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# Felisberta

(fl. nineteenth century), a household slave and wet nurse

Mariana de Aguiar Ferreira Muaze

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who served a wealthy family in the Paraíba Valley, a prosperous coffee-producing region of southeastern Brazil, was born between the third or fourth decades of the nineteenth century. Felisberta was a slave on a large coffee plantation known as *fazenda* Pau Grande, located near Paty do Alferes township in Rio de Janeiro Province. The archival documentation relative to Felisberta is sparse, but the Capivary Baron inventory says that she was a Cabinda slave from Africa, which was not very common among the household slaves at that time. According to the historian Robert Slenes, domestic slaves were often *crioulos* (Brazilian born) chosen among established slave families who had demonstrated a record of loyalty to their masters.

Felisberta served Joaquim Ribeiro de Avellar Junior (1820–1888), the future viscount of Ubá, when he was still a young landowner and recently wed to Mariana Velho de Avellar (1827–1898). In January 1857 Felisberta was chosen to be the wet nurse (*ama-de-leite*) to Luiza, the Ribeiro de Avellar's second daughter, born on their country home on 9 January. Felisberta did well as a wet nurse, and her masters kept her in that function from then on. In March 1858 she also breastfed Julia, her masters' third daughter. In May 1862 she was sent to Rio de Janeiro to breastfeed and care for Maria Izabel, the niece of her mistress Mariana, at the request of the family.

Domestic slavery was a widespread practice in nineteenth-century Rio, with local newspapers full of ads offering slaves for sale or rent. They were usually skilled domestically, performing the functions of housemaids, pages, housekeepers, cooks, *valets de chambre*, governesses—domestic services considered very important for the wealthy families of the imperial capital and the provinces. These sophisticated practices became even more important in the second half of the nineteenth century, when wealthy families started to adopt new habits and a lifestyle imported from the European bourgeoisie, which would become an important element of distinction and prestige among them. Working with the Ribeiro de Avellar family probably as a *mucama* (private maid), Felisberta had to learn new habits to be able to accompany her mistress and her daughters on several social occasions.

The majority of books or manuals of childhood education and medical theses written or translated during the Brazilian Empire recommended that infants be under the exclusive care of one wet nurse, so as to protect the health of the baby. It was also recommended that the nurses follow a proper diet, have enough hours of sleep and rest, and refrain from drinking alcoholic beverages. The child's parents had to guarantee that these conditions were met as a way to safeguard the future health and character of their children.

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Felisberta remained in Rio to serve as a wet nurse until the end of 1862 when following medical recommendations, she returned to *fazenda* Pau Grande for health treatment. Upon her return, she remained as a house slave for the Ribeiro de Avellar family, living in the main house and described by her mistress as “already too old to serve as wet nurse, but still a caring and clean person.” She served her masters in other capacities such as ironing clothes, cooking, and housekeeping. On 20 March 1867 she received beautiful fabric for a dress to be made in recognition of her commendable service from the young Maria Izabel, whom she had cared for.

The documentary evidence related to Felisberta’s personal life is thin, but based on her experience as a wet nurse, one may speculate that Felisberta experienced three or more pregnancies between November–December of 1856 and May–June of 1862. It can also be speculated that Felisberta was among the many enslaved women who served as wet nurses and were not allowed to breastfeed their own children, instead handing them over to other slave women of the same household, within a group of more than seven hundred slaves.

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