

Intersecting Networks of Dependencies in Colonial Archives

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Paradoxically, despite the fragmentary nature of colonial records in the early modern Atlantic, temporal data within are anything but incomplete or vague. Archival records document time obsessively. Establishing the (Christian) date of an event beyond doubt was one of the prerequisites for ensuring the authenticity of a document, and by extension the transactions within—transactions that often involved enslaved human beings. Time was one of the parameters that instituted the power of documents to include or exclude, and possess or dispossess (Drake 2021). For the people in the networks contained in archival records, navigating European conceptions of time showed the ability to negotiate bureaucracy and to establish their status.

This paper reports on ongoing doctoral research that centers the small community of enslaved people in Jewish households in urban Bridgetown, Barbados, in a micro-historical approach to enact reparative justice by restoring this silenced group of people into the historical record (Hughes-Watkins 2018). To write life stories of enslaved people, I necessarily use fragmentary records that in turn bring forth epistemological and ontological aspects of record keeping practices that affect knowledge production, particularly in colonial archives, and demonstrate how what we use to write history is in fact “evidence of terror” (Johnson 2018).

In this research, time is an important element, both as an attribute of data and as a category of analysis. The creation of records to establish and enforce dependencies among various actors, the eventual inclusion or exclusion of these records in archives, and their (un)intentional use, neglect, or suppression in scholarship are all stages that happen at specific times and intervals in the records continuum. Studying these specific moments not only according to their temporal succession, but in their relationship with one another can reveal information that is often not readily evident but is crucial for understanding a story.

For this particular paper, I will present the case study of the manumission of Clarinda, an enslaved woman who in the span of only a little more than a year became free and then a slave owner in her own right. The three extant documents we have about her reveal the networks of actors surrounding her. Beyond such information, more mundane data (such as dates) remains usually studied for their evidentiary value. I argue though that the temporal succession of

documents, and particularly the date ranges, reveal important information that would otherwise remain hidden:

- a) The dates on the documents are only meaningful when ‘read’ alongside the events happening in the household.
- b) Each document carries date of creation and date of filing, and the range in-between sheds light on aspects of the agency of Clarinda.
- c) All the above become apparent once one pays close attention to the invisible Hebrew calendar and possible enslaved temporal worldviews underneath the conspicuous, over-arching Christian calendar.

To understand the above, I employ different methods as heuristics to help me discern patterns in the data, and help me convey this information in more intelligible ways. More specifically, I explore questions of modeling changes of status (enslaved, free, freed) over time and how this affects our understanding of a network. Furthermore, I superimpose timelines of different calendars to show the underlying reasons for temporal succession of events in the documents. To do such analyses, I develop detailed metadata for the documents and examine how such ‘close reading’ reveals information that is often invisible.

Paying close attention to dependencies due to archival processes allows us to tell a more complete story when writing life stories of the enslaved. Weaving Clarinda’s life together with the temporal and spatial trajectories of her documents provides us with bits of information that reveal affect and agency. I argue that deconstructing a document into its constitutive parts, the sedimentation of information, and its spatial and temporal trajectories (Gil 2017; Simon et al. 2016) provides us with details that can help us tell a story, even when it has many gaps.

While I focus on the case study of Clarinda, this methodological approach is also applicable in the cases of other enslaved people in urban Bridgetown. I am conscious that using digital tools in the process of collecting, analyzing, and publishing data inadvertently introduces new silences (Ahnert et al. 2020). Employing a critical stance is a focal aspect of this project. After all, dependencies of systems, people, and infrastructure belie the neutrality of information and its infrastructure (Nowatzki 2021) and, left uninterrogated, get reified and perpetuated with each new reformatting.

SOURCES

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Bio

Amalia S. Levi is an archivist and historian working with the non-profit HeritEdge Connection. She is currently conducting doctoral research at Bonn University's Center for Dependency and Slavery Studies on the community of enslaved in Jewish households in Barbados, looking into issues of archives and knowledge production. She has worked on numerous projects processing and digitizing archival collections. She has Master's degrees in History; Library Science and Archives; and Museum Studies. Her research focuses on 'unearthing' marginalized people, who are usually invisible in archives, by weaving together different types of information to go beyond archival documents.

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