



**Então ela é escrava?**  
***Escrava Isaura, history***  
**and national identity**  
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**Abstract:** This paper analyzes the soap opera *Escrava Isaura*, aired in Brazil by the network Rede Globo from October 11, 1976 until February 5, 1977. Based on Bernardo Guimarães' novel written in 1875, *Escrava Isaura* enjoyed attention from both the media and a vast national audience at a time when television had become a significant and influential medium. The narrative and aesthetics displayed showed a complex relationship between History and fiction, establishing a peculiar view of the past and slavery. *Escrava Isaura* launched a lively discussion in the press around slavery, patriarchy, and national identity at a time of military rule in Brazil.

**Keywords:** Brazilian soap operas; Brazilian television; television and History.

**Resumo:** Este artigo analisa a novela *Escrava Isaura*, transmitida pela Rede Globo entre 11 de outubro de 1976 e 5 de fevereiro de 1977. Adaptação do romance de Bernardo Guimarães (1875), a novela teve grande repercussão na mídia e um alto índice de audiência, durante um período de profunda transformação da televisão no Brasil. A narrativa e a estética presentes em *Escrava Isaura* configuraram um discurso histórico intrincado, estabelecendo uma leitura peculiar do passado e das relações raciais contemporâneas à novela. *Escrava Isaura* gerou debates acirrados na imprensa da época em torno da escravidão, patriarcado e identidade nacional, em tempos de ditadura militar no Brasil.

**Palavras-chave:** novelas; televisão brasileira; televisão e História.

## Introduction

A wide shot of the dining room of the Almeida family's *casa-grande* singles out the big table underneath a crystal candelabra; a Greco-Roman statue dominates the space. A piano and Rafael-like paintings project opulence. Januarina (Zeni Pereira), a domestic slave and a *mammie*, enters the scene and arranges the table. She approaches the lady of the house, a sad Dona Ester (Beatriz Lyra), who is sitting in a lavish couch. A crosscut reveals a young white woman skimming through a French cookbook in the kitchen, Isaura (Lucélia Santos). She is gentle and condescending toward Januarina. Januarina commands her to go check on Dona Ester, Isaura's *madrinha*.

Back to the living room, exchanges between Ester and Isaura are tender. To cheer Dona Ester up, Isaura elegantly reads aloud Camilo Castelo Branco's 1861 novel *Amor de Perdição* setting the time frame of the scene in the last quarter of the Brazilian Empire. The Almeida household radiates a peaceful aura reinforced by the serene and delicate presence of the women, the blue lighting and the ambiance pastel colors. Later, Malvina Fontoura (Norma Blum), a young family friend visits the Almeidas. Dona Ester asks Isaura to play the piano, and the guest is bemused by Isaura's skills as a pianist. Malvina seems intrigued by the sad song, unbeknownst to her. When asked about it, a noticeable upset Isaura replies that the melancholy of the melody matches her own unfortunate condition. Dona Ester finally relieves her guest from the confusion, explaining that Isaura is not a relative but a slave. Malvina is outraged, since Isaura is educated, beautiful, and white (Figure 1).



Figure 1 – Dona Ester, Malvina and Isaura (*Escrava Isaura*)

These first scenes of the first episode of the Brazilian soap opera *Escrava Isaura* (EI), broadcasted on October 11, 1976, foregrounded what would be its gist: the tale of Brazilian slavery during its last throes told through the life story of a white female slave. Aired by the ascending Rede Globo's network from Monday to Saturday at 6pm through February 5, 1977, this adaptation of Brazilian writer Bernardo Guimarães' 1875 abolitionist novel chronicles the struggles of Isaura, who is tormented by the erotic onslaughts of her master and plantation owner Leôncio Almeida (Rubens Falco), who desperately pursues her to no avail.

The making of *EI* and its smashing success locally and abroad (sealed by both its local audience numbers and its subsequent export to 50 countries) signaled the pivotal role of television, and more importantly of the *novelas* during the 1970s Brazil. Enmeshed in a complex game of both authoritarian military rule (1964–1985) and economic development from above (the infamous “Brazilian Miracle”), Brazil experienced a groundbreaking expansion of its culture industry in that decade (FICO, 1997; RIDENTI, 2000; ORTIZ, 2012). The media and telecommunication sectors, key to the military modernization project, received essential backing from the regime. Television in the 1970s became a very profitable medium endowed with ideological value, and *novelas* became its most precious product.

This transformation of the cultural field was both the result of specific state policies and the expansion of a culture industry. The authoritarian state created a vast array of agencies in an attempt to secure control of the production of the symbolic and to reinvent a Brazil that suited their modernizing aspirations. Investment in the construction of an efficient network of microwave towers allowed universal reception of TV programs throughout the country. Television sales boomed.

