

## **An enslaved mother and her children: slavery and death in late XIXth Century Brazil**

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### **Content warning: Racism and Violence**

While it is not hard to understand the importance of maternity in the perpetuation of slavery, it took Brazilian scholars a very long time to recognize this fact. Research into the social history of slavery commonly referring to enslaved people in general terms, as if they were somehow exempt from the categories of gender could instead be lumped together as one single group. Historians frequently discussed the enslaved's way of life in terms of their living and working conditions, their insalubrity, and specific social and community relationships, but without mention of the differences that might pertain to men and women—African or Creole—in the slave-labor system or inside the communities of the quarters.

While this more traditional historiography recognizes only the generic figure of the enslaved, even more recent studies that particularize the experience of captivity have also sometimes neglected the specificities of gendered experiences. For example, in considering enslaved families, a new historiography quite rightly restored the role of familial relationships, disposing of prior dated and racist macro-level visions that perceived the social life of the enslaved as characterized by anomie. However, this lens still needs tweaking in order to recognize the various implications of intimate relationships, marriage and maternity and paternity in the lives of enslaved men and women. This type of detailed research also enables us to probe more deeply the emotional lives of the enslaved.

For enslaved women, being a wife and a mother implied a host of considerable challenges. In addition to the risks to physical health inherent to pregnancy, childbirth, lactation, and child-rearing under the yoke of enslavement, marriage and reproduction also entailed women performing a 'double shift' and being submitted to a dual subjugation to enslavers and husbands. In order to focus on the role maternity and motherhood played in slavery, we therefore must consider the fact that enslaved men

and women experienced it from different places and were subject to different levels of oppression and suffering.

The most important principle legitimizing slavery throughout Atlantic slave societies was *partus sequitur ventrem*, which meant that offspring inherited the legal status of the mother that bore them. This ancient Roman law adopted wholesale in the Iberian Peninsula since the early days of slavery, was also presented as an unassailable immemorial principle. By putting the enslaved woman in the dual role of producer of human beings and of non-human capital, these principles ended up highlighting the centrality of the enslaved woman's body as the very locus of slavery. Whether by stimulating reproduction or by neglecting it, slaveowners had always factored reproduction into their strategies for generating wealth.<sup>1</sup> But how did enslaved women manage their motherhood under slavery? That is a very difficult question to answer due to many constraints., including the silence of the archive and the absence of sources.

This is what makes Geminiana's life story, which contains difficult and challenging violence, worthy of telling. A formerly enslaved woman in the North province of Maranhão, she bought her freedom in 1876, but left her children in slavery. Her two youngest children, boys named Jacinto and Inocência, fell into the hands of a cruel enslaver, who in a very short span of time, tortured and then killed both sons. For a variety of reasons, which not include the nature of the crime and the sufferance of the mother who lost her two young boys, the criminal record filled after this case totals some 800 pages. These documents give us the opportunity to penetrate the many layers of the local slavery-based society where this horrific crime took place. They further allow us to carefully reconstruct the social relations that allowed for such a heinous crime to happen in the provincial capital city of São Luís, in late Nineteenth Century Brazil. Moreover, complementary research on different types of primary sources related to Geminiana and family, allow us to probe even deeper the life story of this enslaved and

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<sup>1</sup> Idem, *Ibidem*, pp. 107-143, Kathleen M. Brown. *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches and Anxious Patriarchs. Gender, Race, and Power in Colonial Virginia*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996, pp. 107-136, Jean Hebrard and Rebecca Scott. *Freedom Papers: An Atlantic Odyssey in the Age of Emancipation*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012.

freed family in the wider context of the amelioration slave laws in Brazil in the decades prior to abolition in 1888.

The advent of laws prohibiting the separation of mothers and children came relatively late in the era of slavery. In Brazil, mothers and children under the age of 15 could be sold separately until 1869.<sup>2</sup> However, the Free Womb Law of 1871, which liberated the children born to enslaved mothers -- leaving them under the guardianship of an enslaver (or the State) from the age of 8 to 21 -- once again separated mothers and their offspring, as enslavers retained the right to keep and explore the work of the free born children.<sup>3</sup> Hence, mothers who managed to obtain manumission under the law were therefore obliged to leave their enslaved or free-born children behind, in the clutches of their former enslavers. Thus, for many women, these laws resulted in the pain and anguish of separation.

