In *Freedom Papers: An Atlantic Odyssey in the Age of Emancipation* Rebecca J. Scott and Jean M. Hébrard explore the role of race, the limitations it imposed, and the ways in which color lines could be negotiated in the lives of the members of one family of mixed black and white heritage across a broad stretch of time. The book is structured as a chronological narrative that traces the experiences of a family of African descent through the Atlantic World from the late eighteenth century through the mid-twentieth century. It begins with a young woman in West Africa, Rosalie, who is enslaved, survives the middle passage, and arrives in St. Domingue on the eve of the Haitian revolt. She is able to both survive and take advantage of the political instability in Haiti to gain freedom and economic opportunities. Her children and their descendants continue to avoid enslavement and become educated and successful. They migrate around the Atlantic World, calling no one place home, but instead looking for opportunities. They refuse to allow their African heritage to limit their opportunities in a world dominated by racism, and they work to avoid enslavement and strive for equality as they move throughout the Atlantic. Scott and Hébrard track this family from its West African origins through many Atlantic locales: two US states (Louisiana and Alabama), Haiti, Cuba, Mexico, Belgium, France, and England. Although the family is able to exercise agency and improve their lives to a remarkable degree in a racist world, the story is also marred by tragedies. It begins with Rosalie's enslavement but, in the epilogue, the authors tell the story of her great-great granddaughter Marie-José Tinchant's enslavement in Nazi camps in Belgium and then her death in the gas chambers in 1945. The evidence suggests that she may have been arrested and eventually executed for a “racial reason” (189). Nevertheless, the dominant message in *Freedom Papers* is one of success and survival. The author's note in the final chapter and in the epilogue that the nineteenth- and twentieth-century descendants of Rosalie continued to take pride in their African heritage and Marie Jose's daughter survived and left Belgium and settled in a peaceful setting in the Atlantic Islands off the coast of West Africa—a fitting conclusion for such an Atlantic tale.

The authors do an admirable job in piecing together this story but they are restricted in how much they can know about the earliest years. The chapters about the family in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries are limited, because of holes in the archival record and the absence of written letters about the family’s economic and legal endeavors and their movements through
the Atlantic. Scott and Hébrard are forced because of misspelled names and lengthy gaps in the records to often speculate about how long family members stayed in one location and when they migrated. The records available for family members after the 1840s reveal much more about their inner lives and their political activism. In large part, this is because the family moved to France and the young men had access to elite educational institutions. The lack of evidence for individual family members for the earliest years means that the narrative until the early nineteenth century tends to be as much about places and social and political contexts in West Africa, Haiti, Cuba, and Louisiana. These chapters offer fascinating evidence of the Haitian Diaspora after the revolution but frustratingly little about Rosalie. These social and political contexts are described in intricate on-the-ground detail, detail that gets lost somewhat in the later years as the evidence for the family grows richer and their voices and the details of their individual lives come to dominate the narrative. It begins as a story about place more than people and becomes a story of people more than place. Both offer rich insights in their own way.

The social and cultural power of the written word and of documents is an interesting theme in the early years of this narrative. Scott and Hébrard are careful to note the extent to which one's freedom hinged on the creation and survival of documents and on the calculated use and nuance of specific words in those documents. They call it the “efficacy of ink on paper” (26). This theme, which seems to have inspired the title of *Freedom Papers*, will not be surprising to early modernists who are accustomed to scholarly discussions of the power of documents. This particular angle means that the documents themselves, such as baptismal or marriage records, become active agents rather than silent and subsumed citations in the narrative of this family until the early to mid-nineteenth century. It is the family’s ability to manipulate documents and written words in the midst of political instability that helps them escape the worst abuses of racism and enslavement.

According to Scott and Hébrard their work is an “experiment” (4). They set out to write, “a micro-history set in motion” (4), which is essentially an “interlinked chain of events defined by one family’s itinerary” (5). It is an ambitious study, filled with rich scholarship that is ultimately about the agency of one family during “the great antiracist struggles of the ‘long nineteenth century’” (3). Overall, *Freedom Papers* is unquestionably a successful experiment but there are moments when the authors could have done more work to analyze the significance of the narrative as it unfolds and to draw some conclusions that would enrich scholarly debates. The intrinsically fascinating narrative, the immense detail and the inspiring and sometimes