

Women in the Portuguese Colonial Empire

Women in the Portuguese Colonial Empire: The Theatre of Shadows

Edited by

Clara Sarmiento



Cambridge Scholars Publishing

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This book first published 2008 by

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

12 Back Chapman Street, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2XX, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-84718-718-8, ISBN (13): 9781847187185

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INTRODUCTION

In the genesis of *Women in the Portuguese Colonial Empire: The Theatre of Shadows*, we find an affirmation that is as apparent as it has been silenced, that throughout the ages, advocates of historical discourse have preferred to view historical events in the light of whether they can be considered “relevant” or “public” and as such, suitable general topics for research and academic attention. Accordingly and considering that History is, in effect, a human construct or, better, a human re-construct, facts are not imparted in an immediate and transparent manner; they are mediated, selected and interpreted so as to create a narrative that makes sense to those who study it in the present. History can therefore be described as a means of expounding on the past from the standpoint of the present, according to a tacitly accepted and established set of interpretations, in a language that is common to all those to whom it is directed.

As a result, History can be seen as a means of creating order from an array of materials that represent the heritage we have received from the past. Selecting certain versions of events or privileging certain individuals and groups to the detriment of others when representing the past creates a semblance of order that attempts to give a present-day coherence to past events, persons and objects. On the other hand, by choosing to represent the past in terms of cause and effect or as a stage in the inexorable progress of “civilization”—an option instantly denied if we take a brief look at the History of the 20th century—historians create and disseminate a specific and almost always, ideological, interpretation of the facts in question. As political and ideological powers intervene to more or less mystify the representations of the past, they bring the definition of History closer to the definition of Culture as a means of producing and disseminating interpretations, if we chose to adopt the more contemporary terminology of Cultural Studies.

Every family, social, national, ethnic and community group has its own History. The understanding of “ordinary” History is one of the means by which a human being acquires and bases her/his identity and by which she/he attempts to make sense of the world she/he lives in and her/his experiences in that world. Thus, reflection of how the past is represented in the present may shed light over the process by which the significance and identity of a specific society in a given space and time are produced

and circulated. Texts such as *Psicanálise Mítica do Destino Português* (*Mythical Psychoanalysis of the Portuguese Destiny*) by Eduardo Lourenço, and *Leituras da Cultura Portuguesa* (*Interpretations of Portuguese Culture*) by Luís Machado Abreu are examples of how a critical analysis of that so very underrated relationship between History and Culture can be applied to the Portuguese context¹.

Eduardo Lourenço examines the mythical representations of Portuguese culture at the same time as he deconstructs, contextualises and psychoanalyses national myths, with reference to Literature, Art, Philosophy and History. Luís Machado de Abreu, believing that there is no single interpretation but rather a multitude of cultural interpretations, distinguishes several levels that are part of the entity known as “Portuguese Culture”. In examining that which in the 20th century was a matter of study and of privileged attention regarding the historical manifestation of Portuguese culture, Machado de Abreu determines the presence of four principal interpretations that he designates as mystic, rationalistic, psychoanalytic and socio-economic. Speaking from a transnational perspective, John Tosh affirms that the creation of historic understanding is political in nature inasmuch as historical research, writing and dissemination are choice methods for sustaining relations of power². In effect, the features that shape a community’s historical awareness issue from the aforementioned selection of so-called relevant facts. The identity, ideology and purpose of those who produce historical understanding and of those who validate it for posterior consumption must be taken into account, as they will influence the unity of the society in question and its ability to renew and adapt itself. Hence, the tendency of so many political regimes and dogmas to manipulate the work of historians in order to promote a specific set of social principles. Although the work of historians may also be at risk of being confined to academic circles indifferent to changes in their society, it can also form the basis for a critical and informed discussion of current affairs or for disputing the relations of power that were instituted by and through History itself. Therefore, when we write, read or re-read History we must attempt to form a critical insight as to the relationship between the past and the present, as well as the role that History played in shaping identities and representations.

Likewise, the production and critical consumption of knowledge of History have long revealed countless gaps and silences within its own discourse. At the same time, there is an increasingly apparent gap between the representations instituted by History and present-day commonly accepted discourses and categories. Today, we question the reason for such gaps and silences; we wonder about the real role of all those who do

not or have never had access to power and to the perpetuating word, those whose voices have been systematically erased from sources and documents because of past or present attending interests.

Notably absent from History are the voices of women who have, by and large, been silenced by historiography in general and by Portuguese historiography in particular. I am talking here about women as equal partakers of History, not as a segregated single minority, nor as mere companions, heiresses or temporary substitutes for male holders of power who were granted immediate or mediated access to the perpetuating word. The absence of women in Portuguese historiography is particularly evident when it comes to acknowledging, describing and examining the marginal conditions to which women, particularly the enslaved, orphaned, cloistered and other similar socially marginalised and destitute individuals were relegated throughout the vast colonial and metropolitan Portuguese empire, from Brazil to the Far East, through Europe, Africa and India.

