

NORMATIVE HORIZONS
READING ENSLAVED AFRICANS' AUTONOMY THROUGH
PRIMARY SOURCES IN COLONIAL BRAZIL
[1690 – 1806]

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ABSTRACT // This essay is an exploration of historical knowledge: how it is authored and, more importantly, how we can access it. Through in-depth inspection and careful combination of primary source documents from 1690 to 1806, the text is a result of my attempts to reconstruct Brazilian slave autonomy as a kind of historical knowledge. Disassembling the language that framed colonial encounters, I argue that historical knowledge from primary texts must first be framed within the everyday ‘encounters’ of others in 18th century Brazil social life. Utilising a socially situated textual analysis, the essay accesses the often overwritten autonomy of slaves through historical documents: (1) the text of a friar writing on slaves’ fantastic religious accomplishments, (2) two colonial mandates prohibiting slaves’ promiscuous and suggestive fashions, (3) a history of slave rebellion against colonial powers and (4) a list of demands composed by slaves offered as a peace treaty to their owner. Through exploring the ‘normative horizons’ of the authorial point-of-view of each text, what follows is not merely an ethnohistorical experiment in accessing historical knowledge, but an ethnographic exposition in imagining the lives and futures of slaves in the past.

THE RUNAWAY

Runaway Slave Advertisement in O Mercantil [1845]

Fled on December 3 of this year from the plantation of Major Antonio de Campos Freire one of his slaves named Jose Antonio of the Benguella nation (though he says he is a creole) from 25 to 30 years of age with the following characteristics: short in stature, thin, well-made body, dark color, face rather long, pale jaw, almost no beard, lips rather full, round head, and is in the habit of going about with long hair, small eyes, long eyelashes, good teeth, nose medium large, [...] He is a master blacksmith [...] He is accustomed to getting drunk and in that condition becomes violent. He took some work clothes, a poncho with a yellow lining, a firearm, a hat of rough straw; and whenever he runs away he usually claims to be free and changes his name. Whoever captures him and takes him to his master will receive 100\$000 reward, in addition to expenses, which will be paid separately.

(Conrad 1984: 362–363)

Even a brief look at runaway slave advertisements evidences a unique way of writing, with latent ‘assumptions, attitudes’ and ‘antipathies’ (Novick 1988: 218). Exhibiting a ‘well-made body’, with a ‘face rather long’, ‘round head’, ‘good teeth’, and a ‘nose medium large’, any hint of humanity this slave could have is obliterated between a constellation of anatomically disembodied features. Falsely claiming his creole heritage, any notion of intelligence is dissolved thanks to the due diligence (and strategic parentheses) of the advertiser, who reasonably assures us the slave originates from the Benguella nation. ‘Accustomed to getting drunk’, he fails even to display primitive movements of consciousness: moved by the alcohol, his ‘violent’ condition seems to be activated purely by exterior forces. Aside from the fact that he is a ‘master’ blacksmith, it appears that the slave is little more than a mindless brute who, ‘whenever he runs away’, is simply captured and returned like livestock.

The runaway emerges from this literature [...] as an animal driven by biological constraints, at best as a pathological case.

(Trouillot 1995: 83)

Although a postcolonial example, this advertisement indicates shared ways of writing that produced documentary knowledge of enslaved Africans in 18th and early 19th century Brazil. The runaway was a disturbed, neurotic, muddled, unstable juvenile. Incapable of higher cognitive functions, the runaway constituted a set of fixed actions and reactions that could be curtailed, contracted, and above all, controlled. Cases of resistance towards white owners were separated from wider sets of relations, each episode amounting to little more than independent pa-

thology: ‘Slave A ran away because he was particularly mistreated by his master. Slave B was missing because he was not properly fed. Slave X killed herself in a fatal tantrum’ (Trouillot 1995: 83).

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Portuguese colonists could not ignore these acts of defiance. In addressing them, and to make sense of them, colonists committed enslaved Africans to particular arrangements of powerful ontological, epistemological, ideological and practical analytical categories. These categories produced the ‘enslaved Africans’ that we receive today in literature from colonial Brazil. Not to implicate theoretical ‘discourses’ (e.g. Foucault 1980, 2001), this observation is only to emphasise the ways in which daily life is permeated by shared exercises of conceptual and practical discrimination, identification and recognisability.

There is a language that frames the encounter, and embedded in that language a set of norms concerning what will and will not constitute recognizability.