During prime time the vast majority of shows were Brazilian in a nation heavily dependent on financial and industrial imports. Globo's case is emblematic: a privately owned network born during a military regime in a dependent country, which produced most of its programs nationally and exported them abroad from a very early period. An astonishing number of shows seen by TV audiences were made in Brazil from the late 1960s to the 1990s; 90% of these were soap operas (WELLS, 1996).

Latin American *novelas* bear the marks of TV's commercial imperatives, responding to the demands of cultural habits and specific ways of seeing which are also in a constant state of transformation and adaptation (LOPES, 1995). In that vein, Rede Globo has exploited a repertoire that includes fashion, music, and sociability standards. Globo's shows sell modernization. They make available and visible structures of desire (of things and modes of conduct) that seemed to open

the doors for a globalized world. Thematically and visually, *novelas* owed an obvious debt to the process of rapid transformation which 1970s Brazil was going through, and the commercial instinct of the ascending network created a sophisticated apparatus composed by audience indicators, market research, and advertisement that guaranteed rating success and Globo's hegemony for almost three decades.

*Novelas* were also soaked with civic values. The quest for modernization in Brazil was for decades intimately coupled with a mission to unravel the nature of *the real Brazil*; i.e. its national identity (NAPOLITANO, 2016; ORTIZ, 2012). The military was not exempt from these concerns and their cultural policies reflected these anxieties (JOHNSON, 1987; SILVA, 2011). Globo aligned with this nationalist/modernizing agenda, despite the ideological and political diversity of its staff and the variety of TV shows and soaps made over those years (NAPOLITANO, 2012; RIBKE, 2011). The network created a specific image for the station associated with high production values, which eventually became a model and a trademark for Brazilian modernization (HAMBURGER, 2011).

*EI*'s sumptuous production and plot suggested a national past obliquely speaking to the grand aspirations of the 1970s. The *novela* created a manifold version of Brazilian slavery that publicly dialogued with present-day racial relations in an authoritarian Brazil that was perceived as developing, while simultaneously expanding peculiar images of race-relations.

In this essay, I analyze how History was imagined and projected in *EI*. Operating within the frame of melodrama, slavery was both aesthetically and narratively displayed as a game of seduction, desire, and mild violence, closely entwining contemporary race relations with the historical events it claimed to depict. I trace the debates that materialized in the press and censorship reports to account for the variety of voices that publicly argued over the soap opera's narrative. Likewise, I assess the juncture of mass media transformation and the debates on national identity.

Undoubtedly, the rocketing rise of television as a lasting part of the experience of what was then called "modernization" happened side by side with a profound conversion of Brazilians' self-image. What I see deepening during mid-1970s Brazil is a nation-wide fascination with soap operas able to efficiently recount the new experiences of consumerism and anxieties about Brazil as a (future?) world power. In that process, *novelas* not only played a prominent role: they became artifacts to be seriously considered as a fundamental component of the nation's cultural fabric. Through daily columns written in O Globo, television would definitely strengthen its role in the mass culture landscape of the 1970s (LOPES, 2009).

### *É boi com abórbora*

*EI* reveled history and myth: a fantasized romantic story of Brazilian slavery with few villains. The articulation of such a historical tale as a melodrama smoothed the traumatic narrative effects of slavery creating audience identification. Simultaneously, history and melodrama knotted projecting a present of racial democratic relations seen as a distinct sign of progress. This narrative became a discursive keystone in the nation building of 1970s Brazil's and an element in the official narrative about Brazil abroad (BENAMOU, 2009).

Globo previously broadcasted *A cabana do pai Tomás* (1969-1970), attained neither audience nor critical success. A literal adaptation of H. B. Stowe's *Uncle Tom Cabin*, it focused on the struggle waged between planters and slaves in the U.S. South during the Civil War. Written mostly by H. Maia and W. Negrão (and supervised by the declining soap opera writer-star Gloria Magadan), it signaled the end of the network shows perceived as removed from Brazilian reality. A century after the publication of Guimarães' novel and seven years after the broadcasting of *A cabana*, *EI* became the most successful literary classic to be brought to television (DUTRA, 1977, p. 15).

