

What can we find in Augusto's trunk? About little things and global labor history

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ABSTRACT

The main purpose of this article is to discuss the possible congruencies between a global and a micro-analytical perspective taking the large field of labor history as a privileged standpoint. The story of the “liberated african” Augusto, who lived and worked in the Island of Santa Catarina in Southern Brazil in the mid-nineteenth century, is connected to the current debate on the emergence of Global History, exploring the tension between the demand for a “Big Picture” and the close analysis of singular cases such as his, as well as the place that his story might occupy in a larger discussion of the history of labor.

KEYWORDS

Global and micro-analytical perspectives, The “liberated African” Augusto, Southern Brazil, Mid-nineteenth century

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Augusto drowned at sea while working as a mariner on June 25, 1861. When he died, he was in his mid-twenties and worked at the seaport in Desterro, on the Island of Santa Catarina in southern Brazil.² Augusto was born in Africa and illegally imported to the Brazilian coast in 1850, when he was apprehended by the Brazilian authorities along with other misfortunate fellows. In this new land, and according to the local laws that anticipated similar cases of the illegal African trade, he was not considered a slave, but what was called an “Africano Livre” (a free African). Under the custody and supervision of the Brazilian state, his work would eventually be assigned or auctioned to private citizens for a temporary (even if long) tutelage.³

Augusto died with a reputation. It was that reputation that drove the police to his house at Rua da Palma, Desterro, in order to make an inventory of his belongings. He had shared the dwelling with five other “blackmen” (*pretos*) of different conditions and from various places: the slaves Roque, Gregório, Francisco, and João, and a freedman named Joaquim. Apparently, the reason for the police official (*subdelegado*) Antonio Mancio da Costa's unusual interest in this poor man's possessions arose from the rumor that Augusto, dead without heirs, had left behind an unknown amount of money kept in a locked drawer under a stool in his room.

The *subdelegado* arrived at the small house that Augusto rented with his house mates, and Roque showed him the drawer containing 3 gold and 33 silver coins and more than two hundred paper bills of different face values, amounting to a total of four hundred and thirty eight thousand *réis*. Corresponding to a third of the price of a slave at Augusto's age, or even a small house in the city, that was not the kind of money usually found in the hands of a black man who was a manual laborer, toiling side by side with slaves earning money for their masters or to fulfill the pecuniary obligations of conditional manumissions, as well as other free and freed poor workers.⁴

² This and all future references to this case come from: “Inventário de Augusto Africano Livre” (executor: José da Lapa Souza Coentro). Juízo de Órfãos da Cidade do Desterro, 1861 – Museu do Judiciário Catarinense (Archives in process of being organized).

³ About “africanos livres”, the best reference is Mamigonian, B. “To be a Liberated African in Brazil: Labour and Citizenship in the Nineteenth Century.” (University of Waterloo. PhD. Thesis, 2002).

⁴ During the Imperial period (from Independence in 1822 to the proclamation of the Republic, in 1889), the Brazilian currency unit was the *mil réis* (1\$000), divided in thousandths. *Tostão*, *pataca* and *cruzado* were coins that circulated in the mid-nineteenth century, with face value of respectively \$20, \$320 and \$400 *réis*. One thousand *mil réis* was known as *1 conto de réis* (1:000\$000). Gold and silver coins had higher values and smaller circulation. See Amato, Claudio; NEVES, Irleis; Russo, Arnaldo. *Livro das moedas do Brasil: 1643 a 2004*. São Paulo: Stampato, 2004.

On the same day, Antonio Mancio visited Lieutenant–Colonel Manuel José Espíndola, the man who had bought Augusto’s services years before and had been legally responsible for him. Espíndola presented Mancio a small trunk holding other objects that belonged to the young African. The *subdelegado* made a list: a pair of shoes, three pairs of black trousers, a coat and a jacket of the same color, a pair of white denim pants and three other pairs of old pants, two white shirts, a straw hat, two other hats made of black fabric, a collapsible top hat, a colored cotton cap and a black satin necktie.

Following the proper judicial proceedings for his *post mortem* inventory, the town’s Judge of Orphans (*Juiz de Órfãos*) appointed a trustee to Augusto’s estate in abeyance, publicized the proceedings in order to identify those who might be legally entitled to inherit it, and tried to ascertain the total value of his belongings.

Within the next three months, the judge fulfilled the formal requirements, starting by asking Lieutenant–Colonel Espíndola to appear before him and report about his former association with Augusto. From Espíndola’s testimony we learn that Augusto had been assigned to him by the government of the northeastern Province of Alagoas in 1850 (where he served as Captain), and that Augusto was part of a larger group of “one hundred and seventy [other Africans] who were taken by government forces and held as contraband”⁵. Caught as an illegal import, following a law to which Brazilian authorities were largely hostile meant to suppress the illegal slave traffic, Augusto was “liberated” to become a “free” worker whose labor was assigned to a private citizen who bid for it in an auction. When Espíndola was removed from Alagoas to a new position in distant Desterro, Augusto followed him.

