

Selected Writings by Luiz Gama, Brazilian Abolitionist

LUIZ GAMA

Translator: Jordan B. Jones

Note: The footnotes below contain explanations from the translator; they do not appear in Gama's original texts.

“Scandals”*

In light of the abolitionist movement that is growing in the empire, and despite the crocodilism¹ of the emperor and the appalling misconduct of his immoral government, the corrupt merchants of human flesh are growing more cautious.

The voices of abolitionists have brought to light a highly criminal fact that has been consistently defended, for many years, by our unworthy authorities: it is the fact that the greater part of the African slaves currently living in Brazil *were imported* after the 1831 law prohibiting such traffic. Struck with fear by public sentiment, possessors of free Africans are beginning to sell them off to places far distant from those where they reside.

From the city of Jaguari, in the province of Minas Gerais, a Mr. Antonio Gonçalves Pereira has just sent to this province the Africans Jacinto and his wife, to be sold here, since there it is known and many have remarked recently that these Africans were imported 20 years ago!...

Translator's note: I wish to thank Ligia Fonseca Ferreira for her rigorous scholarship about Luiz Gama and for her generosity in sharing her insights with me. I'm also grateful to Ethan Harris, Chloe Hill, and Marguerite Itamar Harrison for their careful reading and excellent suggestions.

* The original text in Portuguese is included in Luiz Gama, “Escândalos.” *Radical Paulistano*, Sept. 30, 1869, <http://memoria.bn.br/DocReader/713473/86>. It also appears in in *Lições de resistência: Artigos de Luiz Gama na imprensa de São Paulo e do Rio de Janeiro*. Edited and introduced by Ligia Fonseca Ferreira, Edições SESC, 2020, pp. 145–46.

¹ Scholar Ligia Fonseca Ferreira believes that *crocodilismo*, which appears in the original Portuguese, was coined by Gama and based on the Portuguese word *crocodilo* [crocodile] or on the verb form *crocodilar*, which means to act dishonestly or hypocritically (*Lições de resistência* 146).

We can affirm that *many Africans in this city* find themselves in identical circumstances—a *fact that is known by the authorities*, who are the primary protectors of such a horrifying crime.

We further affirm that the government of His Majesty the Emperor has given secret instructions to these authorities, *so that they feign ignorance* of the claims brought against them with regard to these matters!...

Should friends of humanity, defenders of morality, cross their arms before such abominable crimes?

“Unbelievable Things”*

It is not to the illustrious Dr. Rafael Tobias de Aguiar that I have the honor of responding with regard to the dubious article published in the *Correio Paulistano*² with regard to the *pardo*³ Narciso, but to the honorable Dr. João Mendes de Almeida, who carefully wrote, as a lawyer,

Not to respond to Mr. Luiz Gama, *but* [here is where this *preposterous* question enters the scene!] rather to orient the public about this question that will be of interest to all those who own slaves [And here comes the honorable Dr. João Mendes with his customary artifice of personal odiousness], I transcribe the will and testament relative to *the slave Narciso bequeathed* (!!!) by my mother-in-law to my wife.

Let judicious readers mark the notable disparity that can be seen between the words of the article written by the excellent Dr. João Mendes—*slave Narciso BEQUEATHED*—, and those of the testamentary statement—*services bequeathed for ten years*.

Here is the testament:

My slave Narciso SHALL SERVE for ten years after my death under the heir previously named, and at the end of this period *he shall be free*.

* The original text in Portuguese is included in Luiz Gama, “Coisas admiráveis.” *Correio Paulistano*, Dec. 2, 1870, http://memoria.bn.br/DocReader/090972_03/1010. It also appears in *Lições de resistência: Artigos de Luiz Gama na imprensa de São Paulo e do Rio de Janeiro*. Edited and introduced by Lígia Fonseca Ferreira, Edições SESC, 2020, pp. 179–82.

² A São Paulo newspaper.

³ Light-skinned.

