4

Motherhood Silenced

Enslaved Wet Nurses in Nineteenth-Century Brazil

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> As for the "black mammies," tradition tells us that they held a true place of honor in the bosom of the patriarchal family. When freed, they would almost always round out into enormous negresses. Everyone fulfilled their whims; children asked for their blessing, the slaves treated them as ladies, the coachmen took them out in their carriages. On holidays, anyone who saw them, expansive and presumptuous among the whites of the big house, would have taken them for well-born gentlewomen, never imagining they were slaves from the senzala. . . . It was natural that the *negra* or *mulata* who breastfed the master's son, lulled him to sleep, prepared his food and warm baths, attended to his clothing, told him stories, and at times served as a surrogate mother would have been chosen from the best slaves of the senzala.[1]

In this well-known description, Gilberto Freyre – one of Brazil's most important twentieth-century intellectuals – highlighted Brazilian wet nurses' ability to adapt themselves to the Brazilian patriarchal family. For Freyre, Black culture, characterized as affectionate, creative, and docile, seeped into the intimate domestic relationships of Brazil's plantation houses and urban mansions, helping to forge a master–slave relationship that allowed many Blacks to be seen as part of their masters' family.[2]

Understood in its original context, Freyre's writing constituted a counter-discourse, both opposed to racist theories that were still fashionable in the 1930s and meant to recover and exalt Afro-descendants' role in forging

* Translated by Brodwyn Fischer.

[1] G. Freyre, *Casa grande*, 25th edition, p. 352. Translation adapted from Samuel Putnam's (G. Freyre, *The Masters*, pp. 369–370).

[2] R. B. de Araújo, *Guerra e paz*; É. Bastos, "Gilberto Freyre."

Brazilian culture and national identity. In Freyre's view, two decisive forces had shaped Brazilian society: patriarchal domination, which encompassed not only the family but also slaves, lesser masters, and free men; and the scarcity of white women during Brazil's first centuries of colonization, which allowed for high levels of intimate sociability between the dominators and the dominated. Freyre understood the kindness that purportedly characterized Afro-descendants as emblematic of the Brazilian slave–master relationship, a notion that fomented the so-called myth of racial democracy that gained importance in Brazil between 1920 and the 1950s.[3]

Since then, however, historians have repeatedly interrogated and challenged Freyre's notions of docile slavery. In the 1980s, inspired by the women's history movement, Maria Odila Leite Dias and Sandra Lauderdale Graham foregrounded the role of female resistance in the households of nineteenth-century São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro; their work was crucial in placing the relationships between masters and domestic servants – and especially wet nurses – at the center of Brazilian studies of slavery and abolition.[4] In recent years, these topics have received ever more attention.[5] Scholars are unanimous in emphasizing the hierarchical nature of domestic slave labor, and they also stress the place of the wet nurse at the summit of this hierarchy.[6]

All the same, there is still much to be done. This chapter will argue that, while the relationships between masters and slaves in the private sphere did involve affection, dedication, and loyalty, they were also gestated in an environment of abuse, humiliation, and physical and symbolic violence, all of which were essential features of slavery as an institution. Interactions that might be read initially as paradoxical or ambiguous were in fact constitutive of slavery's ideology of domination, experienced and enacted in various ways by both masters and slaves within Brazil's Big Houses and mansions.[7] What is more, the figure of the wet nurse and the practice of relegating breastfeeding to enslaved women – which was generalized among Brazil's dominant classes during the Empire – helped

[3] G. R. Andrews, *Blacks and Whites*; J. Needell, "Identity, Race, Gender and Modernity"; L. Schwartz, *O espetáculo*; R. B. de Araújo, *Guerra e paz;* M. Chor Maio, "UNESCO"; É. Bastos, "Gilberto Freyre"; B. Fischer, "Quase pretos"; P. Alberto, *Terms of Inclusion*.

[4] M. O. L. Dias, *Quotidiano e poder*; S. L. Graham, *House and Street* and "O impasse."

[5] M. Matos, "Porta adentro"; M. Carvalho, "De portas adentro"; O. Cunha, "Criadas para servir"; M. Muaze, "O que fará essa gente"; M. Arisa, "Bad Mothers."

[6] M. Muaze, "A descoberta"; M. Ribeiro Carneiro, "Procura-se preta"; B. Martins, "Amas-de-leite"; S. Koutsoukous, "O valor da aparência"; M. H. Machado, "Between Two Beneditos."

[7] L. F. Alencastro, ed., *História da vida privada*, v. II.

to forge a slavocratic habitus, a kind of second nature, in which future masters experienced the social relationships of slavery within their intimate circles and everyday lives from a very tender age.[8] This chapter analyzes these domestic and extremely conflictual interactions as an integral part of the slave system, critical to the symbolic and social reproduction of Brazil's master class.

The study of enslaved wet nurses allows us to explore the limits of a private dynamic that distilled the myriad sentiments that constituted the slave–master relationship in the domestic sphere.[9] A wet nurse was allowed to live and participate in her masters' intimate social world, but without ever overcoming her status as property or escaping the physical and symbolic violence to which every slave was subject. Her body remained commodified: her task was to breastfeed the master's child and care for his or her hygiene and physical education, keeping the child's body healthy until early childhood, when the nurse's nurturing services would no longer be needed. Breastfeeding and childcare were sometimes a wet nurse's only duties, but often wet nurses were often charged with other chores as well. In most cases, wet nursing implied the "silencing" of a woman's own motherhood: enslaved women were forced to give up the feeding of their own children in order to nurture their mistresses' babies. After her infant charge matured, a wet nurse could become an *ama seca* (literally "dry nurse" or nanny), be assigned to another service in the big house, or be returned to the sphere of productive work outside the home (which was especially common when a nurse served her owners' children or relatives). If a wet nurse was rented out – as was frequently the case in urban environments – she would be returned to her master and might never again see the child she had raised.

