

The letter of the slave Esperança Garcia, written by herself, and the formation of the african-brazilian literary canon

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I am a slave of the administration of
Capt. Ant^o Vieira de Couto, married. Since that
Capt. got there to administer, he took me out of
the Algodões farm, where I lived with my husband,
to be the cook in his house, where I get very mistreated.
First is that he punch my son so much
that is came blood out of his mouth, me, I ain't got no
explain the I am like a punching bag, get
beaten so hard that once I fell off the two-storey house
with my feet tied like a horse
I no died for the mercy of god
Second me and my partners want to confess for
three years and child of mine and two others
to be baptized.
For this I beg you for Christ's sake and his protection
lay your eyes on me and tell the captain
to send me back to the Algodões farm for me to live
with my husband and get my daughter baptized.
of your slave.

Esperança Garcia
The "Letter" by Esperança Garcia, of September 6th, 1770.
Arquivo Público do Piauí

Abstract

The "Letter" of September 6th, 1770, written by Esperança Garcia, a slave, was addressed to the Governor of the Captaincy of São José do Piauí (MOTT, 1985, 2010), Gonçalo Lourenço Botelho de Castro, a "non-precedent complaint" (MOURA, 2004) for the fact that it is about a slave who addresses to the main authority of the eighteenth-century colonial Piauí. The "Letter" is one of the oldest written records regarding slavery in Brazil, authored by a black slave, in this case a black and captive woman, Esperança Garcia. This concedes the epistolary narrative mentioned above a scripture *status* of a genesis, in other words, the formation of the African-Brazilian Literary Canon. The narrator appropriates the old petition model of the mid-eighteenth century to settle in this symbolic writing territory the voices of the autobiographical narrative or both personal and community chronicle from the black slave in an inhospitable environment, slavery.

Keywords: Esperança Garcia. Letter. Slave Narratives. Brazil.

Resumo

A Carta de 6 de setembro de 1770, de Esperança Garcia, foi endereçada ao Governador da Capitania de São José do Piauí (MOTT, 1985, 2010), Gonçalo Lourenço Botelho de Castro, uma "inusitada reclamação" (MOURA, 2004) por se tratar de uma "escrava" que se dirige à principal autoridade do Piauí colonial setecentista. Do ponto de vista literário e texto de fundação, a Carta de Esperança representa para a literatura afro-brasileira, o mesmo que a Carta de Pero Vaz de Caminha (1500) representa para o cânon euro-ocidental na literatura brasileira. A epístola em estudo foi escrita dezenove anos antes da Revolução Francesa. É

certamente um dos registros escritos mais antigos da escravidão no Brasil, escrito pelo próprio escravizado, no nosso caso uma mulher negra, brasileira e cativa, Esperança Garcia. O que confere à narrativa epistolar citada acima o *status* da escritura de uma gênese, ou seja, da formação do cânon literário afro-brasileiro.

Palavras-chave: Esperança Garcia. Carta. Narrativa dos Escravizados. Brasil.

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The “Letter” of September 6th, 1770, written by Esperança Garcia, a slave, was addressed to the Governor of the Province of Piauí (MOTT, 2010), Gonçalo Lourenço Botelho de Castro, a “non-precedent complaint” (MOURA, 2004) for the fact that it is about a slave who addresses to the main authority of the eighteenth-century colonial Piauí. From the literary point of view and as a text of formation of the Afro-Brazilian Literary Canon, the Letter of Esperança Garcia represents for this literature genre written by black authors from Brazil, the same as the Letter by Pero Vaz de Caminha (1500) represents for the Western Brazilian Literary Canon.

