

Ana Sofia Mendonça Silva: Letters from a Brazilian Schoolgirl

Ana Sofia Beatriz Mendonça Silva was born outside Rio de Janeiro in 1870. What little is known of her family origins is deciphered from her existing letters and her presence at a *colégio*, or boarding school, in Rio de Janeiro.¹ Her attendance at a boarding school suggests that her family was of a middle class stature, since the poor sent their children to public schools and the elite hired governesses.² If it were not for the survival of letters that she sent home from boarding school, Ana Sofia would not appear in the pages of history, for her life was less than extraordinary. She lived much like the average Brazilian woman in the late nineteenth-century, marrying a man from her same social standing and living the semi-secluded life typical of the women above Brazil's lowest classes. After she leaves boarding school in 1884, the only records in which her name appears are her marriage certificate in 1889, the baptismal certificates of her 8 children, and her death certificate in 1909. She died during childbirth, a fact that emphasizes her place in society as a wife and mother.³

The normalcy of Mendonça Silva's life is the very aspect that attracts historians to her letters. Several letters that young Ana Sofia sent home to her mother throughout the course of her education at a boarding school in Rio de Janeiro have survived. These letters provide insight into the everyday life of a Brazilian woman, and the ways in which she viewed the society

¹ The existence of this fictional schoolgirl and the majority of her views are based upon the correspondence of Ina Von Binzer, a German schoolteacher in Brazil from 1881-1884, as well as the travel account of American educator Elizabeth Agassiz who journeyed to Brazil with her husband in the 1860s, as contained in June E. Hahner, ed., *Women through Women's Eyes: Latin American Women in Nineteenth-Century Travel Accounts* (New York: SR Books, 1998), 103-129.

² Hahner, 121.

³ The seclusion of Brazilian women of higher status is described by Elizabeth Agassiz: "There is not a Brazilian senhora...who is not aware that her life is one of repression and constraint. She cannot go out of her house, except under certain conditions, without awakening scandal." Also, following her description of female education in Brazil, I have Ana Sofia leaving school at the approximate age of 14 and marrying shortly after. Agassiz wrote, "the majority of girls in Brazil who go to school at all...are considered to have finished their education at thirteen or fourteen. The next step in their life is marriage." See Hahner, 112-114.

around her and her own place within that society. Accounts of the lives of Brazilian women, written in their own words and portraying their own perspectives of their circumstances and of the world around them, are scarce.

Reacting to foreign ideas, the Brazilian female educational system, societal expectations and a rapidly changing country, Ana Sofia is a young girl exploring her place as a woman in Brazilian society. Her words uphold the societal viewpoint of a Brazilian woman's place as a wife and mother subordinate to a patriarch. However, she also portrays a glimmer of resentment at the prospect of a future full of repression, constraint and obedience. Mendonça Silva's letters provides a rare and refreshing insider's view not only on being female in Brazil, but also provides a uniquely female commentary on the state of affairs, particularly the impending end of slavery in a slave society.

Rio de Janeiro
February 12, 1882

Cara Mamãe,

How are you and the rest of the family? I miss you all, but I am otherwise doing well. I am readjusting to life at school. My only complaint is the cockroaches who continue to haunt this place at night. The teachers and all the girls together chase after them every night with our shoes, but no matter how many we kill, there are always more. We hardly pay any attention to them anymore. They eat the pages of our books, which is not much of a shame, since I find them all to be boring.⁴

I have a bit of news to tell you. There is a new schoolteacher here. Her name is *Senhorita* Von Binzer, but we are to call her *Fräulein*. She is German, although she does not

⁴ Von Binzer's description of the poor condition of the *colégio*, the inadequate building in which it is situated, and (especially) the cockroaches can be found in Hahner, 127-28.

have the look of a German, and is quite pretty. All the girls seem to like her, for she also dresses fashionably, which is not usually the trait of a German.⁵ She is to teach us English and German, both of which I am interested in learning, but I hardly see the practicality of it in a young woman's education. Beside the fact that they are hard languages to learn, being of a root language far different from our native Portuguese, they do not seem useful in our future careers as wives and mothers. Some of the other girls do not even try to learn in her classes, because they don't care to put the effort into learning something whose sole benefit is to say that we have learned it. French is a much more beautiful language, much more useful in everyday interactions, and because it is so similar to Portuguese, we practically learn it in our sleep.⁶ How are English and German important to a girl's education? Education is not necessary, nor expected, in a wife and mother. We should spend our time learning things that are more useful. She also is teaching music lessons, and I will be very glad to take piano lessons from her, since I find that much more agreeable with the lifestyle of a Brazilian lady.⁷

Until next time, with love, Ana Sofia

Rio de Janeiro
February 21, 1882

Cara Mamãe,

I hope to find that you and the family have been well since my last letter. I look forward to the summer, when I can come home and be with you. I have barely anything to do to pass my days, except my studies. I have attempted to spend my time reading, however, we are not

⁵ In her letter on February 12, 1882, Ina Von Binzer writes in detail about comments she receives from others saying that "I do not resemble other Germans" and that she cannot be German because "German women are always poorly dressed, and not at all chic." See Hahner, 126-27.

⁶ The comments here are inspired from a letter of February 12, 1882, in which Von Binzer writes that "both languages are like a closed book to my pupils...Perhaps this is all explained by the difference between Germanic and Latin peoples, since the girls learn French almost in their sleep." See Hahner, 125.

