racist ideals and problematic expressions of sexuality through her television show and commercial products, “one of the most striking aspects of [this] phenomenon,” Simpson (1993) tells us, is the universal admiration and approval that Xuxa gained across the race and class spectrum throughout Brazil (p. 10).

In order to understand how the Rede Globo has retained support from its diverse audience with *novelas* reinforcing negative black stereotypes and shows such as “Xou da Xuxa” glorifying whiteness and controversial definitions of femininity, it is important to examine how ideologies are created and reproduced within popular culture and the ways in which audiences interact with these dominant messages. Looking at the relationship between television and audiences, Hall (1973) and Fiske (1987) describe viewers as active agents in a process of television interpretation and construction of meaning. While these scholars acknowledge an “institutional/ political/ ideological order imprinted” within television and the mainstream media in general, Hall (1973) says that television messages give “*dominant or preferred*” (italics in original) rather than “determined” meanings (p. 46). Expanding on Hall’s theory, Fiske (1987) points to “structures of preference” (rather than a single preferred meaning) that allow for many different textual interpretations while favoring some meanings over others (Fiske, 1987, p. 65). To interpret these “structures of preference” within television texts viewers engage in a process of “decoding” that allows for dominant, negotiated, and/or oppositional readings (Hall, 1973; Fiske, 1987).⁵ In a dominant reading the viewer understands the television text within the hegemonic

⁵ Hall specifically uses the word “reading” to discuss audiences’ engagement with the signs and codes on television because it recognizes the viewer’s subjectivity within a process of “*interpretative work*” (italics in original) (Hall, p. 46).

ideological viewpoint,⁶ whereas a negotiated reading acknowledges the legitimacy of this viewpoint while also taking into consideration personal or local factors that may contradict with some aspect of the hegemonic ideology. Oppositional readings, therefore, are those in which the viewer decodes the text in a way that completely goes against the intended, preferred meaning and dominant ideology (Hall, 1973). Because the viewer is a “social subject” with a “complex cultural history” affecting the way he/she engages with the text, Fiske (1987) tells us that “a process of negotiation” between the subjective reader and the text is much more prevalent in the practice of watching television than are oppositional or dominant readings (p. 65). In considering the power dynamic between the viewer and the television text, Fiske (1987) argues that “meanings...shift towards the subjective position of the reader more than the reader’s subjectivity is subjected to the ideological power of the text” (p. 66).

Recognizing television as a space in which hegemonic ideologies are “affirmed and negotiated” among a wide audience, Gitlin (1982) explains how culture industries must find ways to address “popular aspirations, fears, and conflicts” while making these projections “compatible with the hegemonic ideology.” Television industries appeal to audiences’ fantasies and desires while also serving to “reconcile emotions and images that may well be irreconcilable” and “smooth out” contradictions within the hegemonic ideology (Gitlin, 1982, p. 242-243). Xuxa’s rein on Globo television and her intense popularity among the public, speaks to her ability to do just this. As Simpson (1993) explains:

Through Xuxa, the public achieves a sense of relaxation of the tensions generated by the gradual but real and public questioning of traditional gender roles, by the deeply troubling and largely denied racism in Brazil, and by the

⁶ Hall describes a “hegemonic viewpoint” as defining meanings within the larger society or culture while appearing to be in sync with what seems “‘natural’, ‘inevitable’, [and] ‘taken for granted about the social order’” (Hall, p. 48).

disjunctive experience of inhabiting a society in which the first and the third worlds exist side by side in discordant competition (p. 6).

Simpson (1993) claims that Xuxa's "celebration of whiteness" reaffirmed dominant conceptions of "the blond ideal of beauty" as well as the "nearly universal ideological construction" making the white female "the most prized possession of white patriarchy." Her six year public relationship with the black Brazilian soccer legend Pelé served to reinforce these ideologies as well as "smooth" them out by using this inter-racial relationship to preserve her image from accusations of racism and validate the myth of "racial democracy" in Brazil (Simpson, 1993, p. 8).

The dangers that come from shows such as "Xou da Xuxa" which reproduce harmful ideologies while successfully capturing an extremely large audience across race, class, and gender lines are even more disconcerting when considering the ability of these representations and images to become "naturalized." Hall (1973) claims that as images become commonly viewed by audiences they begin to "produce apparently 'natural' recognitions," which cause viewers to lose sight of the fact that what they are seeing is a representation rather than the "actual" thing (p. 45). Images and messages on television usually become "naturalized" when "equivalence" exists between the ideology of the producer "encoding" the content and viewer who "decodes" the meaning (Hall, 1973, p. 45).

While the dominant ideologies on television may help reinforce conceptions and views within the larger society through naturalization, it is important to recognize that "public moods [and] tastes" also work to shape the hegemonic ideologies reproduced (Gitlin, 1982, p. 243). Gitlin (1982) tells us that in order for a shift in dominant ideologies within the television formula to take place, "changes in cultural ideals and in audience sensibilities must be harmonized" (p. 254). Hegemonic ideologies must, therefore, evolve with changing attitudes among television writers and producers as well as the greater

audience. But even though the reciprocal relationship between audiences and television production helps explain why “the most popular shows are those that succeed in speaking simultaneously to audiences that diverge in social class, race, gender, religion, and ideology” (p. 248), Gitlin (1982) also affirms that the more ambiguous dominant ideologies and values appear, the more success they will have in “attract[ing] a variety of audiences at once” (p. 249).

Understanding how television functions within society requires a move from the logic that television is just a “one-way flow.” Fisk, Hall, and Gitlin demonstrate that audiences are *active* in their television watching and that each “moment” within the “process of production, signification, and consumption” affect one another and are integral in the formation of the ideological hegemony (Gitlin, 1982, p. 241). Writing in 1982, Gitlin warns that because we “receive the images in the privacy of our living rooms” this could “make public discourse and response difficult” (p. 247). Today’s digital world, however, offers easy home access to information and communication through the internet.⁷ Benkler (2006) claims that the internet creates a public, communicative space that allows individuals to express “their observations and their viewpoints...in a way that cannot be controlled by media owners” (p. 11). This “networked public sphere,” Benkler argues, allows individuals to “become less passive” as they are made more aware “of social spaces” and engage “in the debates about their observations” (p. 11). But even without considering how internet technology helps to facilitate the exchange of opinions and ideas in regards to the media, the literature looking at television in Brazil, and specifically examining the *novelas*, notes how integral these shows are within the public discourse. Mattelart and Mattelart (1990) call the *novela* “an echo chamber for a public debate” (p.

⁷ It is important to acknowledge, however, that there exists a “digital divide” disadvantaging those who cannot afford computers and/or internet access. Therefore, those who are most vulnerable to the negative messages and representations on television often do not have the valuable, communicative outlet of the internet.

79), and Machado-Borges (2003) demonstrates how images and ideas depicted within *novelas* become part of women's everyday lives in the "flow" of conversation (p. 136).

As these scholars have suggested, looking at the images and messages depicted on television in conjunction with reactions from viewers can provide extraordinary insight into the ideological climate of the larger society. The relationship between television and audiences is especially intriguing in Brazil where only one broadcasting network owns hegemony over television airwaves and where the prime-time Globo *novela* holds such an integral part within Brazilian society. Therefore, rather than focusing on the question of whether or not Globo's *novelas* are a positive or negative influence on Brazilian society, I want to look instead at the dialogue developed between the *novela* and its audience as a rich text from which one can examine racial, sexual, and cultural ideals. How does the Rede Globo's most recent *novela*, *Viver a Vida* ("Living Life") incorporate hegemonic ideologies in order to please a large, diverse Brazilian audience? And more importantly, what does examining depictions and public reactions to *Viver a Vida* say about attitudes and prevailing dominant ideologies within Brazilian society? How can television serve as a space in which dominant ideologies are simultaneously challenged and reinforced?