The “Letter” is one of the oldest written records regarding to slavery in Brazil, authored by an enslaved, in this case a black and captive woman, Esperança Garcia. This concedes the epistolary narrative upper mentioned the *status* of a scripture belonging to the Literary African-Brazilian genesis. The narrator appropriates the old petition model of the mid-eighteenth century to settle in this symbolic writing territory the voices of the autobiographical narrative or both personal and community chronicle from the black slave in an inhospitable environment, slavery. These voices speak of human pain, struggle and despair of an enslaved woman who speaks on behalf of herself, her children, husband and captivity mates, and thus, acting as a spokesperson of her group. The report written by Esperança Garcia is about a number of accusations and complaints concerning the administrator of the cattle ranches that once belonged to the Portuguese Crown. The eloquence and drama of the epistle strategically undermine the reputation of Captain Antonio Vieira do Couto before the Governor of the Captaincy of São José do Piauí.

The Jesuits owned and managed these cattle ranches until the rise of the Marquis of Pombal. We are not sure if there were other literate slaves on the cattle ranches in the Captaincy of São José do Piauí. We do not believe that there were numerous literate captives in Piauí, considering the lack of material evidence such as the fact there are no further documents written by slaves in Piauí, or even schools that admitted slaves or their children. Studies regarding education or literacy of the enslaved workers in Brazil, chiefly in Piauí, are still very limited or difficult to have access to. We are not sure about surprises future can bring us like the one which is highlighted in this article, the “Letter” by Esperança Garcia, written by herself.

Language and cultural barriers also hindered the integration and access of Africans and African-Brazilians enslaved to the language standards or rules of the European colonizers. As it is stated in the Brazilian chronicle, few captives had overcome that obstacle, but there are exceptions like the slaves Esperança Garcia (1750-1? - ?), the African-Brazilian poet from Bahia Luiz Gama (1830-1882), the African Rosa Egipcíaca (1729? - ?), although they were enslaved. In the second decade of the twenty-first century, I was surprised when I encountered the book *An Interesting Narrative of Mahommah G. Baquaqua* (1854), by Mahommah G. Baquaqua, an African runaway slave who freed himself from slavery escaping to New York in 1847. Some years later, he tells his experiences as a slave in Brazil from 1845 to 1847. The book had two translations to the Portuguese language in Brazil: *Biografia de Mahommah Gardo Baquaqua: um nativo de Zoogoo, no interior da África*, translated by Luciani M. Furtado. São Paulo: Uirapuru, 2017; *Biografia e narrativa do ex-escravo afro-brasileiro / Mahomma Gardo Baquaqua*, translated by Robert Kruege. Brasília: Editora da Universidade de Brasília, 1997. The Nago and Hausa rebels (many of them had already been freed) of the Malê rebellion in Salvador, 1835, characterize a special case regarding to slaves who got literacy by themselves collectively, they have learned how to read through the Quran under the guidance of the alufás, the name given to Muslim

priests. This is what police investigations demonstrated once it has frustrated and defeated the uprising of these black Islamized up people arms against the forces of the Government of Bahia (REIS, 2003). However, the records discovered recently about the São Pedro of Alcântara Rural Establishment, created by imperial decree in 1873, which had originated the city of Floriano in the State of Piauí, have revealed some important data regarding to the existence of a school of crafts and Elementary education for the children of enslaved people from the National Cattle Ranches and to which they had been admitted under the Free Womb Law of 1871.

Nowadays, the Letter has become a paradigm of resistance because of its claim for equal rights for both black and white people, also against racism, as well as to the construction of the identity and self-esteem of black men and women in Piauí. These values have been evoked and claimed by the black people community through organized group actions during the debate on public policies and affirmative actions. At last, the Esperança Garcia Memorial was founded by the Secretary of Culture of Piauí in 2017, and the Order of Attorneys of Brazil, Piauí State Section, granted Esperança Garcia the symbolic title of Lawyer (SOUSA, ... [et al.] 2017).

The “Letter” of Esperança Garcia is an actual portrait of the human experience of black men and women who went through the living hell of slavery. The report comes to us from the experience and through the eyes of a black woman who despite of being held as a captive, she had used her writing to defend herself from the slave system violence. This document is hugely important for it represents slave resistance besides of being a valuable piece of writing, a letter written by a slave’s own hand which historical value is priceless. It is a rare slave narrative from colonial Brazil, most of that because it is a document written by a slave woman who dares to write directly/straight to the Governor of Piauí himself to present her claims against the royal estate manager of the Algodões cattle ranch. This happened at a time when few people had access to literacy, only the wealthy elite and exceptionally the white male population. The manuscript written by Esperança Garcia was found in the Public Archives of Piauí by historian Luiz Mott. Among other considerations, the Brazilian researcher assures that.