In the estate inventories we read further:

Narciso, whose SERVICES of ten years were appraised, the same are valued at 200\$, at the end of which time, according to the will and testament, he will become free.

For my part, honorable Dr. João Mendes, I confess that I have little in common with the most learned opinion of slaveowners, invoked by Your Excellency; these braided whips hold no pleasure for me. I prize my good sense too highly to risk it in discussions and consultations with lovers of the *ladder* punishment and of the *bacalhau*.⁴

What I wish to demonstrate is the real and incontestable liberation granted to the *pardo* Narciso, and I will do this by using the law, guiding myself only by the principles of science, and without resorting to the wise counsel of the honorable merchants of human flesh.

I shall keep this authorized opinion for some future day in which I may have the disgrace of supporting some cause regarding illicit things, since I am not ignorant of the ancient Italian proverb: “We seek for authors according to the matters at hand.”

Let us address the question: Was the *pardo* Narciso freed by Dona Maria Carlota de Oliva Gomes, under the condition of serving her daughter for ten years, or was he bequeathed to the same under the condition of being freed by her, or by someone else, at the end of this period?

From the will and testament we must necessarily conclude that Dona Maria Carlota freed the *pardo* Narciso, because she says: “*My slave* Narciso SHALL SERVE for ten years after my death under the heir previously named, and *at the end of this period he shall be free*.”

The testator did not *bequeath* her *slave* Narciso to her heir; rather, *through her death, she donated his services* for the period of ten years. She did not bequeath *her slave* because she personally and directly freed him, saying, “and at the end of this period *he shall be free*”; and this is so because manumissions in wills are accomplished in two ways:

1. Directly
2. By trustee

⁴ A whip braided from raw leather.

Manumission is direct when the testator independently confers freedom, with or without conditions.

It is trustee manumission when the testator mandates or delegates to someone the responsibility of granting or effecting the manumission, through the conditions previously established by him.

Those of the first category are called immediate, because they come directly from the testator's own person;

Those of the second are called mediated, because they depend on the actions of a third person. Both methods can be unconditional or term based.

In the current case, we are speaking of manumission conferred directly and based on terms, since the testator—not having personally bequeathed her slave, but only his services, for a fixed period—makes enjoying his full freedom, *which she grants*, dependent on a condition that others impose on the freed slave.

Now, if the *pardo* Narciso's freedom was directly conferred by Dona Maria Carlota—if by her will the testator clearly bequeathed to her daughter not the person of her slave, but only his services, for the period of ten years—it follows that no one has the right to call him his or her slave; and, if he is not a slave, it is certain that he cannot belong to Dr. Rafael Tobias.

*To be, or not to be: that is the question.*⁵

It is proven, therefore, with the very documents chosen by the excellent Dr. João Mendes de Almeida, that Narciso is free, and not a slave, and this despite the *proclamations and allegations* presented by His Excellency to affirm the property of his unfortunate client.

This time, therefore, His Excellency's recognized and proven shrewd ploys did not succeed.

Narciso is under my humble protection, and has a court deposit.

He is free, and just as free as Dr. Rafael Tobias and his distinguished attorney.

We have laws, and I know how to summon will.

São Paulo, December 1, 1870

LUIZ GAMA

P.S.

⁵ In addition to reproducing this famous phrase from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Gama may also be playing with the pronunciation of the name Tobias, the first two syllables of which (in Portuguese) sound similar to the English words "to be."

Today the honorable doctor and chief of the police ordered a search warrant to arrest the *pardo* Narciso from my house, an arrest which was unsuccessful.

Allow me to ask His Excellency:

Has the inventory of Dona Maria Carlota already been concluded?

Has the apportionment already happened?

Has the *pardo* Narciso been judicially delivered to Dr. R. Tobias?

If the doctor does not have a deed of ownership, could he have obtained this warrant?

Are the police attempting to exasperate me or provoke me to the point of acting in such a way so as to prompt some order of imprisonment?