Contrary to Gilberto Freyre's description, "everyone" did not fulfill the wet nurses' "whims." The intimacy inherent in the nurse's work may have allowed many captives to live a bit better within the system that oppressed them every day; they might have enjoyed better clothing, food, and shelter than field slaves or *escravos de ganho* (those whose services were rented to

[8] As defined by Norbert Elias, *habitus* is a reflexive way of feeling and acting, a kind of second nature that gradually, and through self-conditioning, becomes a part of an individual's personality. Based on this notion, I argue that, during the Brazilian Empire, the master class was shaping and being shaped by a profoundly hierarchical and aristocratic structure of feeling, which impacted their views of the world and how they saw themselves in it, therefore establishing a slavocratic habitus. This habitus was shared as a behavioral pattern and an element of identity within and outside of the group, but it was also an element of social distinction. On the concept of habitus, see N. Elias, *A sociedade de corte*; *Mi trayectoria intelectual*; *Processo civilizador*, vols. I and II.

[9] T. Glymph, *Out of the House*.

third parties).[10] But the fact remained that the wet nurse's task necessarily involved the silencing of an enslaved woman's own motherhood; both her owner's will and social customs dictated that she would lose the right to live with her own child, even in the baby's first days of life. In that sense, when we consider enslaved wet nurses' living conditions – and the practices of power that such women were subject to – we can understand how slavery operated at the heart of human nature, seeking to negate an enslaved person's humanity and build a slavocratic habitus that would naturalize the hierarchical relationships that structured Brazilian slavery.[11] And not only that: the slavocratic habitus extended beyond the dominant classes, becoming in a certain sense hegemonic.[12] As newspaper advertisements attest, the use of enslaved wet nurses – along with other dominant practices – became widespread among other social classes, who devised a variety of contractual methods and price points to meet their perceived needs.

In analyzing slave agency through the figure of the wet nurse, this chapter takes a relational approach.[13] After all, the use of enslaved wet nurses – and the broader market that was created for nursing services – depended on slaveowning women's belief that the decision not to nurse one's own children was a form of social distinction. Unlike their North American counterparts, Brazilian historians have largely neglected this inseverable link, shying away from considering the role of white mistresses in the widely disseminated practice of enslaved wet-nursing.[14]

"FOR RENT: A GOOD WET NURSE": THE NEGATION OF MATERNAL BREASTFEEDING AS A SOCIAL PRACTICE IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY BRAZIL

Between the thirteenth and eighteenth centuries, it was common practice among wealthy European women to avoid breastfeeding. For much of this long period, the Catholic Church condemned maternal nursing; this stance was based largely in the philosophy of Saint Augustine, who believed that children were beings crushed by the weight of original sin and saw breastfeeding as a "voluptuous practice" that encouraged vice in

[10] M. Carvalho, "De portas adentro." [11] M. R. Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*.
[12] R. Salles and M. Borges, "A morte do barão."
[13] W. Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams*; T. Glymph, *Out of the House*; S. Jones-Rogers, "She Could Spare."
[14] T. Glymph, *Out of House*; E. Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation*; S. Jones-Rogers, "She Could Spare."

newborns and their mothers alike.[15] Although some doctors and theologians exalted breastfeeding, believing it was God's will or nature's calling, their views had scant impact. Thus, from the thirteenth century forward, aristocratic families commonly hired "internal" wet nurses, who lived in until an infant was weaned. Beginning in the seventeenth century, bourgeois families followed suit; by the 1700s, the practice had spread to the middle classes in countries like France, Italy, England, and Portugal, where the women were referred to as *saloias*.[16]

Upper-class women declined to nurse their babies for physical, moral, and sexual reasons: nursing was thought to deform a woman's breasts and body and to be harmful to women's naturally delicate health; the act of breastfeeding signaled a lack of modesty that was beneath the dignity of a lady, stimulating excessive sensuality and desire; and it was thought that sexual activity would contaminate a woman's milk and had to be curtailed for as long as she nursed. Little by little, outsourced breastfeeding, which was originally recommended only in cases where a mother died or was physically incapacitated, came to be understood as a mark of social distinction and a safeguard of feminine morality.[17] Despite some criticism, Brazil's wealthy classes hired women to work in their homes, which allowed them to exercise more control over their children's health and daily life.[18]

In Brazil, this social practice found legal grounding in the Philippine Code (a body of law that structured Brazilian law for more than two centuries after its publication in 1603), which "recognized that some women, because of their rank – that is, their high social status – might not wish to breastfeed their children."[19] And while European wet nurses were generally white, in Portuguese America enslaved Black women generally nurtured their masters' children. The arrival in Rio of the Portuguese Royal Court in 1808 catalyzed this practice, greatly expanding

[15] E. Badinter, *O mito*; P. Ariès, *História social*. Until the seventeenth century, some philosophers and theologians showed an actual "fear of childhood." Among them was Saint Augustine, who created a dramatic portrait of children that were in no way differentiated from their parents' sin. Based on this conception, some pedagogical methods emphasized coldness in relation to children. One example is J. L. Vivés' 1542 *Instruction of a Christian Woman*, where he stated: "Pleasures are the things which most debilitate the body, and for this reason, mothers lose their children when they voluptuously breastfeed them" (E. Badinter, *O mito*, p. 57).