There was an official interest in promoting adaptations of Brazilian historical and literary pieces for cinema, starting as early as 1971; it became policy in 1975 when the state film production company Embrafilme started to coproduce historical films. (MORETTIN, 2018; AMÂNCIO, 2000). Literature played a special role also in mid-1970s television fiction; Globo created the 6pm timeframe to broadcast them. Ascending screenwriter Gilberto Braga had previously adapted two foundational novels, 1876 Machado de Assis' *Helena* and 1876 José de Alencar's *Senhora*. Joaquim Manuel de Macedo's 1844 novel *A moreninha*, was also adapted for a soap by Herval Rossano in 1975, the same who would direct *EI*. Jorge Amado had his popular 1958 *Gabriela* adapted for television in 1975 and broadcast multiple times after that.

The production value of these *novelas* was elevated by well-known playwrights and cinema professionals who, escaping censorship, "migrated" to the medium (RIBKE, 2011). Education minister Ney Braga, asserted "fiction literature [...] has been attracted to TV, allowing the masses to be in touch with key Brazilian major works [...], which has highly improved the cultural level of the medium" (GUIMARÃES, 1996, p. 17).

*EI*'s adaptation kept the three-part structure of the original and emphasized the multigenerational narrative, typical of historical pieces. Braga enhanced old and created new characters, settings, and plot dynamics. The first part set forth

the conflicts: the Almeida family and their slaves; the Fontouras; the arrival of the Almeida's heir Leôncio from Europe; his marriage to Malvina Fontoura and his frantic pursue of Isaura; Isaura's corresponded love for Tobias, a neighbor *fazendeiro*; the death of Dona Ester; Isaura's white father's attempts to buy her freedom.

Isaura's first love interest, Tobias, is invented, as it is Santa (Maria das Graças), Malvina's maid. Isaura's archenemy, the slave Rosa (a glorious Léa Garcia) is much more prominent in the *novela*. Guimarães' André is a spoiled domestic slave, but Braga's André (Haroldo de Oliveira) is a rebellious plantation slave. The prominence of Rosa and André add multiple layers in *EI*'s portrayal of slavery, as his resistance and her wickedness are contrasted to Isaura's docility and acquiescence.

The second part starts with Tobias and Malvina's assassination. To get rid of his rival, Leôncio murders him, accidentally killing his wife. Isaura faces now a tough dilemma: her master's love or the whip. When she chooses the latter, her father Miguel (Átila Iório), former overseer turned administrator of the Tobias family estate, takes her to Minas Gerais (in the book they head to Recife). The third part shows Isaura living with her father and runaways Santa and André in Barbacena. She meets Álvaro (Edwin Luisi), her undisputed love, savior, a wealthy cattle rancher, and abolitionist.

Leôncio finally finds Isaura and takes her back. She harvests sugarcane and sleeps in the *senzala*, measures aimed to break and persuade her to be the master's lover. Leôncio's last attempt to bend Isaura's spirit reaches its peak with her forced wedding to the physically deformed gardener Beltrão, ceremony interrupted by Alvaro, now Leôncio's creditor (his dissolute life left him deeply in debt). Alvaro now owns Leôncio's entire estate. Desperate, Leôncio kills himself. Álvaro frees all the slaves and marries Isaura.

Braga aimed to overcome pompous adaptations of historical pieces. *EI* included exterior scenes with natural lighting, colloquial dialogue, long takes and full shots, all a lot less frequent in soap operas at the time. Less frequent was also the presence of a black cast. Braga claimed he "always heard black actors were not very good in Brazil, but if that is true, we were very lucky. All of our actors (in *EI*) are excellent" (DA TÁVOLA, 1977c, p. 42; ANGEL, 1976b, p. 46). Artur da Távola – in his television column in *O Globo* – wrote about the letters he received. The public irritation was mostly aimed to Isaura blatant whiteness, the made-up characters, and the fate followed by the original ones. Braga's emphasis on the melodramatic elements of the book was also seen as eclectic (DA TÁVOLA, 1976c, p. 46).

A critic observed that,

The network from Jardim Botânico attempted to enrich its repertoire with a show supposed to publicize our literature

[...] but the promise to elevate the cultural milieu was just a promise [...] it [the network] misrepresented Machado de Assis and Jorge Amado, but with *Escrava Isaura*, Globo has crossed the line [...] creating another love [Tobias] and a *quilombo* (Barbacena) [...] changing the time frame [...] everybody who has read the novel knows that it has nothing of abolitionist, quite the opposite, it's racist, as it defends the slave because she is white [...] it would be great if the networks makes soap operas without adapting real novels, stopping castigating our already beaten national literature. (MARIGNY, 1977, p. 35)

Voicing opposite positions, intellectuals and politicians supported *EI*. Nelson Rodrigues said he was addicted to it, as it accurately reflected Brazil's national essence (ANGEL, 1976a, p. 42). José Bonifácio Andrada, politician and supporter of the military praised and applauded the adaptation, as it approached the "Brazilian family" to consecrated works of national literature (SIMBALISTA, 1977, p. 3). Rio de Janeiro Governor Faria Lima and President Geisel praised it for its fidelity to the book, accurate picture of slavery, and its contemporaneity (SIMBALISTA, 1977, p. 3).

