

Introduction

This study examines the experiences of the slaves and ex-slaves who lived and labored in the Bahian Recôncavo, one of the oldest slave societies in the Americas, from the last two decades of slavery through the first twenty years after abolition on May 13, 1888. The Recôncavo was one of Brazil's most important slave-holding and sugar-producing regions, but sugar was not the Recôncavo's only crop, nor did all slaves work in sugar. Sugar was, however, the region's most important crop and most slaves there worked in sugar, even as abolition approached. Examining this history, therefore, reveals the implications of abolition and the consequences of the end of slavery for a significant sector of Brazil's black population.

Until quite recently, May 13, 1888, has primarily constituted a chronological divider between two distinct periods of Brazilian history. Abolition in 1888 and the installation of the Brazilian Republic in 1889 marked the end of one era and the beginning of another. Key to this new period were a number of new elements: free labor, massive growth in European immigration to southeastern Brazil, industrialization, and organized labor. With the new focus on these factors, the legacy of slavery and the men and women who had lived through slavery abruptly disappeared from Brazilian history.

This "disappearance" of the former slaves from the study of the post-emancipation period was, in some respects, ideological, in that it was a way to show that Brazil had done away with the legacies of slavery once and for all. This racialized discourse made it possible to discuss Brazil without reference to Africans or their descendants. In other words, it silenced them.

In the 1940s, in his classic study *História econômica do Brasil*, Caio Prado Júnior argued that free wage labor had "substituted" for enslaved labor in the last years of slavery. By substituted, he meant that the period saw the emergence of capitalist labor relations and labor movements, the principal actors

in which were the European immigrants who had begun to arrive in great numbers in Brazil's Northeast in the 1880s.¹

In the 1960s and 1970s, Prado's work inspired a number of studies in Brazil of what is conventionally called the "transition from slavery to free labor." The authors of these studies also understood the end of slavery as the point of departure for the development of capitalism in Brazil. Slavery, they argued, had so damaged the minds and bodies of ex-slaves and freed blacks that they were unprepared to respond to the demands of a society based on wage labor. From this perspective, blacks, whether ex-slaves or free, appear as "things" or parts of a macroeconomic machine that marginalized them from the most dynamic process of social transformation of the period.²

Toward the end of the 1980s, as the centennial of abolition in Brazil approached, a series of studies based in research in new archival manuscript sources brought about a profound revision in the historiography of slavery in Brazil. Challenging the idea of the slave or ex-slave as "thing," these studies began to explore enslaved agency in the most diverse aspects of their daily lives.³ Previously unexplored documentary sources allowed Africans and their descendants to emerge in the historical literature as thinking beings capable of independent initiative and thoughts about how to live and resist slavery. And, above all, Africans and their descendants appeared as individuals who carried with them memories and understandings of the world learned in Africa.⁴

In Brazil, these revisionist interpretations of slavery have had significant consequences for students of the post-abolition period. Without discarding cultural and social contexts, these studies have attempted to reveal the daily experiences and the improvisation of slaves and freed people as they forged identities and developed survival strategies during and after slavery.⁵

In the 1990s, a number of studies reexamined the role of Africans and their descendants in the movements to end slavery in Brazil. Their deeper analysis of the tensions that marked the end of slavery and their connection to slaves' understanding of freedom began to reshape the historiography.⁶ Hebe Mattos de Castro's study *Das cores do silêncio* (On the colors of silence) was an important contribution in this regard, as it examined the tense discussions about the meanings of freedom that took place in the days immediately after the abolition of slavery.⁷

In the 1990s, some historians also began to broach the temporal boundary of the end of slavery in 1888 to study more systematically the day-to-day experiences of the populations emerging from slavery. For Bahia, two historians from the United States pioneered the effort to analyze the black

experience beyond the limits of abolition. In *Freedoms Given, Freedoms Won*, Kim Butler compared the post-emancipation experiences of Afro-Brazilians in two important Brazilian cities, Salvador and São Paulo. In *From Slavery to Freedom in Brasil*, published in 2006 but based on his 1991 PhD thesis, Dale Torston Graden brought a hemispheric perspective to Bahia's experiences in the post-emancipation period, especially as they related to local struggles for citizenship and access to land.⁸ In this period, the historiography of the post-emancipation period also began to include studies of the daily life, the life histories, and the memories of ex-slaves.⁹ Studies of the impact of racism and racial theories on the daily lives of Afro-Brazilians became especially important.¹⁰

This book is the heir of these historiographical debates, but it moves beyond them to explore the history of ex-slaves through their trajectories. My goal is to lift the curtain on significant historical transformations by exploring the trajectories of individuals, families, and communities. This exploration of trajectories allows us to see what those who emerged from slavery thought and felt about freedom.¹¹ They show us that the day-to-day experiences of slavery influenced choices, attitudes, expectations, and plans for freedom in the post-emancipation period in any number of ways.

