

**LITERATURE AND CULTURAL STUDIES**

# Representing Blackness in Brazil's Changing Television Landscape: The Cases of *Mister Brau* and *O Grande Gonzalez*

Eli L. Carter

University of Virginia, US

elc6b@virginia.edu

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Since the late 1960s TV Globo, Brazil's largest and most commercially successful broadcast network, has been producing long-form serial narratives known as *telenovelas*. Followed by millions of domestic viewers and exported to more than 130 countries worldwide, these melo-realist serials have served as a primary source for what it means to be Brazilian in both the domestic and global social imaginaries. A number of excellent studies, however, have shown that the country's most important fictional television genre has historically underrepresented Brazilians of color while at the same time producing a symbolic good that emphasizes whiteness as the ideal social marker. This article shifts the focus from the telenovela to an examination of the series, an emerging and understudied area of Brazilian television fiction. By analyzing representations of blackness in two contemporary Brazilian serial comedies: *Mister Brau* (TV Globo, 2015–) and *The Great Gonzalez* (*O Grande Gonzalez*, Fox Brasil and Porta dos Fundos, 2015), the article reveals the initial stages of recent developments that have the potential to significantly alter both the field of television production and the way Brazil is portrayed on the small screen.

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Desde o final da década de 1960, a TV Globo, a maior e comercialmente mais bem-sucedida rede de televisão do Brasil, vem produzindo telenovelas. Seguidos fielmente por milhões de telespectadores domésticos e exportados para mais de 130 países no mundo, esses melodramas realistas ao longo dos anos se transformaram na ficção televisiva brasileira por excelência, além de servir como a principal fonte para a construção do que significa ser brasileiro, tanto no imaginário social local como global. Alguns estudos excelentes mostraram que o gênero televisivo ficcional mais importante do país tem historicamente sub-representado brasileiros de cor e, ao mesmo tempo, produzido um bem simbólico que enfatiza a branquitude como o marcador social ideal. Este artigo desloca o foco da telenovela para uma análise de séries, um gênero emergente e pouco estudado da ficção televisiva brasileira. Abordando as representações do negro em duas comédias seriadas brasileiras contemporâneas, *Mister Brau* (TV Globo, 2015–) e *O Grande Gonzalez* (Fox e Porta dos Fundos, 2015), o artigo revela as fases iniciais de recentes transformações que têm o potencial de alterar significativamente tanto o campo de produção de televisão como a maneira pela qual o Brasil é retratado na tela pequena.

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For more than five decades TV Globo, Brazil's most profitable and most watched broadcast network, has been producing long-form serial narratives known as *telenovelas*. Ardently followed by millions of domestic viewers and exported to more than 130 countries worldwide, throughout the years these realist melodramas have become Brazilian television fiction par excellence while also serving as a fundamental point of departure for the construction of Brazilianness in the domestic and global social imaginaries (Kehl 1986, 289; Borelli and Priolli 2000, 32; Hamburger 2005, 30, 57; Grijó 2010; Porto 2012; Rosas-Moreno 2014). Nonetheless, a number of studies have shown that the country's most important fictional television genre has historically underrepresented Brazilians of color while at the same time producing a symbolic good that emphasizes whiteness as the ideal social marker (Silva 1999; Araújo 2000; Grijó and Sousa

2012; Joyce 2012; Mitchell 2013; La Pastina, Straubhaar, and Sifuentes 2014; Simpson 1993; Sovik 2004; Dennison 2013).

In his seminal work *Communications, Culture, and Hegemony* (1993), Jesús Martín Barbero contends that the characteristic melodrama of the Latin American contemporary telenovela provides a language for the popular forms of hope. Barbero (1993, 240) argues that the melodramatic telenovela serves as a mediating link between past and present popular culture, allowing the people as a mass to recognize themselves as authors of their own history. While Barbero's argument is convincing, especially at the level of the nation or of Latin America as a whole, within the Brazilian context the "*estética sueca*" (Swedish aesthetic) or "vast sea of whiteness" that broadly characterizes television production suggests that a significant portion of the "people as a mass" is capable of recognizing itself only insofar as it does not take into consideration matters of race (Araújo 2000; Joyce 2012, 15). Indeed, lending further support to Joel Zito Araújo's landmark study of the under- or misrepresentation of Afro-Brazilians in telenovelas between 1963 and 1997, and to Wesley Pereira Grijó and Adam Henrique Freire Sousa's examination of the same topic in telenovelas during the first decade of the twenty-first century, a recent quantitative analysis of race and gender in TV Globo's telenovelas from 1995 to 2014 from the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro's Multidisciplinary Studies of Affirmative Action Research Group (Grupo de Estudos Multidisciplinares da Ação Afirmativa, GEMAA) found that, on average, white actors and actresses played 90 percent of the central characters while black and *pardo* (brown) actors and actresses played a paltry 10 percent of such roles (Campos, Candido, and Feres Jr. 2014). Such unequal representation in Brazil's most accessible, widely consumed, and exported symbolic good is striking, particularly when one considers that, according to the most recent census from 2010, blacks and browns (*pardos*) make up 50.8 percent of the country's total population (IBGE 2010).<sup>1</sup> Thus, although Araújo (2000, 310) optimistically concluded his book by pointing to encouraging signs of a movement toward more equal representation, these recent numbers suggest more of the same in portrayals of Brazilians of color in TV Globo's telenovelas. Nonetheless, a shift in focus from the telenovela, which has been covered by a number of excellent studies, to an examination of the series, an emerging and understudied area of Brazilian television fiction, reveals recent developments that have the potential to significantly alter both the field of television production and the way Brazil is portrayed on the small screen.<sup>2</sup>

Since the late 1990s Brazilian television has slowly undergone a move away from the broadcast network model toward one characterized by the appearance of increased viewing options, distribution platforms, and the rise of new narrative formats. Indeed, by 2015 the ongoing transformation had accelerated to such an extent that some began to view the network era as nearing the end of its six decades of dominance, going so far as to declare that Brazilian network television was dead (Goes 2015). Moreover, just as TV Globo's telenovela audience sizes were contracting, the Brazilian pay television sector demonstrated significant growth. In 2004, a paltry 4 million homes subscribed to pay television, and by 2010 that number had still only reached 9.8 million. However, industry projections estimated that the total number of subscribers would be an unprecedented 21 million, or 30 percent of all households, in the coming years (Altberg 2016, 126).