His “freedom” was – as for many in the same situation – full of legal and practical ambiguities. According to Espíndola, Augusto was “under [his] direction and governance” but “lived and took care of himself outside the home”, coming to his house, where he had just an old pillow and a mat, only to spend the night and have an occasional meal. But Augusto was used to working and living by himself, and he handled his obligations to the man he would eventually identify as “master” by paying him a daily fee in cash out of his own earnings as a seafarer. When the judge asked about the money that Augusto might have left, Espíndola recalled that he had heard from the “public voice” (*voz pública*) that the African might even have had “a few

⁵ See also: “*Relação dos Africanos pretos livres, pessoas particulares que arrematarão seus serviços, e dos Estabelecimentos publicos a que forão destinados de ordem do Exmo. Presidente desta Província nesta cidade no anno de 1850*”, Arquivo Público de Alagoas, Box: *Curador de Africanos*, In Silva, M. et alli. “Relatório final da Pesquisa – Fontes para a História da Escravidão em Alagoas”, Universidade Estadual de Alagoas, 2010, p. 241 (unpublished).

contos (a currency unit equal to one thousand *mil-réis*)". Augusto was also a "man of confidence" of a local businessman named Maximiano José de Magalhães Souza who paid him a monthly wage of 60 *mil-réis* for the last two years, and that was not the only source of his income.

According to Espíndola, "it was known and a natural thing that slaves would be shy around their masters and will only open up to those with whom they have confidence and familiarity". Clearly considering Augusto no different from a slave in this respect, the Lieutenant-Colonel thus claimed to know little more about his former charge and suggested that the judge ask other informants about Augusto's affairs.

The testimonies that came out of the investigation would eventually add up to create a better image of this young black worker who lived the very ambiguity that legally and practically defined his condition as a bonded worker and a "liberated" man. Those who testified called upon a series of words to describe Augusto's behavior: he had a reputation of being "a very hardworking black: diligent, active, economical", "zealous", "sparing", and always "overseeing what belongs to him."

His employer, Maximiano Souza, a ship-owner who was active in the trading business in Desterro's waterfront, was even more emphatic. He said that "the black was so diligent, dedicated to work, and economical, that he would not lose time, always working and making money from everything, being that [he] almost had no expenses [because] beyond the fact that he [Souza] used to give him clothes and food, it is known that [Augusto], because of his good manners and qualities, would gather similar provisions from the commanders of the ships where he used to work. And he economized to the extent that, very often, he would even borrow money to buy his own cigarettes (...)."

From Souza's testimony we also learn about Augusto's earnings: the trader would pay him, depending on the work he did, from 5 *patacas* (1\$600 *mil-réis*) to 2 *mil-reis* (2\$000) for every day he labored. He appears to have made similar arrangements with other employers to whom he eventually sold his labor. From those wages, Augusto would give his "master" Espíndola a daily fee of two *cruzados* (\$800 réis), or roughly half of his earnings.

The final pieces of information that we have about Augusto's life were given by his house mate Joaquim, a former slave and an African himself. From him we learned that his part of the shared rent was 4 *patacas* and 6 *vinténs* every month (1\$400 réis), and he also assured the judge that everything left by Augusto had already been delivered to the authorities. Asked to report about Augusto, he added: "that from his scars (*marcas*) and language, he knew that he was a *Preto Mina*", indicating his West African origins.

The inquest into the life of the liberated African Augusto found no evidence of any other amount of money that he could have left behind. Eventually, the Judge of Orphans decided to conclude the proceedings and auctioned off Augusto's belongings for the revenue. In the absence of any eligible heir, the assets left were incorporated into the state coffers.

The return of the “big picture”

There is no doubt that Augusto's vicissitudes belong to the history of transcontinental connections. Social processes that reached across the globe frame this story: the long history of slave labor; the African trade and its abolition in the Atlantic world in the nineteenth century; the expansion of the reach of international commerce and the spread of ideologies of free labor; and the invention of new forms of labor management in the larger colonial world.

In this article, I would like to connect Augusto's history to the current debate on the emergence of the Global History of labor, exploring the tension between the demand for a “Big Picture” and the close analysis of singular cases such as his. In the following pages, these questions will be addressed through a general discussion of the meaning of a global perspective in current historiography, as well as its presumed opposition to a so-called *micro-historical* perspective. At the end, we will return to Augusto, his belongings, and his fate, trying to reason about the place that his story might occupy in a larger discussion of the history of labor.

