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The silence of the letters: Slavery, education and freedom in Rio de Janeiro (Brazil, 19th century)

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Abstract

Objective: The goal of this paper is deciphering the "silence of letters" and to understand the meanings of enslaved and freed people's education and instruction in Imperial Rio de Janeiro.

Originality/contribution: The article suggests reading and learning about other historical experiences with the intent of questioning the widespread understanding that African enslaved people weren't educated.

Method: Based on a comparative method and analysis of sources, the article seeks to understanding the existence of subjects made invisible in academic production: literate and educated enslaved women and men. Through the movement of connections, it is essential to map out the debate around the instruction and education of enslaved people in academic studies of the African diaspora in the Americas.

Strategies/information collection: Does studying other African diaspora experiences help understanding Brazil?

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Conclusions: The article conclusion is that the meaning of education and literacy for enslaved people in the Americas allows for a more complex understanding of the Brazilian case, with particular attention given to the city of Rio de Janeiro in the 19th Century.

Keywords: *diaspora; slavery; Rio de Janeiro; literacy.*

El silencio de las letras: Esclavitud, educación y libertad en Río de Janeiro (Brasil, siglo XIX)

Resumen

Objetivo: El objetivo de este artículo es descifrar el “silencio de las letras” y comprender los significados de la educación e instrucción de los esclavos y libertos en el Río de Janeiro Imperial.

Originalidad/contribución: El artículo sugiere leer y aprender sobre otras experiencias históricas con la intención de cuestionar el entendimiento generalizado de que los esclavos africanos no fueron educados.

Método: A partir de un método comparativo y análisis de fuentes, el artículo busca comprender la existencia de sujetos invisibilizados en la producción académica: mujeres y hombres esclavizados alfabetizados y educados. A través del movimiento de conexiones, es fundamental mapear el debate en torno a la instrucción y educación de las personas esclavizadas en los estudios académicos de la diáspora africana en las Américas.

Estrategias/recolección de información: ¿El estudio de otras experiencias de la diáspora africana ayuda a comprender Brasil?

Conclusiones: La conclusión del artículo es que el significado de la educación y la alfabetización para los esclavos en las Américas permite una comprensión más compleja del caso brasileño, con especial atención a la ciudad de Río de Janeiro en el siglo XIX.

Palabras clave: *diáspora; esclavitud; Río de Janeiro; alfabetización*





O silêncio das letras: Escravidão, educação e liberdade no Rio de Janeiro (Brasil, século XIX)

Resumo

Objetivo: O objetivo deste artigo é decifrar o “silêncio das letras” e compreender os significados da educação e instrução de escravos e libertos no Rio de Janeiro Imperial.

Originalidade/Contribuição: O artigo sugere a leitura e o aprendizado de outras experiências históricas com a intenção de desafiar o entendimento generalizado de que os escravos africanos não foram educados.

Método: A partir de método comparativo e análise de fontes, o artigo busca compreender a existência de sujeitos invisíveis na produção acadêmica: mulheres e homens escravizados alfabetizados e instruídos. Por meio do movimento de conexões, é fundamental mapear o debate em torno da instrução e educação de escravizados nos estudos acadêmicos da diáspora africana nas Américas.

Estratégias/coleta de informações: O estudo de outras experiências da diáspora africana ajuda a compreender o Brasil?

Conclusões: A conclusão do artigo é que o significado de educação e alfabetização para escravos nas Américas permite uma compreensão mais complexa do caso brasileiro, com especial atenção para a cidade do Rio de Janeiro no século XIX.

Palavras-chave: *diáspora; escravidão; Rio de Janeiro; letramento.*

Introduction

Commander Joaquim José de Souza Breves established a school in one of his farms, where reading, writing, counting (the four basic operations) and doctrine are taught. The school is managed by one of the commander's slaves, and attended by 30 students (in average) of both sexes, including ingênuos, freedmen, a few slaves and some free people.” (Province President Report, 1879, p. 10, report presented to the Rio de Janeiro Province Legislative Assembly in the second session of the 22nd legislature on August 8th 1879 by the president, Dr. Américo de Moura Marcondes de Andrada).

Can a slave teach? This question would usually be met with an unequivocal and categorical “no”, since enslaved people were kept out of formal instruction, and as such could not act as tutors in schools. Was the slave in charge of Commander Breves's school an exception? Where did he learn to read? How? Why?



The excerpt quoted above contradicts many of the premises defending the complete absence of enslaved, or even freed people from classrooms in the slavery era. Dated 1879, ten years before the abolition of slavery in Brazil, and eight years after the Lei do Ventre Livre (Law of Free Birth), the report written by the president of the Rio de Janeiro province shows the existence of a slave-led school teaching girls and boys, freed and enslaved. Using sources such as the report presented in the Rio de Janeiro Legislative Assembly, I add another piece in the complex puzzle that is deciphering the meanings of enslaved and freed people's education and instruction in Imperial Rio de Janeiro.

The introduction of African people in the New World, through a grievous trip through the Atlantic, "is the birth not only of the modern African Diaspora, but also of modernity itself".² The diaspora or dispersion of African people in the Americas was highly intensified by the trafficking of enslaved people from the 16th to the 19th Century. In total, approximately 12 million African people were brought to the Americas, around 40% of which came to Brazil. What we now call Brazil, was understood as Portuguese America from the 16th Century until the early 19th Century, received the greatest amount of diaspora African people and was the last American country to abolish slavery. Through the movement of connections, I believe it is essential to map out the debate around the instruction and education of enslaved people in academic studies of the African diaspora in the Americas. What are the specificities of each case? What are the contact points? What are the methodological and sourcing challenges in these works? Does studying other African diaspora experiences help understanding Brazil?

