

# Archive, Language, and the “Terrain of History”

Marc Hertzman\*

**Abstract:** This review addresses the book *Palmares & Cucaú* through recent works on the content and various forms of the slavery “archive” and on historical linguistics carried out by Africanist historians.

**Key words:** Palmares; Archive; Language.

**Resumo:** Esta resenha se propõe a abordar o livro *Palmares & Cucaú* por meio de trabalhos recentes sobre o conteúdo e as diversas formas do “arquivo” da escravidão e sobre a linguística histórica feita por historiadores africanistas.

**Palavras-chave:** Palmares; arquivo; língua.

SILVIA LARA’S *Palmares & Cucaú* is an exceptional work of history. The culmination of years of research, the book will bear much fruit for scholars, not only on its own, but also in tandem with its companion website, *Documenta Palmares*, and *Guerra contra Palmares: O manuscrito de 1678*, a critical edition of one of the most detailed contemporary accounts of Palmares that exists, the *Relação das guerras feitas aos Palmares de Pernambuco*.<sup>1</sup> Lara’s enormous contribution descends from a longer line of scholarship on Palmares, which she expertly builds on and critically examines. Like Ernesto Ennes, Edison Carneiro, Décio Freitas, and Flávio Gomes before her, Lara not only advances new arguments about the famous mocambos but also has collected and compiled previously unknown sources, some of which

\* Marc Hertzman is Professor, Director of Graduate Studies, and Associate Chair in the Department of History at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. His work, which focuses on the African diaspora in Brazil and Latin America, has received awards from the Brazilian Studies Association, Latin American Studies Association, the Conference on Latin American History, among others. He has published articles in diverse journals, including *American Historical Review*, *Hispanic American Historical Review*, *Journal of Latin American Studies*, and *Mundos do Trabalho*, among others. He is the author of three books. The first was translated into Portuguese as *De onde vem o samba* by 7Letras in 2023. In 2024, Duke University Press published his most recent book, *After Palmares: Diaspora, Inheritance, and the Afterlives of Zumbi*. E-mail: hertzman@illinois.edu. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8754-3494>.

1 Disponível em: <https://palmares.ifch.unicamp.br/>. Acesso em: 10 jul. 2024; LARA, Silvia; FACHIN, Phablo (org.). *Guerra contra Palmares: o manuscrito de 1678*. São Paulo: Chão Editora, 2021.

are transcribed in *Palmares & Cucaú* (and *Guerra contra Palmares*), others stored online at *Documenta Palmares*.<sup>2</sup> Not since Gomes's pathbreaking work on Palmares (and other mocambos and quilombos) in the 1990s and early 2000's has the field received such a wealth of documents and interesting insights as what Lara has produced.<sup>3</sup>

*Palmares & Cucaú's* contributions are many. The duality invoked in its title is an entry point to explore not only the more well-known Palmares of its most famous leader, Zumbi, but also the lesser-known Palmares settlement at Cucaú, where Gana Zumba settled in 1678 after signing a peace treaty with Pernambuco's governor.<sup>4</sup> *Palmares & Cucaú* utilizes the peace treaty as an entry point to discuss the Portuguese "politics of domination" (p. 27) and in search of greater detail about "the perspective of Palmares's inhabitants" (p. 20). The book critically engages centuries of literature about Palmares, contains transcriptions of primary sources, and includes maps that provide lucid, detailed location of the mocambos and how they changed over time. While these and other aspects and details are all impressive, two areas stand out as especially rich: (1) the recovery of previously overlooked archival material and (2) extended dialogue with the history and historiography of West Central Africa, the point of origin for most African-born Palmaristas. While engaging this history and historiography, *Palmares & Cucaú* advances important insights and arguments that also may generate debate and future research.

Any discussion of the book must begin with the incredible detective work and research that Lara conducted in Brazil, Portugal, England, France, Holland, and Italy where she mined an enormous amount of material. This is remarkable research, made all the more impressive given the fact that scholars and archivists have been combing collections for well over a century in search of new documents about Palmares. Despite those past labors, Lara turned up new material. One set of questions that emerges from all the archival work concerns the limits and composition of what we might call the Palmares Archive. Empiricism is a central—perhaps *the* central—feature of the way the book analyzes that archive. The rich documentary base that it draws from allows for the events of 1678 to become "the empirical entry point" for the text (p. 27). This emphasis doesn't mean that the book simply attempts to "fill a gap" in the literature. Far from it, by recovering lost documents, highlighting forgotten encounters and political processes, and by connecting Palmares to West Central