The case of Geminiana and her family straddles the issues of enslaved women's maternity, manumission and the separation of mothers and children with all the emotional turmoil this generated. In Brazil, it is relatively well known as the "crime of the Baroness of Grajaú" (note the centering of the enslaver, not the enslaved in this title), and occurred in São Luís, the capital of the Northern province of Maranhão, in 1876.

The territory where Maranhão province is located has a particular trajectory. Placed in far North of Brazil, a huge territory covered with tropical forest and dwelled by hundreds of native nations. So, it was hard to be colonized. In order to maximize the area's economic potential, this vast land was put under the administration of the Company of Grão-Pará and Maranhão, becoming a place independently administrated from the Portuguese colonial main territory. Only after the extinction of the company, in the last quarter of the Eighteenth Century, did the territory became an integral part of the

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<sup>2</sup> Decree number 1695, 15/09/1869. (<https://www2.camara.leg.br/legin/fed/decret/1824-1899/decreto-1695-15-setembro-1869-552474-publicacaooriginal-69771-pl.html#:~:text=Prohibe%20as%20vendas%20de%20escravos%20debaixo%20de%20preg%C3%A3o%20em%20exposi%C3%A7%C3%A3o%20publica.&text=Os%20leil%C3%B5es%20commerciaes%20de%20escravos,escravo%20que%20vender%20em%20leil%C3%A3o.>) Accessed on: 18/10/2020.

<sup>3</sup> Free Womb Law ([http://www.planalto.gov.br/ccivil\\_03/leis/lim/lim2040.htm](http://www.planalto.gov.br/ccivil_03/leis/lim/lim2040.htm)) Accessed on: 18/10/2020.

colony. During Independence in 1822, Northern elites, particularly those in Maranhão, rebelled. Looking towards the Atlantic much more than the mainland, Maranhão developed intense commercial ties with Portuguese and English commercial houses, especially in São Luís, in order to ensure a supply of African enslaved people and the export of sugar cane, rice, and cotton grown in huge plantations along the Itapecuru river.

Although formally integrated into the Brazilian nation in 1822 Maranhão only politically submitted to the Empire and to the Southeast elite of Rio de Janeiro, after the civil war of Balaiada in 1840. Beginning as a political dispute between elites, this uprising soon spread, involving also indigenous, free poor working people of mixed ethnicity, and the enslaved, who increasingly rebelled against the system of exploitation employed by the elites. Enslaved people's revolts enabled the development of runaway communities (quilombos), resulting in the emergence of runaway slave military forces. At this point the Maranhão elite laid down its arms and, in 1840, submitted to the court in Rio de Janeiro. Unsurprisingly, their main goal was to keep the plantation system and slavery, although enslaved people's revolts continued thereafter. Consequently, the Maranhão system of slavery became renowned as one of the most violent in all of Brazil. This provides the background context of the life story of Geminiana and her family.

While Geminiana and her family have been the subject of other studies and even featured in Josué Montello's famous novel *Os Tambores de São Luiz (The Drums of São Luís)*, published in 1975, so far no-one has endeavored to scour through the case files as source material for reconstruct the history of the enslaved family that lies beneath the wider political dispute generated by the investigation of the murder of the enslaved boys, Geminiana's sons. So, none of the studies written until now dealt with the question of slavery and the sufferance of the Geminiana herself and their family on the face of losing two boys under torture. It is almost unbelievable that so many scholars had made a series of wider research and published them, focusing on the many angles of this case, including political disputes between families, the use of law in the courts of far North Maranhão, the struggle between Conservative and Liberal part on the life of Maranhão, except dealing with the murder case in itself. My goal here is to narrate this truly tragic story from the point of view of the mother and grandmother of the murdered boys, so

