



PERSONAGENS E PERSONALIDADES ATLÂNTICAS¹

Resumo: A historiadora norte-americana Rachel Harding narra a sua trajetória acadêmica nos EUA e suas experiências de pesquisas no Brasil no final dos anos 90 e início do século XX. Destaca a sua visão sobre as experiências da religião negra durante a escravidão e as possibilidades de pensar diáspora. Descreve suas impressões sobre uma renovada geração de acadêmicas negras no Brasil.

Palavras-chaves: Cultura negra, diáspora, história intelectual e Rachel E. Harding

ATLANTIC TRAVELERS

Abstract: Rachel Harding narrates her academic trajectory and her research experiences in Brazil in the late 90s and early 20th century. It highlights his view on the experiences of the black religion during slavery and the possibilities of thinking diaspora. She analyzes the impressions of a new generation of black scholars in Brazil.

Keywords: Black culture, diaspora, intellectual history and Rachel E. Harding

VIAJEROS DEL ATLÁNTICO

Resumen: Rachel Harding narra su trayectoria académica y sus experiencias de investigación en Brasil a finales de los 90 y principios del siglo XX. Destaca su visión sobre las experiencias de la religión negra durante la esclavitud y las posibilidades de pensar en la diáspora. Analiza las impresiones de una nueva generación de académicos negros en Brasil.

Palabras-claves: Cultura negra, diáspora, historia intelectual y Rachel E. Harding

VOYAGEURS DE L'ATLANTIQUE

Résumé: Rachel Harding raconte sa trajectoire académique et ses expériences de recherche au Brésil à la fin des années 90 et au début du 20e siècle. Il met en évidence son point de vue sur les expériences de la religion noire pendant l'esclavage et les possibilités de penser la diaspora. Elle analyse les impressions d'une nouvelle génération d'érudits noirs au Brésil

Mots-clés: Culture noire, diaspora, histoire intellectuelle et Rachel E. Harding

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**RACHEL E. HARDING**

Professora da Colorado University. Fez o seu Mestrado em Artes em Brown University e o PhD em História pela Colorado University. Seus estudos estão concentrados nas religiões da diáspora afro-atlântica e as perspectivas interculturais. Tem vários livros publicados se destacando “A Refuge in Thunder: Candomblé and Alternative Spaces of Blackness” (Indiana University Press, 2000) e “Remnants: A Memoir of Spirit, Activism and Mothering, with Rosemarie Freeney Harding” (Duke University Press, 2015) e importantes capítulos, entre outros, "The Lithic Imagination and the Tertia: The Longian Paradigm and Art in the Study of Afro-Atlantic Religion," (2014) e "Authority, History and Everyday Mysticism in the Poetry of Lucille Clifton: A Womanist View," (2014)

Fale um pouco da sua origem familiar e trajetória até entrar na Universidade. Quais foram as primeiras referências familiares e extra-familiares? Como foi a sua formação?

Tell us a little about your family background and your trajectory before you entered the University. What were your first family and extra-family references? What was your training like?

I was born in the early 1960s in Atlanta, Georgia, in the middle of the Freedom Movement (Civil Rights Movement). My parents, Vincent and Rosemarie, were activists and educators. So that was the milieu of my youth. My father and mother were also historians. There were always many books in my home – even when we didn’t have furniture, we had books!

On my mother’s side, my family lived in Georgia and Florida during slavery; most of them migrated north to Chicago and New York in the 1920s. On my father’s side, my grandparents were born in Barbados and immigrated to the US (New York) also in the 1920s. My father was born in Harlem, New York and my mother was born in Chicago.

Beyond my parents, important references in my early life were other family members (especially my Cousin Charles, a librarian and artist and my brother, Jonathan) and the rich African American culture of the South during the Freedom Movement time



– soul music and gospel music; the poetry/theater/dance of the Black Arts movement; traditional children’s games; and southern religion.

My family moved often when I was young, so I attended a dozen different schools before I got to college. All kinds of schools – some public schools, some independent Afro-centric schools, and one elite private school. With all of the changes, I would say that my parents were the most consistent source of most of my training before college and graduate school. They gave me things to read and study, took me to marches and conferences, and their friends were fascinating people (artists, intellectuals, community organizers, teachers, students). I always liked being near my parents because their conversations were so interesting!

