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# Tales of a civilized slavery

BY

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Black Brazilians have to fight official and popular narratives hiding the country's brutal and violent legacy of slavery.

Gilda Brasileiro is a chemist who lived a comfortable life in Rio de Janeiro's famous district of Ipanema. She leaves this life behind to go live in the calm small town of Salesópolis, in the countryside of Brazil's São Paulo State. There she finds that the place she chose to take a quiet break from the megacity has its own history of unleashing terror upon her black ancestors. Soon she starts research into this violent history and in the process sheds light on a part of Brazil's dark and gory soul. Brasileiro is the subject of directors Roberto Manhães Reis and Viola Scheuerer's *Gilda Brasileiro—Against Oblivion*, a documentary film that explores the motivations and ambitions behind both official and popular narratives of Brazil's history of slavery and racism.

Her research into the town's past starts with a look into the history of Dória Road, an old slave traders' road in her new home. She reminds us that while the transatlantic slave traffic to Brazil was banned in 1831, Dória Road was constructed in 1832, one year later, which made the road clandestine. It also turns out that certain people held up as heroic figures in the town's history, were actually brutal slave masters and traffickers. They include the priest for whom the road was named as well as former army official, Captain Pereira, praised in official accounts of the town's history. Gilda tries to prove, using old documents, that Pereira's slaves were the ones who constructed Dória Road. This doesn't go down well with the town's present white residents, who claim that Pereira never held any slaves and should be admired for his efforts in developing the region during the nineteenth century.

## Changing the whole history

When confronted by the filmmakers about Pereira's violent history, one of the residents, after denying it, says that the revelation would "change the whole history"—that is the one he was told and continues to tell—and that would not be a good thing. In this resident's version, Captain Pereira was just passing through, in the early nineteenth century, and happened to stumble upon an "out of service" *senzala*, the name of the buildings slaves used to "live-in" as if they were cattle. Ironically, this same resident is some sort of guide in the region. His family has been living in Salesópolis for generations and he heard of all of the town's stories from his father, who learned them from his grandfather and so on. Thus, for him, "changing the whole history" would mean admitting his father lied to him. It's symbolic and it holds power, but it is not surprising. The same thing could be said about Brazil as a whole, not just about small Salesópolis.

The "whole history" of Brazil starts with European heroes discovering tropical lands, just as Captain Pereira discovered the unexplored region that is the focus of the documentary. This line of thought is not new and not surprising: Europeans wrote that history, and all we hear are tales of brave European pioneers, and those pioneers are the fathers of the people who tell us their stories today. So, just like that guide in small town Salesópolis, their fathers could not be telling lies, could they? Could those epic tales be lies? Tales that became official history and history cannot be changed. Or can it?

## Markings of a nation

On the other hand, black people in Brazil know little to nothing of the history of their ancestors in the country. However, in parallel to Gilda's story, the film contains a narration voiced by one of its directors, Roberto Manhães Reis, in a very poetic and moving tone. Manhães Reis, who is black, searches for details of slavery through a series of photographs from the nineteenth century in a coffee plantation in the Paraíba Valley, a region not far from Salesópolis.

When describing his African great-grandmother, Manhães Reis says her face had the "markings of a nation." That description immediately made me think of how race in Brazil is perceived through physical features only: it doesn't matter if one of your parents is black, you're black only if you look black. You're black if you carry the "markings of a nation."

However, later scenes suggest this was not the only intention of that description, but that the

documentary was having a dialogue with itself. When interviewing a white resident of Salesópolis, Gilda discovers that his *ama de leite*, that is a black enslaved woman that would breastfeed white children when their mothers could not, had been branded with the first letter of his family's name with hot iron on her back. His family name was Sandoval, so she had an "S" on her back. While we, black people in Brazil, struggle to this day to see and make our African features be seen as "markings of a nation," white people have been marking us with the markings of cattle.

The "ama de leite" mentioned before also had been given the name of her master's family. She also had Sandoval in her name. That is one peculiarity in Brazilian racism: enslaved black people would be given their master's family name usually with some sort of possessive pronoun just before it. If your name was John and you were enslaved by the Santos family, then you'd be John dos Santos. This tradition has not been left in the past. Even today, most black people and black families in Brazil still have such last names, they continue to carry markings of cattle.

