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“Global lives”: Writing Global History with a Biographical Approach

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abstract

The rise of global history has certainly been one of the strongest tendencies in the development of historiography in the last two decades. As Francesca Trivellato formulates, “the adjective ‘global’ is everywhere.”¹ It is however quite difficult to define precisely what global history is insofar as it covers a relatively wide diversity of themes and approaches. As an inheritor of world history, global history tends to analyze historical processes on a large scale - a macro-scale - in terms of time and space: in that sense, by “combining local histories,”² it produces meta-narratives dealing with “world-systems” and continents over time. Besides this “big history”, global history has also developed in a slightly different direction by focusing on the history of globalization: its perspective is to study - mainly economically but not exclusively - long-distance connections and interactions, to uncover the existence, or not, of an early globalization and, if it can be found, to identify its characteristics. Nevertheless, some studies (self-)identified as “global history” or “world history” do not fit into this large-scale pattern. It is especially the case of what I call “global lives”, using Miles Ogborn’s expression to refer to the biographies of individuals who were particularly involved in the globalization process.

keywords

Global History, World History, biography, biographical approach

The genre of biography is much older than global history but its success does not stop: Jacques Revel speaks of six hundred books in 1996 and one thousand in 1999 for the French context alone.³ It is true that writing the history of individuals’ lives appears suspect to historians to a certain extent: for many of them, biography is too closely related to novels and, since ancient Greece, it has occupied a

¹ Francesca TRIVELLATO, « Is There a Future for Italian Microhistory in the Age of Global History? », *California Italian Studies*, January 2011, vol. 2, n° 1.

² Patrick MANNING, *Navigating world history : historians create a global past*, New York, N.Y., Palgrave Macmillan, 2003, p. 15.

³ Jacques REVEL, « La biographie comme problème historiographique », in *Biographie schreiben*, Göttingen, Wallstein verlag, 2003, p. 329.

sort of popular dimension⁴ inappropriate for the academic sphere. Its methodology has also been strongly criticized by some scholars, like Pierre Bourdieu,⁵ who deny the possibility of writing the history of one life as a coherent whole. Nevertheless, in spite of its controversial status, biography remains a common approach in history to the point that even Fernand Braudel, despite being a specialist in large spaces and *longue durée*, has been tempted to write some.⁶ As Giovanni Levi points out,⁷ the genre of biography has evolved in many ways, from the prosopography which puts together series of lives in order to highlight general tendencies, to the micro-historical study of extreme cases such as Ginzburg's Menocchio.⁸ This last case, that is to say the frequent resort to biography in *microstoria*, is revealing of the nature of writing the history of an individual's life: biography operates at a very low scale in comparison to global history.

In consequence, it seems relevant to ask how it is possible to conciliate the individual and the global in order to write global history with a biographical approach. This paper aims to go beyond the question of the ways of writing global biographies and to ask about the historiographical sense of this demarche: is writing about global lives a simple narrative strategy or does it represent a consistent agenda for further developments in global history?

The paper will discuss these questions on the basis of the analysis of three biographies recognized in the field of global history: *The career and legend of Vasco da Gama*⁹ by Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Trickster travels*¹⁰ by Natalie Zemon Davis and *The ordeal of Elizabeth Marsh*¹¹ by Linda Colley. The first part will focus on presenting these texts and the individuals whose lives are narrated. The purpose will be then to understand the extent to which these books are integrated into the field of global history. Finally, the paper will discuss the relevance of the biographical approach in global history and will open the debate on the use of micro-analysis in the study of early globalization. Considering the issue, the emphasis will be put on the common points between the ways these books deal with the narration of global lives, rather than focusing on their differences.

Three biographies

The career and legend of Vasco de Gama (1469? – 1524)

On the occasion of the five-hundredth anniversary of the first Portuguese voyage to India, Cambridge University Press published a biography of its celebrated "hero" Vasco

⁴ Arnaldo MOMIGLIANO, *The development of Greek biography; four lectures*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1971.

⁵ Pierre BOURDIEU, « L'illusion biographique », *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, 1986, vol. 62, n° 1, p. 69-72.

⁶ "Biographies de Charles Quint et Philippe II", Fernand BRAUDEL, Roselyne de AYALA et Paule BRAUDEL, *Autour de la Méditerranée*, Paris, Editions de Fallois, 1996, p. 171-257.

⁷ Giovanni LEVI, « Les usages de la biographie », *Annales. Économies, Sociétés, Civilisations*, 1989, vol. 44, n° 6, p. 1325-1336.