[16] C. Heywood, *Uma história*, p. 89; J. Golden, *A Social History*.

[17] The practice of replacing a mother's milk with other forms of nutrition (baby food, flours, milk from animals, etc.) or for mercenary breastfeeding is very old. The Code of Hamurabi already included regulations about wet nurses, as did the codes of Ancient Greece and Rome.

[18] E. Badinter, *O mito*, p. 70.

[19] M. Silva, *Vida privada*, p. 14.

the market for enslaved women who had just given birth. For the nineteenth century, wet nursing by enslaved women is amply documented in travel narratives, personal letters, lithographs, and photographs, as well as in countless specialized journal articles and classified advertisements for the purchase, sale, and rental of wet nurses and their services.[20]

For Sale: a wet nurse with abundant milk of superior quality, with or without her 3-month-old son: may be sold with or without him. A demure and dedicated housesmaid.

(*Jornal do Commercio*, April 4, 1840)

For Sale: Wet nurse, 640$, one delivery, childless, healthy, good-looking, and skilled. Inquire at the Beco dos Carmelitas, no. 15.

(*Jornal do Commercio*, August 13, 1840)

For Rent: Wet nurse, at Rua da Cadeia no. 41, a young Black girl with abundant and very good quality milk, one delivery, childless, a perfect housemaid, very healthy and with no bad habits.

(*Jornal do Commercio*, October 1, 1845)

For Rent: A Black woman with very good milk, very clean and with no bad habits. Inquire at Rua Primeiro dos Cajueiros no. 71.

(*Jornal do Commercio*, December 1, 1850)

For Rent: a light-skinned wet nurse, 15, not from Rio, gave birth two months ago and produces good, abundant milk that can be examined on demand, guaranteed good conduct: for more information contact Fleuriano & Araujo Sobrinho at Rua Cortello no. 25, general store.

(*Jornal do Commercio*, May 5, 1878)

In Europe, outsourced breastfeeding was done by peasant women who did not have to abandon their own babies; in Brazil, by contrast, wet nurses were generally not allowed to nurture or care for their children. We can discern this norm in the first advertisement quoted here, which leaves the purchase of the wet nurse's child to the buyer's discretion, with no concern for the three-month-old infant's fate should the mother be sold alone. In the other ads, the enslaved women's children are not even mentioned; it was quite uncommon for mothers and babies to be obligatorily sold together.[21] Research into the *Jornal do Commeércio*'s classified

[20] J. F. Costa, *Ordem médica*; M. Silva, *Vida privada*; M. Ribeiro Carneiro, "Procura-se"; J. S. Jones-Rogers, "She Could Spare."

[21] Among 1,283 advertisements for domestic slaves published in *Jornal do Commercio* in April, August, and December 1840, only one announced that it was obligatory to purchase a mother and child together. The other ones were silent with regard to the slave's offspring, who could have died during or after birth or could have been left in the *roda dos*

ads for the months of April, August, and December in 1840, 1850, and 1871 ratifies studies that have already shown that the hiring of wet nurses was common practice in nineteenth-century Rio de Janeiro and its provincial territories.[22] It was part of the system that reproduced the slavocratic habitus, fomented as much by those who made a business from reaping wet-nursing profits as by families who hired wet nurses out of necessity or a desire for social distinction.

Most wet nurses, in both urban and rural homes, were asked to perform other domestic tasks at the same time that they cared for newborns – thus the mention in classified ads of nurses who were "skilled" or "perfect housemaids." In the wealthiest households, wet nurses could dedicate themselves exclusively to a baby's care, but all the same most sellers advertised a nurse's other virtues and skills – "devoted in the household arts," "she knows how to iron, launder, and sew perfectly," "demure," "modest," "good at ladies' hairdressing," "a good cook" – in order to convince buyers that the women would be useful in the household during and after their period of lactation. In terms of price, a comparison of the 1840s and the 1850s shows that the cost of wet-nursing increased after the end of the slave trade in 1850, along with the general rise in slave prices (especially those of enslaved women). In that decade, the quantity of ads also increased considerably, suggesting that there was a general market valorization of pregnant or lactating slaves. The sale or rental of enslaved wet nurses was an important and profitable economic activity in the major cities of the Brazilian Empire and would remain so in subsequent decades. In the 1870s, however, the wet-nursing labor force seems to have diversified considerably, with the entry of free women of color and poor white women, many of whom were immigrants.[23]

Most wet nurses were hired by families with newborn babies or nursing children. But nurses were also hired to care for orphans in institutions such as the *roda dos expostos*, or "baby wheel," which had been founded in Brazil in the eighteenth century in order to protect abandoned babies and

expostos (the place where mothers anonymously gave young babies over to charity) or even at the original master's house.

[22] M. Silva, *Vida privada*; M. Muaze, "A descoberta"; B. Martins, "Amas-de-leite e mercado de trabalho feminino"; M. Ribeiro Carneiro, "Procura-se"; S. Koutsoukos, *Negros no estúdio*; K. Carula, "Perigosas amas"; M. H. Machado, "Between Two Beneditos."

[23] M. Ariza, "Bad Mothers." As a consequence of this diversification, the Brazilian state passed a law regulating wet nurses' work in 1878, and different counties followed it with their own municipal laws.

save their souls, providing baptism, food, and care until they were old enough to work.[24]

The *roda dos expostos* of the Santa Casa de Misericórdia seeks to rent nurses to feed the children abandoned there: those who wish to offer their services should go to the Rua da Alfândega no. 14.