(Butler 2005: 23–24)

This manuscript is a brief exploration of ‘language that frames the encounter’ between Portuguese colonists and slaves as evident in historical documents. My interest in this language is to explore history not as a ‘single idea, but rather [as] a sprawling collection of assumptions, attitudes, aspirations, and antipathies’ (Novick 1988: 218). The selections below textualise various ‘*normative horizons*’ around these ‘assumptions, attitudes’ and ‘aspirations’, where each author ‘sees and listens and knows and recognizes’ enslaved Africans differently through specific language that always ‘frames the encounter’ (Butler 2005: 22).

ACCESSING KNOWLEDGE

I have borrowed Butler’s notion of ‘normative horizons’ as a historiographic heuristic in attempts to access certain kinds of historical knowledge – in this case, slave autonomy. Following Hayden White, I argue that there is ‘an irreducible ideological component in every historical account of reality’ (1973b: 21). Historical knowledge is never a purely scientific object because ‘the historical record is both too full and too sparse’ to merit objective, holistic analysis (White 1973a: 281).

This means that historians always subjectively ‘interpret’ their materials. They ‘fill in gaps’ in order to ‘construct a moving pattern of images’ that present a cohesive, sensible story to readers (White 1973a: 281). Just as any form of ideology is determined by a ‘specific idea of history’, so too any form of history is determined by ‘ideological implications’ of the present (White 1973b: 24). ‘History’,

therefore, is never *simply* history. It is always ‘history-for’: it is ‘history written in the interest of some infrascientific aim or vision’ (White 1973a: 288). And my aim in the historical analysis below is straightforward: to access Brazilian slave autonomy as a kind of historical knowledge.

Making use of ‘normative horizons’, I situate primary source texts within the everyday ‘encounters’ of others in 18th century Brazilian social life. The documents I present condense particular ‘conditions of address’ between authors and subjects into ‘normative horizons’ dependent on lived encounters between one person and another (Butler 2005: 24). In other words, the ‘normative horizon’ of each primary source is based on social encounters where other subjects are ‘fundamentally exposed, visible, seen, existing in a bodily way and of necessity in a domain of appearance’ (Butler 2005: 25). Exposed to public space, social encounters between subjects are mediated through the ‘operation of norms’ (Butler 2005: 25) or, as I have explored above, each author’s own ‘assumptions, attitudes’ and ‘aspirations’ (Novick 1988: 218). And by highlighting and exploiting these sets of norms, or sets of assumptions, through primary sources, I am interested in situating each particular text into wider constellations of social life to gain access to historical knowledge of slave autonomy.

THESIS

Framing these encounters within a wider 18th century social context allows me to ‘fill in the gaps’ of the historical record, thus enabling me to ‘construct a moving pattern of images’ that brings out the contours and shapes of slave autonomy.

Through dismantling descriptive mannerisms, deconstructing particular vocabularies, breaking down vocal registers and – most importantly – highlighting omissions, erasures and trivialisations, these sources will be taken apart to draw out lived experiences of slave autonomy in colonial Brazil. To analyse these texts I begin with James Clifford and how ‘literary processes – metaphor, figuration, narrative – affect the ways cultural phenomena are registered’ (1986: 4). Exploring literary processes in accounts of (1) black Christian brotherhoods, (2) styles of dress, (3) the famous *Quilombo* of Palmares, and (4) a slave peace treaty, this manuscript foregrounds enslaved Africans’ autonomy in texts that have since cast them into a history of silence.

I want to sidestep winding philosophical disputes over ‘agency’, the ‘rational individual’ and ‘free will’. Exploring autonomy through historical documents, my concern is not with ‘uncovering’ or ‘revealing’ aspects of enslaved Africans, but with writing for autonomy as a kind of uncoerced self-making.

CONTEXT

18th century colonial Brazil was composed of diverse peoples, ethnicities, religions, colonial directives, political projects, regional laws, formalised modes of oppression and improvised moments of freedom. To begin to understand these intricacies, one must be well acquainted with direct testimony of those who lived in the time period. Robert E. Conrad (1984) offers an insightful collection of primary sources that provide excellent insight into colonial Brazil. Including travel stories, sermons, newspaper advertisements, personal letters, political disputes, legal debates and more, Conrad’s selection of documents is comprehensive in introducing the complexity of Brazilian social life. Below I explore four sources from his contribution, chosen over a variety of places, times and from a variety of authors in order to replicate Conrad’s complexity on a smaller, less ambitious scale.

I. WORSHIP: REWRITING TERMS OF OPPRESSION

The Black Brotherhood of Our Lady of the Rosary in Recife [1757]

The black people [...] have proved themselves so devoted to the service of the Mother of God, Our Lady of the Rosary, that they themselves, although poor, resolved to establish a beautiful church, in which they alone are the founders and administrators.

