

## READING, WRITING AND COUNTING AMONG ENSLAVED WOMEN: a history to be written

Ler, escrever e contar entre mulheres escravizadas: uma história a ser escrita  
Leer, escribir y contar entre mujeres esclavizadas: una historia por escribir

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**Abstract:** The main purpose of this article is to identify whether enslaved women knew how to read and to write, as well as to analyze how they learned those skills. First, we discuss the existence of schools for enslaved people. Then, we reveal some aspects involved in the education of enslaved women, especially concerning homemaking skills. Finally, we present data that shows that enslaved women learned how to read and to write in private classes, schools for women, and homes - whether the home of their owners or the homes of white women who were poor or in better economic conditions or of black and mixed-ethnicity women who were free or enfranchised. All data for this research was gathered in newspapers available in the Digital Newspaper Archives maintained by the National Library of Brazil.

**Keywords:** reading; writing; slavery; education.

**Resumo:** O objetivo principal deste artigo é identificar o domínio da leitura e da escrita entre mulheres escravizadas e analisar as circunstâncias desse aprendizado. Discute-se, primeiro, se havia ou não escolas para pessoas escravizadas; em seguida, expõem-se aspectos da formação das escravizadas, especialmente no que tange às habilidades domésticas; por fim, apresentam-se dados que revelam que o espaço da casa, seja dos senhores, seja de mulheres brancas, pobres ou em melhores condições sociais, pretas e pardas, forras ou livres, e algumas aulas e colégios privados femininos foram os lugares possíveis do aprendizado da leitura e da escrita para as escravizadas. Todos os dados da pesquisa foram coletados em jornais disponíveis na Hemeroteca Virtual da Biblioteca Nacional.

**Palavras-chave:** leitura; escrita; escravidão; instrução.

**Resumen:** El principal objetivo de este artículo es identificar el dominio de la lectura y de la escritura entre mujeres esclavizadas y analizar las circunstancias de este aprendizaje. En primer lugar, se discute si había o no escuelas para personas esclavizadas; luego, son expuestos aspectos de la formación de las esclavizadas, especialmente en lo que dice respecto a las habilidades domésticas; por fin, se presentan datos que revelan que el espacio de la casa, sea la de los señores, sea la de mujeres blancas, pobres o en mejores condiciones sociales, negras y pardas, libertas o libres, y algunas clases y colegios privados femeninos fueron los lugares posibles del aprendizaje de la lectura y de la escritura para estas esclavizadas. Todos los datos de la pesquisa fueron recogidos en periódicos disponibles en la Hemeroteca Virtual de la Biblioteca Nacional.

**Palabras clave:** lectura; escritura; esclavitud; instrucción.

## INTRODUCTION

This paper focuses on how enslaved women learned and mastered reading and writing. There are many motivations for this study. Were it not enough to discuss women's education in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, we focus on Black women, who are less often the subject of studies in the historiography of Education. Furthermore, this paper focuses not only on Black women from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which is, for itself, a pressing theme, but on those who were enslaved. This research, thus, brings together gender (women, many of whom not older than 16), ethnic and racial belonging (Black), and status (enslaved). Research on these topics is complex, urgent, and currently insufficient, which justifies the inquiry that resulted in this article.

This study analyzed a challenging topic, both for the history of Education and for the history of enslavement, by posing the following questions: Were there enslaved people who mastered reading and writing? Recent studies indicate that the answer to that question is “yes”<sup>1</sup>. Furthering our questions, we also wonder: Were there enslaved women, specifically, who knew how to read and write? There is also evidence of an affirmative answer. We seek, however, to look further into how such learning took place, understanding and clarifying its circumstances.

Somewhere else, we analyzed how enslaved people, both men and women, had access to reading and writing (Peres, 2020). Some of the conclusions from that study indicated how, where, and from whom enslaved men and women learned how to read and write. We found out that priests, women who provided homemaking services and education<sup>2</sup>, as well as “Ladies” coming from Europe were among those who taught reading and writing to enslaved people at their own homes or in private classes and schools.

Another conclusion from that study showed the relationship between teaching basic reading and writing and teaching homemaking chores and specialized trades. The latter refers most significantly to trades undertaken by men. For women, house slaves and enslaved women who were put to external work by their owners for profit transited in urban spaces more freely and were, therefore, more likely to learn how to read and write. Even though it was not a rule, data indicates the possibility that some

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Barbosa (2009, 2017), Barros (2016), Bastos (2016), Bergamini (2017), Fonseca (2002a, 2002b), Luz (2013), Morais (2007), Moysés (1994), Oliveira (2005), Peres (2020), Silva (2018, 2019), Viana e Gomes (2020), Wissenbach (2002).

<sup>2</sup> We apply the concepts of “education” or “learning processes”, that broadly refer to the education of enslaved women; “instruction”, that refers to teaching and learning basic knowledge, specifically reading, writing, and counting; and “schooling” or “school experiences”, that refer to institutionalized processes, even considering that schooling in the 19<sup>th</sup> century encompassed a peculiar set of practices and experiences, such as schools at homes or classes, mostly collective, in private, philanthropic, assistive or associative spaces.

enslaved women also developed those competencies in places far away from urban centers. As Bergamini (2017) argues, there were many “learning geographies”.

We adopt again some of those assumptions, now focusing on enslaved women. Therefore, this paper presents and analyzes data that shows how teaching was offered, revealing learning possibilities for enslaved women. We also present examples of some of them who mastered reading, writing, and counting. Sometimes that data is just an indication, following Ginzburg’s (2007, p. 157) argument that historical knowledge is indirect, indicative, and based on conjectures. Such argument is based on Ginzburg’s (2007, p. 149) proposal of an interpretative method focusing on residue, on marginal data, which is deemed revealing.

This study also adopts a perspective that recognizes the need to analyze internal dynamics of a society based on slavery, its contradictions, ambiguities, complexities, relationships, and everyday activities, not only its political and economic dimensions<sup>5</sup>. It thus relates to historiography that seeks to broaden the understanding of the actions of enslaved Black people, granting a meaning of resistance to acts that did not have that meaning until now (Fonseca, 2002a, p. 15).