With this reality and in view of the potential of such a vast and stimulating field of research, the essays that are gathered in *Women in the Portuguese Colonial Empire: The Theatre of Shadows* attempt to present a comparative and multidisciplinary viewpoint regarding the almost totally ignored status of women during and within the Portuguese colonial empire, particularly as members of groups that played a relevant role in the socio-cultural conception of local communities, in defining policies for social domination and in forming family alliances. *Women in the Portuguese Colonial Empire: The Theatre of Shadows* is a compendium of writings that are related by theory and methodology to Gender Studies, Colonial and Post-Colonial Studies, History, Literature, Anthropology, Cultural and Intercultural Studies, Epistemology, Sociology, Political Science, Law and Economics.

The widely assorted origins of the authors whose work is included in *Women in the Portuguese Colonial Empire: The Theatre of Shadows* offer an interdisciplinary and transnational view of the History of the social, cultural and economic condition of women in the colonial space from the beginning of the 16th century maritime expansion to the 1974 Revolution and the subsequent devolution of the colonies, which at that time bore the official designation of “overseas provinces”. Such diversity made it possible for these essays to be grouped under the broad topics of “Female Slavery”, “Literature and Female Voices” and “Cultural Behaviour”.

The sad reality of female slavery played a leading role in the organization of the domestic, matrimonial and family markets in the Portuguese colonial empire. The essays on this subject take a broad

approach to this vast subject as they examine the categories and processes involved in the acquisition, transaction and social circulation of this form of slavery with a view to better understanding this peculiar form of the extreme subjugation and destitution of an individual.

“Memories of Slavery: Women and human trade in the newspapers of Pernambuco, Brazil, from 1850 to 1888” shows how these papers were not only crammed with advertisements for renting, purchasing and selling female slaves—as a group or individually or as part of a job lot with objects and animals—but also with news of escapes, suicides and homicides they committed. Slavery was an extremely speculative trade in which the market price was influenced by the person’s health, age, qualifications and other competitive factors. Considered as chattel, female slaves unavoidably transmitted their fate to that of their children, at least until in 1871 the passage of the Law of the Free Womb put a stop to the custom by which newborns were attributed the same legal status as their mothers. “Slave Women’s Children in the Portuguese Empire: Legal status and its enforcement” presents a study of this regime as it was applied to the sons and daughters of female slaves, and how it was enforced according to prevailing Portuguese jurisprudence of the time.

Female slaves attempted to alleviate their socio-economic conditions by resorting to witchcraft in their daily life, a practice that the Catholic Church and the Court of the Inquisition condemned as heresy. “Black slaves and the practice of witchcraft in Portugal during the modern era” explores the magic-religious rituals practiced by Native African women in Portugal between the 16th and 18th centuries: faith healing, idol worship, charms and amulets, among others. All these represent an important reconstructive mechanism by which these women tried to create a new social and cultural identity for themselves outside Africa. Cooking also represented another area of unexpected daily cultural resistance by the slave woman, isolated as she was in a colonial world whose discourse was foreign to her. Although several studies insist in describing that which would later be known as Brazilian cuisine as a recurring mishmash of Portuguese, native and African products and practices, “Food and Religion: Women and the African-Brazilian identity in the late 19th century” offers historical evidence that culinary practices resisted such a fusion, even after slavery was abolished. In addition to their being a feature of the slaves’ cultural identity, many dishes were also considered as sacred, particularly those that were offered to the gods of the *Candomblé*, which also enabled these women to move between the physical and sacred planes.

Female slavery is present in the daily practices in all parts of the empire. The *Annals of Vila Bela*, a narrative of the history of the 18th century Matto Grosso Captaincy, provides detailed first-hand information regarding the structure of a society that has been little studied by Brazilian and Portuguese historians, despite the wealth of documents on this subject. “The Contribution of the *Anais de Vila Bela* to the Study of Slavery in the Portuguese Empire” looks at the daily lives of black, native, white and mixed-blood men, women and children in one of the hinterlands of the Portuguese empire, a region that is, nevertheless, linked with the Atlantic world, and therefore with Asia and with Africa. This essay draws attention to the role of native women and to the manner by which a *quilombo*, or hiding-place for fugitive black slaves, functioned. Most notably, the *Grande Quilombo* (the Great Quilombo) commanded by Tereza de Benguela is a rare exception of the real power that a woman could assert. Despite the fact that Tereza de Benguela possessed real, individual power over a distinct period of time, the fact is that other female slaves exercised a much more symbolic, tenuous, and collective power, which was diluted in their daily routines.