Results and discussion

I believe that taking a closer look at slavery and African diaspora studies enables us to build bridges with the Brazilian experience, which often seems to be isolated as its own case, lacking connection and dialogue with other related historical experiences. The contact with studies about education and slavery in distant and distinct historical realities surprised me the most when confronting the denial of the existence of literate enslaved people. Another point of connectivity was the choice of methodological paths and text corpora. The creativity and imagination present in these works is also notable.

Jean Fouchard's *Les marrons du syllabaire: quelques aspects du problème de l'instruction e de l'éducation des esclaves et affranchis de Saint-Domingue* (1988) analyzes the existence of enslaved and freed people who could read and write in Saint-Domingue when it was a French colony, from 1659 to 1804, and how the literacy process was important in the fight for independence of what is now known as Haiti. The study goes against the thesis that most captives lived in ignorance regarding the written word. Through a rigorous investigation in French private and national archives, Jean Fouchard's study (1988) explored various sources, such as letters signed by enslaved people, newspaper ads for escaped captives, and billboards and proved the use of the written word by the "marrons du syllabaire". In spite of strict laws attempting to keep enslaved and freed people from education, Jean Fouchard points to the importance of marginal silent resistance, such as the subtlety of stealing a syllabary to learn

2 Gómez, Michael, *Reversing sail: a history of the African Diaspora*. Cambridge University Press, 2005, p. 82.

to read and write in secret — “maybe the first letters learned by unfortunate slaves in these undercover schools were the initials of the colonizers, and their black chests, struck with hot iron, became their first syllabary”³. The syllabary was the Sun for many enslaved people in search of freedom’s light.

In *Esclavos de la ciudad letrada: esclavitud, escritura y colonialismo en Lima (1650-1700)*, José Ramón Jouve Martín (2005) argues that “people from African origin didn’t live apart from writing, and were actually capable of giving meaning and using texts and documents to their benefit” (Martín, 2005, p. 50). The author argues that enslaved and freed people of color were familiar with Spanish language written culture. The author attempts to explore the interactions of subjects with literate culture and points to the importance of scribes as mediators to the access of rights. He interrogates: what was the role of writing and legal writing in the daily lives of men and women in Lima’s black community from the 1650s to the 1700s?

The author argues that Lima was a black literate city, where enslaved and free black people used the same codes. Those subjects were engaged in various forms of labor, including in notary and registry. Out of the book’s six chapters, I’ll highlight chapter 2, entitled “Esclavos de la ciudad letrada”, where the author explores the importance of religious instruction and oral communication in the process of acquiring the rudiments of written culture by enslaved and free people of color. The author shows that the process of acquiring the codes of the written word went way beyond schools, where the presence of enslaved people was forbidden.

José Ramón Jouve Martín argues that African people were in contact with the written world long before their arrival in American shores, because:

*Since their capture, individuals sold as slaves in the new continent’s markets were introduced in an environment where their social condition, identity and destiny were greatly determined by different forms of writing used in the trade: embarkment licenses, trade contracts, customs declarations etc. Even though writing and its power as a controlling instrument was unknown to many, it can’t be said it didn’t have a prominent role in the social organization of certain areas of Sub-Saharan Africa.*⁴

The mastery of the written word allowed free people of color, as well as enslaved people, to have access to the law, claiming improvements in living conditions, reporting mistreatment and fighting for manumission letters. Even in the context of colonial dominium by the Spanish Crown, black free and enslaved people learned the colonizer’s language to negotiate benefits, no matter how limited. The colonial city and its urban environment, full of civil celebrations, created opportunities for enslaved people to insert themselves in the universe of the written word, whether directly or indirectly, through various kinds of legal, religious and literary discourse. According to the author, Lima’s black community throughout the colonial era, even among illiterate people, had to deal with the written word, in the form of documents and literate culture’s codes, even if they often needed assistance from other

3 Fouchard, Jean, *Les marrons du syllabaire: quelques aspects du problème de l’instruction et de l’éducation des esclaves et affranchis de Saint-Domingue*. Port-au-Prince: H Deschamps, 1988, p. 85

4 José Ramón Jouve Martín, *Esclavos de la ciudad letrada: Esclavitud, escritura y colonialismo en Lima (1650-1700)*. Lima: Instituto de Estudios Peruanos, 2005, p. 52.

people, scribes. Writing represented a form of communicating the experiences and desires of different subjects, including enslaved people, in the context of a literate urban city.

Cuba, in the Antilles, was also colonized by the Spanish. According to Enrique Sosa's and Alejandrina Penabad Félix's *Historia de la educación en Cuba* (2001), indigenous and black people were segregated from colonial education. Enslaved people of African origins were "objectified" (*coisificado* in the original Spanish) in spite of the law. If, on one hand, there wasn't a great preoccupation with enslaved people's schooling, on the other, some slaveowners considered evangelization was a form of doctrinarian and used Catholic conversion to "tame" rebels and keep them in submission, less prone to claiming freedom. According to the authors, "the social condition of black people in colonial America wasn't equal to that of native indigenous peoples, even in their evaluation as rational beings". In the authors' eyes, black enslaved people were segregated from colonial schooling and "were always kept from schooling", and those who were able to educate themselves were an exception, attempting to learn skills to improve their price when trafficked in the slave trade.⁵

Gloria García Rodríguez's *Voices of the Enslaved in Nineteenth-Century Cuba* also follows the understanding that enslaved black people in Cuba didn't receive education, most of them being illiterate. The author argues that only religious instruction was offered to enslaved people, and bases her arguments on the May 31st, 1789 Royal Decree, which determined that:

