
Netto, Moisés de Souza

(?-1856), a Creole slave

Daniela Vallandro de Carvalho

<https://doi.org/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.013.74666>

Published in print: 01 June 2016

Published online: 31 May 2017

A version of this article originally appeared in *The Dictionary of Caribbean and Afro-Latin American Biography*.

who fought in the so-called Farroupilha civil war (1835–1845), an attempted secession by the rural southern Brazilian province of Rio Grande do Sul. The conflict, known in English as the Ragamuffin War because of the tattered rags worn by the gaucho rebels, was one of many armed uprisings that shook the Brazilian Empire in the wake of don Pedro I's abdication in 1831. The illegitimate son and slave of a rebel general named Antonio de Souza Netto, Moisés was a soldier in the Farroupilha insurrection by 1840. He earned his freedom on 31 May 1845. Moisés's mother's name is unknown, but she was known to be a slave, probably from the same plantation as his father.

The life story of Moisés was long invisible, but the common practice of freed slaves to assume the last names of their former masters makes it possible to piece together his story. Aside from the potential of given names to reconstruct individual biographies, this practice also reveals that breaks from slavery could be relative by pointing to the social networks of slaves and freedmen and the difficulty they often encountered in extricating themselves from family relations established at birth. This practice also highlights the possibility that certain names could confer prestige when effectively appropriated. This exchange of benefits reflected a dynamic in which reciprocity in the relations of slavery occurred at every moment. However, it is important to note that reciprocity did not mean equality.

Moisés's life was shaped by a series of conditions: he was a slave, a man from the countryside, a soldier, and the son of General Netto. Relations between masters and slaves, with various nuances, were commonplace in slave societies. The nature of the relationship between Netto's father and mother remains unknown, but that interaction produced a son born into slavery whose father and master were, for a time, one and the same. Moisés grew up on a few of his father's plantations and from a young age he grew accustomed to seeing the general involved with horses and armed conflicts. The general was considered an expert horseman, having led countless battalions and brigades of cavalry units throughout his life. As a young man in the Cisplatine War (1825–1828) between the empire of Brazil and the United Provinces of Rio de la Plata, he had been the captain of the cavalry. By 1835, however, he had become one of the leaders of an attempt to establish an independent nation in the primarily rural state of Rio Grande do Sul; the state had long chafed under the Empire's taxes and free-trade policies that disadvantaged them against their fellow gauchos in Uruguay and Argentina. By 1836 General Netto had established a separate state, the Riograndense Republic. In his memoirs, the Italian revolutionary Giuseppe Garibaldi, who joined the Ragamuffin rebels in 1839, referenced the general's aptitude, noting that only (Antonio) Netto surpassed the horse-riding skill of Bento Gonçalves da Silva, the first president of the new republic. Moisés's father, in short, was a model horseman, which, in the regional culture of southern Brazil, rendered him a perfect gentleman.

As Netto was a slave and a soldier, his freedom was predicated on his active participation in the war effort, as was the case for many other slaves. The fact that he was the son of a general did not grant Netto special treatment of any kind, nor was he ever acknowledged as a legitimate heir, a fact gleaned from the total absence of any mention of Netto in the general's biographies. In the traditional historiography, the general only had two daughters from his marriage to the Uruguayan Maria Medina Escavola. In that respect, Netto was merely a slave like so many others. His distinct contribution to the Farrroupilha conflict would begin in June 1840, when in the midst of a harsh winter, he was one of General Netto's troops who skirmished against the legalist (imperial) forces of Brazil's Eighth Army Brigade, commanded by Colonel Francisco Pedro de Abreu, the baron of Jacuí, who was intimately involved in the majority of the legalist victories over the Farrroupilha rebels. On 18 July 1840 Netto abandoned the rebels to join the legalist forces of the Fifth Cavalry, where he remained through the rest of the conflict. Following that encounter between the opposing forces, Netto became a legalist soldier, fighting for Pedro de Abreu, his father's great nemesis.

This defection from the rebel to the legalist camp allowed Netto to initiate the negotiations that would secure his freedom and confer upon him a degree of upward mobility in the imperial slave society. In late February 1845, immediately after the signing of the Treaty of Poncho Verde that ended the Farrroupilha conflict, Netto sent an official application for his manumission on account of war service to the baron of Caxias, then the army general and provincial president. On 31 May 1845 the baron wrote in the margin of the document that Netto should be granted his liberty. Six days later, his manumission was registered in the First Notary of Porto Alegre. From that point on, as a freedman, Netto worked for the baron of Jacuí on one of his cattle ranches called Tabatinga in the district of Capivari on the bank of the Pardo River. Netto exercised a few notable functions there. He was the foreman and administrator, which entailed command of a pasture or a meat-salting area called a *charqueada* and also entrusted him to lead troops.

