

Telenovelas and Black Celebrity in Brazil (with Bruno Guaraná)

[opening music]

Dr. Juan Llamas-Rodriguez (JLR): Welcome to the Global Media Cultures Podcast. I am your host, Juan Llamas-Rodriguez. Today, we're discussing blackness, stardom, and Brazilian television. Our guest is Dr. Bruno Guaraná, Master Lecturer of film studies in the Department of Film and Television at Boston University. Originally from Recife, Brazil, he received his PhD in cinema studies from New York University and his MA in film from Columbia University. His current research explores negotiation of cultural citizenship in contemporary Brazilian media. He also serves as the Page Views editor for *Film Quarterly*. Bruno, welcome to the Global Media Cultures Podcast.

Dr. Bruno Guaraná (BG): Thank you so much, Juan. I'm happy to be here.

JLR: I'd like to start asking you about your research interests. Why did these topics interest you and why do you think it's an important area for us to study?

BG: Sure. I actually just recently kind of discovered that my research interests had a lot to do with how I started finding myself to be an interested viewer of cinema. It sort of coincided with the time in which the Brazilian cinema was rebirthing, as we say. So years later, here I am studying the rebirth of Brazilian cinema, and only recently did I realize that it had an association between my interests as a cinephile and what I do as a researcher. But more specifically, my focus is on contemporary Brazilian media, which includes cinema, and the participation and representation of minority groups in films, TV, and what I call peripheral or non-commercial media.

JLR: So today we're discussing your article, "Taís Araújo, The Black Helena against Brazil's Whitening Television," which was published in *Black Camera* in 2018. Could you give us a brief history of this particular essay, like when you began working on it? How did the project originate? How did the ideas change and the process of researching and writing?

BG: The article sort of came out of my dissertation research, which was originally focused only on cinema, until it occurred to me that cinema alone was not sufficient to discuss the impact of these texts and the ways that national identity was articulated. And I felt that TV in

particular was such an inescapable part of popular culture. And consequently, discourses around identity of race, class, and others were very much prevalent in those texts.

And those texts affected the way that we negotiate that in Brazil in common discourse. So my dissertation was just like my main research focus on representation of minority groups in Brazilian media at large. And the focus on Taís Araújo came as an afterthought actually. She kept popping up in my research and in my discussions of different media texts and particularly in a film by Joel Zito Araujo, who has no relationship with her, that was titled *Daughters of the Wind*.

And it's an all-black cast melodrama film and she played one of the protagonists. The filmmaker has other films, including this one, that always seems to make comments on TV representation of Afro-Brazilians. So the leap from that focus to rethinking about TV as an important medium for that was not really very hard to make. And then I started recalling the different telenovela roles that she had played, all of which I had seen back at home, and the ways in which those roles were articulated in publicity materials and also outside of television.

So then the article came about from me thinking that I could reshift the focus away from the dissertation and really think about her celebrity persona as a framework. What does the status as a celebrity allow us to analyze in terms of representations of race.

JLR: Can we talk a little bit about the background of, let's say, race in Brazil in short version. So can we start with talking about what you mentioned as the myth of racial democracy, which seems to be an important aspect to think about how race is and is not represented in Brazilian popular culture, but then also in media. So what is the myth of racial democracy? Where's it coming from and why is it important to think about in terms of thinking about race in Brazil?

BG: Yeah, that is sort of the term that everybody who writes about race in Brazil has to struggle with at some point. And I was hoping that I would not have to address that in the article. But one of my reviewers sort of said, "You can't just drop the term there. You have to unpack it for us." But the literature around the myth of racial democracy is so large that you feel like there's so much work that you have to do just to review that literature and then condense it and try to convey it in one or two paragraphs so that the article does not become an article about racial democracy.

So this little anecdote should just show that the term itself is quite a contentious one. It was once very much celebrated and used to explain the lack of a legal racial segregation in Brazil, like the one we see in the history of South Africa, and even in the US, for example. But

eventually it became criticized by scholars for the way it helped curtail or maybe even dismiss systemic racial inequalities in the country.

What I find really curious about the term is that it is no longer invoked in popular vernacular. Nobody talks about Brazil as being a racial democracy anymore. But the sentiment remains very much present in more subtle ways than that. So the term is almost directly inspired by the writings of Gilberto Freyre, who was a sociologist writing in the '30s. And the myth itself goes more or less like this: so during the colonial period, you have the Portuguese colonists, owners of large plantations that would often go to bed, or in Freyre's work, to the hammock with enslaved women, and sometimes with indigenous women, generating mixed race babies that eventually mix among themselves and create a beautiful race fluid population that we see in Brazil today.

