



# Mediating the Neoliberal Nation: Television in Post-Apartheid South Africa

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## Abstract

Television, with its depictions of the dramas of everyday life, provides a compelling medium for building a normative national consciousness. Since television first arrived in South Africa in the mid-1970s, it has influenced the countrywide belief system, first as an apparatus of apartheid and later as an intended voice of the New South Africa. Today, South African television provides an image of South Africa that serves the government's attempts to construct a nation out of a divided past. In addition to entertaining, television programming aims to foster national unity through the redressing of historical wrongs *and* to encourage economic growth and foreign investment. Through an examination of the political economy of television in South Africa, I discuss how television produces, performs, and contests the post-apartheid South African nation. Using the theoretical framework of feminist, post-structural, and cultural geography, as well as work in cultural studies and anthropology, I will address Wendy Larner's (2003) call for geographers to examine the multiplicity of neoliberalism's production and performance across space.

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## Introduction

If television seems banal, then one of Michel Foucault's most memorable phrases should inspire us: "What we have to do with banal facts is to discover – or try to discover – which specific and perhaps original problem is connected with them" (Abu-Lughod, 1997, 113).

As a medium, television's work is parallel to and interlinked with that of the economy. Both disseminate information to help circulate goods as well as to socialize members of society. Television is thus active in the material and symbolic reproduction of capitalist relations (Rajagopal, 2001, 4).

Television, with its depictions of the dramas of everyday life, provides a compelling medium for influencing a normative national consciousness. Through the use of language, image and sound, television (re)produces a vision of the world for its audiences. These productions link television with the political economy of nation building. The medium can work to socialize people, foment material desires, and normalize consumer relations. In South Africa, many locally produced television programs portray a Black middle class focused on material consumption and individual gain. These depictions, largely uncomplicated by issues of lingering racial and economic strife, serve the government's attempts to construct a neoliberal post-apartheid national imaginary. As Achille Mbembe (2004, 394) has argued, urban post-apartheid South Africa is filled with "public theaters of late capitalism." Through an analysis of South African television's political economy, I will explore how this "theater" of capitalism is tied up with notions of national belonging.

The construction of national belonging, I assert, has (ostensibly) become more complicated with the increasing global entrenchment of neoliberalism. Neoliberalism appears to privilege *universal* ideas of capitalistic gain and *autonomization* over more community-oriented state practices. According to Sparke et al. (2005, 360), the term neoliberal is a "catchall" for:

governmental *practices* – including privatization, free trade, financial deregulation, fiscal austerity, export-led development, benchmarking, and workfare – that are associated in one way or another with the increasing entrenchment of free-market fundamentalism as a template for government globally.

These ideas of universality and globality seem to contradict those of a national citizen. And yet, the concept of the nation, I will argue below, still plays a central role in the construction of an identity that is both neoliberal and nationally oriented. This distinctly spatial orientation makes fertile ground for a geographic analysis.

Many geographers have incorporated the idea of the nation, and indeed all scales and boundaries, as imagined, recognizing the nation as a fluid battleground for meaning (see McDowell, 1999; Yuval-Davis, 1997; Marston et al., 2005). I will extend this argument by showing how television can play a role in this battleground because it provides a forum for constructing, reflecting, and contesting the national imaginary. Though I will employ this theoretical framework, I will also recognize the powerful material effects the imaginary has had in the specific context of the New South Africa<sup>2</sup>, a country supposedly emerging in the neoliberal era. As Anne McClintock (1997, 89) argues, “Nations are not simply phantasmagoria of the mind; as systems of cultural representation ... they are historical practices through which social difference is invented and performed.”

The construction of the nation put forth by some South African television programming can mask enduring racial and economic inequalities and move responsibility for these inequalities from the state to the individual. These material effects play a role in reasserting hierarchical relations of power, especially along race, class, and gender lines. In these hierarchies of power, the idea of the Black middle class becomes increasingly central in contemporary South Africa. The image of this thriving middle class, a class that is distinctly South African, but also ‘modern’ and internationally oriented, invokes the alleged success of current political and economic policies, while eliding continuing racial and economic tensions.