⁸ Carlo GINZBURG, *Il formaggio e i vermi : il cosmo di un mugnaio del '500*, Torino, G. Einaudi, 1976.

⁹ Sanjay SUBRAHMANYAM, *The career and legend of Vasco da Gama*, Cambridge; New York, Cambridge University Press, 1997.

¹⁰ Natalie Zemon DAVIS, *Trickster travels : a sixteenth-century Muslim between worlds*, New York, Hill and Wang, 2006.

¹¹ Linda COLLEY, *The ordeal of Elizabeth Marsh*, London, HarperCollins publishers, 2007, 363 p.

da Gama. Its author, Sanjay Subrahmanyam, was already a famous figure in the field of world history as a specialist of the Portuguese empire in Asia¹² and of merchants' networks in India¹³. This background is reflected in the manner he deals with Vasco da Gama's biography, insisting on the Asiatic sources and points of view in order to stress a more nuanced portrait than the previous ones because, as he says in the preface after confessing his reluctance, at first, to accept such a project, his aim is to "present a re-interpretation of Vasco da Gama's career." In the introduction, Subrahmanyam notices a paradox about Vasco da Gama: "few figures in world history are at once so well-known and so obscure."¹⁴ In effect, several accounts of Gama's three expeditions have provided historians with many details on the voyages to India but little is known about major parts of Gama's life in Portugal: even his date and place of birth are unknown. The methodology proposed by Subrahmanyam aims to fill this gap; the author offers to study the Portuguese context more precisely in order to shed new light on Gama's behavior during his Indian travels.

The court of Dom Manuel of Portugal seems to have played a key role in these expeditions. Not only does Subrahmanyam suggest that the choice of Vasco da Gama – an "obscure gentleman" – to lead the first expedition was the result of negotiations between important factions of the nobility – especially the Almeida and Dom Jorge de Lencastre – but he also points out the divergence of opinions on the nature of the Portuguese overseas empire: Dom Manuel's messianic and over-ambitious project of a crusade against Islam faced a strong opposition from a part of the nobility –among them Vasco da Gama - which was more inclined to develop commerce and private initiatives secured by the military help of the Portuguese Crown.

The narration of the first expedition (1497-99) insists on the scarcity of means implemented by the Portuguese – only three small vessels without any valuable cargo – inappropriate to their over-ambitious claims when facing the ruler of Calicut and the suspicion and tension, on both sides, resulting from various misunderstandings. The second voyage undertaken by Vasco da Gama (1502-03), by now "Admiral of the seas of Arabia, Persia, and India", shows the shift towards the use of violence between Portuguese and local rulers as a consequence of the tensions - already perceptible during the first journey – purposely exacerbated by Cabral's fleet (1500-01) following the crusading aspirations of Dom Manuel. The long period after the return from his second expedition is considered by Subrahmanyam a moment during which Vasco da Gama managed to consolidate his power, obtaining titles and lands in Portugal thanks to his political abilities. His political strength is definitely revealed in 1524 when, after the accession to the throne of Dom Joao III, Vasco da Gama is appointed viceroy and given 14 vessels to return to India, where he dies at the climax of his career.

In addition to the new focus put on the mechanisms underlying Vasco da Gama's career, the book seeks also to be iconoclastic and to deconstruct its "legend".

¹² Sanjay SUBRAHMANYAM, *The Portuguese empire in Asia, 1500-1700: a political and economic history*, London; New York, Longman, 1993.

¹³ Sanjay SUBRAHMANYAM, *Merchants, markets and the state in early modern India*, Delhi; Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1990.

¹⁴ Sanjay SUBRAHMANYAM, *The career and legend of Vasco da Gama, op. cit.*, p. 18.

Subrahmanyam illustrates the forging of Gama's nationalist and hagiographical portrait through a series of examples from the 16th to the 20th centuries. In effect, one of Subrahmanyam's strongest claims is that the legend had already begun its construction in Vasco da Gama's lifetime – and was partly his doing – and grew up in competition with the Spanish one, that of Christopher Columbus. This process culminated in the writing of the poem *Os lusíadas* (1575) by Luís Vaz de Camões in which Vasco da Gama became a mythological hero, a new "Argonaut". The 19th century reused this picture abundantly in the construction of the Portuguese nation-state and, more generally, Vasco da Gama became a western-European symbol of "discovery" and "modernity". In the 20th century, whereas the national hagiography continued in Portugal, a black legend emerged in the process of decolonization in India. In this perspective, Subrahmanyam's book manages to extract Vasco da Gama from his nationalist frames in order to construct a proper figure of world history.