The existence of a literate slave woman suggests us who is aware of a peculiar aspect that took over slavery in cattle farming areas in the backlands of Piauí. [...] we have found documents that referred to slaves who owned oxen, horses, and left some inheritance when they died, slaves that sent some cattle to be sold in distant animal fairs. Slaves who reported to the Governor about any greedier and usurper, stating textually that when a master bought a slave, he did not buy what the slave owned (MOTT, 1985, p.105).

The manuscript written by Esperança Garcia obliterates racial stereotypes about the regarding black slaves “natural” submission. These stereotypes are spread through colonial discourse, besides casting down the false myth of peaceful coexistence or “racial democracy”, as nailed in *Casa Grande & Senzala* by Gilberto Freire. In this way, referred to earlier, the name of Esperança Garcia is closely attached to slave resistance in Piauí. This is due to the fact that she is persuasive, claiming and at the same time moving in her writing, it highlights solidarity by rebutting the captivity abuses. Even though she was a slave, she was brave and bold enough to report abuse, physical torture, prohibitions to her religious beliefs as well as other outrages committed by Antônio Vieira do Couto, the Crown Estates Inspection Manager in Nazaré, against her, her children, her husband and her slave partners (XXX, 2017a).

In the first lines of the “Letter” Esperança Garcia asserts her identity and acknowledges herself as a “slave” and claims as a slave, a mother and a married woman the right to return to Algodões Farm, the place where she first came from, to live with her husband and children. Then, Esperança starts the account of a number of complaints against Captain Antônio Vieira do Couto, who assigned her cooking chores in his house, taking her away from Algodões and taking her to the Inspection House of Nazaré. By doing that, he prevented her from living with her husband. The narrative undermines the reputation of the Prosecutor of the Crown Cattle Ranches before the Governor of Piauí Captaincy, especially because Antônio Vieira do Couto appropriated of slave workforce belonging to the Crown, for his own benefit.

Algodões Farm was located in the county nowadays named as Nazaré do Piauí, in the state of Piauí. The “Letter” states that Esperança Garcia had been a slave who used to do chores in the Master household, and for the standards of the time, she was such a conscious woman that she intimidated the aggressor and resisted slavery aggression, she shows that in his written account (XXX, 2015). Before the Crown owned these Cattle Ranches, a total of thirty, they belonged to the Jesuits who had received them as a gift from Portuguese farmer Domingos Certão. When “the Jesuits were arrested, expelled and had their assets confiscated by the Marquis of Pombal” in 1760 (TITO FILHO, 1978) in compliance with hierarchical order of the Letter of the king of Portugal D. José I, on September 3, 1759, which sentence against the priests of the Society of JESUS: “[...] be promptly, and effectively exterminated, denaturalized, outlawed, and expelled from all my Kingdoms, and Domains, so that they cannot enter them anymore” (Nº 1 – Armário Jesuítico, Coleção dos Breves Pontíficos Leys Regias [...], desde o anno de 1741 [...]. Jesuit Cabinet and Jesuit Registry Office, Book 1A, Num. XVII, p. 33, Torre do Tombo, Lisbon)

The priests of the Society of Jesus had made the number of cattle fields increase from 30 to 39 (FALCI, 1995). We theorize that Esperança Garcia probably learned how to read and write with the Jesuit priests or people related to them, whom she had been slave before these priests were expelled by the king Dom José. Once expelled, the farmers were owned by the Crown of Portugal. The manuscript of the “Letter” written by Esperança, the insurgent slave, was addressed to the Governor of the Captaincy, according to a reliable transcript of that account.

