

# Rethinking Slavery's Abolition in Ceará Through an Engagement with Maritime Marronage

Martine Jean\*

**Abstract:** In late January 1881, a group of anti-slavery raftsmen blockaded the port of Fortaleza to slave traders declaring that enslaved persons would no longer be shipped to Brazil's southern plantations out of Ceará's northeastern harbor. The blockade was a decisive moment in the rising abolitionist movement in Brazil and culminated in slavery's abolition in Ceará in 1884, four years before the national prohibition of the institution. Traditional narratives on slavery's abolition in Ceará emphasize the development of a middle-class led, radical abolitionist movement in the province while lionizing the role played by Francisco José do Nascimento, a free man of color, in leading the raftsmen's charge against human trafficking. Recent research on the raftsmen's blockade highlights the role played by the formerly enslaved man José Luiz Napoleão in the anti-slavery strike. This article revisits the 1881 anti-slavery strike and places it in the context of maritime marronage in nineteenth century Brazil. By probing the long tradition of fugitive slaves using their access to the sea and their skills as sailors and boatmen to escape slavery and relocate from one province to another, this article demonstrates that the world of maritime labor provided opportunities and challenges for slave resistance, and fugitive mariners created a culture of contesting the geography of slavery in Brazil.

**Keywords:** Dragão do Mar; maritime marronage; Sociedade Cearense Libertadora.

**F**ROM JANUARY 27 to 31, 1881, a group of raftsmen blockaded the port of Fortaleza in Ceará province to slave traffickers. According to abolitionist newspapers' accounts of the blockade, the raftsmen who manned small boats that transported goods and passengers from larger embarkations off Fortaleza's Bay to its harbor collectively refused to participate in the interprovincial slave trade in Brazil.<sup>1</sup> Thirty years after the abolition of the Atlantic slave trade

\* Non Resident Fellow at the Hutchins Center, Harvard University. E-mail: martineanya@gmail.com. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8779-7846>.

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(1850), Brazilian slaveholders invested in the genetic reproduction of their captives and the internal slave market to replenish the servile labor force in the agrarian economy centered on cotton and sugar production in regions such as Bahia and Pernambuco and coffee in the center-south.<sup>2</sup> The jangadeiros – raftsmen – who actively blockaded Fortaleza’s port to human trafficking boldly interrupted a key nodal point of the plantation economy – the transfer of enslaved people from the north to the south. Their activism signaled the contribution of port-city workers to the “sacred cause” of abolition.<sup>3</sup>

The news of Ceará’s port-workers’ anti-slavery strike travelled like wildfire from the harbor of Fortaleza to the rest Brazil. It was discussed in newspapers in urban centers from Recife in Pernambuco province to Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo in the southeast. The press highlighted unanimously the leadership of Francisco José do Nascimento colorfully nicknamed the *dragão do mar* – the sea dragon - in organizing the strike and lending popular support for the rising abolitionist movement nationally. Three years later, on March 25, 1884, slavery was abolished in Ceará, making it a free-soil territory in Brazil. Since then, the story of Ceará’s abolition of slavery has remained attached in the popular imagination to the image of the *dragão do mar*, and it has been classically narrated in Raimundo Girão’s *a abolição no Ceará* which primarily attributes slavery’s demise in the province to the activism of a middle-class led, radical abolitionist movement between 1880 and 1884. Francisco José do Nascimento was immortalized in Edmar Morel’s account of Ceará’s abolitionist movement in a biography of the jangadeiro that took on a “history from below” perspective to tell the story of abolition.<sup>4</sup>

Girão’s study, it has been argued, paid scant attention to the socio-economic factors that provided a propitious ground for the success of abolitionism in the state. Girão casted Ceará’s movement as a progressive reckoning of the Brazilian political class with the brief radical actions of Fortaleza’s jangadeiros bracketed in between hagiographic discussions of middle-class leaders.<sup>5</sup> Although Girão discussed the recruitment of Francisco José do Nascimento in the abolitionist cause and noted the significant contribution of the freedman José Luiz

2 SLENES, Roberto “Brazilian Internal Slave Trade, 1850-1888.” In: Johnson, Walter (ed.) **The Chattel Principle: Internal Slave Trades in the Americas**. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008; BARROSO, Daniel Souza, and LAURINDO, Luiz Carlos, Jr. A margem da segunda escravidão? A dinâmica da escravidão no vale amazônico nos quadros da economia-mundo capitalista.” **Tempo**, v. 23, n. 3, p. 567 -588, 2017. <https://doi.org/10.1590/TEM-1980-542X2017v230309>.

3 ALONSO, Angela, **Flores, votos e balas: o movimento abolicionista brasileiro (1868-88)**. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2015; NEEDELL, Jeffrey. **The sacred cause: the abolitionist movement, Afro-Brazilian mobilization, and imperial politics in Rio de Janeiro**. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020; CASTILHO, Celso. **Slave Emancipation and Transformations in Brazilian Political Citizenship**. Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh University Press, 2016.

4 GIRÃO, Raimundo. **A abolição no Ceará**. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Rev. Fortaleza: Secretaria de Cultura do Ceará, 1969; MOREL, Edmar. **Vendaval da liberdade: a luta do povo pela abolição**. São Paulo: Global Editora, 1967.

5 TSHOMBE, Miles. **The Fight Against Slavery and Racism in Ceará (1838-1884)**. Tese. (Doutorado em História), Brown University, 2002; Idem, Black Leaders and Their Concept of Freedom in Nineteenth-Century Northeast Brazil. **African and Black Diaspora: An International Journal**, v. 5, n. 2, pp. 264-82, 2012; MORENO ROCHA, Saulo. **Esboços de uma biografia de musealização: o caso da Jangada Libertadora**. 2018. Dissertação (Mestrado em Museologia e Patrimônio) – Programa de Pós-graduação em Museologia e Patrimônio, Universidade Federal do Estado do Rio de Janeiro – UNIRIO, Rio de Janeiro, 2018.

Napoleão in the anti-slavery strike, he characterized their role as second fiddle to the more ambitious middle-class led movement.<sup>6</sup> More importantly, Girão's analysis did not investigate the significance of anti-slavery sentiments and activism among Fortaleza's port-workers beyond abolitionist leaders and their contribution to the cause. Morel's focus on Nascimento's free working-class background and his black ancestry, while attempting to insert the history of "the common man" in Brazilian history where their contribution he suggests has been silenced too easily, neglected a deeper investigation of Napoleão's participation in the event of abolition in Ceará on the ground of the latter's self-abnegation.<sup>7</sup>

This article revisits the 1881 blockade of Fortaleza's port to human trafficking and interprets it as a working-class abolitionist strike against slavery. It locates the jangadeiro's strike in the larger context of a mixed labor force in Brazil's port-cities and maritime marronage in the nineteenth century Atlantic World. Probing the long tradition of enslaved, free, and freed sailors working alongside one another along the Brazilian coast, the analysis demonstrates that the world of maritime labor has long provided opportunities and challenges for the enslaved to contest slavery in Brazil. Enslaved mariners were well-known to utilize their nautical skills and access to transient ships, rafts, and boats as well as their employment aboard these mobile vessels to escape slavery from one region to another.