The current debate about the emergence of a “global history” seems to reopen the case about the centrality of a macro-level (certainly a macro-geographical) approach to social, political and economic issues in historical thinking. There are certainly many commonalities between the new “global” perspective and the traditional “world” view that was present in the social and economic approach that was triumphant until the early 1970's in some of the most important historiographical traditions; only to name a few, Fernand Braudel's “structural history” and the works of Charles Tilly come to mind.⁶

The intellectual and geopolitical context where the new global shift is taking place is also important. First – and in contrast with the previous moment – the current interest in the bigger picture evolves in an environment that some

⁶ Riello, G. "La globalisation de l'histoire globale: une question disputée", *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine*. 2007/5, n. 54-4bis, 2007, pp. 23-33.

commentators perceive as saturated by the attention to disconnected contexts, disintegrated objects, fragmented social subjects, and localized histories. In opposition to this “history in pieces”,⁷ an intellectual attitude that emphasizes connections and adopts a large-scale perspective presents itself as an antidote to the excesses of a cultural and social history that seemed to abandon any claims for a synthetic and comprehensive approach. One can always challenge this simplistic view of the last forty years of social history, but cannot fail to recognize that the latest surge in interest in a larger historical and geographical frame is anchored in some questions that were absent from, or at least a rarity in, previous iterations of this historical debate.

No less important for the current interest in a bigger picture is the emergence of the notion of “globalization” to describe today’s expansion of transnational markets and the development of new forms of interdependence in modern capitalism. Even severe critics of “globalization” – both the real world phenomena and the analytical concept – agree that there is something to learn from taking broad connections into consideration. As Frederick Cooper said: “Behind the globalization fad is an important quest for understanding the interconnectedness of different parts of the world, for explaining new mechanisms shaping the movement of capital, people, and culture, and for exploring institutions capable of regulating such transnational movement.”⁸ These words, written by a labor historian whose field of study is colonial and postcolonial Africa, are of particular interest because they are part of an acute criticism of the assumption of the “global” as the new fashion in historical studies. Cooper criticizes globalization from the perspective of someone who has spent his career thinking about a geo-political space that has felt the impact of these connections with singular severity.

Cooper's remarks should be read, however, within the context of the current, renewed interest in a global perspective in labor studies, which is critical of the Eurocentric and imperialist approach that characterized earlier versions of the “global”. The thematic and conceptual expansion that labor history is experiencing today, incorporating dimensions that were neglected by traditional labor studies, such as the worlds of informal and un-free labor, is in fact strongly inspired by the commitment to look to transnational and interconnected social processes from outside the conventional point of view of the North Atlantic.⁹

⁷ To use the term coined by one of the commentators on the development of social history: Dosse, F. *L'Histoire en Miettes: des Annales a la "nouvelle histoire"*. Paris: La Découverte, 1987.

⁸ Cooper, F. “What Is the Concept of Globalization Good for? An African Historian’s Perspective.” *African Affairs* 100, no. 399 (2001), pp. 212-13.

⁹ Van der Linden, Marcel. *Workers of the World. Essays toward a Global Labor History* Leiden: Brill, 2008, p. 6.

Nevertheless, even a reinvigorated labor history can take advantage of Cooper's warning that the use of "global" to define the scope of any process of interconnections – loosing any "historical depth" in its analysis – can result in new misunderstandings: "It is salutary", he writes:

"to get away from whatever tendencies there may have been to analyze social, economic, political, and cultural processes as if they took place in national or continental containers; but to adopt a language that implies that there is no container at all, except the planetary one, risks defining problems in misleading ways."¹⁰

Intellectual caution and a salutary skepticism towards scholarly fashions are always welcomed, once we are able to distinguish between good questions and bad answers: If the terminology can be inaccurate or misleading, as in a careless use of "global" and "globalization" as trans-historical analytic concepts, the questions that these concepts are trying to grasp and explain are not.

Global history

Considering the main purpose of this paper, to discuss the possible congruencies between a global and a micro-analytical perspective taking the large field of labor history as my privileged standpoint, there are some questions that should be addressed. The first is about the real meaning that a "global" perspective could have in the actual empirical world of historical research and, therefore, about the historiographical content of the term. Secondly, considering the logical tension between the terms "global" and "micro", what could be the terrain on which these two approaches can learn from each other?

The term "global history" is relatively new. An academic journal with this exact title has been published only from 2006 on. "World history," another term that circulates in the same scholarly contexts, and suggests some analogy, is a little older, but with a stronger interest in colonialism in the modern age.¹¹ In any case, "global history" as a new field of research, distinct from a necessary but insufficient history of empires and imperialism, emerged

¹⁰ Cooper. "What Is the Concept of Globalization Good for?" *op. cit.*, p. 190.