I will begin this paper by examining the literature on the political economy of television and how various actors have employed television to construct, contest, and reflect a national imaginary. Clive Barnett (2001, 7) asserts that, instead of trying to “specify culture as a general ontological category, the main task of a critical human geography of culture should be to track the variable utilization of ‘ideas of culture’ in different contexts by different interests.” This paper will begin to respond to these challenges through its examination of the powerful medium of popular culture, and television in particular, and its connections with gender, race, class, nationhood, and political economy. While it is important to recognize that audiences are not passive recipients of these images<sup>3</sup>, for the purposes of this paper,

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<sup>2</sup> Despite the fact that this ‘new’ imaginary is now more than ten years old, the discourse surrounding the country remains one of newness, emphasizing, I will argue, a transitional period. The idea of transition, and its newness, works to mitigate critique of enduring political and economic inequality.

<sup>3</sup> Stuart Hall’s (1980) work on audience reception highlights the multiple meanings and interpretations found in every representation. In fact, many South Africans challenge the images put forth by South African television. For example, one editorial in South Africa’s most-read newspaper, *The Sunday Times*, assailed one show’s depiction of Black South Africans: “No Black people in Africa talk like that! In fact, most White people don’t even use that highbrow phraseology. As urban, sophisticated South Africans we don’t know ANYONE who speaks like

I will focus on how television serves the interests of the South African government and its neoliberal tendencies. To address these issues, I will use terms like race, racial boundaries, Black and White throughout this paper. By employing these terms, I am not, however, implying any essentialized categories. I am, in fact, arguing just the opposite. These categories are constructed and contested in part through popular culture, but nevertheless play a central role in the material realities of South Africans lives.

I will then explore the political economy of television in the specific South African context to determine the differential, spatially influenced, impact of capitalist social relations (Nagar et al., 2002). I will address Wendy Lerner's (2003) call for geographers to examine the multiplicity of neoliberalism's production and performance across space, by asking what issues 'newly' emerging countries grapple with as they attempt to construct and/or contest a national imaginary in the neoliberal era. Using this framework, I will argue that since television first arrived in South Africa in 1976, it has affected the countrywide belief system, first as an apparatus of apartheid and later as a voice of the New South Africa. Today, South African television plays the roles of entertaining its audiences, fostering national unity through the redressing of historical wrongs, *and* encouraging economic growth and foreign investment.

### **'Mediating' the Nation: Television and National Identity**

Radio, television, film, and the other products of the culture industries provide the models of what it means to be male or female, successful or a failure, powerful or powerless. Media culture also provides the materials out of which many people construct their sense of class, of ethnicity and race, of nationality, of sexuality, of 'us' and 'them' (Kellner, 1995, 1).

Feminist and 'postmodern' scholars have examined the role of media in the production of identity. Gender and race, many have argued, are not ontological, but rather culturally constructed (Butler, 1991). While these insights have been revolutionary in their disruptions of the 'naturalness' of identity, they have often neglected the ways in which cultural constructions are operationalized. Gramscian notions of hegemony provide a useful framework for understanding the role of

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that. And where do they come from? Mars, London? Who gave birth to them? Do they never go home to visit their parents? Why is their [sic] no mention of townships? ... Don't they know anyone who lives in a township? These are really funny Black people" (Mutuba and Owen, 2005).

these constructions. Antonio Gramsci (Hall, 1986) has argued that economic and political powers maintain control not only through violence and coercion, but also through ideology. Gramsci describes a ‘common sense’ emerging from a hegemonic culture that promotes the values of the bourgeoisie. The creation of this common sense helps to maintain the status quo, often to the detriment of the poor and working class. Lila Abu-Lughod connects these themes to Foucauldian notions of governmentality and the everyday banality of television: “one of Michel Foucault’s most memorable phrases should inspire us: ‘What we have to do with banal facts is to discover – or try to discover – which specific and perhaps original problem is connected with them’” (1997, 113).

Popular culture as transmitted by television becomes a constant presence in people’s lives (Abu-Lughod, 1997). In South Africa, the majority of people – Black, White, male, female – use visual media, and television in particular, over most other media forms. While television reaches 80 to 90 percent of the population in a given week, film reaches only 1.5 percent of the population per week and 5.9 percent per month. Only 3.5 percent of the population uses the Internet on a given week and 4.9 percent on a given month (SAARF, 2003). Newspapers reach more people than the Internet – but still far less than television – with a weekly readership of 30.8 percent of the population (SAARF, 2002). In 2004 more than 21 million South Africans owned television sets.<sup>4</sup> Today, only 25 years after television’s introduction to the country, South Africans watch television an average of 3.2 hours a day and 22.6 hours a week (SAARF, 2003).