⁷ These comments on class are consistent with Agassiz's observations of the education of Brazilian girls: "The education of women is little regarded in Brazil...with the exception of one or two accomplishments, such as French or music, the education of women is neglected." See Hahner, 126-27.

allowed to read anything the least bit interesting. The directress carefully supervises all our activities, within the classroom and without, in order to insure that we behave in a way becoming of young ladies. The only books beside our lesson books that we are able to read are books on religion, virtue, and the proper roles of women. As you know, I already have proper manners and behavior from your careful instruction and example. Just once, I would like to read a book about adventure and foreign lands. How could that possibly harm my virtue?⁸

Many of the girls here at school belong to families that own or work on *engenhos* or *fazendas*. The livelihoods of their families are dependent upon the slaves that labor in the fields. Because of this, one can hear talk of slavery ringing through the halls of the *colégio* at all hours of the day and night, much more than I ever hear the other girls talk about their studies. There exists a continuous, and rather heated, debate between those girls who defend slavery because of their economic dependence on the system and those who are against it for various reasons. Some think that slavery is inhumane, intrinsically wrong and against the will of heaven. Others view it as an archaic system that is preventing Brazil from further development and making our country seem unsophisticated to foreign eyes. Many of the girls, myself included, have attempted to solicit opinions from our various foreign teachers, the Frenchwomen and the German. However, this is to no avail, for our teachers think that matters such as slavery are not the business of young women and the continually attempt to stop these conversations.⁹ If they did give their

⁸ In her travel account, Agassiz recounts an experience in which she came across a novel in a Brazilian home, only to be told by the master of the house that it was not suitable for women, and instead given a book of morals to read. The implication, of course, was that this particular man felt that Agassiz lacked both intellect and judgment. See Hahner, 126-27.

⁹ Here again I am extrapolating from the account of Elizabeth Agassiz as contained in Hahner, 112-117. If reading material that was not about morals and virtuosity was not appropriate for women, so too was conversation that did not pertain to womanly virtue.

thoughts, I would guess, that slavery would not look pleasant to them since they have not grown up in its midst.¹⁰

Mamãe, I don't know how I feel about slavery. I have seen slaves since early childhood and they are so much a part of our country. It is hard to imagine a Brazil without slavery, although we all know that it is only a matter of years before it is completely abolished. So many laws have already been passed, and it is gradually ending. Who will work the fields once the slaves are freed? I have heard terrible stories about the treatment of some slaves, and I have seen these poor conditions with my own eyes. I believe that it is wrong to treat these people in such a way, but I also believe that the number of cruel masters is small. Surely, there are many masters who treat their slaves well, and their relationships are ones of a father and his children. This I have also seen with my own eyes.¹¹ Who will care for the colored people once they are all free, if they no longer have masters to provide them with food and lodging? Already there are many freedmen who wander the streets, poor and unable to live in a dignified manner. I do not think that their poor existence is better than slavery, where they will at least be provided for. Slaves do not live without any pleasures. We have seen with our own eyes the joyous celebrations that they are able to undertake during their breaks from labor. They seem quite happy as they dance their lively courtship dances and the cares of their labors pass away. When they are able, they have families not unlike our own, full of love and devotion.¹² I believe that these marriages should not be broken up, as masters have done, separating mothers from their children, husbands from their wives. Although slaves are property, they too are subject to the laws of the Lord, and

¹⁰ As noted in Hahner, 82, Brazil frequently appeared to be culturally backward from the perspective of individual Europeans.

¹¹ Adèle Toussaint-Samson and Fredrika Bremer each describe varying treatments of slaves by their masters in their travel accounts, "A Parisian in Brazil" and "The Homes of the New World," as contained in Hahner, 69-101.

¹² Here I am inspired by the observations of Fredrika Bremer in Cuba who tells of a slave couple that had been together for many years, since before they had been enslaved and brought to the Americas, as recorded in Hahner, 73-75, 78-80.

a master should not have the right to break the union of a man and wife. The masters who do so are breaking the laws of God, and not doing their proper duty to instruct their slaves in Christian morality.

I was so glad to hear that Gabriela will soon be getting married. You know that have been so close since our childhood. I have missed her so much since she has left school; I loved being schoolmates with her as well as sisters. I will miss her even more now, as I know that she must be a proper wife and soon a mother and that will mean she will be much confined to her house, as a good wife should be. I cannot help but question this practice though, for I know that I soon will be marrying also, and I cannot imagine my life being anything but dull if I am restricted from the outside world. To be unable to visit freely with friends and family, and to have little entertainment but the weekly Mass, seems to me a monotonous life.¹³ Even the slave women enjoy lives with much more joy, for they are able to engage in their dances and games and move freely about the city, singing and talking and selling their goods.¹⁴ *Mamãe*, I do not understand why we have to live indoors and secluded, but if it will make you and *papai* happy for me to become an obedient wife and mother, that is what I will do. Give Gabriela my love and blessing for her upcoming wedding and a lifetime of happiness.

With much love, Ana Sofia

¹³ Here I am extrapolating from the assertions of Toussaint-Samson and Agassiz about the secluded life of Brazilian women live. Agassiz asserts that Brazilian women understood the extent of their confinement and understood it as unfair and a plight, noting that “many of the women I have known most intimately here have spoken to me with deep regret of their limited, imprisoned existence.” See Hahner, 114-15.

¹⁴ At various points in their travel accounts, Toussaint-Samson and Agassiz address the freedom of lower-class, indigenous and slave women in contrast to the constrained lives of the middle-class and elite Brazilian ladies, as contained in Hahner, 81-117.

Bibliography

Hahner, June E., ed. *Women through Women's Eyes: Latin American Women in Nineteenth-Century Travel Accounts*. New York: SR Books, 1998.

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