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## Changing GLBTQ representations: The Sexual Other in Brazilian Telenovelas<sup>1</sup>

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**Resumo:** As telenovelas brasileiras não são apenas uma forma bem sucedida de entretenimento; elas também são um importante fórum onde as questões sociais e políticas são trazidas para o centro do debate público. Este artigo explora as representações de “sexual others” em novelas do horário nobre da TV Globo. Nós investigamos como gays, lésbicas, bissexuais, transgêneros e queer (GLBTQ) indivíduos foram retratadas nesses textos midiáticos assim como as reações do público a essas representações. Nós apresentamos um retrato abreviado das representações em telenovelas e discutimos essas imagens em momentos históricos específicos no Brasil. Nossa pesquisa indica que, embora ainda bastante limitada, a representação de membros da comunidade GLBTQ está ficando mais inclusiva e tendo maior aceitação por parte do público.

**Palavras-chave:** Telenovelas; LGBTTT; “Sexual Others”; TV Globo; Representação.

**Abstract:** Brazilian telenovelas are not only a successful form of entertainment; they are also an important forum where social and political issues are brought to the forefront of public debate. This paper explores the representations of sexual others in TV Globo’s prime-time telenovelas. We investigate how gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered and queer (GLBTQ) individuals have been portrayed in those media texts and the public’s reactions to these images of sexual otherness. We present an abbreviated account of the telenovelas’ representation, and discuss these images in particular historical moments in Brazil. Our research indicates that although still quite limited, the representation of GLBTQ community members is changing to a more inclusive and accepting one.

**Keywords:** Telenovelas; GLBTQ; Sexual Others; TV Globo; Representation.

In Brazil, prime-time television is dominated by telenovelas<sup>4</sup>. These television programs are not only a successful form of entertainment, they are also an important forum where social and political issues are brought to the

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<sup>4</sup> highly popular serialized melodramas

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forefront of public debate (Faria 1989, Porto 1994; Mattelart and Mattelart 1990; Hamburger 1999; La Pastina 1999, 2001; Joyce, 2012, 2013; La Pastina at al 2014;). This paper explores the representations of sexual others in TV Globo's<sup>5</sup> prime-time telenovelas. It investigates how gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered and queer (GLBTQ<sup>6</sup>) individuals have been portrayed in those media texts and how the government, media, audience and pressure groups, such as the Catholic Church, have reacted to these images of sexual otherness. It presents an abbreviated account of the telenovelas' representation, and attempts to discuss these images in particular historical moments in Brazil. Our research indicates that although still quite limited, the representation of GLBTQ community members is changing to a more inclusive and accepting one. We present a brief discussion of the US scenario followed by an analysis of earlier representations in Brazil, dating to the 1990s and a second section that outlines the more current representations (200s-present). The paper ends with an in-depth analysis of three specific cases where we discuss the enabling and constraining facts that affect those representations.

A parallel can be drawn to historical representation of GLBTQ characters in the United States, where the GLBTQ movement has gained visibility and political and economic power in recent decades. Although the representation of sexual otherness is certainly limited, representational possibilities have been expanded; especially in regards to cable TV, and more recently, streaming TV content providers, such as Netflix, with shows such as *Orange is The New Black*. Thus, it is safe to say that there is a long history of gays and lesbians in the United States media, even if mostly in minor and stereotypical roles (Capsuto, 2000). In the last few years a number of television producers and creators in the United States have attempted to push a more multifaceted representation of sexual otherness. While shows like *Roseanne* introduced gay and lesbian characters, it was *Ellen* in the late 1990s, the first United States prime-time sitcom with a leading lesbian character played by Ellen DeGeneres,

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<sup>5</sup> TV Globo is the largest network in Brazil, fourth largest in the world.

<sup>6</sup> There has not been a character specifically marked as Queer in Brazilian telenovelas, although TV Globo's current prime time program (*Império*) has a cross dresser who is a motherly figure to a poor community who professes to like women, not men.

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that pushed the limits of gay and lesbian images to be incorporated into the mainstream media. However, Ellen DeGeneres' coming out as a lesbian in real life and in her sitcom (in the 1997–98 season) caused a huge controversy and advertisers fled the show (Joyce, 2013, p. 51).

Although shows like *Will and Grace* (premiered in 1999) and *Normal, Ohio* (short lived sitcom which premiered in 2000), had a gay character as the leading star of the show, these images were still limited in their range of representation and continue to be controlled by subtle forms of censoring such as the TV ratings system (Cooper and Blevins, 2000). In the past two decades premium cable stations such as HBO and Showtime invested in attracting the gay market with daring gay characters in shows and specials such as *If these walls could talk* (HBO) and *Queer as Folk* (Showtime). And many popular teen network shows from that era such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Felicity* and *Dawson's Creek*, and more recently, *Glee* and *Happy Endings* have included central GLBTQ roles.

But representation is still limited. It is noteworthy that it was only in May of the year 2000 that teen serial drama *Dawson's Creek* included what is considered the first male-male romantic kiss on a prime-time U.S. television program (Joyce, 2014; Gauntlet, 2008; Wilke, 2000). While there are limitations, the LGBT representational spectrum seems to be more colorful. As a recent GLAAD study indicates, recent gay characters on television are more diverse than the white gay men on *Will & Grace*. In fact, half of the 46 LGBT characters on broadcast networks are women, and 28 percent are minorities. Furthermore, while the 2012 season failed to feature prominent transgender characters, *Glee* has recently introduced Wade "Unique" Adams, a young transgender woman to the regular cast (Lang, 2013).