Data presented here was found in newspapers published in different Brazilian territories, available at the digital magazine and newspaper archive of the Brazilian National Library.

This paper is structured in three sections: The first one briefly discusses whether there were schools for enslaved people. In this section, the main argument is that the few schooling experiences for enslaved people were aimed at men. Therefore, research on women’s instruction and education proves fundamental and imperative in the historiography of Brazilian education. In the second section, we present examples of education practices aimed specifically at enslaved girls and conducted by women – white, mixed-ethnicity, and Black; free or enfranchised. Finally, in the third section, we analyze data referring to learning and mastering reading, writing, and counting among enslaved girls and adult women. At the end, we present some conclusions.

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<sup>5</sup> To know more about the trends in the study of enslavement in Brazil, see, for example, Chalhoub e Silva (2010). Those authors identify a period in Brazilian historiography, especially until the 1980s, as the “paradigm of absence”, since enslaved people are mostly absent from History, especially from the history of their own freedom (“slave-as-an-object theory”). From the 1980s on, they characterize research as a “paradigm of agency”, with studies recognizing that the actions of enslaved people resulted from negotiations, choices, and decisions taken in face of institutions and established normative powers (Chalhoub & Silva, 2010).

## WERE THERE SCHOOLS FOR ENSLAVED PEOPLE IN BRAZIL?

In 1877, in an ordinary session that took place from 3 to 6 February, the Rio de Janeiro Territory House of Representatives debated an administrative reform introduced by Representative Pinto Lima the year before, on 1 August 1876. It consisted of a proposal to reorganize all sectors of the administration of the Territory (Annaes..., 1877).

During this long and extenuating session, those who advocated for the reform, from the Conservative Party, and Representatives from the opposition, the Liberal Party, traded accusations and offenses, fiercely debated, and engaged in tenacious clashes. The opposition, which was vehemently against the proposed reform, criticized many of its aspects. One of those aspects was private schooling. According to the opposition, it represented an attack on freedom of teaching, which long had been the law in the Territory, as Representative Alberto Brandão argued (Annaes..., 1877, p. 597).

One of the points the opposition criticized the most was that the reform being discussed allowed for the government to oversee and inspect private teaching, which, it argued, went against the principle of freedom in private education. During the intense arguments, Representative Joaquim Breves Filho, from the Liberal Party, took the floor. He was an influential politician with a strong electoral base from the region where he was born, the town of São João Marcos, in Rio de Janeiro<sup>4</sup>.

Joaquim Breves Filho had a Law Degree from the São Paulo Law School and advocated for progressive ideas within the Liberal Party.<sup>5</sup> We highlight here a small, but significant part of his intense speech at the debate on the administrative reform during the 1877 ordinary session of the House of Representatives, in which he stated:

[...] I would like to mention a fact, Your Excellencies, to show the terrible results from the reform proposed by Representative Pinto Lima.

For many years, my father has had in his farm a school that teaches all offspring to read, write, and count, so the last generation of his slaves knows how to read and to write. What I ask is: is this act worth of praise or not?

[...] For in his school he has forty children and is not even close to seeing his initiative being lauded by the government [...]

<sup>4</sup> The son of the so-called “king of coffee,” a socially and politically influential man, regarded as the largest land and slave-owner in Rio the Janeiro, Commander Joaquim José de Sousa Breves.

<sup>5</sup> See Vasconcelos (n.d.).

[...] on the contrary, today, it is subject to many fines due to the reform introduced by Representative Pinto Lima, so I can assure this House that he will close the school as not to be subject in any way to having to request a license to keep a teacher that grants him the sole advantage of benefiting others (Annaes..., 1877, p. 608).

It is hard to determine whether the “benefit” of a school for “offspring” was really effective. We cannot confirm if the school existed in this form, if it actually had forty attending students, if it served the enslaved people in the farm or only free and enfranchised people as well as the children of enslaved women who were considered free at birth by law. We also cannot affirm if there was any system in place other than schooling to educate enslaved people, if the last generation of slaves in the farm really knew how to read and write, or if it was all a rhetorical argument employed by the Representative. For the purposes of this study, however, we cannot discard this speech, especially as it points to the possibility of schools for enslaved people actually existing, even outside urban areas.

There are gaps and uncertainties about the existence of that school, but there is no doubt there was a Night School for enslaved people in Belém do Pará. It was created in 1871 by Father Felix Vicente de Leão<sup>6</sup>, who kept records of the enrollment and performance of enslaved students who attended the school of which he was a principal: Collegio Santa Maria de Belem.

In October 1871, when classes started, five students were enrolled (*O Liberal do Pará*, 1871). One year later, there were twenty students, as shown in Image 1 (next page), that details names, ages, absences, and ownership of enslaved students enrolled by 22 November 1871.

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<sup>6</sup> According to Bezerra Neto (2009, p. 238), he was a politician with ties to the Liberal Party.

**Mapa da frequencia da escola nocturna para os escravos desde o dia 23 de Outubro, em que foi installada, até hoje 22 de Novembro.**

N. <sup>os</sup>	NOMES.	IDADE	FALTAS	NOMES DOS PROPRIETARIOS.
1	Alfredo . . . . .	17 annos	10	Do exm sr. viisconde de Arary.
2	Olinto . . . . .	10 »	13	» » « »
3	Juvenio . . . . .	20 »	0	» » « »
4	Jerorimo . . . . .	25 »		Do padre Felix Vicente de Leão.
5	Corrado . . . . .	14 »		» » « »
6	Cazimiro . . . . .	16 »		Do illm. sr. Francisco de P. Barreto.
7	Satyro . . . . .	17 »	2	» » « »
8	Olegario . . . . .	12 »	4	Do exm. sr. visconde de Arary.
9	Theodoro . . . . .	32 »	1	Do illm. sr. José dos P. Miranda.
10	Luiz . . . . .	23 »	10	Do illm. sr. Raymundo J. de Miranda.
11	José M. dos P..	19 »	3	Do tenente coronel Vicente B. de M.
21	Agapito M. . . . .	18 »		Da exm. <sup>a</sup> sr. <sup>a</sup> d. Antonia J. de M.
13	Henrique . . . . .	19 »		Do exm. sr. José C. da G. e Abreu.
14	Domingos . . . . .	12 »	1	Do exm. sr. visconde de Arary.
15	Cypriano . . . . .	19 »		Do illm. sr. Constantino Motta.
16	Januario F. . . . .	13 »		Do exm. sr. visconde de Arary.
17	Justino A. da S.	25 »	1	Da exm. <sup>a</sup> sr. <sup>a</sup> d. Viuva Bahia.
18	José P. da Silva	21 »	1	» » « »
19	José M. do N. . .	11 »	1	Da exm. <sup>a</sup> sr. <sup>a</sup> d. Maria L.M. Cunha.
20	Manoel Joaquim.	8 »		» » « »