Many factors have played a role in ushering in a still developing post-network era and in the broader challenge to TV Globo's long-standing dominance as the preeminent source for television fiction in Brazil. The most important factor has been Law 12.485 (more commonly known as the Pay Television Law), which was passed on September 12, 2011. In addition to paving the way for global telecommunications companies to enter the distribution market, Law 12.485 was designed to stimulate market competition by eliminating barriers to the entrance of foreign capital, to foster diversified representations of Brazilian culture and strengthen the local independent production sector, and to expand access to pay television to those individuals outside of the country's most affluent A and B classes. To this end, Law 12.485 established quotas that require one Brazilian pay television channel for every three international channels. Additionally, the law stipulates that international pay television channels must broadcast a weekly minimum of three and

<sup>1</sup> According to data from Brazil's most recent census from 2010, approximately 90 million of the country's total population of about 177 million self-declared as being black or brown. In his analysis of the consistency rates of racial self-reporting by Brazilians, Edward Telles (2004, 90) argues that respondents and interviewers are "more able to agree on who is white than who is brown or black, which demonstrates that the white-non-white distinction is the most conceptually clear racial divide in the minds of Brazilians." This lends support for collapsing "the brown and black categories into a single category," that of color, represented here as 50.8 percent of the total population.

<sup>2</sup> I am using the term "series" in the broadest sense to include situational comedies, serial comedies, and serial dramas. Importantly, unlike the open-ended and narratively dynamic telenovelas, series are constructed around seasons and are shot in their entirety prior to going to air. Though the series picked up some steam in 1979, when TV Globo and TV Tupi released seven series between them, historically Brazilian television fiction has centered largely on the telenovela, miniseries, and one-off specials.

a half hours of prime-time content created by Brazilian production companies.<sup>3</sup> Of these three and a half hours, one and a half hours of content must come from Brazilian independent production companies.<sup>4</sup> In short, the law is intended to ultimately increase competition, production, distribution, and consumption within the Brazilian pay television sector.

Indeed, since the law's adoption in 2011, the Brazilian television landscape has experienced a significant diversification, both in terms of content production and distribution channels. One of the most notable results of Law 12.485 has been the exponential increase in the creation of Brazilian series of all kinds. Between 2009 and 2011, for example, 119 Brazilian television series received the necessary licenses from ANCINE (Agência Nacional de Cinema, National Film Agency). With the implementation of Law 12.485 in 2012, by 2014 ANCINE registered 385 series (Lima 2015, 122). Though not directly affected by the Pay Television Law, figures regarding broadcast networks' production of series have also increased over the past four years. For example, between 1965, when TV Globo aired *Rua da Matriz*, the first Brazilian series and an adaptation of *Coronation Street* (ITV, 1960–), and 2011, the year Law 12.485 was passed, a total of fifty-seven series were produced, the equivalent of more than one per year. From 2012 to 2015, broadcast networks produced a total of sixteen series, or four per year. Series in general, and serial comedies more specifically, certainly do not possess the symbolic and economic capital of telenovelas, nor do they attract that genre's still enormous audiences. Nonetheless, their increased presence on contemporary Brazilian television is representative of broader changes to the field of audiovisual production since 2011. One could certainly argue that there are more viable alternatives than ever to TV Globo's ubiquitous, generally conservative portrayals of the country's most pressing issues, framed in an aesthetic that prioritizes an idealized white middle class (Simpson 1993; Silva 1999; Araújo 2000; Sovik 2004; Grijó and Sousa 2012; Joyce 2012; Dennison 2013; La Pastina, Straubhaar, and Sifuentes 2014).

Race and the underrepresentation of Afro-Brazilians are interrelated and central topics of "Somewhere in the Future" ("Em algum lugar no futuro"), the nineteenth and final episode of the critically acclaimed series *City of Men* (*Cidade dos Homens*, TV Globo and O2 Filmes, 2002–2005). Aesthetically and discursively progressive, the 2005 finale moved beyond the fictional confines of the coming-of-age tale of Laranjinha (Darlan Cunha) and Acerola (Douglas Silva), the series' young, impoverished black protagonists. In doing so, it presented the viewer with an uncharacteristic metacritique that laid bare the lack of opportunities available in the predominately white Brazilian television industry for Cunha and Silva, both of whom search for new roles as the series comes to an end. Using the *City of Men* episode from 2005 as a point of departure, this article analyzes representations of blackness in two contemporary Brazilian serial comedies: *Mister Brau* (TV Globo, 2015–) and *The Great Gonzalez* (*O Grande Gonzalez*, Fox Brasil and Porta dos Fundos, 2015).

In order to understand the representations of blackness in the two works and the broader field of production from which they emerge, I borrow the idea of radical contextualization from Toby Miller (2009) and Lawrence Grossberg (2010), both of whom follow Stuart Hall (1993). Though radical contextualization entails a multilevel and multidisciplinary approach that ranges from ethnography to political economy, the two scholars emphasize in their own ways the contextualization of texts and the textualization of contexts (Miller 2009, 174; Grossberg 2010, 40–49). Within the limited space of this article, I conduct a critical content and textual analysis of the two contemporary series within the specific conjuncture of the post-2011 Brazilian field of audiovisual production. In doing so, I will argue that *Mister Brau*, despite being the first serial comedy in the history of Brazilian television to feature an affluent Afro-Brazilian couple, continues the problematic TV Globo tradition of perpetuating racial stereotypes and employing its black protagonist to promote an outdated ideology of racial democracy as the answer to Brazil's racial and socioeconomic inequality.<sup>5</sup> In contrast, I will contend that *The Great Gonzalez*, despite a cast nearly devoid of black Brazilians, constructs a biting, satirical critique of race in Brazil—one that forces nonblack viewers to face the systemic racism experienced by black Brazilians.

<sup>3</sup> Per the law, prime-time programming (*horário nobre*) is that which airs between 11 a.m. and 2 p.m. and between 5 p.m. and 9 p.m., if directed at children or adolescents, and from 6 p.m. to 12 p.m. for all other programming.

