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Sue Peabody, Washington State University, USA

Microhistory as Method: Recentering the Subaltern

Abstract:

Historians began to experiment with microhistories more than half a century ago, yet many are returning to this narrative structure in recent years to tell biographical stories, especially for enslaved and other subaltern peoples. Is every biography a microhistory? What can microhistory do that Big History cannot? Based on studies of enslaved and free people in France's age of revolution and abolition, Sue Peabody analyzes the foundational elements of microhistory and how centering historical inquiry on the lives of specific subaltern people forces historians to ask new questions of the imperial archive to generate new understandings of more traditional historical narratives.

Short Bio:

Sue Peabody is Meyer Distinguished Professor of Liberal Arts and History at Washington State University and Humboldt Research Award recipient (2025-2026). Her books include *"There Are No Slaves in France": The Political Culture of Race and Slavery in the Ancien Régime*, and the award-winning *Madeleine's Children: Family, Freedom, Secrets, and Lies in France's Indian Ocean Colonies*. She is currently co-writing a graphic memoir, *Many Names: The Life Story of a Sudanese Poet*, with Moneim Rahama and illustrated by Lena Merhej, forthcoming with Louisiana State University Press (2027) and a microhistory of French slave smuggling in the Indian Ocean, *The Failure of the Succès: Anatomy of a Slave Smuggling Voyage*.