PADRE FELIX V. DE LEÃO

Image 1 – Record of absences from the Night School for enslaved people.  
Source: *O Liberal do Pará* (1871, p. 1).

We note all students enrolled at the Night School for enslaved people were men of different ages, ranging from the youngest, Manoel Joaquim, who was eight years old, to the oldest, Theodoro, who was thirty-two. Furthermore, we can identify their owners, including Father Felix Vicente de Leão himself, who enrolled two of his slaves, Jeronimo and Conrado, twenty-five and fourteen years old, respectively.

In December 1872, the same newspaper, *O Liberal do Pará*, published a long story about the school, stating, for example, that its creators were called “maniacs”, “utopian”, “communists”, and “agitators”. The story also highlighted the successful and festive final exams for three classes. In the first class, students learned and should master the first reading book by Mr. Abílio [César Borges] and the writing of the alphabet (p. 1). In the second class, the second book by the same author, as well as the multiplication table and cursive writing (p. 1). Finally, in the third class, they should read correctly, draft essays, and do the four mathematical operations (p. 1). As we can see, the school taught basic knowledge: students learned to read and to write the letters in first class, then moved on to the second and third classes to improve their reading, free writing, and mathematics.



The news story mentions that fifty-five enslaved people were enrolled at the school in 1872, but only thirty-two took the exams. When the story details those who took exams per class, however, that number changes to thirty-four: Thirteen from the first class; twelve from the second; and nine from the third. Regardless of the number, the important thing here is that it was significant, given the context and situation of those men.

Notices that enrollment was open, as well as notes about absences and/or final exams are found in that newspaper from the Territory of Pará until at least 1875. It is outside the scope of this study, however, to analyze in detail this important initiative of schooling for enslaved people by Father Felix Vicente de Leão. Our goal here is to show, first, that there was schooling offered to that group, even though these initiatives were localized, and their number was not significant; second, that those initiatives were aimed at enslaved men. Instruction for women from any social group was limited during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which was especially true for enslaved women. Contexts and means through which some of them could reach any level of instruction resulted from other spaces and experiences, generally more individualized, in a direct relationship with other women.

Despite what we have shown above on the schooling experiences for enslaved people – both the one mentioned in the speech by Representative Joaquim Breves Filho and the one from the Night School from Belém do Pará – we stress that Barros' (2016) argument that enslaved people were forbidden from attending school is still pertinent and must be taken into account in any study on this topic, even though it refers to legislation on public education:

Differently from some interpretations that historiography still adopts, we cannot affirm that Black people were forbidden from attending school in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Even the prohibition of slave attendance, included in most laws and regulations on education, must be put into a historical context. From the first law from Minas Gerais (1835) to the law from São Paulo (1887), there are different texts, types of prohibitions, gaps, and permissions referring to the possibilities for Black people in the Brazilian Empire (Barros, 2016, p. 603).

Statutes, therefore, were not homogeneous, monolithic, and universal. In light of that, it is pertinent to notice that instruction of enslaved people, when possible, was the result of struggles, disputes, negotiation, opposing interests, gaps, ambiguities, and contradictions in institutions, the state, and normative powers (Chalhoub & Silva, 2010) in a complex and tense relation with the slave-owning class and of actions and mediation by enslaved people themselves.

The answer to the question posed, “Were there schools for enslaved people?” is, therefore, affirmative, even though we cannot assume the false idea that these were prevailing experiences. Data shows, however, that institutions that instructed enslaved people were, in general, aimed at men, as we have highlighted. We can generally state that when it comes to schools or other institutions that instructed enslaved people (associations, philanthropic and literary institutions, etc.), women were excluded – excluded twofold, even.

We must also point out that in the relationship between reading and writing on one hand, and, on the other, specialized trades that required mathematical and written language knowledge, the trades that come up more often are those undertaken by men: shoemaker, tailor, carpenter, blacksmith, bricklayer, printer, typographer, etc. It is in that sense that this relationship highlights, even if indirectly, the mastering of reading, writing, and counting among enslaved men. We cannot ignore the gender issue that this debate clearly indicates. When establishing a relationship between the so-called basic knowledge – reading, writing, and counting – and professional instruction for enslaved people, one usually mentions male experiences. What about enslaved women? As we stated, that is the focus of this paper: to search clues and evidence of education and instruction processes (not necessarily in schools) and cases of women who mastered reading, writing, and counting. That is what we start to present now.

## WOMEN WHO TAUGHT WOMEN: “RUNNING THE HOUSE”

In Maranhão, in 1835, seven women were at the center of a situation that resulted in a relatively long note in the newspaper *Echo do Norte*. Joana, “[...] thin and of mixed-race”, about thirty years old, and her five daughters: one “[...] still a toddler, two months old, still to be baptized, and apparently of mixed-race [...]”; Marcelina, also “[...] of mixed-race [...]”, ten years old; Guilhermina, “[...] a little mixed-ethnicity girl, thin, with wild hair, and eight years of age [...]”; Raimunda, “[...] a little Black girl, thin and ugly”, seven years old; and the “[...] little mixed-race girl [...]” Maria, “[...] pretty and with a prominent navel [...]”, four years old, were all taken from the house of their alleged owner, Joaquim José Cintra, by another woman, a “[...] fat, light-skinned mixed-race woman [...]” called Quitéria Rufino Ribeiro, who was supposedly Joana’s former master (*Echos do Norte*, 1835, p. 222).