(Conrad 1984: 179)

Immediately, friar Domingos forefronts how the ‘black people’ ‘have proved themselves’. A sense of accomplishment is imaged here in a way that humanises the slaves by recognising their conscious, deliberate efforts. Distributed along contours of anonymity, an element of self-making is no doubt foregrounded by the author, though not narrated in a materialised, individualistic sense.

Poor in earthly goods, the slaves are rich in their heavenly attainment: ‘a beautiful church’. This structure differs from others that slaves built (houses, animal sheds, barns, fortifications) insofar as it is a structure that is truly their own. This is an instance of self-making where the physical result of their labour does not belong to another – it is *theirs*: ‘they alone are the founders and administrators’.

It is certainly highly inspiring and touching to witness the fervor, zeal, and expense with which they serve Our Lady. [...] On Saturdays at five o’clock in the afternoon they chant a recital, and at seven at night again the third part of the rosary. [...] At three o’clock in the afternoon they chant another rosary and at night at the door of the church yet another. On the second Sunday of October they worship Our Lady with great solemnity, and to increase the fervor of their devotion, they engage in dances and other licit

entertainments with which they devoutly gladden the hearts of the population.

(Conrad 1984: 179)

Indexing them between Catholic categories ('fervor', 'zeal', 'inspiring', 'worship'), the friar animates the slaves through terms of the religion they perform. Catholicism may be a religion of their choosing, but for some scholars the institutional terms and articulations that the slaves appropriate are the systemic mechanisms of their own oppression (see Trouillot 1995: 76). However, I would argue that slave autonomy is unique here as it is an instance of *rewriting these terms of oppression*. Through organising and scheduling their time (down to the hour!), singing and chanting of their own accord and dancing and entertaining themselves otherwise, the slaves transformed religious practices to fit their own abilities, skills, enjoyments and interests.

In an interesting aside by the author, one might wonder how the 'dances and other licit entertainments' relate to conventional Catholic forms of worship. Making sense of the dances as merely a *means* of increasing 'the fervor of their devotion' to an *ends* of worshipping 'Our Lady' and to an *ends* of 'devoutly' gladdening 'the hearts of the population', the friar's treatment of the dances and entertainments as an *intermediary technique* to these ends in particular is, at second sight, quite odd. By rationalising the dances through specifically religious ends (that he can relate to), the friar submits what may be foreign, indigenous celebration to a strictly Catholic system of meaning.

This points to a hybridisation of Catholicism that the friar either could not conceive (he receives it as devotion) or that he wished to hide in his account (for one reason or another), by framing it within a purely orthodox Catholic understanding. It is in this sense that enslaved Africans drew out the ritual conservatism of Catholicism into their own indigenous African worldviews and rituals, absorbing the entire articulation of religious practice as an extension of their own autonomy.

II. FASHION: EVERYDAY RESISTANCE

The Banning of Lascivious Dress [1709]

Luis Cesar de Menezes, Friend. I the King greet you cordially. Having seen the petition which the officials of the Chamber of that city sent me concerning the licentiousness with which the slave men and women are accustomed to live and dress in my Overseas Conquests, going about at night and inciting the men with their lascivious apparel, [...] I order that you not allow the slave women to make use in any way of silks or woven cloth or of gold in order that they may thus have occasion to incite sin with the expensive adornments that they dress themselves

with [...]

(Conrad 1984: 247)

This passage is descriptively understated if only because of its political gravity, in that the city Chamber decided to involve the King himself in these matters, instead of resolving them locally. To petition the King over matters of the 'licentiousness' with which slaves 'live and dress' indicates that these material matters were not only of frequent occurrence, but that they were unrelentingly persistent.

In writing out the slaves, motivated entirely around the 'occasion to incite sin', the King dehumanises them as bodies coated with 'expensive adornments'. These bodies are the problem: mindless, automatic and carnal, the King's ordinance strips their external material existence to curtail their internal animal instincts.

Reading the King's rhetoric, one can identify a kind of *everyday resistance* of tangible self-making through the appropriation of specific materials (fabrics, cloths, jewels). That this activity is of such concern to include the King (all the way in Lisbon) is only a testament to the success of this resistance.

A Prohibition of Certain Types of Clothing and Ornaments for Slaves and Free Blacks and Mulattoes [1749]

Having been informed of the great inconveniences which result in my conquests from the freedom of the blacks [...] I prohibit the above, regardless of sex, and even if they have been liberated [...] the use not only of all kinds of silk, but also of cloth and fine wool, of fine Dutch linen, and such fine cloth either of linen or cotton; and [...] ornaments of jewellery, gold or silver, however minimal.