¹¹ *The Journal of Global History*, sponsored by the London School of Economics, has been published by Cambridge University Press since 2006. *Journal of World History* has been published by the World History Association since 1990. "World History" is a preferred term for scholarly works such as: CURTIN, Philip. *Cross-Cultural Trade in World History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984 and BENTON, Lauren. *Law and Colonial Cultures: Legal Regimes in World History, 1400-1900*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001. Also noteworthy here is the pioneering journal published in Leipzig since 1991: *Comparativ. Zeitschrift für Globalgeschichte und Vergleichende Gesellschaftsforschung*.

very recently, and we can correctly state that it is still a half-empty box with a label attached to it. The definition of its contents, methods and boundaries (a question that is not resolved by the claim of the absence of any) is still in dispute.

These questions are not new. As David Armitage recently recollected, Fernand Braudel, discussing the scope of his own study of the Mediterranean Sea, “warned that ‘the historical Mediterranean seems to be a concept of infinite expansion’ and wondered aloud: ‘But how far in space are we justified in extending it?’”¹² Armitage, himself an advocate of a global perspective, asked the same question about the Atlantic Ocean, whose history shares some of the same challenges and similar ambitions for defying the conventional wisdom that nation-states’ boundaries are natural and self-contained contexts for historical research.

The field of “Atlantic History” gives us a good example of successful attempts to address connections and trans-territorial historical processes.¹³ Considering the central role played by the slave trade and captive labor in the building of the Atlantic world, a fundamental topic to any approach to labor history in a global perspective, it is unsurprising that the history of slavery occupies a crucial place in this scholarship, at least in recent decades.¹⁴ And indeed, early works deeply engaged in understanding the “dynamics of slave trade and abolition, the relationship between slavery and industrialism, the Haitian Revolution” by scholars like W.E.B. Du Bois, C.L.R. James, and Eric Williams, as Armitage once more recalls, had been “obviously and consciously” aware of the Atlantic scope of their topics.¹⁵ Later, the same consciousness about the impossibility of really understanding slavery without granting central importance to connections and entanglements would come to prevail among scholars working in Europe and the Americas. This insight would be fundamental to such varied, seminal works as David Brion Davis’ or Pierre Verger’s books published in the late sixties and early seventies,

¹² *Apud* Armitage, D. “Three Concepts of Atlantic History”, In Armitage, D. & Braddick, M. J. (ed.). *The British Atlantic World, 1500-1800*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002, p. 26.

¹³ The common elements between the global histories and Atlantic history were underlined by Zuniga, J-P. "L'Histoire Impériale à l'heure de l'histoire globale". Une perspective atlantique", *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine*. 2007/5, n. 54-4bis, p. 57.

¹⁴ Armitage points out, though, that earlier versions of “Atlantic History” – namely the “anti-isolationist currents in the history of the twentieth-century United States” were concentrated in discussing the connections between the U.S. and Europe, without paying any attention to “slave trade and slavery, and of Africa, Africans, and of race more generally”, Cf. ARMITAGE, *op. cit.* 2002, p. 14. See also: GILROY, Paul. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Cambridge, Mas.: Harvard University Press, 1993.

¹⁵ *Idem.* Other important references about Atlantic History are: BAYLIN, B. *Atlantic History: Concept and Contours*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005; GAMES, A. et als. *The Atlantic World: A history, 1400-1888*. Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2007; GREENE, Jack & MORGAN, Philip (ed.) *Atlantic History: A Critical Appraisal*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2008.

which, respectively, tried to understand the place of slavery in the intellectual and political world of the North Atlantic, and explored deep commercial connections between the Brazilian coast and West Africa, in the South.¹⁶

Paying close attention to intercontinental relationships did not always, however, mean that all parts of the Atlantic world received their due attention. Often, an emphasis on North Atlantic connections and European influences overshadowed a more diverse and dynamic set of exchanges. Even a book that made a strong argument about the radical consequences of taking seriously the circulation of ideas and people in the Atlantic, Peter Linebaugh's and Marcus Rediker's *The Many-Headed Hydra*, failed to go beyond (or below) the North Atlantic in its search for the motley crew of a multi-ethnic and oceanic revolutionary working class.¹⁷

From a South Atlantic perspective, however, the many links between Africa and America are increasingly becoming more important than the older (and more studied) asymmetries and exploitative relations between metropolis and colonies. Going beyond the study of "colonial systems", this scholarship is engaged in understanding how people from both shores of the southern ocean took an active part in building a complex network of trade, political and social institutions, and human relations in the vast geopolitical space of the modern Atlantic.¹⁸

Finding place for a small-scale perspective

Most of the works that focus on the broad field of "Atlantic History" could be used to exemplify that "systemic" perspective advocated by David Brion Davis as an antidote for the excessive compartmentalization (and, we might say, the nationalistic perspective) that is still the norm in slaves studies, both

¹⁶ Davis, D.B. *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1966; Davis, D.B. *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1975; Verger, P. *Flux et Reflux de la Traite des Nègres entre le Golfe du Benin et Bahia de Todos os Santos du XVIIe au XIXe siècles*. Paris: Mouton, 1968.

