

**Telenovela, Gender and Demography in Brazil**  
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Concern with reception marks the literature about Brazilian telenovelas since the early 1970's, when one of the first academic works about these television programs, Micelli's (1972) took viewers into account. Recent work produced insightful ethnographic accounts about the different locations of television sets, different timings of television watching, different ways television, specifically telenovelas, are appropriated in everyday life, according to different social classes and geographic regions in the country (Leal, 1986; Sarques, 1986; Prado, 1987). In this paper, we explore the other side of the coin. We look at the meanings and appropriations of telenovelas that viewers of different gender and social class **share**. We do so by comparing viewership of one same telenovela among viewers in a São Paulo favela and surrounding upper middle class dwellings and in the middle size town of Montes Claros in Northern Minas Gerais state.<sup>1</sup>

Telenovelas are classified by the industry as women's programs and viewers agree with this definition. Nonetheless in both sites men also watch. In what senses are these programs interpreted as female? How does interaction with them interfere with family relations? Research suggests that in São Paulo viewers conceptualize both their own private dramas and telenovela plots as moved by an opposition to what they call "old fashion" family models. Most viewers oppose "old fashion" or sometimes "machista" types of family. In Montes Claros, middle and working class families, build the

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opposition around ideas of “tradition” and “modernity” – telenovelas expressing “modernity” as it is associated with large cities such as São Paulo or Rio de Janeiro.

In both sites, the researched telenovela, *The Cattle King*, worked as a shared repertoire through which viewers enacted their private dramas in terms that were understood by a variety of possible interlocutors, including their family members, their friends, their employers (especially in the case of domestic employees), as well as researchers. The assumption that telenovela’s plots and characters constitute a repertoire most Brazilians share, makes of these series a vehicle of self reflexion. In the particular case we studied, we will see that female and male protagonists escaped what viewers recognized as conventional models of behavior. We will also discuss the case of a secondary, but more controversial, love story in the plot – the violent affair between the first wife of the cattle king and her gigolo lover. The ways in which viewers interact through the enactment of these stories suggest the ways in which telenovelas mediate social relations, providing a common language for public debate of private issues, such as the various sources of family conflict. In times of family instability, viewers praise what they call “understanding” models of relationship among family members.

### **1. Wired Up to the World in Vila Feliz**

Located in the core of one of the richest São Paulo neighborhoods, Vila Feliz synthesizes some of the late-twentieth century paradoxes of Brazilian society. With its 32.500 inhabitants (FIPE, 1994), Vila Feliz is situated in a one-kilometer square hilly lot surrounded by upper and middle-class households. Social inequality is dramatically

inscribed into this urban landscape. Mansions situated in asphalt streets border wood huts, mud trails, and open sewers. Condominium skyscrapers have verandas on each floor, as well as swimming pools facing Vila Feliz. Their sewage comes down the hill through the *favela* in open streams, heading to the main river.

An ambiguous dynamic of fear, separation, and intimacy marks the relations between those who live in Vila Feliz, and those who live in the nearby condominiums. So-called domestic work accounts for 27.8% of the jobs of the *favelados*; another twenty percent of the workers are employed in the construction business (Fabes-SP). Nannies, guards, gardeners, cleaning women, cooks, drivers, sewer workers, bricklayers, office boys, and a whole army of condominium employees live in the *favela*. They walk up hill to their work, which is often inside upper-middle class apartments. In these bunkers, the employees become acquainted with the manners, fashion, architectural styles, cooking habits, and frustrations of their employers. Nonetheless, upper-middle class employers rarely enter the *favela*. Furthermore, upper-middle class homes are heavily protected with systems of gates, video cameras, alarms, and private guards, so as to isolate themselves from the threatening, but immediate, outside world. This complex dynamic of exclusion and inclusion reveals itself in the fact that many security guards who are responsible for protecting wealthy homes from the threat represented by the nearby *favela*, are themselves *favelados*.

### **1.1. Interacting with Telenovelas in Everyday Life: Deconstructing “Old Fashion”**

#### **Models**

Instability marks family life in the favela, in the upper middle class dwellings, and in telenovelas. Some nuclear families were already fragmented when we started fieldwork. Others did so during or after fieldwork. Families that maintain their nuclear structure express their fears of fragmentation.

