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978-0-521-88465-5 - Chica da Silva: A Brazilian Slave of the Eighteenth Century

Junia Ferreira Furtado

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

CHICA DA SILVA

Júnia Ferreira Furtado offers a fascinating study of the world of a freed woman of color in a small Brazilian town where itinerant merchants, former slaves, Portuguese administrators, and concubines interact across social and cultural lines. The child of an African slave from Costa da Mina and a Brazilian military nobleman of Portuguese descent, Chica da Silva won her freedom using social and matrimonial strategies. But the story of Chica da Silva is not merely the personal history of a woman nor the social history of a colonial Brazilian town. Rather, it provides a historical perspective on a woman's agency, the cultural universe she inhabited, and the myths that were created around her in subsequent centuries, as Chica de Silva came to symbolize both an example of racial democracy and the stereotype of licentiousness and sensuality always attributed to the black or mulatta female in the Brazilian popular imagination.

Júnia Ferreira Furtado holds a Ph.D. in social history from the Universidade de São Paulo, Brazil. She is currently a professor of history at the Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais. Her work on Chica da Silva has won awards from the Carlos Chagas Foundation for Women and Gender Research and the Ford Foundation. She has also contributed articles to *Cartografia da conquista das minas* and *History of Cartography*, volume 4. The Portuguese-language edition of this book was awarded honorable mention in 2004 by the Casa de las Américas Foundation of Cuba.

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Junia Ferreira Furtado

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Frontmatter

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CHICA DA SILVA

A BRAZILIAN SLAVE OF THE
EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

JÚNIA FERREIRA FURTADO

Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais, Brazil



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Frontmatter

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Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88465-5 - Chica da Silva: A Brazilian Slave of the Eighteenth Century

Junia Ferreira Furtado

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

*It was there in the district of Tejuco,
where diamonds spilled forth from the stones.*

– Cecília Meireles, *Romanceiro da Inconfidência**

* The epigraphs for each chapter were taken from *Romanceiro da Inconfidência*, by Cecília Meireles. The term *Inconfidência* refers to a crime against the king's power, a crime of lèse-majesté. In the second half of the eighteenth century, during the reign of João I, a special criminal code was published prescribing severe punishments for the crime of *Inconfidência*.

CONTENTS

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	<i>page xi</i>
<i>Preface</i>	<i>xvii</i>
Introduction to the English Edition	i
1. Land of Stars	20
The Diamantine Demarcation	20
The Village of Tejuco	30
2. Chica da Silva	40
Slave, Mulatta	40
Ancestry	53
3. The Diamond Contractors	69
The Old Sergeant Major	69
The Young Chief Judge	85
4. Black Diamond	104
Profane Love	104
Donna Francisca	114
5. The Lady of Tejuco	130
The House and the Street	130
Slave Ownership	146
6. Life in the Village	162
Social Networks	162
Brotherhoods	174

7.	Mines of Splendor	193
	The Patron	193
	Macaúbas	198
8.	Separation	211
	The House in Lapa	211
	The Diamond Contract	220
9.	Disputes	239
	The Grijó Estate	239
	The Marian Era	253
10.	Destinies	259
	The Donna of Serro do Frio	259
	Descendants	261
11.	Chica-que-manda	284
	Historical Memory	284
	Spreading the Myth	297
	<i>Abbreviations</i>	305
	<i>Suggested Reading</i>	307
	<i>Index</i>	315

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88465-5 - Chica da Silva: A Brazilian Slave of the Eighteenth Century

Junia Ferreira Furtado

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Before starting this book I had always believed that research work was, first and foremost, an essentially solitary undertaking that locked the researcher away in archives, libraries, or in an office in front of a computer screen. In reality, researching the life of Chica da Silva was a task shared with friends, historians, colleagues, students, family, staff, and many others who helped me reassemble the intricate web that was the life of this eighteenth-century woman. Thanking them all is a little like retracing the steps of the research that lies hidden behind this work.