Following the Portuguese territorial expansion in East Africa, the extensive Zambezi River Valley was divided into regions, or *prazos*, that were administered by an elite from Portugal and India and by their mixed-blood descendants. Excluding free Africans and settlers, thousands of slaves provided most of the labour the colonial society required. “Female Slavery, Domestic Economy and Social Status in the *Zambezi Prazos* during the 18th Century” describes the work performed by the female slaves, from tasks that were connected to the economy of the *prazos* to household chores. In stately homes, female slaves were responsible for an array of tasks for which they were frequently chosen on the basis of the skills they had acquired from childhood. Nonetheless, female slaves did not just have a working or sexual role; they also held symbolic positions depending on the social status of their owners. Working women (fishmongers, washerwomen, water carriers, and street sellers or *quitandeiras*) came together in the fairs and markets of Brazil and Angola through a complex system of hierarchies, alliances and buying and selling activities. “Women’s Work in the Fairs and Markets of Luanda” addresses the role of these women as negotiators as it discusses their place on the edges of social differences, gender identities and ethnic differences, from the viewpoint of the slave trade and the colonial mentality.

The essays that are grouped under “Literature and Female Voices” examine the literature produced by and about women, as well as the vocabulary used when representing the female gender, under topics such

as slavery, orphanhood, poverty, emigration/immigration, religious retreats, conversion, education, colonialism, post-colonialism and intercultural experiences. Women as subjects or objects (or as producers or products, as originators or destinees) of the literature and its symbolic, social and cultural implications, are the framework for these essays that, with a manifold focus, constantly shift from the individual to the collective.

“Autobiographic Writing and the Adoption of a Female Voice: A portrait of Mariana Alcoforado’s letters” begins with an examination of the love letters written by this nun from Beja then continues with a study of women’s legacy as incessant cultural objects in the post-colonial Portuguese-speaking world: *Novas Cartas Portuguesas (New Portuguese Letters)* by Maria Velho da Costa, Maria Teresa Horta and Maria Isabel Barreno; *Mariana* by Katherine Vaz and the 2005 theatrical representation of *Cartas Portuguesas (Portuguese Letters)*, in Sao Paolo, Brazil. The continuous shift between text and reality, between written descriptions and actual experiences, as expressed through various identities and ideologies, forms the cornerstone of “Representations of Gender in the *Letters and Writings* of St. Francis Xavier”. By questioning the role of women as inferiors according to the man/woman binomial, the author concludes that this dichotomy is similar to the one that compares “civilized” and “savage”, or “European” and “native”, not just in respect of St. Francis’ narrative (1505-1552) but also as regards the entire historico-cultural context of these *Letters and Writings*, that covers Europe, Africa and Asia.

The theocentric misogynistic insight that pervades the religious discourse on the female condition gradually gives way to incipient signs of emancipation. This appears in such diverse forms as a sardonic criticism or as the narrative of a journey, both written by women who were either permitted or were able to have access to the most essential freedoms of thought and movement. Despite the fact that today the work of Guiomar Torresão is published in its entirety, the pencil-written manuscript of her play *O Fraco da Baronesa (The Baroness’ Weakness)* was discovered in the rare books section of the National Library in Lisbon, tucked inside a volume of the Codes of Alcobaça, ultimate proof of how women as authors were scorned during the 19th century. According to “Pre-feminism in the 19th Century. Guiomar Torresão and her Baroness”, the author can be described as a pre-feminist, inasmuch as her use of humour, irony and various narrative and linguistic ploys have a critical impact on society at the time. “19th Century Women Travellers: A female view on the feminine condition in Brazil” begins with a re-interpretation of the history of the Portuguese overseas empire from the viewpoint of post-1974 democracy,

to reveal the unknown universe of the colonial women who have been forgotten by traditional historiography. Such an approach acquaints us with these remarkable women, their behaviours, sufferings and desires, as it recognizes their involvement in shaping the socio-cultural life of the colonies. The literature created by female travellers (a practice traditionally reserved for men) becomes a vehicle for the voices of women such as the Baroness of Langsdorff, Maria Graham, Ida Pfeiffer, Rose de Freycinet and Ina Von Binzer, whether forced to accompany their husbands or willing travellers, young or old, noble or plebeian, yet above all, discerning witnesses to the colonial subordination of women.

With the end of the transatlantic slave traffic to Brazil, in 1850, and the ban on breeding slaves in this colony, the ex-slave owner elite searched for an alternative to slave labour. The solution they found was to send colonial recruiters to the poorest countries in Europe at the time—Portugal, Italy and Switzerland—which resulted in a great migration to Brazil. Whole families and, occasionally, single young men, women and children, were taken to Brazil where, in the majority of cases, the dream of a better life soon vanished as their living conditions varied little, if at all, from that of the slaves before them. “Settlers and slavery in Brazil: The need for a new approach” and “Ibicaba and the Exploitation of Swiss Immigrants in Brazil” both mention Thomas Davatz’s *Memórias de um Colono no Brasil (Memoires of a Brazilian Settler, 1850)*. This narrative of great value to the socio-economic history of Brazil, served as the inspiration for Eveline Haster’s novel *Ibicaba—Das Paradies in den Köpfen (Ibicaba—Dreaming of Paradise, 1988)*, in which the author pays particular attention to the exploitation of women and children, which she describes as genuine slavery. Indeed, several authors, both Brazilian and Portuguese, confirm that the subject of the actual end of slavery at all levels was a long and complex process in recent Brazilian history and that its aftermath was still felt at the beginning of the 20th century.