Da Távola also eulogized it as it "plays with the rhythm, the pauses, the cuts, the ellipses" in an energetic pace. The gist of the original has not been lost; Guimarães' piece was easily translated to the screen as it was equally modern, and the unconditional nature of the characters was either pure or evil, essence of any good and effective story. Braga's eclecticism was very effective in making the story suitable for television (DA TÁVOLA, 1976a, p. 44).

The debate expressed concerns about television's ability to adapt Brazilian masterpieces. A journalist admitted *EI* was "one of the most annoying [but] successful Globo soap operas" (MARQUESI, 1979, p. 17), and Campos added that, "Braga is responsible for one of the biggest hits on TV this year." Indeed, *EI* had reached 81 points in the Ibope during its final week, an all-time record to that point (CAMPOS, 1977, p. 8).

Casting Santos was key for *EI*'s success. Even if Rossano explained as "totally coincidental," his and Braga's decision to choose an unknown actress, Santos came to be "the perfect choice to play the part." Braga had thought about more experienced and alluring cinema novo actress Ioná Magalhães and rumors circulated about another favorite, Débora Duarte (ARAÚJO, 2000; CAMPOS, 1976, p. 6, 8). But Santos juvenile physiognomy and naïve sensuality suited better the complexities of a role that combined eroticism and victimhood; Isaura was desirable but not blatantly sexual, as other female soap opera heroines were in the past (CAMPOS, 1977, p. 8).

Da Távola saw Isaura/Santos as the utmost embodiment of chastity and innocence, someone the public could identify with (DA TÁVOLA, 1976a, p. 44).



Santos naiveté and discrete sex appeal were not accidental. They were consistent with the narrative about history and nation *EI* projected, which interlaced notions of gender, race, and sexuality. The emphasis on her singular and unjust circumstances (her whiteness) made her a privileged victim. The melodramatic mode fleshed out those qualities making the story compelling and a distinct reading of the history of slavery in 1970s Brazil.

### *Malvina e Tobias viraram churrasquinho*

At the end of *EI*'s first episode, Comendador Almeida and Conselheiro Fontoura are in a slave market. Almeida was looking for “pieces” being auctioned to work in his plantation. Brusquely, he opens the mouth of a male slave to examine his teeth; as for him superficial physical appearance could be deceiving. Indeed, the slave's teeth are rotten; Almeida laughs with disdain. In a crosscut, we see a sad Isaura standing in a hill, surrounded by a beautiful garden, and as if able to sense the previous situation, she takes her hand to the chest, sorrow writ large across her face (Figure 2).



Figure 2 – Comendador Almeida and Conselheiro Fontoura in a slave market (*Escrava Isaura*)

These parallel scenes, divergent and devoid of dialogue, are powerfully related through similar *mise-en-scène*. Both are outdoors; a natural blue lighting stress the melancholic atmosphere. There is a sharp contrast between the open spaces in the background and the freedom they seem to promise and the material reality of captivity these two bodies (with all their obvious visible differences) incarnate. The camera distance from the characters is the same, avoiding close-ups to emphasize the overall physical experience of slavery. The male slave's body is defenseless and vulnerable, as is Isaura's.

It is the score that frame and punctuate these scenes so meaningfully together. A sad instrumental melody (a variation of *EI*'s main song which the lyrics speak of the

slaves' vicissitudes) plays at the very moment the two men stand facing the anonymous slave and it plays all the way through Isaura's silent meditation. This music landscape and the images it scores provide a wide range of narrative possibilities.

I explore here the junction between the historical and the melodramatic discourse. Melodrama stages socio-historical change through a display of the private context and the emotional transformations materialized in it. It is "necessarily both personal and institutional because it dramatizes how individuals attempt to embody institutional roles or images, both in the private and public sphere" (ELSAESSER, 1991; ZARZOSA, 2015). Melodrama overplays with dialogue, color, music, voice inflection, and décor precluding realism. In both film and television, the melodramatic mode heavily relies on *mise-en-scène*, which contrasts with the storyline (GIBBS, 2002). The historical narrative favors analysis over narration, debates about the significance of historical events, and embraces social theories to explain such significance.