Research Methods

For my analysis, I have chosen to look specifically at *Viver a Vida*, the Rede Globo's 2009-2010 prime-time *novela*. Because *Viver a Vida* consists of 209, one hour-long chapters,⁸ due to time and length constraints, I sampled scenes and chapters instead of watching the complete *novela*. The Rede Globo's website offers a calendar layout of *Viver a Vida* with video clips of the highlighted scenes from each chapter and a one sentence description of the clip. The entirety *Viver a Vida* can also be accessed through YouTube.

⁸ I will use the word "chapter" instead of "episode" in concordance with Rede Globo's terminology.

I began my research by watching the complete first chapter. I then sampled the video clips offered on the Rede Globo site, watching all (but not limiting myself to) the major plot developing clips connected with Luciana and Helena, as well as those pertaining to Sandrinha and Benê. I also sampled the last three and a half months (from February 1st to the last chapter on May 14th) of *Viver a Vida's* "testimonials." The "testimonials" are one to two minute clips featured at the end of each chapter in which an individual tells his/her life story and the hardships he/she has had to overcome. The topics of these testimonials range from health problems, tragic accidents, poverty, drugs and alcohol abuse, and discrimination. Although the life story interviews cover a wide range of topics and issues, they all deliver an inspirational message of hope and/or triumph. The testimonials strive to connect the "social merchandizing" issues addressed within the fictional narrative of *Viver a Vida* with true stories from the "real world."

My analysis also examines online viewer comments in response to *novela* news reports on several important scenes. I found 31 comments on the "Noveleiros" website in reaction to the scene on November sixteenth in which Tereza slaps Helena; ⁹ 192 comments from "Terra Entertainment news" after the scene on November fourth in which Helena slaps Luciana; and 582 comments in response to the last chapter. ¹⁰ I also looked at two Brazilian magazine articles that discuss *Viver a Vida*. One of the articles is from *Veja*, Brazil's most widely distributed popular magazine, and the other is from *Contigo!*, another extremely popular and widely sold magazine in Brazil. Because all of these primary texts are in Portuguese, I have translated the quotes used in my analysis, providing both my English translation as well as the original Portuguese text.

⁹ <http://wp.clicrbs.com.br/noveleiros/2009/11/10/helena-leva-uma-bofetada-de-tereza-em-viver-a-vida/?topo=52,2,18,,186,67/>

¹⁰ "Terra Diversão": <http://diversao.terra.com.br/tv/noticias/>

Understanding Race in Brazil

In Brazil, as in the United States and all over the world, racism is real. However in order to better understand its manifestations, it is first necessary to recognize that race is a socially constructed concept, defined and understood based on particular social, political, and economic national histories (Marx, 1998). This section, therefore, serves as an important background to my analysis of *Viver a Vida* by providing a brief discussion on the racial myths and historical constructions of race in Brazil.

Since 1991, Brazil's census has separated the population into five categories: *amarelo* (yellow/Asian), *branco* (white), *preto* (black), *pardo* (mixed/brown), or *indígena* (indigenous).¹¹ Unlike the United States, race in Brazil is defined by one's "côr" ("color") rather than ancestry, making it a less clearly defined term within a very subjective continuum (Telles, 2004, p. 79). A 1976 survey conducted by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE) exemplifies the reality of this continuum and the limitation that the five official census categories create. In asking individuals to identify their skin color, the IBGE survey collected 134 different responses which included self-described categories such as "honey colored," "toasted," "purplish tan," and "high pink" ("What Color Are You?," 1999).

The evolution of what Telles (2004) calls "the black-to white" continuum in Brazil can be understood through looking at the nation's unique political and social history. Marx (1999) tells us that "historical circumstance[s]," such as few women and a much more equal proportion of European and African populations, resulted in a "high degree of miscegenation" in Brazil (p. 65). The high level of racial mixture without a "hypo-descent rule" defining race, led to a blurring of "precise color lines" and "the prospect of social advancement...by mixing with whites" (p. 66). Furthermore, while post-abolition

¹¹ The categories white (*branco*), Brown (*pardo*), black (*preto*), and Asian (*amarelo*) have been included in the census since 1950. The category indigenous (*indígena*) was added in 1991 (Telles, 2006, p. 81).

segregation laws in the United States led to the “one-drop rule” and a very strict black-white dichotomy, in Brazil, the absence of official segregation laws resulted in less clearly defined racial categories as “classification was left to individual perception” (Telles, 2002, p. 80).

Even though segregation laws were never imposed in Brazil, racist ideology was still behind many social and political policies. While the United States used “the one drop rule” to discourage mixture and “preserve” the white populations (p. 69-70), miscegenation in Brazil became a eugenics strategy in order to “whiten” the population (p. 67). This whitening strategy was further advanced in 1890, and again in the 1920s and 1930s when Brazil set a ban on the immigration of blacks, and continued to place a preference for white European immigration on through the 1950s (p. 162). The success of this racial “whitening” eugenics movement, however, was not measured from 1890 to 1940 when the Brazilian government decided to omit race from census data “probably due to the elite’s intent to downplay Brazil’s racial composition” (Telles, 2004, p. 31).

Despite the clear prevalence of racist ideologies aiming to reduce the black Brazilian population, in 1930 Brazilian anthropologist Gilberto Freyre denied the existence of racism in Brazil and declared Brazil a “racial democracy” (Telles, 2004, p. 33).¹² Becoming “the glue that held together the Brazilian nation,” this myth was embraced by the Brazilian government and turned it into “a source of national pride” (Marx, 1999, p. 168). Although Freyre’s theory of race relations in Brazil led to the reintroduction of race into the national records when the first modern Brazilian census was established in 1940, it also established the “belief that race was not problematic” (Telles, 2004, p. 38). The myth of “racial democracy” joined with the absence of racially discriminatory laws within Brazil served to maintain the social order by denying racism at the core of inequalities and

¹² Freyre used the Spanish connotation of “democracy” which refers to “fluid social relations” instead of “a type of political institution” (Telles, 2004, p. 33).

eliminating any legal and ideological backings from which Afro-Brazilians could mobilize against (p. 169).

According to Caldwell (2004), the myth of "racial democracy" also helped to "perpetuate colonial hierarchies of gender, race, and class" (p. 21). Historical Eurocentric constructions of beauty and sexuality in Brazil defined the white woman as the ideal representation of beauty based on "features such as skin color, hair texture, and the shape and size of the nose and lips," whereas black and mixed race women were made into objects of sexual desire based on "features such as the breasts, hips, and buttocks" (p. 21). The popular old Brazilian saying: "A white woman to marry, a mulata to fornicate, a black woman to cook," demonstrates a "virgin/whore dichotomy" in which white women represent the "standard of womanhood and female beauty" while black and mixed race women are viewed "in terms of sexual and manual labor" (p. 21). Although these categorizations clearly demonstrate "gendered notions of racial superiority," Gilberto Freyre (ironically) used social identifications of black and mixed race Brazilian women "with sensuality and sexuality...as evidence of racial democracy in Brazil" (Caldwell, 2004, p. 21). These racialized hierarchal conceptions of female beauty, however, clearly evidence an "anti-Black aesthetic standard[]," which Caldwell explains is "an indispensable feature of Brazilian ideologies of whitening" that continue to permeate within contemporary Brazilian ideology (p. 22).