(*Jornal do Commercio*, October 12, 1850)

Historian Luiz Carlos Soares has argued that many masters obliged enslaved women to abandon their babies in the *roda dos expostos* because childless women's services fetched a higher price. In doing so, they opted for the certainty of immediate profit, as any earnings that a baby might have produced if he or she survived early childhood were quite uncertain.[25] Historian Maria Elizabeth Ribeiro Carneiro has shown that the overwhelming majority of wet nurses employed by the Casa da Roda (Rio's public "baby wheel") between 1847 and 1888 were enslaved.[26] Their masters – the men who profited from their work – were counselors of state, barons, priests, judges, doctors, and other members of the slaveowning class. Both Soares and Carneiro show that infant abandonment and the selling or rental of wet nurses were interlinked social practices in nineteenth-century Brazilian society. They were rooted in the open social acceptance of the exploitation of women's bodies in the slavocratic Empire.

In intense conversation with their Continental counterparts, Brazilian doctors and educators translated European manuals on early childhood education, seeking to guide families in their choice of wet nurses and advise them on their children's moral and physical instruction.[27] Excerpts from these manuals were published in women's weeklies or "instructional and recreational" magazines, with or without alterations that catered to Brazil's slavocratic reality:

Selecting a wet nurse is such a delicate task that it requires maximum caution and vigilance. She must be perfect. She will not do if she is cross-eyed, or very fat, or very thin. She should be cheerful, and ought to have good manners, good teeth, and good breath. It is important to examine her gums, because any trace of scurvy

[24] The *roda dos expostos* was created in Italy and was used throughout the Portuguese Empire. It was brought to Brazil in 1726, first in Bahia and then in several other cities: Rio de Janeiro (1738), Recife (1789), São Paulo (1825), Desterro (1828), and Cuiabá (1833). The wet nurses rented by the *roda dos expostos* would take care of the abandoned children until they were three years old. M. Marcílio, *História social*, p. 59; Venâncio, "Maternidade negada."

[25] L. Soares, *O* "povo de Cam," chapter 4, "Escravidão doméstica."

[26] M. Ribeiro Carneiro, "Procura-se."

[27] M. Muaze, "A descoberta" and "Garantindo hierarquias."

could be very harmful for a child. Medium-sized breasts are preferable to large ones, and brunettes are preferable to women who are fair, freckled, redheaded or ugly.

(Dr. César Augusto Marques, *Revista Popular*, 4:14 (April 15, 1862))

When it came to choosing wet nurses on the basis of health and hygiene concerns, Brazil's slaveholding upper and middle classes depended to a certain extent on literal translations of European manuals. But their content was resignified in the context of slavery. The enslaved nurse took the place of the European peasant. The appropriation of an enslaved body, justified as an exercise of property rights and a confirmation of the slavocratic habitus, took the place of free labor. A comparison of the imported normative literature with newspaper advertisements shows that this resignification was accomplished quite successfully. The characteristics most valued among wet nurses in Rio de Janeiro's slave markets were: youth (buyers preferred women between the ages of fifteen and thirty); good health; a childbirthing history that included only one delivery; the ability to produce abundant, good-quality milk; demonstrated "good behavior," which meant the woman was modest and home-bound; and possession of a "good temperament," most frequently defined as being calm, affectionate, peaceful, patient, and friendly to children. Beyond this, parents were advised to regulate a wet nurse's diet, consumption of alcoholic spirits, and sexual life in order to guarantee that their children consumed good-quality milk: experts recommended that it be "white and evenly colored, without yellow shadows, with a sweet taste and a substantial consistency."[28] Such recommendations were very close to those detailed in European manuals, but Brazilian classified ads also included descriptions such as *parda*, *crioula*, *preta*, and *preta da nação*, designations of color and status that both clearly marked the border between slavery and freedom and allowed potential buyers to identify which captives they might wish to acquire. Unlike *mucamas* (housemaids) and *pagens* (valets), whose physical beauty was heavily promoted, wet nurses were valued for their health, age, and ability to produce abundant milk.

For Rent: A very good *parda* wet nurse, very affectionate with children, with ample good milk; anyone who would like to have her should go to the Rua da Lapa no. 67.

(*Jornal do Commercio*, August 22, 1840)

[28] A. M. de Almeida, *Pensando a família*, p. 131.

For Rent: a *crioula* wet nurse with a great abundance of milk from her first delivery, 18 years old with a good disposition and a way with children, polite; Rua Bom Jardim no. 53.

(*Jornal do Commercio*, April 16, 1840)

For Rent: a Black African wet nurse, young and modest, with abundant good milk from her first delivery, she is very healthy and affectionate with children: at Rua do Rosário no. 61.

(*Jornal do Commercio*, December 8, 1840)

Breastfeeding by enslaved wet nurses was a widely disseminated practice among Brazil's wealthy classes until the late nineteenth century. Yet from 1850 forward, the custom attracted increasing criticism. Under the influence of Rousseau's *Emile*, medical and scientific discourse condemned "mercenary" breastfeeding in Europe and Brazil.[29] This emergent vision held that breastfeeding was a mother's highest function. To not perform it was an act against feminine nature, an impediment to the nascent love between a mother and a child, a denial of a woman's most important calling. The only acceptable reasons for a woman to bow out of the full realization of her maternity (which began with breastfeeding) were illness or death. In the new medical discourse, breastfeeding by nurses would only be accepted in order to guarantee a newborn's survival in the event of a mother's absence or incapacitation. This ever-strengthening narrative advocated a new vision of the mother, who was now understood as the central protagonist in the education and instruction of the Empire's future citizens; it also reimagined every role within Brazil's nineteenth-century aristocratic families, placing increasing value on childhood, women's education, and men's patriarchal leadership.[30]