In Africa, the Portuguese government discarded the thesis of a strictly biological racism, that believed it was impossible to “elevate and civilize native people”, in favour of a “native policy” that could be applied to the native population and shape it to its purposes. Aside from economic and political considerations, dogma and discourse justified colonialism as a “civilizing” undertaking that would elevate the native people from the status of “good/bad savage” to which they had been relegated since time immemorial. Forced labour and education as “civilizing” instruments were imposed on both men and women. Missionaries, religious schools and institutions under the protection of the overseas provincial governments supported the dictates of the law and custom as they engaged in the

domestic education and schooling of young women, thereby contributing to maintaining the state of female subordination. In “Female Voices in the Fall of the Empire: *O Esplendor de Portugal (The Splendour of Portugal)* by António Lobo Antunes”, the author portrays a microcosm of the African colonial misadventure itself, in the form of a novel narrated by female voices that is a metaphor for a violent external invasion of the domestic space, despite the fact that both spaces were, from the beginning, a stage for asymmetric power games and for equally cruel and complex de-constructions of identities.

Following the dissolution of the colonial empire, real territories mostly gave way to sentimental territories, sustained by increasingly tenuous cultural and symbolic ties, the most notable of which was the Portuguese language. The devolution of Macao to China in 1999 and the repression and independence of East Timor from 1999 to 2002 triggered, in Portugal, belated feelings of patriotism and post-colonial (or semi-colonial) paternalism. That the Portuguese language has endured as a bond for millions of people was, and still is, due to the dedicated work of teachers, who because of several attending situations and for various reasons, have sustained and even intensified this unique migratory flow of teachers of Portuguese language and culture. “Battle against Silence: the diary of Graciete Nogueira Batalha, a teacher in Macao” is based on the personal writings of one such teacher. More than a mere daily school diary, this narrative describes events in the recent history of Macao through the eyes of an attentive and participative citizen.

The general designation “Cultural Behaviour” groups essays that reflect on the more noteworthy practices of female suppression throughout the ages in Portugal and its overseas empire, as well as in the ex-colonies following the empire’s dissolution. In the selected works, the authors examine formal and informal aspects of a woman’s education, identity construction, active power and daily life, in their most varied aspects, from the 17th century realm of the religious to her present-day involvement in politics, despite the fact that these authors show a marked preference for the study of groups in the mid and long-term.

The great spiritual rebirth that engulfed the Iberian Peninsula between the 16th and 18th centuries made it possible for some women at the time to assume active religious roles in society as mystics, visionaries, writers, founders of religious orders, spiritual advisers or as workers of miracles. The social recognition of “sainthood” enabled women to acquire some protagonism in the public space, as an essential feature of this movement was the dissemination of mystical or saintly biographical writings, which were attentively read by many nuns in the primary orders. “The Conquest

of Public Space: Female protagonism in the religious sphere (17th and 18th centuries)” shows how religious ideals and aspirations were circulated in many convents. For example, Saint Teresa of Avila’s investment in books for the spiritual nurture of nuns is well known. Jacinta de São José, a pious follower of Saint Teresa in 18th century colonial Brazil, also provided books for her religious order in Rio de Janeiro. In the various convents, these works served as supports for a nun’s spiritual ambitions and as examples she could follow to construct and affirm her identity.

Women’s struggle against the ways by which they were oppressed and dominated was already a reality during the first century of Portugal’s colonisation of Brazil. Men in occupied regions did not always obey the Catholic Church’s rules of marital fidelity, as the patriarchal regime and the female slaves on the plantations and in their homes offered them easy access to other women, which led to the birth of numerous children born of extra-marital relationships between masters and their slaves. In “Meanders of Female Subordination: When the servant becomes the master” we see how some of these “chosen” women occasionally rivalled the power of the lady of the house, and how they were not only able to obtain the enfranchisement of their children but sometimes, even, their own freedom. Nonetheless, on so many other occasions, whenever a woman strayed from the strict canons of passive submissive behaviour, because of misfortune or by choice, the supervisory institutions swiftly intervened—by force if necessary—to ensure that the ideological and behavioural pillars of the patriarchal society were never shaken. Women were invariably depicted as stereotypes of their gender, never as possessing an individual identity.