Writing in 1971, historian Carl Degler denounced the myth of "racial democracy" in Brazil by pointing to statistics and data that demonstrated racial inequalities as a result of prevailing racism. He also argued, however, that the goal of racial whitening in Brazil created an "escape hatch" for the mulatto (mixed race Brazilian), who, according to Deglar, experiences less discrimination than black Brazilians. While Degler's theory on "the mulatto escape hatch" has been debunked by scholarship and data showing little

difference in the socioeconomic and social experience between blacks and mulattoes, his theory has remained within “popular belief...encouraging assimilation” (Marx, 1999, p. 68-69).

Although the myth of social and economic advancement through “whitening” also influences whiter racial identifications within census records and popular discourse, attitudes towards claiming Afro-Brazilian heritage are strengthening (Marx, 1999; Telles, 2004). Social movements started among the growing black, urban middle class protesting the existence of informal racism in Brazil have led to more black solidarity and power in the fight against inequalities (Marx, 1999, p. 255). In a federal government television campaign for the 2010 census in Brazil, Taís Araújo, famous actress and central protagonist of *Viver a Vida*, proudly claimed her Afro-Brazilian heritage and encouraged others to do the same on the 2010 census. Araújo tells the viewer: “*Eu sou negra e a cor da minha pele é preta,*” which roughly translates to “I am black and the color of my skin is black.” She urges audiences to choose the category that most truthfully reflects themselves when marking their race on the 2010 census because “Brazil can only serve your needs and become a better nation by first knowing who you are” (*Só sabendo quem você é, o Brasil vai poder atender às suas necessidades e ser um país cada vez melhor*).¹³

Taís Araújo's affirmation of her Afro-Brazilian heritage in this campaign is especially radical when examined within the context of traditional racial categorizations. On the Brazilian color scale, the actress's status and lighter skin would cause others to most likely identify her as *parda* or *morena*, since *preto* is a word that “refers only to those at the darkest end of the color continuum” (Telles, 2004, p. 86).¹⁴ *Pardo* is the official census umbrella term meaning “grayish brown” and includes all people of mixed race. The word *moreno*, however, is even more racially encompassing and is used to describe white

¹³ http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uAkt0_n-SeA&feature=related

¹⁴ Telles (2004) discusses how Brazilians often describe others as lighter than they are so as not to offend them. This was especially seen in cases describing higher-status black women (p.99).

persons with dark hair as well as a large range of black and mixed populations (Telles, 2004, p. 83). Because of its ambiguous and all-encompassing connotation, Telles (2004) says that the word *moreno* “emphasizes a common Brazilianness” and brings the myth of racial democracy into the popular discourse (p. 83). In this advertisement, however, Taís Araújo affirms her Afro-Brazilianness and even “blackens” herself through proudly announcing that she is *negra* and the category she will be marking is *preta* (black). Her use of the word *negra* is also powerful because, while traditionally being seen as offensive, this term has been reappropriated by Afro-Brazilian activists as a way to claim their black pride and eliminate the racial ambiguity that descriptions such as *morena* create (Telles, 2004, p. 85).

Marx tells us that “identity formation is a prerequisite for mobilization” (p. 19). While this census campaign is a clear example of a positive way in which television can be used to promote black identity, the media is also a source in which ideologies of “whitening” as well as the myth of racial democracy are perpetuated and reinforced. The “value” and “beauty” of whiteness is projected on television and in magazines where blacks, mixed, and other nonwhite populations are poorly represented and excluded.¹⁵ Although Levine and Crocitti (1999) cite a recent trend in the media to tell stories of “nonwhites who have achieved success,” they also suggest that these stories may help to “gloss over” racial realities and reinforce the myth of “racial democracy” (p. 352).

In the case of *Viver a Vida*, although Globo’s decision to cast Taís Araújo as the *novela*’s heroine clearly disrupted the tradition to only cast white females in this central position, it is impossible to decipher whether or not the intention of this production choice was to promote black identity or to reinforce the myth of “racial democracy.” To determine

¹⁵ Telles (2004) cites a 2001 study showing that out of 830 actors who appeared in Rede Globo telenovelas from 1993 to 1997, “only 7.9 percent...were black or brown” (p. 155). He also gives statistics showing that only 6.5 percent of 1,204 models who appeared in Brazil’s leading magazine *Veja* between 1994 and 1995 were black or brown. And the figures were even lower at only 4 percent when looking at *Cosmopolitan/Nova*, magazines which target female consumers (p. 156).

whether a change in the television formula also indicates a larger societal shift away from “anti-black” hegemonic ideologies, audience opinions must also be examined. Therefore, while my analysis will expose how traditionally dominant ideologies are challenged and reinforced within the *novela*’s television text, by incorporating viewers’ reactions in conjunction with these texts I am able to provide a more explicit picture of the dominating ideologies within contemporary Brazilian society.

Viver a Vida: Setting the Scene

Viver a Vida— which literally translates to “Living Life”— is Globo’s most recently completed *novela* beginning with its first chapter on September 14, 2009 and last on May 14, 2010. The majority of the story takes place in the city of Rio de Janeiro and is focused around the lives of two fashion models: Helena and Luciana. Helena is an extremely successful international supermodel from a black middleclass family in Búzios, Rio de Janeiro. The *novela* portrays her as a responsible, kind, and intelligent black woman who is highly esteemed by her family and friends. In the first chapter Helena meets Marcos, a rich white man who is much older than she but very good at enchanting and seducing women. While the two fall in love and are married by the second week of the *novela*, their relationship is rocky throughout. Towards the end of the *novela*, Helena divorces Marcos after discovering the affair he had with Dora, a woman who Helena helped by letting her work and live in their house. After leaving Marcos, Helena falls in love with Bruno who also happens to be Marcos’ illegitimate son (although this is not revealed until late into their relationship).

The conflict between Helena and Luciana, Marcos’ daughter from his first marriage to Tereza, dominates the first half of *Viver a Vida*. Both Luciana and Tereza oppose Marcos’ and Helena’s relationship, and Luciana, herself a model, resents Helena’s

prominent position in the fashion industry and rejects her overtures at friendship. When Helena is invited to a fashion show in Jordan, she convinces the director to invite Luciana to model in hopes that they will become closer while traveling together. But the tension between them continues to build, culminating in Luciana's accusation that Helena had had an abortion in order to advance her modeling career. At this point, deciding she no longer wants to have anything to do with her, Helena bans Luciana from her car and forces her to take the bus with the other models. Consequently, Luciana becomes paralyzed in a bus accident on the way to the airport. Through her paralysis, Luciana learns what it is like to struggle and how to appreciate life's small joys. Her path from spoiled, arrogant antagonist to kind, forgiving, and mature protagonist forms the core of the *novela's* concluding months.

The author of *Viver a Vida*, Manoel Carlos (aka Maneco), is known for having heroines with the name "Helena" as the central protagonist of the story. *Viver a Vida*, therefore, marked an important point in the history of the Globo *novela* when Maneco chose Taís Araújo to star as this *novela's* "Helena." Never before had a black actor or actress been chosen to play the central role in a *novela*, and since blacks are also rarely depicted in positions of power, Araújo's role as a rich, beautiful protagonist is especially unique. Although Taís Araújo is a famous Rede Globo actress who has starred in many other *novelas* and films, she has never been casted as the central protagonist for a prime-time *novela*. *Viver a Vida's* other main character Luciana, was played by the white actress Alinne Moraes. As a quadriplegic in the second half of *Viver a Vida*, Luciana also becomes a unique character in *novela* history.

Connecting to *Your "Life"*: Dominant Themes within a
Multivocalic Context

Following the *novela* formula of "social merchandizing,"¹⁶ *Viver a Vida* addresses a plethora of social issues from alcoholism to infidelity with a central focus on two social themes closely tied to the leading protagonists: abortion and discrimination. My analysis of the ways in which *Viver a Vida* tackles these two issues reveals how dominant ideologies that value motherhood and support a prevailing myth of racial democracy are found within a multivocalic television text that allows viewers who may not (completely) agree with these ideologies to still make connections with the *novela* and its social messages.