First of all, I extend my gratitude to Virgínia dos Santos Mendes, whose friendship and academic companionship unwittingly set me on the course of this research. It was through her efforts to construct the Centro de Memória Cultural do Vale do Jequitinhonha (Jequitinhonha Valley Cultural Memory Center), and those of our colleagues and friends at the History Department of the Faculty of Philosophy of Diamantina (Fafidia)/Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais (UFMG), that this project began to take shape. It is to Virgínia, Neusa Fernandes, Mariuth Santos, Kiko (Paulo Francisco Flecha Alkimin), James William Goodwin Jr., Toninho (Antônio Carlos Fernandes), Marcos Lobato, and Dayse Lúcida Silva, companions on those lawless Diamantinian Mondays, that I dedicate this book. Our efforts to make the center a reality, a forum, and an instrument for historical research in the region would not have been possible without the support of the UFMG rector, Professor Aluísio Pimenta, and of the pro-rector of extended studies, Professor Eduardo Andrade Santa Cecília.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88465-5 - Chica da Silva: A Brazilian Slave of the Eighteenth Century

Junia Ferreira Furtado

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88465-5 - Chica da Silva: A Brazilian Slave of the Eighteenth Century

Junia Ferreira Furtado

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

xiii

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The search for documents that could in some way reconstruct the life of Chica da Silva took me on a tireless tour of archives and libraries both in Brazil and abroad, institutions in which I always found helpful and attentive staff who made the distances, costs, and difficulties of the enormous task I had set myself that much smaller. In Diamantina, I thank Til Pestana, director of the region's Iphan – Instituto de Patrimônio Histórico e Artístico Nacional (Institute of National Historical and Artistic Heritage) – who gave me and my interns free run of the Antônio Torres Library and opened up the documentation on the House of the Ottoni at a time when it was undergoing restoration. I am also grateful to staff member Denise Alves Ferreira for all the attention she dispensed.

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Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88465-5 - Chica da Silva: A Brazilian Slave of the Eighteenth Century

Junia Ferreira Furtado

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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(I can only lament the disappearance of the book of wills containing Chica da Silva's last will and testament. This important

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978-0-521-88465-5 - Chica da Silva: A Brazilian Slave of the Eighteenth Century

Junia Ferreira Furtado

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

xv

document went missing from the Archives of the Fórum do Serro, and its return, and that of its accompanying stands, would mean the recovery of part of the already dilapidated memory of the nation's history, the shared heritage of all of society.)

Many colleagues and friends joined me in the search for documents and collaborated with suggestions, readings, and comments on various chapters and drafts; among those to whom I would like to express my gratitude are Adriana Romeiro, Caio César Boschi, Renato Pinto Venâncio, Francis Dutra, Adalgisa Arantes Campos, Luciano Figueiredo, João José Reis, Stuart Schwartz, Thaïs Cougo Pimentel, Pedro Puntoni, and Íris Kantor.

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Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88465-5 - Chica da Silva: A Brazilian Slave of the Eighteenth Century

Junia Ferreira Furtado

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

the course of seven years. He spared no encouragement for me to go deeper into my research, even at the cost of long spells of absence or isolation in front of books and the computer. He was likewise a companion on those constant trips to Minas in search of the farms, towns, and convents through which Chica passed with her family and the routes they would have taken. I thank my parents, Ilda and Evaldo, for their encouragement; like all parents, they were my greatest fans. None of this would have been possible without them. Isabel, sweet as ever, read the original drafts and enriched them with her suggestions and criticism. My daughters, Clara and Alice, were brought up by a somewhat absent mother, which is why they “hate Chica da Silva,” but their unconditional love has also been the reason for my deepest and truest happiness. It is to them, whom Chica robbed of their mother for countless hours, that I dedicate this book.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88465-5 - Chica da Silva: A Brazilian Slave of the Eighteenth Century

Junia Ferreira Furtado

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

PREFACE

*The day is still to come
 When they shall turn to us and ask:
 Who was this Chica da Silva,
 That once lived in this place?*