Telenovelas and specifically the ongoing Globo 8 P.M. series, *The Cattle King*, prove an especially rich subject to stimulate viewers to express their main source of current domestic conflict. Their choice of preferred characters and preferred stories within the plot frames their interpretation and expresses their ongoing private instabilities, which in most cases does not fit the nuclear family model. Their critiques about the main characters highlight their representations about ideal types of women and men.

Viewers are attuned to the evolution female protagonists have developed in previous telenovelas, therefore they expect all female protagonists should develop similar kinds of personal paths. Some viewers see holding the family together as the main positive female attribute, others stress economic independence instead. Most viewers think that ideal female heroines should synthesize the two.

Female viewers in São Paulo criticized the female protagonist's failure to fit what they call the model of a “strong” woman who undergoes a “transformation” – this criticism was also pervasive in Montes Claros, as we will see shortly. Viewers did not sympathize with the character of Luana, the female protagonist of *The Cattle King*. Often

men did not even mention her much. Most women, young and older, upper-middle class or lower-class criticized her. This was a character who did not polarize viewers' attention. Whereas ideal types of women deserved the adjective "strong," Luana was defined by the exact antonym, "weak." The main reason for this dislike of the female protagonist was this character's lack of a conventional "transformation." Viewer's relations with the female protagonist express their opposition to "old fashion" models of women.

Most female viewers, however praise Bruno Mezenga's family members because they are "modern," meaning they understand and respect each other. The sister and brother get along; they both learned to respect their father; the three of them accept their mother back into the house when she needs to be there. A middle-class viewer especially mentions Lia's (the cattle king's daughter) move on the road with her musician boyfriend, as a very "modern" and acceptable thing. She especially praises Bruno Mezenga's liberal attitude towards his daughter and ex-wife:

I like the focus of the 8 PM telenovela very much. It portrays a **modern** family, a girl who left to live with a singer, also the boy... But I like it also because it seems that they love each other. The girl worries about her brother. The father, I find a nice figure because of the way he takes care of the two kids. (Milú, p.7.)

Like in Montes Claros, here the idea of "modern" is associated with understanding and kind relations between family members. Middle-aged and older women in the *favela* also praise family unity. They also learned that family relations can be less authoritarian and more understanding. Moreover, they do not blame women for the current instability of the family; they hardly take the initiative to leave their own

husbands. These women are either abandoned wives, widows, or married women who support uncooperative alcoholic husbands.

Many women in the favela shared similar histories with their husbands. The owner of the first video rental store was also a successful local business woman who supported an alcoholic disloyal husband. Women of their generation are abandoned by their men, but they do not leave. Mrs. Marly, raised five children alone, but still resents her husband's leaving. A few women who were abandoned by their husbands with young children and succeeded in raising them alone, now feel sufficiently liberated that they advise women who insist on supporting useless husbands, to take the initiative and leave them. These women reason that it is better to live alone than to have to deal with fights. Some experienced relationships based on mutual sharing, support, conversation, rather than just on male authority. Their views are closer to the young women's representations about marriage, family and gender. Widows spoke of their former "old-fashioned" husbands with respect, but also with a sense of distance.

Most of these women present an hegemonic representation about the ideal type of women, one conventionally present in many telenovelas during the past thirty years, but not represented in *The Cattle King*. The majority of women we contacted (both in the *favela* and in Montes Claros) praised an ideal type of independent women generally labeled as "strong":

I always led my difficult life – I say difficult because it was hard to raise them [her six children] – but without crying or complaining. I hate when I see a separated woman crying: "Oh, my husband left me with so many kids, Oh my God, what do I do?" Some people don't like me because I tell them: Nothing is hard when we are brave enough to face life. I know many women here with only one son, but crying, complaining... Some did

not send their kids to school, they fell off the line, many were killed, or became bandits... I said: "No my dear, you are following the wrong path, because you did not stop to think. I was left with six; notwithstanding, I did not despair." (Mrs. Luisa, p.4)

Other women have detailed accounts about the difference between the "old style" and "contemporary" gender relations. Lina is one of them:

Old time man was considered as a much more superior being than he is today. Nowadays man is a companion, a friend. Today you have the freedom to speak. When I married, I did not feel free to speak with my husband. It was a shame, and this was not so long ago. I married in 1971. It was shameful to open your mouth and say something other than: "Here is your bath towel, your pair of socks, your piece of clothes," you know, to be only a *doméstica* (maid) in the house. (Lina, p.4.)