The familiar "happily ever after" of the classic (US) love story in which the hero or heroine is rewarded through falling in love, getting married, and literally or metaphorically "riding off into the sunset" presents itself within *Viver a Vida* when all of the central characters are happily settled within their relationships and are married or have found their "true love" by the end of the *novela*. In *Viver a Vida*, however, a theme that trumps even the idealized goal of marriage is the "gift" of motherhood. When Luciana becomes paralyzed, the question of whether or not she will be able to have children becomes a major concern on the minds of those close to her. The possibility of Luciana's infertility even causes Ingrid—the mother of Luciana's love interests, twin brothers Miguel and Jorge (Jorge who becomes her ex-fiancé and Miguel who ends up being her "true love")—to desperately try to end Luciana's and Jorge's relationship, as well as to object to Miguel and Luciana's engagement. The possibility that Luciana will never be able to give Ingrid grandchildren causes her to see Luciana as a "ruined" woman. In the end, however, once Luciana has transformation into a wonderful and caring protagonist, Luciana's dream to become a mother comes true when she marries Miguel and gives birth to twins—a boy and

¹⁶ Use of plot and characters to address social issues

a girl. The ending of *Viver a Vida* also “rewards” Helena with the “ultimate prize” of motherhood when she and Bruno have a baby girl together.

With the idealization of motherhood in *Viver a Vida*, abortion is not only directly condemned by the central protagonists but prompts many of the *novela*'s major conflicts. Within the first chapter, Helena learns that her rebellious younger sister Sandra (aka Sandrinha) is pregnant. Sandrinha lived with Helena in Rio de Janeiro until she started dating Benê, a trouble maker from a *favela* community in Rio. When Sandrinha wants to get an abortion, Helena forces her to go back home to Búzios where she can become a “responsible” mother and raise her child. Sandrinha reluctantly goes home, and after initially refusing and fighting with both her mother and sister, she decides to keep the baby. After she has her child, Benê shows up in Búzios, willing to change his ways and be a father to their son. But after Benê is wrongfully accused of robbery, he flees back to the *favela* and Sandrinha decides to move back to Rio de Janeiro to live with him so that they can be a family. Although both Benê and Sandrinha transform into “good,” responsible individuals through having a child, this is still not enough to “save” Benê, who ends up being shot and killed by gangsters in the *favela*. Heartbroken, Sandrinha returns to Búzios to be close to her mother and to continue raising her child there. In the case of Sandrinha, motherhood serves as her redemption; while fatherhood is a positive influence on Benê, it is not enough to save him from his past life of crime.

The issue of abortion is confronted again in the climatic scene in which Luciana accuses Helena of having had an abortion in order to get ahead in her modeling career. She tells Helena to go ahead and have a child with her father “to make up for the one you took out of you” (“*para compensar o que você tirou*”), and continues to condemn Helena saying, “You killed your own child to get where you are today” (“*Você matou um filho para chegar onde chegou*”). Hurt and infuriated by Luciana's sharp personal attack, Helena

slaps Luciana. With tears streaming down her face, Helena tells Luciana that she has no right bringing up this private issue from her past:

Helena: I put that in the past. It isn't anybody's business. Do you know why? Because it's mine...It is part of my personal life that never enjoyed the luxuries of your life. I've always had a hard life...It continues hard even today. (*Ficou pra trás. Não interesse ninguém. Sabe por que? Porque é meu...Pertence a minha vida particular...que não teve as facilidades da sua vida. Sempre foi dureza...Continua dura até hoje.*)

Luciana: A woman who has an abortion is... (*Uma mulher que faz um aborto é...*)

Helena: A woman who has an abortion, Luciana, carries that with her forever...Dies without forgetting. (*Uma mulher que faz um aborto, Luciana, carrega isso para sempre. Não esquece...Morre sem esquecer.*) (Nov. 4, 2009)

This heavy scene successfully contains within it multiple ways for audiences to connect with the interaction and dialogue between these two women. Abortion is illegal in Brazil, so the characters' attitudes against it are perhaps not surprising. But while the dominant message in this scene presents abortion as a morally wrong act, it also allows viewers to feel sympathy for the protagonist's past "wrong-doings." In the fourth chapter of *Viver a Vida* the possibility of an abortion in Helena's past is foreshadowed when Helena scolds her younger sister Sandrinha for wanting one. Helena warns Sandrinha of the unbearable consequences that "taking out a life from within" her would bring ("*Cê não sabe que tirar vida dentro de você. Não sabe nem querá saber*"). Sandrinha responds by asking, "Why? Would you happen to know?" ("*Por que? Por a caso você sabe?*"), but Helena leaves the room without answering.

While Helena continues to reflect on her abortion as something she deeply regrets throughout the *novela*, in the scene with Luciana, Helena defends her decision to abort as being a private choice that she made based on situational pressures rather than personal

desires. Although the policy of illegal abortion is largely undebated in Brazil where Roman Catholics comprise 73% of the population, recent studies show that one out of every five women of child-bearing age in Brazil has had at least one (non-spontaneous) abortion in her past.¹⁷ By complicating Luciana's accusations of Helena's abortion as a selfish, murderous act, this scene allows the viewer to forgive and/or relate to Helena's decision because of the hardships she was facing. The dialogue, however, is kept within the mainstream ideology against abortion through Helena's warning of the heavy life-time guilt that having an abortion brings.

An examination of the online commentary regarding the confrontation between Helena and Luciana reveals the ways in which audiences constructed different interpretations of Helena's actions. Most of the viewers' comments did follow the dominant ideology against abortion as articulated by "Bianca" who claims that "nothing justifies an abortion," if a woman has a sexual relationship she must also be enough of a "woman" to bear responsibility for the consequences (*"nada justifica um aborto, se foi tão mulher pra ter intimidade com alguém, tem que ser mulher pra assumir as conseqüências"*). A similar comment expressed that Helena "must take responsibility" for her decision to abort rather than "expect others to have compassion for her" (*"A Helena fez um aborto e quer que outros tenham compaixão dela, ela que aguente as consequencis"*). Therefore, many claimed that Helena's reaction to Luciana was not justified because Luciana was simply revealing Helena's "dirty truth" of having an abortion to move ahead in her career. As "Ly" stated, "If [Helena] had an abortion in order to gain a contract, she shouldn't have taken offense" (*"Se [Helena] fez um aborto para conseguir um contrato, não devia se ofender."*)¹⁸

¹⁷ Downie, Andrew. "Brazil: Illegal Abortions Widespread, Says Health Study - TIME." 2 June 2010. <<http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1993205,00.html>>.

¹⁸ Responses from "Bianca," "Gabi," and "Ly" to a novela update report: Sica, Keren. "'Helena Leva Uma Bofetada De Tereza Em Viver a Vida'" *www.noveleiros.com.br*. ClicRBS, 10 Nov. 2009. Web. 11 Nov.

Others, however, did sympathize with Helena and admired the fact that she has had to “fight for her happiness” (“*luta[] pela sua felicidade*”). In Helena’s defense, “Christiane” asks commenters to think about “how many people have [abortions] for worse reasons” (“*quantos fazem [abortos] por motivos piores*”).¹⁹ Interestingly, however, none of the responses defended Helena’s abortion as a healthy life decision rather than the “murderous crime” Luciana accuses her of. Someone with this oppositional reading, however, could still connect with and be satisfied by this scene through seeing Helena slap Luciana in the face for wrongly accusing her of murdering her own child.