Netto died in 1856 on the farm where he worked. He was stabbed after an altercation with a slave named Agostinho who lived on the baron's plantation. His death underscores some important elements of his postwar trajectory and the way in which he built a life as a freeman. Even after a decade of armed conflict, some local commanders not only enhanced their prestige but were also able to manipulate the hardships of those years in their favor, drawing advantages—economic, political, and military—from the situation. Francisco Pedro de Abreu was one such man who, along with his allies, established connections and expanded his fortune in the years after the civil war. The same conflicts that frequently rocked the southern province in the nineteenth century were also key to the consolidation of alternative paths of upward mobility and social integration. This was true both for prominent men of the imperial elite as well as slaves and freemen. The war created spaces for action and facilitated certain relations that granted some slaves the possibility of a freedom less dependent on unpredictable forms of subsistence. This was Netto's trajectory. As a freedman, he attained a position as foreman and administrator that was unobtainable for other former slaves. In fact, these were roles normally reserved for the sons of key ranch hands and men within their circles of trust. Netto, by exercising these important functions, had slaves under his command, a fact that ultimately led to his death.

As for the details of Netto's death, on 13 December 1856 Netto gathered four of his rural laborers in order to punish Agostinho, a man of mixed Afro-Brazilian descent. Agostinho tried to negotiate his punishment with his superior, saying that what Netto had decided was unfair. This misunderstanding enraged Netto, who drew a knife and advanced upon Agostinho. Despite Netto's physical dominance, the slave prevailed, disarming Netto and wounding him in the chest.

This skirmish reflected a number of motivations rooted deeply in the social positions that Netto and Agostinho had reached in their lives. Agostinho was tasked with securing and maintaining the baron's land as well as overseeing the safety of his cattle and, when necessary, overseeing the recovery of runaway slaves. Men in that position usually lived on small settlements on the outskirts of rural properties where they could live with their families, grow their own crops, and raise some livestock. Agostinho occupied, in other words, a position almost as distinguished as Netto, one not available to the vast majority of slaves.

The conflict between the two men can thus be seen as a dispute between the privileges and positions attained by each of them. Even though their roles were considered of greater importance compared to most others on the plantation, they both possessed the same degree of influence. Yet Netto was technically Agostinho's superior. It is important to note that the position of foreman held by Netto was an extremely important role in the arsenal of seigneurial domination. Netto acted essentially as the oppressor of his underlings, distancing himself from the world of which he had been a part. Agostinho also accused Netto of making advances on a slave named Juliana to whom Agostinho was engaged. Finally, Agostinho noted that he knew Moisés as "Mr. Netto." This forced display of deference likely bothered Agostinho as much as it did the other slaves who knew that they were under the command of a former slave. Netto, for his part, seemed to make a point of underscoring this fact to his subordinates on a daily basis until the tension became unbearable. For years, as Netto separated himself further and further from the men and women whose status he once shared, he became an oppressor who used his social standing to enter a world open almost exclusively to white men. His color and shared experience with those in bondage like Agostinho were left behind. The untenable situation and the daily tensions resulted in Netto's outburst against Agostinho and culminated in the attack.

A jury trial at Rio Pardo sentenced Agostinho to death for the murder on 19 September 1857. Agostinho confessed the crime to the jury. The law on which his sentence was based was the direct result of a series of insurrectionist episodes in the 1830s, after which the imperial state strengthened the power of masters over their slaves in order to prevent agitation by the latter. The language of the law reflects greater penalties for crimes committed against slave owners, their families, taskmasters, and foremen. In other words, the jury decided that Agostinho's punishment should fall within the harsh legal architecture created to protect slave owners. In that sense, Netto, the former slave, had his death treated by the law as if it had been a crime committed against the master himself or a member of his family.

Two conclusions can be drawn from this result. The first has to do with the complex and dynamic mosaic of slaveholding relations embedded in this particular context—agrarian, bellicose, and on the southern frontier of the Brazilian Empire. These combined factors allowed for the mobility and changing social status of a figure like Netto within the broader context of the slave society in which he lived. As important as these factors were, however, they did not act alone in Netto's life. The second conclusion to be drawn relates to the perception of how much Netto's social status improved as a result of the relations he built from his time as a slave in the army and afterward as a freeman. This is

the only known situation in which a slave was granted manumission due to his direct participation in the Farroupilha civil war. Generally speaking, for most other slaves and people of color, the arc of freedom worked in reverse course as a result of this conflict, toward precariousness and instability.

Bibliography

Aladrén, Gabriel. *Liberdades negras nas paragens do sul: Alforria e inserção social de libertos em Porto Alegre, 1800-1835*. Rio de Janeiro: FGV Editora, 2009.

Flores, Moacyr. *Negros na Revolução Farroupilha: Traição em Porongos e farsa em Ponche Verde*. Porto Alegre, Brazil: EST, 2004.

Leitman, Spencer L. "The Black Ragamuffins: Racial Hypocrisy in Nineteenth Century Southern Brazil." *The Americas* 33, no. 3 (January 1977):504-518.

Schwartz, Stuart B. *Slaves, Peasants, and Rebels: Reconsidering Brazilian Slavery*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992.