There is no way of telling what the actual relationship between Joana and Quitéria was. What we know is that historiography has shown that not only coffee, sugar, and cattle masters owned slaves<sup>7</sup>. The complex and varied situation of slavery in Brazil leads us to believe that Quitéria, a “fat, light-skinned mixed-race woman,” as described by the note, could have been born free or could have been enfranchised,

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Reis (1986); Matheus (2016).



and, in fact, have been the owner of Joana and, consequently, her five daughters. What we would like to stress, however, is the relationships and live experiences of women regarding slavery. The alleged stealing of Joana and her daughters leads us to look at the agency of women in a slave system. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, women were not only “passive” homemakers or “submissive” slaves who simply accepted their life status.

There were intense relationships – work, education, teaching, friendship, solidarity, ownership, and intrigue relationships as well, of course – in women’s routines. Those relationships existed among enslaved women, as well as between white women – from different social classes – Black women, mixed-ethnicity women – free or enfranchised – and enslaved women. This is a fundamental premise we must adopt in education and instructional processes, especially to establish possible relationships that explain how some enslaved women knew how to read and to write.

We can highlight one first example of the complex relationships among women and the abilities taught by “Ladies” to girls *and* to enslaved girls (always mentioned separately in advertisements, showing the different social status between them):

A widowed Lady seeks an arrangement outside of court. She is qualified to take care of any house or farm, is an excellent seamstress and teaches young ladies or slaves to sew on the machine. She is also qualified to run a large hotel. This Lady owns two slaves who know how to wash, cook, and to starch. She is willing to negotiate their services, accompanied or not. Those interested may leave a letter at this office for M.G., and they will be found (Jornal do Commercio, 1874, p. 6).

We can see that the advertisement pertained to a widow who was looking for work – and thus, did not own a lot of assets – willing to do it at a house, farm, or hotel. Furthermore, she taught “young ladies” and “slaves” to sew on the machine.

Women offering to work at family homes was a common occurrence. What stands out about this case, however, is that the “widowed Lady” owned two enslaved women and was willing to negotiate them or take them with her, as the advertisement mentions.

When there were no women at home – when men became widowers or when they were single, for example – requesting the work of white or mixed-ethnicity women, were they free or enfranchised, was also common. This work always included teaching “young Black girls,” which is a significantly interesting aspect for our argument. In that sense, we present two advertisements:

A white or mixed-race woman is needed to take care of the house of a single man. She needs to know how to sew, because her main job will be to teach two young Black girls. Those interested may visit 86 Rua dos Ourives (Diário do Rio de Janeiro, 1830b, p. 34).

An enfranchised mixed-race woman is needed to run the family of a decent house. She needs to know how to starch and cook perfectly so she may teach the slaves in the house. Whomever matches this description may visit 128 Rua do Lavrario or 41 Rua do Ouvidor (Diário Mercantil..., 1831, p. 3).

Running the house while men ran the nation was a female prerogative. This “noble mission” involved foreign women coming from various places, especially Europe, who needed to survive in Brazil: white women, poor, but also in better economic conditions; as well as Black and mixed-ethnicity women, free or enfranchised, as we have indicated.

As in the previous examples, in which a single man looked for a white or mixed-ethnicity woman and a family from a “decent house” sought an enfranchised mixed-ethnicity woman, let us now examine other cases that indicate a dynamic reality in which women announced their services at their own homes or at family homes:

At 132 Rua do Snr. Dos Paços, there is a skilled mixed-race woman, married, who is available to teach slaves, Black and mixed-race, to sew, starch, embroider, hem, and make lace, as well as to wash silk socks and denim pants, all perfectly, which can be vouched for. All ages accepted (starting at eight years of age). Whomever may be interested in these services may seek the address above to negotiate (Diário do Rio de Janeiro, 1826, p. 2).

Whomever wishes to engage a white Lady capable of running a house or sewing, for any service, including serving as the nurse for the sick, teaching woman slaves how to sew, make dresses, and everything else related to that; who will only take a three-year-old son, who does not hinder the work in any way; and who wishes to find a family or a gentleman who may use her services; please come looking behind Church Saint Anna, at n. 17, or let your address be known (Diário do Rio de Janeiro, 1828, p. 36).

At 35 Rua da Conceição there are some foreign Ladies who are willing to teach slave women. They also sew in any form and starch clothes, everything perfectly and out of their own house. Whomever wishes to employ their services may visit the address above (Diário do Rio de Janeiro, 1830a, p. 3).

At 16 Rua Nova de S. Bento an enfranchised Black woman is available for work. She knows how to run a house, sews, washes, and can treat sick people. She commits to teach women slaves at the house how to starch, cook, and make pastries, and vouches for her behavior (Correio Mercantil, 1831, p. 188).

Nurses, cooks, house cleaners, pressers, seamstresses, teachers, ladies-in-waiting, etc. Those women played a lot of roles. They were widows, married women, “skilled” mixed-ethnicity women, enfranchised Black women, foreign women, all of which needing to survive and sharing the fact they taught “slaves, Black women, mixed-race women, little Black girls, little mixed-race girls.” Some of them, like in the second advertisement, also needed to take care of their own children, guaranteeing that they would not “hinder in any way.” Furthermore, running a house often included teaching enslaved women domestic services. It was a teaching process within an everyday context of the private spaces of homes. Other learning was also possible from such relationships and conviviality, including reading and writing, as we will see below.

There was “commerce” in selling or leasing services from enslaved, free, or enfranchised woman during the whole 19<sup>th</sup> century, but another form of “commerce” also abounded in a slave system: the selling and purchasing of “little Black girls”, of “women-girls” who were sold and bought.

