

Digitizing Guardianship Registers in Senegal (1895-1910): Naming as Evidence and Ethical Concern

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Abstract

Drawing from research on liberated minors, formerly enslaved children whom the colonial state in Senegal entrusted to guardians following their emancipation, this article describes the process of building a database consisting of identifying information about formerly enslaved children in early colonial Senegal based on data originally collected in the early twentieth century, and it uses the database to ask both historical and ethical questions about naming practices and aliases, experiences of unfreedom, and the agency of marginalized African children. Of the 1,324 liberated minors who entered guardianship in Saint-Louis from 1895 to 1910, for example, at least 114 of them took on another name at some point, a fact that raises interesting questions about naming, name changes, and agency. I argue that names contain fragmentary evidence about their bearers' cultural or linguistic background or geographic origin, and, more importantly, that aliases can offer insight into social networks or self-fashioning. Yet reproducing names from colonial inventories in digital history projects could reinscribe oppression and violence and, in some circumstances, could contribute to stigma and shame among descended communities. As such, scholars should include them in databases and other digital history projects, but only if ethical concerns can be addressed and resolved.

This article describes the process of building a database consisting of identifying information about formerly enslaved children in early colonial Senegal based on data originally collected in the early twentieth century, and it uses the database to ask both historical and ethical questions about naming practices and aliases, experiences of unfreedom, and the agency of marginalized African children. Derived from records related to the guardianship of so-called liberated minors — children who, without their parents, sought official recognition of their freedom in the decades after the French emancipation law of 1848 went into effect in Senegal — this data consists of children's names, approximate ages at liberation, gender, and regions of origin, along with other information, including names of parents (if known) and names and occupations of guardians. This article highlights the significance of naming in the archival record, suggesting that children's names and their name changes or aliases offer insight into certain aspects of their identity and allow informed speculation about some of their experiences under guardianship while also raising ethical questions.

Efficient and thorough analysis of these records requires the use of digital tools and, most particularly, a database created from the original guardianship records. There are compelling reasons to make such a database widely and freely available. Importantly, a database derived from these data would shed light on a population — African children — that has often been obscured by or absent from written records. Scholars and students could use the data to examine trends in child slavery and liberation in nineteenth-century Senegal, identifying patterns in gender and age, much like Goodwin et al. have done with the much larger Senegal Liberation Registers database [Goodwin et al. 2021]. They could also use such a database to study social networks in urban Senegal, by paying particular attention to data on the members of prominent families who served as guardians, or to explore questions about child labor, particularly domestic service, or urban poverty. In addition to scholars and students, broader publics, especially Senegalese people living in their country or in the diaspora, could engage with a database by contributing additional data or interpretations and thereby shaping the production of history, conducting genealogical research, or by learning more about slavery and emancipation in West Africa. As a public-facing database that would feature named individuals and bits of information

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about their lives, this project would join other digital history projects on slavery in the Atlantic world (such as LiberatedAfricans.org, SlaveVoyages.org, or the many datasets and projects within Enslaved.org) in honoring those who experienced enslavement, emphasizing their individuality and humanity and even telling their stories [Araujo 2021, 39–40].

Yet, as Risam has pointed out, there is danger in replicating the colonial archive in digital form, since this can reinscribe colonial power structures and knowledge hierarchies [Risam 2018, 47–50]. Perhaps more importantly for these records, their sensitive nature (names of formerly enslaved people) and the particular context in which they were produced (Senegal, where descent from enslaved people can result in stigma) raise important ethical questions about whether names should be shared, questions that are complicated by the fact that important lines of inquiry hinge upon tracing and interpreting names and name changes themselves. Using an early prototype of my guardianship database — which currently is not public-facing — I think through what names might teach us and some of the ethical considerations around using them. I argue that names contain fragmentary evidence about their bearers' cultural or linguistic background or geographic origin, and, more importantly, that aliases can offer insight into social networks and self-fashioning. As such, scholars should include names in databases and other digital history projects, but only if ethical concerns can be addressed and resolved.