Discussing gay representations in the U.S. and their potential marketability in the 1990s, Gleason (1996) argued that they avoid content perceived to be detrimental to the advertisers' image.

In the specific example of the lesbian and gay magazine market, advertisers tend to shy away from publications with explicit sexual content, advertising for sex-related businesses, or highly-political

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articles. In discussions within trade press, the success of national lesbian and gay magazines in attracting MNAs [mainstream national advertisers] was directly linked to eliminating these types of ‘controversial’ content from within their covers. (Gleason 1996, p.15).

The argument developed by Gleason, as well as the case of *Queer as Folk*, which had several clothing manufacturers that traditionally target the GLBTQ market decline to have their clothing used in the show (Heansley, 2000), indicates that the United States market until very recently grappled with subtle forms of content control (Cooper and Blevins, 2000). However, this is slowly changing: as previously stated, in 2014 American advocacy group GLAAD released a study revealing that television has increased and improved its depiction of gay, lesbian and bisexuals with the edge going to cable and the Internet over broadcast networks. Noteworthy is the fact that, the one significant depiction that seems to still be missing at least from “traditional” television is that relating to the transgendered community. One noticeable show pertaining to “stream TV” is Netflix’s “*Orange is the New Black*” (OITNB), which depicts not only lesbians but also transgendered characters. Most importantly, OITNB’s co-star Laverne Cox became the first openly transgender actress to receive a nomination in this year's Emmy Award (Elber, 2014)<sup>7</sup>.

Thus, U.S. programs have managed to slowly introduce more diverse and somewhat less stereotypical GLBTQ story lines on shows such as the aforementioned *Queer as Folk* (2000–2005), but also *Six Feet Under* (2001–2005), the *L Word* (2004–2009), and more recently *Modern Family* (2009–present). However, it is noteworthy that except for *Modern Family*, these shows are cable, not network programs, so the pressure associated with advertising revenue is less intense. Additionally, it is also significant that the only gay kiss on ABC’s *Modern Family* aired on September 29, 2010, after much public discussion and pressure, on an episode titled “The Kiss” (Joyce, 2014, p. 51).

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<sup>7</sup> The GLAAD study indicates that in the 2014-15 season, 3.9 percent of 813 characters regularly seen on prime-time network scripted series will be lesbian, gay or bisexual, a total of 32 characters. This represents an increase over last year's 3.3 percent (Elber, 2014).

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When it comes to Brazil, the GLBTQ movement is still in its infancy when compared with the United States (Green 1999) and the kinds of images available to viewers have been even fewer. But in the last decade the political articulation of the movement has rapidly increased, pushing for progressive legislation that has granted far-reaching rights to GLBTQ individuals. Thus, while society was experiencing those changes, the representation of GLBTQ characters in Brazilian TV has also changed, incorporating a greater range and/or roles as well as levels of complexities.

### **The early years – Representations up to 1999**

Trevisan (1986, 2000), in his account of the history of homosexuality in Brazil, briefly recounts the limited representation of gays and lesbians in the local media. In writing about television up to the early 1980s he points to the role of official censorship:

Brazilian television, which is almost totally dependent on private capital, in under the particularly close eye of political censorship and obeys a strict moral code that prohibits the broadcasting of obscenities or forms of sexual perversions, only “allowing suggestions of sexual relations within the scheme of normalcy” (Trevisan 1986, p. 127).

Despite the scrutiny of political censors and pressure from conservative groups (Trevisan, 1986), television shows, especially telenovelas, have used gay and lesbian images in their narratives, usually reproducing traditional stereotypes of the effeminate gay male and the masculine female. However, in recent years, some telenovela writers have attempted to present more progressive representations, but only in the 1990s, with the vanishing of official censorship, have some of these representations gained depth. But even then, other forms of control such as pressure from religious groups, advertisers and IBOPE (the Brazilian ratings system)<sup>8</sup> reduced the potential for diverse representations in the genre.

According to Mott (1996, p. 15), the “roots of homophobia in Brazil can be traced to [the] repression by the Catholic Church, [but] the persistence of this

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<sup>8</sup> IBOPE points have been the schema for measuring Brazilian television ratings since the 1980s.

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homophobic tradition depends largely on the media and its capacity to maintain negative stereotypes of lesbians and gays.” He sees four manifestations of homophobia in the media: censorship, ridicule, slander, and omission. The author documented the first officially sanctioned censorship of homosexuality in the media in Brazil to happen in 1972 when “Congressman Mantelli Neto, of the Legislative Assembly of São Paulo, introduced legislation ‘prohibiting the depiction of homosexuals on television programs throughout the nation.” In 1985 the director of the federal censorship requested that Globo Network remove three transvestites from the soap opera *Um Sonho a Mais* (One Extra Dream) (pp.15-16).

The ridicule or caricature representations were the ones that predominated in Brazilian television and in telenovelas in particular during the dictatorship. During the 1970s even those images had to be limited to shows televised after 11 p.m. (Mott 1996). In the 1980s, attempts to break with the stereotypical representations of homosexuals were censored. The weekly TV series *Malu Mulher*, normally cited as a landmark of positive women’s representation in Brazilian television, had one of its episode, *A Coisa que deu Certo* (*Something that Worked Out*), censored for ‘allowing homosexual experiences to be shown without providing guidance or censorship’ (Mott 1996, p. 16).