After her husband died, Lina got involved in community and political activity, where she got in touch, and learned to practice, different kinds of relationships. Because Lina thought that nowadays gender relations are more equal, in her mind there are no motives left for betrayals:

I think that today people don't have any reason to betray. Today you have freedom to discuss things. (Lina, p.4.)

Unlike their mothers, young *favela* women do not expect to have more than one, two, or a maximum of three children. Although they have more information about birth control methods than their mothers did, they frequently become unexpectedly pregnant. Perhaps because they are aware that families do not last, and that they are very likely to be left alone with their children, many induce abortion. Nonetheless, most of them have babies early in life. Young women condemn their fathers who abandoned their mother and siblings. Some of them successfully sued the fathers of their children in order to



guarantee that they contribute alimony toward the raising of their children. These women believe that female telenovela heroines demonstrate strengths similar to their own. When characters do not do so, viewers criticize them.

When Luana first appeared in *The Cattle King*, viewers thought that she matched their idea of a “strong” woman. She was a beautiful, pure, landless woman who lived by herself. Her purity was such that she did not even have a name. Because she had lost her memory in the truck accident that killed her whole family, she had adopted a first name. Her life was about hard work, homelessness and loneliness. She was capable of true friendship, as demonstrated by her becoming friends with the landless. She was also “strong” enough to defend herself with a huge knife from a man who assaulted her, and to remain a virgin until she fell in love.

Although viewers originally liked this character’s Cinderella appeal, they did not approve of Luana’s non-conventional decisions throughout the drama. Once she had conquered the love of the king of cattle, and moved in with him, they expected her to go through the conventional “transformation” into a rich and elegant woman.

Male viewers did not refer much to her. Very few female viewers like her. Most viewers found her to be “weak”, “passive,” “inarticulate,” and “inexpressive.” For Reinalda, Luana shared her own lack of decision:

She is like me. My life is like that. I’ve been with José for six years now. But during these years, I went back and forth. I’ve always loved watching telenovelas. But with *The Cattle King*, I am not as I used to be because Luana keeps coming and leaving, and we don’t understand why she moves the way she does. (p.26)

Here, similarity with one's own experience is thought of as a negative sign. Reinalda narrates her own active and violent comings back and forth between her mother's, her father's, her stepparents', and her husband's with details of family violence and instability. According to her thriller-like narrative, her father married five times, and had kids with four of his wives. He drank and beat his wives. She described her mother as also an alcoholic who died after her second husband left her, taking their kids away with him. Reinalda's mother's separation from her second husband stemmed from Reinalda's brother's stabbing their stepfather in defense of their beaten mother. Reinalda also reported that her stepfather did not look at her "with paternal eyes," implying that he had abused her. Her life story was marked, first by her parents' comings and goings, and second, by her own sequence of impulsive moves. Reinalda reported a detailed story of an illegally induced abortion. She also told us that she attempted to induce an abortion when she was pregnant with her son Tiago, but she had failed. During her pregnancy and at the time of her baby's birth, Reinalda was separated from her husband. Luana's story seemed quite mild in comparison to Reinalda's "plot" of stabbing, fight, flesh, and blood.

If the story of the main romantic couple was considered as mild, that was not the case with Léa, the cattle king's ex-wife, and her lover, Ralf, who were amongst the characters viewers referred to more often. However, open appreciation of them was rare, as we will see in detail on the Montes Claros section below. After all, Léa left her son and her daughter plus her rich comfortable life for a bad guy, a gigolo, who battered her. Her conduct violated motherhood, but that was not the only reason why viewers did not approve it. She was carried away by passion in unreasonable ways. She had everything,

but ended up with little. She made a bad and unjustifiable move. Most people thought that above anything she was dumb.

That was not the case with Chico and Celeste though. They identified with Léa and Ralf. This conflicted couple in the favela related the thrilling love relationship they saw in the soap with their own romantic life. Celeste declared that Léa was one of her preferred characters:

Ce - They fight each other a lot. He battered her. He treated her very badly. He was fond of women. She suffered too much on his hands. Poor woman. He wanted to sell her farm. She suffered because of his other women.

