

[H-Slavery Interview with Dr. Ana Lucia Araujo](#)

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H-Slavery is delighted to launch this new series of interviews with our subscribers, with much appreciation for Matthew Dawdy of Iowa State University for organizing it. The series aims to highlight the diversity of our field of study and to discuss topics related to teaching, research, and public engagement. Matt's first interview in the series, with Dr. Ana Lucia Araujo, will appear in two parts.

Part One

ANA LUCIA ARAUJO is a full Professor of History at the historically black Howard University in Washington DC, United States. She has authored seven books, including *Slavery in the Age of Memory: Engaging the Past* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), *Reparations for Slavery and the Slave Trade: A Transnational and Comparative History* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), *Brazil Through French Eyes: A Nineteenth-Century Artist in the Tropics* (University of New Mexico Press, 2015), *Shadows of the Slave Past: Heritage, Memory, and Slavery* (Routledge, 2014), and *Public Memory of Slavery: Victims and Perpetrators in the South Atlantic* (Cambria Press, 2010). Dr. Araujo has also edited or coedited five books and published dozens of refereed articles in journals and chapters in edited books on topics related to the history and memory of slavery. In 2017, she joined the International Scientific Committee of the UNESCO Slave Route Project. She serves on the board of editors of the *American Historical Review* (the journal of the American Historical Association) and the editorial board of the British journal *Slavery and Abolition*. Also, she is a member of the executive board of the Association for the Study of the Worldwide Diaspora (ASWAD), the editorial review board of the *African Studies Review*, and the board of the blog *Black Perspectives* maintained by the African American Intellectual History Society. She tweets at @analuciaraujo.

What topics do you study?

My work is about the history and memory of the Atlantic slave trade and slavery. Most of my work focuses on the nineteenth century to this day. In terms of geographical areas, my primary focus was Brazil and West Africa, more precisely the region of the Bight of Benin and the Kingdom of Dahomey. But over the last ten years, my work became more transnational. When looking at the history of slavery and how it has been memorialized, I often use examples from the United States, and also from countries where I conducted research such as England and France. Both the visual culture and material culture of slavery are two important areas of my work as well.

What classes do you teach at Howard University?

I teach undergraduate lecture courses in the history of the African diaspora. At the graduate level, I teach seminars and readings courses in African Diaspora and Latin America and the Caribbean. My classes focus on slavery and the Atlantic slave trade. This Fall 2020, I will be teaching Historiography. In the past, I also taught at the undergraduate level lecture, colloquia, and seminars in the history of Latin America and especially Brazil.

What drew you towards what you have written about?

In short, most of my research is shaped by my displacement, by my experience as an immigrant, first in Canada and then in Brazil. As I left Brazil, twenty-two years ago, I had a need to understand better that vast country, now with the eyes of someone who was abroad. Brazil had been shaped by slavery, and this dimension was always erased from the public space. I was raised during the period of a civil-military dictatorship in Brazil., since then issues of social justice have always been a concern, my interest in studying slavery is also related to an attempt to understand the persistence of racial inequalities and the many faces of the legacies of slavery. I started by studying the representations of slavery in European travel accounts, in the course of a Ph.D. in Art History, which I finished in 2004. I already had an MA in History of Brazil, and then at that point, I knew that the work I was doing was more history than traditional art history. I started and obtained a second Ph.D. in History, in which I worked on the issue of how slavery and the slave trade were memorialized in Brazil and the Bight of Benin.

What other topics interest you?

As scholars, we always hope to move forward, but we also walk in circles, revisiting the same places, readings, sources, and problems. I worked a lot with written and visual sources, like European travelogues, then with oral stories, museums, memorials, and monuments, and a variety of written archives as well. In my two current book projects, I am again utilizing a lot of European accounts narrating the encounters with African populations. I am also trying to understand the circulation of European-manufactured luxury objects in these commercial relations. This interest emerged about a decade ago when I studied the reciprocal diplomatic missions of rulers of Portugal and Dahomey in the era of the slave trade, occasions in which these rulers and their representatives exchanged gifts. One of the new regions that I am examining in this new work is the Loango coast, especially the French slave trade in that area of West Central Africa.

How have you used examples from the United States, England, and France?