Beyond the act of viewing, however, television takes on a social life of its own through discussion and debate at work and school, on the street, and in newspapers (Das, 1995). Accordingly, “television is an extraordinary technology for breaching boundaries and intensifying and multiplying encounters among lifeworlds, sensibilities, and ideas” (Abu-Lughod, 1997, 122). Through the everyday “breaching,” visual popular culture has the ability to reach large numbers of people of different races, classes, genders, and ages. Print media are often limited to a literate elite. But unlike print media, visual media produce imagined geographies linguistically *and*, significantly, through visual images. Paired with words, images appear to reinforce and verify the authenticity of verbal claims and provide a medium for constructing imagined geographies.

Because of these qualities, visual media can act as a storyteller of the national narrative. Like television, it can serve as a primary mode through which

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<sup>4</sup> It is important to note that television in South Africa is not a strictly ‘private’ experience that occurs solely in domestic spaces. Television watching for Black populations in particular is often communal, taking place in shabeens (bars) or other public spaces (Kruger, 1999; Krabill, 2002). This fact partly explains why only 21 million South Africans own television sets, but around 90 percent of South Africa’s 44 million people watch television (SAARF, 2003).

the imagined tradition of the nation becomes realized. Nations, Benedict Anderson (1991) has famously argued, are not ontological, but rather ‘imagined communities.’ The communities “are constructed by cultural, historical, and geographical mappings related to power/knowledge relationships” (1991, 196). Following this argument, rather than examining nation-states as actually existing bounded entities, I will look at the ways post-apartheid South Africa is constructed as an ‘imagined community.’

But if the nation does not have any ‘essential’ characteristics, how does the idea of the nation retain its hegemony? While Foucault conceived of governmentality as operating diffusely outside the ‘state’ framework, the governmental analytic can still be operationalized when examining state power. But instead of looking at the legitimacy of national power, Foucault (1991) asserts, we must look at *how* and *through what avenues* that power operates. Television provides an example of a ‘diffuse’ avenue of power. Through the media, we get clues about how to act, what to think, and how to imagine ourselves within our communities. Kellner (1995) highlights the specific role that media play in not only constructing senses of race, class, and sexuality, but also in forging a common (hegemonic) culture that is both national and transnational in its reach.

In addition to constructing a national imagined community, the media also work on multiple scales. As Annette Hamilton (2002, 153) argues, “local, national, and international imaginaries are uneasily complicated in the emergent formal and informal media spheres.” Others have argued that media actually de-centers the nation and constructs “transnational subjectivities” (Ginsburg et al., 2002, 17). Thus, through its constructions of scale, media can simultaneously de-emphasize the nation through ideas of a global culture *and* construct a national narrative through specific depictions of the country and its citizens.

These competing spatial imaginations often come to the fore through notions of capitalism and the commodification of culture. Sharon Zukin (1982) has argued that one cannot separate culture from capitalism. Culture often serves to naturalize liberal capitalism. Ruth Mandel (2002, 212) asserts that there is an “assumption that the medium of television is an appropriate tool to further the logical and inevitable transition to a free-market economy, transforming the national imagination in the process.” Mandel examines *Crossroads*, a Kazakh soap opera created by a British organization under Margaret Thatcher. She finds that *Crossroads* formed part of a development plan designed to ‘free’ markets through what she deems a ‘Marshall Plan of the mind.’ In South Africa, Clive Barnett (1999) has noticed an increasing commodification of culture, as well as a growing importance of the economic in cultural policies through links between cultural producers like television and the internationalizing market economy.

In South Africa these ideas of ‘culture,’ media, and identity are particularly fraught. Sarah Nuttall and Cheryl-Ann Michael (2000) call on theorists to

problematize the idea of 'culture' in the South African context because of the term's troubled past. They assert that "'culturalist' paradigms [were] so effectively employed by the apartheid state" that the term has become problematic in the contemporary moment (p. 13). As Nixon (1994) and Krabill (2002) have shown, the apartheid government explicitly employed ideas of 'culture' and the medium of television to reify and normalize racial distinctions. This history provides the background for the ideologically significant role that television plays in constructing a South African national imaginary today.

