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On a Human Scale
Individual Trajectories and Group Portraits in the History of Slavery and Post-Slavery Societies

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On January 23, 1886, twenty-two men pose on a porch in front of a dressed stone and brick-faced façade on a property in Martinique. At the center of the group, wearing a ribboned hat, stands one of the most powerful personalities in the colony, the host, Baron de Lareinty, surrounded by other notables—relatives, large landowners, administrators, and a clergyman. Among these men is Charles de Lesseps, vice-president of the Universal Company of the Interoceanic Canal of Panama, accompanied by several engineers and stakeholders in the construction project. This group portrait immortalizes their meeting, which was likely an attempt to shore up political, financial and logistical support for the canal’s construction, begun in 1881.

The historical study of this portrait, by means of prosopography for example, would undoubtedly shed light on the relationships and networks of acquaintances of each person, as well as their precise roles. Yet this photograph is not just a group portrait. Léon de Bertier de Sauvigny, the photographer, or perhaps another of the protagonists in the scene, has chosen to include another person. In the foreground, at the foot of the porch gallery, a young woman, in a modest Martinican dress and headdress, is sitting on the ground. It is unlikely that this young woman had anything to do with the purpose of the meeting to which this photograph bears witness. As proof, on the back of the photograph, in the “designation of persons represented opposite,” no mention is made of the latter. Nevertheless, the contrast produced by her presence in the photographic setting is striking: twenty-two elegantly dressed and certainly all well-shod “White” men are standing or sitting on the porch and there, at their feet, a young “Black” woman is sitting on the ground, barefoot. If the pose of some of the men is relaxed, it is not so for the young woman who sits straight-backed, with her legs and arms outstretched, hands clasped, her eyes looking into the camera with a neutral expression.

It is not difficult to see this photograph as an allegory of the hierarchies constructed by and for those who define themselves as White. The archive thus appears as a vivid snapshot of gender, race and class inequalities and their inherent violence, which structured colonial post-slavery society in Martinique in the 1880s. The paradoxical importance that this image gives to the existence of this young woman invites the historian to seize upon it to focus in on the individual-subject who has here only a face and a body, in order to try to retrace her life trajectory and to approach her subjectivity.

How can we explain her presence in the photograph? We can assume that she is a member of Baron de Lareinty’s female household staff. Domestics were numerous among the notables of this rank, yet the fact that she is the only female of her social and racial condition to pose is intriguing. Why her in particular? Could her presence be a sign of differential treatment, of an important role within the household or plantation, or even of some special closeness to her employer? Or was she perhaps in charge of serving one of the canal contractors during their stay in Martinique? But then, why include her in this photograph? There are many possible scenarios. Was she asked if she wanted to pose? Could she refuse? Whether this action was consensual or not, there is no way to tell from this document alone that she was not aware of the
colonial, gendered and subservient, racialized scene she was made to play. Approaching this young woman by “zooming in” on her person might provide another image of her, one that would no longer reduce her to her sole subalternity. We would then probably have access to a more complex itinerary, marked by constraints, certainly, but where the limits of these constraints would also be drawn and where spaces of possibilities might somehow be constructed.

5 Paying attention to the protagonists who are not at the center of the archive means trying to understand, among other things, how colonial representations and discourses, but also social relations, were interwoven to construct this document. In this case, associating the study of this young woman’s trajectory with those of the men standing behind her would possibly reveal links, assuming that their mutual presence on this photograph is not pure happenstance.

6 The questions of variations in scales of observation, of the articulation between the individual and the collective, and, finally, of biography as methodology, are central to the social sciences (Bourdieu 1986; Passeron 1990; Levi 1991; Ginzburg 1993; Revel 1996; Passeron & Revel 2005; Loriga 2010, 2017; Rollet & Narbonnand 2012; Magnússon & Szijártó 2013; Carrez, Roffidal & Ruiz 2021). The field of slavery history in the Atlantic and Indian Oceanic worlds is no exception. It first grappled with numbers and the quantification of population movements (Curtin 1969; Daget 1988; Geggus 1989, 1990; Higman 1995; Eltis et al. 1999; Lovejoy 2017 [1982]). For a long time, the study of these demographic flows, greatly advanced by database processing, and the analysis of the political and economic structures of slave systems (Fogel 1975) have prevailed.