When I finally got to college, Brown University, I majored in Religious Studies and minored in Portuguese and Brazilian Studies.

Como foi a escolha pela História? O que te motivava?

How did you choose History? What motivated you?

In some ways, because of my family background, I would say that history was almost an inevitable choice. However, it was not my first inclination. I was much more interested in literature, and in the arts more generally. I’m still very interested in creativity – both as a subject of study and as a practice for myself and in collaboration with others. I graduated college in 1986; and after college, from 1988 to 1990, I did an MFA (master of fine arts) degree in poetry, also at Brown University. While I was doing the MFA, I took a course in Brazilian history with Thomas Skidmore and he introduced me to the work of João José Reis. That was a revelatory moment for me!

I was already interested in the Afro-Atlantic diaspora, because of a trip I made to Cuba in 1976 with Los Venceremitos (the children’s section of the Venceremos Brigade) and because my mother had traveled in Brazil for a month with AnaniDzidzienyo and two other researchers from the American Friends Service Committee in 1980. In fact, I met Anani because of my mother and he became a lifelong teacher and mentos. Also, during my junior year in college, I spent a semester in Bahia - in 1985. So, even before taking Skidmore’s class, I was already very interested in Brazil, but it was João’s work on slave rebellions and Afro-Brazilian religious history that really sparked my interest in a



profound way and I decided at that point that I wanted (and needed) to learn more about the history of my people in Brazil so that I could help tell the stories.

I should also say that when I was about 7 years old, my father became the founding director of the Institute of the Black World – which was one of the first centers in the USA for research on the African diaspora. IBW became an important national resource for Black Studies programs, which were being developed in a number of US colleges and universities at the time. So the emphasis on diaspora has been in my life for a long while.

Seus estudos nos anos 80 acontecem num momento de efervescência negra nos Brasil e nos EUA. Como isso te mobilizava em termos intelectuais? Quais os livros, abordagens, autores?

Your studies in the 1980s took place at a time of black effervescence in Brazil and the USA. How did that inspire you in intellectual terms? What books, approaches, authors?

Yes, I took a number of inspirations from that time. First of all, in the US, the 1980s were a moment of important solidarity organizing – when people from different racial, ethnic and activist communities were connecting across shared areas of concern and commitment. One of the reasons I chose to study at Brown University was because, among the Ivy League schools at the time, it had the most politically-engaged student body. That was important to me. Also, when I was in high school in Philadelphia, I had been involved in Third World solidarity organizing and I was excited about finding more ways to connect the African American struggle with the movements of other oppressed peoples. The anti-apartheid campaign in the US was also very strong in the 1980s and my connections to the Free South Africa movement helped me come to Brazil with a broader consciousness about the various ways structural racism manifests in contemporary societies.

In my teens, I read quite a few West and Southern African writers – Chinua Achebe, Cyprian Ekwensi, Mongo Beti, AyiKwei Armah, Peter Abrahams and others. I was also reading African American and Caribbean novelists and poets – some of my favorites were Lucille Clifton, Carolyn Rodgers, Toni Morrison, Sonia Sanchez, Ishmael Reed, David Bradley, Kristin Hunter, Rosa Guy, Ernest J. Gaines and Simone Schwartz-Bart. In the 1980s, outside of literature, my most important academic influences were still my parents. Both of them had very broad interests. My dad also had an ever-growing



archive of journal articles, conference papers, correspondence and other materials related to his research and I learned about writing essays and organizing and filing documents from helping my dad and mom with their projects.

But I hadn't really decided on history as a professional path for myself until I came in touch with João Reis' work. I saw in João's example a way to connect my interest in Afro-Atlantic religion with my love of research and history. Once I started seriously reading the literature on Afro-Brazilian history, Mary Karasch's work was another important early inspiration for me. Of course also Katia Mattoso, Roger Bastide, Robert Conrad, Manuel Querino, Nina Rodrigues, Sheila Walker, Renato de Silveira and others. I also benefited from people who wrote about Afro-Cuban religion – like George Brandon, Fernando Ortiz and Isabel Castellanos.

Toni Morrison, Charles Long, Sterling Stuckey and Muniz Sodré were among my most important theoretical influences.

Como foi a sua entrada na pós-graduação e escolha de temas para estudo?

How did you get into graduate school and choose topics for study?