2 CARNEIRO, Edison, **O Quilombo dos Palmares**, 5th. ed. São Paulo: WMF Martins Fontes, 2011. ENNES, Ernesto, **Os Palmares**: subsídios para a sua história. Lisboa: 1937. FREITAS, Décio (org.). **República de Palmares**: pesquisa e comentários em documentos históricos do século XVII. Maceió: Edufal, 2004. GOMES, Flávio dos Santos. **De olho em Zumbi dos Palmares**: histórias, símbolos e memória social. São Paulo: Claro Enigma, 2011. GOMES, Flávio dos Santos (org.). **Mocambos de Palmares**: histórias e fontes (séc. XVI-XIX). Rio de Janeiro: 7Letras, 2010. GOMES, Flávio. **Palmares**: escravidão e liberdade no Atlântico Sul. São Paulo: Contexto, 2005.

3 In addition to the citations in the previous note, GOMES, Flávio dos Santos. **A hidra e os pântanos**: mocambos, quilombos e comunidades de fugitivos no Brasil (séculos XVII-XIX). São Paulo: Unesp, 2005. REIS, João José; GOMES, Flávio dos Santos (org.). **Liberdade por um fio**: história dos quilombos no Brasil. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1996.

4 Though elsewhere I suggest an alternative approach, for the purposes of this forum I reproduce Lara's choice to use "Gana Zumba" over "Ganga Zumba". An appendix in *Palmares & Cucaú* provides a discussion of the spelling of proper names (pp. 392-98).

Africa, *Palmares & Cucaú* provides new insights about the shape and contours of the African diaspora in northeast Brazil and sheds new light on the making and maintenance of colonial domination. The book’s suggestive last line, “Barriga não acabou!,” a reference to Zumbi’s mocambo atop Serra da Barriga, prompts us to ask what comes next. What historical, archival, and methodological questions remain?

Some answers may lie in small archives located off the beaten path in the northeast. Are there additional, untapped collections, that contain new material or tell new histories of Palmares? Another area of inquiry, outside of Brazil, beckons. While *Palmares & Cucaú* utilizes archives outside the Portuguese empire to trace what happened in Palmares, we still know little about the repercussions that Palmares did (or did not) have in other slave societies during the eighteenth century. At the turn of the twentieth century, Raimundo Nina Rodrigues famously invoked the Haitian Revolution as he wrote about Palmares, writing effusively of the colonial conquerors who defeated the mocambos and thereby preserved what would become Brazil from a Black revolution in the mold of Haiti.<sup>5</sup> Were there earlier examples of the reverse? Did enslavers in Haiti (or Cuba or Jamaica) ever invoke Palmares as a cautionary tale? How many enslaved people outside of Portuguese America knew about Palmares?

If these questions are based in some version of the idea that there is always “one more archive” out there, other questions stem from the archive that Lara has compiled and that forms the empirical backbone of *Palmares & Cucaú*. History and its practice are emphasized and elevated throughout the book but most explicitly in the introduction, where they are discussed in relation and sometimes in contradistinction to politics. In addition to identifying, culling, and analyzing a mountain of primary sources, *Palmares & Cucaú* also wrestles with the enormous Portuguese-language literature on Palmares and is conceived not only as a book about history but also “a book about the historian’s craft” (p. 27). One reason that the histories in *Palmares & Cucaú* have languished in obscurity traces to the fact that Palmares and Zumbi have often found themselves, centuries after their passing, at the center of political mobilizations and heated controversies. Lara demonstrates how those mobilizations and controversies have shaped our understanding of Palmares and seeks to chart a path above the fray: “In some respects, I leave the terrain of politicized disputes over the memory of Palmares in order to open conditions for a properly historical investigation: I examine events that occurred in the past to understand the actions and intentions of the men and women who produced them and the conflicts in which they were involved” (p. 20). Cognizant that these themes remain “of great interest for social movements,” Lara writes, “I don’t leave politics behind. I don’t flee from the debate, but I remain in the terrain of history” (p. 27). The goal, stated once more in the introduction, is an analysis that is “eminently *historical*” (p. 20, emphasis in the original).

