

## **MULTIPLE PROXIMITIES BETWEEN TELEVISION GENRES AND AUDIENCES**

The Schism between Telenovelas' Global Distribution and Local Consumption

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**Abstract** / How can a Mexican telenovela be more attractive to viewers in Brazil than a nationally produced telenovela? This seems to be the question posed by the increasing transnational flow of cultural products. Most of the data indicate that viewers prefer locally produced programs. Nevertheless, some of the transnational success of Latin American telenovelas abroad seems to question this truism. This article argues that audience preferences are formed within the overall trend toward cultural proximity within both national and cultural-linguistic boundaries. However, within this logic of cultural proximity, other forces also apply. It is important to understand cultural proximity working not only at the national and supranational levels but also at the subnational and regional spheres. With this in mind, the authors first examine the attraction or proximity of genres, from the virtually global attraction of melodrama, as a macro genre, to subgenres within the telenovela. Second, they discuss the sense of shared historical experience of specific groups within nations and how this particular form of proximity might operate at the reception level.

**Keywords** / Brazil / cultural-linguistic markets / cultural proximity / genre / melodrama / reception / telenovelas

### **Introduction**

In the last two decades, telenovelas – primetime serial fiction – have moved from national products within Latin American nations to transnational exports, in some instances challenging local programming as well as US imports in certain regional markets. The flow of telenovelas has spread beyond cultural-linguistic markets to global markets. *A Escrava Isaura* (*Isaura the Slave*, from Brazil) and *Los Ricos También Lloran* (*The Rich Also Cry*, from Mexico) are some of the most cited examples of global successes, but many of the central questions raised by these telenovelas' success rest with the audiences.

What allows a telenovela to become a transnational hit? The concept of cultural proximity (Straubhaar, 1991, 1998) and previous success in the national market are preconditions but not completely accurate predictors of transnational success. The nature of cultural-linguistic markets (Sinclair, 1996; Wilkinson, 1995) helps explain some of its success within Latin America, but not into new markets. Another useful idea is the emergence of subgenres within the telenovela that speak to different audiences within both national and regional cultural-linguistic contexts (Hernandez, 2001).

We examine this question in part by looking at the reception of telenovelas within Brazil, a nation of 175 million and an enormous internal variation in terms of regional culture, interests and cultural capital. The success of some telenovelas is not necessarily homogeneous throughout the country. La Pastina's work in rural communities in the northeast of Brazil, both in 1995 in Pascoal (*A Próxima Vítima*) and 1996–7 in Macambira (*O Rei do Gado* and *Marimar*), seems to indicate that viewers might lack some of the cultural capital to read some of the political and social subtexts in these telenovelas (La Pastina, 2001, 2004a, 2004b). These viewers interpret them according to their cultural context and available extra-textual resources but also look at these texts as a purveyor of an urban lifestyle, even within rural telenovelas (such as *O Rei do Gado*) that do not necessarily strengthen their sense of belonging to the nation (La Pastina, 2003). Furthermore, subgenres of the telenovela, even from other countries within the cultural-linguistic region, can appeal to some audiences more than dominant national programs (Hernandez, 2001). For example, in Macambira, *O Rei do Gado* (*The Cattle King*) was followed by many, but its popularity in the urban south, and its success with a more educated urban middle class was challenged in this rural outback by *Marimar*, a Mexican melodrama about a docile, but vengeful heroine (La Pastina, 1999; Almeida et al., 1999).

How could a Mexican telenovela, produced in a foreign market, be more attractive to viewers than a national product, with better production values and a subtext that dealt with important issues within Brazil such as corruption and land reform? This seems to be the dilemma of reception of transnational products. Most of the data indicate that viewers prefer locally produced programs to foreign imports (a line of inquiry started by de Sola Pool in the 1970s [de Sola Pool, 1977], articulated as cultural proximity by Straubhaar [1991]). Nevertheless, some of the transnational success of Brazilian (and Latin American) telenovelas seems to indicate a trend that could question this truism. It seems that some of these programs, such as the Brazilian telenovela *Terra Nostra* in Italy, were successful in spite of abundant local production.

We argue that audience preferences are indeed formed within the overall trend toward cultural proximity within both national and cultural-linguistic boundaries. However, as Iwabuchi (2002) points out, cultural proximity cannot be seen as an essential quality of culture or audience orientation, but rather a shifting phenomenon in dialectical relation to other cultural forces. Within the logics of cultural proximity and cultural attraction within cultural-linguistic spaces, many other forces also apply. This article first examines the attraction or proximity of genres, from the virtually global attraction of melodrama, as a macro genre (Martin-Barbero, 1993), to subgenres within the telenovela. Genres and subgenres can exert attractions to specific audiences that cross and even contradict the overall logic of cultural proximity, although genres tend to work within cultural proximity most of the time. Second is the sense of shared historical experience of specific groups within nations. For example, contemporary audiences in southern Italy seem to share a very specific sense of cultural proximity to parts of Brazilian history defined by Italian immigrants who largely came from southern Italy, so they might move against an overall sense

of national cultural proximity to national Italian production to prefer imported Brazilian telenovelas that focus on that shared history of emigration (from Italy) and immigration (to Brazil).