7 However, for more than two decades, with Brazilian and American historiography as pioneers and still spearheading the work, a number of studies have focused on enslaved men, women and children, on freedmen, or on people of African descent who were born free, having had parents or forebears who were slaves. Using tools such as micro storia, microhistory, global or not (Trivellato 2011, 2015; Bertrand & Calafat 2018; Ghobrial 2019) and, more rarely, prosopography (Lemercier & Picard 2012; Didier 2017), historians then set about reconstructing their experiences and tracing life histories, individual and/or collective trajectories, often of people who circulated within the Atlantic worlds (Putnam 2006) and generally following a biographical approach (Lindsay & Sweet 2014). Thanks to the development of digital humanities, several sites gathering information on individuals and informing the life stories of enslaved Africans and their descendants have emerged and continue to be developed (Le Glaune 2020).

8 These approaches, which recount the history of what was qualified as a “crime de lèse-humanité” since the end of the 18th century, show their willingness to humanize these millions of anonymous people by individualizing them. It is often a matter of their dignity, of their struggles and of giving a voice to those whose voices have long remained ignored or forgotten. Thus the notion of agency is at the heart of this historiography: enslaved people were never reduced to just being slaves. In other words, they had the capacity to make choices, including making judgments about their situation and demonstrating intentionality in what they undertook. It is a question of understanding how these individuals were actors in their own history, while underscoring the tension between their capacity to act and the constraints to which they were subjected. In this sense, it is not surprising to find that women’s history and gender relations are the privileged subjects in these approaches to individuals. A majority of the cases analyzed by this historiography concern the intersectional
situations of women dominated as much by their connection to slavery as by their
gender (Chaves 1998, 2001; Banks 2008; Fuentes 2010, 2016; Bahadur 2014; Ball, Seijas &
Snyder 2020; Browne, Lindsay & Sweet 2022).

Indeed, this field is penetrated by a series of methodological questions shared by all
social sciences: what can be generalized from a single case? What does a particular
situation say about a group or a society? When one approaches issues by means of
portraits or potentially exceptional trajectories, does one not run the risk of being
duped by sources that are supposedly out of the ordinary, or of succumbing to the
heroization of the extraordinary? How do we define the exceptional in relation to the
ordinary? Are “ordinary lives” within the reach of historians of slavery, for whom
sources are sometimes so difficult to find and exploit? And for that matter, can we even
speak of “ordinary lives” for individuals who were in captivity and/or slavery?

Positions are sharply divided on how to mobilize individual trajectories for analytical
purposes, and the case approach is the subject of many cautionary remarks. In the field
of slavery, focusing on singular stories can thus be viewed as tantamount to
undermining the suffering and violence of the slavery and post-slavery system (Lindsay
& Sweet 2014: 4). Doesn’t focusing the analysis on the agency of slaves or their
descendants lead to minimizing the role of the structure, to subsuming the power
relationships, and thereby also the domination suffered (Johnson 2003: 113-114)? These
two positions, privileging either the individual or the systemic, can be seen on the
covers of history books devoted to these themes: for the sake of embodiment, a
portrait, most often that of an enslaved man, is chosen (Anderson & Lovejoy 2020;
Ismard, Rossi & Vidal 2021). Conversely, the erasure of the individual-subject is favored
through a cross-sectional image of the slave ship, where faces are indistinguishable,
where the captives’ bodies appear as small black bars (Thomas 2006; Fradera &
Schmidt-Nowara 2013; Rediker 2013). Whatever the choice—that of showing faces to
humanize or of dehumanizing to show the violence perpetrated—the individual, his or
her place, his or her representation according to different scales, are always at stake.
The narrative dimension of these studies must also be questioned: is the narration of
the lives of slaves or freedmen only a historiographical fad, sometimes encouraged by
book publishers, something which would apply to this field as well as to others, if not
to all? Is there not a risk, with this narrative turn, of abandoning “problematic history”
in favor of the quasi-romantic narrative, one more likely to interest a larger audience?
This question is connected to debates on the epistemological status of history in its
relationship with literature and its possible transformation into a literary form
(Peabody 2012; Jablonka 2014; Traverso 2020). Indeed, the narrativization of
trajectories and portraits can perfectly merge with fiction, thus giving way to
literature.