5 RODRIGUES, Raymundo Nina. **Os africanos no Brasil**. Seventh. Brasília: Editora Nacional, 1988. p. 78.

If the content and contours of the “terrain of history” are self-evident to some, recent scholarship on slavery suggests that, to others, its borders and meanings are contested, especially when it comes to assessing archives, their limits, and their silences. So too is the definition of empiricism and who gets to make it. *Palmares & Cucaú* considers the position of those who wrote the documents utilized in the text and cites cultural historians, who, during the 1980s and early 1990s, emphasized the “necessity of accounting for the institutional context of the product of each document, the intentions of the author, the terms employed in the description of events [...] and the linguistic and cultural translations operating in each text” (p. 26).<sup>6</sup> There may also be an opportunity to engage more recent work that highlights the silences, violences, and erasures that define archives, especially pertaining to sources related to slavery.<sup>7</sup>

In 2015, *Social Text* published an influential forum on “The Question of Recovery.” The editors describe “the generative tension between recovery as an imperative that is fundamental to historical writing and research—an imperative infused with political urgency by generations of scholar-activists—and the impossibility of recovery when engaged with archives whose very assembly and organization occlude certain historical subjects.”<sup>8</sup> *Palmares & Cucaú* is undoubtedly a sparkling example of the value of recovery, which juxtaposes the book in an interesting way with the ideas debated in *Social Text* (and elsewhere). Though the contributors to the special issue offer different opinions and perspectives, they are united in the hope to develop “modes of accessing Atlantic subjects that do not abandon all hope of recovery in the face of archival lack, but complicate the notion of what historical recovery is. Recovery must have a political purpose beyond documenting black presence, or it is merely a plea for inclusion within the foundational promises of liberal modernity—a critique of its boundaries but not of its essence.”<sup>9</sup> For these authors, the terrain of history must keep politics not on the distant horizon but instead front and center. And yet, as *Palmares & Cucaú* demonstrates, in the case of Palmares that kind of orientation has often led to missteps and distortions.

Another way to ask what remains “occluded” and what may be accessible, either through new documentary evidence or new analysis, is found in the work of John Marquez, who demonstrates how Africans and their descendants in Brazil created and maintained a “counterarchive” of legal memory and arguments during the eighteenth century.<sup>10</sup> Marquez

6 The two authors cited are Roger Chartier and Robert Darnton. CHARTIER, Roger. Textos, impressão, leituras. In: HUNT, Lynn (org.). **A nova história cultural**. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1992. p. 211-238. DARNTON, Robert. Primeiros passos para uma história de leitura. In: **O beijo de Lamourette**. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1990. p. 146-172.

7 For example, see FUENTES, Marisa J. **Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive**. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016. HARTMAN, Saidiya. Venus in Two Acts. **Small Axe**, v. 12, n. 2, p. 1-14, 2008. MORGAN, Jennifer L. **Reckoning with Slavery: Gender, Kinship, and Capitalism in the Early Black Atlantic**. Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2021.

8 HELTON, Laura et al. The Question of Recovery: An Introduction. **Social Text**, v. 33, n. 4 125, p. 1-18, 2015. p. 1.

9 Ibidem, p. 11.

10 MARQUEZ, John C., Witnesses to Freedom: Paula's Enslavement, Her Family's Freedom Suit, and the Making of a Counterarchive in the South Atlantic World. **Hispanic American Historical Review**, v. 101, n. 2, p. 231-63, 2021.

adopts Shawn Michelle Smith’s definition of the counterarchive as a “contestatory archive, offering a place from which a counter-history can be imagined and narrated.”<sup>11</sup> This definition, and the larger debates about archival silences, are especially interesting in relation to *Palmares & Cucaú*. The book is dedicated to understanding how and why the documents that it uses were previously ignored, and it uses those documents to break free from stubborn paradigms. For example, *Palmares & Cucaú* builds on Gomes’s work to thoroughly reject earlier depictions, especially in popular culture, which cast Zumbi as a hero and Gana Zumba as a villain who sold out his fellow Palmaristas. In this sense, there is no doubt that *Palmares & Cucaú* utilizes archival documents to advance a “counter-history.” Marquez shows that Africans and their kin challenged “the paper archive” that forged the backbone of the Portuguese legal system—and that of the larger system of colonial domination discussed in *Palmares & Cucaú*—and pursued freedom by “forg[ing] new kinds of evidence seemingly improbably built from memory and testimony collected across the Atlantic Ocean.” Such counterarchives “interrupted the colonial archive and forced it to expand if only for fleeting moments.”<sup>12</sup> Could this be a way to think about the Palmares Archive moving forward? What would additional attention to “counterarchives” mean for our collective understanding not only of archival silences and omissions but of the “terrain of history” and what it means to write something that is “eminently *historical*?”

