

# TRANSCRIPTION, TRANSLATION, AND COLLABORATION

**ABSTRACT:** This short essay, prepared on the occasion of the conferral of the Distinguished Service Award of the Conference on Latin American History, uses various examples to illustrate the pleasure to be drawn from the day-to-day work of academic history. It opens with reflections on the practice of transcription, the act of bringing recognizable syllables and words out of the often baffling strokes of the pen that have left ink on paper. Although the wave of digitization has increased the sum total of material easily available to us, it is when we do the work of paleography, reducing the continuous lines of manuscript to something close to the discontinuities of type, that we find that our brains can hold on to the words and carry the interpretation forward. After transcription often comes translation, converting the formulas, idioms, and idiosyncrasies of past speech into language intelligible to our readers. As we translate, we are forced to acknowledge our own uncertainties about the meaning of texts, and to make the provisional choices that resolve ambiguity. Across both of these tasks we are nourished by collaboration, the talking and writing together that makes the study of the past into a social activity. Eager collaboration turns the practice of history into a double dialogue, with the documents and with our colleagues, engaging the mind and the spirit and bringing what can only be called joy.

**KEYWORDS:** transcription, translation, collaboration, CLAH award, post-emancipation studies

The Chilean poet Gabriela Mistral once wrote frankly that “a los viejos profesores nos gusta ser queridos de los jóvenes, con o sin, derecho a ello.”<sup>1</sup> I am indeed very pleased to have been accorded the Distinguished Service Award from the Conference on Latin American History, “con o sin derecho a ello.” And I am particularly pleased that even though the pandemic prevented my traveling to New Orleans, my words are reaching you in the person of one of my own former students, Adriana Chira.

Rather than trying to summarize the many pleasures of teaching and writing, I'll offer just a few reflections from across the 46 years since the beginning of my doctoral studies in 1975. Two particular forms of often unheralded scholarly joy stand out in my memory: documentary transcription and collaborative translation. Perhaps appropriately, the first recalls my teachers; the second often involves my students.

1. Gabriela Mistral, *Doris, vida mía. Cartas*, Daniela Schiütte González, ed. (Santiago: Penguin Random House, 2021), 31.

## TRANSCRIPTION

In the early weeks of my time as a doctoral student, Herbert Gutman and Ira Berlin kindly took me on as an hourly-paid research assistant, even though my main scholarly focus was Cuba and theirs was the southern United States. They were both visiting scholars at the Davis Center for Historical Studies, with offices in the basement of Dickinson Hall at Princeton. I listened as the concepts behind the remarkable initiative titled The Freedmen and Southern Society Project took shape in their minds. The project soon emerged in institutional form at the University of Maryland, under the direction of co-editors Ira Berlin, Leslie Rowland, and Joseph Reidy, and supported by the National Historical Publications and Records Commission, the NHPRC.<sup>2</sup>

I learned many things about studying post-emancipation societies from working with Berlin and Gutman, but the aspect I would emphasize here is most firmly associated in my mind with Ira's University of Maryland colleague Leslie Rowland. The first published volume of *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation* laid out a basic principle: the editors were committed to locating documents generated or received by the Freedmen's Bureau and other federal entities, including those penned by newly literate and newly free soldiers and civilians. They would then transcribe for publication a selection of those texts, matching or exceeding the level of precision used for processing the papers of the presidents of the United States.<sup>3</sup>

Take, for example, the December 27, 1864, letter from Joseph Harris, a Black Union soldier stationed in Florida during the Civil War. Harris wrote to ask the Union officer who had recruited him back in Louisiana to do him a "small" favor. Would the officer please cross the Mississippi River at Bayou Sara and retrieve Harris's wife and children from the control of the woman who continued to hold them in slavery in Louisiana?<sup>4</sup>

The editors provided a word-for-word transcription of this letter, rendering the phonetic spelling and the improvised punctuation exactly as it appeared in the words on paper. They thus showed respect for the newly literate author of the letter, conveyed the importance of listening to the day-to-day concerns of the formerly enslaved, and transferred to the printed page as much as possible of the

2. I thank Leslie Rowland for having clarified for me the current institutional structure of the project, which now counts some ten major documentary volumes. See <http://www.freedmen.umd.edu/fsspdocs.htm>, accessed May 23, 2022.