So it's sort of like this rosy depiction of maybe not so much a loving bond, but some sort of a bond between masters and slaves, which I think is the title of Freyre's book in English. But I think that in a way, the fable seems to explain why many individuals in Brazil can't really tell you their ethnic background, myself included in that. It's just easier to say that we're all mixed. But the myth also papers over racial and gender violence that is implicit in this rosy narrative of love. Because what he's describing really is rape, or colonial rape.

And this is what I think is what Gilliam calls the great sperm theory of national foundation that I mention in the article. It's really a term that she uses to critique this colonial rhetoric that celebrates the genetic whitening of colored people by way of miscegenation. I think it would be comparable to the idea that colonialism has brought civilization to all four corners of the world. And I think by dismissing the idea that there is race at all in Brazil, the myth also helps us ignore both symbolic and structural racism. I think the main implication on a day-to-day basis is that racism is often explained by other factors.

JLR: Yeah. And it's interesting that a lot of the sort of erasure of let's say ethnic backgrounds because of all the mixing becomes itself then a tool that can be used to perpetuate specific racial dynamics, or specific hierarchies, even to today. I think at some point you mentioned that there's this sort of implicit pride around miscegenation that is just like everyone was mixing with everyone as if that was a celebratory impulse. And then that becomes the tool of obfuscation and contemporary control too.

BG: And I think also it prevents us from really seeing... I don't think any issue is uniquely or exclusively racial. But there are racial components in nearly every issue in Brazil. So to think about a society that is racially democratic, whatever that means, it's a term that doesn't even

make a lot of sense, leads us to ignore the racial components of a lot of the social issues that we experience.

JLR: Right. For sure. Yeah. One of the things that you mentioned is from Carl Degler, the idea of the mulatto as a sort of escape hatch to, again, avoid these kinds of conversations. Can you tell us more about that, how that operates?

BG: Yeah. The mulatto is an interesting term because it doesn't really apply in Portuguese. Mulatto is a word in Portuguese, but we don't use it to refer to people. So it's an interesting, I guess, term that Degler applies when he talks about the escape hatch. But I think that the more appropriate racial euphemism would be the Moreno or Morena, so the brown or the tan person.

And it really indicates, and I think that that's what Degler is speaking about, it indicates the ability that one may have to pass as white by making use of other markers beyond their skin color. So someone may adopt clothing or hairstyle or speech to present as belonging to a different class or to be more educated. So there are associations between race and class that are hard to untangle.

And then some people, in Degler's term, the mulatto is able to actually navigate between these two different social spheres by adopting non-racial appendages. And I think that that's really the key feature of Taís Araújo's career here, is that while her earlier characters were presented as passing, even as a slave, and therefore being able to participate in a white society, today, I think she can no longer play this kind of character because she can no longer be disassociated from her racial identity.

She has worked so hard to present herself as black, that all of a sudden to have her play a character who's black, passing as white, no longer make sense. And that's very unique in her trajectory to be able to have the popular appeal that she holds today while not having to bend over to participate in a mostly white circle that television is.

JLR: Yeah. And it's interesting that you mentioned that she had to construct that persona or that image around presenting herself as black. Because it points us to... Well, to a number of things, but the fact that race isn't just skin color. That it is imbricated in all of these other structural aspects. But also that it can't be divorced, as you mentioned earlier, from things like class, or other forms of status as well, because it's very different from someone like a television star to be able to negotiate how they present. Whether they present as black or not, then it

might be from someone who's like working class background. So those kinds of privileges and statuses also factor, too, right?

BG: Absolutely. And I think you're getting to a point that became really important in my dissertation work. And you see a little bit of that in this article, which is the idea of intersectionality. Intersectionality became the core framework of analysis for my dissertation, because I was dealing with race, gender, class, and sexuality. And it was really hard to manage all of that. And all of a sudden I started bringing all these texts together to then unpack the different axes of identity and oppression that were present in these steps.

So you can imagine Taís Araújo, for example, going to a jewelry store and not having to dress in a particular way or to speak in a particular way because of her recognizable figure. Whereas someone who's a working class, black woman may have to dress up, may have to present in a certain way so that she is seen at the store as an able consumer. So all of these different axes become very important to analyze really the effect that these presentations have.