Recent Studies of the Brazilian abolitionist movement emphasize the radical push to end slavery in the late nineteenth century while highlighting its significance as a broad-based social movement that wedded the cause of anti-slavery with Brazilian citizenship and popular politics.<sup>8</sup> These studies center middle-class professionals and Afro-Brazilian activists who utilized public performances of liberation, deployed emancipation funds to free the enslaved, and publicized their ideas and their efforts in the country's newspapers. Afro-Brazilian activists like José do Patrocínio, himself the son of an enslaved mother, and André Rebouças, a famous engineer and the son of the famed Brazilian statesman Antonio Pereira Rebouças, overcame the lines of class and racial silencing in the Empire to critique slavery and to construct a broad-based social movement with white politicians like Rui Barbosa to bring about the end of slavery in May 1888. The jangadeiros' strike was one of the first manifestations of Brazilian abolitionism as popular politics. It drew from the political culture of the 1880s that saw the explosion of the riot against a new weights and measures law in Rio for example and the political participation of working-class men and women in abolitionist organizations and emancipation funds to end slavery in Brazil. The practice of abolitionism as popular politics also engaged *libertos* – freedmen and freedwomen – free descendants of formerly enslaved people, port workers, among them jangadeiros and sailors, as well as

6 GIRÃO. **Abolição no Ceará**, p. 102-107.

7 MOREL. **Vendaval da liberdade**, p. 47.

8 ALONSO, **Flores, votos e balas**; CASTILHO, **Slave Emancipation**; NEEDELL, **The Sacred Cause**; for an older study of abolition as a social movement, see also BERGSTRESSER, Rebecca. **The Movement for the Abolition of Slavery** in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, 1880 – 1889. 1973. Tese. (Doutorado em História) – Columbia University, 1973.

middle-class professionals in facilitating the flight of enslaved people from one province to another through various sea and land routes to freedom.<sup>9</sup>

Historians of the Caribbean have long theorized and documented the significance of its waterways and the “marine underground” that connected its archipelago of colonial plantations in providing avenues for enslaved men and women to escape slavery. Julius Scott classically emphasized the significance of Caribbean port cities as sites where a motley of mobile workers transmitted ideas of freedom from ports to ports, and from harbors into the hinterland seeding the ground of resistance and rebellion against slavery in the Caribbean.<sup>10</sup> N. A. T. Hall creatively coined “maritime marronage” as a concept to interpret the use of the Caribbean Sea by the enslaved to escape slavery to the territories existing on the edges of the plantation such as the teeming forest of Porto Rico and Vieques island in the eighteenth-century, thereby challenging land-centered understanding of slave resistance.<sup>11</sup> More recent research on maritime marronage in the Caribbean and the coastal United States reaffirmed the significance of waterways as paths to freedom in the pre-civil war era as Marcus Rediker argues in this issue.<sup>12</sup> Juliana Barreto Farias, Flávio dos Santos Gomes, Carlos Eugênio Líbano Soares, and Eduardo Moreira de Araújo’s research on *Black Cities* in Brazil showed that “urban slaves took advantage of ships to escape” slavery.<sup>13</sup> These pathbreaking studies lay the ground for interrogating slave resistance beyond the terracentric model that has shaped studies on slave agency. The jangadeiros’ strike demonstrates how abolitionist politics in Brazil deployed protests on land and at sea, especially along coastal waterways, to successfully challenge slavery in the last slave society in the Americas.

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- 9 CASTILHO, **Slave Emancipation**; CASTILHO, Celso, and COWLING, Camila. Funding Freedom, Popularizing Politics. **Luso-Brazilian Review**, v. 47, n. 1, p. 89-120, 2010; Castilho. Performing Abolitionism, Enacting Citizenship: The Social Construction of Political Rights in 1880s Recife, Brazil. **Hispanic American Historical Review**, v. 93, n. 3, p. 377-409, 2013; ALONSO, Flores, **votos e balas**; GRAHAM, Lauderdale. The Vintém Riot and Political Culture, Rio de Janeiro, 1880. **Hispanic American Historical Review**, v. 60, n.3, p. 431-449, 1980. AZEVEDO E SOUZA, “Huguenotes, ingleses, abacaxis: associativismo abolicionista e escravizados nas rotas de fuga entre Pernambuco e Ceará na década de 1880. **Topói**, Rio de Janeiro, v. 23, n. 50, p. 408-431, maio/ago. 2022. <https://doi.org/10.1590/2237-101X02305004>; Idem. A participação política das classes populares em três movimentos, Recife (c. 1880-1900). Tese (Doutorado em História Social) –Instituto de Filosofia e Ciências Humanas Universidade Estadual de Campinas; BERGSTRESSER, **The Movement for the Abolition of Slavery**; on race and silence in Brazilian liberalism, see GRINBERG, Keila. **O fiador dos brasileiros: cidadania, escravidão e direito civil no tempo de Antonio Pereira Rebouças**. Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 2002.
- 10 SCOTT, Julius Sherrard and REDIKER, Marcus. **The Common Wind: Afro-American Currents in the Age of the Haitian Revolution**. London: Verso, 2018.
- 11 HALL, N.A.T. Maritime Maroons: “Grand Marronage” from the Danish West Indies. **The William and Mary quarterly**, v. 42, n. 4, p. 476-498, 1989; RUPERT, Linda M. Marronage, Manumission and Maritime Trade in the Early Modern Caribbean. **Slavery and Abolition**, v. 30, n. 3, p. 361-382, 2009; DUNNAVANT, Justin. In the Wake of Maritime Marronage. **Slavery and Abolition**, v. 42, n. 3, p. 2021, 466-483, 2001; DAWSON, Kevin. A Sea of Caribbean Islands: Maritime Maroons in the Caribbean. **Slavery and Abolition**, v. 42, n. 3, p. 428-448, 2021.
- 12 WALKER, Timothy Dale. **Sailing to Freedom: Maritime Dimensions of the Underground Railroad Amherst**: University of Massachusetts Press, 2021; REDIKER, Escapando da escravidão. **Revista Mundos do Trabalho**, current issue.
- 13 FARIAS, Juliana Barreto et al. **Cidades negras: africanos, crioulos e espaços urbanos no Brasil escravista do século XIX**. São Paulo: Alameda, 2006, p. 45.

## Brazil's Port Workers and the Routes of Maritime Marronage

AN INQUIRY INTO THE JANGADEIROS' strike, especially José Luiz Napoleão and Francisco José do Nascimento suggests an alternative fertile ground for rethinking abolitionism in Ceará as rooted in the labor relationship that port workers developed through their occupation in Fortaleza's harbor and the long history of maritime marronage along the Brazilian coast. Jangadeiros, lancheiros and other small boat operators were very familiar with the tragedy of the slave trade by the nature of their profession, especially after the 1831 law which forced the traffic away from major ports to smaller points of entry along the Brazilian coast.<sup>14</sup> As the traffic shifted from major port cities to hideaway coastal regions, jangadas became a preferred means of disembarkation of the enslaved especially in the northeast. They also served to transport fugitive slaves from slavery to freedom.<sup>15</sup> They were traditionally complicit in the commerce, and thus port-workers cannot be easily viewed as anti-slavery activists. They were witnesses to enslaved people, including enslaved mariners, utilizing their access to ships and barks to escape slavery. They understood the potential of the ocean to allow the enslaved to self-liberate through marronage but also its dangers as the route of slavery from Africa to Brazil, and from one province to province after 1850.

Studies on maritime workers and port-city laborers in Brazil show that they originated from diverse social groups. They were racially mixed but also cosmopolitan. The creation of navy arsenals in major provinces after 1830 trained a class of port workers that specialized in ship construction and sailing among other things. They were of both enslaved and free status, and others were freedmen. Many of the enslaved were sent to the arsenals to be trained in marine craft by their owners which increased their value on the labor market. They lived a life of scarcity since training was without wages, and when they ascended beyond the class of apprentices, these workers earned low wages that kept them in an impoverished condition.<sup>16</sup> Jangadeiros and canoeiros were among the people hired at times by the navy arsenals who contributed to construction works among other things in port cities like Bahia, Recife, and Rio de Janeiro. In 1848 for example, the Intendant of the Navy in Bahia published a call for hire for bricklayers and carpenters as well as other workers including the request for a jangadeiro who would be paid 500 réis. This was three times less than the salary of a bricklayer

14 CARVALHO, Marcus J. M. de. O desembarque nas praias: o funcionamento do tráfico de escravos depois de 1831. **Revista de História**, São Paulo, v. 167, p. 223-260, 2012; RODRIGUES, Jaime. Mariners-Slavers and slave ships in Atlantic, 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries: The Perspective of Captives and the Slaveholders' logic. **Africana Studia**, n. 18, p. 175-190, January 2012; idem, **De costa a costa: escravos, marinheiros, e intermediários no tráfico negreiro de Angola ao Rio de Janeiro, 1780-1860**. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2005.

