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Free Africans

Agents of Freedom in Nineteenth-Century Brazil

Africanos Livres

Agentes da liberdade no Brasil novecentista

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Book reviewed:

MAMIGONIAN, Beatriz Gallotti. *Africanos Livres: a abolição do tráfico de escravos no Brasil*. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2017. 632p.

The much awaited book *Africanos Livres: A abolição do tráfico de escravos no Brasil*, by historian Beatriz Mamigonian, does not disappoint. Offering a new perspective on the process of abolition, the author emphasizes the experiences and struggle for freedom of enslaved Africans in the context of treaty negotiations and abolitionist laws that sought to end the Atlantic slave trade. Mamigonian clarifies the connection between the history of enslaved Africans in the nineteenth century; national politics and legislation relative to slavery and free labor; and changes in Brazilian politics, society, legislation, and judicial system that eventually favored the general abolition of slavery. *Africanos Livres* thus restructures the historical narrative about the abolition of the slave trade and of slavery, highlighting conservative efforts to preserve society's

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control over black labor, and underscoring the political and cultural influence of Africans and their descendants on the construction of freedom during the nineteenth century.

The book's first three chapters investigate the category 'free African' which emerged in the context of the Brazilian and British treaties and the law of 1831. Mamigonian shows that neither the treaties, which negotiated the end of the Atlantic slave trade, nor the law of 1831, which freed new African arrivals, sufficiently guaranteed African freedom. The conservative decision to deny citizenship to Africans; efforts to control their presence and productive labor in Brazil; and the lack of political and judicial commitment to enforcing the law ensured trafficked Africans' *de facto* enslavement. Some managed to defend their freedom in court. More generally, however, government officials and agencies sided with the interests of traders and slave owners and avoided prosecuting those responsible for slave trafficking. Moreover, the labor of Africans who were freed by port officials or the mixed Brazilian and British committee that monitored the illegal trade, were "granted" to individuals or public institutions. This practice, similar to the apprenticeship system or indentured servitude of other Atlantic societies, sought to ease the transition from slave to free labor. But unlike those systems, Brazilian grants of African labor rarely imposed or enforced a limit on time of service. As a result, the Brazilian state sacrificed the freedom of Africans to favor the needs of slave owners, and became an accomplice in the expansion of slavery in the country (Mamigonian, 2017, p. 164).

Chapters 4 and 5 explore the labor conditions free Africans experienced. Grantees who were given the right to exploit the labor of free Africans often treated them poorly, threatened them with sale, and ignored the temporary terms of the grant. Free Africans' daily reality was thus not very different from that of slaves. Living conditions among those employed in public works or by government institutions was even more precarious. Forced to perform dangerous and strenuous labor, many died before ever being able to demand their freedom. Here, Mamigonian also examines the British counterpoint to the Brazilian labor grant system with examples of free Africans rescued in Brazil by

British officials and taken, voluntarily or not, to work in the Caribbean. Their experiences among the British, and common subjection to forced labor under demanding conditions, hardly fulfilled the promise of freedom. Despite their abolitionist rhetoric, the British also subscribed to the racist use of forced labor as an instrument of civilization. Both the British and Brazilian empires would continue to exploit the productive capacity of Africans to benefit economically their white subjects.

In chapters 6, 7, and 8, Mamigonian discusses the Eusébio Queiroz law of 1850 and its consequences to free Africans and to the continuity of slavery. The law affirmed the government and imperial justice's firm commitment to end the Atlantic slave trade. But it hardly questioned the state and elite's complicity with the criminal enslavement of Africans during the previous two decades (Mamigonian, 2017, p. 284). Eusébio de Queiroz and other government agents emphasized judicial intolerance towards illegal slave trading after 1850 while promoting a public forgetting of any illicit activities that predated the 1850 law. They thus condemned thousands of Africans to an illegal captivity and strengthened the state's support for slave holding. Between 1854 and 1864, however, free Africans continued to submit their freedom petitions to the courts: they did not abandon their hopes for freedom nor were they willing to forget the sins of the past (Mamigonian, 2017, p. 322-323). Their petitions, moreover, revealed their efforts to seek some autonomy despite their captivity by forming families, learning the language, and becoming economically active in their own right. Ironically, their achievements were used in court as evidence that they were not Africans but Brazilian-born, justifying court decisions that denied their rightful freedom.

The final chapters of *Africanos Livres* reveal the efforts the government made to trap free Africans who tried to pursue their freedom and, conversely, Africans' persistent struggle for emancipation (Mamigonian, 2017, p. 360-361). Mamigonian notes, in particular, the initiative to create a roster of free Africans that sought to protect slave owners from those who might try to question the legitimacy of their claims over slave property. Helped by abolitionists, free Africans used the same records to

argue that their arrival in Brazil postdated the abolition of the Atlantic slave trade. The potential subversiveness of such efforts and the dissemination of notions of African freedom unsettled the imperial state and propertied classes, who feared public disorder and loss of control over the laboring classes. The emerging political will to solve the problem of free Africans strengthened abolitionist efforts during the final years of the nineteenth century and set the stage for the abolition of slavery as a whole (Mamigonian, 2017, p. 454).

Beatriz Mamigonian concludes her book reminding her readers of Minister Rui Barbosa and other official's decision to burn slave rosters and other documents relative to the late history of slavery in Brazil. Again, they sought public forgetting of Brazil's problematic past (Mamigonian, 2017, p. 454-455). Their attempt to redeem the nation's sins with fire promoted, moreover, a historical narrative about abolition that overemphasized the actions of the white political elite and propertied classes. By rejecting that narrative, and delving into the history of this period, Mamigonian has recovered the relevance and political leadership of other historical actors, mainly Africans.

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