



[Review] “On the Footsteps of Abuncare: A Review of *The Story of Rufino: Slavery, Freedom and Islam in the Black Atlantic*” written by João José Reis, Flávio dos Santos Gomes and Marcus J.M. Carvalho and translated by Sabrina Gledhill. New York: Oxford University Press, 2020.

[Review by] Rahma Maccarone

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On the Footsteps of Abuncare:
A Review of *The Story of Rufino: Slavery, Freedom and Islam in the Black Atlantic*
Review by Rahma Maccarone

In 2016, the collective efforts of Brazilian historians João José Reis, Flávio dos Santos Gomes, and Marcus J.M. Carvalho resulted in the publication of *The Story of Rufino*, a compelling biography of a nineteenth century enslaved Yoruba Muslim man named Rufino José Maria. Winner of the Casa de las America Prize for Brazilian Literature, *The Story of Rufino* reads like “history from below,” in this case an academic practice that studies and analyzes the story of individual Africans at the center of the transatlantic trade in enslaved persons, framing the individual as historical agent. *The Story of Rufino* is divided into three parts, creatively structuring Rufino’s life journey to mimic the triangular circulation of people and goods between Africa, the Americas, and Europe. Each section takes the reader on a different, yet interconnected, journey that not only reconstructs Rufino’s life across the Black Atlantic, but the broader narrative of slavery in nineteenth century Brazil, Sierra Leone, and Angola.

At the height of the trade in enslaved persons in the early nineteenth century, Rufino was captured at the age of seventeen. He was then enslaved during the beginning of the Sokoto Caliphate, founded by Uthman dan Fodio, who led a *jihad* (holy war) against rulers of the Hausa states to reform Islamic practice in West Africa. Rufino – or Abuncare as he was also known – arrived on the other side of the Atlantic in Bahia around 1822, just as Brazil’s struggle for independence was unfolding. It is here that Rufino’s life as an enslaved African Muslim begins to reveal “a much larger history that goes beyond his personal experience,” thrusting readers into the wider narrative of enslavement in Brazil and exposing the complex economic networks that linked Brazil with the African continent through the transatlantic trade in enslaved persons (244).

In the first part of the book, we witness Rufino employed as a cook and moving between different affluent owners. He is first purchased by a mulatto apothecary owner in Bahia who supplied drugs to hospitals and residents. He is later sold to a powerful chief of police in Porto Alegre, the capital and metropolitan center of the Brazilian state Rio Grande do Sul. This section features a fine-grained microhistory of the economics of

enslavement in Bahia and the hierarchical class and racial structure that determined lives in Bahia and Brazil at large. For example, through Rufino's biography, we see how mulattos owned slaves or how enslaved people could purchase their freedom and become employed in minor yet vital positions (e.g., as cooks, medicinal specialists, dressmakers, carpenters etc.) Although a great deal of this section is dedicated to Rufino's possible connections to the Malês Revolt, orchestrated in part by enslaved and free Muslims in Bahia in 1835, conclusive information in this regard remains speculative. Nonetheless, the links between Rufino and the connections he may have had in Bahia are intriguing, giving readers a glimpse into the possible realities lived not only by Rufino but by other enslaved Africans – particularly Muslim Africans – at the time.

A great deal of Rufino's life is framed by the Atlantic Ocean – and the wider Atlantic world – which shaped his life in numerous ways. This includes his time spent as a free person employed by a well-known maritime slave trader, Joaquim José da Rocha. Rufino worked as a cook onboard various ships that transported hundreds of enslaved people back and forth from the city of Luanda in Angola to different coastal cities in Brazil, including Rio de Janeiro and Porto Alegre. Perhaps, this portion of the book could be considered the most disturbing, for the sheer fact that over the course of four years, Rufino repeatedly crossed the Middle Passage on board massive cargo ships, each carrying hundreds of enslaved Africans. One cannot imagine what Rufino may have felt or the psychological impact this experience may have had on him. What we do know, however, is that as a cook, Rufino's job was extremely important – yet dangerous – because he was responsible for feeding the enslaved. This not only meant ensuring their well-being long enough for them to survive the difficult journey across the Atlantic but navigating the interpersonal politics between José de Rocha and the enslaved persons to whom Rufino was connected by progeny and predicament.