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Guardianship and Records of Marginalized Children

After the 1848 French emancipation law came into effect in Senegal, officials worried that recently freed children, especially those without parents, might threaten stability and economic productivity in the colony. The French administration responded in April 1849 by establishing a system of guardianship for these liberated minors, entrusting them to local notables who took on responsibility for liberated minors' well-being and education or training in return for rights to their labor. During the decades that followed, a significant number of unaccompanied minors were among the 28,930 enslaved people who left their enslavers in areas where slavery remained legal to seek recognition of their freedom in Saint-Louis, Dakar and other towns and outposts under direct French control. Officials thus relied on the guardianship system to ensure basic maintenance and training for these children. Still more children entered guardianship as victims of trafficking, as slave traders used the system to obscure an illegal trade in enslaved children into the colonial capital and other towns.^[1] It is difficult to quantify the total number of children who entered guardianship, but Martin Klein has estimated that 1,019 children entered the system from 1872 to 1885, and I have identified over five hundred children recorded between 1849 and 1874 and at least 1,620 recorded from 1895 to 1911, when the practice seems to have ended (M3, ANS; [Duke Bryant 2019a]).^[2]

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From its creation in 1849 until its disappearance sometime in the 1910s, guardianship generated records — in varying degrees of detail and at a range of intervals (and sometimes with years-long gaps) — about the children it was meant to supervise. At a minimum, these records consisted of the names of children and their guardians and basic demographics, since officials needed this information as they tried to administer the colony with the trappings of modern bureaucracy. For a little over a decade, guardianship councils in both Saint-Louis and in Gorée worked to identify unaccompanied minors — not only those who had officially received liberation from slavery, but also orphans and abandoned children — and to select their guardians. Instructed to submit an annual report to the governor each year, the president of the guardianship council, a position assigned to the assistant mayor in each town, would have needed to keep track of these children. There is some evidence in Senegal's archives that Mr. Hericé, president of the Saint-Louis guardianship council from 1849 to 1855, made at least a half-hearted effort to do this during his first few years in the role. An 1857 reform required the presidents of the councils to collect specific information, enter it into a register, and publish it in the official newspaper, the *Moniteur du Sénégal*. Another reform in 1862 dissolved the councils altogether, giving the head of the judicial service responsibility for placements, oversight, and maintaining records, with the help of auxiliaries in Gorée and certain French posts. Although Frédéric Carrère seems to have produced copious documentation of guardianship during his tenure as head of the judicial service in the 1850s and 1860s, a series of his successors fell short in their record-keeping duties, as the lieutenant governor complained in 1903 and as research in Senegal's archives today will confirm.^[3] I have not located any records for Gorée during this period (Arrêté, 13 Apr. 1849, M3, ANS; [Moitt 2011]; [Moitt 2024]).

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In the early twentieth century, in the context of France's increasing discomfort with domestic slave trading and slavery itself in French West Africa, Lieutenant Governor Camille Guy and Governor General Ernest Roume undertook an investigation of guardianship. It was an open secret that many notables had abused guardianship, which had long functioned as a cover for a continued trade in enslaved children to French-controlled territories. Once trafficked, these children could be “liberated”, entrusted to a guardian, and then required to work for their keep. Guy argued that a long history of poor record-keeping had hamstrung oversight and allowed this exploitation, and Roume seemed to agree. Indeed, in two reforms of guardianship in 1903 and 1904, Roume sought to address abuses by improving the state's knowledge of and surveillance over liberated minors, a responsibility he delegated to newly created guardianship surveillance commissions (Lieutenant Gouverneur to Gouverneur Général, 4 May 1904, K23, ANS; Arrêté, 24 Nov. 1903, SEN/XIV/28bis, ANOM; [Duke Bryant 2020]; [Moitt 2024]) .

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The commissions' first task, undertaken in 1904, was to track down all the liberated minors entrusted to guardians since 1895, to update and correct their records, and to take note of their current situation. After that, commissions were to convene — first monthly, and then on a quarterly basis — summoning dozens of liberated minors to appear at each meeting so that their health, living circumstances, and status as a minor could be ascertained and documented. The Saint-Louis commission functioned regularly from 1904 until at least 1910, producing fascinating and occasionally rich documentation of guardianship in its final years. The commission in Dakar likewise left some records, as did the *cercle* commandants who supervised guardianship in places like Podor, Kaolack, Dagana, and Kedougou [Duke Bryant 2019a]. Much completer and more numerous for the early twentieth century than for the earlier period, the registers and lists maintained by the surveillance commissions during these years form the core data sets for my database, which includes over 1620 minors who entered guardianship in 1895 or later.

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Particularly important is a register the administration produced in May 1904 as it attempted to track down all liberated minors who had entered guardianship since 1895 and update their information or — if they had reached majority, married, had a child, or died — remove them from guardianship. Seventy pages long, the register is arranged chronologically by date of liberation, with one row of information completed for each minor arranged under these column headings: number-order; date of liberation name and birthplace of the freed person; their age [at liberation]; birthplace; name, profession, and dwelling of the persons to whom the minor under 18 years was entrusted; and observations. It includes 935 names of children liberated from 1895 through 1899 and in 1904; 1900 through 1903 are missing (Liste des mineurs, H(S)173, ANS).^[4] Only a subset of the many more adults and accompanied children liberated from slavery during these years, these numbers reflect the intensity of enslavement, slave trading, and illegal trafficking in children ongoing in Senegal and the wider region at the turn of the twentieth century.