3. Ira Berlin, Joseph P. Reidy, and Leslie S. Rowland, eds., *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation*. Series II. *The Black Military Experience* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982), xxiii-xxviii.

4. Berlin, Reidy, and Rowland, eds., *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation*. Series II. *The Black Military Experience*, 691-692.

information held within the original document. Future readers could hear those voices in the syllables through which a formerly enslaved writer sought to convey them, rather than in the stylized forms of dialect that storytellers and observers often turned to when rendering spoken language in print. Moreover, readers could later ask questions of the document that the editors themselves might not have pondered. As a result, I can now sit with students in a seminar on the first day of class, decades later, and we can read that letter aloud together, line by line.

The explosion of digitization might create the illusion that transcription of this kind has become less important. We can now take a look for ourselves at scanned images of many documents, and search for clues. But anyone who has ever returned from the archives with a camera full of digital files recognizes the sense of both achievement and despair that having those photographs carries. For we know that the content of each document is still locked up until our eyes and brain *read* it. And to get our eyes and brains to register its meaning, we often need to read it aloud, and transcribe it, to hold on to what we have discerned. The resulting text—‘the transcription’—can then become something to share, and can yield up different meanings to us and to others.

Thus, a few years ago, sitting at a table in the National Archives of Cuba, I stared at a nearly illegible set of four pages, penned in 1816 in ink that bled through coarse paper. The pages are tucked into a 100-leaf *legajo* titled “Síndico contra Loriñak” containing the records of a suit for freedom. As I started to transcribe, in pencil, words emerged from the page: “Siendo yo Ma[ría] Coleta natural de Santo Domingo hija legítima de Sebastián y de Ma. Ambrosia ambos esclavos. . . .” This was a deathbed confession, a life history narrated to a priest in hopes of obliging him to write down her story and submit it to a judge. María Coleta wanted to prove that she and thus her womb had long been free, and that her daughters who were being held in slavery should therefore be legally ruled to be free.<sup>5</sup>

When Carlos Venegas and I published our article “María Coleta and the Capuchin Friar: Slavery, Salvation, and the Adjudication of Status,” we asked the *William and Mary Quarterly* to supplement it with our transcription of Coleta’s “confession,” posted on their open-access site, without a paywall.<sup>6</sup> We hope

5. Rebecca J. Scott and Carlos Venegas Fornias, “María Coleta and the Capuchin Friar: Slavery, Salvation, and the Adjudication of Status,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 76 (October 2019): 727–762.

6. The documents are currently available in the OI Reader on the website of the *William and Mary Quarterly*, <https://oieahc.wm.edu/digital-projects/oi-reader/scott-venegas-supplements/>. The journal is changing its formats for online materials, so the documents may later appear on the OI Reader at a different Web address.

that others will come across it. We hope they will share it with students, who may find ways to build another story from María Coleta's words.

## TRANSLATION AND COLLABORATION

It was not easy to follow the twists and turns of a stream-of-consciousness document penned in Spanish by a scribe who was listening to a dying woman whose first language had likely been Haitian Kreyòl. Indeed, Carlos and I figured out the syntax of some of those sentences only as we tried to render them in idiomatic English. We often turned for help to Ana María Silva Campo, a colonialist whose ear is attuned to the vagaries of scribal practice, and whose English prose is elegant.