JLR: Right. For sure. And so television is crucial in all of this, both as a medium of representation. So like television images help in some way shape these ideas that we have about race beyond or reduced to skin color. But then the television industry itself can be separated from these broader social dynamics. So can you tell us a little bit about how this plays out in Brazilian television or how this has played out historically and any sort of contemporary changes to race in Brazilian television?

BG: Yeah. Joel Zito Araújo, who's the filmmaker I mentioned earlier, he has written about the marginalization of black individuals on Brazilian television, on the level of representation, as well as on the level of production. And he has a wonderful documentary called *Denying Brazil*, which actually builds upon in Portuguese with the word black. So it would be a play with "Blackening Brazil" and then "Denying Brazil" at the same time.

And in that documentary, he interviews a lot of black actors who have worked in the golden age of Brazilian television and they talk about their experience. One thing that he says that I think is quite significant is that because television production was for most of its history required a certain level of skill that was available only to the bourgeoisie in Brazil, then you have mainly white TV producers and white TV writers, male writers as well and directors and so forth, writing about white-centric stories and producing white-centric narratives.

But because TV is both, or telenovelas in particular, which is the focus of this article, because telenovelas both tend to be realistic and also responded to the audience's expectations and

what they're thinking about the text, I think that there's a tendency towards a more faithful depiction of society. But it takes a long time for that to happen. So we see a lot of that in representation of queer characters.

There's a very gradual and noticeable trajectory from marginal gay characters to protagonist gay characters. In telenovelas, I think race has taken a little bit longer to appear as something that becomes a narrative component. And so you have a lot of black actors playing marginal roles, second or third tier roles, many of them being working class roles, some of them on the upper-class as well. It has been very rare up until the appearance of Taís Araújo for black actors to get to the top. And again, as it is illustrated in her case, it doesn't necessarily mean that race is going to be important for the narrative, even though they might have cast black people.

JLR: Yeah. It's an interesting dynamic because I think we think of it both in the level of production and representation. There has been this historical exclusion of black people from the television industry. And then there might have been moves towards including more black actors and maybe even some black creatives behind the scenes. But as you pointed out, one of the consequences of the sort of idea of racial democracy, even if it's not named as such, is that it can include black actors without actually positing them as black characters.

It can become that sort of empty celebration of representation of, oh, now we have black actors in it, but the characters are not coded as black. There's nothing specific to them. They could be replaced by a white actor, but they were just cast a black actor instead.

BG: Right. The other thing I think that's important to think about, and this has to do with the political economy of television in Brazil that's very different from the United States, but not very different from Latin America in general, is that you really have very few networks operating. And so you don't have the kind of specialized audience that American cable television has been able to produce and then cater to by specifically creating shows that the big blackness or made by black producers.

In Brazil, you have this intent to have universal appeal for mainstream popular audiences on network television. So you have Globo with the near monopoly of TV production and TV audiences really. So that creates a bottleneck that's really hard to get through if you're not already part of that circle.

JLR: Right. Yes. I think as I was reading your explanation of how Globo sort of does that, I kept thinking of Televisa in Mexico, which is a sort of very similar parallel of basically someone really controlling most of the television market for a very long time. And so that really prevents

any kind of change in terms of reach, but then from a political economy perspective, that also means that there aren't any alternative channels where other forms of representation can happen. So that ends up being just self-perpetuating in that sense. Yeah.

I guess the other parallel is thinking about telenovelas. I think you mentioned that one of the characteristics of telenovelas is this appeal to realism, or to seem like the story is part of real life. And also by the way that they're consumed on a sort of day-to-day basis, it also becomes the kind of media that people follow on their day-to-day lives. So that in itself has a specific role in perpetuating certain social norms, but also could have an important role in questioning those norms and pushing on it because it's so popular and so prevalent as well.

BG: Telenovela texts become part of real life in a weird way. So there's this trend in some Brazilian telenovelas, which is that they often adopt a social issue to address. So all of a sudden that social issue is then reproduced in TV news shows and then in magazines, even though it's a fictional character on the TV. Then you have special interview columns on certain periodicals that talk to real people that are experiencing the issue that's being addressed on TV.

So it's very easy for telenovelas to insert a particular topic into national discourse and have that reverberate in many ways, which is why I thought that in my research, I could not just simply ignore TV. Because cinema doesn't often do that.