Sometime around the second quarter of the twentieth century, the journalist Antônio Torres gathered together items he found in various notebooks on figures and events from the history of Tejuco, then known by the name of Diamantina. On Chica da Silva he wrote: “It is said that her corpse was found many years after her death and that her skin was still dry and black.”¹ At first glance, this affirmation might seem to suggest sainthood; after all, Chica would not have been the first or the last in the long line of Luso-Brazilian tradition to have been found in such a state, considered a triumph over deathly decay and a testament to the saintliness and purity of the deceased. An example of this phenomenon occurred in 1752, when the Portuguese newspaper *Gazeta de Lisboa* announced the death of Sister Isabel de Madre de Deus, a native of Bahia, attributing the fact that her body remained flexible and the presence of sweat in her coffin to the virtuous life she had led, “having lived abstracted from worldly things, conserving her memory and diligence for no other purpose than to serve God.”²

¹ BAT. Biblioteca Antônio Torres’ Private Files, Box 7.

² ANTT. Real Mesa Censória. *Gazeta de Lisboa*. Cx. 465, no. 39. Quinta-feira. 2 de novembro de 1752, pp. 562–3.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88465-5 - Chica da Silva: A Brazilian Slave of the Eighteenth Century

Junia Ferreira Furtado

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xviii

PREFACE

Chica da Silva was buried in the church of São Francisco de Assis in Tejuco, whose stone portal bore the carved image of Saint Margarida of Cortona. The undecayed body of the saint lay in repose in a church in Tuscany, where it worked miracles and cures.³ The effect was deemed to be the result of her venerable life, as she had given all of her possessions to the poor after converting.⁴

The sight of Chica da Silva's still-intact body caused no such impression of purity in her fellow countrymen, much less the suggestion of sainthood. Below is how Antônio Torres described the reactions provoked by the discovery of her corpse:

It was like a bag of bones, which rattled sinisterly with the slightest movement. The gravedigger had the scruples to store it in a sacred place and dispose of it in far off ravines, like the remains of a wild animal. Rolling in the wind, [the bones] produced strange and terrifying vibrations, seeming to snicker with scorn. The bravest amongst the passers-by blurted the customary insult: "Take it away, quingongo!" The rest scurried hurriedly past, blessing themselves at the sound of the rattling bones."⁵

Our interest in the description Antônio Torres provides about Chica's corpse, which was probably discovered during the restoration of the abovementioned church,⁶ does not stem from a discussion of its veracity, but from the analysis of the impressions provoked by its unearthing. The reactions of repulsion and fear described by the author – very different from the sentiments Chica evokes today – expressed how the population of the time felt at the sight of her undecayed body, which conferred altogether different meanings upon the myth of this former Tejuco slave. The popular interjection of "Take it away, quingongo!" reflects the townsfolk's fear. Quingongo,

³ Lúcia Machado de Almeida. *Passeio à Diamantina*. 1960, pp. 88–9.

⁴ Luiz Mott. *Rosa Egípcia, uma santa africana no Brasil*. 1993, p. 70.

⁵ BAT. Arquivo Particular de Antônio Torres. Caixa 7.

⁶ In 1917, a grandiose restoration was carried out on the church, principally in the vault, which was in the process of caving in, thus exposing the pillars. The bodies buried there were transferred to ossuaries constructed outside the church. Iphan/BH archives. File on the Church of São Francisco de Assis in Diamantina.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88465-5 - Chica da Silva: A Brazilian Slave of the Eighteenth Century

Junia Ferreira Furtado

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

PREFACE

xix

a divinity of the Banta religion associated with the bowels of the earth – and thus also related to illness, death, and regeneration – was exhorted to remove her mortal remains.

However, in contradictory fashion, the figure of Chica da Silva always awoke and attracted curiosity. Her image, popularized first in history books and later in novels, cinema, and television, has stood the test of time.