Thus, this study does not examine the maintenance of, or breaks with, patterns of behavior developed in slavery. Such notions oversimplify the complex relationships and conflicts that developed in post-slavery Bahia. Rather, this study uses the dynamics of day-to-day relationships to reveal how past experiences could fuel aspirations or return as memories and recollections.

Nor does this study of trajectories aim to reveal the "behavior of the average" freed person in order to infer broader patterns of behavior or social relationships. I am not searching for models, nor do I believe that models can account for the wealth of lived experiences, the dynamics of the multiplicity of the choices that freed people made over the course of their lives. Rather, I explore how the people who emerged from slavery tried to shape the directions their lives would take in numerous creative ways despite the unforeseeable future and the limits placed on them by a society based on profound socioracial inequalities.

This study does not explore the "transition" from slavery to free labor either.¹² Aside from suggesting that the shift from slavery to freedom was a linear historical process, studies about transition focus primarily on the economic aspects of the substitution of slaves by free workers and rarely consider that most of the "free people" had once been slaves or were descended from them. Slavery was much more than an economic system; it molded behavior,

it defined social and racial hierarchies, and it shaped feelings, values, and the etiquette of command and obedience. Sharp social tensions marked slavery's end, wherever it existed, as long-held demands were unleashed and, at the same time, freedom took on new meanings and expectations. The ex-masters of Bahian slaves understood that the period was dangerous, such that they tried to reduce its complexity to a question of the "substitution" or "transition" to free labor. This study aims to go beyond such notions to consider the attitudes and behaviors of the various social actors in a very specific context—the major plantations of Bahia's Recôncavo in the last years of slavery and first years of freedom.

For some time, historians and anthropologists have been exploring aspects of the history and culture of Bahia's black population in the post-abolition period. Focusing on African heritage and/or the reinvention of such heritage in Bahia, these studies have allowed us to accumulate immense knowledge about the religiosity, family, race relations, forms of resistance, and participation in the labor market of Bahian blacks.¹³ But we know little about the destinies of ex-slaves, about their experiences and plans for freedom, their memories of enslavement, and the ways in which they related to their former owners and to the communities of which they were a part. Even the Recôncavo, which has been the subject of numerous historical studies, is still awaiting the systematic study of the populations that emerged from slavery there.

This study does not pretend to fill that void, but it does address various aspects of freed peoples' experience in the post-abolition period. Many of the questions discussed here grow out of a dialogue with the historiography about the rich and complex trajectory of the black populations after emancipation here in Bahia, in Brazil, and elsewhere in the Americas. Recent studies avoided dichotomies such as rupture and continuity or dependency and autonomy and, in so doing, broadened the possibilities for understanding the various meanings that ex-slaves attributed to freedom.¹⁴

In this study, I am trying to go beyond generalizations to perceive how the ex-slaves interacted with others—including ex-masters and members of the communities to which they belonged—as they went about their daily lives after emancipation. Doing so required building an empirical base that allowed me to see their post-emancipation trajectories. It was extremely complicated, given that the documentation produced in the years after abolition is nearly silent on the juridical status of people who emerged from slavery. Brazilian ex-slaves rarely left documents that they had written discussing their memories of slavery and their experiences of the first days after abolition, unlike their African-American counterparts, who left diaries and let-

ters. Therefore, locating the men, women, and children who lived the last years of captivity on the plantations has been a formidable task.

To follow these people through time and space, I drew on many different kinds of documents—registers and lists of slaves attached to postmortem inventories, as well as certificates of baptism, birth, and death in local, state, and national archives as well as private collections. Using the methodology of nominative record linkage, nicknamed “crossing data,” I was able to follow individuals and family groups over time by putting together data from lists of slaves attached to postmortem estate inventories with parish baptismal registers and the notarial registers created after the declaration of the Brazilian Republic in 1889.¹⁵ The information about the locales in which they were born and lived, the names of the properties on which they worked, and the names and surnames of parents, grandparents, and godparents offered important directions for reconstructing individual trajectories and social networks alike.