L. G.

“Buyers Beware”*

Benedita, whom Mr. Romão Leomil took to Campinas, and whom he is attempting to sell as the supposed slave of the esteemed Dr. Guilherme Caetano da Silva, is free.⁶

Letter to His Son, Benedito Graco Pinto da Gama **

September 23, 1870.

Tell your mother that the difficult duty of keeping herself honest and in good standing has fallen to her; that she should not be afraid of the extreme poverty that I bequeath to you, because poverty is the brightest marker of virtue.

* The original text in Portuguese is included in Luiz Gama, “Acautelem-se os compradores.” *Gazeta do Povo*, Nov. 25, 1881. It also appears in *Lições de resistência: Artigos de Luiz Gama na imprensa de São Paulo e do Rio de Janeiro*. Edited and introduced by Ligia Fonseca Ferreira, Edições SESC, 2020, p. 353.

⁶ In describing Benedita as free, Gama uses the word *forra*, which indicates a woman who was previously enslaved but had since gained her freedom (as opposed to *livre*, which could also describe someone who had never been enslaved).

** The original text in Portuguese is included in Luiz Gama, “Carta ao filho, Benedito Graco Pinto da Gama.” In *Lições de resistência: Artigos de Luiz Gama na imprensa de São Paulo e do Rio de Janeiro*, edited and introduced by Ligia Fonseca Ferreira, Edições SESC, 2020, p. 361.

You must avoid friendship and relationships with great men; because they are like the ocean that approaches the coasts to erode the rocks.

Be a republican, as was the Man-Christ. Become an artist; believe, however, that study is the best entertainment, and a book one's best friend.

Become an apostle of teaching, starting now. Fervently combat the throne, indigence, and ignorance. Work for yourself with unyielding effort so that this country in which we were born, without a king and without slaves, may call itself the United States of Brazil.

Be a Christian and a philosopher; believe solely in the authority of reason, and never ally yourself with any religious sect. God reveals himself only in the reason of man; he does not exist in any church in the world.

There are two books that I recommend you read: *The Holy Bible* and *The Life of Jesus*, by Ernest Renan.

Work and be perseverant.

Remember that I wrote these lines in a crucial moment, under the threat of assassination. Have compassion for your enemies, as I pity the plight of mine.

Your father

LUIZ GAMA

Letter to Lúcio de Mendonça*

São Paulo, July 25, 1880

My dear Lúcio,

I received your letter dated the 28th of last month.

I cannot refuse your request, for I would rather be accused of being ridiculous, by way of putting forth childish details about myself, than of being vain and foppish, by hiding them, as if ashamed. What follows are the details you have asked for, and which I have always carried with me in my memory.

I was born in the city of Saint Salvador, capital of the province of Bahia, in a two-story home located on Bângala Street, situated in the inside curve of the road,

* The original text in Portuguese is included in Luiz Gama, "Carta a Lúcio de Mendonça." July 25, 1880, https://acervo.bn.gov.br/Sophia_web/acervo/detalhe/1562310. It also appears in *Com a palavra, Luiz Gama: Poemas, artigos, cartas, máximas*, edited and introduced by Ligia Fonseca Ferreira, Imprensa Oficial, 2011, pp. 199–203.

on the righthand side for those departing from the Adro churchyard, in the Sant'Ana neighborhood, on June 21, 1830,⁷ about 7 in the morning, and I was baptized, 8 years later, in the central church of Sacramento, in the city of Itaparica.

I am the natural son of a black, free African woman, from the Mina Coast⁸ (of the Nago Nation), whose name was Luíza Mahin, a pagan, who always refused baptism and Christian doctrine.

My mother was short in stature, thin, beautiful, and her skin was of a deep black color, without being glossy. Her teeth were brilliant white like the snow; she was very haughty, hot-tempered, insufferable, and vindictive.

She was employed in commerce—she sold wares on the street and was very hardworking, and more than once, in Bahia, she was imprisoned on suspicions of having been involved in plans for slave uprisings, which were not carried out.

