



READING RACE AND
HOMOEROTICISM IN IVENS
MACHADO'S ESCRAVIZADOR-
ES CRAVO

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Brazilian artist Ivens Olinto Machado's 1974 video performance, *Escravidador-Escravo/Slavemaker-Slave* presents a power struggle between the light-skinned, partially clothed artist and a naked, Afro-Brazilian man named Cesar.¹ For eight minutes, the video captures Machado aggressively abusing Cesar on the floor of his studio. Throughout the performance, Cesar is beaten, tied up, and restrained, in a state of struggling to free himself from his bonds. However, the effort is in vain, for his aggressor returns and subdues his aggravated captive by biting the flesh of his back. The video performance centers on the abrasive actions perpetrated onto Cesar, yet there is also a strong element of homosexual desire or homoeroticism, suggesting he is a voluntary participant. The physicality between the two men and the nature of the abuse is not only about injuring the other, but also about provoking arousal. Pleasure derives from exercising power over the other, the dominant objectifying the dominated.

The video performance and its title recall the violent history of race relations in Brazil as well as deviant sexual practices of sadomasochism. For this paper, I refer to the social and political hierarchy of the master-slave dynamic, prevailing during colonial and imperial eras in Brazil. The two performers act out the authoritative, abusive, white master and the feeble, submissive black slave laborer. All the while, *racial democracy* expounded on by sociologist Gilberto Freyre in his seminal book *Casa Grande y Senzala* (The Masters and The Slaves) from 1933, paints the image of benevolent slavery, compassionate masters, and social harmony among races in Brazil.² And although scholars such as Florestan Fernandes and Thomas Skidmore have

¹ Within Ivens Machado's monograph *Encontro-Desencontro*, the caption of the *Escravidador-Escravo* identifies the Afro-Brazilian performer as Cesar. Henceforth, I will refer to him as Cesar, a fellow artist, Machado's friend and assistant in the early 1970s. *Ivens Machado, Encontro-Desencontro* (Rio de Janeiro: Oi Futuro, 2008).

² Gilberto Freyre, *The Masters and the Slaves (Casa-Grande e Senzala): A Study in the Development of Brazilian Civilization*, trans. Samuel Putnam (New York: Alfred A. Knoff, 1946).

proven Freyre's theory to be faulty for idealizing master-slave relations, *racial democracy* has become integral to Brazil's cultural and social identity.

I argue that *Escravizador-Escravo* assaults a social sense of modesty and propriety, using race relations and homoerotic desire to dislocate power dynamics in the early 1970s in Brazil. First, I will relay Freyre's examination and interpretation of race relations between masters and their slaves on the sugar plantations in Brazil. These plantations prompted cultural, social, and sexual contact between the European masters and their African slaves, the foundations of an ethnically diverse population, and a ranking based on race. Second, I will compare a watercolor painting by Jean Baptiste Debret, a French painter who traveled to Brazil with the French Artistic Mission in 1816, to elucidate complexities in master-slave relations. And third, I will briefly describe Machado's experimentation with video's communicative potential, a medium outside of traditional modes of art, comparable to body art and performance. In the end, reading themes of race and homoerotic cues in Machado's video produces a representation of racial identities and alternative sexualities under the military dictatorship in the early 1970s. Further, dispelling white imperialist patriarchy and subverting the nationalistic agenda of *racial democracy*.