Most of the cases of slander documented by Mott (1996) refer to the news media. According to Mott (1996), the Brazilian news media have provided little access ‘to obtain redress in the event of misinformation or slander. When homophobic articles appear prominently in main Brazilian newspapers, often slandering or defaming the leaders or the work of homosexual movement, the offended individuals are often denied the right to respond when they ask in writing for a retraction’ (Mott 1996, p.15).

Conservative groups such as the Catholic Church and its even more radical organizations such as the Opus Dei and the TFP (Tradition, Family and Property) in several circumstances have mobilized their members to protest against the inclusion in telenovelas of characters deemed to be pernicious to

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society. In most cases these were gay or lesbian characters who were not caricatured enough to be deemed non-threatening to the morals and values promoted by these institutions.

Noteworthy is the fact that caricatured representations of gay characters, as male buffoons serving as comic relief, were traditionally ignored by conservative groups who saw these representations as helping present an image of homosexuality as something undesirable. This should not come as a surprise, when we consider that half of the world's Catholics live in Latin America, where they hold a monopoly of knowledge over what is, as Barthes (1972) puts it, "bons sens." Furthermore, according to a 2003 report by the Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil has 125 million Catholics (73% of its population), which is more than any other country in the world. Additionally, evangelical Protestants represent 16% of the population (Joyce, 2013; Prada, 2005).

Thus, representing GLBTQ characters was never a priority in Brazil. In fact, Silvio Santos, the owner of the SBT network (Sistema Brasileiro de Televisão), the second largest in Brazil, and a popular variety show host, stated in an interview to *Veja*, a leading news magazine, his views about the portrayal of homosexuality on television. He told the reporter that he once had in his variety show a talent judge who was a homosexual and that he received a call from Col. Erasmo Dias, a conservative political figure who headed the police service in São Paulo for many years:

I think it was Erasmo Dias who called me and said – you are giving a bad example to your viewers. I took the talent judge out of my show. The public does not accept homosexuality very well. [...] I don't think it is right to show homosexuals on television, the viewers don't like it. If it is a comedian performing the role of a homosexual, in a caricature form, that is ok. But, when it is for real, the viewer would rather not see them. They think it is an apology of homosexuality. If I can I don't put homosexuals on the screen. But personally I don't have anything against them. (Valladares 2000, p.155, *my translation*)

SBT has traditionally targeted classes C and D<sup>i</sup>, attempting to attract a broader audience among the lower income segments of the population with sensationalist programming and melodramatic telenovelas imported from Mexico (Almeida, Hamburger & La Pastina 1999). Unlike the Globo network that has traditionally targeted the C and B segments of the population with its

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slickly produced telenovelas, SBT has traditionally avoided including topical issues in its programming, preferring to produce historical melodramas when not purchasing Mexican melodramas. The space for the representation for GLBTQ on Brazilian television is clearly limited by the attitude reinforced by Silvio Santos, the owner of a large purveyor of information to viewers and an influential leading figure in the Brazilian media industry.

In addition to ratings another source of potential difficulties for the inclusion of GLBTQ characters in Brazilian telenovelas until recently was associated with the ability to find actors willing to take the role. The production of *Xica da Silva* (Manchete Network 1997) and *A Indomada* (Globo Network 1997) encountered difficulties in finding actors to play an effeminate male and a butch woman respectively. (Polêmica assumida 1997). The actors and actresses who rejected these particular roles said they did so for personal reasons, but the difficulty in finding actors willing to play GLBTQ characters has always been part of the gossip columns in the specialized media.

In the wake of a telenovela character coming out to his mother in the 1999 telenovela *Suave Veneno* (*Smooth Poison*), the news magazine *Época* published a box listing gay characters ‘consecrated by the audience’ (O pai-de-santo Uálber 1999). The magazine did not specify why these particular characters were ‘consecrated,’ why they generated audience response or the type of audience response they generated to merit the ‘honor.’ The article listed the following characters in chronological order:

- Inácio (Dênis Carvalho), the *sensitive millionaire* from *Brilhante* (1982, Globo Network);
- Mário Liberato (Cécil Thiré), the *villain* adored by the audience in *Roda de Fogo* (1986, Globo Network);
- Zaqueu (João Alberto), the *butler* in *Pantanal* (1990, Manchete Network);
- Sandrinho (André Gonçalves) and Jéfferson (Lui Mendes), a young couple in *A Próxima Vítima* (1995, Globo Network);



- Sarita Vitti (Floriano Peixoto), pioneer drag queen in Brazilian television in *Explode Coração* (1996, Globo Network);
- Rafael (Odilon Wagner), the bisexual father who leaves his wife for a young man in *Por Amor* (1997, Globo Network).

The character that prompted the publication of this list, Uálber (played by Diogo Vilela) in the telenovela *Suave Veneno* (1999), was a *pai-de-santo* (father of the gods), the spiritual leader of a center for Umbanda, an Afro-Brazilian religion. A staple of comedians, the image of *pai-de-santo* on television has traditionally been portrayed as a very effeminate male whose main activity is to faint around well-built young men<sup>9</sup>.

These are not all of the GLBTQ characters on the more than 400 telenovelas produced in Brazil until 1999, but they are representative of the GLBTQ population in the genre up to that period. The image of the bisexual father who leaves his wife for a young lover, was criticized by Odilon Wagner, who played that role. In a newspaper article he was quoted as saying that the telenovela raised a polemic issue, but only in a superficial manner. 'Even when having to decide to abandon a marriage of 25 years, Rafael did not experience any conflict, neither with his wife or children. It seems that the author got scared of touching on a taboo issue, such as bisexuality' (Duarte 1998, p. 21). This superficiality and lack of depth in the representations of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender characters in Brazilian telenovelas had been the norm until very recently. In the few representations in which characters were presented in a less caricatured, less stereotyped manner, they were normally asexual and their decisions and lives were not problematized, not even at the level of the melodrama as most other characters in these narratives were.