illustrating the power relations that allow that such a heinous crime to occur in the age of abolition. At the same time, I seek to stress the historical agency, initiative and emotions of the women themselves – the mother, grandmother, and other working women, including those free, freed, and enslaved – who tried to save the children, who later protested against the cruelty of the murderer, and who collectively become charges of elite society’s payback. One year after the trial, São Luís was shocked by the repression of healer practitioners, mostly performed by women of very low class, being them free, freed, or even enslaved. Geminiana and the group of healers who had railed against the crime, was accused and incarcerated as dangerous and ignorant practitioners of witchcraft. The analysis of this second criminal record shows that the accusations were false and explicitly fabricated by lawyers and police authorities connected to Ana Rosa’s family.

Tellingly, coverage of the baroness of Grajaú’s crime frequently refers to the two child victims as “escravinhos” (little slaves), representing them simultaneously as poor children and as persons without social value. The case files additionally suggest that the murder of the two boys took place practically in a public arena, yet, shockingly not one single person of influence made any effective attempt to prevent the murderer, Ana Rosa Viana Ribeiro, from fulfilling her objective. As such, this case reveals much about the nature of slavery in Maranhão specifically and Brazil more widely.

### **Jacinto and Inocência: slaves, not ingênuos (freeborn children)**

The events that led to the sale of two small children from under their mother’s feet began in the early months of 1876 and illustrate very clearly the challenges faced by manumitted enslaved mothers. Despite the emancipationist and liberating aspects of the 1870’s Free Womb Law, especially when it came to the articles that provided for the purchase of manumission, the law ended up facilitating the separation of mothers and their children. This was the case with Geminiana.

Born around 1840, Geminiana, an enslaved woman, grew up in a sugar cane mill in the interior of Maranhão. She was enslaved to the Belforts, an Irish family who settled

in the interior of the province, and made their fortune capturing Indigenous people, clearing the forests, and founding gigantic sugar mills peopled by Africans held in slavery. The Belforts' main fortune came from trafficking these people.

As young girl, Geminiana lived with her mother and sister, along with around hundred other enslaved people. Her mother, Simplicia, had been able to buy her own freedom, probably through working as a street vendor to save money to buy her liberty while simultaneously performing domestic labour for her enslavers in their urban household. When one of the Belforts' daughters married, the slaveholding family offered Geminiana to the newlywed couple as part of the daughter's dowry and she then had to go to live in the capital city with her new enslavers. Geminiana subsequently bore four children: two girls and two boys, although one of her daughters sadly died at very early age, as was common among the enslaved.

Geminiana's enslavers died during the decade of the 1860s and the couple's estate subsequently fell into the hands of a relative, who then decided to sell some of the enslaved people in 1876, taking them to be valued and listed in São Luís market. The sale included Geminiana and her three surviving children. Somewhat unexpectedly, Geminiana was able to deposit her price at court, enabling her own manumission.<sup>4</sup> There are no records that explain how she managed to raise this sum, so as historians we can only offer hypotheses, as is often the case when researching the lives of enslaved women.

One possible explanation is that Geminiana's mother, who lived and worked in São Luís, where she hired herself out as daily domestic, may have purchased her daughter's manumission from her own hard-earned savings. Another interpretation is that Geminiana had her own money, accumulated from her work as a healer (*pajé*). Thanks to a later criminal case involving the faith healer Amélia Rosa, known as the Queen of Pajelança (healing) in São Luís, we have evidence that that Geminiana might have been part of her inner circle.<sup>5</sup> And that is another very interesting angle Geminiana's case can provides to historians: an enticing glimpse into the world of

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<sup>4</sup> Testimony of Dr. José Joaquim Tavares Belfort. ACB/MPEMA, 120–125. [I don't think you need citations as this is a blog]

<sup>5</sup> Mundicarmo Ferretti (Org.), *Pajelança no Maranhão no Século XIX: o processo de Amélia Rosa* (São Luís: CMF/Fapema, 2004). Thanks to Flávio Gomes for kindly alerting us to the existence of this publication and, moreover, tracking this incredible lawsuit down in the Maranhão archives.

popular healing practices of this time, which mixed chanting, rituals, medicines and herbs from Africans, Indigenous people and those of Portuguese origins. Such practices, often operating within women's realms, are mostly hidden to history.