We could solidly assert that the “Letter” is a genesis of African-Brazilian literature, a precursor and formation text of the afro-descendant literary canon in Brazil which grounds and shows a female writing style with a claiming tone. The narrative ornaments such as images, metaphors, a personal and autobiographical account, persuasion strategies, recurrent in this kind of literary writing, are connected to both poems and short stories of black women writers belonging to the *Black Notebooks*, the main journal regarding contemporary African-Brazilian literature, edited by *Quilombohoje* as well as some black writers who are not part of that group, like Lourdes Teodoro, Tânia Lima, among others.

On a broader scale, the “Letter” tries to open the entrance and exit door to the rights of the enslaved black people, thus, it shows their desire to reappropriate their body and fractured memory, violated and abused. The upper mentioned Letter reinvents trails and detours to go through the “The Door of No Return”, this one-way trip deletes the name, identity and ancestral memory of the African Diaspora in the New World, this deletion is also discussed by African-Canadian writer Dionne Brand in the book *A Map to the Door of No Return* (2001).

In the analyzed “Letter”, Esperança Garcia also claims the right to worship the rites of the white religion already appropriated by her and her slave partners. But this religiosity is also taken as a mask, self-defense, a *Negaça* (LIMA, 2005) of the informer slave, who strategically uses pretexts to aggravate either the beating crime or the cattle ranches administrator’s fault that usually assaulted Esperança Garcia and her children.

The motives of hatred and violence are not seen in the account written by the slave. However, referring to Angela Davis, Bell Hooks considers that rape was a usual terrorist practice among slaveholders to “demoralize and dehumanize” (HOOKS, 2018, p. 56) the enslaved black woman. Slave narratives are filled with facts of this nature, the consummation or attempt to rape from the slave’s masters against their slaves. Esperança was married. By the time of slavery, some kinds of assaults were silenced by the victim, particularly those that hurt the slave’s integrity.

Thus, in cases of sexual assault to the black and enslaved woman, she certainly preferred to silence rather than make public the embarrassment caused by the failed attempt or the rape consummation, or any other kind of violence that constrained the captive. This type of experience is also recurrent in both slaves life accounts and slave narratives in the United States, whose authors wrote and published autobiographical narratives, which told facts of their own slave life and their unfortunate slavery partner’s life, in the XVIII and XIX centuries (MORRISON, 1987), as well as in Cuba and other countries in the Americas where the African was enslaved. Esperança Garcia’s text also highlights solidarity, complicity and fellowship through friendly coexistence among the slaves of the Master household: [...] “Me and my partners to confess for three years” [...] (GARCIA, 1770).

The slave, subjugated to body torture, makes use of the written word traps: feelings of pain, onomatopoeic metaphors, the power of visual and hugely sounding images that represent natural phenomena. The writing is grounded on the oral speech, the speech of people almost illiterate, and on body language. It’s a language of contortion, body scourge, game playing and the account of cruelty reports presented in different slavery sceneries.

The narrative is fragmented by these little episodes like a spider web that slowly involves the reader into the world experienced by slaves, in the words of Dionne Brand, this world is described as “a door many of us wish never existed”. (BRAND, 2004, p.19). The “Letter” denounces and disqualifies the perpetrator before the governmental authority in the Captaincy: “[...] First is that he punch my son so much being a child that is came blood out of his mouth, me I can no explain I get beaten a lot, so much I fell off a two-storey house” (GARCIA, 1770).

The persuasive and claiming speech, Esperança Garcia’s autobiographical account and other slave writers migrated to the contemporary memory narratives of African-Brazilian poets such as Conceição Evaristo, Cristiane Sobral, Esmeralda Ribeiro, Geni Guimarães, Miriam Alves were edited by the Black Notebooks. Both Geni Guimarães’ and Tânia Lima’ poems cited below give us an idea of what is like to be a poor black child in Brazil. The autobiographical narrative brings back childhood events experienced by the African descent writers themselves. They make us face issues like racism or racial bias, Brazilian black slaves’ invisibility and social exclusion. For these writers, even dealing with painful experiences, they meet with their own memories, the memory of their beloved and their home, and that means open paths for the future, self-esteem, solidarity, and the overcome of racial issues.