Dyer (1984), writing about stereotypes of gays and lesbians in films, argued that we need to be careful not to attack stereotyped representations of

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<sup>9</sup> See Trevisan 1986 and 2000, for a discussion of these gay representations on comedy shows

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GLBT<sup>10</sup> in terms of feminization of males or masculinization of females, but rather critique stereotypical representations of GLBTQ in the

attempt of heterosexual society to define us for ourselves, in terms that inevitably fall short of the 'ideal' of heterosexuality (that is, taken to be the norm of being human), and to pass this definition off as necessary and natural. Both these simply bolster heterosexual hegemony, and the task is to develop our own alternative and challenging definitions of ourselves (Dyer 1984, p.31).

Dyer goes further in his analysis of the forms of stereotyping used to represent gays and lesbians in film. His notion of stereotyping through iconography seems to be the most useful in the case of telenovelas. Iconography refers to the use of 'a certain set of visual and aural signs which immediately bespeak homosexuality and connote the qualities associated, stereotypically, with it' (1984, p.31). In the few telenovela representations of GLBTQ, iconographic stereotyping was used to maintain the hegemonic discourse of heterosexism, and when this hegemonic order was violated, different forms of censoring were used to control those deviations on the part of the writing/producing team.

Looking back at the list of GLBTQ characters presented by the magazine *Época* and the few other representations of GLBTQ characters in Brazilian telenovelas, a basic set of norms seems to be at work in the construction of these characters.

First, traditionally speaking, the pioneer GLBTQ characters in the telenovelas were males. The few lesbians were either censored or killed early in the narrative. There were cases such as *O Homen Proibido* ("The Forbidden Man - 1967) in which the police censored the suggested love between two female cousins (Trevisan 1986). Or the case of *Torre de Babel* ("Babel Tower" -1998) where the lesbian couple, central to the narrative, was killed a month and a half into the program.

Second, traditionally, most gay characters were presented without any concrete love interest and there was no emotional or physical involvement in the

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<sup>10</sup> he only referred to gays and lesbians since this particular work was published in the early 1980s, but his argument is certainly relevant to the broader range of sexualities that GLBTQ encompasses.

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majority of cases. In fact, in *Deus nos Acuda* (“God Help Us”) broadcast in 1992-1993, the direction of Globo network change the original ending of the telenovela to avoid a gay character to run away with his gigolo. Instead, in this satire of political corruption in Brazil, the gigolo assassinated the gay character (Ribeiro, 1995). The exception was with the few lesbian characters that were presented as sexually active. However, they were consequently punished with death or censoring. The two university-students who fell in love with each other in *A Próxima Vítima* (“The Next Victim”) in 1995 will be discussed later in this paper, but it suffices to say that they were the first gay couple in the Brazilian telenovelas, and they never showed on the screen physical affection towards each other. These types of representation started to change in the late 1990s early 2000s with the most striking example being *Senhora do Destino* (*Master of Destiny*).

Thus, when it comes to the representation of GLBTQ characters our research also found that traditionally, most male characters were presented as either “sensitive” or effeminate. These feminized and feminine representations, referring to Dyer’s argument (1984), are not necessarily problematic in themselves but rather because they attempt to use these characters as comedic foil. They are normally disempowered and emotionally isolated. These characters also tend to present characteristics stereotypically associated with certain melodramatic female traits portrayed in telenovelas such as conniving, deceiving, gossiping and manipulating, or sensitive, caring and nurturing, as was the case of the drag queen Sarita. Sarita’s role did in fact capture the imagination of the audience as measured by the growth of his/her role in the narrative. But Sarita, even though in love with a man in the telenovela, never has his/her affection articulated. Telenovelas have limited the scope and depth of the GLBTQ characters, reproducing traditional stereotypes such as those of gay males engaged in service professions such as decorators and hairdressers, as well as in the roles of villains or idle millionaires.

Thus, in recent years several telenovelas’ authors have attempted to incorporate more complex images of sexual others. Looking at the dates, it seems that since the early to mid 1990s the number of GLBTQ characters has

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drastically increased. The sporadic presence of gay male characters has been augmented and broadened to include a larger array of representations. Some of these are clearly more complex than the stereotypical images of the late 1970s and 1980s, but this depth and complexity has also led to a greater vocal opposition that tended to be mute when acceptable, cartoonish representations were the norm. Telenovela writers such as Aguinaldo Silva and Gilberto Braga have clearly expressed that it is part of their agenda to present more positive GLBTQ characters. Other writers such as Silvio de Abreu (*A Próxima Vítima*, *A Torre de Babel*), Gloria Perez (*Explode Coração*) and Manoel Carlos (*Por Amor*) have also attempted to include in their recent telenovelas more complex and sensitive characters. Still, two of the most positive representations, the young male couple in *A Próxima Vítima* and the lesbian couple in *A Torre de Babel*, were the ones that led to physical violence and pressure from conservative groups. Both telenovelas were written by Silvio de Abreu, who in several interviews has said that he is not gay but believes that sexual orientation is an important issue that needs to be treated with seriousness in the telenovelas (Novela discutiu... 1995).