In the Far East reaches of the empire, the *Santa Casa da Misericórdia* (Holy House of Mercy) of Macao was the first charitable institution to be established for the succour of abandoned children, orphans, widows and “repentant” females, and to provide dowries for orphan young ladies so they could marry, among many other missions. “Women and the Macao Holy House of Mercy” studies the different aspects of the role of this institution in protecting women from birth to adulthood, describing it as an example of the underlying interests of religious institutions in providing care and in regulating social practices. “The Feminine Ideal of 18th Century Colonial Brazil” begins by recognizing that the colonial and post-colonial society of Bahia was faced with the reality of a massive number of impoverished or destitute individuals whose social condition asylums and workhouses desperately attempted to remedy. Although the resulting solidarity network addressed the misery of men, women and children, women appeared to be the group that suffered the most. From the streets to

the cloisters, women belonging to the most diverse ethnic, social and geographic orders were forced to conform to the stereotypical model, regardless of their individual characteristics and desires, on pains of being severely chastised and punished.

One of the means employed to enforce social standards in Bahia at the end of the 19th century was the *casas de mestras* (houses of tutors), charitable and teaching institutions dedicated to training poor girls in skills such as seamstress, embroiderer, gilder or servant. Slave girls were also frequently accepted for this training. The type of instruction and the so frequently cruel fate of these young slave “spawn” at the mercy of their teachers are portrayed in a profoundly dramatic manner by Machado de Assis in his poignant short-story *O Caso da Vara* (*The Case of the Rod*). Set in Rio de Janeiro sometime during the first half of the 19th century, the context of this tale of the tragedy of the young slave Lucrecia at the hands of Sinhá Rita, the domestic skills tutor, is far distant from the abolitionist movements that were gaining in strength around 1860 and would lead to the passage of the *Lei Áurea* by Princess Isabel in 1888³.

The admission of young mulatto girls to the *Internato Normal de Senhoras* (Boarding School for Ladies) showed how primary education had become part of a strategy for the economic rehabilitation of the lower classes, at a time during which women were beginning to be encouraged to participate in the policy for expanding elementary education. Instruction and training of the poor, segregated according to gender, were seen as complementary instruments for educating an entire class of lesser workers whose social status was only slightly above that of slaves. Also considered part of this lower class were those who arrived in the successive waves of European immigrants that we mentioned earlier in the “Literature and Female Voices” section. The essay entitled “Gender and Notability: Portuguese immigrant women in the Societies of Beneficence [Benevolent Associations] in Brazil, 1854-1889” examines the gender relationships amongst the Portuguese immigrants who founded several Portuguese benevolent associations offering social and medical care, during the second half of the 19th century. The reports and statutes of these institutions in the states of Rio de Janeiro, Bahia and Rio Grande do Sul, disclose the role that women played in the activities and policies within the institutional structure of these Associations, during one of the periods of greatest emigration to Brazil.

The socio-cultural links that were created during the empire are still apparent nowadays. The spatial and temporal cycle portrayed in “Cultural Behaviour” may be coming to an end in present-day Asia, when one compares the political evolution to the anachronistic common-sense ideals,

to use the notion of Louis Althusser. In East Timor, although there are different local traditions for resolving conflicts, they share common principles and procedural similarities. Historically, women have been excluded from local decision-making processes and they are still frequently prohibited the right to speak at community arbitration and adjudication sessions. In marked contrast to this, East Timor has actually boasted the greatest number of female Members of Parliament in Southeast Asia. Likewise, women have held high public offices such as Ministers of Finance and Justice and they are commonly appointed as judges and public attorneys whose authority is implicitly accepted by the same communities who continue to prohibit them from exercising any type of role in local resolutions of conflicts. “Equal Before the Law, Unequal in the Community: Education and social construction of female authority in East Timor” addresses the fundamental issue of the different ways by which Timorese women had access to education during the past decades and even during the colonial regime, whereby an urban and literate segment were set apart from other groups in the rural hinterland. This distinction became more marked throughout the period of the Indonesian occupation of the island and acquired new forms during the recent reconstruction of the State of Timor. Hence, differences in recognized female authority are a product of the structural contrasts of the communities, which take into account those women’s belonging to different lineages and generations, at the level of the State and the purely local level.

Women in the Portuguese Colonial Empire: The Theatre of Shadows is an attempt to reclaim the position to which women were entitled, jointly with men, in social spaces in general and in colonial spaces in particular, not forgetting the intermediary and transitory space of the voyage during which the indisputable presence of women was systematically ignored or simply dismissed. Our perception of the past does not come solely from the revelations of professional historians; it is also the product of the memories of an entire people. Although these recollections may eventually include the work of historians, it is still based on this work that our perception selects or adapts impressions and information that, altogether, help us to construct the collective insight into or understanding of a particular event, era or individual. Certain aspects of the past are emphasized by popular memory, whilst others are minimized, fantasized or totally transformed. Historical figures that live on in popular memory as heroes and heroines frequently acquire a truly mythical status, generating stories about their lives and virtuous, courageous or inspiring actions.

Despite the fact that historical research frequently exposes the contradictory and complex human dimension of these individuals, they continue to exist as symbolic, atemporal figures in the collective conscience of the groups for which they have a special meaning. The study of the workings of this process of selection, representation and perpetuation of facts and characters and its causes and consequences, is one of the current challenges to researchers and also one of the objects of this book.