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What makes this dataset particularly compelling and unique is its ability to trace change over time and to offer multiple datapoints — each representing an encounter between a liberated minor and a member of the administration or guardianship commission — for at least 375 children, thanks to the existence of additional source material and, most usefully, a series of lists entitled something like this: “Inventory [état] of liberated minors entrusted in Saint-Louis and for whom the Commission established by the 30 November 1903 ordinance for the surveillance and protection of said minors, must observe the presence, along with the material and moral situation during the month of [MONTH 19__]”. The archive contains at least twenty-nine such lists recorded at monthly and then quarterly meetings held in Saint-Louis from October 1904 through November 1910. Each list includes names of and information about the 41 to 70 liberated minors whose guardians responded to a summons and appeared, with the minor in question, before the guardianship commission for evaluation. The commission filled out hand-drawn standardized tables for the first few years but switched to a machine-printed version in 1906 and 1907; the tables essentially copied the column headings used in the register described above, meaning that there is considerable consistency in the approach to recording data.^[5] This feature of the data, which allows scholars to follow some liberated minors over a decade or longer and to sketch stories about their lives, makes it particularly useful to scholars of childhood and of post-emancipation societies, and it sets this dataset apart from many digital history projects in a similar vein (such as those that make up Enslaved.org) which aggregate data generated in single encounters.

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All records of liberated minors are handwritten and though the documents themselves are in good condition, the

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readability of the handwriting varies. In addition, French officials, often unfamiliar with African names, recorded them using phonetic spellings and likely did so with at least some variation, which researchers must try to identify and address. Indeed, although the association of each person with an order-number was meant to promote accuracy and consistency in the register and inventories, researchers could easily reproduce errors made by members of the commission or administration, or introduce new errors related to readability or other difficulties with the documents. Even so, the dataset has remarkable potential to reveal certain details about children's lives and experiences in post-emancipation Senegal and their encounters with the colonial state through the guardianship system.

When creating my database, which currently exists as a prototype in spreadsheet software (Microsoft Excel and Google Sheets), I reproduced some organizational elements from the original register and inventories, but also added numerous fields that allowed me to combine information from multiple sources and to track certain details that helped me answer specific research questions about children's everyday lives. The case in my database is the individual liberated minor, and I included every name I found as I conducted research across at least nine dossiers in Senegal's archives and in published sources (i.e., this is not a subset of a larger record). Thus, as in the original documents, there are columns corresponding to each minor's date of liberation, name (separated into given and family name), birthplace, age at liberation, details about their guardian, and observations. To this, I added fields where I could record information about subsequent guardians (since many liberated minors were reassigned at some point), and dates of subsequent appearances before the surveillance commission along with additional observations made at those appearances. I also inserted fields to track information that I generated through interpretation, including whether minors were male or female, were returned for reassignment, ran away, reached majority, had a baby, married, were sent to prison, traveled to France with a guardian, received an apprenticeship, died, or — most important for this essay — used an alias or changed their name. Children who entered guardianship before 1895 are not currently part of this database because officials kept records very differently in the early period. Performing more interpretive work on the records from 1849 to 1874 and adding at least one field to track children's status (liberated minor, “free”, apprentice, orphan, etc.), would allow me to include even more records in the future.

I developed these fields as I read thousands of entries about liberated minors, and I think they, and the database they organize, work well as a point of departure. To move toward making this a public-facing digital humanities project, I would need to complete a number of tasks related to digital data generation and organization: cleaning up existing data, exploring options for more user-friendly software, and developing a comprehensive metadata application profile, to name a few. I would also need to revisit the research and interpretation, preferably with a research team well-versed in the French language and in Senegalese naming conventions, to better address the handwriting difficulties and phonetic spellings mentioned above, to develop best practices for representing marginalia and markings added by officials who reviewed these records, and to establish a method for cross-referencing other kinds of documents (such as letters or reports) in which names from the database appear. The most important challenge, however, and the issue I explore in the rest of this essay, relates to ethics — namely the ethics of making public the names of children who were once enslaved.