This brings me to the second theme, that of translation and collaboration. There is a special joy that comes from working with scholars whose first language is different from my own. Reading archival documents together, and then trying to write about what we see in them, we end up with hundreds of questions and answers, and even disagreements. I remember Michael Zeuske—whose first language is German—asking me what the English-language phrase “law on the ground” was supposed to mean. I didn't have a very good answer, but I liked the sound of the words in English, so I tried to convince him that it would be fine to use a variant of the phrase in the title of our article, which ended up being styled “Property in Writing, Property on the Ground.”<sup>7</sup>

While Jean Hébrard and I were working on the book that became *Freedom Papers: An Atlantic Odyssey in the Age of Emancipation*, he urged that we use the term “forgery” to describe a particular document brought to a French official around 1803 by the Saint-Domingue refugee Rosalie Vincent, a document that served to prove her free status. I found the term “forgery” too harsh and shocking. I cannot really say why it shouldn't apply to a supposed manumission document in which Rosalie Vincent appeared as having been freed by a man who, in fact, could never have claimed her as property in the first place, and which was apparently penned in a jurisdiction in which slavery had been abolished. Jean and I eventually reached an *entente cordiale*. The English edition of the book does not use the term “forgery”; the French edition, for which Jean is first author, perhaps will.<sup>8</sup>

7. Rebecca J. Scott and Michael Zeuske, “Property in Writing, Property on the Ground: Pigs, Horses, Land, and Citizenship in the Aftermath of Slavery, Cuba, 1880–1909,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 44 (October 2002): 669–699.

8. Rebecca J. Scott and Jean M. Hébrard, *Freedom Papers: An Atlantic Odyssey in the Age of Emancipation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), 44–46. The text for the French edition of the book has recently been completed, and will be submitted shortly to Éditions Gallimard.

In the last few years, these three elements—transcription, translation, and collaboration—have come together in an extravagant project, an article with five co-authors: Andrew Walker and Ana María Silva Campo, both former PhD students in History at the University of Michigan; Jane Manners, a legal historian at Temple University; Jean Hébrard, a cultural historian from the *École des Hautes Études* in Paris; and me. It started when Andrew Walker and I, with the help of the law librarian Kate Britt, tracked down a microfilm image of a manuscript document in the US National Archives, from a record group called “Miscellaneous Letters of the Department of State.” The document is an 1809 petition addressed to President James Madison by former holders of property in land, and property in persons, in the French colony of Saint-Domingue.

The petitioners had lost that land when they left Saint-Domingue/Haiti for Cuba in 1803. Moreover, property in persons had itself been abolished under French law during the Haitian Revolution. The signatories were now, in 1809, departing from Cuba and heading toward the United States. Their petition, in elegant French, aimed to accomplish a double sleight of hand: to enslave many of the thousands of Saint-Domingue refugees of African descent who were also leaving Cuba, and to evade the 1807 US federal prohibition on the bringing of captive persons into the United States from abroad.<sup>9</sup>

Our goal was to understand through what rhetorical, political, and legal means these petitioners had accomplished their goal. For in the end, the signatories achieved impunity for these acts of enslavement, despite the clear language of the federal law against the international trade in captives. As a result, more than 3,000 refugees, most of whom had lived as free people in Saint-Domingue for close to a decade, found themselves declared “slaves” upon arrival in New Orleans, and placed individually into the custody of other refugees, those who claimed to “own” them.

From our different locations, and with our different languages, the five of us have transcribed, translated, and collaborated. Our collective sense of accomplishment at having reconstructed this bitter story is matched by our eagerness to share it. The essay will appear in a 2022 issue of the *William and Mary Quarterly*, which has again offered us the possibility of providing an online set of documentary materials designed for use in teaching.

9. Andrew J. Walker, Ana María Silva, Jane C. Manners, Jean M. Hébrard, and Rebecca J. Scott, “Impunity for Acts of Peremptory Enslavement: James Madison, the U.S. Congress, and the Saint-Domingue Refugees,” forthcoming, *William and Mary Quarterly*, 2022.

The Conference on Latin American History describes this award as being for “distinguished service.” I have to admit that these more than four decades of collaborating with students and colleagues and friends have not really felt like “service.” But they have *served* to create transcriptions and translations and collaborative interpretations, as well as many conversations. I thank you all very warmly, and I look forward to our being together again in person in the years to come.

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