Through the juxtaposition of these two discourses an affective mode of popular history emerged in *EI* (LANSDBERG, 2015). I examine what melodrama does to the history it chooses to represent (WILLIAMS, 1998; MCKEE, 2009). Isaura, a white slave and an object of multiple men's desire foregrounds the story, at the same time that maps out a particular interpretation of slavery and race relations/perceptions significant in 1970s Brazil.

Mônica Kornis states that in order to grasp the construction of historical narratives in the realm of melodrama,

It is essential to seek the meaning and limits of a historical discourse that is rebuilt in the arena of morality based on a dichotomy between the good and the bad, and pedagogically defined in the construction of a narrative subjected to a strong polarization between its characters and its content. (KORNIS, 2008, p. 51)

*EI*, as many soap operas claiming historical reconstruction, tells the story of slavery focusing on the loves and sorrows of individuals. History becomes a narrative told through subjective states and in doing so, elicits an affective response from the viewers, simultaneously bringing an imaginary past in close articulation to the present. Both story and historical narrative are built simultaneously, and the romantic outcome enhances the historical closure.

It was precisely the feuilletonesque character of Guimarães' book that attracted Braga and convinced him the soap would be successful (AUTRAN, 1976, p. 39). He endowed the plot with the effective presence of love triangles: Isaura's first love, the landowner Tobías, exists only in *EI*, embodying the cause of emancipation; Leôncio's frantic pursuit of Isaura and her furtive meetings with Tobias develop

simultaneously, creating in turn an ill relationship between the men; their dispute is about both Isaura's love and slavery's fate.

Tobias (a slave owner) is manifestly virtuous and supports abolitionism. The Almeidas and Tobias families have adjoining plantations in Campos. During Tobias and Leôncio's several encounters at each other places, the differences between them as masters are clearly sketched out. Leôncio is cruel and is sexually involved with his female slaves. His plantation is shown and field slaves are seen. Tobias plantation is filmed only intermittently; his everyday life develops indoors, a warm home shared with his mother and sister.

Tobias transmits a particular idea about Brazilian slavery during its last throes and the subsequent process of nation building, claiming slavery was becoming less profitable than free labor. He represents a generation of wealthy young men imbued with entrepreneurial spirit. His sister Taís listens to his explanation of Brazil's unique climate and soil, which affords production to grow yearlong. Both Tobias, and after his death, Álvaro, functioned as the opposite to Leôncio, incarnating the ideals of order and progress of the would-be republic (1889-1930). These men are devoted to development.

Patriotic, *ufanista* statements, which spirit would span through *EI* in its 100 episodes, were part of a broader narrative in 1970s Brazil: the idea that because of its history, natural resources, and political leadership, Brazil was finally ready to reach its long awaited full potential (FICO, 1997). Leôncio represents, the past, the cruelest traits of slavery. Having lived in Europe made him believe Brazil is unsophisticated and underdeveloped. He wants to live from the profits of slavery while his father is convinced that the only way to reach progress is through productive labor and industry building.

In *EI*, only the educated and white articulate an abolitionist speech. Discussing this subject, these men and women are placed in salon-type rooms with plenty of flowers, art, and fine music and cocktails. In opposition, André, the rebellious (and literate) Almeida's slave, called *preto dos infernos* by the overseer, runs away after spitting on his face, but does not think or discuss his condition. He does not consider his or any slave's fate as a whole.

*EI* oscillated between the hyperbole of melodrama and realism supported by both dialogue and the reconstruction of material culture. Realism came into play with the creation of real-life prototypical characters and situations, and whatever the screenwriter or director disclaimers were ("it's only fiction"), the soap implicitly made, and was received as making, historical-realist assertions. When newspaper readers voiced whether the show was faithful to the original book, government officials discussed the depiction of slavery as accurate, or critics praised the décor as historically authentic they were all expecting truth to be represented, whatever such truth it was.

*EI* use of melodrama as a convention did not prevent it from asserting a historical truth. The over-the-top décor and pompous dialogue coexisted with the

introduction of several “true” historical facts, i.e. mentions of abolitionist legislation, historical characters, and recognizable locations. The production also bet closely on the set design and clothes to give “authenticity” to the historical account and make true-life claims, material culture providing historical veracity.

Melodrama actually helped to circumvent the clashes with the regime censorship. In Guimarães’ book, Leôncio is already married to Malvina while pursuing Isaura. In the *novela*, he meets and marries her while sleeping with Rosa and chasing Isaura. The military found it inappropriate for a married man to lust after other women, so the censorship forced Braga to kill both Malvina and Tobías in a fire; they both “viraram churrasquinho.” (DA TÁVOLA, 1976b, p. 42). Beyond the comical criticism Da Távola was making to the regime’s obtuse morality, Braga was forced to change his script. It was much more decent and appropriate for a single man to court an also “available” woman.

