Document No. 5. Slavery in Nineteenth-Century Brazil

Thomas Ewbank, “Life in Brazil,” 1856

After much procrastination, the Brazilian government abolished the slave trade in 1850, but only ended slavery in 1888. British abolitionists played an important role in pressuring Brazil to end the traffic in humans, and they and their U.S. counterparts continued to monitor the condition of slaves in Brazil. Thomas Ewbank (1792–1870) was born in England but emigrated in 1819 to New York, where he worked first as a machinist and later as a manufacturer of metallic tubing. From 1849 until 1852 he was U.S. Commissioner of Patents. He visited Brazil in 1845 and 1846 and wrote a lengthy description of the geography, customs, and peoples of the country. His detailed observations about the conditions of Brazilian slaves helped fuel international opposition to the institution.

Among lithographic scenes of life in Rio, designed and published by native artists, those relating to the slaves are not the least conspicuous. There is no more fastidiousness, that I observed, about portraying them in shackles than in their labors and their pastimes. The one at the head of the opposite page represents common punishments: a negra in a mask, and a negro wearing the usual pronged collar, with a shackle round one ankle, and secured to a chain suspended from his waist.

It is said slaves in masks are not so often encountered in the streets as formerly, because of a growing public feeling against them. I met but three or four, and in each case
the sufferer was a female. The mask is the reputed ordinary punishment and preventative of
drunkenness. As the barrel is often chained to the slave that bears it, to prevent him from
selling it for rum, so the mask is to hinder him or her from conveying the liquor to the
mouth, below which the metal is continued, and opposite to which there is no opening.

Observing one day masks hanging out for sale at a tin and sheet iron store, I stopped
to examine them, and subsequently borrowed one, from which the annexed sketch is taken.
Except a projection piece for the nose, the metal is simply bent cylinder-side. Minute holes
are punched to admit air to the nostrils, and similar ones in front of the eyes. A jointed strap
(of metal) on each side goes round below the ears (sometimes two), and meets one that
passes over the crown of the head. A staple unites and a padlock secures them.

At most one of the smiths’ shops collars are exposed, as horseshoes are with our
blacksmiths; at one shop in Rua das Violas there was quite a variety, with gives [shackles],
chains, etc. Most of the collars were of five-eighths-inch round iron, some with one prong,
others with two, and some with none except a short upright tubular lock.

Here, too, were the heaviest and cruelest instruments of torture—shackles for
binding the ankles and wrists close together, and consequently doubling the bodies of the
victims into the most painful and unnatural positions. Had I not seen them, I could hardly
have thought such things were. While making a memorandum of their form and dimensions,
the proprietor or his adjutant, a black man, in his shirt sleeves, came from the rear and
handling them, spoke by way of recommending them, supposing I was a customer. They
were made of bar iron, *three inches wide and three eights of an inch thick!* Each consisted
of three pieces, bent, jointed, and fastened, as shown in the margin. The large openings were
for the legs, the smaller for the wrists. A screw-bolt drew the straight parts close together. One of the joints is shown above. The distance from joint to joint was two feet.

Such are the tortures which slaves privately endure in the cellars, garrets, and out-houses of their masters. T_____, a native merchant, says another common punishment is to enclose the legs in wooden shackles or stocks. Some owners fasten their hands in similar devices, and some, again, retain relics of the old thumb-screws to lock those members together. In the northern provinces, he says, the slaves are much worse used than in Rio; that it is no uncommon thing to tie their hands and feet together, hoist them off the ground, and then “beat them as near to death as possible.” A head log fastened by a chain to the neck or leg of a slave who has absconded, or who is supposed to be inclined to run away, is a usual punishment and precaution. He is compelled to labor with it, laying it on the ground when at work, and bearing it under his arm or on his shoulder when he moves.

I observed one day a slave wearing a collar, the largest and roughest of hundreds I have seen. It is represented in the margins. Of inch round iron, with a hinge in the middle, made by bending the metal of its full size into loops, the open ends flattened and connected by a half-inch rivet. The upright bar terminated in a death's head, which reached above that of the wearer, and to it another piece, in the form of the letter S, was welded. The joint galled him, for he kept gathering portions of the canvas shirt under it. Rest or sleep would seem impossible.