JLR: So talking specifically about the telenovela and the social issue, one of the things that you mention in the article is that as there was more opportunities for black cast members to join telenovelas, a lot of the more black actors cast in telenovelas were about historical narratives. And that had to do with the sort of pushing the conversation about race to the past. Can you tell us a little bit more about that?

BG: When you have a TV show that said in the past, in colonial times, that has to address labor, you kind of need a lot of black actors. And they still don't make up even 50% of the cast, which in reality should be the case. But all of a sudden you kind of see the efforts that television can make to find black actors. Yes, they do exist. Yes, they are looking for work. Yes, they're very talented. But they don't often get outside of that sort of historical period.

But I also think that what these historical narratives give TV the chance to address is racism, more particularly. If you have a show that addresses slavery, the narrative is embedded in racism and it's addressing racism at every turn. But because it's not realistic, because it's not contemporaneous... Perhaps I shouldn't say realistic. But because it's not representing what

looks like the current reality, it's easier to say yes, there was racism in Brazil, but this is something that we have overcome.

And at the same time that it gives this impression, we have a number of examples of... Telenovela is centered on indigeneity and blackness in earlier periods in Brazilian history whose protagonists are white actors or actresses that use makeup to look a little darker. It doesn't go as far as black face per se. But there's a lot of discussion. And sometimes it's just get a Morena or Moreno, even though they have no connection with the identity depicted because of their star value.

JLR: All right. So let's move to the actress that you specifically write about in this article. So can you give us a brief sort of introduction to Taís Araújo's career and star persona and why you sort of focused on these important moments in her career?

BG: There's a memory of Taís Araújo being called the first black protagonist more than once. So then that led me to my research. Was she really the first black protagonist? If so, in what ways? Her career starts, I want to say '95, in a smaller network that was quite popular at the time called Manchete. It no longer exists. And she worked with Avancini, a TV director, that then started casting his next TV show, *Chica da Silva*, a telenovela, which was about the real story of an enslaved woman who gets freed and then marries a white man and becomes one of the wealthiest women in the village in Minas Gerais.

So this figure is quite mythical in Brazilian history, even though historians have demonstrated how she was not particularly unique in that transition from slavery to being part of the wide society. But it is a very interesting figure. So Avancini was casting this show and the actress that was slated to play the protectionist role dropped out because she didn't want to appear nude on television. And that was one of the requirements. Taís Araújo was just starting her career.

She was 17 years old then, and Avancini invited her with no audition, given that he had worked with her before, to play the lead role. And you can imagine that this is any actor's dream job to star as the lead in a telenovela, at the beginning of your career. And given that we hadn't seen a lot of black representation in telenovelas up until that point, it seems like an offer you can't refuse.

And then she moved on to other important roles. And she sort of proved her star value with the fact that she continues to be successful in the characters that she plays in different telenovelas, not always as the protagonist. In fact, only a few times she has been the protagonist. But

undeniably, I think, for anyone who watches television, her star level is comparable to any other contemporary white female actress at this time.

And I should say, she was not the first black protagonist at all. There had been one earlier on, I forget, I want to say in the '60s or '70s, Ruth de Souza, who played the lead character in an adaptation of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. But she lost her top billing as the telenovela played out because people weren't as interested in her character. So eventually she moved from protagonists to just a secondary form or third grade character.

JLR: Yeah. And it's interesting because, I mean, we see this practice in other industries around the world, where it's the promotion of, A, the first, or using the casting of a nonwhite actor in any form as the sort of promotional hook. So being the first black protagonist, even if she wasn't, but people can't remember what the last one was. So that in itself enables all the promotional material around the telenovela.

BG: Yeah. And they use that three times for the three novellas that she played the lead role for.

JLR: Yeah. It just makes it even more funny, but also telling that she would be the first black protagonist three times in a row as if the first one didn't count. We forgot about that one, but now let's talk about this.

BG: There's always a qualifier. So she was the first protagonist ever. Then she was the first protagonist at Globo network. And then she was the first protagonist in a prime time telenovela at Globo. So it becomes more and more specific. And then I haven't seen any other attempt to cast her as first on anything after that.

JLR: To rise in the hierarchy of that.

BG: Exactly.