The idea of racial democracy as described by Gilberto Freyre in 1933, celebrated the unique mixture of Indigenous, African, and European influences in Brazilian society.³ Central to this ideology is the image of Brazil as a country free from racism or discrimination based on ethnicity, where there is an equal place for everyone in the social order. According to Freyre, the

³ The term "racial democracy" was never used in Freyre's book *Casa Grande e Senzala*, however he did adopt it in later publications. Later scholars popularized the term to describe the racial dynamic in Freyre's work, explaining how Brazil escaped racism and prejudice through the close relations between masters and slaves. In actuality, a German Biologist Karl Von Martius conceived the "first version" of racial democracy in 1845 in his essay, "Como se deve escrever a historia do Brasil," (How one should write Brazilian History). Leone Campos de Sousa and Paulo Nascimento, "Brazilian National Identity at a Crossroads: The Myth of Racial Democracy and the Development of Black Identity." *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 19 (3/4). Springer: 129–43. Accessed on December 28, 2015, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40206137>.

origins of such an idea began with the colonial legacy of the Portuguese. The Portuguese colonizers promoted the idea of incorporation of all races rather than the exclusion of specific ethnic groups.⁴ Freyre's assumptions about racial mixture supported the idealistic image of the Portuguese as the egalitarian ancestors of Brazil.⁵ Credit for such an amiable nature, according to Freyre, was Portugal's geographic proximity to Africa, providing the Portuguese with a predisposition to establishing harmonious relations with those of darker skin, also referred to as *Lusotropicalism*.⁶ Freyre, however, excludes this feature from the Iberian and U.S. Americas, which differ in racial and regional orientation. After beginning colonial expeditions in North and West Africa in the sixteenth century, their "natural" tendency of maintaining racial tolerance later transferred to their affairs with Brazilians. Freyre's reinterpretation of Brazil's past upholds the historical legacy of tolerance, yet what remains is a white dominated socio-political order that has been constituted, normalized and maintained.

Escravidor-Escravo demonstrates the existence and persistence of a racial hierarchy, one in which whiteness connotes power and is the preferred racial category. Despite Freyre's idealist notions of all races living conflict free, history proves that the creation of a racially diverse country like Brazil was the result of sexual relations, oftentimes forced, with Indigenous and African women. Consequently, the inevitability of the "cross-racial" sexual practices of heterosexual European men resulted in an increasing number of *mulattos*, or offspring of mixed European and African blood. By 1818, Brazil's population of 3.5 million, was comprised of 60 percent black people and 10 percent *mulattos*.⁷ This generated an array of racial categories that

⁴ Anthony W. Marx, *Making Race and Nation: A Comparison of the United States, South Africa, and Brazil*, (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 30.

⁵ Marx, *Making Race and Nation: A Comparison of the United States, South Africa, and Brazil*, 30.

⁶ Specifically, Portugal's early experience with the Moors, the Muslim inhabitants of the Iberian Peninsula, who ruled in Portugal from 711 to 1249. Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

ranged from indigenous, mestizos, Afro-Brazilians, mulattos or *pardos*, and of course European descendants.⁸ Ultimately, miscegenation or “whitening” of the population benefited Brazil as a whole. Racial mixing aligned Brazil’s nineteenth century elite with other “civilized” nations in Europe, proving “whiteness” as the apex of the racial pyramid.

With Freyre’s theory, we gain insight into a benign form of slavery propagated by the Portuguese, however the history of slavery referenced in Machado’s video performance contradicts it. Machado’s *Escravidador-Escravo* performance recalls the collective and violent memory of Brazil’s role as the largest and longest slave-holding nations in history. Beginning in 1549, the Trans-Atlantic slave trade forcibly imported to Brazil more than 4.5 million slaves from West Africa, today Angola, Congo, and Mozambique.⁹ Abolitionist images of slavery circulated widely in the early 19th century, revealing evidence to slaves’ inferior, yet instrumental role in Brazil’s capitalist economy. In his book *Discipline and Punish* (1975), the French theorist Michel Foucault discusses the “techno-politics of punishment”, explaining how strategies of punishment implicate the body in political and economic fields. Accordingly, slaves’ bodies were not valued for their humanity, but for their production value. Black bodies translate into currency. And to reach the ultimate level productivity, exertion of power or punishment ensured the body’s efficiency and obedience.¹⁰

A comparison between the 1828 watercolor by Jean Baptiste Debret titled, “Plantation Overseers Discipline Blacks” and Machado’s video performance highlights similarities in portraying the colonization of the black body and consequently constructing a visual racial

⁸ The word *pardo* and *mestizo* are both terms for those with brown skin, as a result from mixing with African blood in the former and indigenous in the latter. Darlene J. Sadlier, *Brazil Imagined: 1500 to the Present*, (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2008), 103.