The South African context also makes forging cultural nationalism challenging. As Dolby (2001, 12) notes, "While the cracks in the formation of the nation-state may be felt worldwide, newly emerging democracies such as South Africa face specific and substantial problems in forging national identities." Not only are South Africans trying to construct a coherent nation, but they are doing so in the context of an extremely divided past, a multiplicity of ethnicities and languages, *and* the government's hopes for a globalizing future. There is a temptation, Nixon (1997, 81) argues, "to assume that all nations or aspirant nations have available to them a past that is equally susceptible to effective reinvention." He goes on to assert that

aspirant nation-states find themselves in a catch-22: despite the rarity of ethnically homogenous states, prospective states find themselves held to an archaic and potentially destabilizing vision of what constitutes a nation (p. 85).

This "catch-22" is particularly apparent in a country as racially divisive as South Africa.

But more than just assuming that all countries have a past that allows for the construction a nation, one must also look at the era in which South Africa supposedly became a 'new' post-apartheid nation: the early to mid-1990s. These dates mirror those of the intensification of neoliberal ideologies. Partha Chatterjee (1999) has examined the emergence of nationalism in the modern era, the time in which most colonial countries were gaining independence. In this age, Chatterjee argues, nationalism was linked with industrial society, a society that allegedly called for "a cultural homogeneity and its convergence with a political unit" (p. 5). I want to extend these discussions of nationalism to a country attempting to emerge and articulate itself in the *postmodern*, neoliberal, era. I will explore these ideas through a political and economic analysis of post-apartheid South African television.

## The Political Economy of South African Television

South African history is marked by contested spatial imaginations. During apartheid, the government divided the country by ‘race,’ conflating race with ‘nationhood,’ ‘culture,’ and ‘civilization.’ The popular media has played a central role in creating, reflecting, and challenging these imaginations – and thus control over media becomes crucial in influencing the national imaginary. During apartheid, the White minority government tightly managed visual media, dictating every image that crossed the television screen. Power over television programming, and thus dominant spatial imaginations, long remained out of reach for most Black, Indian, and Coloured<sup>5</sup> South Africans. As I have argued above, visual representations greatly influence popular imaginations. In post-apartheid South Africa, the government and media organizations have attempted to construct a united, coherent, ‘rainbow’ nation that is also ‘open’ to the rest of the world. These constructions rely heavily on notions of both visibility and silences: who is included on television, how are they depicted, and what issues are addressed and ignored?

Television did not come to South Africa until 1976. More than 130 countries had television before South Africa (Krabill, 2002). The National Party had resisted television for so long because it worried that television would bring ideas of racial and gender equality to the country. Politicians wanted to prevent the transmission of politically and socially seditious ideas. They feared a ‘dilution’ of Afrikaner ‘values,’ as expressed by strident Afrikaner nationalism within the National Party, a party that had fought hard to overcome what it viewed as British imperial influences. The National Party also wanted to avoid Soviet influence because the Soviet government had supported armed resistance to the creation of a South African state. Ultimately, then, the struggle to prevent television from entering the country became a struggle to retain “a pure national identity against both capitalism and communism, the United Kingdom ... and the Soviet Union, individualism and internationalism” (Krabill, 2002, 43). But, perhaps most importantly, the National Party wanted to prevent images of the political violence, poverty, and disharmony that wracked the country during the apartheid years.

Nonetheless, the lack of television eventually proved untenable. Nixon (1994) argues that South Africans felt left out of global, ‘modern’ events, such the first lunar landing. Thus, the decision to allow television in the country also reflected a decision to enter the global, ‘modern’ world, albeit on very circumscribed, very controlled terms. By 1976 the government realized that it could use television to further its goals of racial segregation and reified difference.

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<sup>5</sup> ‘Coloured’ South Africans, predominately people of ‘biracial’ heritage, in South Africa were (and to a large extent still are) considered a separate racial group in South Africa.