¹⁷ Linebaugh, P. & Rediker, M. *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic*. New York: Beacon Press, 2001. A similar observation can be made about GILROY's *The Black Atlantic, op cit.*. For a broader (or global) perspective about the age of Revolutions, see: Armitage, D. & Subrahmanyam, S. (eds.) *The Age of Revolutions in Global Context, c. 1760-1840*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.

¹⁸ See, among others: Thornton, J. *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400-1800* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992; Alencastro, L. F. *O trato dos viventes. Formação do Brasil no Atlântico Sul, séculos XVI e XVII*. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2000; Florentino, M. *Em Costas Negras. Uma história do tráfico de escravos entre a África e o Rio de Janeiro*. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1997; Curto, J. C. & Lovejoy, P. E. (eds.) *Enslaving Connections: Changing Cultures of Africa and Brazil During the Era of Slavery*. Amherst, N.Y.: Humanity Books, 2003.

in the northern and southern hemispheres.¹⁹ Very frequently, however, the research strategy of choice by historians engaged in giving content to an Atlantic approach is to follow the transcontinental trajectories of very mobile individuals. In this context, significantly, many of these studies have focused on the (often exceptional) lives of slaves and the formerly enslaved.²⁰

The combination of, and the eventual tension between, the intense research on individual lives and the effort to consider the intercontinental flow of people, goods and culture obviously raises an important set of theoretical and historiographical questions. In this sense, Rebecca Scott's critical analysis of Davis's argument is revealing: She remembers the "potentially problematic" dimensions of a history whose emphasis lies in a systemic and broader approach to slavery: the risk of only "draw[ing] attention to the history of the actors with a system-wide scope of operation, toward bankers and traders and planters", erasing from the picture what she considers "one of the most durable insights of the past decades of scholarship on slavery": the "often very local interplay of the actions of slaves, free people of color, masters, nonslaveholding farmers, and the state". In short: agency, "a bit shopworn", but still a useful term and idea.²¹

Scott's own work exemplifies this urge to combine a "macro" perspective and a micro-analytical approach. Her last book, co-authored with Jean Hébrard,²² focuses on almost two hundred years in the history of the family of an enslaved woman from Senegambia named Rosalie, through the Haitian Revolution, the American Civil War and Reconstruction and going to WWII, discussing the emergence and dissemination of the idea of "public rights" in the Atlantic.

Scott's "micro-history set in motion" - as she describes it - reframes in a Atlantic and even global perspective some of the same questions that made the debate about "micro-history" relevant before: The diffidence towards broad models of explanation that would obscure the individual experiences and actions of less visible social actors and contradictory elements that don't easily conform to "big pictures".

¹⁹ Davis, D.B. "Looking at Slavery from Broader Perspectives", *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 105, No. 2 (Apr., 2000), pp. 452-466. This paper is part of a larger AHR Forum, entitled Crossing Slavery's Boundaries, published in the same number of AHR.

²⁰ To cite just one example: Reis, J. J.; Gomes, F.; Carvalho, M. O Alufá Rufino: Tráfico, Escravidão e Liberdade no Atlântico Negro, c. 1822-c.1853. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2010.

²¹ Scott, R. J. "Small-Scale Dynamics of Larger-Scale Processes", *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 105, No. 2 (Apr., 2000), p. 473.

²² *Freedom Papers: An Atlantic Odyssey in the Age of Emancipation*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012.

And indeed, superficial readings of the rather ambiguous term “micro” gave rise to the conventional idea that a micro-history would only pay attention to local scenarios, anonymous individuals and events, and fragmented historical problems. In contrast, however, if we reconsider the main arguments that inspired the works of micro-historians, or at least the most theoretically conscious among them, we would find a program of research that was keenly aware of the necessity to integrate the singularities of the historical reality and, crucially, to broader and farther reaching social processes.²³