Trickster Travels: the life of al-Hasan al-Wazzan/Leo Africanus

Trickster Travels is the biography of an individual between two worlds: in the Islamic countries his name was al-Hasan al-Wazzan whereas among the Christians he was known as Johannes Leo Africanus. The author, Natalie Zemon Davis, is a very famous historian who made a name for herself especially in the writing of biographies such as her masterpiece *the Return of Martin Guerre*.¹⁵ This new study aims to shed some light on the life of the quite shadowy Leo Africanus, a Muslim of the 16th century who wrote several manuscripts during his ten-year semi-captivity in Rome (1518-1527). Among those writings, one text on Africa's geography and culture, *the Description of Africa*, enjoyed international success after its first publication in Venice in 1550 and constituted one of the bases of European knowledge about continental Africa during the early modern period.

The life of al-Hasan al-Wazzan was shaped by travels from an early stage: he was born in Grenada between 1486 and 1488. After the fall of the Nasrid sultanate in early 1492, his family fled, as many other Muslims, from Grenada, to the Moroccan city of Fez where his uncle was already serving the sultan as an ambassador. After having studied law, Al-Hasan al-Wazzan followed the diplomatic career of his uncle and travelled throughout Africa at the service of the sultan of Fez. He had the opportunity not only to visit the Maghreb provinces but also to cross the Sahara to what is now known as Mali and Sudan and made his pilgrimage to Mecca. His diplomatic role gave him the possibility to meet some of the highest Muslim rulers: he spoke with Qansuh al-Ghawri, the Mamluk Sultan in Cairo and with the Ottoman Sultan Selim when he seized Cairo (1517). However, on the return from this last embassy, his life suddenly changed course when his ship was attacked by a Spanish pirate who captured him and gave him as a present to Pope Leo X.

Another chapter of his life opened up: prisoner at first in the Castel Sant'Angelo in Rome, he embraced the catholic faith, being baptized as "Giovanni Leone" and was freed. He learned Italian and Latin, worked for the Holy See and frequented the Humanist circles in Rome under the patronage of important figures such as Alberto Pio

¹⁵ Natalie Zemon DAVIS, *Le retour de Martin Guerre*, Paris, R. Laffont, 1982.

Prince of Carpi or the cardinal Egidio da Viterbo. Davis paints a multi-ethnic picture of the Eternal City in which Giovanni Leone was involved in several cross-cultural projects, among which was, for instance, the realization of an Arabic-Hebrew-Latin dictionary with the Jewish scholar Jacob ben Samuel.¹⁶ In this part of the book, the author insists on the intellectual cooperation and its resulting cultural gains, presenting al-Hasan al-Wazzan's wish to instruct European scholars and aristocrats about Africa in order to deconstruct stereotypes and commonplaces. She formulates for example the hypothesis that the alliance between the king of France Francis I and the Ottoman Sultan Suleiman after 1536 was driven by the advice of the Prince of Carpi as a result of his contact with al-Hasan al-Wazzan.¹⁷

Natalie Zemon Davis constructs the portrait of this discrete man by frequently resorting to suppositions and hypothesis. Putting in perspective some details in his writings with other Arab and Italian sources as well as with an abundant secondary literature, she provides various conjectures on al-Hasan al-Wazzan's private life in Fez, during his embassies and in Rome where he might have founded a new family.¹⁸ Davis also questions his convictions in matter of religion. As he finally decided to return to the Islamic lands – in Tunis – on the occasion of the sack of Rome in 1527, the author suggests that al-Wazzan had always been interiorly loyal to Islam but practiced the *taqiyya*, the legitimate dissimulation of faith under circumstances of coercion. In this perspective, his few attacks against the Prophet in his writings might have been only some "tricks" in order to conciliate his Christian readers-captors. Finally, what seems to better represent al-Hassan al-Wazzan is the amphibian bird "living between land and water" - depicted in one of his own stories - who "shifts identities each year according to his interest"¹⁹ and constitute a bridge between two worlds.

The Ordeal of Elizabeth Marsh (1735-1785)

The author of this biography, Linda Colley, is a historian of the British Empire who, after having studied the construction of the British nation, published a book on British captives²⁰ which already linked narratives on individual's lives to the larger pattern of a world-wide empire. This study was the occasion of her first meeting with the writings of this particular woman of the 18th century to which she dedicated an entire book: Elizabeth Marsh. *The Ordeal of Elizabeth Marsh* has strong historiographical claims: Linda Colley stresses in the introduction that there are three stories inside the book, the story of Elizabeth Marsh's life, the story of her complex family network and a "global story."²¹ In fact, her purpose relates precisely to the question of this paper because as she states, her book is "an argument for re-casting and re-evaluating biography as a way of deepening our understanding of the global past".

