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A New Color in Brazil TV

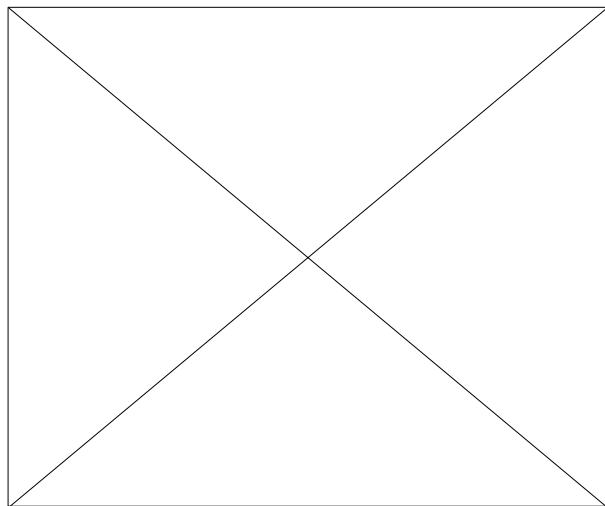
Blacks make up nearly half the population, but they were a rarity on screen. Now there's a channel for them -- one critics decry as racist.

By Henry Chu, Times Staff Writer

SAO PAULO, Brazil — The phone call from the budding station that launched Adyel Silva's television career seemed like a joke.

Sure, as a singer, Silva was used to the spotlight. But who would offer her a shot at fronting her own daytime show?

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"I laughed when I received the invitation because I never dreamed of hosting a television program. You never see a black woman hosting a TV show" in Brazil, Silva said. "We were never thought capable. Maybe I'm the first."

It turned out that the channel extending the offer, TV da Gente, wasn't just taking a chance on Silva. The channel itself, which debuted in late November, is something of a gamble — Brazil's first black-owned TV station featuring programming directed primarily at black viewers.

That it has the potential to be a lucrative venture seems obvious in a country with the largest black population outside Africa — nearly half of Brazil's 180 million people. But the fact that it took so long to emerge, 25 years after African Americans first established their own cable TV network in the U.S., attests to attitudes about race that are pervasive in Brazilian society.

Surf the channels on Brazilian TV and a clutch of beautiful people quickly crowds the screen: bikinied models, stubble-

cheeked soap opera leads, natty news anchors. All are svelte and good-looking. Virtually all are white.

When darker-skinned characters crop up in TV dramas, almost invariably they appear as maids and other domestic workers, or worse. "The soap operas here, the black people are always miserable, and they have an important role only when you're talking about crime," said Silva, 50.

"You grow up with the idea that if you're not blond and you don't have blue eyes, you're not beautiful," she said. "You switch on the television and you see Xuxa," the kittenish, blond former soft-porn actress who is now one of the most popular stars of children's TV in Brazil.

The mission of TV da Gente, or Our TV, is to try to bring a little balance to the scene. Executives at the station speak passionately of the need for the small screen to better reflect the reality lived by the 47% of Brazilians who claim some African heritage.

Yet what might seem a laudable or at least unobjectionable goal, at least by U.S. standards, has whipped up hostility in some quarters here. Critics and commentators swiftly came out of the woodwork to lambaste the new

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channel as racist in its own way.

By singling out blacks as its target audience and insisting on putting nonwhite faces before the camera as presenters and protagonists, TV da Gente contributes to racial division in Brazil, detractors contend.

"If I put a 'TV for whites' on air, I'd have a thousand lawsuits on my back," read a typical posting on one of several blogs and cyber-forums debating the merits of TV da Gente, which airs on a UHF channel. "I'm white; I'm not racist in any way. But I will not watch a single program on this channel because it's practicing explicit racism."

The channel's founder and principal backer, Jose de Paula Neto, is disturbed by such reactions.

"I never thought that organizing and joining together so many blacks would cause such indignation," said Neto, who hosts a variety show on mainstream TV and is one of the few black men to break into the business. "People say that I'm a Hitler, that I'm segregating the country. This has caused me a lot of pain."

The backlash exposed the extent to which race remains a raw nerve in this country. The debate takes direct aim at one of the most cherished notions of Brazilians' sense of themselves: the idea of Brazil as a "racial democracy" where skin color doesn't matter.