Names and History Writing in Senegal

As my description of the records of Senegal's liberated minors makes clear, these sources feature *names* — names of the formerly enslaved, names of their guardian(s), and, in rarer instances, names of other people who were or who became important to them. These *specific* names are valuable data in and of themselves, since analysis of their geographic or linguistic origins or their appearance across multiple sources could offer insight into the demographics of post-emancipation Senegal, social networks and connections in specific urban areas, and other themes. Name changes or aliases captured in the documentation could, as I suggest in the following section, raise questions about what prompted them and open new avenues to consider children's actions and experiences.^[6] The inclusion of names can also work as commemoration, by naming people who were previously nameless in our historical accounts and in official public memory [Araujo 2021, 39–40]. Yet although digitizing these names could support scholarly endeavors and activists working among people with slave ancestry, making them publicly available could also subject descended communities to shame, discrimination, or other harms given the continued stigma of slave descent found in many West

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African communities. After an exploration of one line of historical inquiry about names in Senegal — the use of aliases by liberated minors — which illustrates some of the benefits accrued to historical knowledge by naming names, I reflect on some of the ethical issues that would emerge were I to make my database public.

We might read the inclusion of names — of the self, of family members, of places significant to life experience — in records related to slavery or other marginalized statuses as powerful assertions of personhood, claims to memory, or indicators of identity or origin. As Pier Larson pointed out in an essay on narratives of enslavement by Africans enslaved as children, narrators often remembered their parents and homes and could sometimes name them [Larson 2008]. Goodwin et al. make a similar point in their analysis of the Senegal slave liberation registers, noting that fifty-two percent of “unaccompanied minors” were able to state both parents’ names at liberation [Goodwin et al. 2021]. This adds nuance to Orlando Patterson’s argument that slavery produced “social death”, by emphasizing the importance of the memory of kin and community [Patterson 1982]. Given that the information included in the guardianship records seems to have been collected from formerly enslaved children themselves, the entries can allow some insight into what — and who — these children remembered and how they identified themselves. To explore these themes, users of a digital history project would need to access the names as they appeared in the documents.

My liberated minors database revealed that name changes or aliases were strikingly common in this population, since records for at least 114 of the 1324 Saint-Louis liberated minors included one. Indicated with “dit” or “dite” (i.e., “known as”) before the new name, none of the records indicate who chose the alias or who decided to notify the guardianship council of its use, and the timing of their introduction into the records varied. The May 1904 register of liberated minors includes approximately thirty records that mention an alias, suggesting that the child was already using the name when the register was compiled (Liste des mineurs..., May 1904, H(S)173, ANS; Liberated Minors Database). Other aliases were introduced into the records later — sometimes only after the child had appeared before the commission several times. Given that naming and renaming was an act of power or empowerment, claimed by enslavers and often reclaimed by emancipated people, the introduction of aliases into the guardianship council records raises questions about power, agency, and identity. Especially when combined with other sources related to guardianship, these records provide hints of what might have been formerly enslaved children’s strategies to reclaim names and possibly also identities.

Of the 114 aliases introduced into the liberated minor registry, thirty-one were French names. In all but about three cases, the liberated minors who came to be known by French aliases, such as Marie, Madeleine, or Pierre, had been entrusted to *métis*, or French guardians. Those entrusted to African guardians overwhelmingly went by African or Muslim aliases (some 65 cases), while only about ten liberated minors with French or *métis* guardians were known by African or Muslim names. These trends prompt questions about who selected the aliases and why. Did French guardians assign French names as an indication of the power they held over liberated minors, thus continuing the naming practices we associate with slavery? Did they choose French names for their wards because they did not care to learn to pronounce or to have to remember African names? Could the decision have represented an effort to promote assimilation or inclusion within the household? We could pose similar questions about aliases that originated in the region or were linked to Islam. Did African guardians choose aliases with local significance to assert control over wards whose names suggested foreign origins and ethnicities (such as Bambara)? Or did they do so as a sign of affection, assimilation, or inclusion? Were liberated minors placed with Wolof guardians, for example, more likely to use Wolof aliases? Regarding *all* name changes, is it possible that the children themselves initiated them? Could the use of an alias have been a strategy for obscuring their past and avoiding stigma? Could it perhaps represent affection or belonging?

As noted above, the records suggest that many liberated minors began using an alias at some point long after their liberation and after their first appearance before the guardianship commission, though the later introduction of an alias could simply reflect council members’ efforts to correct wrong or incomplete records. For example, young Souvergné, thought to be five at the time of her liberation on 20 September 1898, appeared at least twice in the registers of the Saint-Louis guardianship commission — in May 1904 and July 1905 — without an alias. Her entry for September 1906, however, indicated that she was now “called Aram”. Her guardian, M. Boubou, a court orderly, and his wife, Mme. Boubou (who became Souvergné/Aram’s official guardian in March 1900), may have been *métis*, since Africans were

not usually assigned these titles of respect (Monsieur and Madame) in the registers. The alias, Aram, appears to derive from an Arabic/Muslim name, raising the question of whether Souvergné/Aram selected the name herself, or whether her guardians assigned it to her. By 1907, she had had a baby, and the register indicated that her name should be stricken from the list of those under guardianship. This final reference to her did not include “dite Aram” (this is atypical, since for most other liberated minors who took on aliases, each subsequent entry repeated the “dit” or “dite” language) (Liberated Minors Database). Might this indicate that she stopped using the name after having her baby, or that she planned to stop using it when removed from guardianship? Of course, these questions cannot be definitively answered by these sources alone, but they move us forward by encouraging us to ask them.

