

Afterword

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In the southern summer of 1862-1863, Lucie Duff Gordon, an Englishwoman who moved in the highest literary circles of Victorian London, found herself in Caledon, a small town some hundred kilometres east of Cape Town. She had come there to gain some relief for her tuberculosis. There she met a man called Klein,¹ the postmaster of the town. Klein regaled Duff Gordon with numerous anecdotes, which she in her turn relayed to her daughter in London. Some of them related to Rosina, who had been enslaved to Klein. She had had two children by Klein, in addition to several others by another free man, and also, after emancipation, by her successive manumitted husbands. Rosina was a woman of spirit. As Klein described it, she had the habit of reading the Statute of Emancipation under his window every First of December.² In addition, when they encountered each other in the streets of Caledon, she would forcibly kiss him. On those occasions, she is reported to have exclaimed, “Aha! When I young and pretty slave-girl you make kiss me then: now I ugly drunk dirty old devil, and free woman, I kiss you.”³

There are three things that need to be said about this exchange. The first is that Rosina’s speech was undoubtedly bowdlerized, somewhere in its transmission from Klein to the publication of Duff Gordon’s letters to her just-married daughter. Secondly, Rosina was no longer alive, and while there is no evidence of foul play, one wonders whether she had been punished by the ex-slave owners taking matters into their own hands. Thirdly, however translated, and perhaps relieved of its grammar and infantilized, Rosina’s speech may be in the form Duff Gordon recorded, and its survival brings into focus a very rare phenomenon. This is the reasonably authentic and unfiltered comment by enslaved people on their bondage, either during slavery or after their manumission. There are very few instances in which the words of the enslaved have been recorded, except in circumstances in which free men and women controlled the transmission—and Rosina’s

outburst was not one of them. Historians have to deal with texts which are heavily biased towards those expressions which would have seemed acceptable to members of the master class.⁴ In order to understand the processes at work, it is as well to remember one of the exchanges between Captain Robert Fitzroy and his travelling companion, Charles Darwin. It occurred when the *Beagle* was docked in Bahia. Fitzroy, an aristocratic defender of slavery, had been on a visit to the plantation, where he had heard the slaves say, when asked by their master, if any wished to be free. When he recounted this question and its answer—unanimously negative—to Darwin, the latter, a fervent abolitionist, asked the Captain “if the answers of slaves in the presence of their master [were] worth anything”.⁵ The result was a rupture between the two men which threatened Darwin’s continued voyage on the ship, and thus the development in later years of the theory of Natural Selection. Darwin of course was right. Even when we know what the enslaved said, which is seldom enough, we still have to try to envisage the pressures that the enslaved were under at that moment. Paradoxically, it is generally the case that, in order to make some estimation of what the enslaved thought, it is more enlightening to look at what they did rather than what they said.

Even working out what slaves did, let alone why, can be difficult. As before, the descriptions and events are produced with a filter imposed by the slave owners or the political authorities. In colonial situations, particularly those where the Dutch were in control, there is often a large cache of records deriving from the law courts. The transcripts of criminal, and indeed civil, trials have provided historians of Batavia, Sri Lanka, parts of India and the Cape Colony with information in detail about the lives of the enslaved which is rarely to be equalled. Nevertheless, court records have their grave limitations. They can provide detailed descriptions of what the enslaved were doing at a given time and place.⁶ Often the people who gave testimony in a case may have been present at the moment in question just by chance, and not by design. The result is that such sources can provide extremely valuable descriptions of the lives of the enslaved—at least for the day, or night, when a crime may have been committed. Against this, however, there is one great problem. The testimony given by the enslaved in criminal cases was often made by men and women who were in fear of their lives, with good reason. Colonial courts rarely found someone not guilty of the crimes with which he or she was accused. The punishment imposed thereafter was horrific, in the literal sense as well as in the normal

usage. Creating horror among the population of the enslaved was generally the goal of the prosecutors, even more than they were concerned to uphold the principles of the rule of law. In general, those who came to court had already confessed to the crime. Their appearance in court was merely to occasion the passing of a sentence, very often in some dishonourable and very painful way. Moreover, the confession on the basis of which the court made its decision may well have been extracted by, at least, the threat of torture. Historians thus have to be very careful in their critical use of slave testimony. It can be enormously interesting, but it is nonetheless necessarily extracted under duress. Even those whose statements were in cases where they were not themselves in the dock may well have been attempting to protect their fellow enslaved.