Furthermore, we also learn that Rufino became employed under José Francisco de Azevedo Lisboa at some point, one of the most notorious operators in the trafficking of African people after the British ban on the slave trade in 1831. Rufino's choice to seek employment as a freed man onboard ship was not coincidental. Despite the risks involved in crossing the Atlantic — possible death, debilitating disease, piracy, and being captured — Rufino knew how lucrative working on slave ships could be; even for a crew

member like himself. In fact, Africans working on ships carrying their own products to sell was relatively common. For instance, on the *Ermelinda* ship leaving Angola for Brazil in 1841, Rufino and another African crew member, Duarte, are reported to have owned 4.4 percent of its cargo – about 180 crates of guava sweets, a product in high demand at the time (111). Thus, Rufino’s story exposes the inherent contradictions and unavoidable circumstances that living under slavery dictated, providing an opportunity for readers to reflect and discuss the role of Africans that became involved in the trade.

At the same time, along with a broad network of shareholders that invested in maritime cargo commerce with products and people destined for the global markets, Rufino was operating at the margins of that trade. As a word of caution, in reading Rufino’s story, one must not fall into the trap of presentism. While it might be unimaginable to think that a formerly enslaved person could work within that same trade, it is understandable that to escape the very system that oppresses, one may, to some degree, engage with it. Rufino managed to buy his own freedom with money he made not only as a cook, but also from carrying goods on board the same ship for small investors waiting in Brazil. This business, however, did not last for long. Four months after leaving Recife, on October 28 1841, the *Ermelinda* was seized by the British Royal Navy under “The Equipment Act of 1839,” which stipulated that ships deemed *equipped* to transport enslaved persons were illegal, would be captured, and their crew put on trial (127). Rufino was put on trial in Sierra Leone, a British colony where most liberated Africans were taken, and acquitted two months later.

Rufino’s 1853 police interrogation in Recife provides much of the information the authors use to tell us what we know about Rufino’s life. Other key sources include publications about Rufino in the Rio de Janeiro newspaper, *Jornal do Commercio*, archival and slave ship records which provide significant details that are central in the reconstructions of how the illegal slave trade operated successfully after its abolition. In addition, the specific procedures that “recaptured” slave ships were subjected to upon arrival in Sierra Leone also tells us the intricate nature of how despite strong efforts by the British, the illegal trade continued to find inventive ways to escape the law.

It is not until the last section of the book and the epilogue that we learn information about Rufino's personal life. He was a father and a devout Muslim who attended Islamic schools whenever possible. After completing his training in Sierra Leone, Rufino decides to return to Recife where he became a local Muslim preacher. There, he appears to have gained a respectable reputation among Muslim and non-Muslim communities for his ability to help people with personal issues, such as health, and with concerns related to their love lives. Eight years later, he was arrested again in connection with a presumed slave conspiracy but was released two weeks later.

Although Rufino's interrogation disclosed part of his personality and character, his ability to read and write in various languages and the centrality of his Islamic faith is at times veiled by the overwhelming historical details of the social unrest registered in Recife between 1848 and 1853. After the 1835 Malês uprising, Muslims were considered a threat in Brazil precisely because Muslims were, on the whole, more literate than other enslaved persons— a dangerous skill that spread fear of other insurrections in the Portuguese government at the time— which is why authorities sought to arrest Muslims, like Rufino, in Recife. Across the Atlantic, literacy was a powerful tool of resistance to systemic oppression and in many cases the written word shaped the nature of slave rebellions. Given the centrality of literacy in Islam and how it promoted thought and raised consciousness, framing Rufino's literacy within the context of Islam in West Africa in connection to the Black Atlantic would have enriched the conversation further.

Rufino and other Africans like him had to constantly adapt to navigate between the world of being enslaved and that of working within the system. Through Rufino's story, we see how precarious – yet powerful – Rufino's life is as a historical agent. His choice to settle in Recife and provide counseling and healing medicine to the spiritual and physical ailments of his community based on his knowledge of Islam coupled with his continued interest in scripture indicate that Islam in the Americas served as a strong undercurrent and counterculture in the Black Atlantic. Therefore, teachers, scholars of history, and those interested in a more nuanced understanding of Atlantic slavery will find this book to be an excellent case study that exemplifies the individual lives of enslaved Muslims in the Americas and how they navigated in and around the transatlantic slave trade. This text brings together the complex histories of Islam in Brazil

and West Africa, the battle against the illegal slave trade, and how Brazilian traders escaped the British ban and continued to profit from enslaving Africans. It certainly makes a welcome addition for undergraduate and graduate courses that focus on the African Diaspora, Islam in the Black Atlantic, and the historical agents that made such history possible.