Absent or mystified, silenced or victimized, women in the History of Portugal and its Empire are the living example of the part historiographical discourse, ideology and the sifting through of popular memory have played in the construction of identities, their practices and representations. This editorial project attempts to reinstate women to their true dimension in History—and consequently in the present—, to restore to them their voice despite the passage of time and to use scientific gravitas to describe their experiences and the prejudices and preconceptions to which they were subject. *Women in the Portuguese Colonial Empire: The Theatre of Shadows* congregates a wide assortment of disciplines so as to provide multiple independent viewpoints, sources and methodologies. By bringing authors from around the world together, this work ensures that the various cultures and memories that are part of the global saga, as well as the various versions of the history of the Portuguese colonial empire, may be heard.

In this book, we have been careful to retain the original language of the writers, whether Portuguese or Brazilian. All the texts are the exclusive responsibility of their authors.

Women in the Portuguese Colonial Empire: The Theatre of Shadows was produced as part of the research program of the Centre for Intercultural Studies of the School of Accounting and Administration of the Polytechnic Institute of Porto (www.iscap.ipp.pt/~cei).

The editor wishes to express her heartfelt thanks to the Scientific and Directive Boards of the School of Accounting and Administration of the Polytechnic Institute of Porto, home institution of the Centre. Namely to Professors Cristina Pinto da Silva, Maria José Angélico, Fernando Magalhães, Olímpio Castilho, and Anabela Mesquita. Special thanks also to Professors Dalila Lopes, Luisa Langford, and Sandra Ribeiro, who enthusiastically joined this project, for their work in revising and editing the text. Last but not least, the editor wishes to express her recognition for the dedicated assistance of Carla Filipa Moreira Carneiro, a distinguished graduate in Administrative Assistance and Translation of the

forementioned School of Accounting and Administration. This work is dedicated to every woman who silently performs a leading role in the shadows on the countless stages of life.

Clara Sarmiento
March 2008

¹ Lourenço, Eduardo. “Psicanálise Mítica do Destino Português”. In *O Labirinto da Saudade*. Lisbon: Gradiva, 2000 [1978]. Abreu, Luís Machado de. “Leituras da Cultura Portuguesa”. *Revista da Universidade de Aveiro—Letras*, 12 (1995): 47-60.

² Tosh, John. *The Pursuit of History: Aims, Methods and New Directions in the Study of Modern History*. London and New York: Routledge, 1991 [1984], pp. 2 ff.

³ Originally published in the *Gazeta de Notícias* in 1881, *O Caso da Vara* by Machado de Assis was first published in a compendium of tales: *Páginas Recolhidas*, 1899. “In his stories, we see the author’s moving literary treatment of the problem of slavery in *O Caso da Vara* and *Pai Contra Mãe*, where these barbaric customs are vividly portrayed” (Mário Matos, “Machado de Assis, Contador de Histórias”, in *Machado de Assis: Obra Completa*, vol. II. Rio de Janeiro: Nova Aguilar, 1979).

PART I: FEMALE SLAVERY

CHAPTER ONE

MEMORIES OF SLAVERY: WOMEN AND HUMAN TRADE IN THE NEWSPAPERS OF PERNAMBUCO, BRAZIL, FROM 1850 TO 1888¹

MARIA ÂNGELA DE FARIA GRILLO

As we look through the newspapers from Pernambuco of the last century, we feel carried back to that period in time by reading the news sections and advertisements found in the newspapers. The advertisements create the atmosphere of that time reflecting society itself with its daily life, traditions, values, needs, lifestyle, trade, and language, that is, everything that took place on the streets and at home.

It is interesting to notice the excessive number of articles on slavery, conveyed in several sections of the press, such as: “Daily Magazine”, “Various Announcements” and “Advertisements”, in the *Diário de Pernambuco*; “Gazetilha”, “Scenes of Slavery”, “Diverse News” and “Fugitive Slaves” in the *Jornal do Recife*, without counting those writings in the magazines and serial publications. This shows the force with which slavery occupied and influenced the society at the time.

It is through the press that we can rebuild, in a given period of time, the tree-lined streets of Recife, crossed by rivers (rivers through which very often slaves escaped) with two-storey houses, lower houses and huts. In these streets we can imagine black women walking by carrying bundles of clothes, and black men driving their masters in luxurious carriages. Composing the mosaic of Recife, in the second half of the nineteenth century, we come across lads taking messages back and forth, beautiful slaves accompanying the white young ladies, black women offering tapioca cakes, sweets and jams on great trays safely carried on their heads, black men offering fish, fruits and other goods. Suddenly, screams and

agitation are heard—a black man or a black woman who, trying to escape, has been discovered.