Helena’s abortion is mentioned again later on in the *novela* when Helena has a miscarriage and believes it is consequence of her past abortion. It is after this miscarriage, however, that Luciana decides to make peace with Helena so that the two can live together in her father’s house and possibly even become friends someday. Helena’s miscarriage, therefore, appears to be a figurative punishment that she must receive in order to receive forgiveness from others within the *novela* and perhaps from audiences as well.

The way in which *Viver a Vida* depicts characters’ attitudes towards reproduction, therefore, clearly incorporates dominant ideologies valuing motherhood. Through Helena, however, viewers can find multiple ways to create meanings that dissent from this dominant ideology without challenging it. But even though Helena’s abortion leaves room for some audiences to sympathize with her, it was a very serious flaw for *Viver a Vida* writers to give their central protagonist. In reviewing the online comments, it is clear that the disclosure of Helena’s past abortion provoked negative opinions towards this already

2010. <<http://wp.clicrbs.com.br/novelleiros/2009/11/10/helena-leva-uma-bofetada-de-tereza-em-viver-a-vida/?topo=52,2,18,,186,67/>>.

¹⁹ Responses from “Diane” and “Christiane” to novela update report: Sica, Keren. “Helena Leva Uma Bofetada De Tereza Em Viver a Vida” *www.novelleiros.com.br*. ClicRBS, 10 Nov. 2009. Web. 11 Nov. 2010. <<http://wp.clicrbs.com.br/novelleiros/2009/11/10/helena-leva-uma-bofetada-de-tereza-em-viver-a-vida/?topo=52,2,18,,186,67/>>.

unpopular heroine. Although Helena's decision is explained as undesired and coerced, by only connecting the topic of abortion to Helena's and Sandrinha's situations, *Viver a Vida* also places a "face" on abortion with that of the struggling black female.

Discrimination is another major social issue addressed within *Viver a Vida*'s plot and through the short testimonials at the end of each chapter.²⁰ Producers used Luciana's paralysis and her transformation into a sympathetic character as a social merchandizing opportunity to address discrimination against individuals with physical disabilities. One example of this can be seen in the chapter where Luciana takes her first trip into the city in a wheel chair.²¹ Flaws in the public transportation system are revealed when Luciana waits an extraordinarily long time for a bus to finally stop and then for the bus assistant to figure out how to operate the electric ramp for handicapped persons. Several of the bus passengers and even the bus driver become frustrated with how long it is taking, and they tell Luciana that she should take a taxi. A woman on the bus, however, stands up for Luciana and reminds everyone that it's Luciana's legal right to enter the bus and that just because she is in a wheel chair doesn't give people the right to treat her unfairly.

Although Helena is also a character who, as a black woman, would be likely to encounter discrimination within the "real" Brazilian society that *Viver a Vida* attempts to project, the only time she confronts racism within *Viver a Vida*'s plot is in the scene where Helena meets Bruno's mother for the first time.²² Upon meeting Helena, Bruno's mother Silvia is surprised and upset. When confronted by Bruno regarding her reaction, Silvia admits that she wasn't expecting Helena to be black but brushes the issue off as insignificant. Although hearing this upsets Bruno, he doesn't press further on the subject because Helena is waiting for him in the other room. In a following scene, Silvia defends

²⁰ Audiences' "real life" stories

²¹ March 23, 2010

²² April 12, 2010

her reaction to meeting Helena by revealing that Helena's ex-husband Marcos is Bruno's father. She tells Bruno that when he talked about his girlfriend she imagined a young college-aged girl who was white and not Marcos' black ex-wife. When she mentions race again Bruno gets defensive and demands:

Bruno: "What difference does it make if she is white, black, indigenous, or Asian?"

("Que diferença faz, ser branca, ser negra, ser índio, amarelo, que que é?")

Silvia: "Because it's surprising! It's natural to be surprised...I just didn't think your girlfriend was black, that's it!" (*"É porque se estranhar! Essa surpresa está natural...Eu não achava que sua namorada fosse negra, só isso!"*)

Bruno: "Prejudiced!" (*"Preconceituosa, isso!"*)

Silvia: "I am not prejudiced! And you are being childish and stubborn!" (*"Eu não sou preconceituosa! E você está sendo infantil e teimoso!"*)

The conversation is then refocused on the "more serious" problem of Helena being the ex-wife of Bruno's father, and the issue of racial prejudice is not brought up again.

This is the only time in *Viver a Vida* that the possibility of racism against Helena is portrayed, and even in this scene it is quickly pushed aside and replaced with a situational factor (Helena as Marcos' ex-wife) as the cause of Silvia's initial shock and upset reaction to Helena. Although not completely ignoring the existence of racism, *Viver a Vida* portrays the issue as an isolated event that does not pose a serious threat to the social situation of the individual and therefore fails to present racism as a larger social problem.

The testimonials reveal a similar trend in the way discrimination is addressed. From my sample of 83 testimonials, 57 focused on individuals overcoming hardships and/or prejudice as a result of a physical disability or disease. In the testimonial after the chapter in which Luciana experiences problems within the public transportation system, Elisa Gama discusses how she encountered prejudice within the school system when she tried to enroll her daughter who was diagnosed with cerebral palsy. Upon revealing her

daughter's physical condition, Gama was told that there wasn't enough room in the school for her daughter to enroll. By placing the focus on prejudice in Brazilian society against individuals with physical disabilities, these social messages address discrimination while ignoring the deeper social, economic, and political structures that focusing on racism would call attention to.

The one social merchandizing testimonial that addressed racial discrimination²³ from my three and a half month sample was on May fourth when Magistrate Luislinda Valois spoke on how she encountered racism as a child (almost 60 years ago) from a teacher who told Valois that because of her poor background and race would be better off cooking for a white person than continuing with school. Valois talks about how she overcame this racism, excelled in her studies, and ended up being the first Afro-Brazilian female to become a federal judge. She proclaims that she now has a wonderful family and "everything" she could "ever want from life." While this is indeed an incredible story, this testimonial focuses on the personal ability to achieve social mobility even with difficult situational constraints and fails to bring out the real prevailing structural barriers that poverty and racism create within the social system. This social merchandizing technique used within *Viver a Vida's* plot and testimonials allows many different audiences to make connections with the social message against discrimination while still preserving the myth of racial democracy; it acknowledges the existence of discrimination in Brazil without challenging this issue as a problem within the larger ideological social structure.

Although this section of my study demonstrates how *Viver a Vida* successfully incorporates messages so that a broad audience can appreciate them, in the section that follows, I address how *Viver a Vida* also failed to please a diverse Brazilian audience through production decisions that both challenged and reinforced dominant ideologies in

²³ Racial discrimination specifically against Afro-Brazilians; there was one testimonial in which a Jewish Brazilian man discussed surviving the holocaust. (May 11, 2010).

ways that upset audiences. The next section reveals what happens when values are not delivered “ambiguously enough” within the television text “to attract a variety of audiences at once” (Gitlin, 1982, p.249).

Racist Ideologies Still “Living”

The emotional scene between Helena and Luciana was the trigger for a series of dramatic events that would serve to turn the course of *Viver a Vida*. After Helena’s past abortion is revealed, her moral status as *Viver a Vida*’s heroine is placed in jeopardy and then threatened further when she is pinned as the culprit of Luciana’s tragedy. When Luciana becomes paralyzed, Helena is overwhelmed with guilt for having banned Luciana from the car and for breaking her promise to Tereza (Luciana’s mother) that she would watch over Luciana. The blame on Helena for Luciana’s condition is emphasized in a confrontation after Luciana tells her mother about the fight that occurred before the accident.