She was blessed with activity. In 1837, after the Revolution of Dr. Sabino, in Bahia, she came to Rio de Janeiro, and she never returned. I searched for her in 1847, in 1856, in 1861, in the Court,⁹ but I was unable to find her. In 1862, I learned, through a few black minas,¹⁰ who knew her and who gave me credible evidence that she, along with other disorderly associates taken from a “fortune house”¹¹ in 1838, was placed in prison; and that she as well as her companions disappeared. In the opinion of my informants, these “insurrectionists” were expelled by the government, which, at this time, was very harsh in its treatment of free Africans, who were seen as agitators.

I was unable to learn any more about her. In that year, 1861, returning to São Paulo, and being employed by the government in the Caçapava community, I dedicated to her the verses that I am sending to you along with this letter.

⁷ Based on extensive archival research, Lisa Earl Castillo and Wlamyra Albuquerque argue that Gama misremembers here; in “Família, insurgências e contravenções: Memória e história de Luiz Gama na Bahia,” they include the image of a baptismal record for Luiz dated October 2, 1831 (13). They also provide documentation to support their assertion that, contrary to popular belief, Gama’s mother, Luíza, was still (illegally) enslaved when she gave birth to him; thus, although he would be freed at his baptism a few months later, they assert that Gama was born into slavery (12–13). Castillo and Albuquerque also argue that, just as her son would be in 1840, Luíza may have been sold away by Gama’s father (her owner), Antônio Agostinho Carlos Pinto da Gama (37–38).

⁸ This area overlaps with the regions that were known in English as the Gold Coast and the Slave Coast.

⁹ This refers to Rio de Janeiro, home to the Portuguese Royal Court from 1808 until 1822, when Brazilian independence from Portugal was declared. Rio de Janeiro continued to be the seat of government power in Brazil until the inauguration of Brasília, in 1960.

¹⁰ Individuals from the Mina Coast.

¹¹ A place for socializing among black individuals.

As for my father, I do not dare to say that he was white, since such statements, in this country, constitute a serious threat to the truth, as it relates to the twisted presumption about human colors. He was a gentleman and belonged to one of the most prominent Portuguese families in Bahia. I will spare his unhappy memory a painful offense by omitting his name here.

He was rich and, during this time, very affectionate toward me; he took an active hand in raising me. He was a revolutionary in 1837. He loved to fish and hunt, he was an admirer of good horses, he was good with weapons and much better at cards, and he loved parties and other forms of amusement. He wasted a large inheritance, given to him by his aunt in 1836, and reduced to extreme poverty, on November 10, 1840—in the company of Luiz Cândido Quintela, his inseparable and kindly friend, who lived off the profits of a gambling house in the city of Bahia, a two-story building on the corner, near the square—he sold me, as his slave, aboard the *Saraiva* vessel.

Sent to Rio de Janeiro in this same ship, a few days later, which embarked full of slaves, I went, with many others, to the house of a Portuguese chandler named Vieira, who owned a candle shop on Candelária Street, near the corner of Sabão. He was a short businessman, circumspect and energetic, who received slaves from Bahia for a commission. He had a son who was obsessed with fashion, who studied in the local school, and I believe three grown daughters, who were very kind, very meek, and very compassionate, especially the oldest. Mrs. Vieira was a perfect matron: an example of candor and godliness. I was 10 years old. She and her daughters immediately took kindly to me. It was five o'clock in the afternoon when I entered their house. They ordered me to bathe, dressed me in a shirt and in the skirt of the youngest daughter, gave me dinner and sent me to sleep with a mulatta woman named Felícia, who was the slave who kept house.

Whenever I remember this good lady and her daughters, tears come to my eyes, because I miss the love and care with which they surrounded me for a few days.

I left there sobbing, and all of them were mournful at seeing me depart.

Oh! I have painful wounds in my life, more burdensome than the mournful legends of afflicted martyrs' lives.

In this home, in December 1840, I was sold to a businessman and smuggler, the *alferes*¹² Antônio Pereira Cardoso, the same who, some 8 or 10 years ago, a ranch owner in the municipality of Lorena in this Province—in the act of being arrested for having starved some slaves to death, in a private jail, and already over the age of 60 or 70—committed suicide via gunshot, the bullet passing through his cranium.