*all slaveholders, of whatever class and condition, will obligated to instruct their slaves in the tenets of the Catholic religion, and in its necessary truths in order that they can be baptized within one year of their residence in my dominions, ensuring that they are properly instructed in Christian doctrine on all religious holidays, on which they will be neither obliged nor permitted to work for themselves nor for their owners, excepting harvest time, when it is customary to grant special dispensations to work on holidays. On these days and all the others on which Church law calls for hearing mass, hacienda owners will bear the cost of priest to celebrate mass for their slaves on these or other holidays, instruct slaves in Christian doctrine on religious holidays, and administer the sacred sacraments to them, likewise with other seasonal Church observances; taking heed that, every workday, at the conclusion of the day's toil, slaves pray the rosary in their owner's or their steward's presence, with the utmost serenity and devotion.*⁶

The biggest concern was keeping the institution of slavery strong, and religious instructions as understood as an instrument to control the bodies and minds of enslaved people, who should keep their thoughts away from dreams of freedom and flight. Religious instruction was intended to make bodies docile.

However, many enslaved people subverted this, undercover. Such was the case of Juan Manzano (1797-1854). Self-taught, he was seduced by the letters on the way his master took between church and school (Romney, 2015, p. 238). Manzano uses the written word to tell his own life story, in first person. In 1835, still in captivity, he wrote *Autobiografía de un esclavo* in Spanish. Manzano's autobiography was spread through the world and was translated and published in English in 1840:

5 Sosa, Enrique Sosa & Alejandrina Félix, *Historia de la educación en Cuba*. La Habana: Editorial Pueblo y Educación, 2001, p. 133.

6 Gloria Rodríguez, *Voices of the Enslaved in Nineteenth-Century Cuba*. University of North Carolina Press, 2011, p. 48.

In his autobiography, between descriptions of the brutal beatings that eventually led him to run away from his master and evidence that casts doubt on the legality of his continued slavery, the Cuban slave Juan Francisco Manzano (1797–1854) unfolds a literacy narrative that should be of interest to rhetoricians. The son of slaves who were servants in a wealthy home, Manzano is initially raised alongside white children and becomes a favorite of his mistress.⁷

Experiences similar to Juan Manzano's, who managed to become literate in spite of obstacles imposed by slavery, showcase the possibilities for literacy among some enslaved people who, undercover and on the sly, appropriated the codes of literate culture and transformed their own reality, in the fight for freedom and better life conditions.

The education of enslaved people in the Caribbean, especially in what's currently known as Jamaica, was the concern of some of Shirley Gordon's works. Published in 1963, *A century of West Indian Education* analyses the issue of black education in the chapter entitled "The Negro Education Grant, 1835-45": "The emancipation of slaves offered the first opportunity to provide schooling for the mass of the people. The Act of the Emancipation included a grant of money by the Imperial colonies; this was known as the Negro Education Grant".⁸

In another text, "Schools of the free", dating from 1998, Shirley Gordon states that "instruction, particularly in literacy, was undoubtedly an aspiration on many slaves, apprentices and ex-slaves, both in the decade before emancipation and the first optimistic years of freedom (...). In the first decades following emancipation, despite near destitution for many, ex-slaves and their descendents developed powers of self-expression and communication, understanding of issues and tactics for what would now be termed sustainable growth. Only a minority received a formal education".⁹

The author criticizes History of Education's exclusive concern with formal schooling in its institutional form, because in the experience of enslaved and freed people, other paths were taken to instruction. According to the author, many former slaves saw in education, however rudimentary, a path towards social mobility. Education was seen as an investment in the future (Gordon, 1998, p. 12).

In 2013, Daive Dunkley published *Agency of the enslaved: Jamaica and the culture of freedom in the Atlantic World*, where he devotes two chapters to the instruction of enslaved people in Jamaica in the times of British rule from 1655 to 1834. In the chapter entitled "Instructing the enslaved", the author analyses the evolution of instruction and schooling of enslaved people in constituting a modern educational system in Jamaica. The chapter is structured around two issues. The first is disagreeing with the thesis of a lack of education prior to the abolition of slavery in British-Colonized Caribbean.

The second issue is the idea that the construction of such a system was indicative of the potential for freedom for enslaved people, who were present in schools since their beginning.

7 Abraham Romney, Rhetoric from the Margins: Juan Francisco Manzano's *Autobiografía de un esclavo*. *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*. Vol. 45, 2015, pp. 237-249.

8 Shirley Gordon, "The Negro Education Grant 1835-1845: Its Application in Jamaica". *Educational Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (May, 1958), pp. 140-150. Published by: Taylor & Francis

9 Shirley Gordon, "Schools of the free". In: Moore, Brian and Wilmot, Swithin. *Before & After 1865. Education, politics and regionalism in the Caribbean*. IRP: Kingston, 1998, pp. 1.

The author argues that it's necessary to review the theme to show that enslaved people were indeed present in the educational system since colonial times in Jamaica, and that enslaved people's agency was essential to understanding this process. There was at least an attempt to shape an education or schooling system with the intention, in spite of its limitations, to indoctrinate enslaved people through Christian knowledge. The goal was to guarantee they were appeased, to continue with slavery and plantations. This new schooling systems, as any other disposition, was part of preserving social order. The problem is that this social order was based in slavery. The Church of England was brought in to build and manage schools, and systematic provisions were put into motion through these schools for educational purposes. This education was far from ideal, but the limitations in themselves don't negate the fact that an attempt was made to build a system to serve society as it was then. Recognizing the existence of this initial educational project provides a way of evaluating how much enslaved people had to endure in their resistance to domination from slaveowners.