The debate over breastfeeding sparked a war of opinions in the press that extended well past slavery's abolition.[31] Some doctors, such as Antônio Ferreira Pinto, believed that enslaved wet nurses were superior to free ones, because the former lived "in hopes of bettering their condition ... stirred by the expectation of social distinction, friendship, food, compensation or even freedom on the part of their masters or the

[29] E. Badinter, *O mito*; E. Shorter, *A formação*; J. L. Flandrin, *Famílias, parentesco*; A. Burguière and F. Lebrun, eds., *Histoire de la famille*; J. Golden, *A Social History*; M. Muaze, "A descoberta"; K. Carula, "Perigosas amas."

[30] M. Muaze, *As memórias*.

[31] Deeper analysis on this confrontation shows that criticism of slave breastfeeding increased during the decades of 1870 and 1880, when other factors such as the abolitionist movement, pressure from the slaves, and moral criticisms of slavery added strength to doctors' concerns about familial hygiene.

parents who rented their services."[32] Such arguments reinforced slavocratic discourse and resonated widely. Yet periodicals such as *O Constitucional* and *A Mãe de Família* argued the contrary, summarily disqualifying enslaved women:

> An infant fed with the mercenary milk of an African woman learns and imitates her customs and habits during the first phase of life, the child will reach puberty like the inhabitants of central Africa, his speech full of errors, with the strangest possible terminology serving as language.
>
> (*O Constitucional*, July 5, 1853)

> African women, stupid, full of had habits, without affection.
>
> (Carlos Costa, "Palestra do medico," *A Mãi de Família*, May 1879)[33]

Notwithstanding the intense battle fought out in the press, in the medical theses of Brazil's Imperial Academy of Medicine, and in early childhood education manuals, enslaved wet-nursing endured among families of the seigneurial class who could continue to afford the costs of renting or buying nurses even as the slave system entered into crisis in the 1870s and 1880s. The new familial ideals prescribed that mothers should bear the greatest responsibility for their children's care and education, in which breastfeeding played an important role. But in the private sphere, the slavocratic habitus – regulated by discretionary, authoritarian, and hierarchical relationships – spoke louder. There, despite normative medical discourse, white women's exemption from breastfeeding persisted as a sign of social differentiation and symbolic reproduction of the dominant class. In debate with strong scientific criticism, some ads in the *Jornal do Commercio* between 1878 and 1880 offered clients the opportunity to send a nurse's milk for examination before she was hired, thus guaranteeing her cleanliness and hygiene. In this way, as historian Ilmar Mattos has observed,[34] the "house" resisted the transformations that the "street" desired, incorporating only those elements that were deemed convenient: a woman's role as educator, the valorization of childhood, closer parent–child relationships, the importance of extended family, and the patriarch's organizing role. Newspaper ads, travellers' accounts, letters exchanged between relatives, and images of wet nurses preserved in family collections and public and private archives throughout Brazil all bore witness: the new familial order would not sacrifice the slavocratic habitus.

[32] A. F. Pinto, *O médico*, cited in L. F. Alencastro, *História da vida*, pp. 203–207.
[33] Quoted in K. Carula, "Perigosas amas," p. 201. [34] I. Mattos, O tempo Saquarema.

For Love and the Right of Ownership

My Dear daughter,

Like your mother, you were born in Brazil and a slave [Julia Monjola] gave you her milk to drink … She asked, in tears, as if you could understand, that you never forget the one who held you in her arms and put you to sleep at her bosom every day. And that if some day you became rich, you might buy her so that she would be only yours.

(letter from Charles Expilly to his daughter Martha, Paris, June 1863)[35]

The production of nineteenth-century narratives about wet nurses was quite unequal. Those most easily found by historians were produced by the dominant class, which exercised greater control over the production of discourse. The historian's challenge, then, is to give voice to subaltern groups by way of documents that sought not to erase but rather to silence them.[36] Such is the case of Epilly's letter to his daughter, as well as many other private family documents; such too was the case of the many photographic portraits of enslaved wet nurses commissioned by wealthy Brazilian families during the Empire.

Portraits were the most ubiquitous genre of photography in the nineteenth century. The custom of sitting for and collecting photos spread quickly among the seigneurial class beginning in the 1860s, when the *carte de visite* format arrived in Brazil.[37] Under the reign of the portrait, social groups distinguished themselves from others, constructing their social identity through visual markers. The portrait, which involved choosing the best possible pose for the mise en scène of the photographic studio, signaled the adoption of a particular lifestyle and social standard. In this way, such images enabled the dominant class's self-representation and circulated through mutual exchanges among family and friends. Research in a number of portrait albums indicates that the great majority of portraits (both male and female) were individual.[38] Children, however, could pose alone, in groups, or in pairs, often accompanied only by their wet nurses or nannies. The main motive for any child's trip to the photographer's studio was a desire to

[35] C. Expilly, *Mulheres e costumes*, pp. 9–10. [36] M. R. Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*.

[37] In Brazil, photographs helped to project images and to build self-images in Second Empire society. During this time, photographic production was based on two aesthetic models: the photographic portrait (with sizes varying from the *carte de visite* format, in which a 6 × 9.5 cm photograph was glued on a 6.5 × 10.5 cm card, to the *cabinet size*, in which a 10 × 14 cm photograph was glued on a 16.5 cm card); and the scenic photograph, generally developed on large-scale plates (18 × 24 cm). M. Muaze, *As memórias*.