JLR: So the first one mentioned is *Chica da Silva*, which was in a smaller network. But then the sort of first at Globo is *Da Cor do Pecado*. And both of these in some way are doing this, the first black protagonist as a sort of promotional strategy. But in this story, there's also drawing attention to her character's blackness, in some ways. So what are some sort of points of connection there and differences in how the narratives treat Araújo's character as black.

BG: Yeah. So both of those narratives address passing. So it is about race and it is about a raced character attempting to inhabit a world in which it doesn't originally belong to. So Chica da Silva is the freed slave. And then *Da Cor do Pecado* is about this street vendor in Maranhão, which is a Northeastern state in Brazil, who falls in love with a... I forget his... Some kind of academic or researcher from Rio, a white researcher from Rio.

And then they have a romantic relationship. She gets pregnant with him and he dies in an accident. He has a twin brother, typical telenovela kind of stuff. But the important thing is that he dies. And then six or seven years later, her son wants to know the whereabouts of his father's side of the family. So she travels to Rio and she finds out that the father had another fiance, who also got pregnant.

So her son has a brother by way of the father. And so she is doing that for her son because he wants to meet his family, but she wants nothing from the family. She doesn't want any money. She doesn't want any connection and she's doing it for the son. But the presence of her son in that white family, his grandfather happens to be a millionaire, seems to threaten the well-being of the family, especially the financial well-being of the family.

And it turns out that the fiance is actually the villain of the story. So she often addresses or she presents racist attitudes or racist behaviors. That makes sense because it's all always treated as symbolic. Now, this is a character who's inherently bad. So of course she would be racist. This is not something you would see out in the street. So even when it does address racism, it can always be justified by way of someone's overall badness.

So what's interesting in these two cases here is that the publicity material that really promotes Taís Araújo as the black protagonist in these telenovelas pays off. Because they are actually addressing racial relations in Brazil. And that's quite significant and rare.

JLR: Right. And it does, in some way, in the text and outside of the text, put all that burden on her. And she does become this first protagonist in a telenovela, first protagonist in a global telenovela. But also her character is carrying this narrative of passing and racial dispute, if you will, but all on herself. It becomes like all the other white characters around her and she's the one that is sort of making a point of difference in that sense too.

BG: Yeah. And mind you, too, as is the case with most telenovelas, the lead role is often very hard to carry because they're the victims. They don't have interesting narrative arcs. They're not surprising in many ways. So there's a racial component to this, as you mentioned. There's also a gender component to this right, that she's always involved in romantic relationships. That it is

always the male character who saves her or who places her in a different social sphere. So her upward social mobility goes through marriage or sexual relations with a white man. But you're absolutely right. The burden of being the black actor who is making or breaking for an entire group of people who might come after you is quite intense.

JLR: Yeah. For sure. And because of the genre, it becomes the trap. Because on the one hand, you want to celebrate the protagonists and the hiring of a black actress for this principal role. But because it is a telenovela, the principal role is perhaps the least interesting one. So it ends up putting her outside the text in this privileged position or something that the promotion can really draw attention to. But within the text, she sort of becomes just the vessel for the story to carry on and all the interesting characters are left to the others.

BG: Yeah. And I think also, what's really unique about her career is that she has played a number of secondary characters that are inherently more interesting. So that allows her to break out of this particular mold. And that adds to her ability or her appeal to become a protagonist later in other telenovelas as well.

JLR: So even in your article title, you call her The Black Helena. Can you tell us more about how that came about? How does she become the black Helena and where does that come from? And what's the background there?

BG: Yeah. I can't claim that term as my own. The tragedy of this term is that that's how she was referred to when the casting was announced, she will be the first black Helena. So alongside being the first black protagonist in a prime time TV television show at Globo, she was the black Helena. And so the writer of this show, *Viver a Vida*, Manoel Carlos, and he was... He doesn't write anymore, but his telenovelas were always very popular and very sort of eventful in the way that Globo promoted them when they were upcoming. And his protagonists were always named Helena. I think it was his mother's name, I forget. And she would become the first black Helena. And that was heavily publicized. So you have Taís Araújo, two-time protagonist being the first black Helena ever.

And the history with that, I've seen some interviews in which she talks about going through a phase in which she wanted to take a break from acting. But she got a call from Manoel Carlos himself saying that he wanted her to play the role. And she thought really hard about it. Again, she felt that's not an offer I can refuse because if I don't take it, we're going to have a white Helena again and this is an opportunity that's never going to come back to me or to anyone else. So she felt this kind of unspoken pressure to take the role. And it was a really hard world

for her to take because unlike the previous roles that she did as protagonist, this one was not about race. It actually erased her race in many different ways.