One of Elizabeth Marsh's originalities is that she is a woman from the British lower middle class who had many experiences in diverse parts of the world. The first years of

¹⁶ Natalie Zemon DAVIS, *Trickster travels, op. cit.*, p. 83.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 373 note 4.

¹⁸ His name appears on a census in early 1527 as head of a household of three individuals, *Ibid.*, p. 211.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 110 and p. 190.

²⁰ Linda COLLEY, *Captives: Britain, Empire and the world, 1600-1850*, London, J. Cape, 2002.

²¹ Linda COLLEY, *The ordeal of Elizabeth Marsh, op. cit.*, p. xix.

her life already prefigured her tendency to move: she was conceived in Jamaica in 1735, raised in Southern England and spent the last part of her adolescence on the Mediterranean island of Menorca. She was then captured by Moroccan corsairs in 1756 while she was on her way back to England where she was to marry an officer of the Royal Navy. She barely avoided becoming the sexual slave of the Sultan of Morocco, Sidi Muhammad and, after having been released a few months later, she had to marry James Crisp, a rich merchant who was her companion of captivity. After this adventurous episode, she spent almost fifteen years in London, living her family life and raising her children. It was also the occasion for her to narrate her captivity in a book she published in 1769. The last third of her life shifted towards India when, in 1770, she decided to join her husband newly installed in Bengal after his bankruptcy in England. There, she managed to travel for leisure inside India with an officer of the Royal Navy with whom she was probably involved in extra-conjugal relationship.

Despite her independent temper Elizabeth relied, at least economically, on several other members of her family. Colley insists on the key role played by her family network during her many travels. The Marsh had been involved in the Royal Navy since the mid-17th century. Her own father, Milbourne Marsh, was carpenter and naval officer, her uncle George was an important administrator of the Royal Navy supplies, her two brothers were naval officers. Since her childhood, she was used to travelling in warships full of men and this close family connection to the Royal Navy granted her the possibility of travelling quite easily and safely during her whole life. She was not only related to the military sphere but also to private merchants networks *via* her husband James Crisp. Before his bankruptcy in 1768, he was a prosperous man involved in the international trade with many collaborators in Europe and exchanges between the four continents. Even after the end of his trading company he influenced Elizabeth's global path towards India by working there for the East Indies Company.

The "global story" narrated by Linda Colley illustrates how the existences of these people were shaped by political and economic events occurring on a global scale. The Seven-Years War (1756-1763) and the resulting threat of a French attack on Menorca are the reasons why Elizabeth Marsh took the ship in which she was captured, modifying her matrimonial future. But this capture by Moroccan corsairs appears to have had higher political motivations: seizing British hostages was a way for the Sultan of Morocco to demand a British consulate in order to develop international trade. Elizabeth's move to India is a result of her husband's bankruptcy which is itself a consequence of the increasing control and take-over of private trade by the British authorities. These interrelationships between the local and the global are a leitmotiv in Elizabeth Marsh's biography: as Linda Colley says, her "book charts a world in a life and a life in the world."²²

Three "global lives"?

The three books which have been previously summarized are well-identified biographies. Nevertheless, we can question the extent to which they should be

²² Linda COLLEY, *The ordeal of Elizabeth Marsh*, p.xix.

considered "global lives" in the sense of their integration into the field of global history and of their participation in some of the main issues discussed among global historians.

Positions inside the field of global history

First, it may be interesting to find out how these three books identify themselves vis-à-vis global history and how they have been received by global historians. Sanjay Subrahmanyam does not make any explicit claims about his eventual contribution to global history. This is not a surprise, first because he seems to be quite critical about the word "global" and its close relation to economic history,²³ and second because the book was published in 1997, when most historians were only speaking of "world history". As B. Mazlish points out,²⁴ the relationship between these two fields of research, world and global history, is a complex question because both of them have a multitude of definitions. Thus Mazlish shows that the meanings of "world history" range from "the whole history of the whole world" to "the interactions between peoples participating in large-scale historical processes" passing by the study of "world-systems". Global history, which was an emergent field when Mazlish wrote his article, already oscillated between two main tendencies: the study of historical processes only visible with a large-scale of analysis - in continuation with many projects of world history - or the more innovative accounts of the history of globalization. Although it is this last definition that fits best to the "global lives" I am here dealing with, I chose to integrate to my argument all references to "world history" because of the fuzzy boundaries between those two fields of research.