15 CARVALHO, Desembarque nas praias, p. 240.

16 On sailors in the Pernambuco, see CARVALHO, Marcus J.M. de. Os caminhos do rio: negros canoeiros no Recife na primeira metade do século XIX. **Afro-Ásia**, n. 19-20, p. 75-93, 1997. <https://doi.org/10.9771/aa.v0i19-20.20948>; WAGNER, Luiz Bueno dos Santos. **A criação da Companhia de Aprendizes-Marinheiros no processo de construção do Estado Nacional Brasileiro: formação militar, educação e civilização no Brasil Imperial**. 2016. Dissertação (Mestrado em História Social) – Instituto de Filosofia e Ciências Sociais, Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro, 2016.



which was 1\$500 milréis.<sup>17</sup> Enslaved jangadeiros were also advertised for sale and for hire in the nineteenth century as was the case of a twenty-four-year-old man “without any vices, a fisherman who was a good jangadeiro and canoeiro, and a great diver.<sup>18</sup>”

An analysis of advertisements to recover fugitive slaves show how the sea and port cities were utilized by enslaved people to escape slavery to areas where they could get anonymity as free Blacks. The extent to which they could be successful was shaped by the expanse of slavery over the Brazilian territory and the policing of quilombos.<sup>19</sup> Unlike the United States, where fugitive mariners could expect to live a life in quasi freedom in the north if they were not caught by slave catchers toward the end of the eighteenth-century, Brazil did not have free soil territories until abolition in Ceará. The ads reveal that enslaved mariners and jangadeiros often successfully escaped for months and in a few cases years without being recovered. In these instances, their enslavers advertised the call to recover their captives in newspapers published in major metropolitan centers such as Rio de Janeiro and in newspapers that had wide coverage such as the *Correio Mercantil* and the *Jornal do Comercio* among others. The enslaved mariner José fled aboard the Brigue Escuna Nova Amizade for months and his owner informed ship captains that “it is believed that he was employed on a national war vessel as he was seen aboard a dinghy in March.<sup>20</sup>” João and Matheus fled their enslavers in the city of Afogados, a district of Pernambuco province in September 1838. They managed to live as fugitives for a full year. João and Matheus’ enslavers believed that the two men had fled to Bahia by sea. They published multiple runaway ads in the *Correio Mercantil* and the *Jornal do Comercio* describing the two men and emphasizing João’s occupation as a “jangadeiro and a fisherman,” and Matheus’ origin from Loanda highlighting that he “spoke sailors’ slang.<sup>21</sup>”

Likewise, for at least eight months, Antonio, an enslaved man originally from Angola, evaded his captors when he fled from aboard a ship that arrived in Rio de Janeiro from Pernambuco in 1839. Antonio was a sailor who worked aboard the Patacho Quatro de Maio. As the Quatro de Maio anchored in Rio’s Bay, Antonio used a propitious time to sail toward the harbor probably utilizing a canoe that carried passengers to shores to lose himself in the city among the Black population. Antonio managed to evade being re-enslaved for at least eight months – the length that the runaway slave ad ran from January to August.<sup>22</sup> Despite being a strongly policed city, Rio de Janeiro’s landscape favored the proliferation of quilombos, communities of runaway slaves, in various hills that were difficult to access.<sup>23</sup>

17 *Correio Mercantil*, October 22, 1848.

18 *Diário de Pernambuco*, October 4, 1830. ,

19 Farias et al., **Cidades negras**; GOMES, Flávio dos Santos and REIS, João José. **Freedom by a Thread: The History of Quilombos in Brazil**. La Vergne: Diasporic Africa Press, 2017.

20 *Despertador*, April 6, 1838.

21 *Correio Mercantil*, September 6, 1838; see, “Marinheiros e fugas atlânticas.” In FARIAS et al., **Cidades negras**, p. 45-50.

22 *Despertador*, August 2, 1839.

23 GOMES, Flávio. Africans and Petit Marronage in Rio de Janeiro. **Luso-Brazilian Studies**, v. 47, n. 2, p. 74-99, 2010; Idem. **Histórias de quilombolas: mocambos e comunidades de senzalas no Rio de Janeiro**. São Paulo: Civilização Brasileira, 2006; GOMES and REIS, **Freedom by a Thread**.

*Jangadeiros* were a subset of the enslaved mariners that escaped slavery utilizing the opportunities and mobility afforded by their occupation. They oftentimes worked as fishermen and these two activities were listed in runaway ads to alert the public about the work sector where the fugitive might seek a means of employment post-flight. When the enslaved Manoel fled aboard a war ship after having “had a previous life as a jangadeiro and a fisherman”, his owner the Sergeant Manoel Zeferino dos Santos from Pernambuco published an advertisement in Brazil’s premier gazette which had a wide territorial circulation<sup>24</sup> For at least three months, João Crioulo’s enslaver published an ad about his flight describing him as a “jangadeiro, canoeiro, and a fisherman,” skilled “for all types of services on land and at sea.”<sup>25</sup>

A national search was done when Athanzio fled his owner who resided in the province of Alagoas. Athanzio was described as a “skilled jangadeiro and a fisherman” who also could “work well enough as a bricklayer and a carpenter.” He was a very valuable slave and they offered 100\$00 milréis to whoever could bring him to his owners. There were five provinces - Bahia, Pernambuco, Rio de Janeiro, Sergipe, and Alagoas - and five respective businessmen who were identified and authorized to negotiate Athanzio’s return.<sup>26</sup> Jangadeiros had a particular appearance and way of dressing themselves that slave-owners identified in runaway ads. Enslaved fugitives were described as wearing “a linen cloth shirt and a large jangadeiro hat,” or the “clothing of a jangadeiro” in many instances to identify their occupations and possible future source of employment.<sup>27</sup>

Slaveholders notified the people of the sea to be on the lookout for escaped slaves. At times sailors vigilantly returned captives to the police. Enslaved people often saw in foreign ships – especially those of the British navy – opportunities to flee slavery from Brazil due to their knowledge of the geopolitics of abolition in the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>28</sup> Enslaved people would offer themselves as sailors to ships that anchored in the bays of Brazil and it was a way for them to get anonymity aboard a ship. Slaveowners were cognizant of this marronage strategy and warned ships’ captains about the tactic. In 1824, an ad ran warning all “ships’ captains especially those from Rio Grande do Sul” about an enslaved mariner named José who may offer to sail with them.” José had fled from Maranhão and had been hired as a sailor aboard a Brazilian war vessel.<sup>29</sup> While transiting through Rio de Janeiro a British captain met with a Black man on Paço Square where the administrative offices of the Imperial government were located. The man offered his services as a sailor to the British captain and claimed to be free. But later, the captain interrogated his new employee aboard

24 **Diário do Rio de Janeiro**, June 12, 1821.

25 **Diário Novo**, August 25, 1848.

26 **Jornal do Comércio**, 12 de Novembro 1834.

27 **Diário de Pernambuco**, June 17, 1831.

28 GRADEN, Dale, and OLIVEIRA DE JESUS, Paulo César. Bella Miquelina Affair: The Transatlantic Slave Trade, British Suppression and one African’s Quest for Liberty in the Bay of All Saints, Salvador, Brazil 1848. **Atlantic Studies**, v. 14, n. 2, p. 196-215, 2017; MOTA, Isadora. Other Geographies of Struggle: Afro-Brazilians and the American Civil War. **Hispanic American Historical Review**, v. 100, n. 1, p. 35-62, 2020.