Denying the existence of an educational system prior to abolition is also, according to Dunkley, erasing slave agency and losing sight of an important path for enslaved people to demonstrate freedom: "It must always be kept in mind that none of this education or instruction given to slaves was intended to liberate them or to give them access to upward social mobility. This was the formidable obstacle that enslaved people in schools were up against".¹⁰

According to Dunkley, since the beginning of British colonization in the Jamaican isle, in 1655, the Crown showed interest in instructing captives, to reinforce its control in their minds and bodies. The Crown determined that governors should help the Church of England in its efforts to spread its doctrine and discipline among the population of the Jamaican colony, including enslaved people. The Church monopolized education and benefited from the financial resources sent to that intent. However, there was also a fear shown by social reformers that educating enslaved people could be a path for their emancipation. As well as Catholic Sunday School, enslaved people attended schools managed by other missionary societies, including Baptist and Methodist churches. Many members of the clergy believed that education was beneficial because it transformed enslaved people into individuals of "calmer and more civilized manners". The Church of England believed that education would allow them total control over enslaved people, who should be catechized three times a week.

Regarding the experiences of British colonies in North America, in what's currently known as the United States, there are important studies surrounding the theme. The analysis of autobiographical print documents written by people who lived in slavery is common in studies on enslaved people's education. After all, could education be emancipatory?

According to Frederick Douglass (1818-1895), an African American intellectual engaged in the abolitionist movement, "knowledge makes a man unfit to be a slave". Born into slavery in the United States, Douglass was a great champion of education as emancipation for African Americans. Douglass was self-taught and the access to reading intensified his insurrection against slavery. Many scholars believe Frederick Douglass was no exception. Published in 1919, *The Education of the Negro Prior to 1861: A History of the Education of*

10 Daive Dunkley, *Agency of the Enslaved: Jamaica and the Culture of Freedom in the Atlantic World*. Lanham MD: Lexington Books, 2013, p. 70.

the Colored People of the United States from the Beginning of Slavery to the Civil is the result of an extensive research conducted by Carter Woodson.

The author uses a diverse corpus of sources, including laws, books on Education, traveler journals (from the United States and abroad), letters, biographies, autobiographies, State history, Church history, sermons, prayers, reports, statistics, flyers and miscellanea from newspapers, magazines, laws, summaries, statutes, constitutions and more. The sturdy tome is structured in 13 chapters, appendixes and bibliography. It's one of the first extensive works to showcase the existence of literate enslaved people in the United States, previously ignored.

The author divides the history of black people's education in two time periods. The first goes from the introduction of slavery until the mid-1830s, and the second is defined "when the Industrial Revolution transformed slavery from a patriarchal institution into an economic institution and when smart black people, encouraged by abolitionists, made several attempts to organize insurrections, changing the balance".¹¹

Many were those (black and white) who defied the law in the name of educating captives. Carter Woodson's book was a pioneer and indicated that approximately 10% of the captive population would have become literate from 1825 to 1881. This figure is questioned by historians who studied the issue since then, such as W.E.B. Du Bois (1935) and Janet Cornelius (1983; 1991).

W.E.B. Du Bois's analysis in *Black Reconstruction in America* (1935) give great weight to prohibition laws; according to him, only 5% of the captive population was literate by 1860, in comparison with Woodson's presumed 10%. According to Du Bois, the "enslaved masses couldn't be educated" since laws were rigorously applied. Although there were isolated cases of indulgent masters or even undercover schools, it wasn't enough to spread literacy among captives, because persecution was strong, especially after the insurrection lead by Nat Turner in Virginia. In Du Bois own words:

*At the time of emancipation, not all the Southern Negroes were illiterate. In South Carolina, a majority of the nearly 10,000 free Negroes could read and write, and perhaps 5% of the slaves. But illiteracy among the colored population was well over 95% in 1863, which meant that less than 150,000 of the four million slaves emancipated could read and write.*¹²

In spite of his negative view regarding the existence of literate enslaved people, seen as an exception by Du Bois, the author defends the interesting thesis that public schools in the South of the United States were founded by black people. Du Bois also argues that the education promoted by black schools and universities was responsible for black people's emancipation, because without investing in their own education.

In the paper "We Slipped and Learned to Read: Slave Accounts of the Literacy Process, 1830-1865" published in 1983, Janet Cornelius estimated that approximately 5-10% of the captive population could read and write in the aforementioned time period. As well as analyzing autobiographies written by former slaves, the author examined 3,420 answers given

11 Carter Woodson, *The education of the Negro prior to 1861*. New York: Putnam's, 1915, p. 2

12 William Edward Burghardt DuBois, *Black Reconstruction in America*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1935, p. 638.

by 272 literate former slaves in interviews to the Works Progress Administration's Federal Writers Project, edited by George Rawick and published under the title of *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography* in 19 volumes. The author highlights the fact that most former slaves in the project "learned to read after 1855, while two thirds of the remaining former slaves learned to read before then". According to Cornelius, enslaved people who learned to read and write were a select group, and were mostly urban and domestic slaves.¹³

According to Janet Cornelius's records, one of the first people to analyze the relationship between literacy, slavery and religion, historian Edith Jenifer Monaghan, advanced the analyses regarding the power of the written word in the world of enslaved people. In her paper "Reading for the Enslaved, writing for the Free: Reflections on Liberty and Literacy" (2000), Edith Jenifer Monaghan supports the thesis that only reading was encouraged among enslaved people, while mastering writing was focused on free people in colonial United States. According to the author, as we examine the relationship between literacy and freedom, different questions should be asked regarding different skills. Teaching reading without writing was a path for those who intended to Christianize and not abolish slavery. Among sources analyzed by Jenifer Monaghan in the book, there are newspaper ads and enslaved people's journeys, including Pompey Fleet, Phillis Wheatley and Frederick Douglass.