Coming back to Vasco da Gama's biography, one can simply observe Subrahmanyam's apparent reluctance to explicitly connect his work to the fields of world/global history: the only clue appears when he refers to Vasco da Gama as a figure of "world history" in his introduction.²⁵ Nevertheless, his work was well received by the *Journal of World History*²⁶ and by some other important historians in the field, such as Serge Gruzinski.²⁷

Neither does Nathalie Zemon Davis explicitly mention the relation of her biography to the field of world or global history, even though in the second part of her title she refers to "worlds."²⁸ Furthermore, in the introduction²⁹ she explains her own motivation to write about Leo Africanus as being part of the larger interest of scholars from the 1990s in cross-cultural studies, quoting Paul Gilroy speaking about his *Black Atlantic* as a study "between the local and the global". Whatever her positions vis-à-vis global

²³ Sanjay SUBRAHMANYAM, « Historicizing the global or labouring for invention? », *History workshop journal*, 2007, Issue 64, p. 329-334.

²⁴ Bruce MAZLISH, « Comparing global history to world history », *The journal of interdisciplinary history*, Winter 1998, vol. 28, n° 3, p. 385-395.

²⁵ Sanjay SUBRAHMANYAM, *The career and legend of Vasco da Gama*, op. cit., p. 18.

²⁶ A. J. R. RUSSELL-WOOD, « The Career and Legend of Vasco da Gama (review) », *Journal of World History*, 1999, vol. 10, n° 2, p. 452-457.

²⁷ Gruzinski SERGE, « The Career and Legend of Vasco da Gama by Sanjay Subrahmanyam - compte rendu », *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales*, 2001, vol. 56, n° 3, p. 732-734.

²⁸ It is « A sixteenth century Muslim between worlds ».

²⁹ Natalie Zemon DAVIS, *Trickster travels*, op. cit., p. 11.

histories exactly were, the *Journal of World History*³⁰ and the *Journal of Global History*³¹ warmly welcomed her work.

For her part, Linda Colley advances strong historiographical claims for the contribution of biography to global history. As already said, she states in the introduction that Elizabeth Marsh's story is a "global story". This affirmation is repeated in various ways until the conclusion of the book, where she explains her contribution to "world history."³² In consequence, it is curious to notice that neither the *Journal of World History* nor the *Journal of Global History* reviewed this book—its claims might have been judged too bold? Nevertheless, *the Ordeal of Elizabeth Marsh* is regularly quoted in global history. More generally, these three cases illustrate the difficulty in pronouncing on the belonging of a study to a historiographical field whose boundaries are not clearly identified. On the contrary, it appears that the self-claimed and recognized identities are not sufficient to define what a biography in global history is.

Three pictures of the first globalization

The question of the relationship between these three biographies and global history should perhaps be asked in terms of participation and contribution to its main issues. One of the principal purposes of global history is to study the history of globalization. In this respect, the debate among the historians comes from the different meanings and interpretations given to this elastic notion of "globalization". Even its starting point is strongly disputed: whereas for the holders of a "hard" economic definition, there cannot be any globalization without a convergence of prices – which occurred only in the 19th century - on the other hand, the adherents of the "soft" definition consider that a first globalization was already taking place in the sixteenth century. This latter consideration, which is based on more open definitions like the one of D.O. Flynn and A. Giraldez³³ evoking "sustained interactions" among the different populated parts of the world, not only looks at the trading aspect but also at other dimensions such as epidemiology, demography or culture.

The previous three summaries show "global lives" in the sense that they deal with individuals who were involved in long-distance interactions between various parts of the world. Many aspects of the first globalization are revealed through these studies. Trade is present in the book on Vasco da Gama: Subrahmanyam even develops a chapter on the state of the trade in the Indian Ocean before the coming of the Portuguese. It is also an important aspect of Elizabeth Marsh's life especially because of her husband's bankruptcy which appears as a consequence of British imperial policy. Politics is indeed another key aspect in all three biographies: we can mention for instance the role of the Portuguese court in Gama's life, al-Hassan al-Wazzan's diplomatic function both in Muslim and Christian lands, or Elizabeth Marsh's capture by the Moroccan sultan for political reasons. In those regards, "global lives" seem to have

³⁰ Edmund BURKE, « Trickster Travels: A Sixteenth-Century Muslim between Worlds (review) », *Journal of World History*, 2007, vol. 18, n° 3, p. 372-374.

³¹ Michael BRETT, « Trickster travels: in search of Leo Africanus, a sixteenth-century Muslim between worlds By Natalie Zemon Davis », *Journal of Global History*, 2008, vol. 3, n° 02, p. 280-282.

³² Linda COLLEY, *The ordeal of Elizabeth Marsh*, op. cit., p. 297-300.