The year 2004, when I started comparing the emergence of the memory of slavery in Brazil and the Republic of Benin, marked a turning point in how black social actors engaged with the slave-trading past of nations like France and England. These social actors have been increasingly present in the public space. They denounced the slave-trading and colonial history of their nations by establishing links between this slave-trading and colonial past with present-day racism. Then at that point, debates on the memory of slavery were taking place on the ground. In Canada, I had the privilege of working with historian Bogumil Jewsiewicki, who holds a Canadian Research Chair in Comparative History of Memory. Jewsiewicki led a very dynamic group of scholars and students working on memory issues in France, Romania, Canada, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Burundi. Jewsiewicki also maintained an international virtual seminar in which many pioneering scholars of memory, such as Pierre Nora, Philippe Joutard, Myriam Cottias, and François Hartog contributed. This seminar had the participation of many historians based on the African continent, and postdoctoral and doctoral students like; Michèle Baussant, Sarah Gensburger, and Claudia Florentina Dobre, who are today established scholars in the field. There we debated events that took place in France since 2001 when the Taubira Law declared slavery and the Atlantic slave trade crimes against humanity and put in place a series of measures to recognize France's slave-trading past gradually.

Likewise, 2005 was also an important year, when a series of uprisings took place in France to denounce the killing of two young men (Zyed Benna and Bouna Traoré) by the French police. A critical debate arose associated with a bill that proposed to recognize the positive role of French colonization. This context led me not to dissociate but rather connect the French case to the other contexts I was examining. In other words, slavery and the Atlantic slave trade were transnational systems, and the emergence of the memory of slavery was also transnational. In those years, I developed connections with historian Paul E. Lovejoy, who also holds a Canada Research Chair in African Diaspora History at York University, there I met other scholars from around the world. In 2005, we organized a conference at Université Laval, with historians Mariana Candido, Lorelle Semley, and others that later gave birth to an edited volume. By then, the United Kingdom was preparing the commemoration of the bicentennial of the abolition of the British slave trade. I also followed the debates regarding the demands of reparations and the organization of many conferences and exhibitions. I had attended a conference in Britain in 2003. In the next years, every time I went to Britain, it was an occasion to visit monuments, museums, heritage sites, and later also do archival research. The incorporation of the United States was a natural one. I work at Howard University, a historically black university created during the Reconstruction. I came to the United States when Barack Obama became the first black president of the nation. Since 2008, I saw in Washington DC and Virginia (where I live) an avalanche of initiatives memorializing slavery. It was and still is the perfect site to conduct research and fieldwork. We have fantastic archives, the Moorland Spingarn Research Center at Howard

University, the Library of Congress, the National Archives, the Oliveira Lima Library, and sites such as Mount Vernon, Monticello, and Montpelier, in addition to the young and huge National Museum of African American History and Culture.

You mention pivoting your work from art history to more traditional history. How do they differ?

They differ in many ways. Art history is a discipline in itself, and its emergence is related to the idea that art has its history and that to study art objects (initially “art” with big “A” such as sculpture and painting), there is a need for specific methods and theories. Of course, the discipline of art history has always been in dialogue with other disciplines, such as history and literature. Then what is in play here is not traditional history, that largely relies on written primary sources (and usually dismiss visual materials, and oral sources) and non-traditional history, but two different disciplines. Now, art history emerged as a white and elitist discipline, that endorsed particular kinds of art (painting, sculpture- especially European) to the detriment of the production of other peoples in other regions. This approach is still very present in programs in Europe and the United States. Still, with the development of visual culture as a field, art historians have developed more dialogue with other disciplines and started considering the study of other cultural objects and art forms—my work benefits from both disciplines. History allows me to study the past through the examination of primary sources but from a broader perspective that considers how individuals and groups have built their past. At the same time, my background in art history gives me the opportunity of considering visual sources as noble as a written archival document.

Circling back to historic through-lines, are there certain elements of slavery that you find comparisons between cultures and nations?

We can compare contexts that are similar and different. Over time, I see many more similarities between slave systems and the experiences of enslaved people in the United States, Brazil, France, and the British West Indies. Overall, enslaved Africans and their descendants shared African cultures, languages, and religions, and despite differences, many of these commonalities persisted. Slavery was based on violence and coercion. In all parts of the Americas, enslaved people resisted slavery in a variety of ways. We can find connections between slave rebellions in Brazil, Cuba, Jamaica, and the United States. In a number of cases, enslaved people and free people who led these rebellions also had common heritage elements that they brought with them from the continent. We also find many similar patterns when examining urban slavery across societies, such as how enslaved people overcame the tragedy of slavery. In all these regions, resilience persisted. As I explored in my latest book *Reparations for Slavery*, the processes of emancipation also had

many elements in common around the Americas. And in all these regions, the legacies of slavery persist, which is why Black Lives Matter and demands for reparations are reemerging in the public sphere.