Although most aliases consisted only of a first name (*prénom*), a few records include alternative first and surnames, sometimes the family name of the liberated minor's guardian. For example, on 2 August 1898, authorities recognized the liberty of a young girl who had come from “the Bambaras” and was estimated to be five years old, recording her name as Nanténé. It appears that the girl continued to go by Nanténé for her first nine or ten years as the ward of Coumba M'Bissine Gueye, a laundress in N'Dar Toute. Records of her appearance in April 1905 before the Saint-Louis commission indicate only that she was “well-kept and happy” and say nothing about an alias. But the next time she appeared in the commission's records, in October 1906, a note added to the “observation” column indicated that she went by the name of Séga. This alias and a notation that she was doing fine appeared in the five additional entries recorded in 1907, 1908, and 1909, and the fourth-quarter entry for 1909 indicated that she achieved majority by virtue of having had a child. Before her removal from guardianship, however, Nanténé/Séga had begun complaining (along with some other liberated minors and guardians) about the frequency with which she had to come before the commission, and in September 1909, she submitted a letter to the commission to this effect. Strikingly, the letter gave her name as “Siga Gueye, daughter of Mme. Koumba Mbisine” and referred to her guardian as her “mother” (Liberated Minors Database; 17 Sep. 1909, Siga Gueye, fille de Mme. Koumba Mbisine à N'Dar Toute to President Tribunal, H(S)178, ANS; [Duke Bryant 2019b, 42–43]). We cannot be sure about authorship, power relations, or other circumstances surrounding the creation of this letter. Yet the incorporation of the guardian's surname into the liberated minor's alias raises the question of whether this reflected fictive kinship between Nanténé/Séga and her guardian, the guardian's claim to rights in the girl, or something else entirely.

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In rare cases, I have been able to triangulate sources, tracking a liberated minor through the records of the guardianship commission meetings *and* in other kinds of evidence, especially police records and letters from guardians, that allow for more extended insight into a particular moment of the child's life. Perhaps the most exciting example is the case of a girl whose name was recorded in the guardianship records as Boyerika at the time that she was liberated in August 1902, at the approximate age of seven.^[7] Her story is fascinating because, though she ultimately took or received an alias, a later police report suggested that she continued to go by Boyerika, the name she had given to officials at liberation, raising compelling questions about self-fashioning among formerly enslaved people.

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After her liberation, Boyerika was entrusted to Mlle. Maria Lacoste of Saint-Louis, a woman whose family name, use of the title Mademoiselle, and residence in the predominantly Christian “Sud” neighborhood of Saint-Louis suggest that she was French or *métisse*. When Boyerika appeared before the commission in December 1905, commissioners reported that she was doing well and appeared to be twelve or thirteen years old, but they made no note of an alias or name change. In their next record, however, dated November 1906, commissioners wrote that she was “called Fanny”, and this alias appeared in six of the other seven entries recorded through 1910 (Liberated Minors Database). Yet other correspondence, generated outside the space of the commission, suggests that she continued to be called Boyerika.

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In April 1909, a Mr. Leconte contacted the secretary general to request permission to take Boyerika *dite* Fanny with him when he returned to France. He noted that the administration had entrusted the girl to him following Mlle. Lacoste's death some time before and that he, in turn, had sent his ward to stay with Limali Diop, a carpenter's wife, while he traveled out of the colony.^[8] Before granting the request, the secretary general corresponded used the margins of Mr. Leconte's letter to ask another official for more information. In his response, which explained that Limalé Diop had given the girl to M. and Mme. Leconte to accompany them to France and that the liberated minor would return to the African woman upon her return, the official broke convention and referred to the girl *only* as Boyerika (no “*dite* Fanny”; 23 Apr.