³³ David Owen FLYNN and Arturo GIRALDEZ, « Born again: Globalization's sixteenth century origins », *Pacific Economic Review*, 2008, vol. 13, p. 359-387.

been shaped by global forces: the economic and political aspects of globalization are situated at the background of the narration and show how the local is affected by the global.

However, these biographies also deal with the social and cultural aspects of the long-distance interactions which constitute globalization. Concerning Vasco da Gama's travels, Subrahmanyam presents the conflict between Portuguese and Indians as a result of cultural misunderstandings and problems of language, but he also stresses the resemblance between trading practices in the Mediterranean and in the Indian Ocean with which the Portuguese were not totally unfamiliar.³⁴ Al-Hassan al-Wazzan's biography also emphasizes the cross-cultural aspect insofar as it deals with the conceptualization of a continent: Leo Africanus' project aims to share his own African culture and to deconstruct the Christians' representation of the "Other" and its attached stereotypes. In this case, the global cultural connection between Muslims and Christians goes beyond al-Wazzan's intellectual interaction with Italian humanists, thanks to the diffusion of the book in various languages. The social dimension of the globalization is particularly revealed through the mechanisms of patronage and family networks – the Almeida faction for Vasco da Gama or the network of the Marsh family inside the Royal Navy for Elizabeth – which determine the possibility of long-distance interactions. In this perspective, the study of "global lives" provides a wide picture of the first globalization, shedding light on the role of individuals involved in the process.

Commitment against nationalist and Eurocentric views

One common feature among historians of the global is their claim for a non-nationalist and non-Eurocentric approach. This commitment is also shared by the three biographies analyzed. In the case of Subrahmanyam's book, the purpose is explicitly to deconstruct a symbol of nationalism. The whole argument is organized in order to put an end to the Western legend which, as Subrahmanyam illustrates by quoting some scenes of the opera *l'Africaine* (1865), represents Vasco da Gama as "a Promethean Superman who stole the fire of modernity from the Gods."³⁵ Yet neither does he accept the black legend which compares the Portuguese expansion to the Nazi genocide.³⁶ His point is to present a more nuanced portrait of Vasco da Gama separated from his patriotic and positivist symbolic. In this perspective, it is interesting to notice that the "global" character of a study relies less on the choice of an object representing long-distance interactions – like Vasco da Gama – than on the way of approaching this particular object from a non-Eurocentric and non-nationalist view.

Natalie Zemon Davis' choice of a narration focused on the life of a 16th-century Muslim who "tricked" the Westerners is also a way of contributing to the enlargement of perspective beyond European-centered views. Furthermore, she presents not only physical but also cultural permeability between Christians and Muslims, questioning the relevance, at least for the period of the study, of the traditional division pictured by the historiography between the "West" and the "Rest".

³⁴ Sanjay SUBRAHMANYAM, *The career and legend of Vasco da Gama*, *op. cit.*, p. 109.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 361.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 367.

Although her story takes place within the frame of the British Empire, Linda Colley stresses the necessity to avoid Eurocentrism each time she has the opportunity to do so. For instance, about the political and commercial reasons behind the capture of Elizabeth Marsh, she says: "Sidi Muhammad's reign is a vivid reminder that, in the words of one historian: 'proto-globalization was, in effect, a multi-centered phenomenon, strengthened by the active participation of Muslim elements'."³⁷ Nevertheless, in contrast with the two other biographies which deal with European as well as African and Asian sources, *the Ordeal of Elizabeth Marsh* is mainly constructed on the exploitation of British sources and does not offer any non-British point of view, perhaps because the narration focuses on a character and a family whose strong "British identity" is regularly stressed by the author.

Biographies: a relevant perspective for global history?

Even though the "global" character of these three biographies cannot be precisely defined and circumscribed, their particular objects, approaches and claims make them at least partially enter the field of global history. But then the next question is: to what extent are they relevant to global history? Do these narratives of individuals' lives offer interesting perspectives?

Biographies and narrativity

Even though Miles Ogborn's attractive expression inspired the title of this paper, his book *Global lives, Britain and the world, 1550-1800*³⁸ has been excluded from the present account because it is not one biography but a sum of 40 short biographies – about 3-6 pages each – whose nature differs completely from the 300-page biographies here analyzed. It is however interesting to compare them in order to highlight similarities and differences between these two different kinds of projects. For M. Ogborn, the "biographical approach serves to give some life to the accounts presented in each chapter, first, by dramatizing the issues for the reader by introducing them to specific individuals and, second, by animating the more abstract processes"³⁹. Here, Ogborn points out an important function of biography: its narrative style, focusing on human characters in the way of a novel, makes history more accessible and aims at a wider audience than the usually "more abstract" studies of large-scale "processes".