This *alferes* Antônio Pereira Cardoso bought me in a lot of a hundred or so slaves; and he took all of us, since this was his business, to sell in this Province.

As I said before, I was only 10 years old, and I walked the whole way from Santos to Campinas.

I was chosen by many buyers, in this city, in Jundiaí and Campinas, and then rejected, as one rejects bad things, for the simple fact that I was “Bahian.”

This imperfection was worth it!

The last to reject me was the venerable and sympathetic elder Francisco Egídio de Sousa Aranha, father of the Excellent Count of Três Rios, my respectable friend.

This one, after choosing me, caressed me and said:

- You will be a good pageboy for my boys; tell me: where were you born?
- In Bahia, I replied.
- Bahian? exclaimed the respectable old man. — I wouldn’t want you even if it cost me nothing. There must be a reason you were sold so young.

Rejected as being “defective,” along with another slave from Bahia, named José (a cobbler), I returned to the house of Mr. Cardoso, in this city, on Comércio Street, no. 2, a two-story building, near the Misericórdia Church.

There I learned to be a butler and a cobbler, to wash and iron clothes, and to sew.

I was 17 in 1847, when the young Antônio Rodrigues do Prado Júnior came to live in Mr. Cardoso’s house as a guest, having left the city of Campinas, where he was living, to study the humanities. Today he is a doctor of the law, an ex-magistrate of high accomplishment, and a resident of Mogi-Guaçu, where he owns a ranch.

¹² Low-ranking army officer.

We developed an intimate friendship, that of dear brothers, and he began to teach me my first letters.

In 1848, knowing how to read and count to some degree, and having carefully and secretly obtained incontrovertible proof of my freedom, I left, escaping from the house of the *alferes* Antônio Pereira Cardoso (who, in truth, held me in high esteem), and I went to enlist. I served until 1854, six years; I became a corporal in my squadron, and I was discharged from service, after listening to counsel for an act of supposed insubordination, when I had limited myself to threatening an insolent official, who had insulted me and who knew to contain himself.

I was imprisoned, then, for 39 days, from July 1 to August 9. I spent the days reading and the nights suffering from insomnia, and the image of my dear mother was constantly before my eyes. One night, after two o'clock, I was drifting to sleep when, in a dream, I saw that they had imprisoned her. I seemed distinctly to hear her calling for me.

I gave a shout and sprang from my bunk, my companions stirred, and I pushed my head through the bars.

The hallway of the prison was solitary and silent and long and dreary, poorly lit by the yellowed light of a smoky lantern.

I returned to my bunk and told my curious companions what had happened, and they told me of similar events. I fell into nostalgia, I cried, and I slept.

During my time in the service, in my free time, I became a copyist; I wrote for the office of the scribe, Major Benedito Antônio Coelho Neto, who became my friend, and who now (through his merit) works in the position of chief officer of the Secretariat of the Government, and as an amanuensis in the office of the excellent counselor Mr. Francisco Maria de Sousa Furtado de Mendonça—who for many years, with applause and adulation of the public in general, filled high positions in administration, in the police, and in the courts, and who is a professor in the College of Law. I was his assistant; by my character, by my activity, and by my behavior I won his respect and his protection and learned many good lessons in letters and in civics, which I cherish with pride.

In 1856, after serving as a scribe for various police authorities, I was named amanuensis of the Secretary of the Police, where I served until 1868, at which time, “for being turbulent and seditious,” I was dismissed “for the public good” by the conservatives, who had then risen to power. The document effecting my dismissal was written by Dr. Antônio Manuel dos Reis, my good friend, who was then

secretary of the police, and signed by the honorable Dr. Vicente Ferreira da Silva Bueno, who, for this and other similar acts, was named a judge in matters related to the Court.