At least two additional ideas that were present in the micro-historical project are also relevant here: First, the firm conviction that a radical reduction of the scale of observation could lead to relevant results in the analysis of *any* historical problem. As a consequence, micro-historians raised the expectation that broader explanatory models could be reconsidered, and even challenged, by the intensive observation of particular cases, individual and group trajectories, and aspects of historical reality that might otherwise be considered statistically irrelevant and intellectually negligible. Second, micro-history was also important in re-examining the idea of “context” as a general model that is assumed as the natural frame in which a given historical problem finds its correct place. On the contrary, according to micro-history, the critical analysis of the “context” – not only the evaluation of its pertinence, but also its definition and construction – should be an integral part of historical analysis. The image of a “*jeux d’échelles*”, the controlled variation of different scales of observation, implied exactly that experimental dimension of context-building. Micro-history, then, did not form in opposition to a “big picture” approach, but rather as a way of avoiding taking the meaning of “big picture” for granted.²⁴

Marcel van der Linden, one of the earliest and strongest advocates of a global perspective in labor historical studies,²⁵ has repeatedly insisted that a “global history” should be intended neither as a theory for explaining “the capitalist world order”, nor as a history of globalization²⁶. According to him, global

²³ See, for instance, Revel, J. (ed.) *Jeux d’Echelles. La micro-analyse à l’expérience*. Paris: Gallimard et Seuil, 1996. On the origins of micro-history in Italy and its ramifications, see Lima, H. E. *A Micro-História Italiana: Escalas, Índicios e Singularidades*. Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 2006.

²⁴ See Douki, C & Minard, P. "Histoire globale, histoires connectées: un changement d'échelle historiographique? Introduction" *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine*. 2007/5, n. 54-4bis, pp. 7-21; also consult, Putman, Lara. "To Study the Fragments/Whole: Microhistory and the Atlantic World", *Journal of Social History*, 39, n. 3 (2006), pp. 615-630.

²⁵ And, with Jan Lucassen, creator of the term “Global Labor History” (GLH) in a booklet that launched the project: Linden & Lucassen, *Prolegomena for a Global Labour History*. Amsterdam: International Institute of Social History, 1999.

²⁶ Van der Linden, “The Promise and Challenges of Global Labor History”, manuscript to be published in *International Labor and Working Class History*, v. 81. 2012, p. 6.

labor history “does not have to be large-scale only; it can include micro-history as well.” It would be possible then to write a “global history of a small village, a work site, or family.”²⁷

In Van der Linden's arguments, global labor history is a kind of intellectual experiment that invites historians to consider the broader contexts in which we write our histories, trying to pay attention to the comparative dimensions of our topics and, more importantly, the connections and entanglements that are silently present in any historical research. The experimental dimension of global labor history in this sense closely corresponds to the same impulse that was present in the micro-historical approach since its inception.

Despite the fact that, as Van der Linden rightly remarks, labor historians were always particularly aware of the transnational dimension of their field of research, both the “methodological nationalism” of the more traditional historiography and the “Eurocentric” intellectual frame that was its main influence prevented a more acute sense of its “global” dimensions from developing properly.²⁸

Participating in the deep transformations of the scope of social history in recent decades with its new attention to the plurality of social actors and questions, the criticisms of Eurocentrism that characterized post-colonial theories and the consequent new attention to the historiographical traditions and research produced outside of the North Atlantic, labor history started to expand and redefine some of its main concepts and framework. Studies of labor, work and workers finally could go beyond the presumption of the industrial, unionized, young, usually white male laborer to also embrace questions of gender and sexuality, domestic and informal labor, and the tension and limits between “free” and “unfree” work.

Both micro-history and global history (and other related fields, like transnational and connected histories), and these fields' many permutations, can be seen then as consequences and protagonists of these new practices of historical research and writing in which we are today fully engaged. They correspond to the necessary impulse to redefine the relevant contexts and analytical categories in which we will write, among others, the histories of enslaved men and women, bonded workers, indentured servants, *coolie* laborers, and (why not?) liberated Africans.

²⁷ Linden, “The Promise and Challenges of Global Labor History”, *op. cit.*, p. 7. See also the Introduction to: van der Linden, Marcel & Mohapatra, Prabhu (eds.) *Labour Matters: towards global histories*. New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2009.

²⁸ For an earlier discussion on “methodological nationalism” and its definition, see Wimmer, A. & Schiller, N. G. “Methodological nationalism and beyond: nation-state building, migration and the social sciences”, *Global Networks*, 2, 4 (2002), pp. 301-334.

On little things and the big picture

Now we can come back to the case that served so far only as the long epigraph of this paper: How does Augusto's tale fit in the discussion on the possible connections between micro-history and global labor history?

We can start with the long history of slave labor: Augusto was transported to the Brazilian coast through previously existing pathways of commodity exchange that connected it to the distant shores of Africa, Europe and beyond. Before him, millions of young African men and women, captured in internal conflicts stimulated by the same trade, were enslaved and carried to the Americas for more than three hundred years. The slave trade, in itself, was an extraordinarily profitable enterprise for those who were involved in it. In Brazil and elsewhere, African enslaved labor was used to harvest products that were widely consumed in a trans-oceanic network of commodities.