[38] M. Muaze, *As memórias*; A. Mauad, "O poder."

perpetuate the memory of family and childhood.[39] Yet portraits such as those in Figure 4.1 also had a pedagogical function: the scene aimed to eternalize slavery and its power relations through the figure of the captive nurse, and thus help to construct and perpetuate the slavocratic habitus.

The images in Figure 4.1 reveal the interdependence between the family order and the slave order in nineteenth-century Brazil. They are part of a still-tiny group of photos of enslaved wet nurses that have been located in private and public archives by Brazilian researchers.[40] Captured in

FIGURE 4.1 *Carte cabinet*, Antonio da Silva Lopes Cardozo, National Archives, Bahia, 1868; *carte de visite*, Carneiro e Gaspar, private collection, Roberto Meneses de Moraes, Rio de Janeiro, 1866–1975.

[39] M. Muaze, *As memórias*.
[40] M. E. Leite, *Retratistas e retratados*; S. Koutsoukos, *Negros no estúdio*.

different moments and spaces, the wet nurses are always accompanied by children, who are usually held on the wet nurses' laps. This is how we see the nurse of the young Antonio da Costa Pinto, son of the Baron of Oliveira and Maria Rita Lopes da Costa Pinto, important members of the Bahian sugar aristocracy; and Vitorina, nurse to a girl named Maria Eliza, part of the Pereira da Silva Porto family, which made a living in the 1860s from the exploitation of slaves for hire in Rio but had made its fortune through international slave trafficking until the trade became illegal in the early 1830s.[41] The poses chosen for such portraits were usually similar and resembled those that were standard among free women, reinforcing the nurse's closeness to the children. All the same, it was clear from the photo's slavocratic visual grammar that the women were captives rather than mothers. The women's beautiful garments were part of a Brazilian ethos unveiled by Expilly: "Among the wealthiest families, possessing a wet nurse was a question of honor and self-regard, as well as an indication of the household's prosperity and wealth."[42]

The first image, with its African shawl and turban, ratified the importance of African customs in the care of infants. The second, by contrast, incorporated contemporary medical critiques, instead projecting the ideal of a hygienic and morally elevated nurse: Vitorina's hair was carefully bound, and her well-cut dress framed her décolletage.[43] Both images represent a modest nurse, like those described in so many classified ads. In spite of a medical-scientific discourse that opposed enslaved wet-nursing, the families who ordered these portraits showed the extent to which the practice was entrenched in familial habit – rooted in love, affection, property rights, or a slavocratic habitus that by its own logic was capable of folding all of those things into one. All the same, the photos of nurses and children reveal "a union grounded in love and past violence: a violence that cracked the slave soul, opening an affective space that is being invaded by the child of her master."[44]

[41] The Atlantic slave trade was officially outlawed by the Imperial government in 1831, though that law was poorly enforced. Definitive abolition of the trade followed after 1850. On these laws and their consequences, see B. Mamigonian, *Africanos livres*, and K. Grinberg, "Slavery, Manumission and the Law." The historian Ynae Lopes Santos states that the inventory of Vicente Pereira da Silva Porto, from 1865, presented 250 slaves, of whom 234 were intended for profit and the rest for domestic services. Furthermore, he was the owner of two houses and a lot on the Rua dos Arcos, as well as cars, jewelry, and shares from Banco do Brasil, Companhia de Seguro Fidelidade, and Cia de Tabaco, in Portugal. Y. Santos, *Além da senzala*.

[42] M. E. Leite, *Retratistas e retratados*, p. 115. [43] S. Koutsoukos, *Negros no estúdio*.

[44] L. F. Alencastro, ed., *História da vida privada*, p. 440.

As artifacts, the wet nurse portraits legitimated a slavocratic habitus that placed pedagogical value on the figure of the loyal, dedicated slave, who lived in hope of winning a master's concessions. In exhibiting well-dressed nurses photographed in expensive, award-winning photography studios such as Carneiro & Gaspar or Lopes Cardoso, the portraits also served as a mark of social differentiation within and between classes. Beyond this, they emerged from families' genuine desires to create memories and immortalize affective ties, even as they also separated subjects from one another in ways that visually reproduced the hierarchies inherent to Brazilian slave society.

These photographs only circulated in private and familiar spheres, where they signified the regard a slave had earned within a family. Yet such esteem originated in that same family's claim to own a wet nurse as property. The enslaved woman was thus fixed in a gray space between a family's affection and the violent fact of having been forcibly separated from her child. This ambiguous emotional position was not necessarily understood as contradictory; affection, violence, and loss were constitutive elements in the slavocratic habitus that was shared within so many of Brazil's big houses and mansions. The images immortalized a nurse's favored position in the eyes of her owner, while silencing the real and symbolic violence inherent in separating her from her child and snuffing out her maternal rights.