From the mid-nineteenth century, when Joaquim Felício dos Santos, a native of Diamantina, wrote about Chica da Silva in his *Memórias do Distrito Diamantino* (*Memories of the Diamantine District*), she ceased to be just one of the many slave-girls living in Minas Gerais in the eighteenth century and became a myth, one that would over time, as demonstrated in Antônio Torres's account, undergo innumerable modifications, updates, and re-readings in accordance with the tastes of the day.

Witch, seductress, heroine, queen, or slave: who, after all, was Chica da Silva? After nearly three centuries, the lack of historical investigation into her life has meant that this question has effectively remained unanswered. This book aims to get to know her, not as a curiosity nor as an exception, but to use her as a medium through which to shed new light on the women of her period and therefore bring them into history. Only thus can they be freed from the stereotypes that have been imposed upon them over time. The path I chose was to search for records of Chica's passage through history in the available documents. What initially seemed impossible became a fruitful and productive task, as can be seen from the countless documents that speak of her and of the diamond contractor and his family found in various archives in Brazil and Portugal and listed at the end of this volume.

However, before the reader makes a foray into the pages that follow, it is necessary to give some indication of what should and should not be expected from this text, which is the fruit of historical reflection based on official documents stored in libraries and public and private archives in Portugal, Brazil, and the United States. These are not intimate records, which unfortunately have all been lost, registering the thoughts and desires of the men and women of the

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88465-5 - Chica da Silva: A Brazilian Slave of the Eighteenth Century

Junia Ferreira Furtado

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xx

PREFACE

time; rather, they are baptismal records, brotherhood rosters, royal orders, lawsuits, petitions, and other such documents, which generally reveal facts, not opinions. That said, this does not prevent the historian from seeking the emotions, desires, and thoughts that motivated them; their re-reading can reveal a lot more than one would expect of the customary limited approach to this type of document.

Though based on painstaking documental and bibliographical research on Chica da Silva and her descendants, this book does not exhaust, nor was it ever intended to, the interpretations of this woman and of the time in which she lived. As such, various questions will remain unanswered. Furthermore, if the portrait that comes of this historical immersion cannot be compared to a Renaissance illuminated manuscript, replete with details, it is no less faithful to the original, albeit through brushstrokes more like those of an impressionist painter. All human lives are fathomless; it is impossible to know a life in full, but the Chica da Silva we have sought to describe herein tries to get as close as possible to the real woman who lived in Tejuco in the eighteenth century. By inserting her within her spatial and temporal context, I have tried to construct a historically credible character.⁷

It was also important to avoid the traps of biographical illusion.⁸ One cannot pretend that biography and history are subordinate to a chronological rigidity in the manner of natural lives, nor expect them to be possessed of unique and linear sense and meanings ruled by rationality. Life and history are not always coherent and often take the least expected paths. Writing the history of a life requires paying due attention to the ruptures, to the disturbances, to the “tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.”⁹

⁷ “Il m’a fallu me demander s’il était possible d’approcher un Saint Louis qu’on pourrait dire ‘vrai’, vraiment historique, à travers les sources.” Jacques Le Goff. *Saint Louis*. 1996, p. 17.

⁸ Pierre Bourdieu. “L’illusion biographique.” *Actes de La Recherche*. 1986, pp. 69–72.

⁹ William Shakespeare. *Macbeth*. Apud: Pierre Bourdieu, op. cit., p. 69.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88465-5 - Chica da Silva: A Brazilian Slave of the Eighteenth Century

Junia Ferreira Furtado

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

This study sought to promote the intersection between the individual account and the historical context to which it belonged.¹⁰ Only in this way does Chica cease to be a myth and become intelligible as a historical figure, both in the aspects she shared with other freedwomen of her time and in those in which she was unique. Biography is never intended to be capable of containing the multiplicity of meanings of a life. The time of biography is fragmented, like that of history, and therefore characterized by contradictions and paradoxes.¹¹