The government had total control over television and utilized programming as its “mouthpiece” (Primetime South Africa, 1996). Working to popularize apartheid, the government permitted only “ideologically approved” programs, including shows that reinforced the perception of South Africa “as the last bastion of democracy” (Shepperson and Tomaselli, 1997). Similarly, the original television programming, Ron Krabill (2002) has argued, was notable in its ‘structured absences.’ Initially, Black South Africans did not figure in television programming at all. Later, Krabill continues, Black South Africans appeared, but only in the context of ‘accepted’ labor roles, as domestic servants or mine workers. In this vein, the government enforced a ban on disruptive figures in the media. This meant that certain names and faces, like Nelson Mandela, could never appear on television. The result was that Black (and Coloured, Indian, and White) South Africans fighting against apartheid were rendered completely invisible in the popular media.

The near total absence of non-White faces in television began to change in the 1980s. In keeping with the tradition of segregation, the SABC initiated separate channels for Blacks in 1982. Programming varied drastically between the White and Black channels, each one working to buttress the image of a culturally distinct people. While shows aimed at White audiences featured White characters acting in a ‘modern’ world and Black characters serving as their domestic workers, shows aimed at Black audiences featured Black characters in ‘traditional’ dress, living ‘traditional’ lives<sup>6</sup> (Krabill 2002). As such, the programming reinforced the idea of a traditional/modern binary divided along racial lines and justified the exclusion of non-White actors from participation in the ‘modern,’ capitalist economy.

After the end of apartheid, however, television took on a new role. Instead of promoting the National Party, television now represents the goals of the New South Africa. This message, Leslie Marx (2000, 131) asserts, both endorses “the rainbow ideology pronounced by the country’s new leaders and reassure[d] international investors (economic, cultural, and intellectual) of the country’s transforming and transformative capacities.” Thus, although control of the media shifted from the National Party to the post-apartheid government, the aim of the programming remained strikingly similar: to shape, contest, and reflect the popular national imagination.

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<sup>6</sup> As Krabill (2002) notes, several scholars have pointed out that, ironically, the paternalism of cultural segregation in programming actually ‘protected’ indigenous cultures, by maintaining and encouraging local languages in addition to ‘traditional’ music, drama, and folklore.

One of the primary changes to television in the post-apartheid era occurred with the formation of the Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA). The IBA marked one of the first acts in the transition from apartheid, occurring *before the first Black South African had even cast a vote* (Krabill, 2002). The IBA, with the mandate of “insuring plurality of players in the media field, as well as guaranteeing the political independence of the national public service broadcaster, SABC,” effectively ended the government’s overt control over programming (Primetime South Africa, 1996). Although now functioning as an ‘independent’ unit, television’s objective remained “to act as the medium of national unification” (Barnett, 1999).

Central to the construction of this ‘new’ national imagination was the rectifying of past invisibilities – showing the existence of a Black middle class, of an urban Black population, among others. Insuring plurality in television, the writers of the IBA stated, would give a voice to those previously excluded from the mainstream. The IBA also noted that, left alone, market forces would jeopardize diversity because the majority of capital resided with the White population. Therefore, the IBA worked to “establish viable market conditions” for diversity in a kind of “regulated pluralism” (Barnett, 1999, 281). This “regulated pluralism” demonstrates the ways in which the South African government attempted to foster the rainbow ideology within the context of neoliberal economic conditions.

The search for improved economic conditions for individuals across racial and ethnic groups and for the country as a whole became central to the political and popular discourse at the time. In their numerous political speeches, Mandela and his successor, Thabo Mbeki, called for non-racialism, racial and gendered equality, *and* improved national economic conditions. Words like “unity” and “solidarity,” figure prominently. In his inaugural address, Mandela (1994) began his speech by heralding a new era: “The South Africa we have struggled for, in which all our people, be they African, Coloured, Indian, or White, regard themselves as citizens of one nation is at hand.” Ten years later, Mbeki’s (2004) words remained strikingly similar. At his televised inauguration, he discussed transforming South Africa “into a democratic, peaceful, non-racial, non-sexist and prosperous country, committed to the noble vision of human solidarity.” Notably, Mbeki has added “prosperity” to his discourse on the New South Africa. The question for policymakers was how to cultivate this prosperity.

External pressure from international organizations like the International Monetary Fund and transnational corporations influenced the decision to move towards neoliberal economic policies. Since apartheid, the leftist origins of the ANC have shifted to a rightist, neoliberal growth-oriented ideology (see Peet, 2002; Jacobs and Krabill, 2005). Widespread privatization of government services like water and electricity turned citizens into consumers (Jacobs and Krabill, 2005). Poor, mostly Black, South Africans struggle to afford basic services formerly

provided by the government. In this context, Jacobs and Krabill (2005, 160) argue that instead of dispelling the codified inequality under apartheid, apartheid's race and class-based public sphere has merely become re-imagined under the new democracy "with the appearance of non-racialism maintained through a small but growing Black elite and middle class active in politics and cultural production." This context has become central to television programming today.