Once this limit of fictionalizing the silence of sources is admitted, the question remains:
what does this close investigation of people provide? Rather than minimizing the
stakes of domination, the individual scale often allows us to question the complex and
sometimes counter-intuitive workings of the system. Thus, studies that focus on an
event and its protagonists show that the mechanisms of slave revolts and their
repression are more understandable when they are analyzed at the level of individuals.
It is when the focus is on individual lives that the intimate sphere, that of emotions,
affects and subjectivity, so often ignored because difficult to document, can emerge
(Cottias & Mattos 2016). Thus, we are able to approach how protagonists made their
choices, examine their strategies to maneuver and act within their societies. The question of the inter-knowledge networks of individuals and interactions between and among people is also important because these express the concrete scope of social relations. Using these interpersonal links as an observation post for societies and their functioning proves very fruitful. The same is true for master/slave relationships, the very foundation of the slave relationship in all its complexity, which the focus on the individual scale allows us to investigate more profoundly (Jones-Rogers 2019). Furthermore, the important subject of the racialization of slave societies in the Atlantic world is also shaken by this change of scale. Indeed, some scholars explain that by moving closer to individuals and groups, and emphasizing their subjective potentialities, the centrality of the racial question is displaced (Bonnefoy 2021; Zuñiga in this issue). Others consider, conversely, that this attention to “tiny lives” should not be a pretext for pushing the racial issue into the background and emphasize the participation of all actors in the racialization of slave societies (Vidal 2019). This debate renews the old question of the agency of subalterns as well as that of orders of magnitude: how many individuals actually escaped the racial order of slave societies set up and governed by Europeans and their descendants?

Last but not least, the most obvious contribution of the variation of scale in the analysis is the additional nuance that it engenders. However trivial it may seem at first, this refinement of interpretations allows for important re-readings. For the history of groups, first of all, collective biography, understood as the study of a sum of individualities, shows that we can analyze cohorts in their diversity rather than considering them a priori as homogeneous. The idea for this dossier arose from our respective work about a group of indentured African “immigrants” who arrived in post-slavery Guyana and another group of Cuban exiles in Europe and the United States in the mid-nineteenth century. Approaching each member of these groups individually significantly altered the analysis. Far from the official regulations and speeches, we see engagement in action, manufactured by a multiplicity of protagonists, sometimes with antagonistic interests. In a similar way, by dissecting its composition, we understand that the Cuban anti-imperial exile displays ambivalent positions regarding the abolition of slavery in Cuba. This additional nuance is also valuable for understanding life paths and their vagaries. Much recent work has shown that through the personal dimension (whether with family, in friendships, or at work), we can reevaluate reversals and contradictions throughout a given person’s lifetime (Hébrard & Scott 2012; Jones 2015). Yet these changes, which for our field often concern access to freedom, re-slavery, or, more broadly, the question of status, are more readable if they are contextualized through a constant back-and-forth between different scales. Finally, a new branch of research in the history of slavery and post-slavery is looking just as closely at the world of slaveholders and their descendants, as well as at the authorities of colonial and imperial worlds (Burnard 2004).

The five articles in this dossier cover a period from the seventeenth century to the present day and focus on territories in the Atlantic, Mediterranean, and Indian Oceanic space. These areas have in common that they were spaces then governed by Europeans or Euro-Americans who practiced or had practiced the deportation of human beings and their enslavement. While each of these societies presents particularities, they all grappled with the history of the trade and slavery of people from sub-Saharan Africa.
Through the lives of two female slaves and a freedwoman in the Spanish empire of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Jean-Paul Zuñiga reconstructs key moments in their emancipation process using judicial sources. The text captures the slave and freedwoman experience at the moment when these women engage with the imperial authorities regarding their status or that of their children. By reconstructing the referential framework of these individuals, i.e. their knowledge, their networks, and above all their own vision of their situations, the author shows the multiplicity of social experiences that these women have. He thus questions the role of racial categories and their contemporary narration as a driving force of colonial slave domination. Jean-Paul Zuñiga thus puts forward in his text a social history as close to the people as possible, which allows him to appreciate and contextualize “the arrangements and accommodations between social constraints and envisioned futures.” For the world of slavery, this approach is as difficult as it is necessary.