If a novel is defined by the freedom with which the author constructs the histories of the characters, biography is limited by the life and real existence of its subject, which it pieces together by analyzing the material derived from the chosen sources. However, both genres are marked by narrative style, with biography being the best expression of the rebirth of the historical narrative.¹² The pleasure of narrating the life of Chica da Silva, of wrapping it in a web of words, was the guiding thread that led to the writing of this book. Even though I followed the guidelines of modern historical methodologies in writing the chapters and selecting the themes, it was the voices of the characters themselves, though indirect and filtered through the records, that determined the paths to be followed. As Borges reminds us: “There is something in the story, in narrative, that will always be with us. I do not believe that man will ever tire of telling stories.”¹³

SLAVERY AND MANUMISSION IN MINAS

In the auriferous region, manumission was always more accessible to female slaves, although paid slaves or those employed in mining managed to save up enough money to buy their freedom, as few were ever released in return for the services rendered to their owners. As

¹⁰ Michel Vovelle. “De la biographie à l’étude de cas.” *Problèmes et méthodes de la biographie*. 1985, p. 191.

¹¹ Giovanni Levi. “Les usages de la biographie.” *Annales*. 1989, pp. 1325–35.

¹² Ibidem.

¹³ Jorge Luis Borges. *Esse ofício do verso*. 2000, p. 62.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88465-5 - Chica da Silva: A Brazilian Slave of the Eighteenth Century

Junia Ferreira Furtado

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

the mining stations began to grow, women were in short supply (especially white women), concubinage became widespread, and many white landowners ended up freeing their slave mistresses. This was generally officially done on their deathbeds and a date was usually set for the concession of liberty, thus ensuring a few more years of service for their heirs. Rarely was manumission conceded during a gentleman's lifetime.¹⁴

In virtue of this, Minas Gerais presented much more diversity and a greater degree of miscegenation than the slave societies of the Brazilian coast, the Caribbean, and the southern United States.¹⁵ In these regions, the generalization of monocultural exportation accentuated the gulf between the worlds of the free, dominated by the whites, and of the slaves, made up of blacks. As the eighteenth century wore on, a demographic of freed mulattos and blacks began to emerge, of which Chica da Silva was but a single example.¹⁶

In the diamond region, the role of women and the family has still not been studied with the depth the theme deserves; while in general terms we see the repetition of the same pattern as in the auriferous region, we can also detect certain particularities. The biography of Chica da Silva does shed some light on the worlds of the region's freedwomen, as the lives they actually led differed very little from those of other women. The historiography has tended to present their lifestyle from the perspective of a reconstructed stereotypical image of the black woman, whether free or slave. Recent studies have shown that once they had attained the condition of white man's concubine, something quite common at the time, the freedwomen sought to reinsert themselves within society, making the most of the advantages this condition conferred in terms of minimizing the stigma of their color and enslavement. However, the existence of this possibility should not be mistaken for a sign of tolerance or benignity

¹⁴ Kathleen J. Higgins. *Licentious liberty*. 1999.

¹⁵ Herbert S. Klein. *African slavery in Latin America and the Caribbean*. 1986.

¹⁶ A. J. R. Russell-Wood. "Preconditions and precipitants of the independence movement in Portuguese America." In *From colony to nation: Essays on the independence of Brasil*. 1975, p. 11. Also A. J. R. Russell-Wood. *The black man in slavery and freedom in colonial Brazil*. 1982.

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Junia Ferreira Furtado

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

PREFACE

xxiii

in racial relations in Brazil, as if stemming from some form of *racial democracy*.¹⁷

The myth of Chica da Silva has been used to support the thesis that, in Brazil, the bonds of affection between free whites and colored women that concubinage established somehow mitigated the exploitation inherent in the slave system.¹⁸ However, we must not forget that, despite the economic benefit it brought to many of these women, this practice disguised a dual exploitation – both sexual and racial – as these women were never elevated to the condition of spouse. Furthermore, as we shall see, as they lived among the free, they tried to imitate their habits, customs, lifestyles, and dress, thus reproducing on a smaller scale the very world that had subjected them to slavery.