29 **Diário do Rio de Janeiro**, July 2, 1824.

the ship before sailing to its destination. Under renewed pressure, the sailor divulged that he was a fugitive slave from Minas Gerais from whence he had fled six months earlier. He seemed to have lived a transient life but was desperate to escape Rio and avoid the net of police surveillance that regulated the movement of the black population in the city.<sup>30</sup> For four months the enslaved mariner Simão fled aboard the galera Leopoldina and his owner found out that he found work aboard a ship.<sup>31</sup> For at least two years, the enslaved man Marcelino escaped the wide search net that his owner deployed to recover him from fugitivity. Marcelino was purchased for only a few months and was supposed to be shipped to a new owner aboard the ship Despique that maintained the traffic with Moçambique. Marcelino was also a sailor and his captors believed that he embarked on another ship after his flight, likely one that sailed to a southern port or one that maintained the traffic between Brazil and Mozambique where he originated. The owner “beseeched all ship captains” who “catch him aboard” any vessel to bring Marcelino to Rio.<sup>32</sup>

In 1838 the enslaved mulatto José fled from an *engenho* in Quintinduba in the interior of Pernambuco in late December 1837. He was seen on his way to Recife, the capital of the province. It was not José’s first time living as a fugitive. In a previous instance, he had worked as a sailor in a “war vessel that sailed in the southern ports” of Brazil. The owner suggests that José may try again to work aboard a war vessel where he could benefit from anonymity and live in precarious freedom at sea. He warned “captains of ships to exert all possible vigilance so that this mulatto does not get hired among your crew.” He also warned merchants who purchase and transport food from the sertão on the oxen mule train to Recife to not “add this fugitive” among their crew.<sup>33</sup>

Fugitives lived a life on the move because they were constantly threatened with apprehension by the police, or the *capitão do mato* – bush captain- that hunted runaway slaves. When they utilized the sea to escape, it afforded them greater protection from policing which was land based. At the same time, they had to avoid being discovered as fugitives by ship captains. Their level of *ladinization* to luso-Brazilian culture, that is their ability or lack therefore to pass off as freed Blacks and to manipulate socio-cultural and commercial symbols of the slave society while retaining African rooted identities could determine whether they would be identified by the police as fugitives or not.<sup>34</sup> Slaveowners therefore highlighted when a fugitive could pass off as a member of the free Black population in major urban centers like Rio, Bahia, or Recife. For example, the *Diário de Pernambuco* advertised that in December an enslaved sailor from São Thomé in West Africa fled from aboard the Bergantim Incansável

30 Idem, September 26, 1822.

31 Idem, September 26, 1822.

32 Idem, February 9, 1824.

33 *Diário de Pernambuco*, January 18, 1838.

34 REIS, João José. De escravo a rico liberto: a trajetória do Africano Manoel Joaquim Ricardo na Bahia oitocentista. *Revista de História*, São Paulo, n. 174, p. 15-68, 2016. <https://doi.org/10.11606/issn.2316-9141.rh.2016.108145>.



Maciel and that he “would probably try to pass off as a *forró* – a freedman – since he was a mariner and bastante *ladino*” that is an African well adapted to the Brazilian slave society.<sup>35</sup> Domingues fled from his owner named Boaventura José Rodrigues who lived on the Praça do Maranhão. He was a skilled shoemaker and described as “very ladinized and born in Pará.” He had boarded a ship and sailed to the south of Brazil.<sup>36</sup> When Lourenço, nação Calabar fled his owner published an ad in the *Diário de Pernambuco* identifying the enslaved as a sailor but adding that “however he hasn’t sailed for a while.” The owner asked he asks ships’ captains to “not invite the fugitive aboard their vessels” and for the police to “now allow Lourenço to transit from one county to the next,” and for any *capitão do campo* who encountered the enslaved to return him to a given address in Rio.<sup>37</sup>

Enslaved mariners often utilized the lapse of time when their ship anchored in a new city and delivered its cargo to escape to shore and disappear among the population. They sometimes deployed the trust that they had developed with their ship captains who sent them on errands on shore to disappear and never return aboard. When José Congo arrived in Rio de Janeiro as a sailor aboard the *Sumaca Libertino Feliz* from Ilha Grande and was sent on an errand he used the opportunity to flee to freedom on land using a smaller boat.<sup>38</sup> When José failed to return aboard the *sumaca*, the vessel's captain advertised authorities that the enslaved had become a fugitive. The runaway ad informed the public and the police that José was a slave for hire - *escravo do ganho* from Villa de Paranagoa where his owner lived.<sup>39</sup> Likewise two enslaved sailors were sent to collect water at Rio's water fountains in one of the city's public squares. They were passing through Rio de Janeiro with the crew of the *Brigue Escuna Navegante*. They never returned to the ship. They blended into the crowd of Black workers that transited through Rio's streets.<sup>40</sup> The ship transited between Rio Grande, Pernambuco, Bahia, and Rio de Janeiro and as far as Montevideo and was involved in the provincial trade by sea linking these cities.

Ships were therefore powerful vectors of captivity through slave trading but also beacons of freedom for runaway slaves who boarded them as fugitive sailors or stowaways. Toward the 1880s, increasingly commercial ships involved in the interprovincial trade were utilized by abolitionists with ties to the business sector to transport runaway slaves to freedom. As abolitionist ideas became part of the fabric of popular politics and as organizations such as the *Sociedade Cearense Libertadora* utilized public performances and emancipation funds to end slavery in Brazil, they took on the radical steps of facilitating slave flights utilizing ships and *jangadas*. The front line of this movement was often men and women from the working-class and port workers like Francisco José do Nascimento and José Luiz Napoleão who were likely

35 *Diário de Pernambuco*, December 12, 1831; REIS. De escravo a rico liberto, p. 61-64.

36 *Diário de Pernambuco*, April 27, 1839.

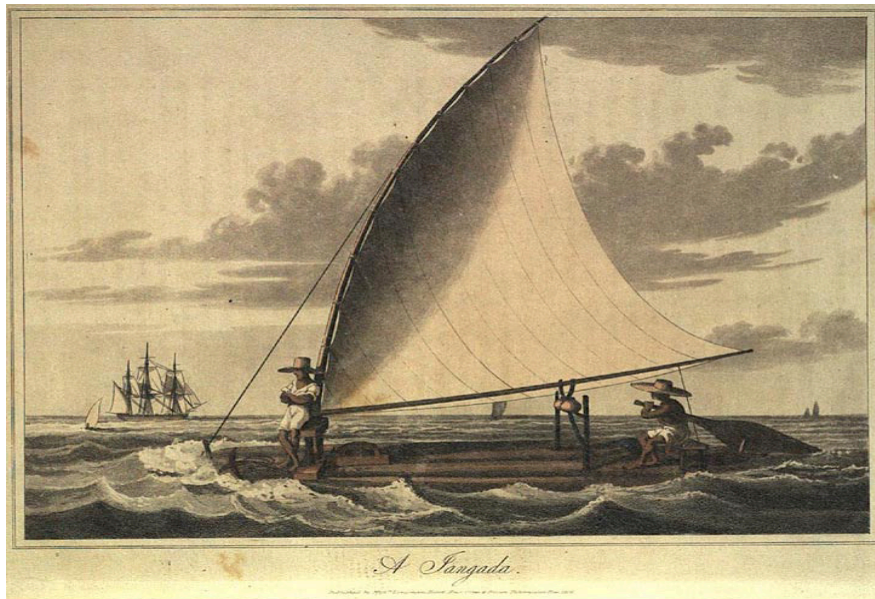
37 *Idem*, November 23, 1836.

38 *O Despertador*, October 26, 1838.

39 *Diário do Rio de Janeiro*, June 17, 1822.

40 *O Despertador*, September 19, 1838.

already involved in the underground railroad that facilitated the escape of enslaved people by sea before the 1881 jangadeiro strike.<sup>41</sup>



Source: **A jangada**. London [Londres, Inglaterra]: Longman, Hurst, Rees, 1816. Acervo da Fundação Biblioteca Nacional – Brasil.