### **Post-2000 – increased transformations**

*Senhora do Destino* was a TV Globo primetime telenovela that aired between June 2004 and March 2005. The program presented audiences with the young (mid 20s) lesbian couple Jenifer and Eleonora. This was a watershed moment within the genre, and more importantly within the television medium in Brazil as the couple challenged the way lesbians were historically portrayed in Brazilian television. For the first time, Brazilians watched a true love story that also included a (subdued) sex scene between two lesbians – although a “French kiss” was noticeably missing. Another first for Brazilians was seeing a beautiful, young lesbian couple come to a happy ending in a telenovela, as such lovers usually wind up separated or dead. Jenifer and Eleonora broke another barrier: They adopted a son, shattering the traditional representation of the nuclear family. Thus, as we have demonstrated, Brazilian telenovelas had portrayed

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homosexuals before Jenifer and Eleonora, but *Senhora do Destino* was in fact different: it was also first the program of this type to show a wedding between two women in order to portray the traditional happy ending between love struck (usually heterosexual) characters in telenovelas. Jenifer and Eleonora were married through a “lawful agreement” (Joyce, 2014, pp. 53-54).

While this particular love story was innovative it also attested to some of the restrictions previously discussed in this paper: Fear of low IBOPE points and cultural censorship prevented an in depth physical representation of love between the two women (i.e. kissing on the lips) and Jenifer and Eleonora’s actions and dialogue were mostly ambiguous throughout the development of their love story, until the final weeks of the broadcast in the long-awaited scene where Eleonora professes her love for Jenifer. As Joyce (2013) demonstrated:

She [Eleonora] delivered her lines unambiguously, not just to her love interest but to audiences at home as well: “I love you,” she said. And just in case Eleonora’s “I love you” was not clear enough, she added: “You want to find out if I prefer girls to boys and the answer is, definitely ‘yes.’” (p. 54)

While the portrayal of the relationship between Jenifer and Eleonora had a lots of “firsts” it lacked the most obvious visual representation of romantic love: a kiss. Thus, it is noteworthy to point out that, as discussed earlier, while Silvio Santos, the head of the SBT networked had consciously limited GLBTQ representations in his network, it is ironic that in a highly dramatic move, worthy of a prime time telenovela, Silvio Santos’s SBT depicted what is now know as “The Kiss”- in other words, the first gay kiss in the history of Brazilian telenovelas. The culprit of this watershed moment: Ratings (Joyce, 2013, p. 58).

In May 2011, the telenovela *Amor e Revolução* (Love and Revolution), set during the military dictatorship in Brazil, aired a lip lock between Marcela and Marina. The historical kiss lasted 40 seconds and aired exactly one week after the Brazilian Supreme Court had ruled in favor of civil unions between homosexuals granting them the same marriage rights as heterosexual couples. However, while cultural discourses and ultimately legal decisions surrounding homosexuality are becoming more progressive in Brazil, SBT’s portrayal of “the

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kiss” was less preoccupied with an inclusive and diverse representation or historical moment than it was with ratings (Joyce, 2013, p. 59).

While in the past TV Globo had traditionally used the argument of low ratings (and the corresponding price of commercial airtime to justify the sudden change in gay-related storylines and especially the well known lack of “the kiss,” the controversies and the buzz generated by the impending “Kiss” on SBT boosted its ratings: viewership doubled on the night of the broadcast to 11% of the audience share, according to the Brazilian ratings system IBOPE. While this share is small when compared with ratings for TV Globo productions, some of which reach 68% (Joyce, 2012, p. 78), the fact that it doubled in one night is highly significant (Joyce, 2014, p. 59).

Another watershed depiction of a lesbian love story was presented to audiences in 2014 in the telenovela *Em Família* (“All in the Family”), by Manoel Carlos, when TV Globo aired its first lesbian gay kiss just months after having aired its first male gay kiss on January 31, 2014<sup>11</sup>. Manoel Carlos is no stranger to homosexual characters. For example the lesbian teen couple Clara and Rafaela in *Mulheres Apaixonadas* (“Women in Love” – which aired from February 17, 2003 to October 11, 2003), has been credited as hailing new types of representations for the GLBTQ community in Brazil (Joyce, 2014). Although this love story also lacked the physicality of traditional heterosexual love stories, Manoel Carlos’s next couple Clara and Marina did not. It is important to note that while Clara and Rafaela (2003) did not share an on-screen kiss due to a possible reduction of IBOPE ratings (Joyce, 2014), Clara and Marina’s kiss(es) were a clear effort to garner higher ratings (Garcia, 2014).

Much to everyone’s surprise the anticipated telenovela by acclaimed author Manoel Carlos, known for his high ratings, social merchandising-filled stories, and heroines that carry the same name throughout the years (Helena), the program had low ratings, despite the fact that this would be his last. Whether it was due to constant interruptions brought about by World Cup games, or due to the fact that the author had simply “lost his touch”, IBOPE

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<sup>11</sup> The first homosexual gay kiss (between Felix and Niko in “Amor à Vida” will be discussed later in this paper.

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ratings were extremely low and so in June 30, 2014, TV Globo aired the lesbian kiss in *Em Família*, also known as TV Globo's "biggest flop". The move was credited with being a "desperate" call by the network in an attempt to raise ratings (Garcia, 2014).

Recent examples of a traditional stereotypical depiction is Bernardinho in *Duas Caras* (Two-Face - 2007), and a more novel example of a villain who redeems himself in the end is Felix (actor Mateus Solano) in *Amor à Vida* ("Love of Life" – 2013-2014).