Therefore, rather than serving as a point of departure for the construction of a black identity, manumission all too often signaled the beginning of a process whereby former slave women embraced the values of the white elite with a view to finding a place in that society for themselves and their descendants. Far from revealing the democratic nature of race relations, this process of ethnic and cultural whitening really betrays the subtle traps through which racial oppression is hidden in Brazil. On the other hand, new studies on Brazilian slavery have shown that African customs and traditions were often maintained behind this innocuous front.¹⁹

In the hierarchical and exclusive society of the time, marriage was subject to stringent rules. The constant mobility of the men and the inequality of the spouses in terms of background, social standing, and race tended to complicate and even impede legal matrimony. The Portuguese state normally did not allow the union of individuals from different pedigrees and even went so far as to establish processes to verify the origins of the betrothed. In other words, black and mulatto women could only marry men of their ilk. The lack of

¹⁷ Emília Viotti Costa. “The myth of racial democracy.” In *Myths and histories*, 1985. This myth, formulated by Gilberto Freyre, found one of its most recent exponents in Darcy Ribeiro.

¹⁸ Kathleen J. Higgins, op. cit., pp. 9–10.

¹⁹ Robert W. Slenes. *Na senzala, uma flor*. 1999.

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Junia Ferreira Furtado

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

“suitable” consorts meant that consensual couplings between individuals from different conditions became common and widespread among white men and colored women. Consequently, by not making these unions official, the white gentry could withhold from these companions any right to their patrimony, as would otherwise have been their due under Portuguese law, which meant that the position of these women was clearly disadvantaged when compared to that of a legal wife.²⁰ What was positive in this act was that it avoided the stigmas of color and birthright inherited from former slave mothers being perpetuated in official documents. In a society in which such “marks” were handed down through the generations and in which lineage was a fundamental element in social identification, having this condition registered in as few official documents as possible was the only way of minimizing what was clearly considered a handicap. One lived in hope that time would erase these stains from memory.

This immersion in the past with a view to reconstructing the influence of the family and women in the colony is a course that still needs to be arduously pursued. Today, we can no longer accept the traditional view of the patriarchal family in which the woman was delegated a practically nullified role. Recent research on the subject shows that there was a whole gamut of multiple and varied approaches and that countless possibilities opened up to these women once freed, ranging from declassification to more positive forms of social inclusion. Studying the life of Chica da Silva, among other freedwomen, will allow us to understand the society in which they lived and what they had to do to be accepted in it.

Chica da Silva lived a considerable part of her life at the side of the High Court Judge João Fernandes. Her relationship with this important white man gave the course of that life altogether different meanings. Telling the tale of this woman’s life will also require tracing the history of the diamond contractor, as – though apart in their final years, he in Portugal and she in Tejuco – their paths were otherwise permanently entwined. This book tells the story of the lives of Chica da Silva, João Fernandes de Oliveira, and their descendants; lives

²⁰ Ibidem, p. 112.

Cambridge University Press

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Junia Ferreira Furtado

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

PREFACE

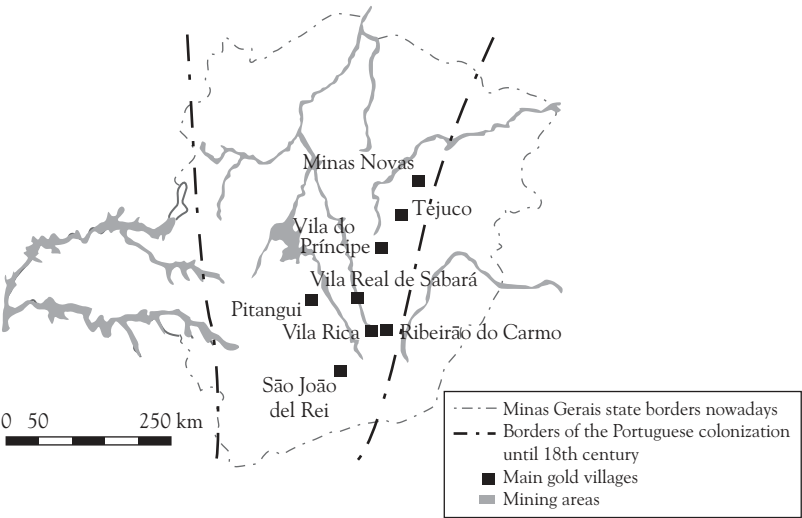
xxv

that remained connected and whose meanings can only be understood if analyzed in conjunction.