The author suggests that during the entire colonial period until 1820, "reading was generally seen as a tool completely compatible with the institution of slavery". Monaghan also cautions to the need of distinguishing reading and writing skills, which didn't happen simultaneously in colonial United States. Many settlers believed that the path to converting the souls of captives to Christianity was through religious teaching and reading the Bible. However, there were great restrictions to teaching writing to enslaved people, because masters considered enslaved people who could write a danger, since they could forge freedom passes and escape slavery. Writing meant power, and passes were a symbol of slaveowners' control of their ownership of slaves, who weren't free: "Passes should include the name of the passholder, identify the plantation and specify the date and time of absences covered by the pass. These passes (also called tickets, letters or license certificates) had to be signed by the owner or by a manager and were the local equivalent to passports".¹⁴

The power of writing should be a privilege of white people's domain. The author also explains that even in the few schools for enslaved people, writing wasn't taught, and all instruction was given by women, some of whom were enslaved or politically disadvantaged. Teaching reading was encouraged "by the Christian demand that children were taught to read Scripture. Reading was taught purely to engrain Christianity and docility".¹⁵

However, in the 19th Century, the fear regarding the ruin of slavery began to consider even reading a dangerous activity among enslaved people. Laws prohibiting the teaching of reading and writing to enslaved people began appearing, based on the fear that literacy would lead to rebellion and insurrection.

13 Janet Cornelius, "We Slipped and Learned to Read": Slave Accounts of the Literacy Process," *Phylon* 44 (1983), 173.

14 Jenifer Monaghan, *Reading for the enslaved, writing for the free: reflections on liberty and literacy*. Worcester: American Antiquarian Society, 2000, 321.

15 *Idem*, p. 321.

In her book *Learning to read and write in Colonial America* (2005), Jenifer Monaghan follows the argument that teaching writing was avoided at all costs by slaveowners, but individually many enslaved people were capable of learning to write and this acquisition became a crucial part of these subjects' process of self-definition in their search for freedom. The author defends that enslaved people were conscious of the power carried by literacy, that illiteracy was one of the factors through which whites kept their domination and that writing was an essential skill to build an African American identity and their freedom desires¹⁶.

Starting with the question "what did common African Americans from the South did to provide education for themselves during slavery and when slavery ended?", Heather Williams's *Self-Taught: African American Education in Slavery and Freedom* explores the efforts of subjects themselves, whether enslaved or freed, in fighting for education in the United States during slavery, the Civil War and the first decade of freedom. The author observed that enslaved people's creative efforts in the fight for literacy provided grounds for the interest in attending schools right after the Civil War. Many literate men escaped slavery to enlist in the Union Army and became teachers in black men battalions. After the war, these men continued teaching in local communities, in the fight for political equality and for citizenship rights in freedom in a literate society.¹⁷

The author reviewed paths already trodden by other historians to interrogate their silences and read between the lines. Williams exposes the discomfort with white missionary paternalism and the absence of sources produced by black people. Encountering a black man's autobiography was a turning point in her research:

"That day, I found Elias Marr in a bibliography of black autobiographies, and he became an important guide that took me from the time he learned to read while enslaved in Kentucky until his decision to bring other black men into the army, into his teachings. His regiment, his agitation over African American political rights and, finally, his teaching of black children in the 20th Century".¹⁸

According to Williams, through reading Elias Marr's autobiography, other guides sprung up in her research, names such as John Swney, Mattie Jackson, London Ferebee, Margaret Adams, which appeared in autobiographies, military records, enslaved people's accounts, black university archives, and more.

The author explores the meanings of literacy for enslaved people and reports the methods used by subjects to conquer literacy, even when state legislation and local practices forbade it.

Among the authors who encouraged and contained Williams's premises (2005) around the central role played African American people in the fight for education in the South, it's worth highlighting W.E.B. Du Bois, James Anderson and Herbert Gutman. According to the author, by focusing her attention in African Americans, it was possible to glimpse forgotten elements, such as the fact that it was freed black people, and not white people from the North, who began the educational movement in the South. Williams believes that the educational

16 Jenifer Monaghan, *Learning to read and write in Colonial America*. University of Massachusetts Press, 2005.

17 Heather Williams, *Self-Taught: African American Education in Slavery and Freedom*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005, p. 1.

18 Idem

movement towards public schools after the Civil War is part of the enslaved people's own fight, who kept themselves awake after their long work hours, in spite of all hardship, to study in night schools and learn about the world of letters. The author defends the thesis that African American people were responsible for their own education.

In spite of prohibition laws, enslaved people resisted in different ways and, often, in secret and undercover spaces, where they dare to study. Mastering the written word could be the path to freedom for many, because enslaved people could then learn about abolitionist activities, read the Bible and even write freedom passes and escape from freedom. Reading allowed the creation of a private life for enslaved people and questioned the legitimacy of slavery.¹⁹

What's particular about Christopher Hager's *Word by word: emancipation and the act of writing* is his attention to manuscripts produced by common enslaved people, unknown and seldom studied by historiography, in the daily lives and struggles in slavery. Dating from 2013, the book explores the acts of writing by enslaved and recently freed people in the South of the United States during emancipation. Subjects such as an anonymous "Man of color", Thomas Duckett, Maria Perkins, John Washington, William B. Gould, Abram Mercherson, Martha Glover, Garland H. White and Peter Johnston. Subjects who lived through slavery and, "somewhere along the path, learned to write, even though none of them received more than fragments of education".²⁰