E- Do you like this couple?

Ce - They are the ones who actually make the telenovela.

Ch - They have horrible fights, but they feel very passionate about each other. (p.1)

Chico expressed his understanding that although Léa and Ralf fought, they were passionate with each other, and that was positive. For him, passion justified battering. Although, when referring to their own drama, actual beating never explicitly came up, the story about their conflict did.

Chico was born in Ceará state in a family of 11 children. He married and had 5 kids there. He never went to school. He said he learned to read by himself. Already in his thirties, he migrated to São Paulo. His memories of his youth were paradigmatic of family life in poor dry regions of the Northeast. He described his father as very authoritarian and controlling. He came to São Paulo, at least in part to escape his control. Nonetheless now he recognized a positive side to this authority. According to him, he and his brothers obeyed their father, while his own kids did not obey him.

There was a whole sense of lack of authority in Chico's perception of the contemporary world. This lack of authority for him started at home - since women not only did not respect their husbands, but also taught their kids not to do so - and extended to the whole country, for if kids did not respect their fathers, they would not respect any kind of authority. Chico felt ambiguous about his father's model of family and authority. On the one hand he recognized that he himself once felt the need to escape. On the other hand, he resented his own lack of authority in his São Paulo house. At this point in his life he identified with his father, who, after two marriages, was left alone in Ceará. Although Celeste and Chico married because they were in love with each other, they were going through a serious crisis that ended when he left for his hometown in Ceará.

Their crisis had to do with a complex interplay between what they called "old fashion" and contemporary models of family relations. Chico was physically disabled. He was able to do light things once in a while, but he could not have a regular job. He was ready to do domestic work. He claimed that she knew this before, to use his words, "coming to his power," meaning moving in with him. While he defined himself as an old invalid man, he thought of her as healthy and young, therefore perfectly able to work. He brought his monthly R\$ 200<sup>2</sup> retirement pension plus his housework, she should bring the rest.

But she was not satisfied with that arrangement. Celeste came from Piauí when she was very young, with her physiological single mother. Although her mother lived two blocks away, Celeste declared that she was raised by her grandmother, who she

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<sup>2</sup> At time of fieldwork, R200 was equal to \$200. Today, R200 values less than \$100.

called mom. Her physiological mother married and had kids the same age as her own kids. Her mother worked as a maid in two houses, one from 7 AM to 10 AM, and the other for the rest of the day, until 8 P.M.. Because she had 2 jobs, she made R800. Her grandmother lived across the street in one of the best houses in that block. According to Celeste, because she worked hard as a cleaning woman, sometimes Monday through Sunday, she made around R\$ 1000 a month. Her grandfather did not make as much, but he had a regular job. The shanty house where Celeste and Chico lived was her grandmother's. One of her sisters (actual aunt) lived with her son in the big bedroom in the back of Celeste and Chico's house. This "sister" worked as a manicurist in a middle class beauty saloon. Celeste was ambitious and very proud of everything her women siblings conquered, but she did not want to be responsible for supporting the household. He would like her to come along to the Northeast. She would not even consider that possibility.

The money issue was obviously intertwined with a dispute around gender roles and authority, including authority over the kids. Even though Celeste opposed what she called "old fashion style of raising kids", she could not deal with the fact that her husband could not support the house. She would rather let him go than accept the inversion of gender roles that his proposition implied. On his turn, although Chico expressed his affiliation to his father's patriarchal family model, he felt comfortable about being supported by his wife. *The Cattle King* spoke directly to their conflictive life. When describing Léa and Ralf, Celeste and Chico came back to this subject. Celeste contrasted Léa and Ralf with Luana and Bruno, the main romantic couple in *The Cattle King*:

Ce - I like Léa and Ralf better because Luana and Bruno are too serene, they are always quiet. (...) Only Ralf and Léa bring charm to the telenovela. (Celeste and Chico p15.)

I - What happens now that he is dead?

Ce - Now this telenovela lost a bit of its charm because I watched mainly to see their fights.

Ch - That telenovela is more about fighting. All that battering there is very good.