### **Television Today: The South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC)**

As the national public broadcaster, the SABC is by far the most dominant force in South African television. The SABC's three channels account for about 75 percent of television viewing in the country (SAARF, 2002). Today, the SABC maintains a quasi public/private status influenced both by corporate sponsorship and constitutional mandates. A board, comprised of members selected at public hearings and appointed by the state president, runs the policy matters of the SABC (SABC, 2005). In this way, the government maintains some indirect control over programming, despite the mandates of the IBA. And yet the SABC also has a distinctly privatized bent.

Most national public service broadcasters are funded principally through revenue from licenses and state grants. The SABC, however, relies chiefly on commercial sources, privatized both as part of the ANC's neoliberal turn *and* in reaction to the National Party's control of the media under apartheid. Seventy-six percent of the corporation's annual income comes from advertising and sponsorships, and eight percent from interest and the hiring of broadcast facilities. Television licenses account for 16 percent of income. State funding merely supplements this mix and is generally used only for specific public broadcasting projects (SABC, 2005). Thus, both state and corporate interests, such as sponsors and advertisers like Old Mutual, Telkom, Vodacom, and Coca-Cola, impact television programming. As Kruger argues (1999, 110), like other parastatal<sup>7</sup> post-apartheid institutions, the SABC is influenced by

competing impulses and persistent tensions – between democratic access and efficient management; strict independence from the state and incorporation into the government project of nation-building; and the claims of diverse but often impoverished constituencies and corporate sponsors' preference for affluent viewers.

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<sup>7</sup> South African scholars use the term 'parastatal' to refer to institutions that are controlled by the state, but are also formally independent. Krabill (2002) uses the examples of Amtrak and the United States Postal Service to elucidate what a 'parastatal' would look like in the United States context.

These competing impulses play out in the SABC's programming. Since 2003, constitutional mandates have required public service channels (the main SABC channels) to include at least 55 percent local programming. Additionally, all 11 official South African languages must be treated "equitably and with respect" (SABC, 2005). The mandate continues: the SABC has to develop "South African expression" through programming that:

1. Reflects South African attitudes, opinions, ideas, values and artistic creativity
2. Displays South African talent in education and entertainment programs
3. Advances the national and public interest
4. Informs, educates and entertains
5. Responds to audience needs (SABC, 2005)

South African journalists, however, have questioned the manner in which this 'equity' actually plays out in programming. A 2004 article in *The Sunday Times* argues that the SABC privileges English news because it garners more lucrative advertising (Msomi, 2004).

The SABC goes beyond merely including languages and local programming, however. The corporation also actively takes on the mantle of the 'voice' of the nation. The vision of the revamped SABC is: "To be the Pulse of Africa's Creative Spirit," and its values, "Talking, Listening and Hearing. Integrity, Exceptional Programming, Harnessing Diversity" (SABC, 2005). These representations are illustrated by the SABC's signature song, 'Simunye,' or, 'We are One.' Through its continued use of 'we,' the SABC redefines the nation from distinct spatially-determined homelands into one coherent whole. In this context, the SABC uses the notions of unity to market their products, combining the messages of equality through solidarity *and* neoliberal economic growth policies.

The idea that the SABC expresses the voice and represents the 'reality' of the people, of *all* South Africa's people, also appears consistently and prominently. When navigating the website, these words greet you:

Your SABC is a national asset. Owned and driven by the people of South Africa. So too is this website. Select how you want to travel through it, and *see how it changes to reflect your selected reality*. A lot like what we do. Your world. Your SABC (SABC, 2005, emphasis added).

The repeated use of the word 'your' emphasizes personal ownership and responsibility, while de-centering the role of the state and the corporate sponsors. *You* are in control of the SABC, you have choices, and the SABC reflects *your* life.

Following this logic, the corporation labels itself the foremost television brand “that embraces social realism, packaged in hard-hitting and entertaining content that inspires the viewers to engage their reality” (SABC, 2005). In this way, the SABC essentially commodifies not only ideas of national unity, *but also reality itself*. Reality becomes a brand, a selling point.