In order to achieve literacy, many enslaved people had to subvert rules and dared to study through creativity, often in secret. For freed people, learning to read symbolized the end of slavery and a new, albeit still uncertain, path. Literacy was a symbol of freedom. The author defends that, as in the case of slave autobiography authors, the black intellectual history was also written, through "letters sent, chronicles kept and art made by American slaves, under the repressive surface of the South".²¹

With emancipation, former slaves "had become citizens under the Constitution and could now claim a place in the citizenship of letters". That's the through line of the book: the articulation between emancipation and writing. The subjects' writings are the manifestation of "an interior experience of mass emancipation, very different from solitary flights towards the North Star that engaged the readers of published slave narratives". The author intended to give visibility to the experience of men and women who used writing, in search of "a little justice; some safety for themselves and their families; a deeper understanding of themselves and their world".²² The author concludes the book defending the acts of writing as an expression of the desire for freedom. Writing was the freedom song of enslaved people, "because they sung it, word for word".²³

19 Heather Williams, *Self-Taught: African American Education in Slavery and Freedom*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005.

20 Idem, p. 20.

21 Christopher Hager, *Word by Word: Emancipation and the Act of Writing*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013, p. 5.

22 Idem, p. 24.

23 Idem, p. 243.

Through the analysis of the relationship between education and slavery in different colonization experiences in the Americas (Spanish, French, British), as well as the different emancipatory processes in each place, I delimit the nuances of the Brazilian cases, which went from a Portuguese colony to an independent nation in 1822 and only officially abolished slavery on May 13th 1888, through the signing of the Golden Law. However, since the first enslaved African people arrived in 16th Century Portuguese America, Brazil didn't stop importing enslaved labor. From North to South, slavery spread through Brazil, with distinct configurations and appearances in each region of the huge territory.

The renovating movement in slavery historiography itself, and particularly in Social History studies purporting to think about enslaved people as subjects with their own will, under the logic of slave agency instead of, instead of as “things”, is substantial and consolidated in Brazil. However, there's a certain prevalent perspective that, due to prohibition laws, the amount of literate enslaved people in Brazil was very small, different from the United States, for example. In her important 1982 book *Ser escravo no Brasil*, historian Katia Mattoso states that not even freed people could attend classes in Brazil, a prohibition which was “kept through the entire time of slavery, even during the second half of the 19th Century, in the middle of the dissolution of the servile system”.²⁴

According to the author, there were isolated cases of masters who dared to subvert the law and decided to teach reading and writing to captives, justifying the fact that Brazilian enslaved people were completely unknown, lacking written archives; “they lack ‘slave memories’, so numerous in the South of the United States, which could have told, with all its affective weight, the lives of these women and men in captivity”²⁵.

In *História do Brasil* (1994), Boris Fausto, analyzing the data from the first official census in 1872, interprets that only 0.1% of enslaved people could read and write: “the first general data about education show huge deficiencies in this area. In 1872, among slaves, the rate of illiteracy reached 99.9%, 80% among the free population, reaching over 86% when considering only women”. Still according to Boris Fausto (1994, p. 237), Rio de Janeiro was the main urban center in the late 19th Century.²⁶

The absence of archives, autobiographies or printed memoirs hasn't prevented research to contradict the thesis of complete illiteracy among Brazilian enslaved people. In the classic text *Rebelião escrava no Brasil*, first published in 1986 by Brasiliense, João José Reis analyzed the power of letters and literacy in the Male revolt in Bahia in 1835.

Focusing on legal documents, for example, historian Sidney Chalhoub found an order of investigation for “a black man living in Valongo street, near the theatre, who's highly respected by others, who come to him to be initiated into religious principles”. It was suspected that the house, in Larga de São Joaquim, served as a school, “where there are meetings of *mina* black men who go there to read and write”²⁷.

24 Katia Mattoso, *Ser escravo no Brasil*. São Paulo: Brasiliense, 1982, p. 113.

25 Idem

26 Boris Fausto, *História do Brasil*. São Paulo: EdUSP, 1994, p. 237,

27 Sidney Chalhoub, *Visões da Liberdade: uma história das últimas décadas da escravidão na corte*. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1990, p. 187.

The complete absence of written archives produced by enslaved people was contested in studies developed by Klebson Oliveira, who, in the year 2000, found an expressive collection of documents written by enslaved and freed African people in the Underprivileged Protection Society (Sociedade Protetora dos Desvalidos), started in 1832. Using this collection, the researcher developed his Master's dissertation, entitled *Textos escritos por Africanos and people of African descent in 19th Century Bahia: sources of our 'vulgar Latin'?*, presented to UFBA in 2003, and his Doctoral thesis, *Negros e escrita no Brasil do século XIX: sócio-história, edição filológica de documentos e estudo linguístico*, also presented to UFBA in 2006. The latter analyzed the relationship between literacy and African people and people of African descent, with a focus on "documents from the hands of slaves or made by others, as an expression of their will". Focusing on Bahia, the author cites the regulations of April 22nd and September 27th, 1873 to argue that there was a legal prevention from captive attendance in schools. Still during the era of prohibitions, the author highlights cases of literate enslaved people.²⁸

The author systematizes some of the possible paths taken by enslaved people in 19th Century Bahia towards literacy: affectionate relationships between slaves and the master family, learning in the master's house; the specialization of certain occupations, demanding knowledge in reading, writing and counting; the positive representation of literacy among black people and the role of black brotherhoods.