<sup>4</sup> Law 12.485 states that a Brazilian independent production company must: (A) not control, be controlled by, or be affiliated with programmers, packers, distributors, or dealers of sound and image broadcasting services; (B) not be bound by a contractual instrument that, directly or indirectly, confers or seeks to confer to minority shareholders—when these are programmers, packers, distributors or dealers of sound and image broadcasting services—commercial veto rights or any type of commercial interference regarding produced content; and (C) not maintain an exclusive relationship that would prevent it from producing or selling audiovisual content to third parties (Lei da TV Paga 2011).

<sup>5</sup> The first telenovela to feature a middle-class Afro-Brazilian (a secretary played by Léa Garcia) was *Selva de Pedra* (writ. Janete Clair, TV Globo, 1973) (Araújo 2000, 118).

## Blackness Outside of *City of Men*: The Marginalization of Cunha and Silva

*City of Men* began its first of four seasons with a four-episode run in October 2002. The series follows the lives of Laranjinha and Acerola as they struggle to survive from their marginalized position in one of Rio de Janeiro's South Zone favelas. Over the course of the series' nineteen episodes, Laranjinha's and Acerola's normal adolescent activities unfold in the context of a violent, impoverished space where they face explicit racism, lack of parental figures, the allure of the drug trade, and teenage pregnancy. As the final episode suggests, however, the real struggle has only just begun for Darlan Cunha and Douglas Silva, the actors playing Laranjinha and Acerola.

In "Somewhere in the Future" ("Em algum lugar no futuro," 2005), Laranjinha and Acerola—no longer the cute ten-year-old boys upon whom the premise of the series was initially based—are now in their late teens. The episode begins with a young black boy selling pirated CDs on the street. When his friend, another young black boy, approaches to greet him we learn that their names are Laranjinha and Acerola. (The viewer familiar with *City of Men* will recognize this particular plotline's similarity to the series' fourth episode, "Uólace and João Vitor.") The spectator might ask, "Who are these boys? Where are the original Laranjinha and Acerola?" Things become even more confusing when both Cunha and Silva appear separately, each inquiring about the CDs for sale. A cut to the off-screen space, where actress, presenter, and director Regina Casé (playing a version of herself) yells "Cut!," reveals that the scene is a part of the updated version of *City of Men* and that the two unknown boys are the new actors cast to play Laranjinha and Acerola.

Dejected, as they watch themselves being replaced and almost immediately forgotten, Cunha and Silva enter a TV Globo van that takes them away from the on-location shoot. On the ride home, Silva asks a visibly troubled Cunha what he thinks will happen to the characters Laranjinha and Acerola as the continuation of the series unfolds. Cunha's reply—that he is "more concerned with what will happen to Darlan and Douglas"—serves as the episode's narrative motor.<sup>6</sup> Interweaving parodies of auditions, archival footage, voice-over commentary, interviews, and animated depictions of possible futures for the two teenagers, the narrative that looks back at Cunha and Silva's personal coming-of-age tales as the young actors garnered fame and critical acclaim, first for their supporting roles in *City of God* (*Cidade de Deus*, 2002), then as the protagonists of *City of Men*, and forward into the future as they try to secure new roles.

During the ride home the driver picks up Letícia Spiller, a well-known white Brazilian actress who is on her way to an audition at TV Globo's Projac Studios. After Cunha and Silva share their respective professional trajectories with Spiller, which are intermixed with archival flashbacks, she tells the *City of Men* protagonists that, like them, she was also a child actor. What is more, like Cunha and Silva, Spiller is also currently unemployed. Although problematic and oversimplified, the broad professional parallels established among the three actors serve an important function in the episode's development. Rather than going home, Cunha and Silva decide to accompany Spiller to Projac Studios, where they too will audition for roles.

In the boys' first audition, despite doing very well, the director tells Cunha and Silva that they are too young for the parts. The same director, however, informs Spiller, their audition partner, that she has secured a role in the upcoming telenovela. Because Cunha and Silva are indeed clearly too young for the roles for which they are auditioning, age, not race, serves as a logical justification for their failure to be selected. Nonetheless, the boy's subsequent audition and interactions with industry professionals reveal the systemic racism present in Brazilian television.

In response to their first failed audition, the boys decide to try for a more "age-appropriate" role. The part in question is that of a sixteen-year-old boy whose parents express concern about his refusal to leave his bedroom to go outside and play. Cunha goes first. Though visibly surprised to see a black actor coming out of the bedroom into the living room, the white actors playing the parents do not initially give up on the scene. Before long, however, they interrupt the audition to tell Cunha he cannot play their son. Surprised, to this Cunha responds, "Why not? It says here, an attractive sixteen-year-old boy. That's me." While they agree that that is true, the actors point out that Cunha does not look like them. That is, they are white and he is black. Clearly upset, Cunha goes to the dressing room where he informs Silva that the audition went horribly and that the son needs to be white, though he wonders aloud, "Why couldn't the son be black?"

The answer to Cunha's question is implied during the actors' subsequent, improvised audition. Discouraged, but not defeated, the resilient teenagers get a gig as extras on *Grande Família* (TV Globo, 1972–1975, 2001–2014), a family sitcom. In the middle of the scene, Cunha decides to interrupt the dialogue between Tuco

<sup>6</sup> English translations for "Somewhere in the Future," "Negro," and *The Great Gonzalez* were taken from the works' subtitles. English translations for *Mister Brau* as well other Lusophone newspaper articles and scholarly works are my own.

Silva (Lúcio Mauro Filho) and Beiçola (Marcus Oliveira) to ask them about a possible part on the sitcom. During the exchange between the actors, Mauro Filho, now playing a version of himself, mockingly asks the two if they have looked for work on *Linha Direta*, a journalistic program that produces sensationalistic portrayals of everyday urban crime and violence. Cunha perceives Mauro Filho's malice and indignantly asks, "So do you mean to say that two black men can only be on television if they are stealing!?" In his paternalistic reply, Mauro Filho—like the two white actors from the previous audition—becomes the overseer of race, informing Cunha that he, unlike his friend Silva, is not even black. Silva declares that Mauro Filho's comments are discriminatory and forcefully demands to know how many black people work on *Grande Família* and whether the racial quotas are being met.