A new impulse for enslavement and the profitable trade of humans, which some authors called the "second slavery,"²⁹ started just as slavery as an institution was undergoing an unprecedented transformation in public opinion in the West, becoming a public abomination and losing the moral support that had taken it for granted for centuries.³⁰ The slow but noticeable spread of abolitionism since mid-eighteenth century was parallel and connected to the triumph of the market economy and capitalism in the same imperial powers that had profited the most from the "infamous trade", United Kingdom *à la tête*. The British actions against the slave trade from the beginning of the nineteenth century (with its abolition in the British Empire in 1807 and the subsequent pressure over its satellite metropolises like Portugal and the newly independent American nations to suppress it), and the subsequent military actions against the slave ships, had at least two strong consequences. First, it rearranged the routes and logics of the slave trade. Second, the British-led military and political campaign to end the slave trade catalyzed a complete reorganization of the labor systems in the Atlantic and the colonial world in general.

Augusto's situation as a "liberated African" reflects both dynamics. He was unlawfully transported to Brazil where international treaties and national law had made the slave trade illegal since 1831. Seized in 1850 on one of the unusual occasions that the law was actually enforced, partially as a response to growing British pressure, Augusto was placed in a new juridical category

²⁹ Especially Tomich, D. *Through the Prism of Slavery: Labor, Capital, and the World Economy* Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield, 2004, chap. 3.

³⁰ Miller, J. *The Problem of Slavery as History: A Global Approach*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009.

that was created by the same international laws that abolished the traffic in the long run. "Africano livre" was the Brazilian version of a legal form that was widespread in the Atlantic, inspired by the British experiments in the early nineteenth-century, like the institution of "Apprenticeship" and "Indentured African" status.³¹ These types of labor would later combine with other forms of indentured and forced work that became the staple for labor management in the extended colonial world of Africa and Asia.

This invention was both a response to the new disgust for slave labor and a socio-legal category designed to give form to the idea of "free labor" in a way that would eventually also be used to answer the growing demand for a cheap and reliable labor supply in an expanding colonial and capitalist world. Bound against his will to a form of labor contract into which he entered without knowing the terms and conditions, Augusto, as a "liberated African" would have his "wages" kept by the government in order to pay for his eventual return to Africa.

In Brazil, as in other slave societies, enslaved and freed persons were not passive spectators of unintelligible deep social, political, and economic transformations. On the contrary, they knew well that the diffusion of new ideologies of free labor, and related notions of natural rights and entitlements, opened up new practical possibilities to bring their actual condition closer to their own expectations of freedom. The presently and formerly enslaved disputed the terms of their freedom in courtrooms and in front of other civil authorities. Even "africanos livres" were able to manipulate the legal ambiguities of their condition to face, or sometimes to avoid, some of the unsettling dimensions of their "liberated" status.

Augusto's experience of these transcontinental processes was also shaped and mediated by the local dynamics of the place to which he was brought. Since the beginning of the nineteenth century, Brazil had become one of the main world producers of sugar and coffee, especially after the Haitian Revolution made the old French colony of Saint-Domingue lose its place as the most profitable colony in the Americas. That was the principal reason why, despite the former suppression of the Atlantic slave trade, in the same period more than seven hundred thousand Africans were illegally introduced into Brazil in bondage and were largely used in the coffee plantations of the Southeast. In comparison, only about 11,000 Africans were rescued from the illegal trade along Brazilian coasts between 1821 and 1856, Augusto among them.³² Working as a seafarer, Augusto was involved in the infrastructure of market

³¹ Rupprecht, A. "When he gets among his Countrymen, they tell him that he is free": Slave Trade Abolition, Indentured Africans and a Royal Commission", *Slavery & Abolition*, 33 (3), 2012, pp. 435-455.

³² For example, see Mamigonian, "To be a liberated African ...", *op. cit.* p. 6.

connections between the Brazilian coast and the rest of the world. Desterro was not an important trading port, but was certainly part of this intricate web, where both goods and ideas circulated, carried by men and women from different ethnicities, participating in the new expansion of economic relations in the Atlantic and beyond.

These same processes reverberate in the objects that were found in Augusto's locked drawer underneath his stool and in his trunk, starting with the same bank notes with which he was usually paid: manufactured in the industrial printers of Perkins, Bacon and Petch, in London, and imported from England by the Brazilian National Treasury since 1835,³³ they were a link in a chain of asymmetrical economic exchanges and transnational dependencies on a large scale.

Finally, Augusto's history was shaped by the way he was able to navigate and find his way into the interstices in this world of bondage and constraints.

