The Slave Market in Rio de Janeiro circa 1869: Movement, Context, and Social Experience

Zephyr Frank & Whitney Berry

The market for slaves in Rio de Janeiro underwent a series of major transformations over the course of the nineteenth century. Prior to 1831, slaves poured into the city during the period of the legal Atlantic slave trade. Tens of thousands more Africans landed in Brazil's imperial capital before the illegal Atlantic trade was finally suppressed in 1850. Thereafter, buying and selling slaves shifted to a local market typified by individual sales. The proportion of Brazilian-born slaves rose and the social experience of the market changed for all parties involved. Rather than a concentrated, large-scale process dominated by formal market spaces and professional slave traders, the mature slave market in Rio de Janeiro evolved after 1850 into a continuous (in the sense of both time and space) process that encompassed every neighborhood in the city. The absence of an individual slave would be felt in the neighborhood from which she originated, just as her new presence would be felt in the home and neighborhood of her new owner. Mapping the origins and destinations of slaves in this system, using detailed transaction data from the year 1869, highlights the ubiquity of slavery in Rio de Janeiro as well as the constant movement of slaves in and out of new environments. Connecting buyers and sellers to data regarding their wealth and occupations further highlights the significant changes experienced by all parties caught up in the system. Dynamic visualization techniques reveal meaningful patterns at multiple scales.

Keywords: slavery, Rio de Janeiro, slave market, slave mobility, property values

Historical Context

Rio de Janeiro, Brazil’s imperial capital, provides the setting for this study in spatial historical visualization. An emerging metropolis in the middle years of the nineteenth century, Rio de Janeiro’s population and economic status were unparalleled in Brazil. With 272,000 residents in the urban parishes according to the 1872 census, the city accounted for a disproportionate share of the country’s export trade (dominated by coffee) and was home to nearly all of the important institutions of the state. In this context, a population of nearly 50,000 slaves lived, worked, and were sometimes bought and sold. Although slaves made up just under one-fifth of the population, they accounted for a much more significant proportion of the labor force, particularly in the manual trades and domestic service. The distribution of slaves was broad in Rio de Janeiro, with very few owners commanding more than ten bondspersons. In addition, given the urban environment and labor market, slaves were often rented out to third parties or expected to work outside of the supervision of their masters. Thus, slaves, sometimes operating autonomously, were found in virtually every part of the city.

Analysis

Our analysis centers on the notion of changing circumstances associated with slave sales. Slaves moved from sellers to buyers and, in the process, from one household and neighborhood to another. The greater the change in household and neighborhood, the more profoundly slaves experienced the effects of being sold in Rio de Janeiro’s complex urban setting. There are three important categories where we can observe the degree of change in our dataset. First, we examine the simple question of distance: how
far did slaves move? Second, our data allows us to determine the
gender of buyers and sellers, providing insight into this important
dimension of change in circumstances. Third, using detailed
information about property values, we can address the question of
change in general neighborhood characteristics as well as in
the specific value of the properties of sellers and purchasers. Our
focus on these three categories is warranted for the following basic
reasons:

1) Since slaves were somewhat (or entirely) constrained
in their movements, being sold over a great distance meant
moving partly or wholly out of one context and into another.
Maintaining connections to the old neighborhood would,
we hypothesize, become increasingly difficult over greater
distances. In addition, in cases where slaves were sold out of
the city or purchased from sellers in other communities, the
spatial dislocation would have been complete.

2) The gender of a slave’s owner was consequential for
at least two reasons. First, female slaves made up about 55
percent of the average woman slaveholder’s bondspersons;
on the other hand, females made up about 36 percent of the
average male slaveholder’s bondspersons. Thus, on average,
a slave sold from a male owner to a female owner would move
from a world dominated by male slaves to one where female
slaves made up a slight majority. Second, female owners,
on average, were slightly more likely to manumit their
bondspersons, and their propensity was to manumit female
slaves. Thus, a female slave sold from a male owner to a
female owner might see a slightly higher chance of freedom
in the long run. A male slave in the same scenario might
actually see a slight decrease in the chances of manumission.
In any event, the immediate effect of being sold would often
be to place the prospect of liberty further over the horizon for
a slave, as many owners who manumitted their bondspersons
did so on account of their years of “good service,” a laurel
slaves could only hope to garner after a significant period of
time.

3) The value of property occupied by the slave owner is
a reasonable proxy for their economic standing. Likewise,
the surrounding values in the neighborhood provide crucial
information regarding the wider context of wealth or poverty
within which the slave would be expected to live and work.
Note, of course, that some slaves lived outside of their owner’s
residences, so this is a tendency, not a universal rule. A slave
moving from a rich neighborhood to a poor one would, we
hypothesize, experience quite different conditions of living
and labor.

According to our data, most slaves sold within the city
moved significant distances. As the visualization shows, many
slaves moved from the periphery of the city center and vice versa.
Movement was, therefore, often from one kind of social world
to another. Filtering by gender, the visualization and underlying
data show that male slaves tended to move greater distances than
their female counterparts as the result of a sale. For the portion
of the data where we have two addresses located within the city,
the average distance traversed by males was 1,408 and by females
1,198 meters. Women buyers and sellers, a relatively small
minority in both cases, tended to transact across shorter distances,
suggesting that gender influenced distance both with respect to the
characteristics of the slave and the owners. Finally, in the limited
number of cases where it was possible to calculate neighborhood
rent statistics, on average slaves experienced a 41% absolute
difference between the rent values associated with their previous
home and their new one.