## The Jangada Libertadora: A Tale of Two Abolitionisms

THE PARTICIPATION of José Luiz Napoleão in the 1881 blockade of Fortaleza's harbor to slave traffickers is significant. Both Francisco José do Nascimento and José Luiz Napoleão were port workers and jangadeiros, an activity that was important to Ceará's economic life, but also as I argued in the previous section, a profession that was tied to marine slave resistance. Jangadeiros operated small wooden boats known as jangadas that transported goods and people to and from Fortaleza's harbor to larger ships anchored in the bay. These ships could not reach the harbor due to its shallow seabed. Jangadeiros often did not own their vessels but rather were employed as wage workers in Ceará's harbor and the coastline as fishermen among other activities. Jangadas were fragile embarkations against the treacherousness of sea waves and jangadeiros therefore developed skillful knowledge of oceanic movement, wind patterns, and the depth of local sea floors as they ply their trade along the coastlines for fishing or transportation. They were part of the chain of workers that linked Fortaleza and its hinterlands to other Brazilian provinces, among which Amazonia, Pernambuco, Bahia, Rio de Janeiro, and São Paulo. They shaped the region's political history and working-class activism beyond the 1881 strike.<sup>42</sup> Newspaper records of ships leaving Fortaleza's harbor and returning

41 AZEVEDO E SOUZA, Huguenotes, ingleses, abacaxis, p. 408-431.

42 BARBOSA, Gabriel Coutinho and DEVOS, Rafael. Parallaxe e "marcação por terra,": técnicas de navegação entre jangadeiros na Paraíba e Rio Grande do Norte. *Mana*, Rio de Janeiro, v. 23, n. 3, p. 343-372, 2017. <https://doi.org/10.1590/1678-49442017v23n3p343>; ABREU, Berenice. Para que o jangadeiro, quando morrer, não

to it brought people from these provinces but also sugar, coffee, cotton, and the news of abolitionist ideas out of and into the province. These ships were also utilized by a network of abolitionist individuals who were involved in interprovincial commercial networks to transport fugitive slaves from the slave economy of Pernambuco to Ceará after 1884.<sup>43</sup>

Ceará province was on the frontier of the Brazilian economy and did not produce the three staples that ensured national wealth in the nineteenth-century: coffee, sugar, and cotton. Colonization at the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century and the dispossession of native lands brought African slavery to the province. But a harsh climate that changed from a dry to a wet season was not propitious to an agrarian economy like in Bahia and the Paraíba Valley, or Pará/Maranhão where sugar, cotton, and coffee fields were tilled by indigenous and enslaved laborers. The wet season began in Ceará around March bringing with it needed rain to an otherwise parched land marked by the expanse of the sertão and its catingas. The province thus developed historically mainly as a cattle ranching and livestock economy.<sup>44</sup>

Francisco José do Nascimento and José Luiz Napoleão as well as the other jangadeiros that blockaded human trafficking were a racially mixed group that included whites, caboclos – people of mixed white, indigenous, and African ancestry – and people of African descent of enslaved and free status. Both Nascimento and Napoleão were of African descent. Unlike José do Nascimento who was born into a poor jangadeiro family of free status, Napoleão was born into slavery. He became a foreman at Fortaleza's harbor by 1881 where he oversaw the service of embarkation and disembarkation of passengers and goods carried out by other jangadeiros at the port. He seemed to have had good a relationship with his subordinates.<sup>45</sup> At some point before the 1881 strike, Napoleão amassed enough savings as a port-worker to purchase his freedom, that of his wife Maria Simôa da Conceição - Tia Simôa – and that of his four sisters and possibly other extended family members.<sup>46</sup> He owned property and was a taxpayer. He appeared in a list of citizens who owed taxes for three houses on Boulevard do Imperador and Rua do Patrocínio for a total of 36\$ milrês in 1879 and 1880.<sup>47</sup> Napoleão and his wife both appear separately as proprietors of two buildings in Rua de Santa Isabel in Fortaleza.<sup>48</sup> Although not much is known about Tia Simôa, she probably acquired the savings to become a property owner herself by working in the informal economy a food seller, a quitandeira, and or as a washerwoman among activities where free women of color gained self-employment.<sup>49</sup>

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necessite da caridade pública, mestre Jerônimo e os direitos sociais na cultura política da jangadeira. **Revista Mundos do Trabalho**, v. 7, n. 13, p. 255-74, 2016. <https://doi.org/10.5007/1984-9222.2015v7n13p255>.

43 AZEVEDO E SOUZA, Huguenotes, ingleses, abacaxis, p. 408-431.

44 STUART, Barão de. Geographia do Ceará. **Revista do Instituto do Ceará**, v. 38, p. 3-120, 1924; BEZERRA, Antônio. **O Ceará e os cearenses**. Fortaleza: Assis Bezerra, 1906.

45 BEZERRA, **Ceará**, p. 58.

46 ROCHA. Esboço de uma biografia, p.39-45; GIRÃO, Abolição no Ceará, p. 104.

47 **Cearense: órgão liberal**, August 3, 1879; Idem. January 25, 1880; Idem. January 29, 1880.

48 ROCHA, Esboços de uma biographia, p. 38 citing **Cearense**, January 16, 1881, p. 3.

49 LINHARES, Juliana Magalhães. **Entre a casa e a rua: trabalhadores pobres em Fortaleza (1871-1888)**. Dissertação (Mestrado) – Universidade Federal do Ceará, Programa de Pós-graduação em História, 2011; RODRIGUES, “Serviço doméstico”; ACERBI, **Street Occupations: Urban Vending in Rio de Janeiro**. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2017; GRAHAM, Richard. **Feeding the City: From Street Market to Liberal Reform in Salvador, Brazil, 1780-1860**. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010.

Napoleão had a political identity although as a *liberto*, he did not enjoy the right to vote for the electors that nominated senators and deputies to the legislative chamber. He could participate in municipal elections. He appeared in a list of qualified voters to elect local officials. There, he was identified as a 55-year-old married man, an illiterate property owner, and son of José Félix da Silva, with an income of 400 milréis.<sup>50</sup> He therefore seemed to have exercised his limited voting rights as a member of the free working class. As a political actor of limited citizenship, Napoleão may have been involved in the liberal activism of the era which attracted vast numbers of members of the working class through popular associations that raised money for emancipation funds and facilitated slave flights. Liberal abolitionist politicians such as Antonio Bezerra de Menezes, who was a provincial deputy and a member of the Sociedade Cearense Libertadora, utilized their political networks to foment abolitionism. Others such as João Cordeiro a businessman and a founding member of the SCL with ties to the commercial network that linked Fortaleza's harbor with the other provinces facilitated the escape of enslaved people aboard trading ships in the 1880s. It is very likely that Napoleão was part of these political circles through abolitionism before his participation in the 1881 strike as research on abolitionism and the liberal political culture of the era demonstrated.<sup>51</sup>

Napoleão's active role in the blockade of Fortaleza's port to human trafficking was rooted in his identity as a formerly enslaved man and as a *jangadeiro*, an activity that was implicated in maritime marronage by enslaved sailors, raftsmen, and boatmen as I discussed previously. His wife, Maria Simôa, was also active in the strike showing that they both saw it as an issue that spoke to their struggle as self-emancipated people. Not much is known about Maria Simôa's specific contribution to the blockade, but she is mentioned in most accounts of the strike as an actor in her own right. She may have been active in guiding the rescued captives from the coast to hideaways in the homes of abolitionists and other freed persons.<sup>52</sup> Reporting on the strike, the *Gazeta do Norte*, identified it as a new phase in the abolitionist movement in the province. The newspaper interpreted the *jangadeiros'* strike as an event "that perfectly expressed the degree of intensity and extent with which the generous abolitionist aspirations had been propagated" in the province "and had given rise to public indignation against human trafficking."<sup>53</sup> The journal reported that "trying to eliminate the public wave of outrage against the infamous trade in human flesh," Fortaleza's prosecutor authorized the embarkation of twenty-three enslaved persons to Brazil's southern provinces upon solicitation by their owner. The news reached the *Sociedade Libertadora Cearense*, the province's abolitionist organization which had just

50 While the name José and Luiz are quite common in Brazil, the name "José Luiz Napoleão" only appears a few times for one person in the newspapers that I consulted for this research. I believe it refers to the same person and that person is most likely the *jangadeiro* José Luiz Napoleão who led the 1881 strike; see **Cearense, órgão liberal**. September 26, 1880.

51 ALONSO, Flores, votos e balas; NEEDELL, Sacred Cause; CASTILHO, Slave Emancipation; AZEVEDO E SOUZA, Huguenotes, ingleses, abacaxis, 413-416.