More significant to *EI* historical discourse was the pressure exerted by censors on certain terms used in the dialogues. Braga was summoned to censors’ headquarters in Brasilia on numerous occasions to have a “conversation.” The repeated use of the word “slave,” would incite racism, censors claimed. They suggested he alternate the words “slave” and “piece”, as a way to deflect possible misunderstandings. Braga complied but the newspapers reported it (CAMINHA NETO, 2003). Scenes were also cut: Isaura’s trashing of her room in reaction to Tobias’ death and her slapping of Leôncio were seen as improper behavior for a (female) slave (ANGEL, 1976b, p. 46).

These anecdotes underscore the tensions present in the story told in *EI* and the distortions and obliterations of the historical narrative about slavery, central institution in the making of Brazilian modern social fabric. There is a remarkable absence of the origins of it, the middle-passage, African culture, or colonialism. *EI* stressed what it seemed to be the “romantic aspects” of slavery in the 1970s. Racial democracy and its subsequent idealization of *mestiçagem* was an official state ideology in those years, circulating widely (FICO, 1997; ALBERTO, 2011; DOMINGUES, 2008). *EI* and

### **Slavery and patriarchy or *A branca de alma negra***

Approximately a month into *EI*, an angry Leôncio commands Isaura to take off his boots. Alone with him in the family room, she is visibly uncomfortable and confused. Leôncio, who is as evil as he is smart, asks her why she looks so surprised. He reminds her she is a slave and slaves obey their masters’ orders. Isaura complies not without complaining that she has never been asked to do such a dreadful thing. With a smirk on his face, Leôncio says good times are over for her. Isaura storms out of the room.

I analyze the variety of representations around slave labor and their association with that of gender, race, and sexuality stereotypes. Domestic and outdoor duties, especially in the fields, were assigned to characters in close association to their race and gender, foregrounding representations with high significance in Brazil's social dynamics during those years. The scene described above fleshes out recurrent themes throughout *EI*, i.e., Isaura's white privilege and, thus, the "injustice" of her situation, the "appropriate" duties associated to her exceptional condition, and the patriarchal character of slavery.

Densely inhabited by women, the domestic space works as a place where the white female characters feel safer, socializing more freely. Also strongly racialized, the *casa-grande* is defined as a landscape where white and black females are bound in relationships of inequality but also protection. Dona Ester both shields and holds Isaura back, as she gives Isaura an outstanding education but does not want to grant her freedom. When Dona Ester dies, her daughter-in-law Malvina, takes on her role.

White mistresses are victims of the patriarchal structure. Dona Ester's exchanges with her husband and son always end up in her humiliation. Leôncio decides on every single detail of Malvina's married life. Dona Ester wants to manumit Isaura, but she ends up realizing it is not up to her; the lawyer she consults in secret tells her Isaura is not hers, but her husband's.

The Fontoura's household is not much better. Malvina conveys her need of a maid. Her father tells her he will go to the slave market and buy a *peça* for her. The term upsets Malvina, who finds the idea of the slaves displayed as objects repugnant. Her father patronizingly responds, "who would do the work if we did not have slaves? Have you been reading abolitionist literature?" Malvina remains silent. When her father brings Santa from the market, she accepts her new maid gladly (Figure 3).



Figure 3 – Malvina and Santa (*Escrava Isaura*)

Braga thought of *EI* as a protest against female oppression (AUTRAN, 1976, p. 39). He saw the story as a tale of a woman and her right to make decisions, helped by other women, enslaved and free. The domestic space works in *EI* as a stage of the common oppression of white and black females, a metaphor of Brazilian social fabric mostly shown through the living room dynamics and network of pseudo affections, obliterating the daily violence of slavery. Isaura is in the living room because she's white. Still, she is constantly reminded of the fragile nature of that and the space she occupies is tied to her mistresses' influence, judged by all the men as female weakness. Leôncio's frequent threat to send Isaura to the fields encounters not only her mistresses' outrage, but also slaves' and some male slave-owners indignation. It is mostly in those instances that slavery is seen as aberrant and unjust.

And yet, Isaura does not "ask" for anything and accepts her fate stoically. Despite the privileges she enjoys, she claims she recognizes "her place." Her stoicism and virtue are opposed to Rosa's jealousy and André's rebellious personality. Both work as Isaura's opposite, negative attributes about these slaves' behavior and offering a wider window to discern more clear-cut notions on race and gender relations in 1970s Brazil.