## Audience, Proximity and Genre

That most television programs in most genres will be locally produced and adapted rather than imported is predicted by the theory of cultural proximity (Straubhaar, 1991). This argues that audiences will tend to choose to watch television programs that are closest, most proximate or most directly relevant to them in cultural and linguistic terms. Their first preference would tend to be for material produced within their own language and local or national culture. Audience research tends to show a strong preference for national productions, but those are only created and broadcast when economically possible and when the expertise to produce them has been acquired.

If national drama and other genres are too expensive for the market to bear, the audience's second preference is usually for television programs produced within similar cultures, usually within a cultural-linguistic market defined by historical, ethnic, religious, linguistic, geographical and other similarities (Sinclair, 1996; Wilkinson, 1995). For example, the cultural proximity or relevance of telenovelas between Latin American countries leads to extensive exports across the region (Antola and Rogers, 1984). Singhal et al. (1994) note that successfully exported television programs often share a language, such as the simplified export-oriented Spanish of *Simplemente María*, a Peruvian telenovela popular throughout much of Latin America (Singhal et al., 1994).

The audience's other preferences are generally for programs that are in genres too expensive to be produced locally or regionally (such as many current forms of feature film); in genres that rely on sex and violence, where cultural and linguistic particularities do not matter as much, e.g. *Baywatch*; or for programs that touch on broad universal themes, which a program like *The Simpsons* seems to do in many countries.

So there are two combined factors that create a general context in which audiences make choices. Overall, audiences do tend to choose programs that are most culturally relevant or proximate. Second, this proximity tends to be defined by historical spaces of cultural and linguistic commonality. However, these tendencies are dynamic and relational; they change over time as cultures change, and they work out in relation to other trends, some broad across nations and supranational regions, some very localized by subnational cultural differences, or very particular to the specific interests of groups that help mediate what people choose to watch on television and what sense they make of programs as they watch them (Martin-Barbero, 1993).

There are other notable factors that guide people's choices and interests in culture such as television programs. These include the nature of various genres and their fit to specific cultures, the development of subgenres that divide broader audiences, and the maintenance of historical or interest ties between subgroups of larger cultures that may guide them away from dominant national television genres and programs.

## Cultural Bound Reception and Multiple Proximities

Cultural proximity is based to large degree in language. However, besides language, there are other levels of similarity or proximity, based in cultural elements per se: dress, ethnic types, gestures, body language, definitions of humor, ideas about story pacing, music traditions, religious elements, etc. Indian movies are popular in the Arab world for such similarities, Brazilian telenovelas dubbed into Spanish are more popular than *Dallas* or *Dynasty* because of such similarities (Straubhaar, 1991). Iwabuchi (1997) shows that Taiwanese young people see Japanese television and music as culturally proximate, sharing a sense of 'Asian modernity', despite the language difference between Japanese and Chinese.

One way to begin thinking about the complex attractions between cultural texts and audiences is that there is cultural proximity at multiple levels. People have multilayered, complex cultural identities. Aspects of them are geographic or spatial: local, subnational regional, national, supranational regional, global. Other aspects are purely cultural or linguistic, as when migrants continue to have a strong layer of identity linked to their 'home' country or culture. Other aspects might be religious, as when Catholic or Islamic messages or cultural products appeal across geographical and cultural boundaries. Others might be ethnic or diasporic, as when various Afro-descendent subcultures across the Americas feel common ties because of their African heritage. Others might be gender related, as when women across cultures identify with family drama or melodrama that points out commonalities of family struggles.

Much of one's cultural identity continues to be local or linked to a subnational region. Texans are almost all proud of being Texans, but those in Austin and Dallas will likely construct 'Texan' quite differently and be proud of their city/local identity as well. People born in the city of São Paulo distinguish themselves as *Paulistanos*, compared to *Paulistas* born in the state of São Paulo, even though those people may have lived in the capital city most of their lives. These definitions of locality and local identity are complex and subject to ongoing redefinition in the interaction of global, national and local forces (Iwabuchi, 2002).

In terms of television reception, we often may need to look at the local culture, rather than at the national culture, to see the level of proximity between a variety of television texts and the local viewers. Even within a country, local viewers may not understand or identify with elements of the 'national' culture as projected in national television. For example, of the authors, Straubhaar is from Idaho, in the rural US Intermountain West. Interviews with his family there while *Seinfeld* was a popular national program revealed that most of them did not like it or identify with it, thinking it 'much too New York'. In one of the cases we explore later in some depth, villagers in the rural northeast of Brazil found many barriers in national Brazilian television programming that kept them from identifying with it (La Pastina, 2003). In some cases they found imported Mexican programs more proximate, relevant or appealing to their own tastes and sexual relationship values, which indicates the existence of complex, multiple proximities across both spatial relationships (local-national) and

cultural relationships (traditional sexual values related to Latin American Catholicism).