These references to choice, ownership, individuality, and responsibility allude to neoliberal notions of ‘responsibilisation’ (Lemke, 2000; Mitchell, 2003). If you are responsible, then the state no longer needs to work toward rectifying racial, gendered, and economic inequalities. And yet, the continued presence of constitutional mandates to erase past invisibilities and correct the capitalist free market complicates this picture and disrupts any hegemonic notions of neoliberalism within the South African context. Once again, we see the ways in which the South African government negotiated neoliberal ideologies of individuality and ‘rainbow’ ideologies while also supporting the rectification of past injustices through corrective action.

Throughout the SABC’s television shows, storylines and characters reiterate the ideas of nation and unity. The call for unity is exemplified by the soap opera *Soul City*’s theme song. As the “heartbeat of the nation,” the song calls for South Africans of all races and backgrounds to “stand together” and “live as one.” By asking people to listen to the *heartbeat* of the nation, the program stipulates that the country is one unified entity with one communal heartbeat. Soap operas like *Generations*, South Africa’s most popular television show, depict a ‘modern,’ urban, world of Black upper-middle class business elites. The show, with its emphasis on the emerging Black middle- and upper-classes presumably made possible by the new elections, encapsulates the hope of the post-apartheid era. *Generations*’ website makes frequent references to the links between the show and the post-apartheid era. *Generations*, the website proclaims, “can proudly claim to have not only survived political and social changes during this exciting period, but also to have evolved in tandem with our nation from the birth of its democracy in 1994 to the present time.” The show considers itself unique, “born and bred in South Africa” (*Generations*, 2005).

Centered on the fictional New Horizons advertising agency, *Generations* follows the life of the (Black) Moroka family who runs the flourishing business. Over time, the show’s landscape has broadened from advertising to include the wider media empire. Through this world, *Generations* depicts a society obsessed with power and money. If the characters have experienced poverty, they have moved past it through determination and hard work. A brief examination of the *Generations* character descriptions elucidates this seeming aspirational meritocracy:

Queen grew up in Soweto but always aspired to move to the Northern suburbs. Aiming to become a wealthy, respected woman

with class and status, she started out as an opportunistic gold-digger but has since mellowed into a lovable kugel whose passions in life are men and fashion ... Her main aim in life is to marry well.

Tau grew up on the streets with little (if any) guidance from his mother...With his “new” money Tau tries to buy class, which often translates as an accumulation of sometimes tasteless, sterile and impersonal objects. He has never been exposed to tradition and his cultural roots - if he had to ask the ancestors for guidance, he wouldn't know how to go about it. Now a ... major player in the international business world, he can handle himself in any conversation or situation.

Julia's a manipulative, scheming individual who's typical of those cunning yet beautiful women obsessed with proving themselves in a male-dominated world ... Assertive, determined and strong-willed she has no qualms about stabbing someone in the back, in the pursuit of her own selfish interests.

Ntombi is a feminist who believes that anything a man can do, a woman can do better. She fights the stereotypical image that beautiful equals brainless, but isn't militant about standing up for women's rights, showing that actions speak louder than words by making a success of anything she tackles (*Generations* 2005).

Each character has overcome his or her humble beginnings to become major players in the business world. Their racial and economic backgrounds seem not to have hampered their success. They epitomize (neo)liberal notions that everyone has an equal chance at success if the market operates unhindered. The women in particular show that “anything a man can do, a woman can do better.” Thus, we see the connections between the ‘new’ constructions of gender, a seeming absence of patriarchy, and the aspirational quality of neoliberal ideologies. The women are scheming, ambitious, self-interested. Equality, in this discourse, is measured by being able to succeed in the ‘masculine,’ ‘Western’ business world. In *Generations* these goals remain unquestioned.

Jyoti Mistry, head of television studies at the University of the Witwatersrand School of Arts in South Africa, argues that these shows give “Blacks a sense of identity and pride ... That's the success of the show ... It's a fact that you can be Black and successful” (Esipisu, 2005). Flockemann (2000), however, critiques the hope that *Generations* attempts to encapsulate. The show, she argues, presents an image of “an already-achieved world of commercial success beyond debates around affirmative action and Black empowerment” (p. 143). These depictions of wealthy Black South Africans mask the enduring racial and socio-economic inequality persisting in the country and portray individual wealth

and power as the *de facto* aspirations for the ‘new’ country, obviating other possibilities beyond those espoused by neoliberal capitalism.