In "E agora, com a escrita, os escravos!", Klebson Oliveira (2004) analyses specifically 14 documents written by enslaved people "or as an expression of their will", most of them letters, including one letter of attorney. According to the author, "becoming literate could also find a place in the expectations slaves built regarding their masters", in a kind of "mutually-beneficial veiled pact. The masters gained their subordinates' obedience and good service, and slaves gained freedom, professional skills or even recognition in the world of white men"²⁹. The author concludes his argument warning that the history of literacy in Brazil isn't exclusively white and that enslaved people dared to write, no matter how tortuous or contradictory their path.

Specifically regarding the use of writing by slaves, there are others important studies. Based on the analysis of a letter written by freed woman Florença da Silva to her daughter (the slave named Balbina), Graham³⁰ considers the uses and insertion of slaves and freedmen in the written culture universe. In her paper *Writing from the margins: Brazilian slaves and written culture*, Sandra Graham presents as a source the letter written by freedwoman Florença da Silva to her daughter, the slave called Balbina, in order to question the uses and insertion of enslaved and freed people in the universe of written culture.

Analyzing aspects regarding the practices of literacy and schooling among the population of African descent, Wissenbach³¹ argues that the capacity to read and write was known and

28 Klebson Oliveira, *Negros e escrita na Bahia do século XIX: sócio-história, edição filológica de documentos e estudo linguístico*. Tese de Doutorado. Universidade Federal da Bahia, Salvador. 4 v., 2006, p. 54.

29 Idem, p. 144.

30 Sandra Graham. *Writing from the Margins: Brazilian Slaves and Written Culture*, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, v. 49, n. 3, pp. 611-36, 2007.

31 Cristina Wissenbach, *Letramento e escolas*. In: Lilia Schwarcz; Flavio Gomes, *Dicionário de escravidão e liberdade*. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2018.

widespread in Africa even before the arrival of Europeans, because Muslim regions already practiced writing and reading in Arabic and “in many Sahel cities, in the margins of the great desert and the Niger river, schools and libraries were opened near mosques and markets, helping to spread the Quran’s laws and beliefs”³². The author articulates the uses of writing in Africa with the fascination it continued to exert in the lives of enslaved and freed African people in Brazil in the times of slavery. According to Wissenbach, even when kept from schools, enslaved people weren’t kept away from written culture since the beginning of colonization and the Atlantic slave trade.

In the last century of Brazilian slavery, gaining distinct forms of expression, writing shows up time and again in political treaties commissioned by enslaved people in the search for recognizing their rights; other times, it shows up in the handwritten correspondence between enslaved and freed people, usually confiscated by police, since literacy was a sign of suspicious attitudes and practices. It also shows up in the form of listed objects, goods and services provided by enslaved people, and in numerous other papers associated to ordinary daily situations. In bookshop records from the Rio de Janeiro court in the 1860s, records were also found of books being sold to slaves and former slaves, including the Quran and Arabic grammar books.³³

Even among those who couldn’t write, “delegated writing” was a customary practice among poor free people, as well as enslaved people. Based on the case of Teodora Dias da Cunha, an African woman from Congo who commissioned the writing of letters to get news from her husband, Wissenbach states how questionable it is that the black population (both freed and captive) was kept completely apart from writing. However, I believe it’s also worth questioning the idea that captives and freed people didn’t attend school due to prohibition laws.

The preoccupation with the issue of the education of Afro-descendant people (which doesn’t necessarily refer to enslaved people) has been growing in Brazilian education historiography. It has become evident through the publication of papers, presentations and books, the results of research projects developed in graduate programs in Brazil. Among studies surrounding this theme, I selected a few for debate:

História da Educação do Negro e Outras Histórias (“A History of Black Education and Other Stories”), edited by Jeruse Romão³⁴, compiles writing from different historical periods and Brazilian regions, through a series of papers concerned with anti-racist education, following the agenda of actions and projects around the Law 10.639/2003, which instituted mandatory teaching of African and Afro-Brazilian History and Culture. Through the mapping of studies about black people in History of Education, Surya Pombo de Barros highlights the growing preoccupation with the theme, demonstrating the importance of the issue of ethnoracial relations in the field of Education.³⁵

32 Idem, p. 292.

33 Idem, 293.

34 Jeruse Romão, *História da educação do negro e outras histórias*, Brasília: SECAD, 2005.

35 Surya Barros, *O Estado da Arte da Pesquisa em História da Educação da População Negra no Brasil*. 1. ed. Vitória/ES: SBHE/Virtual Livros, 2015.

Researchers in the field of History of Education continue to mobilize efforts around the theme, in works based on documental research, such as *A História da Educação dos Negros no Brasil* (“A History of Black Education in Brazil”).³⁶

The studies in the realm of literate culture also attempt to problematize the acquisition and use of writing by enslaved and freed people. Those investigations indicate the importance of documents, such as letters and autobiographies, for the understanding of paths undertaken by subjects in search of freedom. However, who writes the enslaved people’s texts? Did they write themselves? Where did these people learn to write?

Now that we’ve taken stock of the growing and more and more relevant and consistent studies regarding the education of the Afro-descendant population, in a broad sense, it’s worth interrogating the specificity of being an educated slave. Through the mapping of studies on this theme, it’s also possible to draw a path in the sense of considering how the cross-referencing of sources and questions can broaden the horizon of possibilities around educating oneself in slavery. Studies in the realm of historiography, on the other hand, have been focused on the distinction between instruction and education, in the passage from the 19th to the 20th Century, which manifested itself particularly in actions aimed towards poor classes, where institutions shouldn’t just instruct, but also educate, “instilling behavioral norms, habits and certain cultural values, to the detriment of the culture and values of lower classes”.