Advertisements for sale, lease, or purchase of “little Black girls,” especially younger than sixteen years of age, are recurring in newspapers until the 1880s. Being a *mucama*, i.e., a young home slave who served as a companion to a Lady, was the destiny of most of them. For that purpose, beyond physical qualities that indicated whether those young, enslaved women could serve as “farm slaves” or “home slaves,” domestic skills – mastered, according to the newspapers, to different degrees of perfection – are the requirement that appear most often in advertisements. Many of them were “not familiar with the streets:” “Little Black girl for rent for 16\$. She washes clothes and cooks, is not familiar with the streets. At 11 Rua Espírito Santo” (Correio Mercantil, 1866, p. 4). This meant the “little Black girl” was not familiar with urban life, circulating only at the private space of a home. Advertisements often indicated the sale of girls “indoors,” or that their lease expressly determined that they were not to go out to the streets. With that, slave-owners emphasized, among other things, that these were not girls who wandered through the streets to complete services for their owners or who were put to external work by their owners for profit, with skills and knowledge in sales or other similar services.

As for the first aspect, the physical attributes, let us see two advertisements and whether enslaved girls could be “house slaves” or “farm slaves”: “Little Black girl for sale, fifteen to sixteen years of age, adequate for any service at home or in a farm, as she is not pretty. At 77 Rua de S. José, 1st floor” (O Despertador, 1840, p. 4). Another example:

## SALE

At 20 Largo da Sé, at the home of Major Andrade, by Rua da Valle, there is a little Black girl for sale. She is thirteen, beautiful in all senses, not only for her lithe figure, good manners, cheerful disposition, and good upbringing, but also for the rare tendency to be very skilled, which has been applied to sewing – only under the supervision of her Lady. She already sews very well and has no disease or vice. We hope she will catch the attention of whomever wants to have a good slave. We will disclose to that person the reason for sale (Diário do Rio de Janeiro, 1832, p. 1-2).

For men, physical strength was one of the main attributes mentioned in advertisements. For women – especially for girls – their beauty (or what was considered beautiful by men) is highlighted. An enslaved girl's worth as a product for sale, trade, or leasing was also determined for physical qualities her tormentors deemed “beautiful” or “ugly.” In the first case we mentioned, the enslaved girl could work in a farm because “she is not pretty.” In the second one, for having so many skills, for always being “under the supervision of her Lady” to learn sewing, and for having a “good upbringing,” the enslaved girl had the “tendency to be very skilled.” To what other learning and knowledge the thirteen-year-old “little Black girl” who lived at Major Andrade's house in Rio de Janeiro may have had access? In that particular case, there is no way of knowing.

When we consider all advertisements, however, we can state that enslaved girls and adult women mastered many different knowledges and had many skills that were frequently highlighted in advertisements: they knew how to sew, embroider, starch, press, dye, make flowers, hats, lace, pleats and stockings, cook, refine sugar, make pastries, set tables, arrange tea trays, “groom a Lady”, care for and entertain children, care for sick people, etc. Beyond those, which were necessary tasks and knowledges for servicing a house, we must also consider what was not mentioned, not authorized, and not recognized (at least by the sources in which we have researched), i.e. knowledge from those women's ancestry: they knew how to consecrate, make medicine, heal, pray, sing, dance, care for their children and their families; they mastered knowledge about nature – fauna, flora, weather, etc<sup>8</sup>. For children whose destiny was to be a *mucama*, being at a private space in a house might have meant an opportunity for learning not only domestic skills, but also reading and writing, among other abilities.

While researching data that might indicate instructional and educational processes for enslaved women, we found some notes in which they were advertised

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<sup>8</sup> Literature has repeatedly shown that. See, for example, *Um defeito de cor* [A Defect of Color], by Ana Maria Gonçalves (2017), in Brazilian literature, and *Eu, Tituba. Bruxa negra do Salem* [I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem], by Maryse Condé (2019), in international literature.

for sale or leasing and that mention mastering of a foreign language by “little Black girls” or “little mixed-race girls.” Let us see two of those cases:

At the two-story house at 42 Rua da Quitanda, via the entrance at 13 Beco do Carmo, there is a presentable African-born little Black girl, fifteen years of age, who sews, starches, cooks the most ordinary dishes, washes, and can groom a Lady. She is familiar with all arrangements throughout the house and understands and speaks German. She is healthy, humble, and possesses no known vices (Diário do Rio de Janeiro, 1833, p. 67).

A beautiful twelve- to thirteen-year-old little Black girl is for sale. She speaks French and Portuguese very well, knows basic sewing, and understands home services. To see her, please visit 7 Ladeira Santa Tereza or 76 Rua do Ouvidor (Jornal do Commercio, 1840, p. 4).

How was it possible that “little Black girls” mastered not only Portuguese, but also another language<sup>9</sup>? There are many plausible hypotheses for that: they could have been taught by “their Lady”, even if a Brazilian Lady, as it was common for rich families to master a foreign language; they could have been enslaved by a foreign family or have worked at their home; they could have been prepared to travel abroad accompanying a certain family, etc.

In 1835, in Rio de Janeiro, at 15 Beco do Carmo, a “[...] beautiful and skilled *mocamba* [...]”, who was seventeen, with a one-year-old daughter, two “[...] African-born Black men [...]”, one who washed clothes and cooked, the other, a shoemaker, as well as “[...] an eleven-year-old little Black girl” were all for sale. At the end of the advertisement, the following appears: “At that house, the English and Portuguese languages are taught” (Jornal do Commercio, 1835, p. 4). The life of those women – the skilled *mucama* and the eleven-year-old girl – in a home where Portuguese and English were taught might indicate the circumstances in which they learned a foreign language.

In an 1846 edition of the newspaper Diário do Rio de Janeiro, the following advertisement is noteworthy:

We need to purchase and enfranchise a gorgeous little Black girl who is not older than five or six. If she is already enfranchised, we will pay for the required services. She is meant to go to a foreign country where there is no slavery. If anyone has someone like that to offer, please visit 95 Rua da Quitanda (p. 4).

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<sup>9</sup> Possibly, also, an ancestral language.

As we can notice, small children were requested for purchase or lease so they could be enfranchised and accompany families in trips abroad, to places where there was “no slavery.” Even if they were enfranchised, there is no way of knowing how those girls really lived. We could analyze many aspects of that reality, as this was not the only advertisement of its kind that we found during the research. What matters for now, though, is proposing hypotheses that explain how enslaved women and girls could master a foreign language. Those hypotheses may refer to spaces and times that explain, for example, how an “[...] African-born little Black girl, fifteen years of age [...]” mastered German and the case of the “[...] beautiful twelve- to thirteen-year-old little Black girl [who] speaks French and Portuguese very well [...]” from the advertisements above.