Viewed in isolation, the notarial registries, for example, have little to say, either because the notaries did not take into account peoples’ pre-abolition social conditions or because the freed people themselves hid such information. For ex-slaves, affirming freedom and the rights of citizenship did not encourage revealing their pasts in slavery. Only a few did as Juvenal when he registered the death of an elderly friend. He described himself as a “freedman” and a *crioulo* resident of the São Bento Plantation. He described Salomão, the deceased, as eighty years of age, single, and an “African Preto” “who had been a slave on that plantation and lived in an earlier period of labor service.” He also stated that he did not know Salomão’s “parentage or other circumstances because the deceased African had been very old.”¹⁶ Among hundreds of birth certificates in the Cartório of the Registro Civil of São Félix, I was able to find only one that mentioned previous slave status. In it, the notary recorded that Domingos Florêncio dos Santos had informed him that, at four o’clock in the morning of February 16, 1892, “his ex-slave” Maria Rita dos Santos gave birth to a “*parda* colored” baby boy called Porfírio, whose maternal grandmother was Rita Maria dos Anjos.¹⁷

Given this lacuna in the post-emancipation civil registries, documents produced prior to abolition were essential to reconstructing individual and family group trajectories for slaves and their descendants. For example: On July 17, 1889, the single seamstress and “Brazilian citizen,” Ângela Muniz, who lived on the Mombaça Plantation in Monte Parish in the town of São Francisco, reported the birth of a daughter, baptized Gertrudes. Mother and daughter carried the same surname as their grandmother, Antônia Muniz. The list of slaves attached to the 1880 postmortem inventory of Mombaça’s owner revealed

that Gertrudes's mother and grandmother were two of the 119 slaves who lived on the plantation at the time. Both were labeled *crioula* field hands.¹⁸

On January 1, 1891, the birth of a “*parda colored*” girl named *Marinha* was registered in the notary's office of São Sebastião. The records indicate that she was the daughter of *Maria de São Pedro* and granddaughter of *Rosalina*, both of whom lived on land belonging to the former *Carmo* Plantation. Checking the list of slaves on the *Carmo* property in 1865 reveals that the little girl's grandmother, *Rosalina*, was enslaved there at the time. The girl's mother, *Maria de São Pedro*, seems to have been born after the 1865 list was compiled, since her name does not appear among the slave children belonging to the plantation. The reader will meet *Rosalina* again in chapter 2 of this book.¹⁹

Taken together, these documentary fragments reveal ex-slaves' struggles for freedom from slavery. On February 10, 1889, the twenty-year-old *crioula* ex-slave *Etelvina Rego* went to the notary's office in *Rio Fundo* a district of *Santo Amaro*, to register her son *Antônio*, who had been born a few days before. The father, *Antônio do Rego*, was the son of *Serafina do Rego*, and both lived on the *Paranaguá* Plantation. But the little boy's grandmother had also appeared on the list of slaves who fled *Paranaguá* in June 1882. A number of slaves had escaped together, claiming that they had completed the term of captivity determined in the will of their former owner, *Antônio Honorato da Silva Rego*. The new plantation owner, the *Baroness of Monte Santo*, published the names of all the fugitives in the region's newspapers. Among them was *Serafina*, a “*crioula preta*,” the thirty-year-old mother of three children.²⁰ Clearly, *Grandma Serafina* had been a fugitive, and little *Antônio's* father had probably been among the three children that she took with her when she fled the plantation.

Such events were common and the snippets of peoples' experiences left behind in documents help us to reconstruct fascinating stories. This methodology allowed me to follow the lives of the slaves and freed people on the plantations, as the reader will observe throughout the book. By “microanalyzing” these documentary bits, I was able to see how the family ties and other relationships that developed among slaves of the same plantation during slavery were preserved and enhanced during the post-abolition period. I was also able to see the social and symbolic logic that shaped the choices that individuals and groups made before and after slavery ended. I argue that the material and symbolic resources of the communities forged under slavery were fundamental to their survival strategies after captivity ended, especially when they tried to expand the space available to them both on and off the old plantations.

Returning to the structure of the book, the first three chapters provide a general picture of the enslaved population on the Recôncavo's sugar plantations in the last years of slavery. They demonstrate that social tension existed on the large sugar estates at that time and continued into the post-abolition period, although with different meanings. Chapters 4, 5, and 6 reveal the conflicts, tensions, and negotiations over rights and resources on the plantations that emerged between former masters and ex-slaves shortly after May 13, 1888, the day that slavery ended in Brazil.

Chapters 7 and 8 analyze the tense relationships between the owners of sugar plantations and freed people who remained on their properties after abolition. Here we reveal the social consequences for freed people of remaining on the properties on which they had been born or on which they had served as slaves. Within communities formed during slavery, the freed people tried to modify relationships with their ex-masters, confirming traditional rights and expanding beyond them. Further, they gave new meaning to the ex-master's paternalist "protection" and used it on a daily basis to conquer and amplify their own space for survival.

Finally, the last chapter tackles the question of the challenges freed people faced when they left the places of their former enslavement after abolition. Ex-slaves made freedom real when they migrated, whether within or beyond the Recôncavo, whether to break ties to ex-masters or to look for work. Wherever they went, the men and women freed by Brazilian abolition on May 13, 1888, moved in the context of, and frequently in opposition to, the wishes of individuals and groups who hoped to control them.