The dramatic scene begins when Tereza unexpectedly shows up at Helena’s home. Before the conversation even begins, a power dichotomy is created between the two women through their physical appearances. Tereza is dressed in a professional gray suit, like a prosecuting attorney ready to condemn a guilty suspect. Helena, on the other hand, is dressed in an extremely plain, slightly off-white cotton long-sleeved shirt and pants. Her hair is completely pulled back in a tight bun and she is wearing no make-up. The prosecution begins with Tereza reminding Helena of the promise she made to look after Luciana. She tells Helena that because she didn’t keep her promise Luciana now has to suffer a condition which, if permanent, may lead Luciana to wish for death rather than a life of immobility. She accuses Helena of “not knowing what it is like to watch your dreams

die so early in life" (*"não sabe o que é ver morrer os sonhos tão cedo na vida"*) and guilts Helena further by asking:

Tereza: "Haven't you already achieved everything you've wanted? Haven't you left a life of poverty for one of luxury? Haven't you been able to climb all of the steps that were in front of you? Didn't you overcome prejudices against your color? Weren't you able to arrive at the top? Didn't you manage to find a rich man to marry? (*"Não conseguiu tudo que quis? Não saiu da pobreza para o conforto? Não subiu todos os degraus que estavam diante de você? Não superou o preconceito contra a sua cor? Não chegou lá em cima? Não conseguiu um casamento com homem rico?"*) (Nov. 16, 2009)

Helena corrects Tereza's accusations only by defending her marriage to Marcos as based on love and not money. Even though Helena told Luciana that she continues to face a "hard life," here Helena does not object to Tereza's claim that Helena no longer has to face prejudices and hardships now that she has arrived "at the top." Tereza then brings up Helena's abortion saying:

Tereza: If you had an abortion in order to secure a contract...[and] if you gained success in life because of that contract, your success was achieved through the death of a child. You shouldn't have been so offended by the truth. Now add this second (murder) crime to your conscious. And try to be happy with them both. (*Se fez um aborto para conseguir um contrato, não devia se ofender...[e] se subiu na vida a partir desse contrato, subiu mesmo a partir da morte de uma criança. Não devia se sentir tão ofendida com a verdade... Fique agora com esse segundo crime na consciência. E tente ser feliz com eles.*)

Helena responds to this by fully accepting the guilt and responsibility for her past actions and tells Tereza she wishes she could trade places with Luciana and put herself in the hospital bed. With tears streaming down her face, Helena gets down on her knees and asks Tereza to forgive her. Tereza responds with one swift and forceful slap to Helena's

face and then coldly replies, "I'm giving you back the slap that you gave to my daughter" (*"Estou lhe devolvendo a bofetada que você deu na minha filha"*). Helena remains silent and Tereza leaves the room.

The imagery of Helena humbled, on her knees, and begging for forgiveness may, once again, be read in multiple ways. On the one hand, it evokes a Catholic image of a sinner begging for spiritual redemption. Brazilian historian and gender scholar Mary del Priore cites that "aesthetic practices" have traditionally carried negative connotations of vanity within societies such as Brazil "where Catholicism was a hegemonic cultural force" (Adelman and Ruggi, 2008, p. 559). According to Priore, makeup and accessories "were condemned by priests and moralists" who viewed these items as "attempts to 'correct God's work'" (p. 559). Stripped of all makeup and jewelry with her hair completely pulled back, Helena's religiously "virtuous" depiction may be an attempt to evoke sympathy and forgiveness from viewers as she confesses her "sins" of abortion and "wrong-doings" against Luciana and puts herself and the mercy of Tereza, her accuser and potential redeemer.

On the other hand, this scene may be read as creating a servant or slave-like image in which Helena is subjugated to Tereza's power. Harkening the colonial image of white rule and the subjugation of Afro-Brazilians, the explicitness of this scene allowed viewers to use it to challenge the ideology of "racial democracy" and evidence racism within one of Brazil's major cultural centers: the Globo *novela*. The subjugation of Helena and the racial implications of her submission to Tereza's authority stirred controversy and complaints from racially conscious viewers and black activists in Brazil. One viewer notes that the plainness of Helena's hair, makeup, and clothing combined with the humiliation she receives from Tereza makes her appear "far from the top super model" that she is supposed to be (*"longe de parecer uma top model famosa"*). The head of the department

to combat racism under the Central Workers' Union (CUT), Maria Júlia Nogueira, protested against this episode saying that Globo chose to "humiliate *negros* during the month of black consciousness" in Brazil ("*A Globo humilha os negros no mês da consciência negra*") (Nogueira qtd. in Marthe).



Tapa na pantera (A Slap on the Panther)

A humilhação de Taís Araújo faz com que Viver a Vida finalmente dê o que falar. Já tem até militante do movimento negro dizendo besteira ("The humiliation of Taís Araújo allows *Viver a Vida* to finally give what it said it would. It even has the militant black movement already talking nonsense.")²⁴

Fotos divulgação



DE JOELHOS (ON HER KNEES)

O incrível embate de Taís e Lília: as lágrimas são de verdade, tadinha

"The incredible confrontation between Taís and Lília: the tears are real, poor thing"

In his unashamedly racist article that appeared in Brazil's top-selling magazine *Veja*, Marthe (2009) claims that even though *Viver a Vida* has not been successful in capturing a strong prime-time audience, these recently dramatic episodes have "finally

²⁴ Headline and photo of Marthe's (2009) article which appeared in Brazil's top magazine *Veja* <<http://veja.abril.com.br/251109/tapa-pantera-p-188.shtml>>

transformed" (*"finalmente transformaram"*) this *novela* into a "topic of discussion" (*"tema de discussão"*). As revealed in *Veja's* article, polls taken by Globo demonstrated that "the protagonist [Helena] failed to arouse sympathy among viewers" (*"a protagonista não despertava simpatia"*) and instead was interpreted by audiences as being "superficial and arrogant" (*"superficial e arrogante"*) (Marthe, 2009). Although it is unclear if *Viver a Vida's* producers' intended to use this scene as a strategy to capture more audience sympathy for Helena, it certainly failed to do so and instead further facilitated Helena's removal from the central role after sparking controversial news reports and commentary regarding whether or not she even deserves to be *Viver a Vida's* heroine.

Many viewers' reactions to this scene sympathized with Tereza and called Helena "unworthy of the principle role in this *novela*" (*"ele não merece o papel principal na novela"*).²⁵ Negative online audience responses demonstrate that some viewers attributed their dislike of Helena to the actress chosen to play this role. One viewer claimed Taís Araújo "lacks talent and ability to interpret the role of an elite woman" (*"pobre de talento e não te[m] a capacidade de interpretar o papel de mulher da elite"*).²⁶ And another commenter affirmed, "If Maneco [writer and director of *Viver a Vida*] wanted a *negra* to play Helena, he should have opted for the beautiful and talented *mulata*²⁷ Camila Pitanga" (*"Se Maneco queria uma Helena negra, mas o melhor era ter optado por uma mulata linda e talentosa Camila Pitanga"*).²⁸ Marthe (2009) claims that even within Globo there were those who felt that the role of Helena should have been given to Pitanga rather than Araújo. The images of these two actresses reveal why racist attitudes might label

²⁵ Quote from "Cris" Response to: "Helena Leva Uma Bofetada De Tereza Em Viver a Vida" www.novela.com.br. ClicRBS, 10 Nov. 2009. Web. 11 Nov. 2010. <<http://wp.clicrbs.com.br/novela/2009/11/10/helena-leva-uma-bofetada-de-tereza-em-viver-a-vida/?topo=52,2,18,,186,67/>>.

²⁶ "Realista" commenting on the online *novela* news report: "Viver a Vida: Helena dá tapa na cara de Luciana nesta quarta" <<http://diversao.terra.com.br/tv/noticias/>>

²⁷ Sexualized word used to describe a mixed-race Brazilian woman

²⁸ "Christina" *ibid*

Pitanga—the clearly whiter looking actress—as the more “suitable” *mulata* to play out the role of Helena.