Giulia Bonazza analyzes several groups of captives and slaves in the Grand Duchy of Tuscany in the 18th century. Studying these people locked up in the prisons of Livorno, Pisa and in the House of the Catechumens in Florence, allows the author to detail how their living and working conditions were more diverse than what historiography had previously shown. Relying on the interpretation of slaves’ petitions, she demonstrates, in particular, the extent to which personal differences in origin, skills or religion modify their access to freedom.

In a text on a slave who became “de facto freed” in Martinique in the early nineteenth century, Myriam Cottias reconstructs a life trajectory by questioning the ramifications of the aspiration to freedom and equality. Crossing private sources, judicial archives and civil status registers, the historian discovers in the course of her investigation that behind the name “Agricole” there are, in fact, two individuals: one usurps the identity of the other to establish his freedom and that of his descendants, while the other claims it through collective revolt. She then shows the importance of family and intimate ties in the construction of an emancipation strategy: researching in close proximity with these individuals allows her to follow in detail their differentiated ways of dealing with the constraints of social and racial status.

In a completely different context, that of a community born of British colonial and abolitionist policies in the Indian Ocean at the end of the 19th century, Marie-Pierre Ballarin examines the construction of a family memory that aims at establishing a group “identity.” James Juma Mbotela is the son of a man deported but “freed” by the Royal Navy from the steerage where he was held captive to be sold to a slave trader. Mbotela Sr. was then placed in the British Catholic mission in Frere Town, in what was not yet Kenya, and where James Juma Mbotela, his son, was born and raised. It is this son who produces, at different times in his life, seminal accounts of the mission and its inhabitants who were born into the slave trade. Marie-Pierre Ballarin shows how these narratives trace the course of a line of individuals raised in the British missions who become intermediaries in the colonial situation, and then occupy important roles in the struggles for Kenya’s independence in the middle of the 20th century. Focusing on the trajectories of these individuals and on how they tell their stories reveals the ambivalence of a group of intermediaries who support colonization but nevertheless suffer its violence.

Aurélia Michel studies the life stories of several members of families descended from slaves who migrated at the beginning of the twentieth century from the Brazilian
coffee regions to the outlying neighborhood of Casa Verde, in São Paulo. It highlights the links that persist between the world of the plantation and the one that is gradually being built in the city, over the generations. The paths of these individuals, caught up in ties of kinship, solidarity and dependence, show how marginalization linked to social class, racial categories and gender inequalities weigh durably on the same groups of people, while demonstrating processes of inclusion and exclusion as well as how these are experienced.

Throughout the centuries and spaces studied, this issue illustrates what the human scale can do to enrich the knowledge of slavery and post-slavery societies. Focusing on personalities, gaining knowledge of itineraries, discovering experiences and analyzing them with new angles are some of the lines of inquiry this thematic dossier follows to show the contributions and limits of this alternative manner to historicize slavery and post-slavery.

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NOTES

1. See Samuel Poyard who is currently writing a dissertation entitled “Projets et construction d’un canal interocéanique dans l’Isthme de Panama au xixe siècle” (Projects for and Construction of an Inter-oceanic Canal in the Isthmus of Panama in the 19th century) at the EHESS. We thank him greatly for having introduced us to this photograph during his talk entitled “Les migrations de travail pour construire le canal de Panama au temps du chantier français (1881-1903)” (Labor Migration to Build the Panama Canal at the Time of the French Construction, 1881-1903), Doctoral Seminar, Clément Thibaud and Geneviève Verdo, EHESS, February 16, 2023, and for having provided us with precious information, including the erroneous date in the referencing of the document.

2. The numbers added in pen on each of the twenty-two men in the photograph are transferred to the back of the photograph followed by their name and often their function in relation to their meeting. Sometimes, family ties linking them are also indicated. gallica.bnf.fr/BnF, department Société de Géographie, Portrait-13007: gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b105011480.item#.