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Similarly, in January 1911, the police commissioner used only the name “Boyerika” in communication with the lieutenant governor about his efforts to track down nine liberated minors who had not appeared before the commission's most recent meeting. Boyerika's case is particularly interesting, because of both the variation in how the commissioner referred to her and the news he learned about her. She appeared on the lieutenant governor's list as “Boyerika, *dite* Fanny, 16” and the first part of the commissioner's comments repeated this formulation. Limalé Diop, he wrote, claimed that she had given the summons to “the minor Bayérika *dite* Fanny” and had expected her to appear before the commission on her own. Next, the commissioner shared information he claimed to have learned from the girl herself, and he rendered her name differently as he summarized the justification she had provided: “Bayérika declares that she left Abdou Diop [Limalé's husband], because she was not well cared for, and she took refuge with Doïner Diop, living in Nord”. According to Bayérika, she simply forgot to visit the commission (Liste des mineurs, Réunion 21 Jan. 1911, H(S)178, ANS; 4 Feb. 1911, Commissaire de Police to Secrétaire Général, H(S)178, ANS).

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It is significant, I think, that these sources imply tensions between what the guardians (at least those who were French or *métis*) called this liberated minor and her own apparent name preference. This constellation of documents offers glimpses of some of the ways marginalized people may have engaged in self-fashioning and encourages us to take names and naming seriously, as a possible method of not only restoring names of enslaved people to history, but also learning about how they may have shaped their daily lives. Indeed, the specifics of names and name changes — their association with a particular ethnicity, religion, region, or community; their commonality as chosen nicknames, and so on — are datapoints that we can use as we try to better understand ordinary experiences in early twentieth-century Senegal. Attention to names and aliases might also lead us to consider how people navigated a colonial regime that valued fixed and recorded identities. In these ways, the specificity of names, whether given, inherited, selected, or imposed, can be central to a historical methodology and would need to be known to the researcher to be used as such. This aspect of my database and analysis — which tracks multiple contacts between individual formerly enslaved children and representatives of the state over time and which takes seriously shifts in how the names were recorded — might serve as a model to others working on similar kinds of digital history projects.

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Names and Ethics

Using the actual names of marginalized people in the past raises important ethical concerns related to potential effects on descendants living today and the need to avoid reinscribing the oppression and epistemic violence that is so often contained within the colonial archive [Risam 2018, 47–48]. Digital history projects encourage much wider circulation of data and analysis than traditional academic publications — this is a central goal of the digital humanities — and we therefore cannot assume that creators can predict who will use the information and to what end. This fact has led many digital humanists to decide against including sensitive material in publicly accessible projects, and this precedent raises questions about how to handle names of formerly enslaved people in West Africa. It is well known that stigma associated with enslaved ancestry can affect people's status, marriage prospects, and access to resources, and that it may drive them to remain in patronage relationships. Scholars have explored some of the ways that descendants of enslaved people in West Africa have tried to improve their status — by hiding their enslaved origins, seeking to rehabilitate them, or renegotiating relationships with former enslavers or patrons [Klein 1998] [Klein 2009] [Rossi 2009] [Schmitz 2009]. Digital humanities projects that provide searchable databases of names of the (formerly) enslaved might facilitate these efforts of rehabilitation or might assist in people's efforts to trace family history, but they could also have the unfortunate and unintended consequence of reinforcing stigma or revealing descendants' previously hidden origins in slavery. Yet on the other hand, Lotte Pelckmans has found that some Ful'be living in contemporary Mali have sought to obscure enslaved ancestry partly by changing their names, suggesting that a project like mine could provide useful information about historical precedents and contexts.

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Creating a publicly accessible database of names of liberated minors in Senegal also raises ethical questions related to knowledge production and reproduction. Because it would bring names of formerly enslaved people into an online public space, we could view such a digital database as a monument to those who were enslaved, a virtual “wall of names” that could, if done right, help “rehumanize” enslaved people by naming them and providing biographical information

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about them. In this way, it could contribute to the project of “recovery” that Kim Gallon positions as a central concern of Black digital humanities. But, to extend to the digital arena, Ana Lucia Araujo's critique of the lists of names of enslaved people that appear in many physical sites memorializing slavery, a database would fail to achieve this if it presented only names and skeletal information and if descendants of the people named were not involved. Indeed, as Araujo and others point out, most records pertaining to slavery (and by extension, to recognition of individuals' emancipation), such as plantation inventories, bills of sale, ship logs, and insurance records, represent the perspectives of enslavers and slave traders [Araujo 2021, 39–40, 52–67] [Gallon 2016]. The case I focus on here is a little different, since these records were produced not by enslavers but by colonial officials tasked with recognizing liberation from slavery in an orderly way. But the fact that French officials pitched better record-keeping as a key strategy to reform guardianship in 1903 and 1904 underscores the extent to which they viewed collection of data as a technique of governance and colonial power. Thus, the information they collected reflected colonial preoccupations, as did its organization and preservation, and uncritical replication of it could reinscribe colonial power structures.