After her manumission, Geminiana had to leave her three children behind in enslavement, a process that no doubt caused her grief, anguish and despair, all painful emotions to experience, especially after the loss of her infant daughter previously. Geminiana's surviving daughter Isaura, aged around 12 years, was sold on to a rich family of São Luís soon afterwards. This left just the two sons, Jacinto and Inocência, aged 6 and 8, who remained on sale listings for several months before attracting a buyer, probably because they were young, and most enslavers failed to consider their future value as adult with abolition on the horizon. The firm Silva & Teixeira acquired them, whose Portuguese owners ran a bakery. The bakers apparently found the children "cute" – a notable racist depiction of young children of African descent, but they soon discovered that neither of the two boys had much utility. Too small to work effectively, they simply hung around the bakery counter waiting for customers to buy them treats, perhaps enacting out a sense of their own appeal as 'cute' to the bakery's customers.

The bakers probably made the acquisition with an eye on the immediate sales market, as it was becoming very late to invest money in children who would become full adult workers too late due to the fact abolition was already on the horizon. Most likely they negotiated purchasing the boys with another buyer in mind. Unsurprisingly, then, the bakers quickly sold Jacinto e Inocência to Ana Rosa Viana Ribeiro, a woman from a rich local family, already notorious for torturing her enslaved people. Both Jacinto and Inocência would both be dead within three months of purchase, leading to loud public rumour and speculation about the crimes taking place within Ribeiro's mansion.

We don't know the emotional anguish Geminiana must have felt about the loss of her infant daughter, followed by the sale of her other daughter, then the deaths of her sons. Too often, those enslaved or freed people remain as shadows, if not entirely absent, in archival evidence. Yet we can and should employ techniques of speculation, empathy and imagination as we research the past. Through the careful probing of historical records, we can seek to reconstruct the lives of people held in the horrific

system of enslavement and bring their biographies to the centre of historical narratives that better inform our present.

But while archival absences can be typical when researching the lives of enslaved women and their families, what makes this case so rare is that the criminal record which followed the death of Inocência surprisingly offers some clues about the emotions and reactions of the mother, Geminiana and grandmother, Símplicia, when facing the death of the two boys. Their murder additionally shows how the poorest layers of this slavocratic and racist society reacted against the murderer of children, openly protesting it, and publicly challenging the power of the most powerful local families. After the death of the second children, Inocência, rumors were rife, with tongues wagging to such a degree that the Deputy Chief of the Second Precinct had to order an autopsy on Inocência's body, which was still waiting to be put to rest at the chapel in his cheap little coffin.

Such was the general revolt caused by the murder of this young boy that the autopsy, conducted by a physician and a pharmacist, caused quite a tumult. A crowd packed into the small room at the cemetery to watch the proceedings, with the women, "wicker baskets in hand", railing against the high-society perpetrator of so heinous a crime.<sup>6</sup> Geminiana was there too, most probably surrounded by her faith-healer friends.

The lowliest slaves, the ones with the hardest, most menial remits, made such a scene they had to be removed from the room. But their protest continued outside and across town, making it impossible to cover up that terrible atrocity, accusing the region's social elite of violating all humanitarian and Christian principles.

### **Geminiana in the face of her sons' death**

This section below gives a glimpse of my forthcoming book, *Geminiana and her children: slavery and death, motherhood and infancy (Brazil, XIX Century)*. This exerts deals with the moment and subsequent days of Inocência's death:

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<sup>6</sup> Testimony of José Maria da Rocha Andrade. ACB/MPEMA, pp. 238-241.