3. The use of quotation marks emphasizes that “White” and “Black” refer to socio-politically constructed racial groups to entrench mechanisms of oppression and power that, while they have no natural and biological basis, nonetheless have concrete effects in the social world (Bessone 2013).

4. The www.slavevoyages.org database is emblematic of this work.

5. Brazilian historiography is considerable, for an overview up to 2012, see de Carvalho Soares & Hébrard 2012. Since then, production has not waned, see among others: Reis 2006, 2015; Ferreira 2014; Grinberg 2016; Mattos 2016; Viana 2016; Mamigonian 2017; Reis, Dos Santos Gomes & de Carvalho 2020. For the United States, see the work of Schafer 2003; Sparks 2004, 2016; Sensbach 2005; Scott 2009; Landers 2010; Sweet 2011; Browne, Scott & Hébrard 2012; Peabody 2017; Johnson 2019; Lindsay & Sweet 2022.

6. This approach has even led to the emergence of what is now called the “biographical turning point.” It should also be noted that this type of study has been conducted in the context of articles rather than monographs.

8. As early as 1794, the deputies of the Convention defined slavery as a “crime of lèse-humanité,” see Pierre Serna’s column in Le Monde, July 16, 2017, available online: www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2017/07/16/le-esclavage-etait-bien-un-crime-contre-l-humanite_5161107_3232.html [last accessed, April 2023]. This qualification was reiterated at the time of the second French abolition in 1848, see Bessone & Cottias 2021: 31.

9. The question of the voice of the enslaved and the possibilities of apprehending it through different archival corpora occupies an important place, especially in French historiography in recent years: Parfait & Rossignol 2014; Régent, Gonfier & Maillard 2015; Rogers 2015; Oualdí, 2021; Roy 2022. See also Bellagamba, Greene & Klein 2013, 2016; White 2019; White & Burnard 2020.

10. As Mariza de Carvalho Soares and Jean Hébrard (2012) recall in their introduction, the notion of “agency” was borrowed from English working-class historian Edward Palmer Thompson, who used the concept as early as 1958.

11. The tendency to format chapters or even monographs along the lines of case-based storytelling, particularly in the English-speaking academic publishing world is cited, for example, at the end of Schaub’s 2018 review.

12. For works that epitomize what literature can say about the experience of enslaved people, read Condé 1988 and Morrison 1987.

13. Michele Reid-Vázquez (2011), Aîcha K. Finch (2015), and Manuel Barcia (2008), for example, have provided an embodied account of various plantation conspiracies and insurrections in Cuba from the 1820s to 1850s, which had previously been apprehended almost exclusively through a “top-down” reading of the sources on Spanish power.

14. In the introduction to Pour une microhistoire de la Shoah, the authors note: “Inserting the men and women into networks of acquaintance and groups of belonging, informing their biographical trajectories, recalling the means they had at their disposal, restoring what they were able to know in a given place at a given time, and then holding these different aspects together makes it possible to construct the space of possibilities and constraints. The circumscribed field of observation is thought of as a social world in which it is possible to reconstruct the social determinants of the itineraries and the choices with which individuals are confronted. It is not a question of pretending to give the causes of the decisions taken, but of considering them in context, at once familial, social, temporal and local.” Bruttmann, Ermankoff, Mariot & Zalc 2012: 12-13.

15. Romy Sánchez, forthcoming. Céline Flory also has a work in progress on the subject, see Flory 2021.

16. Charlotte de Castelnau-L’Estoile’s latest book Páscoa et ses deux maris (2018) is one of the few monographs in French historiography in the field to adopt this scale. It is also an example of microhistory that crosses national, imperial, and Atlantic scales. For the study of a slave trajectory that is part of a trans-imperial history, see Oualdí 2023.

17. For example, two dissertations incorporating individual trajectories are currently underway, one on the slave-owning “Libres de couleur” in nineteenth-century Martinique (Jessica Balguy, EHESS), the other on the circulations of “Blancs créoles” in the Caribbean in the nineteenth century (Adélaïde Marine-Gougeon, Sorbonne University and EHESS). See also: Balguy, 2020; Marine-Gougeon, 2023.
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