
Garcia, Esperança

(fl. eighteenth century),

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enslaved Afro-Brazilian woman and author of the earliest known petition signed by an enslaved person in Brazilian slave society.

Nothing is known about the date and location of Garcia's birth, but her 1770 petition includes key biographical details about her. She was of African descent, married, a cook, and mother of two children: one 3 years and the other 7 months old. She was a practicing Catholic. When the petition was written, Garcia lived in the captaincy of Piauí, in the northeast of colonial Brazil, on the Fazenda dos Algodões (Farm of the Cottons), in the Nazaré inspectorate, a part of the farmland that had belonged to the Jesuits until a royal decree expelled them from Brazil in 1759. Her letter, dated 6 September 1770, was written to Gonçalo Lourenço Botelho de Castro, governor of the region of Piauí. It deserves full transcription because of its uniqueness and dramatic flair:

I am Your Excellency's slave, under the administration of Captain Antonio Vieira de Couto, married. Ever since the Captain went there to administer those lands, he took me from the Fazenda dos Algodões, where I lived with my husband, to be a cook in his household, where I am very unhappy. My first complaint is that my son, who is only a child, was beaten severely so that blood came from his mouth. As for me, I can't even explain it, I am a punching bag. My second complaint is that I have been here with my fellow slaves for three years without being able to confess. My child and two others still need to be baptized. I ask Your Excellency for the love of God and your high charge, take notice of me, command your servant to send me back to the farm where he took me from so that I can live with my husband and baptize my daughter. I am Your Excellency's slave, Esperança Garcia.

This letter, found in the state archive of Piauí, comes with a document narrating the atrocities practiced by the captain against Garcia (among other slaves), who accuses him of cruel beatings, forcing slaves to work at night for his own—and not the Crown's—profit. Some of her labors included making manioc flour, cleaning cotton, weaving hammocks, and extracting castor oil for lamps. It reads: "Having suffered various punishments, Esperança ran away several times and as a result the Captain really laid into her, beating her over and over with a stick, and swearing all the while that he would tie her up, and so she ran away for good with her two children and up to this moment there has been no news of her."

Such is the last piece of information available about Garcia, a pioneer in denouncing the cruel treatment meted out to slaves by their owners in Brazil. When the letter was discovered in 1979, Esperança Garcia became an important icon for the black movement in Piauí, and the letter's date, 6

September, became an official state holiday commemorating the Afro-Brazilian presence in the history and culture of Piauí. In addition, a maternity hospital near the area where Esperança lived was dedicated to her. Many nongovernmental organizations founded by Afro-Brazilian women also bear her name. She is additionally remembered and commemorated with a statue that may be found in the Centro de Artesanato (Center for Artisan Crafts) in Teresina, capital of Piauí.

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