## 2. Montes Claros

Montes Claros is the largest town of the north of Minas Gerais estate, with 250 thousand inhabitants. The region is "sertão", "cerrado" (a savanna-like type of vegetation and natural landscape) – its periodical droughts is responsible for a well-known image of poverty in a part of Brazilian backlands. Being considered the capital of a cattle-breeding region, it concentrates the health and educational facilities – many people travel from small towns to Montes Claros in order to see a physician, to get to one of its hospitals, or to go to one of the schools and colleges. For the students coming from nearby smaller towns, the city has many boarding houses.

Extensive cattle breeding has been the main economical activity of the northern region of Minas Gerais since the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Montes Claros has been the main regional commercial center. It is located by the railroad, and since the 60's, federal incentive programs attempt to foster local industry. In the past 40 years there has been relative economic growth. The federal agency SUDENE has designed actions that were mainly directed at the "development" of the *sertão* in order to integrate it to the national setting, through industrialization. Some of the criticisms to the programs it had fostered since the 60's include the feeling that, if SUDENE has brought some "modernization", it is only

partial. Montes Claros has really changed a lot, but its main economical activity is still commerce, and the regional economy still rests on the agribusiness sector. Besides, there are urban problems, such as those related to lack of infrastructure, related to intense migration from rural areas.

Although located in a poor region, Montes Claros is a middle size city with relatively average patterns in terms of economic indexes when compared to other middle size cities of the country, or to the Minas Gerais state. According to the 1991 census the city has 250.062 inhabitants, with average 4.58 dwellers per household. The water system covers 71.20% of the households, the sewage system covers 58.15% and the garbage collection reached 69.42% of the households. The Gini index was 0.6283 and 20.55% of the household heads had no education. In 1970, 9.3% of the households in Montes Claros had a TV set, and in 1980, the percentage reached 56.54%. Among the 42 municipalities of the north of Minas Gerais, it has the largest percentage of TV set ownership.

## **2.1. Reflecting about family life through telenovelas**

The first fieldwork impression in Montes Claros suggested that gender relations were more unequal when compared to the *favela* studied in São Paulo (Vila Feliz). The perception of gender inequality was stressed in conversations and in books about the region – many people introduced the city as being “traditional” and *machista*. Particularly when comparing to sexual behavior in the telenovelas, which they call *modern*, people expressed a sense that Montes Claros was more *traditional*, and women should not behave as telenovelas characters. Some people regard this tradition as positive, others

criticize it as *machismo*. Nevertheless, as fieldwork progressed, generation and personal histories revealed internal differentiation. In all social classes, but specially among middle class families, younger groups expressed more egalitarian gender relations.

Fieldwork on telenovela reception among middle and working class families, suggested that an intense reflexive process goes on through viewers relations with these television series. Telenovelas have been part of middle class families' daily lives for many years now (since the 80's), constituting a main cultural reference. Although viewers in this class describe telenovelas as portraying and pertaining to the reality of large cities (particularly Rio de Janeiro) – specially in reference to sexual, gender and family behavior and values – these viewers are, at the same time, used to their messages. Viewers establish an intense dialogue with TV content – they discuss what they see, and through telenovelas stories and characters they reflect about their own life and situation.

Like the examples about Vila Feliz suggest, most people in Montes Claros did not enjoy the main character in *The Cattle King*. They were waiting for the right transformation of the main female character, Luana, into a strong, independent, powerful, beautiful and rich woman. Arlete, for instance, a 22 year old working class mother of two children, told me that Luana was her favorite character in the beginning. But throughout the story she did not change and continued to be a hillbilly, never turning into what she expected – and her expectations were backed up by a whole body of previous telenovela's heroines - a modern, elegant and powerful woman. For this reason, she was very disappointed with the character, and even said she “hated her”. Arlete saw herself as a “struggler” – she was the only one among her siblings that had finished high school,



and worked to have her own money. She stressed she did not depend on her husband, and having her money (even if it was only the minimum wage) allowed her to make choices and decisions.

Like São Paulo viewers quoted above, most people in Montes Claros valued positively the idea of what they defined as “strong” women. A strong woman was generally defined as someone that holds the family together as much as she can, being both breadwinner and affective support. Women were thus seen as the strong sex, particularly in terms of emotions and ability to deal with life hardships.