## Civilized slavery

While narrating the history of a photograph of enslaved black people working on a coffee plantation, Manhães Reis describes how the whole scene looks staged, as to give the impression that the people in the frame were well-treated; "to convince people—especially foreign merchants—that slavery in Brazil was civilized." Although this description of Brazilian slavery is not new, I had never considered the intentional framing of it from a historical perspective—and thus, that white supremacy's strategy for black genocide in Brazil was and is the result of a long-term and planned propaganda effort.

Being the last country in the America's to officially outlaw slavery, the Brazilian government at the end of the nineteenth century was surely concerned with how the outside world perceived it. It makes sense they would have wanted to sell a softer image of its institutions. Subsequent Brazilian governments have continued this strategy of crafting publicity campaigns in order to make it seem as if its society was not as brutal and violent as it was (and remains). This propaganda became internalized and is still believed by many Brazilians today.

This strategy is also reflected in the pseudoscience used to justify the white supremacy that is at the foundation of Brazilian national identity. Gilberto Freyre's pseudo-sociological book *Casa-Grande & Senzala* (published in English as "The Masters and The Slaves"), first published in 1933, tells a tale of a harmonious relationship between white slave masters and enslaved black people. Probably the most famous book about slavery in Brazil, this propaganda piece is read and

studied in every social science school to this day, even though it has none of the fundamentals of a scientific study.

Because of such popularized propaganda, it's typical for some Brazilian politicians and cultural icons to take pride in how Brazil dealt with racism during the twentieth century, particularly in comparison to the Jim Crow era in the United States and apartheid in South Africa. Brazil never had explicit racial laws like was the case in the US or South Africa, yet the reality of black people in, say, Rio de Janeiro, was and is no different from black people in either country.

“Where are these Africans?” asks Manhães Reis at one point. That is a tough question. The long term of planning of Brazilian white supremacy was thorough, amongst the tools that it employed is a topic that remains quite controversial amidst the black movement in Brazil today: miscegenation.

Miscegenation in Brazil started with mass raping, especially of black women by white men, during slavery (I can't help but remember that when someone dares to take pride in Brazil's mixed racial makeup). But this raping didn't just occur as some sexual impulse of white people, it was programmed and encouraged by the settler-colonial state.

After the founding of the republics of the Americas, the tactic of whitening of the population as a means of exterminating the African and indigenous populations transformed and took hold across South America (also employed in Australia). In Brazil (along with, most famously, Argentina) this manifested in an immigration program, that imported white immigrants from Europe to rival the number of freed slaves (which had until then significantly outnumbered the European population—also explaining the origins of Brazil's harsh policing system), and in the very well-known practice of praising and magnifying white beauty and culture (thus making black people want to marry whites and have whiter children). Such a program was grounded in an official Brazilian policy (backed up by the medical field), which said that through the mixing of Africans with those new European immigrants over generations, any trace of blackness would cease to exist in the Brazilian population by the beginning of the twenty-first century. They were wrong, kind of.

In 2008, all of the black movements in Brazil celebrated the fact that for the first time we had become the majority in the country, proving the early twentieth-century pseudoscience wrong. Although it is hard to tell whether we had in fact become the majority that year, or if it was just the result of more black people declaring themselves as black, the fact is that in 2020 blacks make up around 53% of Brazil's population.

However, the reality is more tricky. In actuality, 43% of the population declares themselves as *parda* and only around 10% declare as *preto* (black). Again, *pardo* is a tricky term. That is what whites called light-skinned blacks during slavery times, or, how they referred to blacks with less “markings of a nation.” But the term continues to be used today and is almost considered as a

kind of default “Brazilian race.” Many whites declare themselves as pardos, taking pride in the mixed race national myth. However, in the early 2000s, the black movements succeeded in adding “pardos” to the blackness spectrum on official surveys.

Before abolition, dark skinned blacks were the absolute majority within the black population. Today, they are a small minority. Those pseudo-scientists may have got the timing wrong, but maybe not the final product. Today, blacks in Brazil are the ones marrying less within their own race, and black women are the majority amongst the population of single people in the country. So, to answer Manhães Reis’s question, “where are these Africans?” is a tough task. Maybe if we could change history, it would be an easier question to answer. But films like *Gilda Brasileiro* and efforts like sister Gilda’s help us understand how we got here. At least that’s a start.