In addition, crime is invariably in some sense exceptional. Even if those acts which are considered crimes are part of the regular way of life of some group, there remains the question why in this particular case individuals were caught and tried. This may have little to do with the precise nature of the deed committed. Historians have to make hypotheses about the decision-making process of the political authorities, as well as about the behaviour and values of the enslaved, in order to evaluate and understand what has transpired and how it can be interpreted.

Similar strictures to those which apply to the use of criminal records are, *mutatis mutandis*, valid for most other windows through which historians have attempted to gain insight into the lives of the enslaved. Within this book authors have used their knowledge, and indeed their intuition, to reconstruct something of how the enslaved managed to endure their bondage. In a sense, though, it is those who failed to endure who are the most poignant in the archival record. Suicide and infanticide were among the social facts of slavery and its aftermath which demonstrate most clearly what it is to have been enslaved, and particularly, perhaps, an enslaved woman. They give an insight into the pressures, and the sheer terror, which slavery entailed, and of how some at least considered death to be the only protection against the monopolizing world of the slave owners.

At this point, it is necessary to state an obvious fact which permeates all of the writing of history about slavery. Modern historians have themselves never been enslaved. We have to rely on the sources which have come down to us, partial and limited though they may be, and on the skill and imagination that we have managed to develop and, just as importantly, to discipline. By using these skills, the authors in this book have provided major insights

into the lives of the enslaved across the Indian Ocean. This has been done through the reconstruction of what may have been no more than minutes in the life of one of the enslaved. This micro-historical work, requiring as it does the drudgery and the excitement of detailed archival research, cannot simply be scaled up to give a view of society as a whole, but it can be used to fuel a greater understanding of the lives of that great majority of the enslaved who have disappeared into anonymity, leaving no trace except perhaps as a constituent unit of some statistical description.

It may seem a pessimistic conclusion to argue that it is impossible for us fully to envisage the horrors of being enslaved, but perhaps it is not. John Dunn once memorably wrote that “it takes a real historian to extract intellectual *excitement* from the thought that one can fail to understand someone else”.⁷ In other words, people who are separated from us by time, by culture and by thought, and who thus acted in ways which we cannot retrospectively predict, and are therefore continually surprised by. We can learn to make our predictions of what we will find in the archive steadily more accurate, but we can never hope to fully succeed in this endeavour.

Nevertheless there may be one exception to the rule that historians can never fully rethink the thoughts of the enslaved, and thus convincingly reconstruct their actions. As Anne Marieke van der Wal has pointed out,⁸ in many societies, not least in the Cape Colony, that which cannot be said can often be sung.

Notes

1. Very possibly Willem Hendrik Kleyn, who married Anna Frauenfelder in 1816.
2. The date of the emancipation of slaves in the Cape Colony, somewhat later than in Britain's West Indian Colonies.
3. Lucie Duff Gordon, *Letters from the Cape*, edited by John Purves, 99-100. London, Humphrey Milford: 1921.
4. This is, for instance, also the case with the autobiographies of successful fugitives from slavery in the southern states of the US, which were generally published by abolitionists, and probably even in the oral interviews conducted by the Federal Writers Project in the 1930s. For Indian Ocean slavery, moreover, there is very little which in any way approximates to these two sets of sources.
5. Adrian Desmond and James Moore, *Darwin's Sacred Cause: Race, Slavery and the Quest for Human Origins*, 76. London: Allen Lane, 2009.

6. See, for instance, the chapters by Kate Ekama and Geelen et al. in this volume.
7. John Dunn, "What is Living and What is Dead in the Political Theory of John Locke?", in his *Interpreting Political Responsibility: Essays 1981 – 1989*, 9-25, 10. Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014.
8. See the contribution by Anne Marieke van der Wal in this volume, above; cf. Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made*. New York: Vintage Books, 1972.