The bibliographical review on the theme shows a growing movement around studies concerned with the black (captive and freed) population’s education and instruction in different Brazilian regions, from colonial to post-abolition times.

Based on this bibliographical review, I will now delimitate specific studies about Rio de Janeiro from the mid-19th Century to the early 20th Century, considering this is the main scope of my investigation. Compared to the rest of the country, Rio de Janeiro can be understood as a “literate city”. What did it mean to walk a “literate city” for enslaved and freed people? I posit that these subjects weren’t kept away from the written word, even if that aspect was kept a secret by many of them.

Based on a movement started in earlier studies³⁷, I propose an analysis of the relationship between city and literate culture, since the city of Rio de Janeiro already presented a series of specificities in comparison with the rest of the country in the mid-19th Century, including a growing expansion of the school network and gradual decrease in the illiteracy rate. I concluded there was a discrepancy between the increase in consumers of books and schooling rates, which led me to consider the self-taught audience that didn’t go to school but wanted to learn. Among those consumers of textbooks, we can’t ignore the possibility that many were enslaved or freed, as it was seen in other slave societies.

According to the 1872 census, only 15.7% of the Brazilian population was literate. However, Rio de Janeiro, the Empire’s capital, had the highest literacy rates, even though half of the population was still considered illiterate. In 1890, there were half a million people in the

36 Surya Barros & Marcus Vinícius Fonseca, *A História da Educação dos Negros no Brasil*. Niterói: EdUFF, 2016.

37 Alexandra Silva, *Entre memórias e experiências: ensino e mercado editorial de livros didáticos de História do Brasil – Rio de Janeiro (1870-1924)*. São Paulo: Verona, 2015.

city, twice the amount in 1870. Out of these half million people, 57.9% of men and 43.8% of women were reported as literate, which represented around 270 thousand people who could read and write. In 1924, out of 1,157,141 citizens, 61.1% were literate, overcoming the number of “illiterates” in the city (Damazio, 1996, p. 125). These rates were the lowest in the country and show the continuous growth of the literate population in Rio de Janeiro who, in theory, mastered their first letters or could at least read and access printed text³⁸. I believe there is a strong correlation between those figures and the process of fight and effort by the black (captive and freed) population to educate themselves.

Enslaved people could, indeed, be consumers of books sold in Rio de Janeiro, a literate city, with an expressive number of bookstores, schools and knowledge circulating, particularly from the mid-19th Century onwards. In view of the growth of the literate population in Rio de Janeiro, and trying to find better footing in this business, different stores became specialized in different products and audiences. Slaves couldn't be ignored in this process. They could read and buy books.

The creation of night schools for enslaved and freed people was one of the actions undertaken by abolitionist groups in the city of Rio de Janeiro and its surroundings. In methodological terms, empirical and theoretical frameworks were crossed, grounding the indications found in the sources with theoretical contributions of Social History, in the sense of avoiding the homogenization of experiences.

Conclusion

275

The records of social experience used as sources in this research were analyzed with the concern of avoiding the homogenization of the experiences of subjects involved in tensions and disputes around the education of enslaved people.

From a theoretical point of view, education as resistance and as a path for emancipation is anchored in Social History, in the sense of considering the subjects self-doing, from the margins, understanding education as a fighting tool for enslaved subjects, since the relational dimension of social constructions shouldn't be ignored. Therefore, everyone – men and women, rich people, black people, native people, white people, the ruling and the ruled, bosses, employers, enslaved people – started to be conceived as historical subjects. The use of the theoretical perspectives of Social History, for example, can be indicated as a component which explains the multiplicity of subjects in the history of education, in a commitment to give visibility to other subjects who are “outside” of the big themes established by historiography; this follows a concern with the understanding of the nexus and social relations existing in human activity.

From the assortment of academic works regarding the relationship between slavery and education in the African diaspora in the Americas, I was surprised by the lack of dialogue and conversation between texts, that seem to not know or ignore the existence of studies on the theme since at least 1919, when Woodson's book was published. The lack of dialogue

38 *Idem*, p. 15.

between international works on the theme seems to occur in part due to a lack of translation, given the diversity of languages in studies on the theme in the Americas (French, Spanish, English and Portuguese).

Reading studies about distinct realities, such as those of the Caribbean, Peru, Haiti, Cuba and the United States, was essential for connecting the dots, mainly regarding the recurrent and widespread notion in part of historiography denying the existence of literate and educated enslaved people. Confronting this tradition was a constant in all read works. Another contribution of reading and dialoguing with other studies is understanding methodological sources, research questions and the search for sources, where I found a large variety: legislation, reports, criminal lawsuits, newspapers, newspaper advertising, flyers, memoirs, travelogues, autobiographies, letters, notes, wills, inventories, manumission letters, passports and freedom passes, letters of attorney, requirements, iconography, oral statements by former slaves, literary works, archeological artefacts, notebooks, journals, textbooks, petitions, poems... Sources from different typologies, produced with different intents, many of them forged by slaveholder logic, with the purpose of keeping slavery alive as an institution. How can we see the desires of enslaved people in this puzzle? That's another challenge.

Enslaved people were complex human beings gifted with intelligence and skill. In the hardest conditions and in extreme suffering, they learned. The ability to learn languages, instruments and mastering the codes of the written word was often used to achieve better life conditions and freedom itself. Enslaved people's intelligence and capacity for learning threatened slaveholder power; therefore, it's possible that many enslaved people learned in secret, by themselves, even in order to have some advantage in a society with high illiteracy rates. Knowing how to read and write might have been the captives' secret garden, a haven from pains and deprivations of a life without freedom.

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