Burning childhood

In the morning, watery
Clear, warm coffee
Visible from the bottom of an old pot
Almost finished
I grabbed the notebook
Boots on the ground, hard ground
I went to school to study
[...]

My box with six pencils in
Hid, ashamed of other long boxes:
Thirty-six colored pencils.
And in the afternoon
When I was back home
I stared at my dinner in the corner
of a wood-burning stove
Thinking about my father
Chopping the wood to light up the fire
Barefoot,
Ragged hat.
I didn't know why
Something hurt so deeply
That my heart ached
I had an insane desire
To pick up those coals
And set fire to the world³
(GUIMARÃES, s/d., p. 62-64)

The house is the cocoon of our childhood memories, the place where dreams are born and parents make plans for their children's future. Although that house is simple, the house from our childhood is the most beautiful house in the world, it is the place to our imagination, our childhood fantasies as humble as this house may be, it is revisited by our personal memory as the poetry of the African writer Tânia Lima highlights:

And all there shone from the ceiling
But it was a poor house
So poor
I have not seen any books
a single one to tell
the story⁴

(LIMA, 2000, p. 43)

The book *Úrsula* (1859), by Maria Firmina dos Reis, a Junior High teacher, is considered the first Brazilian novel essentially abolitionist as well as one of the first romanesque prose written by a black woman in the Americas to address this issue (DUARTE, 2004), different from books such as *Slave Isaura* by Bernardo Guimarães, inasmuch as this work reproduces racial matters, stereotypes and racial stigmas regarding slave way of thinking of the time. Therefore, in the chapter entitled "Black Susana", the maranhense novelist narrates from an inside point of view, she is aware of her black origin and feels the pain of that woman who had been kidnapped by slavery, where the old African woman narrates as both a subject and as an amplifying agent to her own voice to tell her memories from Africa: life in freedom, the pain of

being separated from her daughter, her husband, her family and beloved ones. From the perspective of the autobiographical memory narrative, the character recalls the traumatic episode of her capture on the way to the cereal crops, scenes of death, violence and horror during the crossing to the black Atlantic (GILROY, 2001) in the basement of a slave ship; the character also recalls how slaves were ill-treated and whipped by their Masters for trivial reasons, it's also worth mentioning the humiliation and desolation in the land of exile and slavery (XXX, 2017b, 2008). The account seems to us a true experience, as if Maria Firmina had taken it straight out of an African captive's mouth who went through all this, and the writer faithfully told that ill-fated experience as her own.

It was harvest time, and there was plenty of corn, yam, and mendubim (peanut) in our fields. [...] and all of a sudden two men showed up, and tied me up with ropes. I was a prisoner – I was a slave! I begged them in the name of my daughter to be free again: the barbarians laughed at my tears. They put me and other three hundred companions of misfortunes and captivity in the narrow and infectious hold of a ship. (REIS, 2004, p. 116-7).

The place, history, the human condition of enslaved Africans of their descendants, gender and social relations, “the eloquent and dramatic autobiography of the narrator, the ethnic and social engagement are part of each African descendant author's style. As an example of that, it's worth mentioning Conceição Evaristo's novel *Becos da memória*, which establishes dialogues with the African descendant literary tradition highlighted in both Esperança Garcia's Letter and several other slave narratives. That tradition is stated in the construction of a number of different literary genres written by male and female African Brazilian writers, just like *Recordações do Escrivão Isaías Caminha*, by Lima Barreto; *Quarto de despejo: diário de uma favelada*, by Carolina Maria de Jesus.