A Bahian planter, the brother of an ex-councilor, dined with us one day, and spoke with such freedom on slavery. With most men, he thinks the land can never be cultivated in the northern provinces by whites. The city slaves of Bahia, he said, are principally Minas. Shrewd and intelligent, they preserved their own language, and by that means organize
clubs and mature schemes of revolution which their brethren of Pernambuco have repeatedly attempted to carry out. Some write Arabic fluently, and are vastly superior to most of their masters. In the interior, he remarked, the slaves are badly fed, worse clothed, and worked so hard that the average duration of their lives does not exceed six years. In some districts it reaches to eight, while the number that see ten years after leaving Africa is small indeed. Deceptions are played off on foreign agents of the Slavery Commissions. These visit the Engenhos [sugar mills] once or twice a year. The planters, informed when they set out, have their slaves decently garbed and well oiled, to make them look supple and in good condition. On a late visit, the examiners were so highly gratified that one left, and wrote home a flattering account of the treatment of the helots. The other continued his inquiries, came to a fazenda [farm] where he was not looked for, and there beheld what he did not expect—a negro about to be boiled to death for some act of insubordination. His owner had invited, according to custom in such cases, neighboring proprietors to witness the tragedy.

From the little I have seen, I should suppose the country slaves are the worst off. Every morning while nature was enshrouded in blackness of darkness, did I hear them driving wagons through the thick mist, and as late as ten at night were they shouting at the oxen as the jolting and groaning wheels rolled by. (This was, however, in the busiest season.) I often wondered how they found their way over the horrid roads, how their naked feet and limbs escaped unharmed, and how they then worked in the fields, unless their pupils had the expansile and contractile powers of night animals.

On large estates, a few days’ rest are given them every three or four weeks during the sugar season, but on smaller ones, where owners commonly have difficulty to keep out of
debt, they fare badly, and are worked to death. Staggering into their huts, or dropping where their labors close, hardly do their aching bones allow the Angel of Sleep to drive away the memory of their sorrows, than two demons, lurking in the hell and lash, awaken them to fresh tortures. To say these poor creatures are better off than when ranging their native lands is an assertion that language lacks the power justly to describe. It may be true, if the life of an omnibus hack is better than that of a wild horse of Texas. I would rather, a thousand times, be a sheep, pig, or ox, have freedom, food, and rest for a season, and then be knocked on the head, than be a serf on some plantations. I say some, because there are in Brazil, as in other lands, humane planters.

Suicides continually occur, and owners wonder. The high-souled Minas, both men and women, are given to self-destruction. Rather than endure life on the terms it is offered, many of them end it. Then they that bought them grind their teeth and curse them, hurl imprecations after their flying spirits, and execrate the saints that let them go. If individuals are ever justified in using the power Heaven has placed in their hands to terminate at once their earthly existence, it must be these. Those who blame them for putting the only barrier between them and oppression could not endure half their woes. And how characteristic of human frailties! Here are slave-dealers who weep over the legendary sufferings of a saint, and laugh at worse tortures they themselves inflict; who shudder at the names of old persecutors, and dream not of the armies of martyrs they make yearly; who cry over Protestants as sinners doomed to perdition, and smile in anticipation of their own reception in the realms above by Anthony and Loyals, Benedict and Becket.

Rich people who lose a slave by suicide or flight scarcely feel the loss, but to many families the loss is ruinous. There are not a few that live on the earnings of one or two
helots. The papers are constantly noticing the flight of slaves who have manumitted themselves by escaping across a river their oppressors dare not attempt, since they there become denizens of a country in which Brazilian process can not be served. They unsheathe their spirits, and leave the scabbards for their masters.

It is only suicides reported by the police that become publicly known. Were all recorded, every issue of the daily press would, I am told, contain more or less. Instances that have occurred within the last few weeks are here taken from the *Diario*.

**June 22-24.** “In the parish of Sta. Anna, an inquest was held on the body of the black, Justo, who killed himself by hanging. He was the slave of Major José de Paiva e Silva. Also on the body of the slave Rita, who destroyed herself by drowning. The body of a black, in a state of putrefaction, was found, thrown ashore by the tide, on the beach near the Public Garden.”

**July 1.** The body of one was found near the Carioco Fountain; another, a female, in another parish, had released her spirit with a rope—“suicidou-se com um baraço.” **July 5.** Another in a fit of despair, precipitated himself from an upper window upon a mass of granite. **23rd.** The slave Luiz Pharoux killed himself with a rope. **24th.** The slaves Pedro and Camillo by strangulation. **August 1.** Another drowned himself on the Praya Manoel. On the 4th, my last day in Brazil, one was lying on the rocks at the city end of the Gloria Beach, washed up by the tide. He was apparently under thirty years of age. As I stood looking down on him, a Mozambique girl came along, put her basket on the low wall near me, dropped a tear on the corpse, and passed on.

When the means of suspension are not at hand, it is no unusual thing for high-minded Africans, of both sexes, to expire under circumstances surpassing aught that history records.
Some draw ligatures tight around their throats, lie down, and deliberately die. Others, I am
told, have the art of folding back their tongues so as to prevent respiration, and thus
resolutely perish.

Suggestions for Further Reading