⁹ Marx, 49.

¹⁰ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 24.

hierarchy. Debret's image presents a clothed European plantation overseer brandishing a large whip and towering over a naked African slave on a rural plantation. Compositionally, his body stands in the center of the landscape, his arm reaching towards the sky wielding the whip. His stance and position contrasts drastically to the naked cowering slave, his body thrown to the ground, entangled around a wooden rod, and bleeding. Both the slave's size against the landscape and placement underneath the *senzalas* or slave dwellings signify his low socio-economic rank.

In addition, the exertion of power exhibited in Debret's watercolor painting and revisited by Machado, reinforces connotations of objectification, fascination, and pleasure within master-slave relations. The difference in nakedness between the overseer and the slave invites the viewer to fixate on the slave's vulnerable figure. The anticipation of the whip's harsh descent onto the slave's buttocks, a common location for lashings, emphasizes a sensual part of the body. The close proximity to the sadistic spectacle incites anxiety, disgust or even excitement in viewing violence. Similarly, *Escravidador-Escravo* generates this affective experience through the carnal interaction, the voyeurism of the camera over Cesar's strong muscles, and the soundtrack of grunts and sighs of satisfaction. Both representations of master-slave relations construct a power dynamic where the polarization of opposites is a stimulus for either repulsion or homoerotic pleasure. Satisfaction lies within the tension between repression and anguish, crime and punishment, where pain becomes inevitable or even chosen.

Interestingly, Freyre describes sexual connotations within exertions of power over the slave. Freyre states that *brincadeiras* or foolish playing between the master and "negro slave

boy” as children, would build a fondness for one another as adults.¹¹ This would then develop into rough thrashings or whippings with homosexual undertones.¹² “The master’s sadism is apparent in the administration of violent or perverse commands, implying a fondness for controlling others.”¹³ Freyre further indicates that this was “characteristic of every Brazilian born and reared in a plantation Big House.” Therefore, a racialized hierarchy and pleasure in exercising power, according to Freyre, become entrenched in the formation of the Brazilian patriarchal family.

In analyzing Debret’s representation of master-slave relations, we see the construction of a racialized order, where black bodies are abused, sexualized, but above all, instrumental to the white elite. The legacy of slavery embedded racial domination and discrimination into the social fabric of Brazilian national identity, lingering even after abolition, declaration of the Republic, and arguably does today. Afro-Brazilian slaves and free men emerged greatly underprivileged and deprived of the social and economic means to advance. Contradicting Freyre, *Escravizador-Escravo* symbolizes the reality of exploitation, humiliation, and degradation, cutting ties with the positive representation of racial hegemony in Brazil.

With the analysis of *Escravizador-Escravo*, I now come to my third context and final point, Machado’s experimentation with video during the early 1970s and the most repressive period of the dictatorship. Under General Emílio Medici, censorship was a crucial strategy in deflecting negative perceptions of the government, even dictating what qualified as “good taste”

¹¹Freyre, *The Masters and the Slaves (Casa-Grande e Senzala): A Study in the Development of Brazilian Civilization*, 75.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

on television.¹⁴ As a result, pioneer video artists conceived of television as an instrument of the government, generating uniformity and passivity. They strove to contest Brazil's perfected image on television by working outside of the commercial circuit, operating without central broadcasting. The commercial availability of the Sony Portapak in 1973 in Brazil allowed artists to generate their own messages in relation to their post-modern realities.¹⁵