Women Slaves: Buying, selling and hiring

Searching for slaves was taking place on a large scale, as slave trading was considered highly profitable and there was a lot of speculating in the business. The African slaves had a double function: they represented capital as a workforce and they were a source of income for their owners when they sold goods on the streets to increase the owner's income—this was the case of the slaves for profit—and owning them increased the owner's "status" (Costa, 1979: 217). It is important to notice that the slaves also represented a threat to social well-being, due to their cultural and religious differences. Usually, they were obliged to abandon their habits and forms of worship in order to avoid such a threat. It is what Kátia Mattoso calls "depersonalization", since the masters established the standards, the slave was obliged to do a triple apprenticeship: to learn the master's language, to pray to the Christian God and to perform useful work. There was still, among the masters, concern in mixing the ethnic groups and communities in order to make the group of slaves less homogeneous, avoiding in this way, certain forms of mutiny (Mattoso, 1988: 102).

Since the sixteenth century, slaves abundantly came to Brazil. The law of 1850, which extinguished the slave trade, made slaves scarce, not preventing, however, some dealers from insisting on that type of trade. There is news that the last clandestine landing of slaves took place in Pernambuco on October 11, 1855, in Serinháem, the South coast of the Province (Veiga, 1975).

The extinction of the slave trade decreases the amount of labor, mainly in the South, where coffee growth is in full expansion. The detouring of slaves from North to South is an intense interprovincial trade: the search was still big, the offer was decreasing, and the price was increasing. The intense traffic of slaves created a new profession: the traveling buyer of slaves. These businessmen periodically visited the Pernambuco harbour, returning to Rio de Janeiro with their merchandise (Conrad, 1978: 65-66; Prado, 1988: 174; Gorender, 1980: 345).

In the mid nineteenth century, which is the focus of our research, we find the newspapers full of advertisements for the purchase and sale of slaves. These ads were published on a large scale, and contained specific details on each slave. They were offered in groups, as well as individually, but their abilities were always mentioned:

18 Cruzes Street, third floor, excellent light colored woman for sale, presses, sews well, cooks, and washes; a 20-year-old black woman, presses well, sews well, cooks, and washes; three very young women, who can cook, wash with soap and sell in the streets; a 30-year-old woman, suitable for the plantation or street service; a beautiful little black girl about 11 or 12 years of age and a very clever 14 months boy, already weaned. (*Diário de Pernambuco*, 01/27/1851)

We can understand through this ad that children had started being traded, since 1850 and it became profitable to raise a slave's child in order to use the child's services later. Up to the extinction of slave traffic, this was not worthwhile, since the price of an adult slave was less than the cost involved in raising a slave's child (Mattoso, 1988: 126). Many other ads were found that offered or wanted black women slaves with children, which shows the value of the trade:

Wish to buy a young slave with a pretty figure, with skills, good street seller, without bad habits or health issues, preferably with a child, price is not important: at Cruz Street. (*Diário de Pernambuco*, 09/09/1850)

There were the ads that explained the reason for the sale; however, they always described the outstanding skills and "good" appearance of the slave that was being offered:

For sale, a good 20-year-old slave, presses perfectly, taught on purpose by a foreign house, cleans the floor, soaps well, knows how to serve at the dining table, has a good stature and pretty appearance: she is being sold because of her habit of fighting with her older partners: talk to João Vignes, 28 Larga do Rozario, first floor. (*Diário de Pernambuco*, 03/31/1851)

As we read this advertisement, we can verify that, inside the master's house there was not always harmony among the slaves and that, very often, they fought among themselves for several reasons, perhaps, jealousy for the master's preference.

A slave could be offered for sale, and another one given as a gift, perhaps because the latter did not have any skills, which made it difficult to set a price that would be worth selling for:

For sale, a black young woman who was born in Brazil, to work away from the province or in the fields, another one available for a very affordable price: 30 Rangel Street, second floor. (*Diário de Pernambuco*, 04/07/1851)

Many times, the slaves were sold together with other objects and/or animals, which clearly demonstrates that slaves were considered as goods, and they were qualified as such:

10 S. Francisco Street, for sale a healthy young black woman slave born in Brazil, cooks daily meals for the house, presses badly, washes and sews very well; also for sale a modern convertible cabriolet, and a very beautiful stable horse. (*Diário de Pernambuco*, 05/13/1851)

The price of a slave depended on several factors: the competitiveness, the degree of speculation that existed around the slave, age, gender and professional qualifications. Gender is an element that is not possible to despise, since women were considered as being less productive, physically more fragile and likely to age faster (Mattoso, 1988: 84). In this way, a man is sold in similar conditions, but in general he is more expensive than a woman.

On July 17th, 1885, the *Diário de Pernambuco* publishes, in the Daily Magazine section, a “Project on the servile state” dated May 12th, containing slaves’ prices, whose sale could not exceed these values, according to the following categories:

Slaves under 20 years of age—1.000\$000
 Slaves from 20 to 30 years of age—800\$000
 Slaves from 30 to 40 years of age—600\$000
 Slaves from 40 to 50 years of age—400\$000
 Slaves from 50 to 60 years of age—200\$000

The value of female individuals will be regulated in the same way, however, with a discount of 25 % on the prices established above.