Actress Camila
Pitanga

In another online comment, a viewer called Araújo “marvelous, beautiful, and everything good” (“*maravilhosa, bonita e tudo de bom*”), and claimed that the problem with Helena has nothing to do with the actress but with Globo’s styling and make-up choices.²⁹ This last comment is especially interesting because it brings out the issue of audiences being accustomed to seeing black actors and actresses “whitened” through hair and makeup decisions and evidences the prevalence of “anti-black” aesthetic standards within contemporary Brazilian ideology. As demonstrated in the two pictures below, makeup and hair styling choices to embrace Araújo’s “black and beautiful” look in *Viver a Vida* went against the dominant media formula to create and accentuate features in concordance with the white standard of beauty.

Taís Araújo in *Viver a Vida*



Taís Araújo “whitened” for a photo shoot.



²⁹ “Elia” *ibid.*

Globo's choices in the portrayal of Helena through Taís Araújo clearly revealed a conflict between audiences' expectations of racial representations and dominant conceptualizations of beauty in Brazil. As the above comments suggest, Meneco and the producers at Rede Globo had wrongly measured contemporary public attitudes with regards to race, and actress and styling choices for a black Helena were not "subtle" enough to appease a wide Brazilian audience. Although the plot originally sets Helena up as the character with whom viewers should identify, audiences responded negatively to seeing an unquestionably black woman as a protagonist more beautiful and successful than her white adversary who one viewer called "the most beautiful woman on Brazilian television" ("*a mulher mais bonita da tv brasileira*").³⁰

The mixed opinions in online forums and magazines in regards to Helena as *Viver a Vida*'s heroine, however, also demonstrates audiences' ability to both identify and disagree with dominant ideologies, which provoked a public debate over important social issues of race and cultural ideologies of beauty. Viewers recognized that negative reactions to Araújo in *Viver a Vida* could be a result of the fact that this was the first time a black woman had been chosen to play the central protagonist: "Taís Araújo has been a widely renowned actress for some time now and has never suffered so much criticism" ("*Taís Araújo já é uma atriz conceituada a tempo e nunca sofreu tanto desprezo*").³¹ As another commenter points out:

The majority of the public only accepts a black man or woman cast to play a role as a pitiful person in poverty, a sufferer, a slave, a house worker, a *favela* dweller,

³⁰ "Diversão" *ibid.*

³¹ "Christiane" response to: "Helena Leva Uma Bofetada De Tereza Em Viver a Vida" *www.novela.com.br*. ClicRBS, 10 Nov. 2009. Web. 11 Nov. 2010. <<http://wp.clicrbs.com.br/novela/2009/11/10/helena-leva-uma-bofetada-de-tereza-em-viver-a-vida/?topo=52,2,18,,186,67/>>.

a single mother, a van driver ³²...But a black woman who is rich, beautiful, happily married, and a successful model is unacceptable...Until now, the public loved Taís Araújo! If this wasn't true, she would not have gained the lead role. But the author wasn't counting on RACISM from the public. [caps in original text] (*A maior parte do público só aceita negro(a) no papel de pobre coitada, sofredora, escrava, doméstica, favelada, mãe solteira, motorista de van...Negra rica, bonita, bem casada, modelo de sucesso, aí não pode....Até hoje, o público adorava a Taís Araújo! Se não fosse assim, ela não tinha ganho papel principal. Mas o autor não contava com o RACISMO do público.*) ³³

One comment congratulates Taís Araújo's ability to do "wonders with such a tasteless role" ("*fazendo milagre com um papel tão insosso*"), and asks why people are saying that Araújo isn't fit to play the part of Helena. This commenter accuses these criticisms of being based on the fact that Taís Araújo "doesn't have the classic beauty (blond, light eye color) that Alinne Moraes [the actress playing Luciana] has" ("*nao tem a beleza classica (loira, olhos claros) da Alinne Moraes*"). ³⁴

After the negative ratings and reactions to Helena in the first section of the *novela*, rather than trying to improve her script as the central protagonist or "whiten" her look, *Viver a Vida* simply switched its focus from away from Helena and towards Luciana, who received more favorable ratings from audiences and was called the "more beautiful" and "appropriate" protagonist between the two. ³⁵ After Luciana's accident, her process of recovery is placed in the spotlight as she embarks on an archetypal "hero's journey." On the road to her "happily ever after" she faces physical and mental struggles as a result of

³² Similar to a taxi driver, except "vans" are usually owned by an individual rather than a company and cost much less (usually the same amount as the bus fair).

³³ "Ai Jisus" commenting on the online *novela* news report: "Viver a Vida: Helena dá tapa na cara de Luciana nesta quarta" <<http://diversao.terra.com.br/tv/noticias/>>

³⁴ "Rosa" responding to: "Viver a Vida: Helena dá tapa na cara de Luciana nesta quarta" <<http://diversao.terra.com.br/tv/noticias/>>

³⁵ Reactions from viewers such as "Lana" and Diversão to the online *novela* news report: "Viver a Vida: Helena dá tapa na cara de Luciana nesta quarta" <<http://diversao.terra.com.br/tv/noticias/>>

her paralyzation, but ends up finding strength, love, and happiness in Miguel who is her ex-boyfriend's identical twin brother and one of the assisting doctors in her recovery. Miguel and Luciana fall love and Miguel literally sweeps Luciana off of her feet and into his arms.

³⁶ Meanwhile Helena is left facing deception and divorce, and although she eventually finds happiness with Bruno, their relationship appears to be merely an afterthought in the *novela*. Helena's divorce from her elite husband Marcos and pairing with his illegitimate son may also have served as a production attempt to reconcile viewers' uneasiness with Helena's elite portrayal by placing her with someone more befitting of her "true" status as a black woman.

Unsatisfied Endings: "That's Life"

The last chapter is perhaps the most tragic failure of *Viver a Vida*, as "the happily ever after" is portrayed in a way that is pathetically clichéd and fails to satisfy the desires of audiences. The "triumphant" highlight of the last chapter is when Luciana and Helena model together in a runway show. Luciana comes out with her legs crossed in her electric wheel- chair followed by Helena. The two are confident and radiant despite all of their adversities throughout the *novela*. The camera focuses on Luciana's husband Miguel in the crowd, smiling and supporting Luciana while he holds their twin babies. We then see Helena's husband Bruno holding their very white baby girl as he cheers her on. Luciana and Helena pose in the middle of the runway side by side. In the last moments of *Viver a*

³⁶ This metaphor is exemplified in the episode on May 11th when Miguel and Luciana are walking by the banks of the Seine in Paris during their honeymoon and Miguel asks Luciana to dance with him. She tells him she can't and he tells her of course she can. He then lifts her out of her wheel chair and hums while he rocks her back and forth as if the two are dancing. The setting then magically transforms into a black and white scene mimicking Woody Alan's "Everyone Says I Love You." Luciana and Miguel enter into a dream-like fantasy where Luciana can use her legs and the two dance to the same jazz tune that Woody Alan and Goldie Hawn dance to by the banks of the Seine in the 1996 film. Then the scene transforms back into real life and Luciana is back in Miguel's arms. While in Brazil, I noticed that many middle and upper-class Brazilians had an extremely large knowledge base of US cinema (often more than I), and would flaunt this knowledge in what I interpreted as a somewhat pretentious fashion. Therefore, this is a reference that the majority of the Brazilian elite and upper-middle class would probably pick up on.

Vida, film snapshots of each of the main families in the *novela* are shown smiling with their children. These shots end with Luciana's family, which now also happens to include Helena because of her marriage to Luciana's illegitimate half-brother Bruno.