The message from this scene is clear. Returning to Cunha's earlier rhetorical question, the actor playing the son cannot be black because, in the broadest terms, the television fiction produced by Globo is predominantly white. Or, to cite Araújo (2000, 38, 40), Brazilian television's portrayals of a white Brazil, fueled by the elite's push for the Europeanization and North Americanization of the country, continuously reaffirm "the symbolic victory of the ideology of whiteness." The episode suggests that challenges to this distorted reality carry with them severe consequences. In fact, in an exchange that evokes Brazil's past of slavery, when Silva raises an objection to the discrimination both he and Cunha have suffered, the white Mauro Filho silences the two teenagers by literally chasing them off the lot. In doing so, Mauro Filho figuratively expels the boys from the center (Projac Studios) and visibility (mainstream television) and sends them back to the marginalized position from which they began: the favela and, by extension, its limited, often stereotypical televisual representations.

Of course, "Somewhere in the Future" is itself a TV Globo coproduction that criticizes the broadcast network's representation of race. However, while such a critique is progressive and needed, a few points must be made. First, O2 Filmes, one of the largest independent production companies in Brazil, produced the series with a relatively high degree of autonomy, shooting on location, employing a number of nonprofessional or unknown actors who had first appeared in Fernando Meirelles's 2002 *City of God* and were not under contract with TV Globo, and recreating the neorealist pop aesthetic from Meirelles's film. Thus, in what was an uncommon, if not unprecedented practice at the time, in terms of production, TV Globo did not play a central role. And this brings us to the second point: the role that TV Globo did play, according to Suzana Schwertner (2007, 58), functioned to marginalize the series in relative terms. More specifically, TV Globo's minimal and sporadic marketing and inconsistent air days and late time slots—always after 10:30 p.m. and on several occasions even after 11:00 p.m.—limited the series' uneven political message. In short, the last episode's forward-looking metacritique, despite airing on TV Globo, was constrained, or to evoke Hall (1993, 107), "policed" by the network and therefore not seen by as many spectators as it might otherwise have been.<sup>7</sup>

## Looking Back from "Somewhere in the Future": Racial Democracy in *Mister Brau*

Despite this, there was reason for hope insofar as "Somewhere in the Future" dealt explicitly with Brazilian television's generalized marginalization and misrepresentation of Brazilians of color, issues raised only years earlier in Araújo's book. However, nearly ten years later, not only had TV Globo not discursively progressed as seemingly promised by "Somewhere in the Future," it had regressed to an emphasis on Brazil as a racial democracy, one of the central ideologies highlighted by Araújo (2000, 40) as structuring Brazilian television's characteristic whiteness and underrepresentation of individuals of color. In 2015, TV Globo and Jorge Furtado, co-screenwriter of "Somewhere in the Future," teamed up to create the thirteen-episode first season of *Mister Brau*.<sup>8</sup> The serial comedy centers on the relationship between Brazilian music superstar Mister Brau (Lázaro Ramos) and his wife, manager, and backup dancer Michele Brau (Táís Araújo), and their socioeconomic ascension to the predominately white Brazilian elite.<sup>9</sup> *Mister Brau's* interrelated

<sup>7</sup> Overall, the *City of Men* series had an approximate average viewership of 1.7 million households in the greater São Paulo area, which, for that time was fair to middling (Bartolomei 2005).

<sup>8</sup> *Mister Brau* replaced the TV Globo sitcom *Tapas e Beijos* (2011–2015). According to the *Folha de São Paulo* (2016), *Mister Brau's* first season achieved an average audience share of 1.3 million homes in the greater São Paulo metropolitan area—the same audience share, according to the Brazilian Institute of Public Opinion and Statistics (IBOPE), as its predecessor.

<sup>9</sup> *Mister Brau* received international attention for featuring an Afro-Brazilian couple. For example, writing for the "Shadow and Act: on Cinema of the African Diaspora," a subsection of the US website *Indie Wire*, Kiratiana Freelon (2015) published an article titled "Groundbreaking New Series—'Mister Brau'—Gives Afro-Brazilians Representations to Cheer Despite Flaws." Additionally, reporting from Rio de Janeiro, Bruce Douglas (2015) of the *Guardian* wrote an article titled, "Brazilian Television Slowly Confronts Country's

focus on class and race is indicative of TV Globo's more recent effort to capture the large and growing C-Class,<sup>10</sup> a significant portion of which is composed of black or brown Brazilians (La Pastina, Straubhaar, and Sifuentes 2014, 107; Rêgo 2014, 93).

Part of the significance of *Mister Brau*, and the attention paid to it, stems precisely from Brazilian television's role as a cultural mirror and from the historical absence of blacks reflected in that mirror (Subervi-Velez and Oliveira 1991, 80; Araújo 2000, 229–230; Sovik 2004, 318; Joyce 2012, 15; Mitchell 2013, 178; La Pastina, Straubhaar, and Sifuentes 2014, 104–108). In an interview leading up to *Mister Brau's* premier, series creator Jorge Furtado explicitly commented on this representational lacuna: "Brazil's population is 52% black or brown, and this percentage is not represented in Brazilian television and film. With a black population of 13%, the United States has more black protagonists in film and television series" (Mesquita 2015). Furtado goes on to say, "We are a racist country; we abolished slavery very late. This division of the country is important, and we need to talk about it in order to get past it" (Mesquita 2015). By putting similar words in the mouths of his characters, Furtado reiterates his understanding of race and racism in Brazil, both implicitly and explicitly, throughout *Mister Brau*. However, Furtado's promising comments notwithstanding, *Mister Brau's* narrative ultimately erases the problem of race, arguing for its dissolution through the discursive implementation of the idea of a racially mixed and therefore egalitarian Brazilian population. In doing so, despite the centrality of its Afro-Brazilian protagonists, the series paradoxically situates itself in the broader context of TV Globo's telenovela production, which has a long history of erasing the importance of race by promoting Brazil as a racial democracy (Silva 1999, 339; Araújo 2000; Grijó and Sousa 2012, 200).

Before the series formally introduces Mister Brau and Michele, the narrative begins at three in the morning with the two standing in front of a large house in one of Rio de Janeiro's most affluent Western Zone communities. Looking at the beautiful home, Mister Brau asks Michele, "So, let's go in?," to which she responds, "Are you crazy?!" (*Mister Brau*, episode 1, 2015). Despite Michele's insistence to the contrary, Mister Brau runs around to the side of the house informing her that he will find a way inside. Shortly thereafter, Mister Brau appears at the front door with the keys, letting his wife into the house.