Bernardinho (actor Thiago Fragoso), played the archetype of the modern-day "Cinderello," who was forced to cook and clean for his stepmom and stepbrothers. The story changes midway through the telenovela when he eventually becomes a respected chef who opens his own restaurant. Although these are traditional "feminine" traits and stereotypes associated with gay men (implying a lack of rugged masculinity), Bernardinho was not just a gay character – he was in fact involved in a love triangle between one woman and two men. The character also challenged audiences to question Brazil's notion of "what it means to be a 'man'".

As Joyce (2014) demonstrated,

generally speaking, regardless of whether one professes to be Christian (or a derivative of that faith), a moralist, or a machista, in Brazil as in other Latin cultures, what makes a man gay is his passive status in the relationship, as exemplified by this scene: Minutes after leaving Bernardinho's bed, Carlão announced he was a "sword," a Brazilian slang term implying a man in all senses: strength, masculinity, virility, penetration, and finally, heterosexuality. He added that the sex between them was merely "a new experiment, I am a 'sword' and I was active, remember?" This was the first time this issue was openly addressed on Brazilian television (p. 57).

Finally, in 2014 TV Globo presented its viewers with the long awaited gay kiss in its telenovela *Em Família* (*All in the Family*). Although viewers knew from the first day of the broadcast that the main villain was gay, it was not until the final episode of the broadcast and after much discussion and speculation that the then redeemed character Felix (actor Mateus Solano) kissed his true love Niko (actor Thiago Fragoso) in another watershed moment in Brazilian television history.

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In the next section three complex representations of GLBTQ characters will be discussed in depth. In the first two telenovelas from the 1990s, gay characters were shown as a couple without the traditional iconographic stereotypical characteristics normally used to convey sexual orientation in Brazilian television. In the latter a recent success, Felix was the most complex character to date: although a villain, he was well liked by the public perhaps through the use of his campy mannerism which originated hundreds of online memes under the pseudonym Felix Bicha Má (Felix Evil Fag). Our analysis will also look at the ways in which society responded and at times contained these representations.

### **A Próxima Vítima (*The Next Victim*) – 1995**

A thriller in which an unknown killer systematically eliminated many of the central characters, this telenovela generated good ratings and the last episode was heavily guarded in an attempt to protect the suspense. The narrative dealt with two polemic issues in Brazilian society: racial relations and homosexuality. This was the first telenovela to include an upper-middle-class black family. One of three children in the family, Jefferson was a law student and close friend of Sandro, one of his classmates. Sandro was from a suburban Italian family whose mother owned a pizza place. In an interview towards the end of the telenovela, Silvio de Abreu, the writer, explained that they had auditioned 50 actors until they found André Gonçalves (Sandro) and Lui Mendes (Jefferson). ‘We wanted men without mannerisms, manly and which would not be presenting caricatures’ (Novela discutiu ... 1995).

The level of intimacy between the two friends earlier in the narrative could indicate the potential for their relationship to be more than friendship. While conducting fieldwork in Pascoal, a small rural community in the interior of Ceará in northeast Brazil, during the airing of this telenovela, I interviewed several residents about the two friends. In São Paulo, where I had spent time earlier that month, Sandro and Jefferson were seen as a couple and already mentioned in the local press as an attempt by the writer Silvio de Abreu to



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introduce the theme of homosexuality in a more realistic manner. In Pascoal, none of the more than twenty people I asked about the two friends saw them as potentially gay. There was no association whatsoever between their intimacy and their sexual orientation (La Pastina 1995). Most residents, similar to what I would encounter a couple of years later at another site (La Pastina 1999), considered gay characters on television to be detrimental to society. The normal accusation was that these characters would influence the youth to think that being gay was acceptable. I bring these cases up to problematize the representation of gayness on television in Brazil, to address the dynamic that existed between the different potential audiences for the same program (La Pastina 1999), and to indicate a basic resistance to these representations among a segment of the audience (Hall 1982).

The characters of Sandro and Jefferson ‘came out’ to their families towards the end of the narrative and had to confront a relationship crisis. Jefferson, feeling threatened by family pressure, hovered towards a girlfriend but ended the narrative acknowledging his love for Sandro, even if never clearly expressed verbally or physically. Throughout the narrative there was never any clear expression of affection between the two characters, while the heterosexual couples in the narrative consistently demonstrated their affection verbally and physically.

Sandro and Jefferson were symbolic of the crises in representing GLBTQ characters on television. Andre Gonçalves and Lui Mendes, who respectively played Sandro and Jefferson, suffered systematic aggression from male viewers. Disgruntled male viewers on the streets of São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro hit Gonçalves, who played the white, middle-class, gay university student. The confusion between the actors and characters was possibly underscored by the racial component of their relationship. Gonçalves, the white actor, became the main target of harassment by viewers, who saw in him not only a gay person promoting gay relationships but also someone who was willing to maintain an interracial relationship. And the possibility that viewers interpreted his role as the “passive” partner in the sexual relationship, since Jefferson dated a woman in the program, may have increased the anger towards Gonçalves, who was seen

as a white male submitting sexually to a black man. This subtext acquires importance within the Brazilian social construction of homosexuality. According to Parker (1991), Brazilians in general perceive the gay male as the one who adopts the “passive” role in the relationship while the “active” member of the couple remains a “man.” In my own ethnographic work in the interior of Brazil I found similar positions among local residents who saw homosexuality as clearly reproducing the patriarchal hierarchies that existed between men and women in the local community (La Pastina 1999).