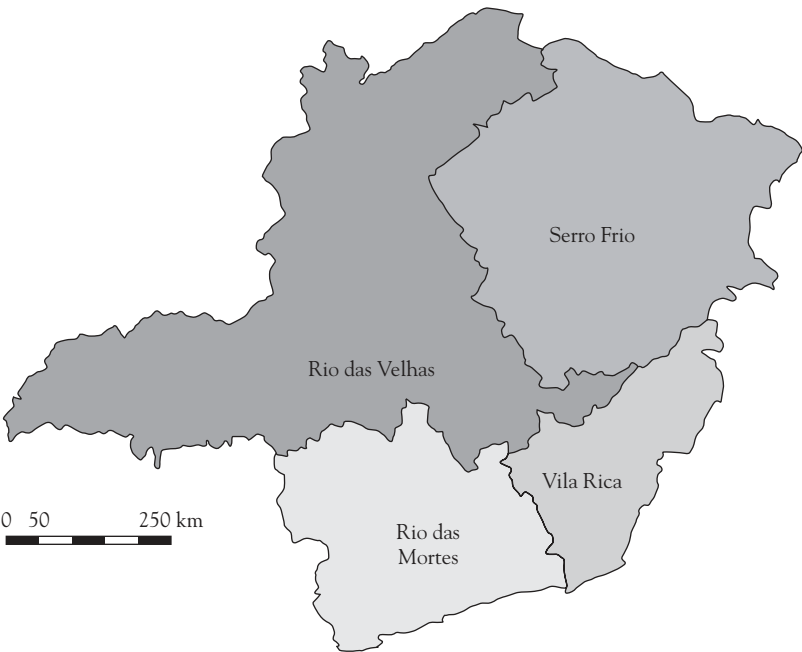
The book begins with a treatment of the historical and geographical context in which the lives of Chica da Silva and the High Court judge unfolded. Chapter 2 dissects the vastly different backgrounds of each; she the daughter of an African slave and he the son of a Portuguese with a descendant of the São Paulo gentry, whose father had sought social and economic ascension through business in the colonies. We will also seek to clarify how this slave-girl came to meet a noble diamond contractor in the mountains of the Diamantina District. Chapters 3 and 4 deal with the couple's relationship, which spanned fifteen years and produced thirteen children, and how this family came to hold a position at the heart of a society as dominated by the values of hierarchy and birthright as Minas Gerais. Chapters 5, 6, and 7 will analyze the lifestyle they led, the properties they accumulated, the slaves they acquired, and the education they gave their children, and it will also glean something of the relationships they established in the village through the examination of the godparents and wedding sponsors named in marriage and birth records. From Chapter 8 on, the book will describe the fates of Chica, João Fernandes, and their descendants after their separation, when he returned to the Court and she stayed on at Tejuco. Chapter 11 details the birth and metamorphosis of the myth of Tejuco's most famous slave.

One final forewarning: the Chica da Silva that emerges from these chapters bears little resemblance to the myth propagated by cinema and television; it is up to the reader, with an open mind, to find the answers to the question that has guided the production of this book: "After all, who was this Chica da Silva, that once lived in this place?"²¹

²¹ Cecília Meireles. *Romanceiro da Inconfidência*, 1965, p. 51.



Map 1. Areas where gold and diamonds were produced in the first half of the eighteenth century.



Map 2. Counties of the captaincy of Minas Gerais (1720–1815).
(Maps by Fernanda Borges de Moraes)