(Conrad 1984: 248)

The 'great inconveniences' of slaves wearing 'silk', 'cloth', 'fine wool', 'fine Dutch linen' and 'other fine cloth either of linen or cotton' and 'ornaments of jewellery, gold or silver', yet again concerns Lisbon. Forty years between them, these two mandates in tandem illustrate the pervasiveness of these material forms of everyday resistance for slaves.

The political and social concern of these items of clothing, on the one hand, is an instrument of systematic classification and material oppression: resigning and authorising restrictions on certain types of clothing for a particular socio-ethnic group. On the other hand, by reading into documents authorising this oppression, we can dismantle their descriptions to pinpoint the trivialisation of what must have had to be a commonplace (and threatening) act of everyday self-making for enslaved Africans.

III. PALMARES: A COUNTERINSURGENCY

A Report of the Facts of the War with the Black Quilombolas of Palmares [~1690]

The inhabitants of Algoas, Porto Calvo, and Penedo were constantly under attack, [...] by the blacks of Palmares. The blacks killed their cattle and carried away their slaves to enlarge their quilombos [...] forcing the inhabitants and natives of those towns to engage in fighting at a distance of forty leagues or more, at great cost to their plantations and risk to their own lives, without which the blacks would have become masters of the captaincy because of their huge and ever-increasing numbers.

(Conrad 1984: 370)

Contrary to every above account of slaves – the neurosis of the runaway, the devotion of the worshippers and the sin of the lascivious dressers – this account writes blacks as a threat, an army and a kingdom. ‘Killing their cattle’ and carrying ‘away their slaves’ to strengthen their own forces, the blacks are acknowledged as a ‘constant’ ‘risk to their own lives’, where because of ‘ever-increasing numbers’, they could have ‘become masters of the captaincy’.

After sending ‘twenty-five probing expeditions’ into Palmares to begin a military excursion against the blacks, every single group suffered ‘great losses’ and failed ‘to uncover the secrets of those brave people’ (Conrad 1984: 369). Looking to Sucupira, the war command and training centre for the blacks, the author describes it as ‘fortified, but with stone and wood. Nearly a league in length, it contained within its boundaries three lofty mountains and a river’ (Conrad 1984: 369). Encapsulating fortresses, armies, rivers and mountains, this show of autonomy is a full-on *counterinsurgency* against colonial power.

The author doesn’t trivialise the peril of this situation (although it would indeed be easier to dramatise retrospectively, since a status quo had been re-established). In exploring strategic movements, moments of conflict, geography of enemy territory and recounting the speeches of generals, the author writes about the (enslaved?) Africans like a war historian might recount the battles between European nations. The slaves are granted, for the first time yet, full autonomy over their actions, mobilised through battle tactics and organisational measures.

[the peace terms] were the following: that they agree to make peace with the king of Palmares, acknowledging his obedience; that they [the blacks] be granted the site where they would choose to settle, a place suitable for their dwellings and their farms; [...] that they were to return all the runaways who had come from our populated places [...] that their king would con-

tinue as commander of all his people.

(Conrad 1984: 376)

Drawing up a peace agreement with the blacks, the Portuguese extend European civility. By permitting them an autonomous region, with an autonomous people and a (mostly) autonomous king, the Palmares counterinsurgency is an exceptional case demonstrating enslaved African resistance to Portuguese rule: one of the most vivid images of slave self-making in colonial Brazil.

Relaying this instance to the runaway slave advertisements in the introduction, we can trace interesting dissimilarities. Whereas the runaway slaves were always neurotic, pathological individual cases of incapable and irritated creatures disobeying their masters, we see in this account the power of an amalgamation of runaways in *quilombos*. Moving from one position to the other – the isolated juvenile to the disciplined warrior-kingdom – we encounter a critical textual slippage. This descriptive dissimilarity between different vocal registers spotlights the ‘normative horizon’ of different authors to pinpoint conjoined contours of slave agency: people motivated by freedom, aspiring for a more hopeful future, taking up independent action to achieve collective success. This authorial disarming of slave autonomy is more than evident: clouding the actual motions of self-making that characterised everyday life and thoughts of enslaved Africans.

IV. THE PROPOSAL: CONTRACTING FREEDOM

The Royal Magistrate’s Letter [1806]

Illustrious and most Excellent Sir: [...]