Once inside, the couple navigates through the space, which appears to be under construction or being moved into. Commenting on the home's grandeur and how they have always dreamed of owning a house like this, the couple finds their way to the backyard, where they eventually strip down to their underwear and jump into the pool. Soon, their playful shouts awake their white neighbor, Andréia (Fernanda de Freitas). Alarmed, Andréia wakes up her equally white husband, Henrique (George Sauma), to inform him of a possible break-in. Calm, collected, and rational, Henrique asks his wife, "How do you know they did not buy the house?" Undeterred, Andréia goes to the balcony off their bedroom, where, through her binoculars, she sees Mister Brau in the pool. Focusing on his nude, black body as it emerges from the water, Andréia definitively declares, "It's a thief!" In the next shot, in response to Andréia's phone call, neighborhood security descends on the backyard to apprehend the "trespassers." However, the overall tone changes when it is revealed that Mister Brau and Michele are actually wealthy, famous entertainers as well as the new owners of the house. This new knowledge sets off a problematic transition in which Mr. Brau's black body goes from symbolizing a threat to the space as defined by its association with whiteness, to the justification of the body's presence in that space due to its connection to fame and fortune.

While there are other important moments throughout the series, this scene is arguably the work's most powerful and progressive. So often portrayed as violent criminals, prisoners, slaves, favela dwellers, or hired help, black Brazilians like Mister Brau and Michele are not supposed to be in affluent neighborhoods like the one represented in the series. According to television images, if they are in such a space, they are expected to be working as maids or doormen, or in similar subaltern professions reserved for Brazilians of color (Rial 1999; Silva 1999, 348; Araújo 2000, 97, 150, 168; Grijó and Sousa 2012, 190–191, 193). Otherwise, their presence implies that they must be breaking the law. Along these lines, the opening scene of *Mister Brau* activates the viewer's familiarity with a broader audiovisual context and social reality, established in part by sensationalistic journalism, oversimplified representations of people of color, or what Teresa Caldeira refers

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Deeply Entrenched Race Issues." In addition to their own write-ups on the serial comedy, Brazilian media outlets such as *Globo*, *IG*, *Veja*, *Folha de São Paulo*, and the blog *Black Women of Brazil* reported on the attention the show received from the British publication.

<sup>10</sup> The Centro de Políticas Sociais (Center for Social Politics) of the Getúlio Vargas Foundation defines the C-Class as those households that earn a monthly income between R\$2,005 and R\$8,640 (Fundação Getúlio Vargas 2014). Recent demographic research from the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística) estimates that the C-Class makes up 54 percent of Brazil's population, approximately 105 million people (Portal Brasil 2012).

to as the “talk of crime.”<sup>11</sup> The scene, then, forces the viewer to face the problematic, socially constructed notions of race in Brazil. In this way, Andréia’s explicitly racist behavior toward Mister Brau and Michele serves as a mirror for the viewer. The “misunderstanding” is seemingly resolved when Henrique informs his wife that she needs to open her mind, be more modern, and realize that the country and world have changed. In what reads like a message intended for both his wife and the viewer, the enlightened Henrique further emphasizes his point by asking his racist wife, “Did you know that the GDP of Brazil’s favelas is equal to that of Uruguay?” “Enough with all the prejudice!” he concludes.

It is difficult to argue with Henrique’s message. The problem, however, is not the message itself but how the series suggests overcoming prejudice in Brazil. Primarily through the figure of Mister Brau and his words, the series puts forth the thesis that racist attitudes in Brazil stem from a generalized misrecognition of the country’s racial composition. Broadly speaking, racial mixing has characterized Brazil and its development since the Portuguese reached the territory’s northeastern shore in 1500. Consequently, Brazilians are multiracial and multicultural, and to focus exclusively on one’s skin color is to misunderstand that the majority of Brazilians have traces of European, African, and indigenous descent. Such discourse is an explicit reference to the idea of Brazil as a racial democracy.<sup>12</sup> Though he did not coin the term, in his seminal *Casa-grande e senzala* (1933) (*The Masters and the Slaves*, 1946), Brazilian anthropologist and sociologist Gilberto Freyre made famous the idea of racial democracy, arguing that “every Brazilian, even the light skinned fair haired one carries about him on his soul, when not on soul and body alike, the shadow or at least the birthmark of the aborigine or the negro, in our affections, our excessive mimicry, our Catholicism which so delights the senses, our music, our gait, our speech, our cradle songs, in everything that is a sincere expression of our lives, we almost all of us bear the mark of that influence” (1946, 278).

*Mister Brau*’s support for the concept that Brazil is a racial democracy is most clearly demonstrated in the series’ second episode (2015), which establishes a metaphorical relationship between an adhesive bandage and Brazil’s need to heal its deep racial divide. While playing music with some friends during a party in his backyard, Michele approaches to draw her husband’s attention to his bleeding finger. When Mister Brau stops to get an adhesive bandage, his friend Lima (Luís Miranda) notices that the box containing the bandages states that the light-colored product is “skin-colored.” The obvious absurdity of such an absolutist and limiting description propels Mister Brau into a didactic lesson on Brazil’s current racial composition, one that clearly recalls Furtado’s comments from the interview cited earlier. With the music paused and the entire party listening attentively—a clear cue to the audience at home that it too should pay close attention—Mister Brau indignantly declares, “What do you mean ‘skin-colored’!? Brazil’s population is 52 percent black [*negros*]!” Lima emphatically responds, “Exactly! We are the majority! Skin color in Brazil should be understood as dark!” Mister Brau, however, undercuts this powerful, albeit formulaic and didactic exchange when he responds to his friend—and, by extension, to the partygoers and those watching at home—with a conservative, middle-of-the-road suggestion that conjures up the myth of racial democracy. He concludes, “No! There should be a number of different colors; a number of skin colors!” Drawing the camera’s attention to the partygoers’ different skin colors, he continues, “Look here, each skin color is a different color.”

Having evoked Brazil’s past of miscegenation, Mister Brau brings the scene to a close by explicitly declaring his support for a multicultural, racially democratic Brazil: “Everybody is different. The world is not black and white, right? There should be many colors. There should be a multicolored adhesive bandage. There should be, no; there must be; there will be! We will have one!” To the crowd’s enthusiastic cheers Mister Brau calls them—and more broadly, Brazil as a whole—to arms, “Let’s make one!” he enthusiastically proclaims. Of course, the “one” in Mister Brau’s proclamation refers to an adhesive bandage; but the subtext positions the bandage as a metaphor for the nation’s racial divide. A deep open wound, caused by centuries of slavery and racial inequality, has yet to scar. Healing, the series suggests, can only come through a curative that is both multicultural and racial, one that necessarily represents Brazil’s diverse racial composition.