There can be strong local values and historical alliances between the original culture of the text and the local culture. Local values may more closely resemble values in other nations than the values represented in the core, television-producing centers of their own nation. There can be a considerable gap between the national metropolis, which has its own distinct cultural formations, and the rural and regional areas of its nation, which still consume the television and other cultural products that the metropolis produces. They may have their own distinct subnational regional cultures, such as the locals that Hannerz (1996) defines in contrast to cosmopolitans, who are more oriented to either national or global cultures. For example, Rio de Janeiro in Brazil, which produces much of the primetime entertainment consumed on Brazilian television, has a very different culture in terms of values and mores from the rural interior of Brazil, which is noted for being far more socially conservative. Particularly within globalization, many major cities that function as centers of cultural production become transnationalized as global cities (Sassen, 2000). They may be hybridizing or 'glocalizing' global ideas in a manner quite distinct from the experience of some of the less urban (or less 'glocalized') audiences for which they produce cultural products.

## Genre Proximity

Some genres themselves facilitate their ability to be shared across very diverse cultures. Rafael Obregon (1995) discussed the idea of genre proximity, emphasizing the common structure of melodrama that covers many cultures. Melodrama builds on underlying oral structures, formulas and archetypes that can be shared by cultures. The underlying structure of melodrama has offshoots in almost all parts of world, so melodrama can reach past cultural differences. Many, if not most, cultures seem to have experienced some form of serial storytelling rather like melodrama even before television became available to them. These kinds of story-telling have flowed between countries centuries before television in forms like the chapbook (or *Cordel* and *Corridos*, in Iberia and Latin America; see Martin-Barbero, 1993). So the flow and adaptation of a new form of story-telling, like the modern television soap opera, are facilitated by the global spread of earlier roots of the same genre. An example that has been discussed in a number of publications is the transplant of the explicitly educational telenovela from Mexico to Asia (Singhal and Rogers, 1992).

So we can talk about multiple layers of proximity. The primary layer of proximity does seem to be local or national, particularly national for television. It does seem empirically, from both quantitative audience research and ratings, when available, that most audiences respond most avidly to television programs from within their own national culture. Primetime in many countries is increasingly full of nationally produced programs (Straubhaar et al., 2003). Cross-national business reporting, like that in *Variety*, tends to show that the top 10 television programs in most countries are nationally produced. The production

and flow data for 24 countries generated by Straubhaar et al. (2003) show that most countries surveyed produce most of their own programs, particularly in primetime. To date, programs corresponding to that primary sense of cultural proximity tend to be nationally produced because the nation-state is still the dominant locus of market definition, television network organization and regulation, and because many states have given enormous priority and resources toward the promotion of that sense of national identity via the media, both historically (Katz and Wedell, 1976) and currently (Waisbord and Morris, 2001).

One strong secondary layer of proximity, depending on the television program genre, does seem to be programs from the US. Again, the production and flow data by Straubhaar et al. (2003) show the US to be still strong in exporting feature films, action series, dramatic series and cartoons to a number of countries. US material does best in its own cultural-linguistic space or market, that of other English-speaking countries with strong Anglo-colonial heritages and strong historical migration from the UK, such as Australia, Canada, the English-speaking Caribbean and New Zealand (Abram, 2004). Beyond that, however, the strong presence of US cultural products in so many media over the years has created a sense of familiarity or proximity with them. So when genres are expensive or difficult to create, like animation or action series, or when they have become strongly identified with US images and themes, like action series, then the sense of secondary proximity with the US cultural products can be maintained.

Another way to see this form of proximity, according to Iwabuchi (2002), is a desired proximity with modernity. In this analysis, the US cultural products represented not so much a true cultural proximity or familiarity, but that of desire or aspiration. People watched US programs to see what global modernity looked like (Featherstone, 1992). However, according to Iwabuchi's (2002) analysis of the rise of Japanese cultural exports to East Asia, this hegemonic role of the US as the cultural avatar of modernity seems to be declining as other countries begin to represent a more familiar or proximate, regional or cultural-linguistic, form of modernity.

## **Audiences' Multiple Layers of identity and Multiple Proximities**

All audiences have a strong sense of local identity, as they live their daily lives in a specific place and time. Their interpretive community is based in a family, local friends, neighbors, clubs, church congregations, sports groups, etc. Most people also have a sense of region that is larger than their immediate locale, but smaller than the nation. Based on our review of the literature as well as fieldwork in Italy and Brazil, we find that people make sense of media first through a set of identities based on space and place: local, regional, national and global. Very related are identities based on culture and language, which tend to be linked to space and place.

So, much of the knowledge or cultural capital that people use in interpreting media, such as television, comes from the very local experience of daily

life in a very specific culture shaped by their immediate environment, place and time. Sometimes the experience of locality sharpens a sense of difference between the experience of local life and what is shown of global or national scenes on television. For example, rural Brazilians observed and interviewed by La Pastina felt themselves to be on the periphery of Brazil, somewhat alienated from what they saw of urban Brazilian life on television (La Pastina, 2003). The experience of locality is bound up with other layers of identity, such as ethnicity or language/culture.

In larger nations like Brazil or medium-sized nations like Italy, there are usually coherent subnational regional identities that reflect these enduring forms of identity. In many places, those conform to the cultural contours of pre-European/colonial cultures. As we discuss later, in the case of Brazil, these local and (subnational) regional cultures tend to maintain a sense of difference from national cultures that mediates their use of national media (Martin-Barbero, 1993). People there tend to filter national, supranational and global media through this filter of perceived local difference, even as they adapt elements of those outside cultures into the local aspect or level of their own multilayered identities.