The "freedom letters" that families sometimes granted to wet nurses – especially powerful documents because they made the dream of freedom concrete – can be read from this same interpretive perspective.[45] Take, for example, the case of a Black woman named Custódia, wife of Pedro, who was manumitted by Antoinio Rodrigues Barbosa "for having (as a slave) raised my son Luis."[46] Or that of all of the nurses who breastfed the children of Florinda Maria da Silva and Caetano Alves de Oliveira, owners of the Barra Limpa and Ribeirão Frio coffee plantations in the part of the Paraíba Valley that sat within the Province of Rio de Janeiro. Their will stated:

> I emancipate my slaves Bento (from Congo) and his wife Claudina (*parda*); José Maria (from Benguela); Diogo (from Angola); Vitorino (from Congo) and his wife Feliciana (from Cabinda); Ana (*crioula*), who nursed my son Francisco; Cristina (from Congo), nurse to my daughter Rita; and Joana, the aged nurse of my daughter Joaquina. And as it is my intention to free from slavery all of the nurses

[45] R. Slenes, "Senhores e subalternos"; R. Salles, *E o vale*.
[46] Antonio Rodrigues Barbosa's will, October 31, 11839, Piraí. Arquivo Municipal de Piraí.

who cared for my children, who were already divided among some of my heirs, I authorize the executor named below to pay, at fair value, compensation to whichever of my heirs who might have this right, so that they can arrange to grant those slaves letters of freedom, and I beg my heirs to respect my request.[47]

The master clearly delineated who would ascend to the status of freedperson and why. Among his 683 captives, Caetano Oliveira granted freedom to only twelve, less than 2 percent. Ana (*crioula*), Cristina (from Congo), and Joana (already aged) were explicitly named; the captives Rosa (from Cabinda) and Joaquina (from Benguela), who had been given away as part of the dowry of Caetano's daughters Maria Florinda Alves and Helena Severina de Oliveira Ferraz, had their manumissions paid for by the estate. In all of these cases, freedom letters were granted only after the patriarch's death, in recognition of good service to the family.[48] Thus understood, manumission reinforced the slave system by legitimizing the image of the "good master" and alleviating the internal tensions of a society where the majority was Black and African.[49]

It is important to note that the inherent violence of a system that deprived enslaved women of the right to feed and care for their children was also an explicit part of the patriarchal playbook. Like the children of Caetano and Florinda Alves de Oliveira, the sons and daughters of Mariana and Joaquim Ribeiro de Avellar, Viscountess and Viscount of Ubá, were also cared for by wet nurses. Owners of more than 700 slaves, the couple also loaned lactating captives to close relatives. In 1862, an African woman from Cabinda named Felisberta was sent to care for Maria Izabel, the Viscountess's niece, after having breastfed her mistress's own children, Júlia and Luísa. Four years later, it fell to an African woman from Mozambique named Bernarda to go to Rio de Janeiro to serve the infant Mariana, the second heir of the Viscountess's brother José Maria

[47] Caetano Alves de Oliveira's will, April 1, 1844, Piraí. Arquivo Municipal de Piraí.

[48] Nevertheless, it should be remembered that Custódia and the slaves belonging to Caetano Oliveira were freed in the first half of the 1840s, during a period of great expansion of coffee farming in the Paraíba Valley, which drove a steady upward flow in the illicit slave trade and ensured the easy replacement of freed captives (T. Parron, *A política*; R. Salles, *E o vale*). With the end of the transatlantic slave trade after 1850, the price of slaves rose and the number of manumission letters decreased sharply; for two decades they would become scarce benefits, distributed according to the masters' whims. After the Free Womb Law of 1871, manumission letters began to rise again, first timidly and then quickly as slavery entered into its final crisis. This rise was driven not only by enslaved people's post-1871 entitlement to self-purchase (in full or in installations) but also by the expansion of abolitionism, which drove the establishment of emancipation funds and led masters to use conditional manumission as a tool to keep enslaved laborers working on their lands.

[49] R. Salles, *E o vale*, p. 292.

(also called Juca) and his wife Carolina. In a letter to his sister, Juca sent news about the new wet nurse:

Bernarda is fulfilling her duties very well, she is meeting all of our expectations and making us very happy. She is very respectful and thanks you with gratitude for all the constant good news that you send to her through me about her son, she thanks you very, very much for all of the care you bestow on Feliciano. If Bernarda continues this way, as I hope, I will be at ease.

Please send us news of our dear friend Felisberta, we never tire of remembering her seriousness and dignity, and the tokens of concern and friendship that she gave us while she was caring for Maria Izabel, what a lovely creature! Please send her our warm regards and tell her that we always remember her with pleasure. . . .

Your brother and sincere friend,

José Maria[50]

Despite Juca's elation about his family's harmonious and cordial relationship with Bernarda and Felisberta, in practice those ties were generated by a situation of extreme violence. From the sequence of letters, based on the birthdates of the children she served, we can calculate that Felisberta had given birth at least four times: in 1857, 1858, 1862, and 1866. In Bernarda's case, given very high rates of infant mortality, the chances that she would reunite with her son Feliciano when she returned to the provinces were very slim. Yet if she had resisted the post of wet nurse that her mistress offered to her, she would have sparked a conflict that could strip her of the hard-won privileges of a "house slave." Her only option was to do Viscountess Mariana's bidding and implore her to look out for the health of the son she had left in the care of other plantation slaves.