<sup>11</sup> Caldeira (2000, 19) contends that the perpetuation of stories of crime and violence “only serves to reinforce people’s feelings of danger, insecurity, and turmoil”. As a result, according to Caldeira, “the talk of crime feeds a circle in which fear is both dealt with and reproduced, and violence is both counteracted and magnified.”

<sup>12</sup> In addition to showing how the scholarly work on race in Brazil transitioned from the idea of Brazil as a racial democracy to Brazil as racist, Telles (2004, 33–46, 101) argues that recent data suggests “young persons are socialized to identify increasingly in black and white categories.” Thus, whereas an ideology of racial democracy “uses ambiguity and middle categories to avoid the placement of others in particularly stigmatized categories,” the emergence of the black movement in Brazil has given rise to support for a system “that excludes the middle categories increase, forcing the vast majority of Brazilians (Asians and Indians excepted) to identify as either black or white” (Telles 2004, 105). While, as Telles correctly documents, by the 1950s Brazilian academia, in large part, had moved beyond the idea of a racial democracy, Smith (2016, 6) notes that the broader Brazilian “society continues to hold on religiously to the ideology of racial democracy.”

After throwing himself into developing and marketing his own “Braudaïd,” Mister Brau learns to his dismay that multicolored adhesive bandages have been commercialized for at least fifteen years in the United States. The result of his potential copyright infringement and—at the level of the subtext—his appropriation and importation of a global North ideology for understanding race in the unique Brazilian context, forces Mister Brau to clarify his position in front of an arbitrator. During the meeting Mister Brau explains that his intention with the creation of “Braudaïd” was—unlike the already existing (American) product—never to confuse itself with the skin color of its user. Instead, he says, “Our intention, my intention, was to always mix the different colors. Mixing is always more healthful.”

Mister Brau’s comments represent a form of popular culture undermining the current racial discourse in Brazil, which in the 1970s moved toward the binary black/white model from the United States in an attempt to assert forcefully the importance race plays in systemically perpetuating socioeconomic inequality in the country (Telles 2004, 47–61). In place of such a binary model, Mister Brau suggests its opposite—that is, a return to the ideal of a racial democracy within which racial mixing is one of the defining characteristics of Brazil and race is erased as a deciding factor in one’s socioeconomic position. In essence, *Mister Brau*’s bandage metaphor advocates for a discourse that fits into a long tradition of hegemonic race theories in Brazil, which, as Larry Crook and Randal Johnson (1999, 3) note, “have tended to neglect or minimize the importance of race in the structuring and perpetuation of social inequalities.”

This problematic position is further heightened by the way in which the series declares affluent white male Brazilians innocent of racism. Despite his explicit sexualization of Michele, Henrique, as mentioned earlier, stands in stark contrast to his racist wife. Whereas Andréia reveals blatantly prejudiced behavior and ideas, Henrique frequently speaks out against racism, even when the perpetrator is his own wife. Henrique’s white, well-to-do father-in-law who owns the law firm where Henrique works similarly sexualizes a woman of color, but quickly admonishes his daughter when she makes racist comments in his presence. By explicitly positioning these men in contrast to the racist Andréia, the series not only acquits them of participating in racist behavior but locates such behavior within another misrepresented and relatively powerless minority, white Brazilian women. Such a dynamic paves the way for apparently benevolent white individuals like Henrique to step in and take control. Indeed, the two men come to agreement almost immediately, when Mister Brau reveals—in a portrayal of his ignorance and superficiality—that he has a manicurist, a hair stylist, and a masseuse, but not an attorney. Overly eager for Henrique to come on board, Mister Brau naively offers his neighbor such a high percentage of his own earnings that it makes Henrique blush with joy.

In short, the series’ construction of gender and racial dynamics establish white women as the locus of racism. In contrast, white men are open-minded, intelligent, and racially and socially malleable individuals. Despite their intelligence, wit, and hard work, black women are ultimately reduced to hypersexualized objects for white men like Henrique and his father-in-law to enjoy (Mitchell 2013, 177). Black men, exemplified by Mister Brau, are brainless individuals who at best are clownish figures who entertain the masses. This last point is particularly important, since *Mister Brau* has been praised specifically for featuring affluent black Brazilians. One of the takeaways from this rare portrayal of a well-to-do man of color, however, is that successful black men, unlike their wealthy white counterparts, achieve their respective economic status through the limited possibilities available to them, namely playing soccer or working as entertainers. Thus, while *Mister Brau*’s representation of blackness and racism in Brazil appears, on the surface, to be progressive, it actually embodies a form of veiled racism that has long characterized Brazilian television fiction. Darnell M. Hunt’s observations regarding the US audiovisual industry accurately describe *Mister Brau* and another recent TV Globo series, *Subúrbia* (“Periphery,” 2012): “Against a backdrop of increasing racial diversity a white-controlled industry continues to channel blackness in ways that affirm whiteness, while at the same time promoting the fiction of an America beyond race” (Hunt 2005, 300). Similarly, while some recent telenovelas have embodied certain advances, depicting the black Brazilian as having left the kitchen and the favela to become a boss, a doctor, or a model, these are still only exceptions to the rule that historically situates Brazilians of color as occupying socially inferior positions (Grijó and Sousa 2012, 203).

### **A View of Blackness through the Backdoor**

In *Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for “Blackness,”* Herman Gray (1995, 10) recognizes and mostly agrees with the widely accepted notion in critical television studies of race “that television representations of blackness work largely to legitimate and secure the terms of the dominant cultural and social order by circulating within and remaining structured by them.” However, Gray is also careful to recognize the possibility of representations that run counter to those that support and structure the hegemonic discourse: “There are alternative (and occasional oppositional) moments in American commercial television



representations of race, especially in its fragmented and contradictory character.... In some cases," he continues, "television representations of blackness explode and reveal the deeply rooted terms of this hierarchy" (1995, 10).