So this was a character that might as well have been played by a white actress and no one would have told the difference. Her mother in the show and her sister appear to be a lot more raced, narratively speaking, than she was. But nothing about her storyline was about race at all. And I think because of her trajectory on television up until that point, it became a programmatic fit because she could no longer be accepted as a morena even. And there were interactions among characters especially positioning her as the victim in many different situations that to most people watching the telenovela seemed to be racial attitudes, but they were not addressed as such. They were addressed as personal vendetta, they were addressed as bickering.

And so even though race was not part of the telenovela, there were some things that seemed racist in the way that her character was suffering, but it amounted to gender issues, or class issues, or professional issues even. And nobody liked her character. So speaking like we were before about this uninteresting character, it was quite challenging for that character to survive as a protagonist because there was not much more you could do with that.

JLR: So what about after that? Because you end by talking about what has allowed her since then is the fact that she is a very famous actress and a celebrity. She's been able to take control of her star image, to some extent, and since she's already been positioned in a way that she won't be cast as anything other than black. How does that allow her to do certain things now in terms of the kinds of projects that she does and how she presents herself?

BG: She continued to have important roles on television. There is one telenovela that's not super prime time, but it was called *Cheias de Charme*, about three maids that accidentally make a music video that goes viral on the internet and they become superstars overnight. So she was one of those three maids, and she was the only black one. So her race was somewhat part of the narrative.

But at that point it was less important because she was already leading as black. But more significantly than these TV roles that in terms of industry practices, she doesn't really have a lot of control over. She has produced a play alongside her husband, *On the Mountaintop*, I think is the name in English, by Katori Hall. And that sort of is a fictional account of the last day of Martin Luther king.

Her husband played Martin Luther King and she played a maid in the hotel that he stayed the night before his assassination. And they both produced an act. I can't remember who directed the show. But that's very much taking control over the roles that she's playing. And they had a very well-received TV series that I think lasted for three or four seasons called *Mister Brau*. That was about a...

Also, alongside her husband, so her husband played a character who's a singer, a very popular singer, and she played his dancer on stage. But it was really focused on their relationship as a married couple. Super wealthy. And that show had repercussions in international media as well. And so some of these papers picked that up, compared them to be Beyonce and Jay Z, which is a silly comparison.

But it sort of points to this idea of celebrity and stardom that they carry. And also I think that the work that she's been doing on her social media accounts is really relevant. And it sounds silly to talk about social media, but it is an important outlet for these artists to speak on their own terms. The other day, I saw that she spent a very long time using her Instagram stories to detail the process of going into bed while preparing her hair for the next day.

And it was so long that in the middle, she says, this was a bad idea. I knew I would regret doing this. And it's been three hours, I'm still working on this. But you don't see black women in their bathroom, with no makeup, doing her hair for hours and hours and hours, sweating and telling their audiences about the process. What's right, what's wrong, how it's working, how it's not working, how it's difficult.

And again, I think that is, in many ways, reclaiming her own identity or reclaiming her own image. This is what I present. And she has hosted interviews, talk shows and beauty related TV shows on cable television. So it seems like she's not necessarily autonomous. But she doesn't need anyone else to sort of have a show of her own, if that makes sense. That she seems to carry a lot of power and clout in the media industry.

JLR: Right. And it seems even part of a lineage of her earlier decisions and taking like *Viver a Vida*, the prime time Globo role, and like, this is important for me to do because there's always been a white Helena. So someone has to be the first black Helena, to then now doing many other types of media to think about the sort of impetus and in some ways, the burden of that representation that falls on her.

BG: I saw in an interview her say that after *Viver a Vida*, she considered quitting acting altogether due to the amount of criticism that she received. So the disappointment of her

character translated a lot as disappointment with her as an actress. She also mentions, I think in that same interview, that she continues to receive invitations to be on the cover of different fashion magazines in Brazil. And she keeps telling them, "I'm not the only black actress out there." Stop inviting me. Sure, I'll take it this time, but look at everybody else who has worked with me, even. If you know my body of work, you know other people who could be illustrating these magazines. So it's both that, both knowing the responsibility that she has because of her star value and continue this line of representation, but also how she also needs to step down or step aside so that other people have the same kind of opportunities.