Nevertheless, some people interpret this as bearing a hard life, being strong might mean even being submissive to her husband, but holding on to keep the family together. On the other hand, specially women below 40 stressed the idea of being independent, self-assured, self-confident, a “struggler”. Most women defined themselves as individuals who were always struggling in life. Women struggle in their profession or career, or struggle to earn money when they do not have a “career”. They struggle to impose themselves to their husbands, especially when those are classified as *machista* types, who want to control them. And they struggle to provide the best they can to their children – children being very important for those women. Because money is so hard to make and children are so important, women think it is better and easier to have few children – two kids is often mentioned as the best option.

We want to show one example here of a couple that criticizes telenovelas in terms of their moral values (particularly in terms of women’s sexual behavior) – as mentioned above, a very pervasive criticism of telenovelas. However, at the same time they reflect

about their own situation in terms of family relations and gender constructions through discussing with the telenovela's stories. They show how they think a woman should have her work and independence (a very common point of view in Montes Claros, among all social classes); and how housework should be shared and parent-children relationships are changing into a more affective and friendly tie (these two last points are stressed by most middle class families). This example is similar to many other families we got in touch with during seven months of ethnographic fieldwork.

Armando, 53, is a public servant and teaches in the evenings. His wife, Aparecida, is a teacher in a public school working in the afternoons and evenings. They have three children – from ages 18 to 13. They defined themselves as participant Catholics involved in activities with the church. Their two youngest children – especially the girl, Rita – watch a lot of telenovelas. Aparecida cannot watch *The Cattle King* on a daily basis, because most of the evenings she is teaching – but she watches once a week and through the review in the newspaper she follows the story. Armando says he does not care about telenovelas, but he knew more or less what was happening in *The Cattle King* because everybody else in the family followed it, and also because he knew the story was better than usual because it dealt with politics (the agrarian reform), and with beautiful rural and nature scenes. He also revealed that many men in the city hall were following this telenovela, which was a hit even among men.

Rita was a major telenovela fan – she watched the three Globo network telenovelas, besides the ones from other channels (SBT and Bandeirantes). Since the schedule was more or less the same, with different networks airing novelas at more or

less the same time, she did so by switching channels during commercial breaks. At her age, it is considered both normal and typical to be so interested in those romantic stories. Claudio, 15, also happened to watch most of those narratives with his sister, but he preferred Globo's seven o'clock slot, which shows agile, urban and modern narratives, with lots of scenes of undressed young men and women, and sometimes a detective story. These soaps are designed and produced to keep a teenage audience, and they are the only ones that fit the interests of many teenage boys I met in Montes Claros. The older son did not care for TV or telenovelas – he was a scout, loved sports and outdoor activities.

Armando and Aparecida worried that telenovelas were “bad examples” for girls like Rita, particularly concerning female sexual activities before marriage and the lack of respect kids showed for their parents in this story. And they dealt with the opposition between modern and tradition in order to reflect about the relationship between novelas and their own family daily life:

“Aparecida: You might say I am traditional, but I think that in terms of sex... I think the kids should know about everything, that is how we do here at home. We talk naturally about that with them, if they ask, we answer. (...) But the way TV focuses, even parent-children relationships, I think respect should prevail. That does not mean that because we are parents we have to impose our authority. (...)

Armando: Those pregnant teenagers, they are influenced by television. Because they meet one guy, then another, they chat, they talk, and then she is into it [sex]. (...) They think that is how it happens, but that's not the way it is, that is not the reality. The girl should impose limits to her boyfriend.”

The main idea here is that a girl should preserve herself. Ideally, she should keep her virginity until marriage. For this couple, control over sexuality marks gender differences. Both Armando and Aparecida agree with this idea. The same restrictions are

not important for boys, who might have sexual initiation with prostitutes. This idea could also be seen through the way they controlled much closer their daughter than their son. Nevertheless, when discussing other issues, this same couple stresses a tendency for gender equality.

Even if Armando and Aparecida could not watch telenovelas very often, they showed a common feature with other telenovelas viewers: through talking about the characters and the story, they discussed as if the characters were real known people, friends, neighbors, relatives. Besides, after that, they compared their situation and attitude with real people and even with themselves.

“Heloisa: Which character you dislike?