Another promising way to think through these questions is found in the work of Africanist scholars, whose work often helps identify new ways to read old documents and may even seem to lead us beyond the archive itself. In addition to the works that appear in *Palmares & Cucaú*, there is a large body of Africanist scholarship that, as Rhiannon Stephens puts it, may help us “think through the limitations of the archive and our interdisciplinary attachment to it.”<sup>13</sup> While scholars have previously placed Palmares in conversation and dialogue with African history and historiography, *Palmares & Cucaú* represents the most sustained engagement to date.<sup>14</sup> Steeped in prior scholarship, the book

11 SMITH, Shawn Michelle, **Photography on the Color Line**: W. E. B. Du Bois, Race, and Visual Culture. Durham: Duke University Press, 2004. p. 9 apud MARQUEZ, Witnesses to Freedom, p. 234.

12 MARQUEZ, Witnesses to Freedom, p. 259.

13 STEPHENS, Rhiannon. Conceptual History in Precolonial Contexts: A View from East Africa. **History of Humanities**, v. 9, n. 1, p. 129-141, 2024, p. 130.

14 In connecting Palmares and Africa, *Palmares & Cucaú* once again builds on Gomes and also draws from earlier work, such as: ALENCASTRO, Luiz Felipe de. História geral das guerras sul-atlânticas: o episódio de Palmares. In: GOMES, Flávio dos Santos (org.). **Mocambos de Palmares**: histórias e fontes (séc. XVI-XIX). Rio de Janeiro: 7Letras, 2010. p. 61-99. ALENCASTRO, Luiz Felipe de. Palmares: batalhas da guerra seiscentista sul-atlântica. In: REIS, João José; GOMES, Flávio dos Santos (Orgs.), **Revoltas escravas no Brasil**, São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2021. ANDERSON, Robert Nelson. The Quilombo of Palmares: A New Overview of a Maroon State in Seventeenth-Century Brazil. **Journal of Latin American Studies**, v. 28, n. 3, p. 545-566, 1996. GOMES, **Palmares**; KENT, R. K. Palmares: An African State in Brazil. In: PRICE, Richard (org.). **Maroon Societies**: Rebel Slave Communities in the Americas. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996. p. 170-90. SCHWARTZ, Stuart B. Mocambos, quilombos e Palmares: a resistência escrava no Brasil colonial. **Estudos Econômicos**, v. 17, p. 61-88, 1987. SCHWARTZ, Stuart B. Rethinking Palmares: Slave Resistance in Colonial Brazil. In: **Slaves, Peasants, and Rebels**: Reconsidering Brazilian Slavery. Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1996. p. 103-36. THORNTON, John. Angola e as origens de Palmares. In: **Mocambos de Palmares**: histórias e fontes (séc. XVI-XIX). Rio de Janeiro: 7Letras, 2010. p. 48-60. THORNTON, John K. Les Etats de l’Angola et la formation de Palmares. **Annales: Histoire, Sciences Sociales**, v. 63, n. 4, p. 769-797, 2008. Though less explicitly related to Palmares, also of note here is the work



pays careful attention to the wars that ripped through West Central Africa as the Portuguese pursued dominion and enslaved people to send to its American colony.<sup>15</sup> As *Palmares & Cucaú* makes clear, those wars, the violent pursuit of human captives, and African political dynamics and processes are central to understanding Palmares, whose denizens (at least those born in Africa) brought with them a shared “political syntax” from across the Atlantic (378). This shaped the peace treaty and Cucaú, which represented “an alternative path for many of the inhabitants of Palmares: a form of obtaining freedom, land to work, and safety to survive and grow” (378). What else may be said about the African histories and “syntaxes” that helped make Palmares?

Even as we participate in this forum, exciting new scholarship that connects Palmares and Africa in new ways is taking shape. A year after *Palmares & Cucaú* came out, José Lingna Nafafé published an intriguing book about the Ndongo royal José da Silva Mendonça, through whose life Nafafé traces an early African genesis of the abolition movement.<sup>16</sup> Palmares has a prominent role in the book, as Nafafé attempts to connect Mendonça to the mocambos.<sup>17</sup> Also of note are in-progress works such as Austin Nelsen’s forthcoming dissertation at the University of Florida and *The Long Atlantic: Toward a History in Terms of Africa*, by Kathryn de Luna, whose immersive knowledge of African history and linguistics promises to blaze a new horizon for scholars of Palmares and the diaspora.