JLR: Right. Even in the international press, the parallel to calling her Beyonce and her husband Jay Z means that all of these journalists didn't have another point of reference, or there's not a lot of points of reference for black celebrities of any popular black celebrity around the world becomes the new Beyonce, in that sense. But related to that, so the question that she keeps getting asked to appear on the cover of magazines because the editors decided that we need a black actress on it and that was the only person they could think of.

Your analysis is focused specifically on her because of all these significant roles and trajectory and what that's meant for black representation on Brazilian television. But more contemporarily, can you think of other Brazilian stars that are doing something similar or that their career is taking off, but in different ways, and how they're managing race in that star persona?

BG: I think we see a much more diverse representation in cinema and even in theater. I would single out Grace Passô, who's an actress from Minas Gerais, who's been doing a lot of interesting work. And also Isabél Zuaa, who's in a very sort of crazy, interesting genre film called *Good Manners*, that I highly recommend. But on television, we have Lázaro Ramos, who I can't believe I haven't said his name yet, who is Taís Araújo's husband?

He's had a lot of television roles. He starred in *Madame Satá*, which is queer a film that sort of launched his career. And Camila Pitanga I think would be another big black actress who has similar star value that Taís Araújo does. And in fact, there is a book out called *Imagining the Mulatta* by Jasmine Mitchell. And it has a section about Camila Pitanga, talking specifically about how people have perceived her race.

Her father is a very important black actor in Brazil. But people have seen Camila Pitanga more as morena than as black. And Camila Pitanga has consistently affirmed herself as black. But there is this resistance to see her as such. So her skin color is much lighter than Taís Araújo. And she has played a number of important roles in television. And I think the new generation, there is an

actress called Lucy Ramos from Recife, actually, my hometown, who has been working a lot on television.

I think her big breakthrough was a role that Taís Araújo couldn't take because she was pregnant. So again, like this idea of stepping aside and allow someone else to take over might've been a good entry way for Lucy Ramos to appear. And I think that if she continues to work at the pace that she is, she will become someone with a similar kind of importance as Taís Araújo has today.

JLR: Right. So that's a good sign, perhaps, right? The ability for new actors to be able to take on these roles. It definitely seems like structurally, there's still much change to be done, especially, as you mentioned, actresses who may be able to pass have to consciously keep reaffirming their blackness as part of their star persona, because otherwise they very easily industry-wide could be try to push back to being white passed again.

BG: Yeah. It doesn't become black representation. If you're a morena or a moreno, that's not what it reads as. And the other thing is that there is a quantitative change in black representation on television. We have a lot more black actors working today. And it's not enough. It hasn't changed significantly, but there has been a change. So that might also explain why I can't think of one person in the new generation who is a stand out because you have other people along their side. So maybe we're going to see a group of people working more and more and more and appearing frequently rather than one or two stars like we have with Camila Pitanga, Taís Araújo, and Lázaro Ramos. So that's another good sign, I think.

JLR: That's a good sign. Yeah. So what are the areas that you're working on now or your new project working towards?

BG: What I'm focusing on right now is actually this one that I mentioned earlier, *Madame Satá*, that actually has Lázaro Ramos as its protagonist. Because we're coming up to its 20th anniversary and I feel like the film has been overlooked and I consider it to be a queer classic. And I kind of want to rekindle an interest in this film. And that article should be published in *Film Quarterly* next year.

So I find *Madame Satá* to have a resonance with many other queer films that have come after. And even in the ways in which the film can be seen as quite problematic for today's standards, but that was very much groundbreaking at the time. And the film is very much intersectional. Let's say you have a drag queen character at its center who is of a lower class and who's black and who tries to use force and his masculinity to then assert himself before the police who are trying to capture him because he's black and gay.

So there are many layers to this character and the film attempts to unpack the character for us and fails at doing so, I think that's the whole point of them, not being able to reveal the core identity of someone. Nobody has core identities. That it's about how you negotiate it.

JLR: Right. Bruno, thank you for joining us.

BG: Thank you so much. It was a pleasure.

[closing credits music]

JLR: This episode of the Global Media Cultures podcast was produced by me and edited by Alan Yu, and closing credits music by Cloud Mouth. This project is supported in part by the School of Arts, Technology, and Emerging Communication at the University of Texas at Dallas. Global Media Cultures podcast introduces media scholarship about the world, to the world. I'm Juan Llamas-Rodriguez. Thank you for listening.