There were, therefore, education processes happening in the daily life of women, as we have indicated, in the relationship among enslaved women, as well as in their relationship with white women – from different social classes – Black women, and mixed-ethnicity women, especially those who were free or enfranchised. In those relationships, it was possible they learned how to read, write, and count, be it by need or by interest. We will now discuss that aspect.

## **DID OTHER WOMEN TEACH ENSLAVED WOMEN HOW TO READ AND TO WRITE?**

In 1827, the newspaper *Diário do Rio de Janeiro* announced the sale of a “[...] little mixed-race girl, fifteen to sixteen years of age”. Her attributes included knowing how to “[...] read and to write, sew, starch, wash clothes, as well as basic cooking” (p. 14). This is just one example in which sale, purchase or leasing advertisements or escape notifications expressly mention the attribute of knowing how to read and to write, even if we cannot establish from those advertisements and notifications the level of those skills: if they read and/or wrote only rudimentarily and their numeric knowledge was basic or if they fully mastered those competencies.

Other notifications, advertisements, and short news stories contribute to our purposes of reaffirming that there were enslaved women who knew how to read and write and had knowledge of numbers (operations, prices, change, counting, identifying digits, coins, and notes, etc.) and of looking for clues that indicate how they used those competencies and how they learned them. There is relevant evidence that allows us to determine spaces and subjects responsible for such learning, as well as uses of those competencies, as we will see below.

An advertisement from 1838 was published in *Diário do Rio de Janeiro* in the following terms: “A beautiful Black woman is for sale. She cooks, washes, and starches, is an exceptionally good saleswomen of general wares, and is familiar with all new standard tickets. At 47 Rua de S. José”.



Even if this source does not mention reading and writing, it provides relevant data. Being “an exceptionally good saleswoman” and being “familiar with all new standard tickets” indicate she possessed reading and writing competencies and knew her numbers (operations, digits, values, notes, coins, change, etc.). The “tickets” mentioned in the advertisement probably refer to lottery tickets.

According to Loner (2014, p. 200-201), lotteries were introduced “in the Colony by the Governor of the Captaincy of Minas Gerais, Luiz da Costa Menezes, with the purpose of funding the construction of the Vila Rica City Hall in 1784”. Still according to the researcher, “from that start and due to its success among the public, lotteries spread throughout the Territories, being regulated by Emperor D. Pedro II in 1844, in Decree 357” (Loner, 2014, p. 200-201)<sup>10</sup>. In the newspapers we researched, advertisements for the sale of lottery tickets at various locations were not uncommon. It is also plausible to consider that enslaved women put to external work by their owners for profit also sold those tickets, knowing that to perform that task, they had to have at least basic skills in reading, writing, numbers, values, money, change, etc.

We can mention another example here, of a “little Black saleswoman” who managed not to be swindled by a man named Manoel Antonio Pires, a situation that resulted in his arrest:

Manoel Antonio Pires wished to taste the pastries sold by a vivacious saleswoman and gave her as payment a small-amount Oriental coin, also requesting 500 réis as change. The little Black girl did not fall for it and requested the intervention of the patrol officer, whom Mr. Pires provoked, fought, and wrestled with. He made such a scene, there was no alternative but throwing him in jail. What a bitter pastry (Jornal da Tarde, 1878, p. 3).

News stories and advertisements for street commerce undertaken by enslaved women who were put to external work by their owners for profit indicate knowledge of reading, writing, and counting among them, as well as their characteristic acumen, as in the case of the “[...] little Black girl who did not fall [...]” for the attempt of payment with a foreign coin plus the request for change<sup>11</sup>.

As we mentioned above, it was possible for enslaved woman to learn how to read and to write in the space of a home, from other women. In 1845, the newspaper *Jornal do Commercio*, from Rio de Janeiro, published an advertisement for a widow Lady who announced her skills to “run a house”. She requested interested parties to

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<sup>10</sup> To know more about the history of lotteries in Brazil and its relation to enslaved people, see, for example, Loner (2014).

<sup>11</sup> On commercial activities, survival strategies, and transit through the streets of São Paulo by poor, enslaved, and enfranchised women, see the classic study by Dias (1995).

send a sealed letter to the newspaper's press. Such request was possible because she knew how to read, write, and count. Even though she did not include those skills in the list of competencies she could teach enslaved women – only cutting, sewing, embroidering, making pastries – it is plausible she might teach them their letters:

IF ANY gentleman, single or widower (with children) needs an old widow Lady who knows how to read, write, and count to run a house, teach slave women how to cut, embroider, pleat, and sew in any way, as well as to make pastries and to take care of everything pertaining to domestic chores, please send a sealed letter with initials A.P.V. to this press (Jornal do Commercio, 1845, p. 4).

Advertisements for “Ladies” who offered to work on domestic services at family homes are recurrent, as are those that announced services at their own homes, as we have mentioned above. In this routine of women's lives, there was a need for enslaved women to learn how to perform domestic chores. This type of relationship was also often associated with learning how to read and to write, even if that was not always advertised directly for enslaved women.

Three advertisements, one from 1845, one from 1848, and one from 1868, all published in different newspapers from Rio de Janeiro, offered teaching services for “little Black girls” and “little mixed-race girls”, as we can see below:

176 Rua da Valla.

We teach little Black girls and little mixed-race girls, both outside and as interns, how to sew, embroider, pleat, all perfectly. If desired, we also teach them to read. At the store located in 72 Rua de S. Pedro, Cidade Nova district (Diário do Rio de Janeiro, 1845, p. 4).

There is a Lady who teaches little Black girls and little mixed-race girls how to sew, pleat, embroider, read, and write. She can be found at the corner of Rua das Violas (Correio Mercantil, 1848, p. 4).