Scholars who rely on the colonial archive have long sought to challenge their internal logics and power structures by adopting an expansive approach to archival research, reading sources against the grain, and asking questions that the data was not necessarily intended to address [Stoler 2009] [Burton 2005] [Donlon 2021], but digital projects must go farther. In her recent book on postcolonial approaches to the digital humanities, Roopika Risam calls upon scholars to work in a way that avoids merely replicating colonial archives — and therefore the “epistemic violence” of continued omission and marginalization — in digital form [Risam 2018, 56–60]. Postcolonial digital archives, she suggests, can become projects that invite users to draw on their own knowledge and resources while engaging with content in innovative ways, perhaps by contributing annotations, suggesting alternative organizational frameworks, tagging materials, or identifying related content. She also suggests that deeply engaged tagging and cross-referencing — of complete sources and, when possible, the component parts of longer sources — might allow people to make new connections between items cataloged in different files or held in different archives. Projects might even incorporate digitization of items from private collections or museums, or they might rely on cultural knowledge — solicited, freely given, and acknowledged — of people living in the places under study to interpret or explain records in a digital collection.

A recent study of the names of liberated Africans, which were recorded at the same time that British and international courts worked to combat the illegal transatlantic slave trade in the first half of the nineteenth century, provides one model for engaging a broader public in the production of knowledge. Researchers put out a public call for help identifying geographic origins and cultural content of names associated with Igbo speakers, and numerous Nigerians responded with a wealth of information [Eltis et al. 2024]. By broadening the scope of historical inquiry and directly engaging the public, digital humanists can democratize access to and produce new knowledge, and I will aim to pursue this approach.

Yet this approach may be challenging. It seems relevant that historians of Senegal, several Senegalese news outlets, public intellectuals, and members of the Senegalese public have engaged in rigorous debate in recent decades about history and memory of the slave trade, but this debate has not centered on the issue of whether and how to memorialize named victims of slavery or the slave trade, or whether such marginalized people should be named in print or online. Instead, it has considered the meaning and symbolism of a UNESCO World Heritage Site on Gorée Island, the *Maison des Esclaves* (Slave House), juxtaposing its importance as a site of memory of the slave trade with the history of the transatlantic slave trade, in which the Maison figured minimally if at all. The debate has also positioned Africans only or mostly as victims of the slave trade and has paid little or no attention to the internal slave trade, to the existence of African traders, or to the incidence of slavery within Senegal. This is due, Cheikh Sene notes in a recent article, to the shame associated not only with enslaved ancestry but also with descent from slave traders, and to the intentional “forgetting” that has primed closer connections with the African diaspora and elevated Gorée in tourist circuits [Sene 2022] [Forsdick 2015]. This debate raises questions about how Senegalese intellectuals, leaders, and community members would respond to a publicly accessible database of named liberated minors. Are they simply focused on other issues, or would they find such a database offensive or painful? Would they engage or contribute to a crowdsourcing effort, when invited? Before moving forward with any plans, I would need to partner with Senegalese scholars who could

help ensure cultural appropriateness and sensitivity and who could assist with community engagement efforts.

Conclusion

This essay has offered a reflection on what (digital) historians and those who engage with their work might gain from naming names of formerly enslaved people in digital history projects, and on the ethical issues that might give them pause about revealing names. Using several examples from a database of formerly enslaved children in Senegal, it shows that names and name changes — aliases — can carry fragments of information about children's life experiences, backgrounds, and social ties. Though the names lead to more questions than answers, they are useful datapoints, especially given that we know comparatively little about the daily lives of enslaved and recently emancipated children in African history. If recorded names were replaced by pseudonyms or codes — approaches commonly used to protect research subjects' identities and safeguard their interests — researchers would not be able to duplicate the sort of analysis that I offer above.

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Using real names in an effective digital history framework with well-chosen tagging can also enable cross-referencing, allowing users to make connections between sources found in disparate parts of an archive or perhaps in different archives altogether, much like I was able to do in the case of Boyerika discussed above. The recurrence of some of these names across multiple inventories leads to a unique aspect of this database: namely, that it indexes fragments of individual children's lives derived from repeated appearances before the guardianship commission, allowing scholars to trace changes or continuities over time. And further, by connecting names of at least some formerly enslaved people to documents that reveal other aspects of their stories, whether it was the relationship cultivated with their guardian or another person, the neighborhood in which they lived, the work they performed, or something else about them, we can move beyond the “wall of names” approach that Araujo rightfully calls into question. Effective digital repositories would allow users to make these kinds of connections more easily and would also provide context, analysis, and stories that go beyond the names. In addition, by inviting users not only to read content, but also to interact with it, contributing their own stories, reactions, or analysis, a digital repository based on guardianship records could adopt an inclusive post-colonial stance. Such a dynamic collaborative project could also help activists, historians, and others respond to the need to remember domestic slavery in West Africa as a means of breaking through stigma and allowing people of enslaved descent to reclaim identities, as Eric Hahonou and Lotte Pelckmans advocate [Hahonou and Pelckmans 2012].^[9]

