

Oral Presentation of Silvia Hunold Lara

by Rebecca Scott

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Silvia Lara is an immensely creative historian of slavery, law, and structures of rule in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Brazil. As mentor and advisor to an entire generation of younger scholars, she and her students have built a subtle legal history of slavery in Brazil, tracing the multiple dimensions of the lives of those subjected to claims to hold their very persons as property.

Silvia Lara earned her undergraduate degrees and her Ph.D. in History from the University of São Paulo. Her first book, *Fields of Violence: Slaves and Masters in the Captaincy of Rio de Janeiro, 1750-1808*, was a deep critical analysis of paternalism and punishment as ideology and practice in eighteenth-century Brazil. This book brought her into view as a major figure as the subject of slavery was being reopened for serious empirical study in the euphoria and scholarly combat of Brazil in the post-dictatorship period of the late 1980s.

She began her career as an assistant professor in the Department of History of the State University of Campinas (UNICAMP), a department

famous for its innovative approaches to history, on a campus comparatively free of the censorship and expulsion that had marked the federal universities under the years of military control. Public discussions about race and inequality expanded as the legislature crafted a new national constitution that confronted the ongoing need for redress of many kinds.

When the Partido dos Trabalhadores (Workers' Party) won municipal elections in the city of São Paulo in 1988, Silvia Lara moved into "public history," serving for three years as Director of the Iconography and Museums Division of the Historical Heritage Department of the Municipal Secretariat of Culture for three years.

After returning to the university, she wrote a magisterial work on 18th century cultural history, titled *Eighteenth-century Fragments: Slavery, Culture, and Power in Portuguese America*.

In collaboration with colleagues and graduate students from UNICAMP and elsewhere, Silvia Lara was building the field of socio-legal history in Brazil, directing doctoral theses on different aspects of labor history, social history, and cultural studies. She directed some 43 masters and doctoral dissertations, yielding a roster of authors of major historical works that pioneered the systematic use of testimony recorded in Brazilian

notarial and judicial archives. With her former student José Mendonça, for example, she published a major collection of essays titled *Laws and Justice in Brazil: Essays in Social History*, a landmark in socio-legal historical studies.

In the early 2000s, and drawing on her understanding of law and treaty-making, she turned to the study of the long-lived seventeenth-century colonial communities of runaways from slavery and their descendants known, collectively as Palmares. Calling attention to neglected sources and perspectives on the negotiated relations between this sub-state led by Africans and their descendants, on the one hand, and a sequence of Portuguese colonial authorities, on the other, her work culminated in a book titled *Palmares & Cucaú* -- published earlier this year. Scholars have characterized it as a "methodological tour de force."

In the process, she re-transcribed and reinterpreted sources on the community of Palmares that had often been cited from flawed printed transcriptions. She dug out new sources, and in a generous initiative characteristic of her pedagogical and mentoring mission, she made sure that each of these new transcriptions would be published as well, making the raw material available to those who shared -- or challenged -- her approach.

Instead of focusing on the martyred figure of Zumbi, who had fought to the death to defend the independence of the community of Palmares, she turned instead to the diplomatic achievements of Zumbi's predecessor Gana Zumba, who successfully negotiated a peace treaty with the Portuguese authorities in the region of Pernambuco in 1678.

Understanding that Gana Zumba could not have foreseen the depth of Portuguese duplicity, she explores the understandings of statecraft and responsibility that underlay his negotiation of the treaty itself.

Throughout her career, Silvia Lara has had a sharp eye for documentary riches that would be of value to a wide community of scholars. Along with her students, Silvia Lara created the first-ever compilation of Portuguese legislation on slavery, a massive (700 page), open access word-searchable research resource.

Most recently, she has arranged, overseen, and organized the digitization of the vast collection of late 20th and early 21st c. labor inspection reports generated by the Public Ministry of Labor in the State of São Paulo. The paper originals held in the offices of the Ministry were at risk of being routinely destroyed. Digital copies are now archived in a research library at UNICAMP, becoming a valuable resource for the history

of labor and of the enforcement of Brazil's labor laws, including the laws against the "imposition of labor in conditions analogous to slavery."

In sum, from the end of the Brazilian dictatorship, across the tumultuous establishment of a new constitutional order, Silvia Lara has helped to build the profession of history in Brazil, the study of law and slavery, and a sophisticated public-facing historical outreach to her fellow citizens. Her generosity and tremendous energy have brought scholars together in fruitful collaborations throughout Brazil, as well as across borders and languages.

In a period when social historians were often tempted to raid legal records for juicy stories, Silvia Lara was already attending carefully to the dynamics of the interpretation and application of law in a specific place and moment. Microhistories built from judicial records, in her hands, remained true to the complexity of the legal processes that generated those records.

The ASLH characteristically describes Honorary Fellows as those "on whose shoulders we stand." Silvia Lara's books and articles, combined with the training, mentoring, and editorial initiatives that she continues to offer so generously, honor our field even as we honor her.