We accept little Black girls and little mixed-race girls to be taught everything a *mucama* and a mother of a family needs to know. We also teach them how to read, write, and count, the Christian doctrine, piping<sup>12</sup>, and how to sew with a machine. At 291 Rua do Hospicio (Jornal do Commercio, 1868, p. 4).

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<sup>12</sup> *Piping* is a type of “trimming stitched in seams or along edges (as of clothing, slipcovers, or curtains)” (Merriam-Webster, 2022).

The cases shown above expressly mention only “little Black girls” and “little mixed-race girls.” Even if it did not include the expressions “slave” or “captive,” it is plausible that this type of advertisement was aimed at them, since this is how enslaved girls were referred to. This hypothesis is also raised due to the advertisement below, in which the teaching of reading, as well as of sewing, is offered explicitly to “captives:” “Whomever owns a captive little Black girl or little mixed-race girl, and wishes her to learn sewing and reading, please let yourself be known and you will be found” (Correio Mercantil, 1853, p. 4).

This advertisement is from 1853 and shows that enslaved girls were taught privately how to read (it does not mention writing). In this case, the relationships between sewing and reading, knowing how to sew and how to read, teaching how to sew and how to read, learning how to sew and how to read all make sense. The two activities are alike in the fact that they make up the ideal of what adequate feminine education was at the time, even for an enslaved girl: as well as sewing, they could learn how to read. Needle, thread, cloth, sewing machine, with a book by their side, perhaps. This was a common setting for 19<sup>th</sup> century women – even if they were enslaved.

Teaching enslaved girls was not restricted to Rio de Janeiro, capital of the Brazilian Empire. In 1842, in Recife, a “teacher of girls” offered her services under the following terms:

At Rua de Joaquim José de Veras, across the alley, at a green house by the wall to the square, there is a teacher of girls who teaches reading, writing, counting, Portuguese grammar, sewing, embroidery, whitework embroidery<sup>15</sup>, and how to make pleats perfectly. For one thousand réis per month, or two patacas for a slave (Diário do Pernambuco, 1842, p. 5).

Even at a difference price, there is a clear mention to accepting captive girls. The “teacher of girls” from the “green house across the alley,” as well as teaching domestic skills, also taught reading, writing, and Portuguese grammar. There is no mention to a school, so it is plausible these were private and possibly individual classes.

In the same year of 1842, also in Recife, an advertisement mentions teaching “little mixed-race girls” and “captive Black women”. The same person taught domestic skills to enslaved women, also teaching them how to read, write, and count:

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<sup>15</sup> *Whitework* is a style of “embroidery worked in white thread on white material [...] Especially favoured in the 15th century as embellishment for underclothing, whitework [...] was crafted by mounting strips of fine-gauge mesh in light wire frames and embroidering them for use as edgings and insertions” (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1998).

Locals and outsiders who wish little mixed-race girls and captive Black women to be taught sewing, whitework embroidery, embroidery, and making pleats for an affordable price, with the promise that they will be ready in no time, please visit the two-story house at Pátio do Carmo with the balcony, second floor. There, they will find who to talk to. This person also teaches reading, writing, and counting (Diário do Pernambuco, 1842, p. 5).

Examples presented up to now show possibilities for enslaved girls to learn reading and writing alongside domestic skills from women who offered their services out of their own homes or at the homes of families, teaching and instructing captive girls.

The possibility that enslaved girls attended school – defined as a formal, organized institution where learning happened collectively, even if stretching the concept of “school” for that period – also seems plausible. In 1836, in the purchases section of the newspaper *Diário de Pernambuco*, we find the following advertisement: “A little Black girl or little mixed-race girl, around six to eight years of age, who is supposed to go to school. At the hardware store by 69 Corpo Santo” (Diário do Pernambuco, 1836, p. 4).

Probable hypotheses for someone to be looking for an enslaved girl with those characteristics are that this could be a “little Black girl or little mixed-race girl” to accompany another girl, the daughter of a slave-owner, at school; or that, for some reason, the person looking to purchase them required an educated girl.

A notification published on the newspaper *Idade d’Ouro*, from Bahia, in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, corroborates the existence of enslaved women who accompanied the daughters of slave-owners to school. First, the “Principal of the Colégio de Educação de Meninas [Girls’ Education School]” notifies the public in general and parents that, to benefit the schoolgirls and to avoid “[...] the commotion and censorship that already took place,” she was undoing the “[...] second table [...]” and would keep only the first one. By “table,” she most likely meant some sort of classroom activity or final examination. What interests us, however, is the second part of the notice, published as follows: “The Principal also states that any schoolgirl who wishes to bring her slave to serve her may do that by paying 3,200 réis per month for her upkeep, paid in advance” (Idade D’Ouro do Brazil, 1813).

We must thus consider the possibility that enslaved girls attended school, be it to accompany a “schoolgirl,” be it as students. In 1824, the newspaper *Diário do Rio de Janeiro* announced the sale of a “little Black girl” under the following conditions:

Little Black girl for sale, eleven to twelve years old, pretty. She has been at home for a year and a half and at school for eight months, knows basic sewing and is highly skill for a *mucama*. Whomever needs her may visit Travessa de S. Joaquim, across 146 Rua de Vallongo. (Diário do Rio de Janeiro, 1824, p. 2).

Even though we do not know the real meaning of the eleven- to twelve-year-old little Black girl being “at school for eight months,” this is an unusual reference. We ask: What does “school” mean in those advertisements? Were they private learning places, public institutions for collective learning, or sparse, individual classes? Any of those references may be correct and indicate possibilities that allowed little Black girls to learn reading and writing.

Was being enslaved by a teacher also a possibility for girls to learn to read, write, and count due to that relationship and to the spaces where they transited, i.e., classes and/or schools? It is impossible to give an absolute answer, but that is not an unlikely occurrence: “A teacher from Boa Vista needs a slave who starches, cooks, and goes outside. Whomever owns one and wishes to lease them, please let your address be known or send her to 7 Rua da Mangueira to negotiate” (*Diário do Pernambuco*, 1857, p. 4).