52 GIRÃO. Abolição no Ceará, 104; ABREU, Abreu. Epopeia do Ceará, p. 135-148; MENEZES, Ceará e os cearenses, p. 61.

53 **Gazeta do Norte**: órgão liberal. January 28, 1881.

been founded in December 1880 to end slavery through radical means.<sup>54</sup> The organization “convinced the lancheiros and jangadeiros” that participating in the interprovincial slave trade was “demeaning to their profession.” The *Gazeta do Norte* qualified the jangadeiros’ reaction as a “revolt” that was “immediate.” It continued: “none of [the jangadeiros] was willing to take on board the poor creatures that ambition was going to throw away from their native land.” The usual police repression against the workers’ resistance was unable to compel the boatmen to aid in the embarkation of the enslaved.

Significantly, the *Gazeta do Norte* identified the “freedman José Napoleão at the head of the boatmen’s strike against the shipment of slaves in the harbor.” The article noted that a few years earlier Napoleão was himself a slave but had purchased his freedom and that of his four sisters through hard work. This suggests that Napoleão was an *escravo de ganho*, a system that was prominent in urban slavery especially in port-cities in Brazil where the enslaved participated in the labor market and earned wages. There were two forms of wage slavery in Brazil: one in which the enslaved was rented to employers by their enslavers, and another where the enslaved was allowed to live outside their owners’ house, earn salaries as a worker by volunteering their skills and services in the labor market, and paid an agreed upon amount to their enslaver. If Napoleão was able to save enough money as an *escravo de ganho* to purchase his freedom and that of his family members, he probably worked as the latter because it afforded more autonomy and greater flexibility for savings.<sup>55</sup>

It is significant that the *Gazeta do Norte* immediately recognized the leadership of Napoleão in organizing the jangadeiros’s opposition to the interprovincial slave trade. This contrasts with the Sociedade Libertadora’s own report on the event which was published in its newspaper the *Libertadora*. The *Libertadora* was published by the Sociedade Cearense Libertadora, Ceará’s radical abolitionist organization, to publicize its abolitionist campaign against slavery in the province. Its first print was on January 1, 1881, with new issues published every two weeks. It covered the 1881 strike in its third issue published on February 7, 1881. The *Libertadora* described the 1881 jangadeiros strike as originating from the people of Fortaleza, perhaps to strategically publicize the general opposition against human trafficking and slavery in Brazil and demonstrate the popularity of their position. The paper did not elaborate on a specific person taking the lead on changing the jangadeiros’ mind about their participation in the embarkation of the enslaved out of the province but referenced 1500 “people of all classes,” converging on the harbor and declaring that enslaved people would no longer be shipped out of Ceará’s port. The “jangadeiros were already” in the harbor at work when the crowd uttered “in one voice” its opposition to the embarkation of slaves out of Ceará’s port, the *Libertadora* reported. The article added that the raftsmen resolutely

54 GIRÃO, *Abolição no Ceará*, p. 87-88.

55 ALGRANTI, Leila. *O feitor ausente estudos sobre a escravidão urbana no Rio de Janeiro - 1808-1822*. Petrópolis: Vozes, 1988.



rejected all financial enticements to bring the enslaved aboard the ship *Espírito Santo* which was to transport the captives to Rio as well as coercion by the police.<sup>56</sup>

Raymundo Girão who wrote the classic story of abolition in Ceará attributed the jangadeiros' strike to the action of a member of the SCL named Pedro Artur de Vasconcellos who gave several abolitionist speeches in public squares and theaters where he encouraged those in attendance to "prevent the shipment of captives out of the province."<sup>57</sup> At another abolitionist event, Vasconcellos again emphasized the necessity to recruit the jangadeiros to cease their involvement in the traffic through the transfer of the enslaved from the harbor to the ships.

Vasconcellos gave another abolitionist speech on January 26, 1881 at the Teatro São Luis where he raised the necessity to recruit jangadeiros in the SCL's campaign against slavery in the province.<sup>58</sup> Vasconcellos had a keen understanding of how the jangadeiros could offset the transfer of Ceará's enslaved population to the south of Brazil as an employee of Casa Singlehurst, a commercial shipping company that operated in the province.<sup>59</sup> Vasconcellos was also well known among Fortaleza's port workers as an employee of Casa Singlehurst. He and fellow SCL member José do Amaral recruited Napoleão to organize the jangadeiros to block human trafficking out of Ceará's harbor. According to Girão, Napoleão was recruited because he was a foreman at the port, and he was well known and appreciated by his co-workers.<sup>60</sup> Francisco José do Nascimento did not play a prominent role in the January 1881 strike, a fact recognized by Girão and Morel who cited a 1934 article written by Isac do Amaral, a brother of José do Amaral, the president of the Sociedade Cearense Libertadora. The strike, Amaral wrote, produced a resounding result "surprising the entire country" and shedding a "colossal light on the abolitionist crusade."<sup>61</sup>

In the *Libertadora's* rendering of the January 1881 strike, the emphasis was placed on a faceless crowd likely to demonstrate the popularity of abolitionist sentiments in January 1881 in Ceará. This approach also attributed the success of the resistance movement to the Sociedade Cearense Libertadora's leadership. The *Libertadora* discussed how the directory of the SCL intervened to employ legal means to free one of the enslaved, a girl named Luiza using the 1871 ree womb law as she claimed to be free. The 1871 free womb law declared free the children born of enslaved womb, but it left them under the authority of their mother's enslaver until they reached majority. As a result, slaveholders easily utilized the labor of these minors and kept them in slave conditions. The *Libertadora* reported that activists from the SCL,

56 *Libertadora: órgão da Sociedade Cearense Libertadora*, February 7, 1881, see also March 3 and 17, 1881.

57 GIRÃO, *Abolição no Ceará*, p. 102.

58 GIRÃO, *Abolição no Ceará*, p. 102-103; Vasconcellos' contribution was previously cited in Júlio César da Fonseca, "em torno da abolição," *Revista do Instituto do Ceará*, v. 38, p. 355-360, 1924, accessed on 10/15/22 at <https://www.institutodoceara.org.br/revista.php>.

59 Casa Singlehurst regularly figures as a prominent shipping company in Ceará's newspapers and in government reports. See *Cearense*, August 14, 1881, and April 14, 1881, for example.

60 GIRÃO, *Abolição no Ceará*, p. 104.

61 Isac do Amaral interview in *O Nordeste*, March 24, 1934, cited in GIRÃO, *Abolição no Ceará*, p. 104; MOREL, *Vendaval da liberdade*, p. 113-115.

using the law, “grabbed” Luiza from the ship where she was already brought with nine other slaves and “brought her to land under the banner of the Brazilian flag.”<sup>62</sup>

The SCL also utilized the occasion of the strike to free from aboard the Vapor Pará, one of the ships anchored in Fortaleza's harbor, “a mother, who though free, was embarked in Maranhão with four of her daughters to be sold into slavery in Rio de Janeiro!” The President of the SCL deployed the law to bring the issue to the Police Chief to secure the captives' freedom. The crossing of the enslaved from the sea to land is significant because it captures the spatiality of the ocean as a zone of ambiguous legal domain and the land as the territory where police authorities and Brazilian law encompassed more capaciously by 1881.<sup>63</sup> Since the November 7, 1831, law that abolished slavery in Brazil, slaveholders have traditionally deployed the ocean as beyond the reach of Brazilian sovereignty to continue human trafficking under the banner of illegality. They also exercised tremendous power to ensure that anyone of African descent could be reduced to slavery if their free status could not be asserted through legal documents. They casted Africans who had been brought on the Brazilian territory as property using the ambiguity of Brazilian politics on the Atlantic slave trade as well as the complicity of authorities to engage in human trafficking until the 1850 abolition law.<sup>64</sup> The 1871 law restricted the totality of slavery on the Brazilian territory and planter's power by freeing the womb of enslaved women and despite its limitations, the law served as an important tool for abolitionists to contest slavery by the 1880s.<sup>65</sup> But new research on Afro-Brazilian resistance to slavery has shown how the enslaved understood transiting ships especially those of the British squadrons and American whaling ships during the Civil War as possibilities for maritime marronage and to question the geography of slavery in Brazil based on their understanding of the geopolitics of global abolitionism.<sup>66</sup> The 1881 jangadeiro strike brought the contentious history of transiting ships along the Brazilian coast and their transportation of enslaved people into relief as well as the potential for abolishing slavery by cutting off interprovincial supply lines in the aftermath of the 1850 law.