In most places with relatively coherent, relatively powerful nation-states, people do come to have a layer of identity that reflects an imagined national identity, as proposed by Anderson (1983). According to Anderson (1983), print capitalism, through newspapers and novels, combined with the efforts of the state to define national identity in the 19th century, gave readers a sense of common activity, purpose and identity with those across the same political and linguistic boundaries. In the 20th century, it seems that radio and television have continued that process in many countries, extending it to less literate, more remote peoples within the national boundaries. Still, while national identities seemed to become the primary form of identity according to many observers, we would argue that what was created was a new layer of identity, above locality, and in some cases above subnational cultural-linguistic communities, supplementing but not necessarily reducing those older layers. The creation of national borders and identities did not completely reduce existing supranational cultural-linguistic communities and identities. For example, four centuries of common Spanish language and heritage brought peoples together, which we still see in the cultural-linguistic space in which television programs and channels move around Latin America.

## **Culturally and Historically Defined Spaces of Identity**

Cultural-linguistic markets are defined by language and other aspects of culture: 'Audiences share the same or similar languages as well as intertwined histories and overlapping cultural characteristics. They share colonial legacies, independence movements, struggles against foreign hegemony, development challenges and the like have knit together a region where similarities extend beyond the languages spoken' (Wilkinson, 1995: viii, 52).

While cultural factors tend to be associated with language, they do often span similar cultures with differing languages. That often has to do with shared

histories and geographic proximities, like those of Iberia, which unite Spanish and Portuguese cultures in many ways. While Brazilians speak Portuguese rather than Spanish, they have a great deal in common with Spanish-speaking Latin Americans in terms of underlying culture inherited from Iberia and further developed and hybridized with other cultures in Latin America. So even though a Brazilian television program might have to be dubbed from Portuguese into Spanish, it will otherwise tend to look far more familiar to a Venezuelan than will one from New York.

Shared history also draws countries together in cultural-linguistic markets. There was a great deal of pre-European cultural and language group diffusion. Besides migrations, precolonial empires made conquests and resettled ethnic groups. European empires moved people around even more dramatically. The contemporary ethnic face of Latin America is due to the migration of Iberian colonists, who then brought millions of African slaves, who were followed in the 19th and 20th centuries by new waves of Europeans and Asians. Former colonies also interact with each other, borrowing elements from their shared roots. For example, shared African roots make it easy for Brazilians to borrow elements of Jamaican reggae to synthesize with their own samba, both variations on African rhythmic and percussive traditions.

## Related Forms of Proximity

Theorization and research about cultural proximity must take note of the fact that many programs have successfully crossed cultural and linguistic borders for decades, to the point of being described as a one-way flow from the US in the early 1970s (Nordenstreng and Varis, 1973). US programming has been successfully exported to most countries and, increasingly, Japan, Mexico, Brazil and Hong Kong are exporting television programs well beyond markets defined by either language or culture. It is also important to consider other economic and structural factors that have led to increasing exports of telenovelas outside Latin America starting in the mid-1980s (Mattelart and Mattelart, 1990).

A specific, useful concept that supplements the notion of cultural proximity is cultural shareability, advanced by Singhal and Svenkerud (Singhal and Svenkerud, 1994). They note that successfully exported television programs often share a language, such as the simplified export-oriented Spanish of *Simplemente María*, as mentioned earlier, a Peruvian telenovela popular throughout much of Latin America (Singhal et al., 1994). But shareability also refers to common values, images, archetypes and themes across cultures that permit programs to flow across cultural boundaries. For example, in an analysis of the globally marketed Japanese television soap opera *Oshin*, Singhal and Udornpim (1997) attribute part of that series' cultural shareability to its use of cultural archetypes that span across a number of cultures. They build on Jung's description of archetypes as independent of mediation, existing in individuals worldwide (Singhal and Udornpim, 1997: 174). For *Oshin's* broad cross-cultural appeal, they cite the universal archetype of 'self-seeking individuation', of self-determination, endurance and strength. They also note an archetype of the main character as a 'disobedient female', a woman who defies oppressive social



constraints. Third, they note an archetype of 'heroic struggle' and resistance against enemies, poverty and misfortune until the heroine ultimately succeeds (Singhal and Udornpim, 1997). We might add a fourth archetype common to soap operas in many cultures, upwardly mobility by the individual or family from poverty to material success.

Cultural proximity is also limited by three other factors. First, there are material and structural limits at the production level on many cultures' ability to produce media products to meet the potential demand that cultural proximity might generate. Second, there are structural barriers of income or economic capital at the individual reception level, which keep many people from getting access to media, particularly new channels like satellite television or the Internet (Mosco, 1996). Third, there are less tangible barriers of cultural capital, as discussed earlier, at the individual level, which keep people from choosing or understanding some kinds of media, particularly those in other languages or which presume an in-depth knowledge of other cultures.