Publishing works by either slave authors or former slaves has not been common in Brazil but in The United States a great number of this kind of work was published, they're called slave narratives, especially from the second half of the eighteenth century until the first half of the nineteenth, such as accounts and epistles of runaway slaves. The strategies regarding these slaves autobiographical and personal experience narratives observed in the “Letter” (1770) of Esperança Garcia as well as in the book *Twelve years a slave* (1853), by Solomon Northrup; it's also worth mentioning *Autobiografía de un esclavo* (1840), by Juan Francisco Manzano, a former Cuban slave who narrates his experiences as a captive (MANZANO, 2015; 2006); another example of this kind of work are soldier Henrique Dias's epistolary narratives (17th century) he was a free black man who stood out as the leader of the Brazilian army in the fight against Dutch forces (CARNEIRO, 2005).

His epistolary narratives stand out for the claiming and autobiographical tone; the slave narratives upper mentioned highlight the afro-descendant tradition in diaspora, which has been especially practiced since its genesis, dating back from the eighteenth century up to the present days, in different literary genres such as memoir narratives, diaries, chronicles, epistles, autobiographies, poems, novels, tales, drama, published in old or modern editions.

APPENDIX / PHOTOS / ARCHAEOLOGICAL ARTIFACTS
Nazaré do Piauí, State of Piauí, Brazil, November, 2015



Pic. 2 – (Landowner, descendant of Esperança Garcia). In the location of Algodões' Cattle Ranch old house where Esperança Garcia has lived, Nazaré do Piauí, Brazil. Photo belonging to the author's collection.



Pic. 3 – Ancient Algodões Cattle Ranch, countryside of Nazaré do Piauí, State of Piauí, Brazil. In the location of the already demolished Cattle Ranch old house where Esperança Garcia lived. Photo belonging to the author's collection.

Notes

¹ A Carta da escravizada Esperança Garcia, escrita por ela mesma, e a formação do cânon literário afro-brasileiro (fragmentos). Author: Elio Ferreira de Souza, State University of Piauí, Brazil. Version: Francisca Oliveira, State University of Piauí, Brazil; Elio Ferreira de Souza. Revision: Nilson Macêdo Mendes Júnior – IFPI; Brazil.

² Eu Sou hua escrava de V.S. dadministração do / Cap^a m Ant^o Vieira de Couto, cazada. Desde que / o Cap^a m p^a Lá foi ademinar, q. me tirou da / fazd^a dos algodois, aonde vevia com meu marido, / para ser cozinheira da sua caza, onde nella / passo mt^o mal. / A Primeira hé q. ha grandes trovadas de pancadas / enhum Filho meu sendo huã criança q. lhe / fez estrair sangue pella boca, em mim não poço / esplicar q Sou hu colcham de pancadas, tanto / q cahy huã vez do Sobrado abacho peiada; por / mezericordia de Ds esCapei. / A segunda estou eu e mais minhas parceiras por / confeçar a tres annos. E huã criança minha e duas mais por Batizar. / Pello q Peço a V.S. pello amor de Ds. e do Seu / Valim T^o ponha aos olhos em mim ordinando digo / mandar a Porcurador que mande p. a Fazd^a aonde / elle me tirou p^a eu viver com meu marido e Batizar minha Filha / de V.Sa. sua escrava / Esperanca garcia.

³ **Infância acesa** / De manhã, café minguado / branquinho, morno, cansado, / saltava do velho bule. / Me apossava da brochura / pés na estrada, terra dura / ia para escola, estudar. / [...] / ... / Minha caixa com seis lápis / se escondia, envergonhada / ante outras caixas compridas: / Trinta e seis lápis em cores. / E a tarde, / de volta, em casa, / vendo meu jantar no canto / do fogão movido a brasa, / adivinhando meu pai / rachando a lenha pro fogo / pés descalços, / chapéu roto, / eu não sabia porque / vinha um doer tão profundo / que o meu peito se estreitava, / sentia um desejo louco / de pegar aquelas brasas / e botar fogo no mundo. / (GUIMARÃES, 1998, p. 62-4).

⁴ E tudo brilhava lá do teto / Mas era uma casa pobre / tão pobre / que não vi / um só livro / um sequer para contar / a história / (LIMA, 2000, p. 43).

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