The turbulence spoken of consisted of my belonging to the Liberal Party, and, in the press and in the ballots, of fighting for the victory of my ideas and those of my party, and of promoting cases in favor of free persons who had been criminally enslaved, and of lawfully helping (as my efforts permitted) to effect the liberation of slaves, because I detest captivity and all masters, particularly kings.

From the moment I became a soldier, I started to become a man—because until age 10 I was a child; from 10 to 18, I was a soldier.¹³

I wrote poetry, I wrote for many newspapers, I collaborated on other literary and political journals, and I edited a few others.

I come now to the period in which, my dear Lúcio, we met in Ipiranga, on Carmo Street—you as a typographer, poet, translator, and fledgling pamphleteer; I as a simple apprentice-composer, from which I left for the law and for the courts, where I earn bread for me and my own—who are all the poor, all the unhappy—and for all the wretched slaves who, numbering over 500, I have snatched from the claws of criminal enslavement.

This is what I can tell you, hastily, without much importance or value, least of all for you, who esteem me for who I truly am.

Your Luiz

Works Consulted

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¹³ Here Gama may be inserting a play on the word *soldado*, which most commonly means “soldier” but can also mean “soldered.” By his own account he was enlisted from ages eighteen to twenty-four, so his use of *soldado* to describe his experiences from ages ten to eighteen is somewhat surprising. He may have opted for the term to describe how his firsthand experiences with slavery during those eight years shaped his perspective, forged his abolitionist sensibilities, and prepared him to fight against slavery—hence the possible dual meaning of the original phrase *fui soldado* (“I was a soldier” and “I was soldered”).

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LUIZ GONZAGA PINTO DA GAMA (1831–1882), hailed today as one of Brazil’s great abolitionists, was born in Salvador, Bahia. His father (whom he never named in his writings) was from a prominent Portuguese family living in Bahia, and his mother, Luiza Mahin, was “a black, free African woman” from the West African region referred to at the time as the Costa da Mina. Gama states that, though he was born free, at age ten he was sold into slavery by his father and transported to Rio de Janeiro and later São Paulo. Near the end of his eight-year enslavement he learned to read and acquired proof of his right to freedom. After

securing his own freedom he continued to study and practice law, and he liberated over five hundred enslaved people before his death.

Many of Gama's legal arguments hinged on the 1831 Feijó Law, which banned the slave trade. This law was largely perfunctory, however, passed only to appease the British (who exerted significant economic and social pressure on Brazil), and it was not enforced regularly. It was only after the passage of the 1850 Eusébio de Queirós Law that the Brazilian government actually put an end to the slave trade. Nevertheless, Gama repeatedly insisted that the passage of the Feijó Law meant that any enslaved people brought to Brazil after 1831 should, by law, go free. Such arguments are visible in the texts below, extracted from newspaper columns and letters Gama wrote. Gama was also a poet, publishing his collection *Primeiras trovas burlescas* [First Burlesque Verses], under the pseudonym Getulino, in 1859. He worked tirelessly as a *rábula* (a term used to designate those who practiced law without an official law diploma) until his death in 1882, just six years before Brazilian slavery was abolished, on May 13, 1888. Gama was honored with a law degree *honoris causa* from the University of São Paulo in 2021.

JORDAN BENJAMIN JONES is an assistant professor in the Department of Spanish & Portuguese at Brigham Young University. He holds a PhD in Portuguese & Brazilian Studies from Brown University, as well as master's degrees in Luso-Brazilian Literatures (Brigham Young University), secondary English education (Johns Hopkins University), and Hispanic Studies (Brown University). Jordan is the author of articles appearing in journals such as *Luso-Brazilian Review*, *Estudos de Literatura Brasileira Contemporânea*, *Hispania*, and *Machado de Assis em Linha*. He is the translator of *Somewhere* (Amherst College Press, forthcoming March 2026), by Brazilian-Argentine author Paloma Vidal, and of *The Myth of Economic Development* (Polity Press, 2020), by Brazilian economist Celso Furtado. His research and teaching interests include human rights and race in contemporary literature/culture, antislavery texts, translation, and inter-American literary studies.