Rosa's character works in symmetrical opposition to Isaura. Her "beauty" and noble soul is contrasted to Rosa's blackness, fiery temperament, and overt sexual behavior. She occasionally circulates the domestic space, but works in the spinning room and sleeps in slave quarters. The sexually charged energy Rosa radiates and her supposed encounters with the white men (Leôncio and the overseer) explicit through dialogues do not meet, paradoxically, its visual equivalent. Their sexual encounters are a known reality, but never really shown. There is always distance between Leôncio and Rosa's bodies; glances cross and hands touch, but she is not kissed throughout the soap opera while Isaura kisses and is kissed by different men. Leôncio, even if he proclaims he owns Isaura, fervently desires her consent (Figure 4).

Rape, constitutive element in the relationship master-slave, is never mentioned. Interracial sex and intimacy, even if not shown, are strongly suggested. Such an idea was and has been key "to the construction of Brazilian racial exceptionalism and the myth of racial democracy" (AIDOO, 2018). Rosa is the character who better embodies that notion, as she is not only always available; she is the one inciting the sexual encounters with white men.



Figure 4 – Sexual encounters and distance (*Escrava Isaura*)

She is astute, unrefined, aggressive, and intrinsically evil. Manipulative, her only goal is to destroy Isaura. Rosa's insane jealousy is driven by a certainty she will never occupy a place similar to her rival. Despite insisting Isaura is a slave just like her, Rosa is aware they are radically different. Rosa will never play the piano nor will she be kissed by a white man. Her ultimate decision, to take the poison she intended Isaura to drink, is pushed by the horrific prospect of a manumitted Isaura's upcoming marriage to rich and handsome Álvaro.

André's portrayal is also Isaura's inverted mirror. Initially sold to the Almeidas as a domestic slave, the only literate Afro-Brazilian in *EI* is quickly demoted to the fields. His defiant attitude makes him the target of both Leôncio's and Francisco's ire, and consequently he is the only slave physically punished. When he behaves "properly," he is allowed back to the household, only to make a single slip and be thrown into the pillory again. Such a pattern in André's fate works as a warning against bottom up violence; in the narrative, even other slaves advise him not to resist.

A few days before the end of *EI*, Da Távola ponders the reasons viewers widely supported Isaura.

It could be thought [hypothetically] the only reason viewers love her is because she is white, beautiful, and cultivated (had she been black, ugly, and uneducated, it wouldn't reach the

samer results), and he goes further, “but that is not the reason [...] it is the fact that she is so humble, nice, and docile that makes everybody love her, including the slaves who wrongly thought violence was a tool to finish slavery [André]. Viewers realize she was white but her soul was black, making slavery so unjust. It is her human dignity, the fact that despite her whiteness she did not use it for her own benefit.” (DA TÁVOLA, 1977b, p. 40).

The statement expressed the complexity of racial representation in *EI*. Isaura looks (and is) white, despite her aforementioned “African blood.” She is also a slave, creating a paradox in terms of visual representation. The emphasis on Isaura’s whiteness obliterates the historical connections between colonialism, racism, and slavery. Slavery, an overall injustice, if incarnated in a beautiful and cultivated white woman becomes not only much more visibly outrageous to Brazilian audiences; it also creates an ahistorical and de-politicized account of its origins and dynamics. It is unbearable for the characters and the viewers to see her enslaved and at the mercy of Leôncio’s urges. (AUTRAN, 1976, p. 39). Braga’s slavery affected all women equally and violence was mostly absent of the equation. When shown, it targeted black men.

The soap opera title sequence always opens with a seemingly “work song” written by Jorge Amado and Dorival Caymmi and a succession of French artist Jean-Baptiste Debret paintings, contrasting with the visuals of the soap itself, as the watercolors are much more graphic (Figure 5). Braga’s decision to move the story from the original 1840s to the 1860s and 1870s allows him to show the slave system in decline with a society that condemns it and plans a future without it.



Figure 5 – Jean-Baptiste Debret paintings



The last episode materializes all the aforementioned elements, giving closure to the love story and the historical narrative. Arriving at Leôncio's plantation by surprise, Álvaro communicates Leôncio the news regarding his devastating financial situation. Owner of his formal rival estate, he liberates all of Leôncio's former slaves promising a piece of land to all and making them sharecroppers, as they do not know any other life and the world is too dangerous for them. He and Isaura stand in front of the slaves, benevolently granting their freedom, mimicking the 1888 Lei Aurea.