Within the Brazilian context, such representations are becoming increasingly possible, in large part due to the growth of the pay television sector and the Pay Television Law's requirement for domestically produced content, which has fueled the emergence of new channels, producers, and narrative formats.<sup>13</sup> Additionally, the expansion of pay television in Brazil and its accompanying "triple-play" packages (pay television, Internet, and phone) have also played a central role in growing the Internet's reach to nearly 50 percent of all Brazilian households (Lima 2016, 153). One important example arising out of this new context is the independent production company, Porta dos Fundos (Backdoor), which Antonio Tabet, Ian SBF, and Fábio Porchat founded in March of 2012.<sup>14</sup> Since its creation, Porta dos Fundos has produced content for both the Internet and television. That content has served as an "oppositional" voice on matters regarding racism and racial inequality. Indeed, in its YouTube video "Negro" and its serial comedy *The Great Gonzalez*, Porta dos Fundos uses satire to construct representations of racism that, to cite Gray (1995, 10) once more, "explode and reveal the deeply rooted terms" of the socially constructed racial hierarchy. Such confrontational representations were virtually nonexistent in the Globo-dominated television production landscape before the Pay Television Law.

On August 4, 2014, Porta dos Fundos released "Negro." In roughly eighteen months following that date, the three-minute video accumulated nearly 6.2 million YouTube views.<sup>15</sup> The satirical sketch revolves around a thirty-something white man (João Vicente de Castro) who has hurriedly entered a police station to report he has just been robbed on the street in front of the building. Calmly sitting behind his desk, the white Sergeant Peçanha (Antônio Tabet)—a recurring Porta dos Fundos character who parodies the violent, corrupt, and racist Brazilian police force—begins to ask the man a series of questions about the assailant: "Was he black [*negro*]? A nigger [*preto*]? A super big creole guy [*creolão*]? A big black guy [*negão*]?" (Porta dos Fundos 2014).<sup>16</sup> Shocked by Peçanha's unapologetic racism, the victim continuously insists that the assailant was a white man. Undeterred, Peçanha asks if the man accompanying the assailant was "*um preto*" (a nigger). Again, the man takes a deep breath before telling the sergeant that the assailant was alone. Nonetheless, Peçanha presses on with his line of questioning, descending into more and more ridiculous racial stereotypes, ranging from the assailant's clothing—"Was he wearing a shirt with "Olodum" written on it? (a reference to the Afro-Brazilian percussion and cultural group based in Salvador, Bahia)—to his hair: "And his hair, was it Rastafarian, dreadlocks, or black power?" When he finally accepts that the assailant was white, Peçanha simply and confidently assures the victim, "Don't worry then, he'll return your stolen goods."

Unlike *Mister Brau*, the Porta dos Fundos sketch more accurately locates the primary source of racism in Brazil within white men and the structures—that is, the police force and politics—they traditionally oversee. The independent production company revived this critique in the ten-episode serial comedy, *The Great Gonzalez*.<sup>17</sup> Not long after *Mister Brau* premiered on TV Globo in September 2015, the first thirty-minute installment of *The Great Gonzalez* aired at 10 p.m. on November 2, 2015. Written and directed by Ian SBF, the series stars Porta dos Fundos's cast member Luis Lobianco as Gonzalez, a debt-ridden, mediocre magician who has been mysteriously murdered while performing at a child's birthday party in an upper-middle-class neighborhood in Rio de Janeiro. Other members of Porta dos Fundos's largely white recurring cast (Clarice Falcão, Gregório Duvivier, Rafael Infante, Gabriel Totoro, Porchat, Tabet, and Castro) feature

<sup>13</sup> At the end of 2015, the Brazilian Independent Television Producers Association registered a total of 600 member companies, up from 215 in 2012 (Altberg 2016, 125).

<sup>14</sup> Porta dos Fundos released its first sketch, "Porta dos Fundos Nº 1," on August 6, 2012. Over the nearly four years since that time the group has released on YouTube over five hundred satirical sketches. These sketches, approximately two to five minutes in duration, include a wide range of themes, but they are unified by their satirical tone, their high production value, and the consistent use of actors employed by the production company. In the short period since its formation, Porta dos Fundos has become the preeminent producer of fictional Internet content in Brazil and one of the most successful in the world. Currently, the Porta dos Fundos YouTube channel has over 14 million subscribers and its videos nearly 4 billion total views.

<sup>15</sup> Coming in only behind the United States, Brazil ranks as the second largest consumer in the world of YouTube videos (Lima 2016, 153).

<sup>16</sup> While some will argue that *preto* does not carry the same negative connotation in the Brazilian context as the word *nigger* does in the US context, there can be no argument that when the word is used to refer to one's skin color it becomes a pejorative term. As such, like the word *nigger*, *preto* is to be avoided when referring to people of color.

<sup>17</sup> *The Great Gonzalez* achieved an audience share similar to that of *Mister Brau* (see note 8). While not close to its fourteen million plus YouTube subscribers, the series attracted over one million viewers. In doing so, it increased Fox Brasil's prime-time audience share by 43 percent and elevated the network to second place among pay television networks and fifth overall for the time slot (*Revista da TV* 2015).

in the “whodunit” narrative, which retells the story of Gonzalez’s death from the perspective of each of the numerous suspects. Though the series briefly deals with racial stereotypes of Brazil’s Asian population, blacks are decidedly missing from the cast and narrative. However, it is precisely the absence of blacks that heightens the work’s critique of race and racism in Brazil.

By the tenth and final episode, “The Reenactment” (“A Reconstituição”), the viewer has been presented with each suspect’s account of the day of the alleged murder. In order to put all the parts together and sum everything up one last time, the police detectives decide to take all the suspects back to the crime scene to reenact the events from the day in question. Finally, with the reenactment complete, the suspects eagerly wait for Lucimar (Tabet), the lead detective, to reveal the name of the murderer. To their surprise, however, Lucimar informs the suspects and those present that the Great Gonzalez drowned in his water tank due to an allergic reaction to shrimp. Immediately, Rebecca (Falcão), one of the suspects, seeks clarification: “So you’re saying that nobody here is responsible for his death.” “Not so fast,” Lucimar responds. “Actually, none of this would have happened,” he continues while pointing to a middle-aged black female who appears from offscreen in handcuffs, “if the cook hadn’t taken the shrimp out of the water Gonzalez used to fill up his tank.” Camilo, Rebecca’s husband, asks, “My God, so it was the cook?” The absurd conclusion, emphasized by the montage of looks of disbelief on the part of the suspects, becomes even more so when Lucimar responds with: “Not just her. We found a whole criminal faction here, all of whom were responsible for the murder of the Great Gonzalez.” As Lucimar says these words in response to Camilo’s question, the camera cuts to the detective who is now standing alongside a black cook, chauffeur, maid, and gardener, all of whom are in handcuffs. Ironically, it is the clown Rômulo (Porchat) who speaks for the entire shocked group when he sensibly, albeit hesitantly asks Lucimar, “And you . . . maybe you want to share your theory as to why they are guilty?” Suggesting that no response is necessary, Lucimar does not reply, and the scene ends without an answer.