And yet racial conflicts occasionally surface in the programming to undermine the sense of unity. One *Soul City* storyline epitomizes this tension. Facing economic hardship, the clinic feels it must layoff a worker (Episode 12, Season 6). Sister Bettina, the head of the AIDS clinic that provides the backdrop for the show, is at a loss as to what to do. Siphso, a Black male nurse, believes that Karen, the White administrator should go: “I think they should employ a Black person,” he argues, “Karen must go.” Karen, however, fights desperately to keep her job. How will Sister Bettina solve this problem? She has Karen do an audit of the clinic to see where they can save money. On the day that Sister Bettina is to make her announcement, Karen confronts her, saying that she will resign. Startled, Sister Bettina asks why. “At the end of the day, it’s just about making the numbers balance and according to my numbers, I’m the one who should go,” Karen replies. Thus, the racial tension and conflicts around affirmative action are solved by the logic of marketplace economics. Abstract, supposedly rational numbers trump any desire Karen had to remain with the clinic, a place that she considered her family.

### **Conclusion: The Neoliberal Rainbow Nation?**

Television permeates the daily lives of most South Africans, helping to construct a hegemonic culture. Because television airs everyday, viewers are constantly exposed to its characters and images, and notions of identity are repeatedly performed. Thus, scholars must be wary of ignoring the impact of the seemingly mundane properties of popular culture. Television in South Africa is an ideologically charged space that provides a compelling medium for articulating a ‘new’ vision for the country. The SABC works toward constructing an image of the ‘New’ South Africa, a country freed from apartheid and united through the ‘rainbow’ ideology.

Many scholars have examined the construction of the ‘nation’ in the ‘modern’ era of the early to mid-twentieth century (Chatterjee, 1999). Gaining independence from colonial powers, these countries worked (whether on their own or through the compulsion of ‘Western’ or international forces) to become homogenized entities ready to participate in an industrializing world. ‘New’ nations, like South Africa, emerging in the neoliberal era face a somewhat different international climate. Neoliberal policies, such as those dictated by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, call for countries to open up their borders and embrace a more ‘global’ and less ‘nationally-oriented’ vision. These ostensible tensions – constructing a coherent nation and yet cultivating a global vision – become visible through the storylines of South African television programs. The programs seemingly work toward building a united nation. And yet,

at times, the programming also encourages economic growth in ways that seem in conflict with the 'rainbow' ideas of unity and corrective action.

By complicating the cultivation of nationhood in the neoliberal era, this research attempts to add to the dialogue on post-colonial nationalism by posing the following question: Is the apparent tension between the rainbow ideology and the neoliberal economic policies reconciled in the SABC programming? Perhaps one answer stems from the SABC's use of the notions of unity, such as 'Simunye,' to market their products. Through this commodification of unity, the SABC *combines* the ostensibly contradictory messages of equality through solidarity and neoliberal economic growth policies. Another answer could be that the SABC does not reconcile this tension, that the unresolved tension remains a constant, if spectral, presence in South Africa. Or perhaps, as Wendy Lerner (2003) asserts, there is no monolithic neoliberalism, but rather multiple 'neoliberalisms.' The 'tension' underscoring popular cultural constructions in South Africa could help elucidate the ways in which neoliberal ideologies are re-imagined in the specific South African context through a national imaginary that serves to bolster the ANC's neoliberal project.

But the question remains: Who benefits and who loses from the particular visions put forth by South African television? Certainly the SABC and its international sponsors and advertisers have benefited from the immense popularity of its programming. But perhaps the biggest beneficiary has been the state. By showing already-achieved economic prosperity and racial harmony, television seemingly places the responsibility of enduring hardships on individuals. These depictions allow the government to put forth its neoliberal economic vision without appearing to disrupt the idea of a 'rainbow' nation. The millions of South Africans living in squatter camps and facing continuing racial discrimination, rampant disease and extreme poverty find their lives nearly as invisible as they did during apartheid. South African television, therefore, provides an important forum for visually grappling with (or ignoring) the issues attendant in constructing and contesting a *neoliberal* national imaginary.

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