The concept was articulated more than 70 years ago by anthropologist Gilberto Freyre, who postulated that relatively peaceful coexistence and widespread miscegenation among white masters and their black slaves gave rise to Brazil's more relaxed attitude toward race.

Freyre's theory is an article of faith among many here. And undeniably, visitors are often struck by the variety of faces on the streets and beaches, where complexions range from milk to mocha to coal. In one famous survey in Brazil in 1976, respondents gave 134 different terms to describe their skin color, including "cashew-like," "burnt yellow" and "dark tan." (There was also "roseate" and "bluish.") Mixed-race couples are so common they go unnoticed.

But below the placid surface lie uncomfortable truths.

Brazil was the last country in the Western Hemisphere to ban slavery, in 1888. The enduring legacy of that is evident in the fact that blacks lag behind whites according to almost every social measure, including literacy and education.

Brazil's vast slums are populated mostly by people of color. Young black males are far more likely than any other segment of the population to die violently. Discrimination, though usually not overt, works subtly and powerfully to help keep blacks in lower-paying jobs.

"In whatever indicator you use, whether it's the job market or access to public services such as water or public sewage or the murder and homicide rate, the inequality is there," said Marcelo Paixao, an economist at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro.

Only in the last two decades, after a 20-year dictatorship that ended in 1985, has black consciousness and activism bubbled up and become a greater social force, Paixao said. But the movement is still far from the powerful civic and political player it is in the U.S., he said.

TV da Gente is a product of this relatively new vein of activism.

Neto, who grew up in a poor neighborhood of Sao Paulo, South America's largest city, made his name as a singer before making the jump to television as host of a Sunday variety show. The program's signature segment is "Princess Day," which plucks a deserving woman from the slums and awards her a makeover, shopping spree and other prizes.

Neto remained bothered, however, by the singular lack of nonwhite faces on TV. "It wasn't open discrimination. It was tacit," he said, perpetuated by white producers and executives who had no experience or contact with the poor, mostly black residents on society's margins.

To start up TV da Gente, Neto dug into his own pockets for most of the \$5.2 million needed to keep the station going for the first six months. The remaining 30% came from investors in Angola, another former Portuguese colony.

Because Brazil doesn't have a formalized Nielsen-type ratings system, the channel's popularity isn't yet known. At the moment, it's available only in Sao Paulo and the northeastern city of Fortaleza, but deals with cable and satellite providers in major cities throughout Brazil are under discussion, executives said.

When the channel debuted in November, it offered six hours of programming a day — news, Silva's daytime show geared to women, sports segments, musical outtakes. By Christmas, the number of hours had doubled. In three to four months, Neto hopes, TV da Gente will broadcast round-the-clock.

To meet the demand for content, translators are working feverishly to dub European and U.S. shows, including programming from the Black Family Channel, the Atlanta-based network co-founded by boxer Evander Holyfield, baseball player Cecil Fielder and singer Marlon Jackson, among others.

"There were definitely parallels between their group and ours, and we started talking. And it just worked out," said Samara Cummins, a vice president with the Black Family Channel. "We're in a global environment now, and what's good for one is good for another."

But Neto, 35, has been disappointed by the fitful response from other networks and potential U.S. investors. He hasn't been able to seal a deal with Black Entertainment Television, the oldest black network in the U.S., which began broadcasting in 1980. TV da Gente doesn't have the resources to buy rights to hit programs, and some U.S. studios and black networks are interested only in the bottom line, not in showing solidarity with TV da Gente's vision and making their programming more affordable, he said.

"It makes me feel like I'm asking for a handout," Neto said. "They're looking at Brazil as a [market] of 90 million blacks to grab hold of. My dream is that they look at us as a place of 90 million brothers."

If there's an echo of Martin Luther King Jr. in some of Neto's pronouncements, it's because the slain civil rights leader is a source of inspiration for him and also for Silva.

In Brazil, no one is expecting to replicate the huge marches or protests that won greater equality for blacks in America, but Silva sees TV da Gente as a major advance in the fight for increased rights and visibility.

"I know that in the '60s in the USA, black people stood up. We're standing up almost 50 years later," she said. "Our revolution is to tell people in a peaceful way, 'We can live together — we can melt.' But please don't pretend we're not here. Don't pretend we're not talented. Because we are."

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