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Ethical issues go beyond concerns about reproducing the logics of the colonial archive, however. Since enslaved ancestry carries stigma in many West African societies still today, scholars need to consider whether a public-facing digital database could be used to connect contemporary West Africans to enslaved ancestors and how this might affect people today. Thus, any public database or other digital history project that includes names of enslaved or formerly enslaved people in West Africa must be done in close cooperation with partners in the region to minimize the possibility of stigma or other harm, to promote cultural sensitivity, and to work toward decolonizing digital history. Such a project could democratize access to the information, allow others to engage in related research, and contribute to the important work of highlighting Black histories in digital spaces. Perhaps most importantly, if ethical concerns can be resolved in collaboration with local partners, names offer potentially rich insights into moments in ordinary — even marginalized — people's lives and digital tools allow us more effectively to trace and connect the fragments.

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Archival Sources

- 1F-Police et sûreté
- H-Santé et assistance publique
- K-Travail et main d'oeuvre, esclavage
- M-Justice

- SEN/XIV-Travail et main d'oeuvre

Notes

[1] Saint-Louis, Gorée, several French outposts along rivers or the coast, and eventually also Rufisque and Dakar. Officials recorded names, approximate ages or birth years, and a variety of other demographic information for each person they liberated, producing a wealth of historical documentation that scholars can now use to learn a lot about slavery and emancipation in Senegal, as Goodwin et al. have explored in an initial article on their ongoing digital humanities project utilizing the Senegal Liberation Registers. Furthermore, Goodwin et al. found that "unaccompanied minors" accounted for 16% of all people seeking liberation from 1894 to 1903, the period with the richest data [Goodwin et al. 2021].

[2] The guardianship registers for the earlier period (1849 to 1874) include children with a wider range of identities and social positions — orphans, apprentices, and liberated minors — and it is often very difficult to determine an individual's status based on the information given. My numbers for the earlier period are therefore necessarily estimates. The Archives Nationales du Sénégal catalogs do not include guardianship registers for 1874 to 1895, which may mean that they were not preserved.

[3] While the records for this period include one list of liberated minors, organized alphabetically by name, which was meant to include everyone who entered guardianship prior to 1864, most of the records were organized by date or by claim (*reclamation*, i.e., a request made by a resident to obtain guardianship over a child or to arrange apprenticeship, a complaint about a ward, a change in guardianship, etc.). See file M3, ANS.

[4] The full title of this document is "Liste des mineurs délivrés de la captivité et confiés à la tutelle de M. le Procureur Général, Chef du Service Judiciaire depuis l'année 1895". There were only 24 minors with liberation dates in 1904, since the program was on its way out by then; the number of children entering guardianship in the other years ranges from a low of 166 in 1899 to a peak of 199 in 1896.

[5] These "inventories" are found in the following files in the Archives Nationales du Sénégal (ANS): H(S)173, H(S)174, H(S)176, H(S)177, and H(S)178; the initial census of liberated minors, conducted in May 1904, is in H(S)173. Other sorts of documents in these files and in H(S)175, H(S)206, 1F1, and K23 provide additional qualitative data about specific liberated minors and are incorporated into the database as well.

[6] Similarly, Margaret Williamson argues that scholars can learn a lot about enslaved persons in Jamaica through careful analysis of inventories and lists of names [Williamson 2017]. She suggests, much like I do below, that the use of certain kinds of names may have resulted from agency on the part of enslaved people.

[7] "Boyerika" appears numerous times in the guardianship registers in this form, though I think it is more likely to be a combination of two or more shorter names. One possibility is that the final syllable, "ka", was the surname Ka or Kâ, a common name in the region associated with Peul people. "Boye" is a Peul given name meaning long awaited, and I am unsure what to make of the middle "ri" syllable in this rendering. See Association Nationale pour La Promotion des Patrimoines Sénégalais, <http://www.facebook.com/988756457973749/posts/1652304014952320/> (Accessed: 22 August 2020).

[8] The records are a bit confusing, since the commission registers say nothing of Mr. Leconte, indicating only that by October 1908, Boyerika's guardian had changed from Mlle. Lacoste to the wife of carpenter Limalé Diop.

[9] A model digital history project might be the Jamaican Slave Names Project, <http://jamaicanslavenames.com/>.

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