## Conclusion

Given the documented under- and misrepresentation of blacks on Brazilian television, the comparison between *Mister Brau* and *The Great Gonzalez* reveals that it is not sufficient merely to put people of color on-screen, especially if the portrayals perpetuate outdated ideologies and long-established stereotypes of marginalized racial minorities, as in the TV Globo-produced serial comedy. Along these lines, Hall (1993, 107) has argued that invisibility is replaced by “a kind of carefully regulated, segregated visibility.” *Mister Brau*’s Afro-Brazilian protagonists’ symbolic movement from invisibility to “segregated visibility” is masked by humor, which popular culture and the media have long used to reinforce, naturalize, and legitimate racist culture in Brazil (Telles 2004, 222). The often uncritical humor in a program like *Mister Brau* positions the black subject as a caricature who need not be taken seriously, while at the same time promoting the internalization of the racial hierarchy “with minimum conflict and without the need for segregation” (Telles 2004, 222). This reality is compounded further by the fact that TV Globo, Brazil’s largest and most prolific producer of television content, brands itself as the author of the construction of what it means to be Brazilian and declares that its social mission is to contribute to the education of its hundreds of millions viewers while informing and entertaining them (Rede Globo 2016).

Ultimately of interest here are those emerging voices that seek out conflict and make light of racial segregation; those that critically challenge established power structures such as TV Globo; or those that employ strategies that, as Hall (1993, 107) contends, “can make a difference and can shift the dispositions of power.” Porta dos Fundos, in its meteoric rise as a producer of content for both the Internet and pay television, represents one potential challenger to the established power structure while also exemplifying a broader, ongoing shift to the landscape of Brazilian television. As an independent production company that emerged shortly after the implementation of Law 12.485 and during a period of strong growth for the pay television sector and Internet, Porta dos Fundos has maximized the relatively less regulated space of the Internet and Law 12.485’s content stipulations for pay television to position itself as a critically progressive voice on important social issues in Brazil. Whereas *Mister Brau*’s adoption of the hegemonic discourse of racial democracy results in the work’s co-option into what Antônio Cândido (1970, 76–84) has referred to as the “realm of order” (*polo da ordem*), Porta dos Fundos’s satirical YouTube videos and serial comedy *The Great Gonzalez* lay bare, for its tens of millions of viewers, the fact that in Brazil, “whites continue to enjoy the privilege of racial status,” while black Brazilians are represented as violent criminals or, in exceptional cases, as entertainers and athletes (Telles 2004, 238). In doing so, the narratives created by Porta dos Fundos remain unresolved and therefore echo as a continuous critique of the status quo.

In his argument for a new mode of interpretation of contemporary Brazilian cultural production, specifically as a counterpoint to Cândido’s conciliatory “dialectic of malandroism” (*dialética da malandragem*), João

Cezar de Castro Rocha (2005, 31) argues that “the model of the dialectic of marginality puts forward a new form of relationship between the social classes. It is no longer a question of reconciling differences, but rather of pointing them out and refusing to accept the improbable promise of compromise between the tiny circle of the powerful and the expanding universe of the excluded.”

The underlying argument of the dialectic of marginality is that by avoiding co-option by the dominant discourse(s) to the “realm of order,” alternative voices emerge from outside the center, offering new perspectives and challenges to the existing hierarchy of power. Though *Porta dos Fundos* does not operate from the marginalized space of an author like Férrez, one of Castro Rocha’s examples and a key proponent of the dialectic of marginality, and though the group is composed primarily of white, upper-middle-class Brazilians, their work, as exemplified by “Negro” and *The Great Gonzalez*, puts into practice the spirit of the dialectic of marginality insofar as it directly challenges traditional representations of race and unapologetically uses satire to shed light on the racism present in Brazil’s predominately white-controlled society. The group’s position—centered in socioeconomic and racial terms in the context of broader Brazilian society, and marginalized relative to TV Globo in the context of Brazilian television production—expands on Castro Rocha’s idea of marginality by showing how the center/margin dichotomy is disrupted to varying degrees depending on the context. At the same time, Castro Rocha (2005, 33) argues, “the dialectic of marginality has as its target the collective dilemma and is characterized by a serious attempt at highlighting the mechanisms of social exclusion, a project for the first time undertaken by the excluded themselves.” *Porta dos Fundos*’s position points to the need to broaden access to the means of production to those groups that are marginalized independent of context.

*The Great Gonzalez* can be understood as one early example of the possibilities afforded by the changing landscape of Brazilian television production. As scholars continue to study the emergence of the series and the new agents creating them under the auspices of Law 12.485, one can expect a number of other competing voices and narratives to emerge and thereby enrich the complexity of televisual representations of Brazil and Brazilians. For now, however, the fundamental difference between *Mister Brau* and *The Great Gonzalez* can be summed up by their competing visions: *Mister Brau*’s introduction of a multicolored adhesive bandage that merely covers—but cannot heal—the still festering wound of racial prejudice in Brazilian history and society with the comfortable and comforting ideology of racial democracy, long a characteristic of TV Globo fiction; and *The Great Gonzalez*’s comedic surgical intervention, which, from a position of opposition to TV Globo, does not pretend to offer a cure, but at least cuts open the wound, exposing the infection within.

### Author Information

Eli L. Carter is an Assistant Professor of Brazilian Literature, Film, and Television at the University of Virginia. He holds a BA in Communications from the University of California, Davis, and a PhD in Hispanic Languages and Literatures from the University of California, Los Angeles. Professor Carter’s research focuses broadly on Brazilian culture(s) with an emphasis on television and popular culture. His first book, *Reimagining Brazilian Television: Luiz Fernando Carvalho’s Contemporary Vision*, was published by the University of Pittsburgh Press in April 2018. Professor Carter is currently working on his second book, *Brazil Reframed: Television and Internet Fiction Post-2011*, under contract with the University Press of Florida.

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