Aparecida: Lea. (...) I hate vulgar, common women, a woman that is abused and likes it. Before loving anybody else, we have to have self-love, self-esteem. We have to love ourselves, then to be able to love someone else. We have to have our own lives, and not to be after someone.”

Lea was a woman who was abused by her lover and husband, Ralf, the main villain in this narrative. But she did not leave him, although unhappy, she stayed with him, even though she supported him financially. Aparecida always mentioned that a woman has to impose herself, and not be submissive. This same idea was expressed by most women I met there, they all said that Lea was “stupid” or “dumb” in staying with that husband.

Once, we were watching *The Cattle King* together with her two youngest children. A scene of sex between a young unmarried (but in love) couple disturbed Aparecida, who said: “I am not a puritan, but that’s too much”. Her daughter, though, was enjoying the scene, with one of her favorite romantic couples in the story. But the talk was interrupted

by another much more disturbing scene, when Ralf beats Lea. Like many other women I met in Montes Claros, Aparecida said those scenes and Lea's passivity stressed the *machismo*. A woman that accepts such a situation is stupid and dull, in most people's point of view, because she should leave this man.

From telenovela to real life: Aparecida then told me the story of her sister, who is married to an alcoholic abusive husband. Like most women I met, she said she could not understand why her sister stayed with that "evil man". She said her sister is the breadwinner at home, and does not need him to support her kids. Aparecida talked many times to her, but it did not work, and she almost never sees her now. Afterwards, she revealed her sister had got pregnant very young and her family had pushed her into marriage. Many years later, she realized that was wrong, because she is so unhappy now. Many people told stories about abusive husbands and submissive wives, but they were always stories about someone else – a friend, neighbor or relative. They all made the same type of commentary Aparecida did.

In other conversations she explained better what she meant about the idea of a woman "imposing herself", even when talking about housework. She said that having her job was very important, and that Armando did the supermarket and many other household chores, like cooking. Armando agreed that it was important to share the responsibility for the house and the children, and said that a *macho* husband that arrives late at night and wants his dinner ready does not exist any more. He also said that one person cannot earn enough for one family, so they have to share everything – this was companionship. When

he said that, she smiled: “How much have you changed!”. Aparecida also showed her autonomy expressing different political opinions than Armando when discussing the agrarian reform.

On another occasion, Aparecida and Armando discussed family relations in the telenovela. They said that the cattle king, Bruno, was not a good father in the beginning of the story. He did not care about his children, he did not talk to them, he did not stay with them at home and he was authoritarian – instead of discussing things, he wanted to impose his view. This matter pointed to a major change in parent-children relationship. Aparecida said that her mother was submissive and unhappy, and her father was very authoritarian. They never talked to them, and were distant from their many children. He was a rich man, but spent his days drinking and gambling, and lost everything.

She then discussed what happened once, when she was working too much and did not have time to spend with her children, like the cattle king did. She was working during the day at a lawyer’s office and teaching in the evenings. She said her oldest son came back from school one day with a composition saying that what he disliked most about his mother was that he hardly saw her. She said she was like Bruno, the cattle king: absent and only worrying about her career and earning money. Both things were wrong: being so distant and authoritarian like her parents, or being so absent and only thinking about professional career. Children need parents that talk to them, that know how to keep the dialogue going on even when they disagree and have some arguments.

She expressed how telenovela could be a realist text, in terms of showing and discussing issues that are similar to what happens in most families. She could also identify with the character – even if it was a male character – because she had experienced the same problems. This identification is related to what people reflect about their own lives and situations, and not with having the same features of the characters. There was an identification concerning mother or father roles, the situation of family life, of raising children. She also felt she had the authority to criticize the character because she had lived the same problem but solved it. In the end, she opted for a more feminine career – teaching – and left her work at a lawyer’s office during the day.

We also see here an example that happened with almost all the families I met in Montes Claros: women and mothers are also the breadwinners. The task of earning the family income is both feminine and masculine. Women’s jobs and professional activities are seen as “natural” and part of everyday reality in most middle and working class families. The only middle class woman in Montes Claros I met which had no job was in fact married to an abusive husband, and could not get divorced. She also felt she was incompetent and lacking something, for not having neither a job nor a paid activity.