While in many countries television is still a privileged medium, around 90 percent of the Brazilian population are able to see television on a regular basis, and over 85 percent have televisions in their homes. However, building on Bourdieu (1984), we might point out that there are very major differences between classes in terms of cultural capital in Brazil, which powerfully affects what they watch and how they interpret it (La Pastina, 1999, 2001, 2004b).

For Giddens (1984), human agency is not all-powerful, but rather coexists in precarious balance with other powerful societal structures such as economic and social institutions. Society not only bounds and constrains individuals, but also enhances their knowledge and potential for agency. Daily routines, historical creation of contexts that bound and guide action, the solidification of rules or normative guidelines, and conscious power exercised by institutions are some of the mechanisms that might bound and constrain human action.

Mosco (1996), discussing the application of structuration theory to media, sees social class as a factor limiting access to media in many parts of the world. In the case of the Brazilian rural communities discussed here, both the poverty of many people and the remote rural situation in which residents live were certainly a constraining factor. The geographical situation may limit access to a broad range of networks, which may reduce economic access to a consumer culture and hinder the potential to reproduce lifestyles presented on television. The local political culture and the agrarian lifestyle were also elements that constrained the ability to participate in the readings of the text. Nevertheless, these same constraints created other social formations and forms of cultural capital that led them to alternative readings and interpretations of media texts that seem to lead to a space where Mexican telenovelas were more culturally proximate than some of the productions from the industrialized south.

The cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984) required to read media content does not correspond to the access obtained by virtue of economic capital. Economic access to a broader range of media, provided in Macambira by ownership of a satellite dish,<sup>1</sup> might result in greater exposure. But the cultural capital necessary to participate in certain readings of media text is not necessarily available

to all viewers, and certainly does not implicate in a direct correlation to the economic capital of a certain viewer.

Cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984) is used here to sum up a series of identifiable factors that people tend to use when deciding what they want to watch on television and how they interpret what they watch. Those are specific things like humor, gender images, dress, style, lifestyle, knowledge about other lifestyles, ethnic types, religion and values. Cultural capital also builds on politicization, degree of consciousness about social issues, membership in socially aware groups, religion and some even more basic issues, like gender types and socially constructed gender-related interests, what men and women are commonly 'supposed' to be interested in. In the process of consuming media, viewers engage in a certain level of agency that allows viewers, in the case of telenovelas, to discard views conflictive to their own set of values as well as to accept, endorse and appropriate others they perceive to be useful or advantageous.

### ***Marimar in Brazil***

The ethnographic field research reported here was conducted in Macambira, a small rural community in the Sertão do Seridó in Rio Grande do Norte. These data help us get at the question of multiple proximities that might lead the viewer well beyond a simple sense of cultural proximity. The specific question explored in this section is how could a Mexican telenovela, produced in a foreign market, be more attractive to viewers than a national Brazilian product, with better production values and a subtext that dealt with important issues within the nation?

The reception data discussed here were collected through an extensive, year-long ethnographic fieldwork in Macambira in the interior of Rio Grande do Norte in northeastern Brazil in 1996–7. Informal conversations; structured, unstructured and ethnographic interviews (Lindlof and Taylor, 2002); participant observation; and repeated in-depth interviews with a select group of 30 viewers across class, gender, age, race and educational level were conducted. Many of the accounts collected in these interviews were reinforced through information gathered from other residents with whom the author maintained extensive informal contact.

Macambira, with fewer than 2000 inhabitants, depended on women's artisanal labor and monthly infusions of capital from the federal government to survive. The largely black population and descendants of early white settlers have formed a society in which the roots of racism are evident in public discourse. However, the increase in inter-marriage over the last decades has weakened the role of racism in structuring community life, unequal income distribution and limited access to political power persevere. In contemporary Macambira, the separation between residents' rural lived experiences and the urban modern Brazil of the south, which was visible on television news and fiction, seemed to define their identity much more profoundly than the racial conflicts of decades past described by elders in the community (La Pastina, 2003). This sense of being on the periphery of the nation, in the outskirts of

modern, urban Brazil, shaped residents' readings of media products as well as their outlook on life.

Class was a clear marker of distinction, an arbitrary construct based both on income and an association with white settlers who owned most of the land and the brick and mortar homes around the church square. While class did not seem to play a central role in the patterns of socialization, it did play a role in access to outside information through sporadic travel to the state capital, the purchase of magazines, or possession of a satellite dish.

Early in the fieldwork, before *Marimar* was broadcast, Marta,<sup>2</sup> a very religious woman in her seventies was following *Maria Mercedes*. She spent most afternoons quilting and normally did not watch telenovelas, but because she had heard *Maria Mercedes*, a Mexican telenovela on SBT (Sistema Brasileiro de Televisão), the second largest television network in Brazil, was a 'good and honest' telenovela, she decided to follow it. According to her she preferred this telenovela over the one from Globo because 'this telenovela doesn't have all of that grabbing and nonsense you see in most of the others'. Her moral values and beliefs influenced her views of what she wanted to see on the screen. But not only the perceived more puritanical content of these Mexican narratives, such as *Maria Mercedes*, *Topazio* and *Marimar*, but also the traditional melodramatic structure of the Mexican telenovelas were an important factor attracting viewers, particularly women, in Macambira.