It is possible to find some appeals to this kind of human empathy in several passages of the three biographies at analysis. For instance, Linda Colley calls for the necessity of including a human dimension to global history: "Writings on world and global history [...] sometimes seem as aggressively impersonal as globalization can itself."⁴⁰ Similarly, Subrahmanyam concludes his book by asking the reader for his empathic understanding: his message is, "concerning past human actions, to laugh when they are ridiculous, to weep when they are tragic, to detest them as they were often detested by

³⁷ Linda COLLEY, *The ordeal of Elizabeth Marsh*, op. cit., p. 68.

³⁸ Miles OGBORN, *Global lives*, op. cit.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁴⁰ Linda COLLEY, *The ordeal of Elizabeth Marsh*, op. cit., p. xxxi.

those who were their victims, for how else would we ever come close to understanding them?"⁴¹

This use of the biographical approach would correspond to what Giovanni Levi calls "a biography in context."⁴² This type of narration is constituted by the goings and comings between the life's story and a fixed background context. In our cases, the biography serves to illustrate a global context – "giving it some life" as Ogborn says. In this sense, it can be said that Elizabeth Marsh's life is a pretext to look at the 18th century globalizing British Empire from a more human perspective. But the story of the life is also enriched by this same context: here is for instance the role of Subrahmanyam's background about the trade in the Indian Ocean before the coming of the Portuguese. In the case of Natalie Zemon Davis, the lack of biographical details available in the sources forces her to resort massively to secondary literature about the context in order to make some hypotheses on Leo Africanus' life.

In this sense, the resort to biography would be more a narrative trick than a true historiographical approach. This conception of biography as a way of giving a human face to historical processes can be respected insofar as it participates to the diffusion of our discipline out of the restricted professional audience by providing a more accessible reading centered on human characters and closer to the popular genre of the novel. Nevertheless, its historiographical interest, that is to say its possibility of making a valuable contribution to the historical field, and in the present case, to global history, has to be found elsewhere.

The importance of sources

In addition to the difference of length between Miles Ogborn's biographies and the three biographies analyzed in the paper, there is also a distinction between their methods: Ogborn's book relies exclusively on secondary literature whereas Subrahmanyam, Davis and Colley's works are mainly based on the analysis of primary sources. More generally, it should be noticed that Ogborn's book is not an exception: many studies in global history do not provide any analysis of primary sources, probably because this is not compatible with a large-scale analysis.⁴³ In contrast, the three books analyzed here are full of references to manuscripts, printed books and diaries.

Diaries play an important role in two of the three biographies. The chapter on the first voyage of Vasco da Gama relies mainly on the critical analysis of a manuscript written during the voyage by an unknown member of the expedition whose identity is discussed by Subrahmanyam. For the second journey, he compares several manuscripts and printed diaries in order to obtain a more complete version of the facts. Besides these westerners' writings, he resorts to Indian writings – in Arabic – that give a better understanding of the increasing violence between Portuguese, Muslims and Gujarati. For her part, Linda Colley constructs her whole book thanks to the abundant material

⁴¹ Sanjay SUBRAHMANYAM, *The career and legend of Vasco da Gama*, *op. cit.*, p. 368.

⁴² Giovanni LEVI, « Les usages de la biographie », *op. cit.*, p. 1.330.

⁴³ One the most quoted books in global history, Pomeranz's *Great Divergence*, is almost entirely based on secondary literature, Kenneth POMERANZ, *The great divergence : China, Europe, and the making of the modern world economy*, Princeton, N.J., Princeton University Press, 2000.

written by the Marsh family: not only did Elizabeth publish a diary of her captivity but she also wrote many letters during her life as well as a diary of her travel in India, while her uncle George kept updated a family book which provides a larger picture of the Marshs' global lives. Concerning al-Hassan al-Wazza, Natalie Zemon Davis' detailed interpretations on his attitude towards religion and life both before and after his capture are based on the analysis of various manuscripts written by himself and especially a manuscript version of the *Description of Africa* before it was modified and printed. An important part of Davis' concerns is about the source in itself: what aspects reveal and conceal the writings of a Muslim in Christian lands? In this sense, in addition to a more "human" narration, the three biographies offer a distinct methodology from the main streams in global history: a history much closer to the sources and, for two of them, the reliance on extra-European documents which seems to suit better the non-Eurocentric pretensions of global history.