The Sociedade Cearense Libertadora's transfer of the captives of the Santo Espírito and the Pará ships from the sea to land to assert their freedom denote a critical transformation in the politics of slavery and freedom by 1881. It showed that the 1871 free womb law and abolitionists' activism had questioned the practice of deploying the Brazilian territory as a

62 *Libertadora*, February 7, 1881.

63 See my discussion of the law and the ocean in the campaign against human trafficking in Brazil, Martine Jean. The Slave Ship 'Maria da Gloria' and the Bare Life of Blackness in the Age of Emancipation. *Slavery and Abolition* v. 42, n. 3, p. 522-544, 2021.

64 CHALHOUB, Sidney. *A força da escravidão: ilegalidade e costume no Brasil oitocentista*. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2012; MAMIGONIAN, Beatriz. *Africanos livres: a abolição do tráfico de escravos no Brasil*. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2017.

65 CASTILHO, Slave Emancipation, p. 53-70.

66 On the 1831 law and its controversies, see CONRAD, Robert. *World of Sorrow: The African Slave Trade to Brazil*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1986; MAMIGONIAN, Africanos livres; CHALHOUB, Força da escravidão; on slaves escaping slavery aboard British ships, see GRADEN and OLIVEIRA DE JESUS, The Bella Miquelina Affair, p. 196-215; MOTA. Other Geographies of Struggle, p. 35-62; BENTON, Lauren. *A Search for Sovereignty: Law and Geography in European Empires, 1400-1900*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.

landscape of unchallenged slavery. It also demonstrated the difficulty that the sea represented as a territory where transiting ships could easily perpetuate the enslavement of people of African descents thirty years after the 1850 law against the Atlantic slave trade to Brazil. As such, the jangadeiros' actions in stopping the embarkation of the enslaved to the ships in Fortaleza's harbor was pivotal to attacking slavery in one of its pillars following the abolition of the slave trade in 1850.

The Sociedade Cearense Libertadora played an important role in changing public opinion on slavery in Ceará. Formed on December 8, 1880, the organization assembled a group of middle-class activists who swore to end slavery "by any means necessary" according to its statutes.<sup>67</sup> The SCL published its activities in its newspaper the *Libertador* starting on January 1, 1881. The organization was not the first abolitionist association created in Ceará. It took over from budding anti-slavery activism that began in 1870 with anti-slavery organizations that sought to end the institution through free-womb laws and the liberation of minors. In particular, the Sociedade Manumissora Sobralense aimed to raise funds to free enslaved girls.<sup>68</sup> The promulgation of the free womb law by the Brazilian parliament in September 1871 changed the conversation about abolition nationally by emancipating all children of enslaved mothers born after the law. It established an emancipation fund that served as a bedrock for political activism around the question of abolition in the 1880s.<sup>69</sup> With the promulgation of the free womb law in September 1871 residents of Fortaleza could read in the province's newspapers the liberation of enslaved children from slavery using the province's emancipation fund.

Ceará's enslaved population was significant and there was a high degree of racial mixture of Africans, indigenous and whites among the enslaved. Ceará's slaves originated from Bahia and Pernambuco by land and were Brazilian born and racially mixed. According to Barão de Studdart, enslaved Africans were significantly less expensive in Ceará than the enslaved native population in the seventeenth-century. At the beginning of the nineteenth-century, Ceará began importing enslaved people directly from the African coast. Studdart estimated that there were 30 000 slaves in Ceará in 1884 when slavery was abolished.<sup>70</sup> A study of 1139 post-mortem inventories of slaveowners in Ceará between 1850 and 1884 shows that 74.5% of the enslaved listed in these records were born in Brazil.<sup>71</sup> After the abolition of the slave trade to Brazil in 1850, there was a relocation of slavery with the sale of enslaved people to the export driven agrarian economic zones. Slaves became

67 GIRÃO, Abolição no Ceará.

68 GIRÃO, Abolição no Ceará, p. 67.

69 CASTILHO, Slave Emancipation, p. 53-55; CASTILHO and COWLING. Funding Freedom, p. 89-120.

70 STUDDART, Barão de. Geographia do Ceará, p. 54; ALBERTO DE OLIVEIRA, Pedro. As origens da escravidão no Ceará. *Revista do Instituto do Ceará*, v. 93, p. 325-338, 1979; Idem. A escravidão no Ceará na primeira metade do século XIX. *Revista do Instituto do Ceará*, tomo especial, p. 49-72, 1984; ALCÂNTARA PINTO, José Marcelo de. A extinção da escravidão na provincia do Ceará. *Revista do Instituto do Ceará*, tomo especial, p. 112-132, 1984.

71 ASSUNÇÃO, Mariana Almeida. *Escravidão em Fortaleza: um estudo dos inventários post-mortem (1850-1884)*. 2002. Dissertação (Mestrado em História) – Faculdade de Filosofia e Ciências Humanas, Universidade Federal da Bahia, Salvador, 2002, p. 39-46; From the 1139 post-mortem records, 892 identified the place of birth of the enslaved.

expensive as a finite commodity barring natural reproduction.<sup>72</sup> During times of economic difficulties as Ceará experienced in 1877-1879 when a two-year drought devastated the land and impoverished struggling families, those who held enslaved people as property resorted to selling them to the south. According to Girão, 291 slaves were sold to the south through Fortaleza's port in 1872, and 505 in 1872. During the 1877-1879 drought, 1725 slaves embarked Fortaleza's port to the south in 1877 followed by 2909 in 1878, and 1925 in 1879.<sup>73</sup> As late as 1877, Girão asserted, there were 2909 slaves that were shipped from Ceará's port to southern Brazil.<sup>74</sup> More than 7000 enslaved cearenses were sold out of the province between 1871 and 1881, which was a fifth of the servile population. However, as new research shows a great number of the enslaved reported to have been sold out of the province were runaway slaves who had been led out of the province through the land and sea underground railroad fomented by abolitionist organizations among which the SCL.<sup>75</sup> The demographic shift led one provincial deputy to state during legislative debates on abolition that "Ceará only turned to abolition after having sold its slaves" to the south.<sup>76</sup> Enslaved people like José Luiz Napoleão and Maria Simão da Conceição relied on self-emancipation through self-purchase to free themselves as between the 1871 law and 1881, few people in Ceará appeared particularly disturbed by the sight of the relocation of the enslaved to the south. Others fled to freedom through the abolitionist network that assisted runaway slaves<sup>77</sup>

Following the January 1881 strike, both Francisco José do Nascimento and José Luiz Napoleão were added to the Sociedade Cearense Libertadora's board of directors. The two boatmen shaped the organization's abolitionist crusade after the initial attack on human trafficking initiated with the 1881 strike. According to Antonio Bezerra's recollections of the abolitionist movement, Nascimento became more visible in the movement where he bravely utilized his *jangada* to free two captives from a ship before it could sail to the south of Brazil in August 1881. Bezerra served as the president of the Sociedade Cearense Libertadora upon its founding in December 1880. He was a writer, a politician, and a historian of Ceará. According to Bezerra, Nascimento became the face of the *jangadeiros'* strike against human trafficking in Ceará when he participated in an August 1881 blockade of Fortaleza's port. Then, a group of slaves were about to be transported from Ceará to other provinces aboard the Vapor Espírito Santo. Bezerra argued that it was a last-ditch attack on the Sociedade Cearense Libertadora by the police who engaged in suppressing the organization's radical stance on slavery. The author reported that the SCL assembled

72 SLENES, The Brazilian Internal Slave Trade.

73 GIRÃO, *Abolição no Ceará*, p. 60.

74 *Ibidem*, p. 73.