For Aparecida – as most married women – her financial independence was a strong point in her self-esteem, in a situation when women changed their lives. She stressed that this was a major difference from her submissive and unhappy mother:

“In former times, a woman suffered all her life, but stayed with the same husband because she had no other way, she depended on him for everything she needed. If she was unhappy with him, she would be even worse without him. But today women work, they have their independence.

(...) If the husband supported her, gave her enough money, she had to accept everything, he could do anything he wanted out of home, and she could not complain. But this has changed, and today a woman does not have to accept that.”

The equality is thus evident in many points: work, financial independence, household chores, taking care of children. The only point that gender inequality is still present in some middle class families in Montes Claros is in terms of control of sexuality – although that is also changing rapidly, as many cases of women over 30 who got married pregnant reveal, as well as teenage pregnancy nowadays, particularly among working classes. However, this couple expresses a very pervasive value that is mostly discussed in dialogue with telenovelas and TV content: the change in family relations. From authoritarian and absent parents, to a closer and more affective relationship with their children, revealing the important idea of dialogue and friendship.

Besides, other middle class families also showed a more equal point of view concerning sexuality matters – especially in families where the parents were below 40. They also stressed the idea that in telenovelas and in big cities women are freer and happier, revealing that those patterns of sexual control (like the matter of virginity) are rapidly changing and do not make sense any longer.



### 3. Conclusion

Because it focused on female infidelity and violence against women, *The Cattle King* spoke directly to the instability of family life in Brazil. When men and women watched and commented on it, they expressed their assessment about their own position in this unstable private world. Indeed viewers we interacted with moved back and forth very easily between the story on television and their own stories. In so doing, they enacted their representations of ideal types of national gender roles and family structures, as constructed in unexpected ways in relation to and through the mediation of television.

Fieldwork confirmed that although women were certainly more attuned to telenovelas, men also followed these soaps. Men and women established different relationships with and had different perceptions about telenovelas. Nonetheless, both male and female viewers were aware of the conventions of the genre as well as of the characters and events in ongoing soaps. Although there is a commonsense notion, confirmed by ratings, that associates telenovelas with young and older lower-class women, telenovelas constituted a common repertoire through which viewers enacted their private problems. For both, men and women, this telenovela also constituted a common repertoire through which they could theorize about their nation, not necessarily in the terms set by the explicit content of the text, but in terms of legitimate ideal types of women, men, marital and paternal relationships. Some viewers even explicitly expressed their interpretation of *The Cattle King* as a telenovela that somehow bridged different levels and dealt with issues that were crucial to the family as the basic bond of the nation.

Moreover, through the talk about this telenovela, viewers – male and female – enacted their most private experiences and conflicts in public terms.

When viewers commented on the telenovela with their friends, family members, or workers, they mobilized a whole repertoire of previous telenovelas conventions which they had appropriated and interpreted in specific ways. When they defined their attitudes and interpretations about *The Cattle King*, they positioned themselves both in relation to their own perspective on this publicly-acknowledged body of theories and notions, and in relation to their own personal stories and contexts. Different issues, events, and characters in the telenovela position viewers in different ways. Issues of “old times” or tradition, current family, and gender values seemed to mobilize cross-class, cross-sex, generation identities, while observations about the character Luana seemed to polarize the attention of a cross-class-female audience. As a shared repertoire, telenovelas capture, express and constitute the means through which viewers might mobilize some of their multiple social identities, as citizens, as consumers, as men or women, as belonging to a certain social class, or generation cohort.

Besides, this active interaction with telenovelas’ stories allow people to review and reflect about their own life – even changing their point of view. The longer they are interacting with telenovelas, the more they know the rules and conventions - like the strong independent woman - the more they seem to incorporate this type as a positive gender construction. In São Paulo and in Montes Claros, it is evident that telenovelas show what is identified as a modern and urban lifestyle, and they interact with this model, and use it as a reference to review their positions, situation in life and points of view.

This is clear in the idea that parents and children should relate in affective, close, and understanding ways. The “strong” woman viewers in both sites value is also similar and opposes what viewers identify as “old fashion”, or “weak” models of women. Finally it is worth noticing that following and referring to the telenovela’s plot in order to position themselves in their own daily lives did not imply agreeing with the characters. This article shows examples of the specific ways viewers were attuned to telenovelas as a shared repertoire that expressed their interpretations and theories about their own lives.

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