Guilherme Piva, an actor who played Zé Mulher, a wig maker in a telenovela called *Xica da Silva* (Manchete Network 1996), said that when he accepted the role he expected to suffer persecutions like Andre Gonçalves had suffered. He did not have any problems, which he believes was the result of the heavy make-up and wigs he wore for his role, rendering him unrecognizable (Regitano 1996).

### **A Torre de Babel (*Babel Tower*) – 1998**

Elegant, beautiful and rich, the ex-model Leila (Silvia Pfeifer) and the stylist Rafaela (Christiane Torloni) live a solid romance. The two are going to be the center of a lot of attention in *The Babel Tower*, the telenovela by Silvio de Abreu premiering on May 25 [1998] at 8 p.m. on Globo. The network prohibited kisses, loving phrases or caresses. Instead of a double bed they will sleep in two twin beds. (Casal lésbico ... 1998, *my translation*)

The above quote from a news story in a São Paulo newspaper clearly illustrates the limits imposed on the representation of GLBTQ relationships in telenovelas. This couple, nevertheless, was heralded as the most progressive gay characters on Brazilian telenovelas. Prior to the broadcast the script predicted that one of the two women would die in an explosion at a shopping mall and the survivor would fall in love with Marta (Gloria Menezes), a married woman with difficulties in her marriage.

The telenovela, through flashbacks, presented the suffering of the two women before they could assume their sexuality. Rafaela was abandoned by her family when she was sixteen. Leila was married to an abusive husband. The

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three actresses, with well-established careers and a solid reputation for the glamorous and sexy roles they played in previous telenovelas, did not feel threatened by the lesbian roles. In fact, Gloria Menezes, who was supposed to play the third lesbian character, voiced her enthusiasm. “At my age, it is difficult to be invited for a role that is not silly. If Marta were to stay with Leila I would love it” (Casal Lésbico... 1998, *my translation*).

But Marta did not have a chance to escape her marital problems with Leila. In fact, Marta never even had a chance to experience her sexual orientation in the telenovela. In the 30th episode, when the shopping mall was planned to explode and kill Rafaela and leave Leila widowed, they both died. The explosion not only killed the two characters but eliminated the issue of lesbianism from the narrative completely. In many letters, calls and focus groups, viewers opposed the possibility that Gloria Menezes, who had played so many leading roles next to Tarcisio Meira, her real-life husband and one of the most famous telenovelas stars in Brazil, would play the role of a lesbian (Freaza 1998).

Cristiane Torloni, who played Rafaela, was frustrated with the destiny of the narrative. She said that she was saddened by the homophobia that existed among viewers that forced the elimination of that theme. In an interview with the Portuguese magazine *Vidas* she said:

We showed we can talk about this issue with beauty. We had one scene in which we showered together. And I could not even see Silvia in the shower because of the steam. How could this be too daring? I have done many more daring scenes in my career. I had so many baths in scenes with Reginaldo Farias. Nobody complained because he was a man (Freaza 1998).

The argument used by the network to justify the sudden change in plans was the dropping audience ratings. With the prices of commercials tied to ratings, the declining popularity of the telenovela scared the network, and, as it had done in the past with other telenovelas, it completely revamped the narrative. The elimination of the lesbian theme allowed Globo to respond to pressure from several groups in society that argued that the problem with the couple was not just that they were lesbians but that they were the best-adjusted and happiest couple in the narrative. Don Eugenio Salles, the then cardinal-

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archbishop of Rio de Janeiro, in his Sunday column at the daily newspaper *O Globo* criticized the network and promised that all those involved in the telenovela would have “to pay their debts to God.” Don Eugenio Salles, a leading figure in the conservative wing of the Catholic Church in Brazil, was one of the stronger voices against the presentation of gay characters in *The Babel Tower*.

But commercial interests were also at stake. Silvia Pfeifer, one of the actresses playing a lesbian in the telenovela, said that she had lost some publicity contracts because the companies decided they did not want to have their products associated with a lesbian character (Telenovela aborda 1998). In Brazilian telenovelas, actors’ salaries are supplemented by product placement and opportunities for participating in commercials, which increase during the period they are working for a particular telenovela (La Pastina 1999).

### ***Amor à Vida (Love of Life) – 2013***

*Amor à Vida* was a TV Globo primetime telenovela that aired between May 2013 and February 1, 2014. Although it followed the traditional melodramatic plot of the damsel in distress, love triangles, lost loves and good and evil, it had a peculiar twist: the villain, or antagonist was an openly gay (at times bisexual<sup>12</sup>) character. This malicious character was capable of despicable acts such as leaving his sister on the floor of a filthy restaurant bathroom bleeding to death after giving birth. Minutes later Felix disposes her healthy child in a garbage dumpster in order to ensure his inheritance would not be divided up.

Felix was an extremely complex character. As Fernandes (2014) discussed, although originally he was not conceived as the protagonist of the program, we could consider him to be the (gay) protagonist, as he was the “motor”, in other words, the one who caused or “ignited” most of the actions

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<sup>12</sup> Although Felix had been married for many years to a woman and would have sex scenes with her, he was never openly referred to or claimed to be bisexual. He was always referred to as gay. Felix would also navigate the world of traditional masculinity and femininity seemingly, which suggests that this was the first queer character in a Brazilian telenovela.

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throughout the plot of the telenovela (p. 4). Additionally, although as the story progresses he is clearly marked as gay, in the first chapter of the program audiences witness a torrid love scene between Felix and his wife Edith, only to discover three episodes later that he was having an affair with a man and that he in fact had known from a young age that he was indeed homosexual. Felix also professes to be happy with his choice of living as a heterosexual husband and father and that his homosexual affair had been nothing but a “slip” (p. 8).