In seigneurial discourse, the praise directed at Felisberta and Bernarda wove together notable elements; competence in the tasks they carried out, good behavior, gratitude, a desire to please, subservience, and recognition of the master–slave hierarchy. In exchange, Juca and Mariana engaged in the "politics of favor" instituted by the slavocratic habitus. Cases like Felisberta's and Bernarda's point to the borderlands that existed within the master–slave relationship. Just like the nurses who were manumitted or depicted in family portraits, these women, through long years of intimate coexistence, came to experience affectionate bonds such as those expressed by Juca, Carolina, and Marica Izabel, who even refered

[50] Letter from José Maria Velho da Silva to Mariana Velho de Avellar, Rio de Janeiro, August 4, 1866. Roberto Meneses de Moraes private collection.

to Bernarda as "*mãe* [mother] Beta."[51] All the same, those affective ties were constructed through the coercion, oppression, and violence that necessarily grounded all slave–master relationships.[52]

Like Viscountess Mariana, the Viscountess of Arcozelo (Maria Isabel de Lacerda Werneck) – who lived at the Monte Alegre *fazenda* (coffee plantation) and also owned two other *fazendas* in Paty do Alferes (Rio Province) – also received a request for an enslaved wet nurse, this time to serve her granddaughter. In her journal, she explained: "The infant is voracious" (December 21, 1887). In response to the request, she visited her various *senzalas* (slave quarters) in order to find the best nurse. She chose Agostinha, mother of Guilherme, who had been born some six months before on June 25. Viscountess Maria Isabel noted in her diary: "I think she will do" (December 22, 1887). Two days later, before Agostinha left the plantation for Rio de Janeiro, Maria Isabel gave her 42$000 réis as a tip and wrote: "Agostina was pleased." But at the end of the 1880s, when methods of seigneurial control were wearing thin, Maria Isabel was soon frustrated by the news that her plantation administrator, Pedro Celestino, had liberated Agostina and another slave named Inez, in exchange for a payment of 1,326$000. Maria Isabel vented: "I am going to send for Agostinha, who has gone to nurse my little grandchild, and send another nurse in her place. It always shows that Pedro is Black and was once a captive" (December 28, 1887). Her account reveals more than simple dissatisfaction that Agostinha had been manumitted; it was clearly based in the notions of Black inferiority that characterized relations of dominance in Brazilian Imperial society.

Humans participate in history as actors and narrators.[53] This chapter argues that the visual and written narratives of Brazil's master class sought, through multiple practices of power, to construct a vision of the "good wet nurse" and the "generous master" capable of effacing the violence inherent in forcing a woman to nurse another family's baby. In so doing, they sought also to render invisible the violence of slavery itself. The sentiments and affections generated between wet nurses and their white children were a constitutive element of Brazil's slavocratic discourse. Even in a society where slavery was ever more condemned in

[51] "From Sabino you will receive a dress that Maria Izabel sends to her mother Beta." Letter from José Maria Velho da Silva to Mariana Velho de Avellar, Rio de Janeiro, March 20, 1867. Roberto Meneses de Moraes private collection.

[52] E. Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation*, p. 33.

[53] M. R. Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, p. 25.

moral terms, enslaved wet-nursing endured because of its critical pedagogical function in the slavocratic order: it taught future masters to put aside their sentiments in order to exercise control. Affection and violence were thus two complementary faces of a practice that contributed to the construction and reproduction of the slavocratic habitus that was also so precious to the master class as a form of symbolic and social distinction.

Competing with seigneurial discourse, most doctors and educators complained about enslaved wet nursing, alleging that slave women had poor hygiene and that no one could control their inferior temperaments, alimentary habits, and customs, which would inevitably harm a baby's health and moral education. The masters' narrative emphasized the good sentiments that grew from intimate coexistence, thus reviving the figure of the "good master" and seigneurial discourse more generally. Yet the medical narrative was based in a deep suspicion of the enslaved nurse. It cannot, therefore, be said that doctors were opposed to slavery, much less champions of enslaved women. They intended to promote medical knowledge at the expense of popular curative knowledge, to reassert white women's roles as educators, and to promote maternal breastfeeding for the sake of babies' health and family hygiene.[54] Despite their differences, masters and medical professionals converged in silencing and neutralizing the voices of enslaved women. In various spheres where enslaved women had exercised expertise and influence during the nineteenth century (including healing practices, medicine, childbirth, and child-rearing), Black women's contributions were attacked, criticized, and gradually replaced by occidental medicine and the ideal of the "civilized" white mother.

Enslaved women, however, expressed their suffering through their actions, often quite unexpectedly. This was the case of an enslaved woman studied by Maria Helena Machado, Ambrosina, who suffocated her master's son with a rag doll, killing him. In her deposition, Ambrosina claimed her innocence and revealed that she had been compelled to favor the master's son over her own; both boys were named Benedito. She also endured nights without sleep, suffering from overwork and extreme exhaustion. Her testimony revealed the suffering of a woman divided

[54] J. F. Costa, *Ordem Médica*. Medical manuals researched: F. J. Almeida, *Tratado da educação*; C. Amaral, *Lição para meninos*; L. Barreto, *Tratado de educação*; F. Fénelon, *De l'Éducation*; F. Franco, *Tratado de educação*; F. Froebel, *L'Éducation de L'homme*; J. Imbert, *A infância*; Dr. D. Jaguaribe Filho, *A arte*; V. Jolly, *Tratado de educação*; A. Martin, *Educação das mães*; J. Melo, *Generalidades cerca da educação*; A. J. M. Moraes, *O educador*.

between "two Beneditos," a state that was always denied in the seigneurial discourse.[55] So too was the case of Julia Monjola, who, in saying goodbye to the young Martha Expilly, implored in tears that the girl return to purchase her after she grew up, out of gratitude for the services the nurse had rendered – an appeal, in truth, that was directed more to the adult Expillys, parents to the still-infant child. Julia Monjola sought arguments that might lead to her manumission in the slavocratic primer, finding recourse in the gratitude that the family might have felt during the time she cared for the baby girl. Julia likely feared the fate she might suffer in the hands of another master, but her pleas – like those of thousands of other wet nurses – fell on deaf ears. The boundaries between love and property rights became well drawn, and property rights held the advantage whenever it became necessary to choose between them.

[55] M. H. Machado, "Between Two Beneditos."