Thus, if the assortment of bank notes circulating in Desterro's waterfront were an indicator of the growing spread of monetization in labor relations and the constitution of a labor market even among day laborers and manual workers like Augusto, they could also be related to his other activities at the port: not only as a seaman himself but, most likely, as someone who had become involved in recruiting and managing the work of other slave or free men, Africans like him, as his apparent position of "man of confidence" would suggest.

Augusto's money, including the gold and silver coins of higher value (that would hardly have been used to pay manual workers), speaks to us of other circuits of currency that he was able to access. These coins could be evidence that he managed to operate in an informal market of credit that existed in a society where formal financial institutions (banks or others) were still developing. Participation in this informal credit market expanded the resources slaves had at their disposal to bargain for their freedom. Augusto's ability to acquire a good reputation with white traders and his fellow Africans alike would certainly have enhanced his ability to take part in this trade whose currency was not just money, but also trust and knowledge gathered from the "public voice".

Keeping a considerable amount of money under the same roof that he shared with other Africans, instead of seeking the assistance of one of the white patrons with whom he seemed to have good relations, suggests a relationship marked by mutual confidence and even camaraderie between him and his

³³ About the company and its production of bank notes for international clients, see: Hewitt, V. (ed.). *The Banker's Art: studies in Paper Money*. London: British Museum Press, 1995.

peers. Horizontal relations between these men cut across their different legal status, whether enslaved or freed. Augusto's apparent choice to treat these men with "confidence and familiarity" - a privilege that Captain Espíndola keenly perceived that he himself did not have - reveals a world of social solidarity and shared interests that was also a fundamental part of his life.

If Augusto was aware of the nature of his relationships with others, both the solidarities and the hierarchies, then he probably also understood the possibilities of social mobility and recognition open to men like him. Despite his probably accurate reputation as a spendthrift, he certainly paid considerable attention in his self-presentation, and in his rare moments of leisure we can effortlessly imagine him wearing his black outfit, shoes, necktie and other fineries found among his belongings in his post-mortem inventory. These clothes and accessories, examples of the European taste coming into fashion among Brazil's local elite, were the trappings of modern bourgeois respectability that Augusto might have desired for himself. This taste for fashion was only made possible by the international circulation of marketed goods such as the collapsible top hat, the *chapeau claqué* that he owned, a stylish item invented in France some decades before.³⁴

What the surviving documents reveal to us about Augusto's short life is very limited. It is even possible – as the authorities certainly suspected – that the objects found by the police had been discretely selected by his mates. By identifying him as a “preto Mina”, his fellows - themselves men from different parts of the African continent - gave us a hint about other sets of transcontinental connections that might also be a silent presence in his personal history. Augusto could have brought from the Bight of Benin more than his scars and language. Some of his mores, or even religious beliefs, could have taken form in his own place and culture of origin. He could even have been, as were many other resourceful “minas” like him, a man of the Muslim faith.³⁵ But none of these hypotheses could be properly addressed in a short article like this. We can certainly say that many of the details and greater historical meanings of Augusto's short life would remain as inscrutable to us as the presence of the colored cotton cap, "o barrete de algodão colorido", that was found defying the chromatic sobriety of his other personal belongings. Either a sign of his singular taste, or an object connected to his devotions, this cap reminds us that the physical as well as the documentary artifacts of Augusto's life leave his story and its place in the bigger picture open to future debate.

³⁴ Colonetti, A. et alli (eds.) *Cosa ti sei messo in testa. Storia e geografia del cappello*. Milano: Mazzotta, 1991.

³⁵ Karasch, M. *Slave Life in Rio de Janeiro, 1808-1850*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987, p. 26.

By digging through Augusto's trunk we can find, along with the various objects he left behind, evidence of the world of transcontinental connections that helped define his experiences and choices. Paying close attention to those objects that Augusto unwittingly bequeathed us, we also realize that his world - structured and coherent as we may find it - was also a place of autonomous action, and individual and collective creativity. The conditions of Augusto's life could be interpreted as collateral products of a process in which the impersonal forces of the free labor market came to displace an obsolete system of chattel slavery and class- and race-based personal constraint. Yet these social and economic processes which are manifested in what we can reconstruct of his life actually call into question the validity of any coherent model of transition to "modern" social and economic relations. As we have seen, Augusto's life is telling as an example of both broad and far-reaching social processes and the gaps and cracks in them. The new world of "free" work was constantly intertwined with and redefined by, not only the remains of a superseded model of labor management, but also - and maybe moreover - the active invention of new social and legal constraints, the constant negotiation of the social and cultural meanings of personal dependence and autonomy, and the perpetual redefinition of collective interests. The daily reality of social and labor relations, conflicts and solidarities contributed to the creation, with all its ambiguity and unfulfilled promises, of the world of "labor freedom" in which we still live.