After I finished my MFA in poetry, I worked for a film production company, ROJA productions, owned by Orlando Bagwell. I still wasn't sure if I was going to teach literature or if I wanted to really dive into film production or perhaps try to get a job at a foundation and do some kind of international work. At some point, in separate conversations with my mother and my cousin Charles, they both encouraged me to get a PhD because they were convinced that the degree would offer me more opportunities, more creative and intellectual flexibility in my career and – as my cousin said, “you won't have to spend your life stubbing your toe against the tree stump of ignorance,” by which he meant, having a doctoral degree would hopefully save me from having to be under the constant supervision of petty people. I would have some independence. When I couldn't figure out what discipline to go into (I think I was considering literature, history, religion and anthropology), my mother told me it really didn't matter. Any discipline would do. She said I should just pick something I'm interested in.

So, at some point, I decided that I was actually very interested in the history of Black religions in the Americas and the way Africans and their descendants used religion to sustain their humanity and to navigate and transform their circumstances. Once I



decided that, I looked for Latin American Studies programs. I considered Brown, because Thomas Skidmore was there and he had been very encouraging of me; the University of Pittsburgh, because Reid Andrews was there and it was a strong program; and perhaps one or two other places, I don't remember now. But in the midst of trying to decide which program I would choose, my father got very sick and I felt an obligation to return home. So I chose to do my doctorate at the University of Colorado Boulder where I could be closer to my parents. Robert Ferry, who studies colonial Venezuela and Evelyn Hu-DeHart who works on Cuba and the Asian diaspora in Latin America, were the Latin Americanists at UC Boulder and both were very helpful to me. Evelyn Hu-DeHart, in particular, was a wonderful model of how to function with integrity, vision and fortitude as a woman in academia. I am still grateful to her.

When I entered the PhD program at the University of Colorado, I initially thought I would do a comparison of the 19th century development of Santería/Lucumi in Cuba and Candomblé in Brazil, but after a while it became clear to me that I would have to choose Brazil or Cuba, not both. I chose Brazil largely because of an experience I had in 1992, when I organized my first study-tour to Salvador and Rio at the request of the Interdenominational Theological Center (ITC).² Lélia Gonzalez, whom my mother had met in 1980, put me in touch with Luiza Barros and Luiza agreed to help me organize this study-tour for about 25 faculty and students from ITC. In fact, Luiza organized the full program (with help from Isabel Reis, who was an undergraduate student at UFBA at the time) and on that trip I made my first visit to the Terreiro do Cobre, had a marked experience of Oxûm's presence, and met the woman who would eventually become my mãe de santo, Iyalorixá Valnizia de Ayrá.

My areas of study in graduate school were Colonial Latin American history, Colonial US history, African American history and African Diaspora Religious history.

Você optou por estudar Brasil, escravidão e religiosidades. Fale um pouco das primeiras leituras e impressões sobre Brasil. Viagens etc.

You chose to study Brazil, slavery and religiosity. Tell us a little about your first readings and impressions of Brazil. Your travel, etc.

² ITC is a consortium of historically Black seminaries that prepare students for the Christian ministry. It is in Atlanta, Georgia.



That's a long and powerful story. I won't try to tell it all here. But my first visit to Brazil was in January 1985. Just as the dictatorship ended. I was in my third year of college and Brown University had established a study-abroad program in Bahia. I was a member of the first cohort. I remember the day I arrived in Brazil because it was January 15 – as it happens, exactly 36 years from today as I am writing the responses to these questions. I remember, of course, because January 15 is Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday.

My first experience in Brazil was overwhelming in many ways. I was young and although I had travelled a bit in the Caribbean (Cuba, Jamaica, Barbados) I had never lived away from home for more than a few weeks and I was frankly not prepared for Brazilian racism. I didn't have the cultural and emotional tools to protect myself in Brazil that I had developed in the US, and it hit me pretty hard. I was living with an upper middle class family in Salvador who, I'm sure, in the Brazilian context identified as white, although in the USA they would be light-skinned Latinos. And while I believe they tried to be hospitable to me, I also don't think they were expecting a Black woman as their "American exchange student". So, it was difficult. They had a retinue of servants, all of whom were Black. I don't think they had ever had a Black person stay in their house who didn't work for them. Perhaps my presence was especially disconcerting because I was interested in Afro-Brazilian culture, I wanted to visit Candomblé ceremonies and I was curious about the ways the music and ritual life of Black communities helped Afro-Brazilians survive in what I thought was an emotionally oppressive space. The family I stayed with was not happy about any of that.

