

CREATIVE DECEPTIONS: TELEVISION SOAPS AND WOMEN'S BODIES IN BAHIA

Brown, Lisa Beljuli (2011) **Body parts on Planet Slum: Women and television in Brazil**. London: Anthem Press. (Key issues in Modern Sociology.) ISBN 978-0-85728-797-7 hbk; also available as an eBook. Pages xxv + 156.

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As its rather bleak title suggests, this is not a book for the faint-hearted. It is though a powerful text which attempts to understand why women in the slums of Salvador in the state of Bahia, Brazil, adore watching *telenovelas* almost to the point of obsession. Lisa Brown turns firmly away from a reading of the *telenovelas* as redemptive fantasy (Modleski, 1982; and see Modleski, 1983). Neither does she give an analysis that allows for the emergence of a nationalist idea of belonging spun from “the magic of television and film stars” (Abu-Lughod, 2005: 228). Rather she demonstrates that the diet of *telenovelas* destroys and yet sustains the women who constitute the poorest of the urban poor in the most “African” of Brazil’s provinces. Brown’s study is based on a year’s fieldwork in two of Salvador’s *biarros* in 1999 and 2000. During this time she lived close to the women whose lives she studied, became acquainted with their families, neighbours, the rhythm of their lives and with the visual texts and narratives which absorbed and in a sense dominated them. Eschewing a more standard anthropological telling, Brown opts instead for a fictive recreation, interlaced with theoretical explanation. This approach works well most of the time but can be heavy-handed, so that at moments her theoretical framing seems intrusive and her insistence on the three alienated “body parts” of her women subjects: the vagina, the womb and the back intrudes too heavily.

Yet she does succeed in building a picture “of a life taking place”. In her second chapter, ironically titled, “The meek shall inherit the earth” – Brown takes the reader into the dense life experiences of her central characters, Nilzete the 36 year old mother of 11 and Francisca, 18, the mother of 4 children living in desperate poverty. She builds through narrative and in a (realist) novelistic way, an image of their life in the broader Bahian society – their economic marginalization and the narrowness of their worlds of knowledge. She contrasts with them the figures of the health workers, Caty and Videlma, the church woman, Tania, and the social worker Yvonne, each of whom stands outside their world but is also part of it as all live in the *bairro*. At the centre of the narrative is the dominant presence, the television screen and its ever present *telenovelas*, or *novelas*. While full of powerful images that tell of physical decay such as Nilzete’s “lumpy” hand, her “six teeth” and swollen legs, the narrative moves sometimes

confusingly between figure and places, camera-like, jumpy. Yet through this technique her central “characters”, both immigrants from the rural hinterland move before the reader, parading in their best clothes through the muddy streets, catching buses, trying to engage with the bureaucracy through whom they hope to improve the everyday problems in their lives. Deftly, Brown shows at points like this *through* the narrative, the obstacles women such as Francisca and Nilzete face as they attempt to improve the texture of their lives. Change begins to seem impossible and any chance of a sudden uplift, a miraculous transformation fades as we read. The dream of development, the expectations of a humane modernity are still-born here.

Into this, largely joyless world, enter the *telenovelas*. Clearly these constitute devoted viewing across Brazilian society but, Brown reminds us, they are not “innocent”. They are part of a huge multi-million business enterprise in which – in the pre-1984 years of military dictatorship, the ruling military were closely involved. In that period they were closely censored and linked to the promotion of a national identity. The post-1984 period saw considerably less censorship in the *telenovelas* but still the production of a particular Brazilian world, one in which Afro-Brazilians appeared as servants or slaves and rarely if ever in other roles. In other words, these luscious and seductive productions constantly marginalize black and poor viewers who nevertheless remain avid followers. Running normally to about 100 episodes of 30 minutes each, with eight to nine separate titles daily, the rhythm of life in the slums is fixed, for some women, by the times of the *telenovelas*. Figures show that, in Brazil overall, the mid-evening *telenovela* in 1999, was watched by 40-million, so in their viewing, the women of the *bairros* of Santa Cruz and Jardim Cruzeiro form part of a single national community of watchers but their lives never feature. Moreover, the *telenovela* narratives largely reinforce the old Brazilian hierarchies of race, wealth, the powerful and the powerless.

This is where Brown introduces her challenging idea of “creative deceptions”, arguing that “through a complex work of imaginative deception, the women use the soap operas to reconstruct their alienated bodies and convert suffering into pleasure” (p xxiv and Chapter 5). Important in Brown’s theoretical framing is the notion of woman alienated from her own body. Drawing on Simone De Beauvoir’s classic study, **The second sex**, as well as Luce Irigaray, Lacan and more distantly Marx and Hegel the author sets her central subjects in a world where women’s *dis*-embodied bodies are totally socially and historically inscribed with meaning. So much so, that any sense of wholeness and joyful full-bodiedness is an abstraction. Instead the passage of a woman’s life moves thus: first the inscription of the shameful and shaming vagina – then the womb that signifies an entrapping idea of motherhood simply as fulfilment – and finally, the back. This, she argues, metonymically defines women through the endless unrecognized heavy physical work carried out at all stages of their lives in their own homes and sometimes also for employers who often pay below the minimum wage. How, in this alienated space, can women possibly find a meaning for their lives, “a social theodicy” she asks, using in a new frame, Hegel’s proposition of every human’s need to *make* meaning for their lives. And at this point, *suffering* enters Brown’s critical narrative as a major player in the real life drama of the characters she has studied, and provides the crucial link with the *telenovelas*.

Her characters, Francisca, Nilzete and others such as Marie Helene, identify pleasurably with the *suffering* of the women characters in the *telenovelas*. It does not matter that the women are often blonde and blue-eyed (part of the increasing

“blondification” of the Brazilian *telenovelas*) and are from a different social class – as they suffer misfortune of a whole epic range of possibilities, so the women viewers in the *bairros* experience this with them and find it deeply pleasurable. This is their “creative deception” through which they embody their lives with meaning and create a “social theodicy”. I find Lisa Brown’s theoretical framing, intriguing, her narrative powerful but I long too for some relief from the unremitting persistency of her position. Was there perhaps also the possibility that the working out of narrative, the multiple presences of revenge, love, infidelity, despair, ecstasy all woven together and the pure artfulness of this, might have intrigued the women and given aesthetic pleasure? We hear too little about the *telenovelas* themselves. I wonder too, about the possibilities of other forms of pleasure and of sociability in the *bairros* even for women in the bleak social position of Francisca and Nilzete? The church is present in this study as the other dominant influence in the *bairros*, alongside the *telenovelas*. Yet it appears almost in caricature: even if the women do not attend mass as they have no money for the collection do they never pray? And true, sex has a silenced if not shamed role in much Catholic teaching. Yet if one considers the dialogue between the Old and the New Testaments – one could say that lust, pleasure and sexual abundance are so present in the books of the Old Testament that it is hard to elide them from the whole experience of the Church. There is silence too on the subject of the role of the deities of Candomblé in the lives of the inhabitants in the *bairros*. It was a topic around which there was much secrecy, Brown states, but it may nevertheless have had great hidden meaning for many. The Pentecostal churches too are fairly summarily dismissed.

Finally, in spite of its elisions, this remains an important book for South African as well as other readers. Much exchange in a range of disciplines between Brazil and South Africa already exists but there is a great deal still to do. This bold study, moving between feminism, media studies and a social theory of global poverty is an exciting part of this process of productive exchange.

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