75 AZEVEDO E SOUZA, *Huguenotes, ingleses, abacaxis*, p. 408-431.

76 ALCÂNTARA PINTO, *Extinção da escravidão*, p. 122.

77 RODRIGUES, Elyo Fagner Silva. **Liberdade ainda que precária**: tornando se livre nos meandros das leis, Ceará (1868-1884). 2012. Dissertação (Mestrado em História) – Programa de Pós-Graduação em História Social, Universidade Federal da Bahia, Salvador, 2012.

a group of activists along the harbor to protest the embarkation of the enslaved and the jangadeiros maintained their refusal to participate in the traffic.<sup>78</sup>

The August 1881 strike became more confrontational as the police called a battalion of the army against the activists. A few of the enslaved had already been transported aboard the Vapor Espírito Santo in the harbor. The Police Chief called for support from the battalion of the Military Police led by Colonel Francisco de Lima e Silva. The colonel had already espoused the abolitionist cause and delayed sending assistance to the police. It is then, Bezerra reported that Nascimento utilized his jangada and rescued the two enslaved women from the ship in plain sight of the Police Chief who was taken over by the course of events and offered no resistance. The two rescued women were hidden in the residences of abolitionists and were later transferred to the house of a free black woman – Tia Esperança - through a land underground railroad. Bezerra recounted the August 1881 strike in a dramatic fashion. Although he mentioned José Luiz Napoleão's participation in the event, he attributed Nascimento as the main "leader" of the jangadeiros' activism.<sup>79</sup> At some point, Bezerra reported, Nascimento offered himself to assassinate the police chief for the cause of abolition since he did not have children and had therefore nothing to lose.<sup>80</sup>

Curiously, Bezerra's story of Nascimento's dramatic August 1881 strike is not reported in Ceará's main newspapers which had profusely written on the January 1881 strike. The *Cearense's* only note on the Vapor Espírito Santo which Bezerra reported was at the heart of the conflict between the police and an abolitionist crowd, anchored in Fortaleza on August 30, 1881, at ten in the morning and left the port sailing north later that day. It carried aboard it 2 slaves and an ingênuo, a child born after the 1871 free womb law, among other passengers. The vapor Pará, also mentioned by Bezerra, was also in Fortaleza's port and sailed further north on that day according to the publication.<sup>81</sup> Puzzled by the lack of specific reports on the confrontation between the police and the jangadeiros on August 31, 1881, I studied the main newspapers for any reference to the event from August 30<sup>th</sup> to September 1881. On September 6, 1881, the *Cearense* published an editorial lamenting the violent encounter between the police and the abolitionists. It stated that it supported the cause of emancipation but within the law.<sup>82</sup> The editorial was a mild reference to an event that hinted that there was abolitionist activism in the province but surprisingly the paper did not have a specific report on the August 1881 strike in sharp contrast to the January blockade. Meanwhile the *Libertadora* did not publish an article on an August 1881 strike in September. It alluded to the event in its September 28, 1881 edition relaying that the *Gazeta da Tarde* in Rio de Janeiro had published

78 BEZERRA, Ceará e os cearenses, p. 57-61.

79 Ibidem, p. 58-59.

80 Ibidem, p. 60.

81 *Cearense*, August 31, 1881, p. 2.

82 *Cearense*, September 6, 1881; it referenced a publication by the journal *A Constituição* on "events of the 30<sup>th</sup>" which was possibly about a jangadeiro strike as reported by Bezerra. I could not verify the *Constituição's* publication because the Biblioteca Nacional's hemeroteca does not have digitized copies of the journal for that year.



on the August blockade.<sup>83</sup> A few months later, in December 1881, the *Libertadora* published an editorial criticizing Ceará's Police Chief's promotion and lamenting that its members were being politically persecuted. It cited the fact that José Francisco de Nascimento had been fired from his job.<sup>84</sup> My conclusion from the lack of newspaper evidence on the August 1881 strike is that Bezerra conflated Nascimento's role in the event with the January 1881 blockade where Napoleão was unanimously reported as a decisive actor.

Bezerra's claim that Nascimento offered himself to assassinate the Police Chief aligns with Raymundo Girão and Edmar Morel's rationalization of the disappearance of José Luiz Napoleão's leadership after the January 1881 strike. Both authors argued that Napoleão chose to not continue being at the forefront of the jangadeiros' activism in the harbor and Girão specifically asserted that the freedman identified Nascimento as the person more qualified to continue the popular organizing of port-workers against slavery. However, this is contradicted by the fact that José Luiz Napoleão joined the directory of the SCL along with Nascimento where he could easily be identified by the police as any other member of the radical organization.

Bezerra, Girão, and Morel's explanation of the silencing of Napoleão's role does not suffice. Rather it seems that the leadership of the SCL deliberately lionized Nascimento at the expense of Napoleão both in its original report on the 1881 strike and in Bezerra's history of the province and its abolitionist movement. By May 1881 Morel reported that at the first Abolitionist congress of Brazil held in Maranguape, Nascimento was invited to sit in the first rank of the 123 members in attendance, but Napoleão's name vanished in subsequent history of the movement.<sup>85</sup> The erasure of Napoleão from the SCL's account of the 1881 strike, from its inception, may be due to his identity as a formerly enslaved person who self-emancipated because the organization as well as subsequent rendering of the movement privileged a self-righteous opposition to slavery emanating from free people. While Napoleão's leadership among the jangadeiros was useful to successfully blockade the port to human trafficking, it is undeniable that the organization was not comfortable in making him the face of the movement. In subsequent years, it was Nascimento who travelled to Rio de Janeiro and his jangada was immortalized and placed in a museum to document the abolitionist movement in Ceará with the captivating image of the "sea dragon" freeing presumably hundreds of enslaved people from being sold to foreign lands. Nascimento, an impoverished jangadeiro of free birth leading the boatmen presented one genealogy of abolitionism as the work of free people. Napoleão, an impoverished jangadeiro of slave birth who self-emancipated, however, presented a radical genealogy of abolitionism shaped by the enslaved. For all its radicalism, the Sociedade Cearense Libertadora did not seem to fully embrace the Napoleão story of abolitionism. The Napoleão story of abolitionism would have reckoned with the tradition of the enslaved, and enslaved mariners, having utilized the ocean as territorial possibility for freedom and that fugitive

83 *Libertadora*. September 28, 1881, p. 5.

84 *Libertadora*. December 8, 1881, p. 2-3.

85 MOREL, Vendaval da liberdade, p. 128.

mariners created a culture of contesting the geography of slavery. However, the silencing of Napoleão from the story of abolition in Ceará by the leadership of the SCL is consistent with the discourse of abolitionists which created a fiction of emancipation as a gift granted selflessly from the free to the enslaved, without agency on the part of the latter.<sup>86</sup>

## Conclusion

THIS ANALYSIS of maritime marronage along the Brazilian coast in the nineteenth century affirms that seaborne fugitivity was a persistent method of self-emancipation deployed by the enslaved to escape slavery. Enslaved sailors, *jangadeiros*, *canoeiros* as well as slaves without any skills maneuvering ships, found in these transiting vessels a vehicle to freedom whereby they could reinvent new identities in Brazil. In doing so, they established a long tradition of maritime marronage that informed port workers' understanding of the possibilities of flight by sea for self-emancipation but also the operationalization of the ocean as a territory to enslave people of African descent through dislocation from Africa to the Americas, and relocation from one province to another in Brazil following the abolition of the slave trade (1850). While the *Sociedade Cearense Libertadora* did provide the organizational legitimacy for the *jangadeiros* to blockade Ceará's port to the interprovincial slave trade in 1881, its own rendering of the event, and its silencing of José Luiz Napoleão's role in leading the boatmen's strike presented abolition as the work of free Brazilians especially José Francisco de Nascimento.<sup>87</sup> Recovering and highlighting Napoleão's leadership in the sacred cause suggests another genealogy of freedom in Ceará rooted in slave experience and the long tradition of maritime marronage among the enslaved, many of whom were often *jangadeiros* and mariners themselves.

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86 ALBUQUERQUE, Wlamyra. **Jogo da dissimulação**: abolição e cidadania negra no Brasil. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, p. 81-83.

87 *Ibidem*, p. 82.