One good thing was that the father in the family ate a strictly macrobiotic diet. And at the time, I also ate mostly macrobiotic food. The brown rice with gergelim and the ensalada de algas com tofú were comforting to me, in a way.

But the modern Afro-Brazilian human rights movement was still relatively young at the time, and I found it hard to be in a city that was so obviously and overwhelmingly Black but where Black people had the most menial occupations and the small population of "white" people were running everything. As a child of the Black Freedom movement in the US, it was a really disconcerting experience for me. I had a hard time.

Nevertheless, that initial trip was very important for two reasons – first, living with the wealthy white family gave me a chance to observe (and also experience – *sentir na pele*) the vastly disproportionate power relations between whites and blacks in Brazil.



I could see and understand in a very visceral way that those dynamics had their roots in Brazilian slavery. And so when, a decade later, I was working on my doctoral dissertation, I had not only the archival documents and scholarly studies as resources for my work, but I had my own bodily experience as a kind of informant. Secondly, I met Makota Valdina Pinto during that visit in 1985. One of my father's students, scholar and photographer Dr. Ken Dossar of Temple University, was visiting Salvador, unbeknownst to me, and he saw me from a bus window one afternoon as I was walking along Avenida 7 de Setembro. Ken jumped off the bus and told me there was somebody he wanted me to meet. Makota Valdina became one of my dearest friends and honored mentors and her teachings and understandings of Candomblé have impacted my scholarship and my personal life.

Você teve contato com uma geração de mulheres negras historiadoras no Brasil. Quais as suas percepções a respeito.

You had contact with a generation of black women historians in Brazil. What are your impressions of them?

Although I finished my PhD in 1997, I lived and worked at the margins of academia for another ten years. It wasn't until 2008 that I took a tenure-track job and began a full-time career as a scholar in academia. Previously, (and still, to a significant extent), my work straddled the line between academic research and community-based scholarship/activism. That's another aspect of my trajectory that I inherited from my parents. So, most of the Afro-Brazilian women researchers who became my friends were people connected, in some way, to the movimento negro and to Candomblé. Not all of them are trained historians, strictly speaking, and some of them do not have advanced degrees at all, but they are all tremendously capable and engaged thinkers whose work has had an important impact on my understanding of Afro-Brazilian experience. In addition to Makota Valdina Pinto, I would mention Prof. Ana Célia da Silva and Dra. Lourdes Siqueira.

I lived in Salvador for eleven months in 1994-95 while I was working in the state archives researching my dissertation. During that time I stayed in the home of the sociologist and pedagogue Ana Célia da Silva. Through Ana Célia, I met Lourdinha. Ana Célia and Lourdinha were some of the first academically-trained Afro-Brazilian scholars I knew who were also initiates in Candomblé. (Julio Braga was another.) Talking



with them and observing them, I learned a great deal about respecting the wisdom of community elders, people who did not have formal education but who, oftentimes, had wisdom of extraordinary depth. This was a value – honoring the knowledge and leadership of grassroots elders and community scholars – that I first learned from my parents and the African American context. So, seeing these same values in Brazil reinforced them for me.

Without question, the Afro-Brazilian historian with whom I have worked longest and most closely is my dear friend and sister, Dra. Isabel Cristina Ferreira dos Reis. I have learned so much from Isabel – and my contact with her has opened a world of connections, experiences and understandings for me. Isabel is one of the generation of Afro-Brazilian women historians who came up at a time when there was little support for their studies and when there were fewer elder scholars within the Black Brazilian community who could point the way and open doors. She has worked tremendously hard to research and write excellent histories of Black women and families in slavery in Brazil and her example (and generous advice) have been foundational for the younger scholars who have followed her.

Finally, I am part of a Candomblé community where there are a number of women researchers, across several disciplines (especially history, education, sociology, literature, mathematics and anthropology) who have been teaching/studying, writing and mobilizing for more than three decades on subjects related to Afro-Brazilian orientations and resistance. Beginning with the leadership of our terreiro, Mãe Val, who has written several books on her own personal history, Cobre is also home to scholars Lindinalva Barbosa, Eliane Costa Santos, Lindinalva Silva dos Santos, Kenia Santos Silva, Isabela Barbosa, Cleidiana Ramos, Isabelle Sanches, Vilma Reis, and Anuria Oliveira among others.