Chica, in her sixties, was another example, she took care of the ranch house, cooked and at least twice a day said the rosary. Like Marta she did not like television, or telenovelas, but nevertheless she was watching the Mexican melodrama *Marimar*. For most of the women in this town, the Mexican melodramas provided a romantic antidote to the harsh urbanity of many of Globo telenovelas.

*Marimar*, broadcast by SBT at the end of 1996 and beginning of 1997 was very popular in Macambira, even though only viewers with access to a satellite dish could watch shows such as the Mexican telenovelas, as they were not aired on Globo, the largest television network in Brazil. Due to their reliance on a local relay station purchased by the town, Globo was the only channel available to all viewers. This technological barrier, however, did not limit the visibility of the telenovela among locals. Many, returning to the habit of visiting a neighbor who owned a television, but now one connected to a satellite dish, saw *Marimar* as frequently as possible, many times running back home to watch *O Rei do Gado* that was broadcast by Globo.<sup>3</sup> *Marimar* was the story of a young, beautiful woman wronged by greedy wealthy people. The man she falls in love with disdains her because she is poor. But after few episodes she becomes wealthy and decides to destroy the family that abused her.<sup>4</sup>

For most women in Macambira, telenovelas were about romance (see La Pastina [2004a] for a discussion of gender and telenovela reception in rural Brazil) and there was no need to find further justification to follow the series, while many males would argue that they were following a telenovela because it was realistic or had a rural thematic that appealed to them. Women liked those elements as well, but for them the melodramatic plot was the key element in these texts. The modernization of the genre in Brazil, incorporating issues of

contemporary urban daily life in its narrative, seems to have been effective in attracting male viewers. But in doing so these texts seem to be distancing themselves from their melodramatic roots, raising complaints among female viewers that Globo telenovelas are not romantic anymore. Katia was representative of the complaints commonly voiced by local women: 'Globo's telenovelas have only sex and no romance.'

The Mexican telenovelas that were broadcast by SBT, on the other hand, were followed and admired by many female viewers for their romance, with excessive melodrama and little sex. It was expected that a telenovela would provide a romantic text with couples struggling to fulfill their love. Longing and desire were important elements expected of telenovelas. Most of these women wanted to see the romantic couples struggling and developing a relationship at a certain pace. A common complaint against *O Rei do Gado* and other contemporary Globo telenovelas was that the couples were too quick to start kissing and having sex without developing intimacy.

Cota and Lucia, two women in their early twenties, mentioned *Topázio*, *Maria Mercedes* and *Marimar* as among their favorite telenovelas. In *Maria Mercedes*, 'we didn't miss a day waiting for the first kiss. It was so romantic.' But at the same time Cota, blushing and laughing, said that sometimes she did not like them as much because 'it never got to be really interesting'. She was jokingly referring to the absence of sex and more explicit love we were talking about before in regard to Globo's telenovelas such as *Explode Coração*, *O Fim do Mundo* and *O Rei do Gado*. Cota's comments represent the ambivalence many younger viewers feel, who were still attracted to the traditional melodramatic genre norms but at the same time were seduced by the urbanity and more explicit sexuality of contemporary Globo telenovelas.

Celma, married to a powerful local politician, said that her 15-year-old daughter loved to watch *Maria Mercedes* and *Marimar* with her. But they could only do it when her husband was not at home. 'He wants to see the *Jornal Nacional* on Globo at the same time the telenovela is on the SBT.' She also mentioned *Topázio* and said that she really liked the Mexican telenovelas on SBT, they were so much more romantic and 'I don't feel ashamed in front of my daughter like I do when they have those sex scenes in the telenovelas on Globo.'

Zé de Bia disliked telenovelas and even though he owned the largest number of cattle in town he did not follow *O Rei do Gado* (*The Cattle King*). He used to watch the newscast on SBT and one day decided to watch *Marimar* after seeing trailers for it during the newscast. Zé de Bia saw the telenovela as a very realistic text discussing class mobility. He focused on the protagonist's struggle to become respectable; overcoming her background as a poor orphan who suddenly inherited a fortune. He saw himself in her struggle. Orphaned at an early age, he had had to fend for himself and today was one of the wealthiest men in town.

His identificatory position – cutting across gender and age, and, if you will, national boundaries – is important to understand the pervasiveness of telenovelas in reaching broader segments of society. Engaging with the telenovela repertoire, Zé de Bia, a conservative older male who believes that the man should control the household and support his family, identified with a female

character, accepting and enjoying the myth of class mobility and ultimate happiness of *Marimar* with the man she loves. His attention span for the long, drawn out telenovela was limited, and the inevitable secondary plot lines irritated him. But, nevertheless, the melodramatic narrative was much more appealing to him than the more complex Globo telenovelas.

Ozenildo, a small business owner in town, was one of the few other men who acknowledged watching *Marimar*. He started after glancing at it a couple of nights while his wife was watching it before *O Rei do Gado*. *Marimar* for him was about class ascension, and he enjoyed the way it was represented.