In 1974, the pioneers of video art in Rio de Janeiro gained access to this new medium through a former cultural attaché Tom Job Azulay, a contact of Machado's former teacher and fellow artist Anna Bella Geiger. Azulay, a filmmaker, shared his half-inch Sony PortaPak with the Rio de Janeiro group of artists, which included Ivens Machado, Anna Bella Geiger, Paulo Herkenhoff, Sônia Andrade, Letícia Parente, Geraldo Mello, Fernando Cocchiaralle, and Miriam Danowski. In video art, unlike the superficiality of television broadcasting, "the camera becomes a character, open to reality, to chance, and to the world."¹⁶ Machado's videos, similar to his colleagues, exhibits the capturing of "live situations" where the camera-in-hand comes face-to-face with a live scenario, which transmits directly to the viewer. Yet, the act of recording was never solely documentary for early video artists in Brazil; rather it was a critical investigation of broader social realities. In Rio, early video was defined by performing symbolic gestures in front of the camera, breaking the routine message on television to share their experience of oppression and violence.

¹⁴ Justified by the preoccupation for the wellbeing of Brazil, Institutional Act #5 suspended civil rights, reinstated capital punishment and established specialized military courts for the sole purpose of trying subversive individuals. The major act in censorship allowed the government full control of what was allowed on television. The passing of AI#5 drastically changed the social and cultural output in Brazil. Elena Shtromberg, "Bodies in Peril: Enacting Censorship in Early Brazilian Video Art (1974–1978)", in John C. Welchman, ed., *The Aesthetics of Risk: SoCCAS Symposium*, vol. III (Zurich: JRP/Ringier, 2008), 267.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 102.

¹⁶ Ivana Bentes in Arlindo Machado, *Made in Brasil: Tres décadas do video/Three Decades of Video* (Sao Paulo: Itau Cultural), 156.

Like performance art, video used the body to transgress societal limitations and constrictions, both in art and in life. In her discussion of early video art, Art historian Elena Shtromberg discussed “the body as a site for exposing tension” within society, particularly under authoritarian regimes.¹⁷ The body was then the receptor of the social, cultural, and political repression of the military dictatorship. The video artists engaged the viewer directly, without producing the conditions for a passive or comfortable viewing. Themes of race and homoeroticism call upon society’s outdated perceptions of relations thought to be indecent and perverse. The spectators of Machado’s videos, particularly government censors, may feel confusion, disgust, or even arousal. This video tape’s feedback loop activates or even better, aggravates the viewer’s environment to deviate from normality and conventional thought. Where television consumed the viewer, the transgressive acts recorded on video held the potential to shock the viewer out of their complacency.

By way of conclusion, we acknowledge how *Escravidador-Escravo* demonstrates the body not just as a site for violence, but as a site for expression, a rebellious tool. Machado highlights the raw, brutal, even erotic nature of the “paternal” “benevolent” interactions between masters and slaves. The video performance features racial and homoerotic transgression to challenge socio-political realities, contributing to the post-modern definition of identity. Gilberto Freyre’s assimilationist theory ingeniously translated Brazil’s long history of slavery and Portuguese ancestry into an asset of a culturally unique society. Miscegenation was not a menace to society as it was in Europe and the United States, but instead was an advantage for Brazil’s elite. Freyre’s ideology upholds white heterosexual definition of *Brasilidade*, in a society where

¹⁷ Shtromberg quoting art critic Nelly Richard in *Bodies in Peril: Enacting Censorship in Early Brazilian Video Art (1974–1978)*, 275.

racial and sexual repression is encouraged. Machado created *Escravidor-Escravo* in 1974 when feminist groups began to voice their critiques of Brazilian *machista* culture while Afro-Brazilian youth enthusiastically consumed Soul, Funk, and R&B music from the U.S., finding the language to express black identity. Not until the late 1970s did major racial activist organizations such as *O Movimento Negro Unido*, mobilize to combat social and political issues, like the myth of racial democracy.¹⁸ Nevertheless, Machado contributes an early cognizance of an Afro-Brazilian and LGBTQ critique of Brazil's historical narrative, allowing for an awareness, reinterpretation, and inclusion.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 42-3.