Some other data show that, especially during the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there were teaching spaces, practices, and experiences in which different people converged, even though in the announcements, the subjects taught might have appeared separately for different groups, as we have shown. We could pose, however, the following question: How did that happen in practice? Was it possible to keep boys and girls apart the whole time? To keep the older students apart from the younger ones? Enslaved girls apart from non-enslaved girls? These questions are based on advertisements such as the following:

At 321 Rua de S. Pedro, there is a school that teaches reading, writing, Portuguese grammar, and mathematics for male students; and fashion, reading, writing, and counting for female students. We admit slaves and boarders to learn domestic services for a home. Whomever wishes to employ our services, please visit the house at the address above to negotiate (*Jornal do Commercio*, 1836a, p. 3).

In the same newspaper from Rio de Janeiro, also in 1836, the principals of a school located at Rua do Sacramento published the following advertisement:

The principals of the school at Rua do Sacramento, with exit to 59 Rua do Sr. dos Passos, let parents know that in our establishment we teach reading, writing, counting, Portuguese grammar, sewing, embroidering, making pleats of all kinds, and everything else needed for educating a girl. We also cut and make Ladies’ dresses in different models, for an affordable price. At the same house, we accept slaves to teach them how to starch and make pleats perfectly (*Jornal do Commercio*, 1836b, p. 4).

In all advertisements, mentions to boys and girls, boarders, enslaved girls, little mixed-ethnicity girls, little Black-girls, mixed-ethnicity women, captive Black woman

etc. indicate different people transited those spaces, especially in the latter cases we have shown, i.e., in schools and private classes<sup>14</sup>. This leads us to believe that even if teaching, spaces, and time were organized differently at those schools, some conviviality and learning not specific to “their sex” or “their social belonging” took place. We can entertain that some enslaved girls learned to read, write, and count at those places, either from classes taught directly to them or from listening to classes taught to other girls while they cut fabric, sewed, embroidered, starched, pressed, etc. As the title of this paper indicates, this is a history to be written. This paper, however, is an effort to contribute to writing that history, or better yet, histories, since they are plural and varied. Data from our research shows considerable evidence of reading, writing, and counting among enslaved woman and should be further investigated, broadened, and reflected upon.

## FINAL REMARKS

It is urgent to deconstruct the image of enslaved women as illiterate, incapable, rude, and uninterested in accessing other types of knowledges beyond those they already had from their original cultures. In place of that, however, we cannot build a perspective that generically and abstractly puts them in a favorable context of education, instruction, and literacy. This would lead to the false impression that it was common for them to happily and merrily reach some level of instruction or to learn skills and competencies reserved to them, especially those pertaining to “running a house,” as those were vastly different from the cultures to which they belonged. This topic is much more complex and demands a delicate approach: neither to give the false idea that mastering reading, writing and numbers was a prerogative for them – especially as during this period, according to the census of 1872, approximately 85% of the general population did not know how to read and write, a number that reaches over 99% for enslaved people (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística [IBGE], 1872)<sup>15</sup>; nor to affirm that, barred from attending school, enslaved people did not have any learning opportunities beyond hard work at farms and houses of slave-owners, especially of basic knowledge. Capturing the specificities, the plurality, and the variance in reading, writing, and counting among enslaved women requires, thus, attentive reading of documental sources available, as well as an exercise to question assumptions about data that is available or, at least, to raise plausible hypotheses to understand the phenomenon.

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<sup>14</sup> It is outside the scope of this paper, but there are advertisements from those schools accepting noticeably young children, as young as two. These teaching spaces of the 19<sup>th</sup> century were, thus, not strict on conviviality between children of different ages.

<sup>15</sup> To know more about this topic, see, for example, Ferraro e Kreidlow (2004).



We must recognize, however, that – as historians – we have no access to the actual experiences, lives, practices, and knowledges of enslaved women. Firstly, because this included ancestral knowledge that, for the most part, was linked to an oral cultural tradition; secondly, whatever may have been written and recorded by some of them was not allowed to exist or did not survive such long time. Researching literacy and oral culture practices among enslaved people and based on arguments by Agnes Heller, Barbosa (2017) states that “knowledge is a value that is particular to each time period: there was always something that could not be known, knowledge deemed cursed, things no mortal should comprehend” (p. 154). Maybe reading and writing practices of some of the few enslaved woman who had access to those competencies and mastered them were considered “cursed knowledge,” something “no mortal should comprehend.”

Therefore, we must try to extract how cunning and disaffected those women were from the few vestiges of history. Learning to read and to write falls under that perspective because, as Davis (2016, p. 34) stated when referring to enslaved women in the United States, their resistance included, often, actions more subtle than uprisings, escapes, and sabotage. It also included, for example, secretly learning how to read and to write, as well as transmitting that knowledge to others. In that context, we insist on the need for studies to focus on enslaved girls and adult women. As we have seen, consistent data points to the fact that, in general, the few and rare classes or night schools created specifically to teach enslaved people to read and to write were aimed at men. It is not implausible to affirm, thus, that in studies about “literate” enslaved people there are still inaccuracies and generalizations, as well as emphasis in male practices and experiences of education and instruction.

If writing that history in the feminine form is hard, it is not unfeasible. From the little that has reached us in the present on writing, reading, and counting among enslaved women, we can conclude that the space of homes, whether at owners’ houses or women’s houses (be them white, poor or in better social conditions, Black or mixed-ethnicity), as well as some classes and private schools maintained by women – “Ladies” or “teachers of girls” – were the places by excellence where it was possible for enslaved women to learn how to read and to write. Even if it may seem redundant, thus, we must emphasize that teaching was from women for women, happening mostly in private spaces and intertwined with the teaching of domestic chores. This history is made invisible by studies focusing only on schools and public classes or on institutionalized teaching practices (in associations, philanthropic and literary institutions, etc.).

Being a woman, being Black, and being enslaved did not stop some of them – in their relationships with other women – of transcending what was reserved for them – servitude, forced labor, illiteracy, lack of instruction, submission, passivity, etc. – and entering a universe that gained traction and space in the society of the 19<sup>th</sup> century: written culture. Knowing how to read, write, and count may have provided some of them perspectives that the records of history may never recover. That is not to say we will stop looking for those histories.

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