*She came out of the mud, and she did it so fast and now is taking care of the whole thing with so much control and class and really managing that business. And she is so beautiful and correct. . . . Marimar is also too bright, because to come from where she did and became such an important woman so fast, really only on the telenovelas. . . . O Rei do Gado is much more part of our reality; but I think it is because Marimar is from Mexico. It was recorded in Mexico and it must be different there so the telenovela is really showing their life and their reality.*

Other males were watching *Marimar*, but only those with a satellite dish. Unlike women, I did not talk to one male who had gone out of his house to watch *Marimar*, while some did go to the square or a friend's house to see *O Rei do Gado*. This paradoxical position by these two males, Zé de Bia and Ozenildo, in relation to the established discourse that regards telenovelas as female texts, points to a fascinating fissure in this established dichotomy between male and female viewers' taste. Most males used the argument that they enjoyed telenovelas that were perceived to be realistic. Several male viewers in Macambira stretched this definition to conquer melodramatic texts to a male domain. But this also underscores the complexity of cultural proximity. In the case of *Marimar*, viewers' local culture and the perceived challenges posed by urban Brazilian telenovelas to local values generated a positive atmosphere that facilitated the reception of a foreign text, that felt more proximate because it did not overtly challenge notions of gender roles and relationships while upholding more conservative gendered behaviors. The concept of cultural proximity (Straubhaar, 1991) in this case could be stretched to imply not necessarily the text produced in the home national culture, i.e. in the urban south, but rather a text that seems to provide the local viewers with ideological content that does not challenge or question their own values and beliefs but rather returns viewers to an idealized reception state in which telenovelas provide a melodramatic, cathartic space that did not question these viewers' attitudes. This example points to the need to operationalize cultural proximity both at the national and the subnational levels, where different cultural groups, either because of regional culture, urban rural divides or differences of class, might feel more proximate to products originating in other cultures that might share some of the same values. Genre proximity, in the form of melodrama, also helps explain the complex relationship that existed between these rural Brazilian viewers and these Mexican melodramatic texts.

The next example, of the reception of *Terra Nostra*, a Brazilian telenovela, in Italy, seems to reinforce this idea of a transnational text that challenges local

programs as it provided some viewers with a venue to deal with the sense of loss caused by the Italian diaspora. In this process, cultural proximity again works at the subnational level, allowing this foreign text to become a hit among viewers in a small community in the south of that country.

### ***Terra Nostra* in the Italy of the North and in the Italy of the South**

While residing in Italy during the spring semester of 2002, La Pastina visited his aunt, whom he had last seen in 1999. This time she had something new to talk about, *Terra Nostra*, a Brazilian telenovela set during the early part of the 20th century chronicling the saga of Italian emigration to Brazil. Even though the telenovela's reality and the reality La Pastina's father and uncle experienced when they migrated to Brazil in the early 1950s were very different, and even though she had seen many other Brazilian telenovelas before, *Terra Nostra* had touched upon a primal necessity to connect to her brothers' experiences.

*Terra Nostra*, it seems, contextualized the Italian diaspora among residents of the small community of Castellabate, a small coastal village in Campagna, in the southern region of Italy where almost all families have relatives in Brazil. As in many other southern communities, emigration was more intense and widespread than in the progressive northern regions like Tuscany, where La Pastina was residing. In the south, it seems, the telenovela rekindled memories and bridged informational gaps, even if through a fictionalized saga of success. In the north it seems that the historical and geographical distance between the actual emigration and the lack of closer relatives who participate in this diaspora made the text a mythic narrative of othering, in which southern Italians are seen as the others in a distant land.

The relationship between Italy and Brazil has been long marked by migration. With the first mass migration from Italy in the late 1800s the future of the two nations became intrinsically tied in a flux and counter-flux of diasporic identities and memories. But for those who stayed in Italy and dreamed of the possibilities of another land, or longed for their loved ones – sons and daughters, brothers and sisters, fathers and mothers – the idea of Brazil was one of undefined contours, of riches and dangers. In the post-Second World War period, when the most recent wave of Italian immigrants left their country in an attempt to make it big in the new world, many, like La Pastina's father, then 21, left his hometown for Brazil. The family of seven could not survive on the limited resources generated by their plot of land and other choices were few. The two younger sisters would marry and move; the oldest brother would stay with the parents and work out of the land his survival, as tradition prescribed, while the other two brothers had to search for a future. Brazil, where many others from that region had moved to, was a dream and the possibility to build a promising future.

La Pastina's aunt, now the only survivor of those five children, lives in a small hill town less than three miles away from where she was born. She likes to talk about the sadness they all felt when her brothers left, the anxiety of not knowing what had happened to the ship, not knowing if they had arrived safely,

found a job. The lengthy wait for the few lines that would sporadically arrive and tell them all about their progress was painful. She only saw her brothers four times during the 50 years that separate their departure and the *Terra Nostra* screening, the first 25 years after they had left. Technology, the cost of flying and telecommunications increased their contact as they aged, but still the memories and the fantasies of what her brothers' life had been in Brazil was always one of difficulty, suffering, pain and distance, shrouded in mystery. And *Terra Nostra*, an idealized tale of early 20th-century migration became a way for the local viewers interviewed to discuss their ideas of Brazil and the experiences of their relatives.