Micro-analysis and global questions

Proximity to the sources and the low-scale of analysis serve as a general claim for the writing of global history, especially in the case of Linda Colley. In the conclusion of her book, she says that "the micro strategy – using the perspectives of the past afforded by a family - becomes paradoxically more, and not less, valuable when dealing with historical developments that extend over vast territorial and oceanic spaces", and, a few lines further, she states that "there can and should be no Olympian version of world history."⁴⁴ This last normative sentence shows the author's commitment in favor of a global history using the micro-analysis method, a historical approach first developed by Italian micro-historians in the 1970s and whose purpose is to question general historical issues on the basis of precise and detailed analyses at a local scale.

Nevertheless, according to Francesca Trivellato, herself author of a book of global history written with a micro-historical approach,⁴⁵ the micro-analyses implemented by Linda Colley and Natalie Zemon Davis differ from those of the *microstoria*. Trivellato observes that the micro-level has been transformed by Anglophone historiography into a narrative device whereas the *microstoria* emphasizes its "jeux d'échelles",⁴⁶ making inductive conclusions from a very small scale to a larger perspective. However, she concedes that beyond their narrative strategies, these global biographies have also wider conclusions to give "about the most elusive of all global history's assignments: to understand the global and overlapping connections across cultures and groups from the perspective of the actors involved in them"⁴⁷.

The micro-level of analysis permits a better understanding of synchronic processes such as the functioning of networks, cross-cultural connections and interactions and more generally the role played by individuals in the globalization process. In this perspective, Subrahmanyam's book on Vasco da Gama demonstrates how large-scale

⁴⁴ Linda COLLEY, *The ordeal of Elizabeth Marsh*, *op. cit.*, p. 300.

⁴⁵ Francesca TRIVELLATO, *The familiarity of strangers: the Sephardic diaspora, Livorno, and cross-cultural trade in the early modern period*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2009.

⁴⁶ Jacques REVEL, « Jeux d'échelles : la micro-analyse à l'expérience », Gallimard : Seuil, 1996.

⁴⁷ Francesca TRIVELLATO, « Is There a Future for Italian Microhistory in the Age of Global History? », *op. cit.*, p. 10.

political and economic factors, such as different projects of empire, as well as material and local issues – the need for autochthonous pilots, linguistic and cultural misunderstandings – shaped the interactions between Portuguese and people of the Indian Ocean. Natalie Zemon Davis gives an example of cross-cultural interactions which goes beyond the spatial framework, questioning the cultural boundaries between Christians and Muslims. By focusing on the life of Elizabeth Marsh, Linda Colley is able to show that women also took part in the history of globalization and that they should be taken into account. In this sense, global biographies, if they are carried out with the micro-analysis method, can address some wider issues in global history.

Conclusion

Biographies in global history appear quite similar to al-Hassan al-Wazzan's amphibian bird which changes its claims and identities according to whether it speaks with fishes or birds. Faced with an enlarged audience of students and amateurs, their stories about "global lives" constitute undoubtedly a kind of narrative trick which gives a more "human" face to global history, whereas in addressing scholars in global history, they propose a historiographical project with a renewed approach. Nevertheless, this project should go beyond the mere narration of lives in global context. In fact, the most valuable - implicit - historiographical claim of global biographies is to be what Francesca Trivellato calls "global micro-histories."⁴⁸ In this perspective, the focus on a particular individual is only one way among others to reduce the scale of analysis and stick closer to the sources. It seems to me that these micro-histories of globalization may have more ambitions than to be merely ways to "populate our models and theories with real people"⁴⁹ as Tonio Andrade suggests it: they offer an alternative methodology for global history.

The project of applying micro-analysis to global history would not signal the end of global macro-narratives. On the contrary, it would be still necessary to have diachronic analyses and large models of causality because they escape the eyes of micro-historians. What is suggested here is more a perspective of development towards a path currently under-estimated by global historians despite its relevance in solving some questions about the history of globalization. Not only does micro-analysis appear to be a more adequate solution against Eurocentrism insofar as it has the possibility of relying on extra-European sources – and not only on Anglophone secondary literature – but, when it is applied to the right objects (particular individuals, networks, cities) it also highlights more clearly the functioning of long-distance human connections and interactions. There cannot be an understanding of globalization, taken in a "soft" definition, without including this issue and adapting the methodology to approach it.

⁴⁸ Francesca TRIVELLATO, « Is There a Future... », p. 11.

⁴⁹ Tonio ANDRADE, « A Chinese, two African boys and a warlord: toward a global microhistory », *Journal of World History*, vol. 21, n° 4, Décembre 2010, p. 573-591.

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