Conclusions and Pathways for Further Exploration

The data and accompanying visualizations presented here
reveal complex and meaningful patterns in slave experience. Rich
data regarding buyers, sellers, and their slaves, illuminate a dynamic
market system differentiated along lines of gender that sometimes
thrust slaves into dramatically different living conditions. Because
the data contains elements of both space and time, it moves beyond
static portraits of slave life and begins to capture the dimensions
of instability and change experienced by thousands of slaves in the
city of Rio de Janeiro over the course of the nineteenth century.
Connecting these events to detailed information regarding the
wider context of slave’s points of departure and destinations yields
further insights into how changes in ownership were significant for
individual slaves and for categories of bondspersons.

There are significant limitations to our analysis, including
a lack of full information with respect to most cases of slave
sales. Furthermore, our data cover but part of one year, 1869,
and only future archival work will tell whether these patterns
were similar over longer stretches of time. Finally, our approach
to understanding changes in slave experience is indirect and
inferential. This probably cannot be helped, given the paucity
of information available in the archives concerning what slaves
themselves felt about their lives and owners. Nevertheless, here
for the first time we see the outlines of the slave market in Rio de
Janeiro at a particular point in time. We see slaves in motion and
can begin to do the work of historical sleuthing and imagination
necessary to give meaning to their paths through the city.
### Street Distance Traveled by Slave Gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Obs</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Dev.</th>
<th>Min</th>
<th>Max</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male Slaves</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>1408</td>
<td>1343.3</td>
<td>15.5</td>
<td>5148.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female Slaves</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>1198</td>
<td>1161.1</td>
<td>13.8</td>
<td>5106.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Slaves</td>
<td>172</td>
<td>1355</td>
<td>1073.3</td>
<td>13.8</td>
<td>5148.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Difference is Rents as a Percentage of Seller’s Rent by Slave Gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Obs</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Dev.</th>
<th>Min</th>
<th>Max</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male Slaves</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>0.51</td>
<td>1.34</td>
<td>-0.9</td>
<td>5.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female Slaves</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>0.34</td>
<td>1.42</td>
<td>-0.78</td>
<td>7.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Slaves</td>
<td>131</td>
<td>0.41</td>
<td>1.39</td>
<td>-0.9</td>
<td>7.71</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Change in Owner Gender by Slave Gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Male Slaves</th>
<th>Female Slaves</th>
<th>All Slaves</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Obs</td>
<td>Percent</td>
<td>Obs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Change in Owner Gender</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>84%</td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change in Owner Gender</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>143</td>
<td></td>
<td>208</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Slave Market in Rio de Janeiro
Movement, Context, and Social Experience

Figure 1 | See patterns
The Slave Market in Rio de Janeiro
Movement, Context, and Social Experience

Transaction Information

Slave gender: Female  Slave name: MARIA
Seller gender: Female  Seller name: D.MARIA ROZA DA CONCEICAO FERREIRA
Buyer gender: Male  Buyer name: JOSE PACHECO FERREIRA
Distance traveled: 663 m  Slave age: 40 years
Property value change:

Timeline  Filters

Day  Transaction Range: February 13 - February 14, 1869  Routes

February 13, 1869  May 7, 1869

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Figure 2 | Discover pathways
Figure 3 | Analyze gender

2. For a discussion of professional slave traders in Rio de Janeiro, before and after 1850, see Luís Carlos Soares, *O “povo de cam” na capital do Brasil: a escravidão urbana no Rio de Janeiro do século XIX* (Rio de Janeiro: 7Letras, 2007), esp. pp. 51-53, 56. Soares does not analyze the small-scale local slave sales that form the basis of the present analysis, focusing his attention, instead, on larger slave traders. Relying on published newspaper data for the buying and selling of slaves, Soares comes to the conclusion that there were far fewer slave sales in the city after 1850.


5. One out of 964 slaves in the slave sale database with civil status noted was listed as married; the remaining 963 appeared as unwed. This is not, it should be noted, an artifact of the category—slaves for sale. Independent records yield rates of marriage almost as low. For instance, in São José parish, the baptism records of slaves in 1850 and 1868-71 show that married mothers made up just 11 of 448 cases. For the study of slave marriage in rural plantation zones, see Robert Slenes, *Na senzala, uma flor esperanças e recordações na formação da família escrava Brasil Sudeste* (Rio de Janeiro: Nova Fronteira, 1999). A detailed case study is also offered in Sandra Lauderdale Graham’s *Caetana Says No: women’s stories from a Brazilian slave society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).


7. Meia-siza, Recebedoria do Rio de Janeiro, 1869, AGCRJ.

8. Decima urbana, 1870, AGCRJ.

9. This calculation is based on 181 estate inventories (70 women, 111 men) drawn randomly from the Arquivo Nacional for the period 1855-1860. ANRJ, inventarios. Nearly identical percentages (57 percent female slaves among women owners, 36 percent among men) were also calculated from a large corpus (N = 1,096) of vaccination records involving adult slaves during the years 1851-1854. AGCRJ, vaccinations.

10. Analysis of 85 manumission records from the periods 1854-55 and 1868-70 suggests that women made up between one-fifth and one-third of manumitters, and that they overwhelmingly manumitted female slaves (about 85 percent). Using these same records, we see that female slaves accounted for about 63 percent of all manumissions. ARQUIVO NACIONAL, CARTAS DE LIBERDADES, livro n.53 ano 1854/55 do 1.oficio de notas do RJ. Periodo 24/03/54 a 21/06/1855 e ARQUIVO NACIONAL, CARTAS DE LIBERDADES, livro n.74 ano 1868/70 do 1.oficio de notas do RJ. Periodo 10/09/68 a 04/05/1870.

11. For a similar argument based on the study of the movement of artisans within the space of the city, see Zephyr Frank, “Layers, Intersections, and Flows,” *Journal of Social History* 41:2 (winter 2007).

Supplementary Information is linked to the online version of the paper at http://www.stanford.edu/group/spatialhistory/cgi-bin/site/pub.php?id=11.

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