In the Tuscan village where La Pastina was staying at the time, *Terra Nostra* was about Brazil, the land, the farms, the location and also about the experience of 'historical' Italians. The program did not attain the same popularity; it did not become the main topic of discussion at the cafes. Viewers interviewed in Tuscany distanced themselves from the experience, pointing to the fact that most of the Italians who migrated were from the south and tended to reinforce that very few people from that region had migrated. In using the local history to guide the text, this community were engaging with the program very differently from the southern community, who were reading the show as their own experience.

For instance, the Matarazzos – a wealthy Italian Brazilian family mentioned in the telenovela – had donated money and a building to the community in Campagna, increasing the sense of recognition of the narrative by many viewers in the southern community. There was an emotional, financial, physical and historical connection to the characters' experiences and the narrative constructed on the screen, while among viewers in the north the telenovela account was distant and dissociated from their experiences as Italians. This lack of recognition bound the readings and the cathartic potential of the narrative but also demonstrated how cultural proximity here works at subnational levels and is bound to the genre's historical potential. The cultural proximity here, one of shared historical and lived experiences, supplants the national cultural proximity of local programming.

### **Cultural Proximity within Culturally Bound Reception Practices**

As the two examples demonstrate, transnational narratives have the potential to motivate strong processes of identification. In one case, rural people in Brazil, particularly women, found a Mexican telenovela more relevant and attractive than the national Brazilian telenovelas available. In another case, people in southern Italy found a Brazilian telenovela about Italian emigration to Brazil more attractive and interesting than Italian programming. These are not examples of simple cultural proximity, where most people tend to prefer national programming when it is available (Straubhaar, 1991), but of some set of proximities and attractions that are more complex.

Cultural proximity, as proposed by Straubhaar (1991, 1998), still seems to be an important concept in the process of reception. Shared linguistic and

historical experiences tend to create cultural commonalities that lend themselves to a sense of closeness or proximity in audiences to certain cultural sources. We tend to think of that at the national level, but this research shows that the concept can and does work at much more of a micro level. In these two cases, the concept of cultural proximity needs to be discussed in terms of shared local values and historical alliances between the original culture of the text and the local culture.

In a broader sense, these two texts, though foreign, connected to the viewers in Macambira (in the case of the Mexican melodrama) and the southern Italian viewers (in the case of the Brazilian melodrama). But in these cases one needs to look at the local culture, rather than at the national culture, to see the level of proximity between these texts and the local viewers. Cultural and social capitals were also central to the process of interpretation of these narratives, bounding and constraining the process of identification. Southern Italians had specific cultural capital to employ in their interpretations of the narratives at the same time that their level of emotional involvement allowed for identification to happen. Rural Brazilians had a sense of traditional moral values and traditional gender roles that corresponded better to values and roles contained in a Mexican telenovela than in many Brazilian ones. So specific proximities of history and values were stronger than a sense of identification with national programming, which often reflected metropolitan or cosmopolitan values more than the traditional values that tend to prevail in more traditional rural areas.

However, in a larger sense, we see specific value and historical proximities playing out within a larger set of general cultural and historical proximities. Brazil, Italy and Mexico are all tied culturally by the original linguistic heritage of Latin-based languages and centuries of shared 'Latin' or Mediterranean culture. Brazil is strongly tied to Italy by millions of Italians immigrants, their descendants within Brazil and their relatives back in Italy. Brazil and Mexico share a 20th-century history of genre development of the telenovela, in which Brazilian and Mexican producers have borrowed ideas from each other in developing several subtypes of telenovelas, which appeal to different kinds of people, as the Brazilian case here shows.

## Notes

1. The reduction in the cost of satellite dishes in the mid-1990s, as well as the decline of inflation and strengthening of the currency in that period, allowed many locals to acquire larger consumer items, such as satellite dishes. With a dish, a local household's access to channels increased from one, Globo Network, to 14 or 16, depending on the size of the dish. Most of the open channels in the south became available, bringing in a wide range of choice. However, the increase in satellite dishes did not change the local habit of following the leading telenovelas broadcast by Globo.
2. All the informants' names as well as the name of the community have been changed to protect their anonymity.
3. SBT, using a proven strategy, scheduled its telenovelas before and after Globo's to avoid a head to head competition for the audience.
4. Marimar is an innocent girl who lives next to the sea with her elderly grandparents. They are very poor, and sometimes Marimar has to steal to keep food on the table. One day she goes to the Hacienda Ibanez to steal some vegetables and eggs for her family. The foreman catches her



red-handed and attempts to take advantage of her; he tells her that she can take the vegetables if she lets him kiss her. Marimar resists and her screams bring Sergio, the spoilt son of the house, running. He defends her and then tells her that under all her grime she is 'beautiful'. Marimar falls in love with him on the spot. And when Sergio hatches a plot to revenge himself on his family because they won't give him his half of the inheritance, insisting that he settle down once and for all, he conceives of a plan to marry the 'dirty girl from the beach' to humiliate them. Marimar, dazzled, agrees to marry Sergio and falls foul of his fiendish plot, without knowing that her own father, an extremely wealthy man who abandoned her mother, is looking for her now to make her his heir ([www.rinconlatino.com/telenovelas/marimar.html](http://www.rinconlatino.com/telenovelas/marimar.html)).

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