In the early hours of November 14, 1876, Geminiana, a young black freedwoman who had only recently bought her manumission and now scraped a living as a hired help, left her home on Mocambo street and walked to the corner of Grande, where she met with four men carrying a casket. Though the coffin was closed, in fact with lock and chain, she could immediately see that it was child-sized and bore no identifier whatsoever of who lay within<sup>7</sup>. It would later emerge that the coffin was cobbled together in a rush, before dawn, and that its only adornment was some blue fabric lining on the inside.<sup>8</sup> There was no cortege, just four enslaved people carrying the casket on their shoulders, and they seemed to be trying to get to the hospital-owned São João Chapel, which stood right beside the graveyard, as quickly and as silently as they could. For the enslaved Primo (or Firmo, in some depositions), Geraldo, Anísio and João, the four pallbearers, the weight of this task was immeasurably heavier than the box and its contents, given the exceptional and altogether nebulous circumstances surrounding the little boy's death.

Naturally alarmed by the sight, Geminiana stopped and asked the coffin-carriers where they were coming from, and it was then that her very worst fears were all but confirmed: they had come from the residence of *Dona Ana Rosa*. Geminiana dashed back home, and from there made for the cemetery, now accompanied by her mother Símplicia, a freedwoman who had once belonged to the Texeira Belfort household but now was a hired worker in town. All the indications were pointing to the deceased child being Geminiana's young son Inocêncio, aged 8, who had been purchased by Ana Rosa Lamagnère Viana Ribeiro a little over three months earlier. These suspicions were soon confirmed.

When she reached the chapel, the distraught mother searched high and low for the child-sized coffin and finally found it in a backroom, awaiting the chaplain, who had not yet arrived. That was immaterial, as without the proper paperwork from the police, the chaplain could not have proceeded with the burial anyway. Geminiana asked the pallbearers to open the coffin, but they resisted: *Dona Ana Rosa* had given them express

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<sup>7</sup> Geminiana's testimony. Case file on the Baroness's crimes, 1876-77. São Luiz: Ministério Público do Estado do Maranhão (Public Prosecutors' Office), 2009, p. (hereafter ACB/MPEMA), pp. 111-112. On child burials, see Luiz Vailati. *Morte menina. Infância e morte infantil no Brasil dos oitocentos (Rio de Janeiro e São Paulo)*. São Paulo: Alameda, 2010.

<sup>8</sup> João Marcelino Romeu's testimony. ACB/MPEMA, p. 103.

orders only to unlock the casket in the presence of the chaplain, so he could commend the deceased unto the Lord. That done, they said, they were to lock the chain again and bring back the key. Geminiana protested, saying that she had been **“denied sight of her son in life, and would not be so denied again in his death”**.

The coffin was then opened, although there is some discrepancy in the case files as to who actually performed this task. The four enslaved denied doing it, but some witnesses claimed it was they who removed the coffin lid, while others said that the chaplain had ordered it. Most likely, there is some truth in both claims: the enslaved man, Primo, who had the key in his pocket, may well have disobeyed orders and allowed a mother a peek at her dead son, only to re-open the coffin later, and for a longer period, in the presence of the chaplain.<sup>9</sup>

The sight of the dead child sent Geminiana and Simplícia, his grandmother, into emotional convulsions of despair. According to the mother, the boy was wearing striped shirt and trousers, and had his arms stretched by his side—not resting on the chest, with the hands entwined, as would have been customary. When she took his hands in order to place them in the correct burial position, she noticed rope burns on the wrists, indicating that the boy had been tied up. The two women then undressed Inocêncio’s corpse to conduct a thorough examination and found that the body was covered in scars—some older, others very recent—from various whippings and beatings, with a great deal of damage to the arms, back and elbows.<sup>10</sup> A later coroner’s examination identified a considerable number of marks, abrasions and burns caused to the boy’s body by ropes, whips and other instruments. He had also suffered a brain hemorrhage, and his feet and hands were swollen. In addition to being visibly undernourished, the boy displayed rectal prolapse and injuries to the anus.<sup>11</sup>

However hurriedly Ana Ribeiro Viana had tried to bury this “inconvenience”, as she declare consider the death of the child under her household, circumstances did not work in her favor. As soon as it became apparent that the young boy was at death’s door, she had started to plan the best way to make him disappear.<sup>12</sup> Hailing as she did

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<sup>9</sup> Testimony from Primo, Anísio, Geraldo and João. ACB/MPEMA, pp. 17-110.

