

CATEGORY: BRAZIL: SLAVERY

CONCEPTS: SOCIAL CLASS, economics, race/ethnicity, work

ACTIVITY: READING A NINETEENTH CENTURY DESCRIPTION OF A SLAVE AUCTION. The following reading describes how Brazilian slaves were treated as commodities instead of human beings. It is self-explanatory and sheds light on the institution of slavery wherever found.

OBJECTIVES: Students will be able to describe a Brazilian slave auction as well as some of the types of work performed by slaves in Brazil.

MATERIALS: The following reading, reproduced or read aloud in class.

PROCEDURE: Have the students read the handout or read the description to them. The reading itself should bring about discussion, but a series of words might be of help. Have the students describe the life of slaves in relation to these words:

family	salary
medicine	individuality
freedom	human rights
children	old age

VOCABULARY: auction, merchandise

RESOURCES: C.R. Boxer, Race Relations in the Portuguese Colonial Empire, Oxford: Clarendon, 1963. T. Lynn Smith, Brazil, People and Institutions, Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1963.

LEVEL: MIDDLE GRADES

Source: Gibbs, Virginia G. *Latin America: Curriculum Materials for the Middle Grades*. Center for Latin America, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. 1985. | 1989.

A Brazilian Slave Auction

Slavery played a very important role in Brazilian economy and the formation of Brazilian society. Like every place else, slavery was a cruel system in which people were treated as things or animals. Slavery was finally abolished in 1888. Here is a description of a slave auction, written by a traveler from the United States, Thomas Ewbank, in 1856.

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I often passed an auction store at the corner of Ourives and Ouvidor. Today printed announcements were hanging by the door. I took one and stepped in. A long table extended from near the entrance to the low desk of the salesman. Behind it, an iron rail separated part of the store. The place was filled with new and secondhand furniture, old pictures, Dutch cheeses, Yankee clocks, kitchen utensils, dishes, old books, shoes, pickles, etc.

Sales of these things are held here daily, and once or twice a week another type of merchandise is offered. This was the case today - an assorted collection of goods, arranged on benches behind the iron railing. The catalogue contained eighty-nine lots, and each lot had a corresponding number pinned to it, that purchasers, after looking at the list of goods, might compare the articles with their description.

These goods were living beings. Every lot was a man or woman, boy or girl. There were fifty-three males, most of whom ranged between eighteen and thirty years of age - carpenters, masons, blacksmiths, and farm hands. One was a sailor, another a boatman. There were two tailors, a coachman, a lumberjack, a shoemaker, cooks, a coffee-carrier, and a barber, who, like most of his profession, was a musician - "Number 19, one young man, barber and good musician."

Of the females, the oldest was twenty-six, and the youngest between seven and eight - washers, sewers, cooks, two "very accomplished" dressmakers. Others made shirts, dressed ladies hair, etc.

They were of every shade, from deep Angola jet to white or nearly white. One young woman facing me was certainly much more intelligent than some of the buyers. The anguish with which she watched the proceedings, and waited her turn to be brought out and sold was distressing. A little girl, I suppose her own, stood by her weeping, with one hand in her lap, obviously dreading to be torn away. This child did not cry out - that is not allowed, but tears chased each other down her cheeks and such a look of alarm marked her face as she turned her large eyes on the proceedings, that I thought she might drop.

The auctioneer, a tall, black-bearded man, was a master of his profession, if one might judge from his quickness and fervor. A hammer in his right hand, the index finger of his left hand pointing to a farm hand, he pours out a flow of words. The poor farm hand had on a canvas shirt, with sleeves ending at the elbows. A bidder steps up, examines the man's muscles and teeth. He is now told to walk toward the door and back to show his gait. As he was returning, the hammer fell to signify a sale, and he was pushed back behind the railing. Another poor man, who had only four toes, was also quickly sold.

The clerk next went behind the rails and brought forward a woman - a field hand. She was stout, and seemed older than reported in the catalogue. Dressed as plainly as the men, she too was examined, and told to walk to and fro. When near the door, a bidder asked her a question which I couldn't hear. His meaning was soon plain since she raised her skirt slightly to show legs that were very swollen. Two hundred and fifty milreis [Brazilian money of the time] was the sum she was sold for.

(Adapted from Thomas Ewbank, Life in Brazil or a Visit to the Land of the Cocoa and the Palm, New York: Harper and Brothers, 1856.)