The juxtaposition of Luciana and Helena at the end of *Viver a Vida* attempts to present two heroines to this *novela*. It is obvious, however, that although *Viver a Vida* began with the first black protagonist to star on a prime-time Globo *novela*, Helena's leading role was replaced by a white character who marked Globo's first paraplegic heroine. In an article from *Contigo!* magazine, *novela* journalist "Jorge Brasil" criticizes Manoel Carlos for giving all the attention to Alinne Moraes (Luciana) and leaving Taís Araújo "clawing tooth and nail for the few good scenes she was left to interpret" ("*agarrando com unhas e dentes as poucas boas cenas que teve para interpretar*"). The article mocks *Viver a Vida* for being the first prime-time Globo *novela* with "two such unusual protagonists: a chic, successful black woman and the other [a white] quadriplegic, with a better outcome for the second than for the first" ("*duas protagonistas pouco comuns: uma negra chique e bem-sucedida e outra tetraplégica, com melhor resultado para a segunda do que para a primeira.*")

The criticized ending of *Viver a Vida*, however, still marked this *novela*'s highest IBOPE rating of 46 points, which is average for a prime-time *novela* and demonstrates that around 46 percent of Brazil's televisions were plugged into the final episode.³⁷ The rise in audience ratings, however, only occurred within the last couple months of *Viver a Vida* (Prado, 2010). According to Prado (2010), *Viver a Vida* began with a solid rating of 42 points in the first chapter on September fourteenth, but began to lose its audience by the second chapter and continued to show a decline in ratings until February. Interestingly, Prado's article attributes *Viver a Vida*'s weak audience to too much concentration on

³⁷ "Último capítulo de 'Viver a Vida' registra 46 pontos de média no Ibope."
<<http://diversao.terra.com.br/tv/noticias/0,,O14432508-E114301,00-Ultimo+capitulo+de+Viver+a+Vida+registra+pontos+de+media+no+Ibope.html>>

Luciana even though the decline in ratings was already evident by the second chapter when the *novela's* focus was still on Helena (Prado, 2010). It is also important to note that the chapter on November sixteenth — in which Helena is slapped by Tereza — marked an incredible audience recovery with an IBOPE peak of 44 points.³⁸ Prado's (2010) review of *Viver a Vida's* ratings, however, fails to mention this. By ignoring Helena as a possible cause for low ratings, Prado avoids the political implications behind the incredibly low support for the first black, prime-time *novela* heroine and preserves the myth of Brazilian racial democracy.

Although *Viver a Vida* ended up with a relatively high IBOPE rating, online comments reveal that many audiences were dissatisfied with the last chapter and the *novela* as a whole.³⁹ In the end, more than a melodrama, fairy-tale, or "real" depiction of life, *Viver a Vida* turned out to be a tragedy after it lost the interest and respect of the large Brazilian audience that the Globo *novela* prides itself on and was even called "Globo's worst novela ever" ("*o pior novela da Globo!*").⁴⁰ In casting Taís Araújo as Helena, *Viver a Vida* tested the social attitudes of the Brazilian public and revealed that a large part of society wasn't ready for a black heroine, forcing producers to retreat to safe grounds and focus on the white Luciana as the *novela's* new lead.⁴¹ However, there is a silver lining to this tragic ending: it unintentionally revealed the racist ideologies embedded within contemporary mainstream Brazilian society.

³⁸ <<http://diversao.terra.com.br/tv/noticias/0,,OI4106440-EI12993,00-Emocao+em+Viver+a+Vida+garante+lideranca+da+Globo+na+audiencia.html>>

³⁹ "Último capítulo de 'Viver a Vida' registra 46 pontos de média no Ibope." <<http://diversao.terra.com.br/tv/noticias/0,,OI4432508-EI14301,00-Ultimo+capitulo+de+Viver+a+Vida+registra+pontos+de+media+no+Ibope.html>>

⁴⁰ *ibid.* Comment by "Matheus". Many of the other comments mirrored this comment, naming *Viver a Vida* the worst *novela* ever.

⁴¹ *ibid.* Some viewers' comments recognized that the role of the central protagonist was clearly taken away from Taís Araújo and given to Aline Moraes as Luciana. As clearly stated by "Noveleiro": "This *novela* started with one protagonist, Helena, and ended with another, Luciana" ("*Essa novela começou com uma protagonista, Helena, e terminou com outra, Luciana*").

Conclusion

The story of *Viver a Vida* and its failure to gain widespread approval of the first black “Helena” illuminates the power that Brazilian audiences have in controlling what happens behind television screens. In contradicting the assumption that the media and the elite powers always seek to promote mainstream ideologies in creative and attractive ways, *Viver a Vida* tested the true power of the media and revealed that, in Brazil, the media is perhaps more a *reflector* than a *creator* of a mainstream audience. Rather than just absorbing images and messages into their psyche, audience members react to what they see and television producers value and respond to this reaction.

Because Brazil has only one major television network that broadcasts to an extremely large and diverse audience, there is even more pressure for production decisions to follow the television formula discussed by Gitlin and Hall in which television content supports mainstream, dominant ideologies while also remaining ambiguous enough for a wide range of audiences to enjoy. The unmatched success of Globo’s blond icon, Xuxa, exemplified producers’ ability to reconcile and project the contradictory hegemonic ideologies of whiteness as the ideal representation of power and feminine beauty with the prevailing myth of Brazilian racial democracy through Xuxa’s television presence. Unfortunately for *Viver a Vida*’s producers, almost twenty years later these ideologies still hold hegemony within Brazil’s mainstream audience. In a progressive effort to diverge from the dominant television tradition to create an almost all-white television world for a mostly non-white society, Globo casted a black woman in the leading role of a prime-time *novela* and was faced with a discontented Brazilian audience.

Although *Viver a Vida* exemplifies how dominant ideologies can be incorporated into television texts in ways that are open to multiple meanings, my study in some ways challenges the assumption that audience resistance necessarily/invariably serves to

empower subordinate (race and class) groups. While Fiske (1987) and Hall (1973) do not deny the ability of a dominant mainstream audience to challenge and resist television texts, their focus is with the ability of minority groups to negotiate and oppose the hegemonic ideologies on television. The examples of audience resistance that Fiske (1987) provides highlights viewers who experience “powerlessness” within their daily lives but find agency in their resistance of “meanings...preferred by the dominant ideology” (p. 71). In *Viver a Vida*, however, oppositional readings ended up favoring a white mainstream audience. *Viver a Vida*'s initial non-discrete attempt to disrupt the racial hierarchy through a black Helena backfired on producers through negative commentary and low ratings, and in an effort to regain audience support Luciana became the *novela*'s new central protagonist.

Looking at *Viver a Vida* and the public reactions it generated, however, also reveals how the internet was used as an empowering tool for subordinate audiences to challenge the hegemonic ideologies that *Viver a Vida*'s production exposed. Fiske (1987) states that “the ability to articulate one’s experience (of powerlessness) is a necessary prerequisite for developing the will to change it” (p. 71). By changing the central protagonist mid-way through *Viver a Vida*'s production to correspond with the ideological climate of the mainstream audience, producers provided obvious evidence that Brazilian society does in fact contain a racial hierarchy in which “whiteness” dominates. Through the internet, viewers were able to publically express their opposition to this dominant ideology and start a debate with other viewers whose negative comments against Helena and the actress Taís Araújo clearly evidenced an “anti-black” dominant ideology. Even though Brazil lost what would have been the first black woman to ever star on a Globo prime-time *novela*, audiences’ ability to resist *Viver a Vida*'s television texts helped to further debunk the Brazilian myth of racial democracy within a public media space.

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