<sup>10</sup> Geminiana’s testimony. ACB/MPEMA, pp. 111-112.

<sup>11</sup> First coroner’s report. ACB/MPEMA, pp.

<sup>12</sup> The term “inconvenience” appears on the deposition of Ana Rosa Ribeiro Viana. ACB/MPEM.

from one of the main slave-owning clans of Codó, in the Maranhão hinterlands, and married to Carlos Ribeiro Viana, leader of the Liberal Party in the province, she had no reason to think the death of this enslaved boy would amount to more than another nuisance to be covered up—as had occurred many times before, including only weeks earlier, when Jacinto, Inocêncio’s younger brother, aged 5 or 6, also died under her charge. Like his sibling, Jacinto had been buried in a rush but without attracting much attention.<sup>13</sup>

Things went a little differently with Inocêncio. On the night of November 13, when she heard the little boy’s death rattle, Ana Rosa summoned her private physician, Dr. Santos Jacinto, who arrived either immediately after the boy’s death or during his final throes. This doctor apparently had no problem writing a death certificate attesting that Inocêncio had died of natural causes brought on by intertropical hypoemia, a diarrhea-causing infection commonly known at the time as “the yellowness”, and most likely contracted through the lad’s habit of eating earth.<sup>14</sup> The doctor stuck to his story at the second coroner’s examination, conducted under his responsibility on the boy’s exhumed corpse five days after his death.<sup>15</sup> In general, medical doctors who worked with a rich, but scarce, clientele tend to subscribe their demands, even when it resulted in unethical procedures. Attend medical school was, as well, only possible to upper class, making them probe to maintain status quo.

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<sup>13</sup> Numerous witnesses affirmed that Ana Rosa Viana tortured slaves on a routine basis. One of the slaves mentioned, a girl named Militina, had all her teeth pulled out for having smiled at Ana Rosa’s husband, while another, Carolina, suffered punishments that were considered severe even by the standards of the day. Ana Rosa was replaced in court by her brothers, who had decide to assume the charge in order to preserve a woman of the family to the shame of being sued, as discussed by Lenine Nequete in *O Escravo na Jurisprudência Brasileira*. Porto Alegre: Diretoria da Revista de Jurisprudência e Outros Impressos do Tribunal de Justiça, 1988, p. 61-77.

<sup>14</sup> In 1835, Dr Cruz Jobim characterized intertropical hypoemia as a disease typical of regions with a humid climate and most common among the lower classes, especially slaves. Key symptoms were diarrhea, anemia and aerophagia. Later, other doctors established the connection between the sickness and the presence of the hookworm *Ancylostoma duodenal* in the sufferer’s intestines. The habit or “mania” of eating earth, quite common among slaves, was frequently listed as a cause and sometimes as an effect of the infection, which slaveowners considered particularly damaging to their interests. Dr. Xavier Sigaud also associated the condition with maculo, also widespread among slaves, known to cause diarrhea and lacerations to the anus. See Flávio Edler. “Opilação, Hipoemia ou Ancilostomíase? A sociologia de uma descoberta científica”. *Varia História*, (32), 2004, pp. 48-74 and J.F.X. Sigaud. *Du Climat e des Maladies du Bresil ou Statistique Médicale de cette Empire*. Paris: chez Fortin, 1844, pp. 130-132.

<sup>15</sup> Exhumation and autopsy report ACB/MPEMA, pp. 323-328.

In the hours prior to Inocência's passing, Ana Rosa asked the doctor to put at her disposal his longest-serving and evidently most trusted enslaved man, Sebastião dos Santos Jacinto, to assist in the preparations for ridding herself of the problem of the dead boy as swiftly as possible.