Overall, my impression of Afro-Brazilian women historians is that they are profoundly and creatively engaged in their own intellectual work and at the same time they are committed to the wellbeing of their communities, and to passing on to others the histories, lessons, visions, possibilities they have known. I think of people like Solange P. da Rocha, Luciana Brito and Giovana Xavier. I'm especially thrilled by the kind of comparative work that some of them are doing – bringing the perspectives and insights of an Afro-Brazilian lens to archives and histories in the USA. This is exciting to me. I



am greatly impressed with the Black Brazilian women scholars I have had the pleasure to know. They inspire me. They make me hopeful for the diaspora.

Você poderia fazer um paralelo entre Brasil e EUA em termos de inserção e atuação de pesquisadores homens e mulheres negros?

Could you draw a parallel between the role and impact of Black scholars in Brazil and the USA?

In one sense, I think Black scholars in Brazil are in a position somewhat analogous to that of their counterparts in the USA during the 1970s and early 80s, a time when Black studies was growing as a discipline and the work of Black scholars was still organically connected to the needs, concerns and struggles of the larger Black community.

And in another sense, largely because of the successes of the Afro-Brazilian human rights movement and the educational transformations that happened during Lula's (and Dilma's) administrations, I think Black researchers in Brazil have been at the forefront of 21st century work on issues impacting Black people globally. They are providing important points of inspiration and connection for us in the United States. Black women scholars in Brazil are doing amazing work – both theoretically and in terms of the foundational tasks of raising consciousness and organizing resistance to racism and hetero-patriarchy. The work of scholar-activists in Brazil around the problem of state-sponsored violence reverberates in the USA and connects with the efforts of researchers and organizers in the Black Lives Matter movement. For example, I think of Sharrelle Barber, a Black epidemiologist in Philadelphia who met Marielle Franco on the night Marielle was murdered. Sharrelle recently completed a film on Marielle that benefits from contextual work developed by the activist-scholarship of Afro-Brazilian women. I also think of the way Angela Davis is making links between feminist and prison-abolitionist movements in the US and Brazil precisely because she has been made aware of the tremendous work happening in Brazil along those fronts.

A few years ago, I was invited to UFPB and then to several UNEB campuses in rural Bahia. These universities reminded me of HBCU's³ in southern towns, where although often struggling for resources, the schools are blessed with dedicated faculty

³ HBCU stands for Historically Black Colleges and Universities



members and extremely bright students who are eager and excited to develop subjects of study related to their lives, their families' situations and their concerns for improving the destiny of their country.

Quais os desafios para os intelectuais acadêmicos?

What are the challenges for academic intellectuals?

One of the challenges I can think of is the relative lack of financial and administrative support for work in the humanities and social sciences.

Another challenge is that both the United States and Brazil are societies in dire need of the knowledge and context that intellectuals can offer. Our democracies are under assault and need the perspectives of those of us who have some understanding of how we arrived at this point and what may help us move with greater commitment toward become truly humane and just nations.

Also, one of the very practical challenges facing academics, is the stress of balancing our responsibilities for family members (children, partners, siblings, aging parents, extended family) with the need to take care of ourselves and to do both while giving our best thinking and energy to our scholarship. (Of course, because of patriarchy this challenge often hits female scholars with a particular force.)

Você acha que seja possível construir uma história da diáspora transnacional?

Do you think it is possible to build a history of the transnational diaspora?

I'm not sure. But I'm encouraged by the rich possibilities for comparative work that exist as younger scholars in Brazil and elsewhere in the diaspora are able to engage each other's experiences, histories and work. The internet helps this in a substantial way although we still need opportunities for scholars to spend time in each other's spaces (national, institutional, cultural, familial, etc).

Fale um pouco dos seus projetos acadêmicos e intelectuais atuais.

Tell us a little about your current academic and intellectual projects.



I have a longstanding project of comparative work on the conjunction of Black women's mysticism and racial justice activism in Brazil (from the 1980s to the present) and in the USA (in the Southern Freedom Movement of the 1960s and in the Black Lives Matter movement of the 21st century).

I'm also beginning a project related to my father's archives and his published work – not exactly the same as I did for my mother's memoir, but similar. *Thank you very much for inviting me to participate in this project. It is my pleasure and honor.*

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