Age is very important, because the elderly and children are cheaper, as we can verify in this advertisement:

For sale, an almost white, light-colored little fellow, good as a companion for the price of 400,00 rs; also for sale a beautiful black woman good for rural work or street vendor, at the price of 520,000 rs: 25 Direita Street, first floor. (*Diário de Pernambuco*, 04/30/1851)

Age and health issues were important factors of interference in the price of the slave, as is demonstrated at the Auction announced in the Editorial of the *Jornal do Recife*, on September 10th, 1872:

[...] Joaquina, a 38-year-old black woman born in Brazil, does housework, 500\$000—Joaquina, 48-year-old black woman, caçango, with the right arm almost useless as a consequence of repeated erysipelas, who suffers from gout and has a *belida* in the right eye, 150\$000—Antonia, 60-year-old black woman, camondongo, who suffers from chronic asthma, which prevents her from performing her duties, 100\$000 [...].

In relation to the skin color, it is important to notice that it does not interfere in the value attributed to the slaves. The woman slave was used for housework as well as for plantation work, since many African women were already used to working land (Mattoso, 1988: 85). The same way that women were used to perform heavy work, men were used to perform housework, without any distinction.

There were also cases of indebted owners who sold their slaves in order to settle their debts:

For sale an African young black woman, with skills, without bad habits or health issues, selling to pay a debt; a 10-year-old black girl born in Brazil: 38 Rangel Street, second floor. (*Diário de Pernambuco*, 01/11/1851)

It is worth pointing out in this ad the importance that is given to the moral attributions and professional qualifications. This form of description is set against other types of ad, where the negative characteristics are highlighted instead.

Another aspect related to the women slaves' trade concerns sales, since very often there were frauds, as for example, the sale of slaves that belonged to other owners, or even the sale of freed slaves. In these cases, notes and warnings were published in the newspapers, in order to denounce those frauds:

Benvenuto da Costa Moreno, from Ingazeira, as states the commissioner of this term, has sold to Miguel de Barros da Silva Junior a 11-year-old black boy named José, and a 30-year-old black woman named Felicia who did not belong to him. (*Diário de Pernambuco*, 05/12/1865)

Warning: The undersigned, [...] married to João Martins de Mello, warns the public, that her husband is trying to sell two slaves, one black man born in Brazil named Francisco, who is 40 years old, and another one named Francisca, a black woman born in Brazil, between 16 and 18 years of age, who are free; whose letters are launched in books of notes of Bonito Village, freed by the undersigned in order to avoid the waste that the above-mentioned husband has been inflicting on the couples' possessions; so that nobody else does any kind of business transaction with him, I warn through this present note.

Village of Gravatá, on July 22, 1868

Marcolina de Ornelis Pessoa. (*Jornal do Recife*, 07/27/1868)

It can be verified, through these advertisements, that when buying and selling slaves, the physical characteristics were highlighted with great emphasis, as for instance: “beautiful stature”, “lovely appearance”, “pretty little black girl”, as well as their professional qualifications. In the ads for selling slaves “one tries to attract, catch, and absorb the reader’s attention, in a very special way: with practical and immediate objectives, through words able to win the reader for the advertiser or for the announced object” (Freyre, 1979: XLVII).

Along with many “slaves to sell” ads about women, there were, in the same proportion, among the “classified ads” of the newspapers, notices under the titles of “slaves to buy” and “slaves needed”.

Very often, traders published these ads, as can be seen below:

Slaves of both genders with or without skills: 38 Rangel Street, second floor. At the same house a young little black girl for sale at a modest price. (*Diário de Pernambuco*, 01/20/1851)

Slaves of both genders bought and sold; commission accepted, both outside and inside the Province in safety: 14 Larangeiras Street, second floor. (*Diário de Pernambuco*, 02/03/1851)

Advertisements like these appeared very frequently, especially in the years that followed the extinction of slave traffic. The existence of slave traffic between provinces is here confirmed when a trading house, like the one located at 14 Laranjeiras Street, places an ad that says: “for outside the province”:

A black or dark-brown slave woman is required outside the province, a seamstress, who starches and irons, and can do *crochet*, is young and beautiful; do not mind the price, because it is for a generous person: 14 Laranjeira Street, second floor. (*Diário de Pernambuco*, 02/04/1851)

We may notice, by the proximity of the dates of the two ads that it was quite a popular house of trade, and that for this reason it already had previous orders from its clients.

Despite the fact that no references have been found regarding the preference or rejection of the skin color in the above ads, the allusions to the skin color are clear in the following ones. It is surprising to see in these ads the fact that, near the word slave, there is always the demand for the color black or dark-brown. This detail or specification about the skin