Her first step was to try to get the child off her property. To this end, she chose the house of the mixed race Olímpia, who once in a while worked for Ana Rosa as a hired house servant. However, Olímpia refused, saying that she was sick herself, and that "a person in an ill health can't be tending to another".<sup>16</sup> The mistress then summoned Gregória Rosa Salustiana, a black hired servant who had done some work at the mansion a few weeks earlier. Gregória arrived a couple of hours before Inocência's death, so she and Sebastião were the only witnesses to his passing and the preparation of his body for burial. However, they gave vague and inconsistent testimony, though they did let slip some highly revealing details as to what took place at the house during the final hours of Inocência's life. For example, it emerged that Inocência had died in his usual bed, which was just a piece of cloth extended on the floor of the first room along the house's balcony, contiguous with Ana Rosa's own bedroom, and that he was wearing only a short

It appears he had at least been bathed that day, though that did not seem to be at all habitual, even for a child suffering from diarrhea. We know about his bath because, according to the hired slave Zuraída Guterres, rented out to Ana Rosa by Maria Clara Guterres, the boy, sullied with excrement, had been found that very afternoon passed out in the yard under a searing hot sun. Zuraída delicately washed the child, including the area around the anus, which was clearly torn. She dressed him in a clean and slightly longer shirt, fed him some cornmeal and took him back to his room.<sup>17</sup> The boy was apparently alone in his final moments, as Gregória says she was sent to buy coffee, while Sebastião claimed he was already making his way back from Olímpia's house.

*Dona* Ana Rosa tried to get rid of the boy every which way, not only by dispatching Sebastião to Olímpia's to convince her to take the dying child in, but by sending the same messenger back again immediately after his death, asking if she would be responsible for arranging the funeral rites. Once more, Olímpia declined. So, Ana

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<sup>16</sup> Testimony of Olímpia Francisca Ribeiro and the slave Sebastião dos Santos Jacinto. ACB/MPEMA, pp. 115-119 and 156-159.

<sup>17</sup> Testimony of Zuraída Guterres. ACB/MPEMA, pp. 259-261.

Rosa decided a hasty dawn burial was her best bet, at six am, and in a locked casket to avoid prying eyes. By allowing only the most perfunctory of ceremonies, followed by a rushed interment, far from public view, Ana Rosa hoped to escape a public outcry, as many people had long been asking questions about what was happening to enslaved people within the mansion on São João Street. For example, the mysterious death of little Jacinto, Inocência's younger brother, on October 27, less than a month earlier, had already aroused a great deal of suspicion.

Not that *Dona* Ana Rosa seemed particularly worried. If she was at all apprehensive about any potential repercussions from the death of a second enslaved child at her house in so short a period of time, she certainly did not show it. For people like her, from the wealthy, powerful families who had flooded into the backlands of the province during the previous decades, clearing vast plantations and rapidly building up huge stocks of enslaved people, everything seemed permitted.

Born in Codó, the future Baroness of Grajaú grew up in one of the most dynamic regions of the Maranhão interior, where fast-sprawling cotton plantations had gone hand-in-glove with swelling enslaved populations, bought on credit or on consignment against future harvest yields.<sup>18</sup> Pressure from enslavers for ever-higher productivity translated into extreme rates of punishment and brutal exploitation of labor. Ana Rosa was married to Dr. Carlos Viana Ribeiro, leader of the Liberal Party, and the owner of vast slaveholdings in Alcântara.<sup>19</sup>

Although being an official document, the Geminana file can allow the historian work against the silence of archive. Notwithstanding the lack of interest of all authorities to discover how this distraught mother was facing the loss of her children, the file offers some breach through which we can glimpse the universe of emotions hidden beneath the formal vocabulary and juridical procedures of the criminal record in question. The voice and feelings of Geminiana, her mother, and others record in this huge document

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<sup>18</sup> Mathias Rohrig Assunção. *De Caboclos a Bem-Te-Vis. Formação do Campesinato numa Sociedade Escravista: Maranhão, 1800-1850*. São Paulo: Annablume, 2015, p. 361.

<sup>19</sup> Yuri Michael Almeida Costa. "Celso de Magalhães e a Justiça Infame: crime, escravidão e poder no Brasil do Império". PPG História. Universidade do Vale do Rio dos Sinos, 2017, pp. 169-180.

can help us to foresee of what the historical source normally denied. The universe of the intense life lived by the silenced ones.