

## [H-Slavery Interview with Dr. Ana Lucia Araujo, Part 2](#)

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*This is the second of a two-part interview with Dr. Ana Lucia Araujo of Howard University.*

### **On the topic of sources, how do you go about minimizing bias?**

It is not hard to hear the voices of enslaved people in the nineteenth-century United States, a period in which there are a wealth of sources, including narratives written by the enslaved themselves and also the WPA narratives, among many other sources. Overall, literacy among enslaved people and free people in the United States was much more present than in other parts of the Americas, such as Brazil. Then it is more challenging to hear the voices of enslaved people before the nineteenth century and in languages other than English because in places like Brazil, not even the white population was literate, then the voices of enslaved people are often hard to find. One way to minimize these gaps is to continue digging the archives, to look where previous historians did not look at, and also to revisit archives that were allegedly explored. Comparative research can also be a way of filling these gaps. The use of alternative sources such as visual images, oral traditions, linguistic sources, and oral history can also be a way of having access to these voices. By acknowledging the silences and the intrinsic violence of the slavery archives, especially regarding enslaved people and enslaved women, it is possible to overcome or at least to attempt to overcome this bias.

**You discuss using oral and/or visual sources in your work. You mention historical analysis can be dismissive of such sources, which is a sentiment I agree with despite it not being something I do. I've had the opportunity to work with an excellent scholar of French culture, John Monroe. His classes have been more than a little eye-opening. So, having said that, as historians, how much history do you believe we may miss when we do not use these source bases?**

It's hard to say how much. When we are working with populations and regions where literacy did not exist, or where writing existed in non-traditional forms, we are missing a lot. For example, how do you study the history of the Kingdom of Dahomey without considering the bas-reliefs decorating the walls of Abomey palaces? How can you study African religions in the Bight of Benin by dismissing the paintings that cover the Vodun temples? Or without examining the visual vocabulary of wall hangings woven by Abomey's artisans. These are just two examples. My point here is that although the members of these societies were not necessarily writing with ink on paper, they used a variety of visual images to create a vocabulary with which they told their histories. The same applies to their oral traditions, the praise-names, and songs they sang during festivities and commemorations. Historians can see these sources as material for anthropologists and ethnologists, but they are legitimate

sources that should be examined. By the way, I love the work of John Monroe, including his latest book *Metropolitan Fetish*, even though we never met in person. Historians and art historians who have examined this region, such as Pierre Verger, Suzanne Preston Blier, and Robin Law, have been teaching us that visual culture and oral traditions are crucial.

### **Continuing with oral sources, how do you utilize them in your work?**

I used oral sources for my second Ph.D. dissertation, and also in my book (derived from the dissertation), *Public Memory of Slavery: Victims and Perpetrators in the South Atlantic* (published by Cambria Press in 2010). As I was looking at memory, I was not necessarily seeking to separate what was true from what was false, but rather understanding how stories from the period of the Atlantic slave trade have been transmitted, recreated, and reinvented in the light of present-day political battles. Still, I was working with contemporary social actors, who were educated and spoke French, and who had a certain social position that allowed them to speak about controversial issues. The problem of oral sources, especially when dealing with slavery in Africa, is that there is still a lot of silence associated with slavery on African soil and also regarding the involvement of African elites and local agents in the transatlantic slave trade. The works of Sandra E. Greene, Alessandra Brivio, and Marie Rodet have illuminated these controversies, and I advise anybody who wants to work on these issues to check out their works.

### **How important do you find the dialogue between disciplines?**

In the United States, there is still a lot of resistance in breaking the barriers among disciplines. I conducted much more collaborative work with sociologists, anthropologists, and literary scholars in France, Canada, and England. As I said previously, although slowly, art historians (especially those working on the African continent and Latin America) and historians are increasingly collaborating. I cited Blier, but other art historians like Cécile Fromont in the United States, or anthropologists like Gaelle Beaujean in France, and historians like Juliana Ribeiro (from Brazil but now in Canada), are examples of young scholars who have been breaking barriers among these disciplines.

### **How do you go about making your work more accessible to people?**

Regarding how to make my work accessible to the public is a tricky issue. I have a strong presence on social media, and this presence allows me to create dialogues with individuals and groups that I would not be able to meet in real life. I use social media, through the use of the hashtag #slaveryarchive, to promote slavery scholarship, and of course, my own work. I am making more efforts to write op-eds and articles on websites that are intended

for large audiences. I made particular efforts to do so, after the National Museum was destroyed in 2018, and during these last two years, with the debates regarding the Confederate monuments in the United States. Some of these contributions are here [https://analuciaaraujo.org/?page\\_id=846](https://analuciaaraujo.org/?page_id=846). I am also making efforts to have my books published directly on paperback and to write these academic books in accessible language.

**From what I understand, movements such as Black Lives Matter are not uniquely American. Other countries are going through some of the same kinds of experiences. Comparing Brazil and the United States, do you see overlap in how they have handled racism that has led to such situations where people felt the need to rise up and make their voices heard?**

Yes, there is overlap. Brazil is a country where the majority of its population is black. But the ideology of racial democracy (according to which Brazil did not experience racism because legal segregation never existed) greatly contributed to blur the existence of racism, a racism that is as cruel and violent as the one experienced by African Americans and populations of African descent in the United States. Brazil now has the third-largest incarcerated population in the world, just after the United States and China. Most of this incarcerated population is young and black. Black Brazilians are also being assassinated by the police in dramatic numbers. But in addition to the obstacle of the ideology of "racial democracy," Brazil had several dictatorships during the twentieth century, the bloodiest one being the civil-military dictatorship of 1964-1985. In this context, there were major hindrances for an open debate and reckoning with the country's past of slavery and persisting racism.

**I believe, personally, that part of the problem in America vis-à-vis race is the refusal of sections of our population to reconcile our history with what transpired. I find knowledge of actual historical events lacking when I deal with undergraduate students. Do you find this too? How should we remedy this situation, if it is present?**

I hear you. I know important segments of the population, including the youth and college students, are not aware of these issues. Many still live segregated in their predominantly white schools, neighborhoods, etc. However, I am lucky not to have to face this reality. Students at Howard University make a conscious decision to attend a historically black institution, and they bring with them a consciousness of what is to be a black person in America. They are aware that racism is a pervasive reality. However, many students in the United States are not always aware of the realities of racism and white supremacy elsewhere. Our focus on African diaspora history helps to create this knowledge. Then it is certainly crucial to remedy the situation. Though I am not at all optimistic, I believe that

making mandatory the teaching of African history, African diaspora history, and the history of slavery could contribute to alleviating widespread ignorance about black history in the United States.