Although a historical analysis would indicate that this character had all the ingredients to be hated by the audience – his evil acts, and the biggest sin of all, the fact that he was gay, audiences grew to love him and as the story progressed, viewers were presented with a back story for Felix; one that would explain his evil ways: His father’s César (Antônio Fagundes) total rejection, lack of love and overt homophobia. Along the way Felix loses not only his father’s affection, but also his mother’s, and sister’s (who miraculously survives her near death encounter) and is kicked out of his luxurious home and is forced to sell hot dog on the streets of São Paulo in a midriff baring shirt and flower in his hair, in an effort to survive poverty and live an honest life<sup>13</sup>. Thus, through this narrative arc Felix is offered redemption not just to the audiences but additionally, he is also forgiven by his mother<sup>14</sup>. Soon after he starts a relationship with another minor character in the plot, who shows Felix that his is not really evil. His actions were the consequence of a life long loveless existence.

Furthermore, Felix and Niko are especially interesting because they illustrate a scenario where ratings actually gave more, not less visibility to GLBTQ characters. As previously discussed, TV Globo has consistently used IBOPE as the reason for gay characters’ near absence from its productions. This has been the norm especially in regards to the superficiality and lack of depth and physicality between these characters culminating in the total absence of the gay kiss (Joyce, 2014; La Pastina, 2002). However, the odd-couple Felix and

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<sup>13</sup> The humorous scenes relied heavily on campy stereotypes of the effeminate voice, mannerism, attire, and especially the double entendre of his slogan: “Felix’s wieners”.

<sup>14</sup> and towards the end of the narrative, his father.

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Niko were so well received by Brazilian viewers that their initially minor characters “grew” to become the protagonists of the program. As Fernandes (2014) stated, the two characters are in fact considered the true “leading-love-birds” (*mocinhos da trama*) of the program (p. 12). Although this is a clear case of the previously discussed “open text”, what makes this storyline especially powerful is the fact that we are dealing with a gay couple and the audiences’ anticipation for their gay kiss – the first in a TV Globo primetime telenovela. Additionally, the storyline problematized the lack of familial support to gay daughters and sons (Maia, 2014).

Finally, the first TV Globo gay kiss aired on January 31, 2014. The date has become a type of historical landmark not only to television history, but also to the Brazilian society as a whole. The physical representation of the long awaited kiss has sparked a national debate and divided the opinion of Brazilians. The kiss was a trending topic with over 600 thousand tweets and was highlighted in most Brazilian news outlets, including *Jornal Nacional*, the highest rated nightly news program in Brazil (Freire, 2014).

The audiences’ affection and overall receptiveness towards Felix and consequently the first representational gay kiss in a TV Globo telenovela seems to follow SBT’s rationale for their first lesbian kiss: the search for high ratings. But while the reason behind changes in representation might not be noble, as Joyce (2014) suggested “it may however be akin to a realization that has already happened in the United States: Advertisers came to see that although sexual minorities are powerless culturally, they do have power economically” and that the sheer number of gays and lesbian characters in recent TV Globo telenovelas indicates that the audience has come at least to expect, if not accept, their presence” (p. 61). This is a trend that continues to this day: The current Primetime telenovela (*Império*) has not just one gay character, but several, including the cross dresser Xana Summer, a South of the border homage to Donna Summer.

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## Conclusion

Direct government censorship played an important role in the representation, or misrepresentation and under-representation, of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered characters in Brazilian telenovelas up to the mid-1980s when the country was under the military regime. But as this paper has demonstrated, official control was not the only force limiting the inclusion of positive representation of GLBTQ characters in mainstream television in Brazil. Although this paper focused on telenovelas, the most popular genre in that country, the picture would not have been much different if it had discussed other genres.

Early governmental censorship during the dictatorship, audience ratings, pressure from conservative groups and commercial controls have clearly impacted upon the ability of writers and producers to push forward an agenda of positive representations of sexual otherness in Brazilian telenovelas. Even though Dyer was discussing a different context his analysis fits the case in Brazil where the kinds of representations currently available ‘simply bolster heterosexual hegemony’ (Dyer 1984, p.31).

The images that were previously available to Brazilian viewers were stereotypical and inoffensive; characters served as comedic foil to heterosexual main characters without an opportunity to develop beyond the one-dimensional representation of gayness. The few representations that attempted to break with these limitations were either censored or the actors suffered physical violence on the streets. The growing articulation of the GLBTQ movement in Brazil, as well as the strengthening of democracy and civil rights, has led to a greater inclusion of GLBTQ characters and is slowly breaking the limits of stereotypical representations.

However, even though telenovelas are complex cultural texts they are still commercial enterprises. As we have demonstrated, networks only began to seriously consider the incorporation of GLBTQ characters in more positive representations when they felt these images would not threaten their profits and would in fact strengthen them. But similar to what is happening in the United

States, where the number of leading gay characters and homosexual actors and actresses have increased in the last few years, Brazil seems to be moving in that direction.

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## Endnotes

<sup>i</sup> The index adopted in Brazil by the association of audience and market survey agencies ABA/ABIPEME, weights cultural capital in determining one's social class standing. The point criteria balances the education of the head of the family with the possession of several key icons of acquisitive power to classify social classes in five hierarchical groups, from A to E. (Straubhaar, and Duarte 1997).