In Guimarães' novel, Leôncio, bereaved and distressed commits suicide. Refusing to consent to explicit violence, the censors did not allow Braga to include the scene in *EI*. Instead, we see Leôncio with the gun and just hear the shot (ANGEL, 1977, p. 12). Rosa's death follows right after. Furious about Isaura's triumph, she tries to poison her, but takes the beverage instead. We hear her painful screams and see the faces that look at her, but we do not see Rosa's corpse. There is a crosscut to her grave (Figure 6).



Figure 6 – Rosa's death and Isaura's triumph (*Escrava Isaura*)

*EI* ends providing a satisfying emotional closure. Isaura and Alvaro finally get married but worry about the future of slaves who have not been freed yet. "Look at the US! Says Isaura. Abolition already happened there! We should follow their example." Alvaro smiles and promises her Brazil's future will be even better. The last scene is the celebration of their wedding and the party takes place in the same room where Isaura was once a slave. That space now is full of freed men and women dancing to African music (in one of the very few scenes that display African culture). Immediately after, they are serving their former masters, a very familiar scene in 1970s Brazil: former slaves and their descendants working as the help (Figure 7).



Figure 7 – The future of slaves (*Escrava Isaura*)

### *Senzala modelo*

On November 25, 1976, *O Globo* published historian and geologist Alberto Ribeiro Lamêgo's article commenting on the authenticity of some aspects of the soap opera, claiming it reminded him of several situations present in his own family history. He affirmed, "my great-grand father who is said to have owned the *sobrado* in Campos that inspired Guimarães to write the novel, never had a pillory or a whip, as did some slave owners in the region. (LÂMEGO, 1976, p. 25; CORDEIRO, 1976, p. 24). Another local historian from Campos, Barbosa Guerra, accused *EI* of being totally fictional, as Gilberto Braga had never visited former plantations in the region, despite Lamêgo's claims (BASTOS, 1976, p. 12). Notwithstanding Barbosa Guerra's criticism of the authenticity of *EI*, the picture it drew and spread was Brazil's three centuries of slavery as a "senzala modelo", as a reporter had mocked. (SENZALA..., 1976, p. 28).

An absurd scene exemplifies it clearly. One night, there is a soiree at the Almeidas' estate. Tobías is desperately looking for Isaura. Crazy jealous, Leôncio follows Tobías asking if he is looking for a *senzala*, giving the fact he is so interested in other people's slaves. Tobías, disgusted, replies he would not be surprised if there was such a despicable place there, a *senzala*, considering how vile Leôncio was.

Leôncio and his overseer Francisco are both portrayed as exceptional sadists who enjoy their total power over male and female bodies. Other masters and overseers are compassionate and kind, barely accepting slavery, respectful of female slaves, helpful with runaways from other plantations. Mistresses are completely oblivious to the realities of slavery and its everyday life; they always oppose physical punishment and are affectionate with their domestic slaves. They even encourage them to meet with their (male) slave lovers.

*EI* dialogued with the massively popular 1976 Carlos Diegues's film *Xica da Silva*. A very successful domestic box office, it generated a wide-ranging public debate around national history, identity, and race relations. In both *EI* and *Xica*, African and African descents cultural traits are superficially developed. Physical punishment is barely

shown. Black women, Rosa and Xica, offer themselves willingly to their masters. Freedom is achieved through sexual favors (JOHNSON, 1995, p. 216-224; STAM, 1997).

Coercion and plain rape, essential characteristic in master-slaves relations everywhere, renders invisible. All the men who ever wanted Isaura aspired to be worthy of her love. Rosa sleeps with her masters willingly (and so does Xica), and is happy to do so. These depictions perpetuate the notion of a game of sexual seduction and “encounters” between masters and slaves sanctified by several authors during the twentieth century, especially the pivotal work of anthropologist Gilberto Freyre, foundational for the notion of racial democracy the military was so eager to embrace.

*EI* imagined a community whose elements were engrained in an exceptional historical path and particular narrative of slavery. *EI* participated in the creation and consolidation of an account that guaranteed a tale of the nation’s past able to shake off the stigma and essential connection between colonialism, racism, and slavery; constellation veiled in the creation of a 1970s ideology of racial democracy.

Through *EI*, the past bleeds into the present, and the trauma of slavery and racial violence allegedly ends with the last episode of *EI* when Isaura and Álvaro get married and promise a new beginning for themselves and Brazil; after all, “slavery, as a historical and economic institution was overcome after a certain moment.” (DA TÁVOLA, 1977a, p. 48). Through the use of discontinuous and fragmented narrative, *EI* draws attention to history and shores up prevailing mythical notions of the nation state. Through the use of emotional representations (affect), décor, piece of clothing, and real locations, *EI* cements pieces of discourses together creating an imaginary past that is worthy of unquestioned respect and constant revision.

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