The above-mentioned Manoel da Silva Ferreira being master and owner of the aforesaid engenho with three hundred slaves, including some of the Mina nation, discovered the majority of them in rebellion refusing to recognize their subordination to their master. [...] taking control of part of the engenho’s equipment, they fled to the forest refusing not only to give their service or to obey their master, but even placing him in fear that they would cruelly take his life.

(Conrad 1984: 399)

Manoel de Silva Ferreira’s slaves refuse ‘to recognize their’ (inevitable) ‘subordination’ as if subjected by God himself. The author paints slave resistance neither as a movement of rational beings nor as an autonomous grasp for freedom. Instead, it is their cognitive inability to recognize their ‘subordination’; it is their susceptibility to follow the ‘principal leader of this disorder’, the slave George Luis, as a pack of wild dogs follows the alpha wolf (Conrad 1984: 399). But ‘refusing to recognize their subordination’ is not a small, short-term concern: the sugar plantation they rebelled against has ‘remained inactive for two years with [...] notable damage’ (Conrad 1984: 399). The author paints the motivations of the slaves as

if they were disobedient children, misunderstanding the precepts they are expected to follow, and causing violent disruption in their irritable, juvenile state.

Yet, one might be amazed to hear that these juveniles managed to send ‘emissaries to their Master with a proposal’ of a treaty for peace (Conrad 1984: 399).

*Treaty Proposed to Manoel da Silva
Ferreira by His Slaves During the
Time that They Remained in Revolt [1806]*

My Lord, we want peace and we do not want war; if My Lord also wants our peace it must be in this manner, if he wishes to agree to that which we want.

In each week you must give us the days of Friday and Saturday to work for ourselves not subtracting any of these because they are Saint’s days.

To enable us to live you must give us casting nets and canoes.

[...]

You are not to oblige us to fish in the tidal pools nor go gather shellfish, and when you wish to gather shellfish send your Mina blacks.

[...]

The present overseers we do not want, choose others with our approval.

[...]

We shall be able to play, relax, and sing any time we wish without your hindrance nor will permission be needed.

(Conrad 1984: 400)

This extraordinary document is one of very few from colonial Brazil written by enslaved Africans themselves, and as such, it is a key text from which we can textually elucidate dimensions of slave autonomy. The elegance, sophistication and intellect of this document falsifies the vindictive and condescending remarks of the magistrate in his letter. The opening demand – ‘[peace] must be in this manner’ – documents the slaves in a cerebral, creative and politically conscious moment. They exploit their leverage, after two years of disrupting the plantation’s operations, and through adopting methods of their oppressors (emissaries, philosophical implications of a peace treaty, well-composed legal text) the enslaved Africans forge a process of *contracting freedom*.

Demanding autonomy over time, materials, other slaves, their work environment, their white managers and over their own bodily movements, this document presents the slaves in a way that no other historical document can. The rambling list of demands calls to mind a group of shouting, debating, discussing slaves, all eager to get their demand in, or their requirement written. Even though this was likely the brainchild of one slave in particular, George Luis, the entire group was coordinated in the protest and treaty (the emissaries, those who took control of plantation equipment, those who caused ‘notable dam-

age’). These articulations condense into this document a moment of liberal negotiation: an arrangement whereby hopes, futures, interests, desires, preferences and aversions of slaves are foregrounded and reworked through the very political principles their oppressors abide by.

FINDING FUTURES IN THE PAST

Accessing historical knowledge through these texts leaves us with a kaleidoscopic picture of 18th century slave autonomy. Images of slaves leading worship with dance and entertainment, dressing with silk and jewellery against the law, fighting off colonial oppressors in *quilombos* and composing demands for a peace treaty illustrate the diverse contexts of self-making for enslaved Africans in colonial Brazil. As a ‘moving pattern of images’, (White 1973a: 281) these examples present slave autonomy as historical knowledge dispersed across ‘a sprawling collection of assumptions, attitudes, and antipathies’ (Novick 1988: 218).

Borrowing Butler’s notion of ‘normative horizons’, the ‘conditions of address’ between subjects in 18th century Brazilian social life do help us access slave autonomy as a kind of historical knowledge, but the autonomous acts of slaves further allude to their desires and ambitions. While we can access historical knowledge to dissect issues of representation, authorial perspective, oppressive vocabularies and descriptive mannerisms, the rewarding aspect of this process is neither the scholastic pleasure of analytical deconstruction, nor the political satisfaction of sketching forms of resistance. The most rewarding anthropological moment is when we can begin to imagine how, like us, enslaved Africans lived through their own hopes, dreams and aspirations. When we can begin to imagine how they lived for their futures in the past, much like we live for ours in the present. ♦

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