One of the most useful sets of evidence that we have about Palmares comes in the names of mocambo leaders recorded by the colonial forces charged with destroying Palmares. *Palmares & Cucaú* has a useful appendix of over two dozen names of Palmaristas. To interpret the meanings of some of the African names recorded during the seventeenth century, Lara employs Kimbundu dictionaries along with insights from European missionaries in Brazil and Africa. This can be a reasonable approach, yet it has its limitations. *Palmares & Cucaú* suggests, “The inhabitants of Central Africa belonged to two close Bantu linguistic subgroups, Kikongo (in the Kongo region) and Kimbundu (in the majority of the Angolan highlands). According to contemporary accounts, both were notably similar, like Spanish and Portuguese” (p. 194). Work by Africanist scholars reveal two related problems with this characterization. Kimbundu and Kikongo are complex and internally diverse, and the relationship between the two is quite different than that between Spanish and Portuguese. Marcos Abreu Leitão de Almeida writes, “Historians have been working with Kikongo and

of Roquinaldo Ferreira. For example: FERREIRA, Roquinaldo, *O Brasil e a arte da guerra em Angola (sécs. XVII e XVIII)*. **Revista Estudos Históricos**, v. 39, p. 1-23, 2007. FERREIRA, Roquinaldo. **Cross-Cultural Exchange in the Atlantic World: Angola and Brazil during the Era of the Slave Trade**. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.

15 *Palmares & Cucaú* is in especially close dialogue with Linda M. Heywood and John K. Thornton, most prominently: HEYWOOD, Linda M.; THORNTON, John K. **Central Africans, Atlantic Creoles, and the Foundation of the Americas, 1585-1660**. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

16 NAFAFÉ, José Lingna, **Lourenço da Silva Mendonça and the Black Atlantic Abolitionist Movement in the Seventeenth Century**. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022.

17 In a note, Nafafé mentions having “a long conversation with [Silvia] Lara about making a connection between Lourenço da Silva de Mendonça and Brazil and Palmares, but her view was that there was no connection.” Ibidem, p. 140.

Kimbundu as if they were two bounded entities as close to each other as Portuguese and Spanish. From a historical point of view, this is misleading. Kikongo and Kimbundu language clusters are genetically quite distant and internally diversified.”<sup>18</sup> As early as the sixth century CE, Kikongo had split into four distinct regional subgroups, predating the division between Spanish and Portuguese by centuries.<sup>19</sup> Just within the Kikongo language cluster, cognation rates, a measure of linguistic similarity, are less than 50 percent. The rate for English and German is 60 percent, French and Spanish is 75 percent, and the cognation rate for Spanish and Portuguese is nearly 90 percent.<sup>20</sup> Just as there is diversity within the Kikongo language cluster, the differences between those languages and most Kimbundu languages is often even greater. As Almeida and de Luna argue, comparing Kikongo and Kimbundu to Spanish and Portuguese not only masks the diversity of West Central African languages but also likely hides histories of contact between specific variants of Kikongo and Kimbundu. While most Kimbundu and most Kikongo languages “are generally not mutually intelligible,” de Luna writes, “that fact does not preclude multilingualism or speakers’ recognition of cognates (false and true).”<sup>21</sup> This points to exciting questions and future research. What may closer attention to the internal diversity of Kimbundu and Kikongo tell us about this and other aspects of Palmares—how may we use linguists’ tools to reread the names and words that have been passed down from Palmares? What concepts and ideas, besides land, security, and freedom animated the women, men, and children who settled in Cucaú?

The forthcoming scholarship of de Luna and others will surely broaden our answers to these questions, and in doing so these works will build on *Palmares & Cucaú*, reaffirming the book’s place at the center of a still expanding field of knowledge about one of history’s most remarkable examples of African creation in the New World. So, too, will *Palmares & Cucaú* continue to generate debate about the “terrain of history” and the Palmares Archive, whose content and scope are deeper, greater, and better understood thanks to the extensive and tireless work that went into the research and writing of this impressive book.

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18 ALMEIDA, Marcos Abreu Leitão de. African Voices from the Congo Coast: Languages and the Politics of Identification in the Slave Ship *Jovem Maria* (1850). *Journal of African History*, v. 60, n. 2, p. 167-89, 2019, p. 180.

19 DE SCHRYVER, Gilles-Maurice *et al.* Introducing a state-of-the-art phylogenetic classification of the Kikongo Language Cluster. *Africana Linguistica*, v. 21, p. 87-162, 2015, p. 146.

20 REA, John A. Concerning the Validity of Lexicostatistics. *International Journal of American Linguistics*, v. 24, n. 2, p. 145-150, 1958. p. 147.

21 DE LUNA, Kathryn M. Sounding the African Atlantic. *William and Mary Quarterly*, v. 78, n. 4, p. 581-616, 2021. p. 594-95.