

Reflections on the Ethics of Research with the Registers of Liberated Africans in the Indian Ocean

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Abstract

This paper examines ethical issues related to the use of the registers of liberated Africans in the Indian Ocean for historical research. The registers provide rich details about the physical appearance (height, age, facial scarification, brands, tattoos) and origins (language, ethnicity or “caste”, mother’s name, father’s name) of liberated Africans. They also reveal aspects about their treatment at the hands of colonial officials, including the individuals to whom the Africans were indentured, the work they performed, and the new names that were assigned to them. Such details make these registers invaluable sources for historians, but they also present ethical challenges. In the Indian Ocean world, some descendants may take pride in their liberated African ancestors, and claims to liberated African ancestors can have important implications for claims to land and status, yet others may prefer that information be lost to what Pier Larson called “the countervailing forces of historical amnesia” [Larson 1999]. Containing intimate personal information that may permit investigation into both the origins and the descendants of enslaved Africans, registers may also be considered sources of biometric data. As such, should they be subject to the ethical standards applied to biometric data in the sciences? This paper explores a model for the ethical use of historical biometric (DNA) data from Australia as an example of what historians might consider emulating when making use of registers of liberated Africans in the digital humanities.

On August 10, 1860, the HMS *Brisk*, a British Royal Navy sloop-of-war patrolling the waters between Mozambique and Madagascar, spotted the Cuban slave ship *Manuella* sailing from Zanzibar to Havana. The *Brisk* pursued and captured the slave ship and, on boarding, discovered that the *Manuella* was carrying 846 African captives — making it one of the largest slave ships ever captured. The African captives found on board were taken to Mauritius, where they became known as “liberated Africans” — the term British officials applied to Africans removed from slave ships by the Royal Navy. Despite the misleading nomenclature, “liberated Africans” were not released on the island to live independently. They were placed into indentured servitude as “laborers”, “domestic servants”, or “apprentices to trades” for terms up to 14 years.

The captives aboard the *Manuella* were part of a global phenomenon. Between 1808 and 1897, the British Royal Navy captured more than 2,800 slave ships and removed more than 188,000 enslaved Africans from vessels in the Atlantic and Indian Ocean [Lovejoy 2024]. More than 20,000 of these Africans were captured aboard slave ships like the *Manuella* in the Indian Ocean. As in the Atlantic world, liberated Africans in the Indian Ocean were never simply released near their place of capture. Instead, they were transported to the closest court of adjudication where slave ships could be tried and condemned, and where Africans could be registered and placed into indenture contracts. Although the *Act of Abolition* (1807) may have envisioned indenture as a method to provide training in marketable skills that would enable these captives to earn an independent living in a colonial economy, in reality most liberated Africans were placed into menial positions as domestic servants or agricultural laborers, just as if they had been enslaved [Hopper 2020] [Domingues da Silva et al. 2014]. Today, an original register of the liberated Africans from the *Manuella* is preserved in a volume at the Indian Immigration Archive at the Mahatma Gandhi Institute in Mauritius. It contains personal information about each of the captives. For example, a 9-year-old boy who was landed at Mauritius from the

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Manuella in September 1860 and given the colonial name “Jacob” was listed as four feet tall. The register tells us that his birth name was Nungamooliah, his father's name was Chembinday, he had a distinctive brand seared into the flesh of his right arm in the shape of the letter “G”, and he became “Engaged to Mr de Courson as domestic servant” (MGI, PE 161).

As part of a wider study, I use registers like the 1860 volume from the *Manuella* to explore the lives of African captives removed from slave ships around the Indian Ocean. I examine the collective experience of formerly enslaved people who lived through the trauma of enslavement, dislocation, and an oceanic journey only to have that journey interrupted and then be transferred to another foreign ship and carried to another foreign destination. These “liberated Africans” experienced traumas of extraordinary scale, and survivors demonstrated extraordinary resilience. To identify the origins of these individuals and learn their stories after their captures, I examine the details of the registers of liberated Africans from archives around the Indian Ocean, including the Mahatma Gandhi Institute in Mauritius, which contains complete registers from 1856 to 1869 kept alongside the registers of indentured laborers who arrived contemporaneously from South Asia. Most registers of “liberated Africans” include birth names and/or newly assigned colonial names, and sometimes the names of fathers or mothers. These names offer potential to help identify the ethnic groups to which enslaved Africans belonged, as has been done with the registers from Sierra Leone [Domingues da Silva et al. 2014].

Some Indian Ocean registers also include detailed drawings of individuals' distinctive markings, including brands, but also facial scarification and tattooing, which can be compared with nineteenth-century ethnographic work to identify further clues about origins in East Africa. The registers at the Western Cape Archives in Cape Town, for example, contain carefully drawn patterns of scarification for captives delivered between 1843 and 1851. And, although the original registers created by the Collectors of Customs at Mauritius for approximately 30 ships taken to Mauritius between 1811 and 1825 do not appear to have not survived in Mauritius, copies of nearly all of these registers have been preserved in the records of the High Court of Admiralty (HCA 35 and HCA 37) and the Colonial Office (CO 167) in the National Archives in Kew (UK). The registers created by Hart Davis, the Collector of Customs in the 1820s, contain particularly detailed drawings of facial scarification like those at the Cape. The registers from the 1870s and 1880s from one of the other major places liberated Africans were taken — the Seychelles — even include individual photographs of the African captives, the majority of whom are children.

Registers therefore present unique opportunities for historians exploring the origins and lives of enslaved African communities around the Indian Ocean. Registers often contain the names of individuals to whom Africans were indentured, offering the potential to trace their whereabouts years after they arrived. The biographical information contained in registers, including birth names, colonial names, names of parents, ages, height, distinguishing marks, and sometimes ethnic descriptors, can provide clues to help trace aspects of their personal lives, as these individuals often later reappear in marriage, birth, death records, and other colonial correspondence, including, occasionally, police records when they ran afoul of the law or absconded from their indentures. Historians can use the serial data contained in these registers to draw broader conclusions about the experiences of enslavement in the Indian Ocean in the nineteenth century and investigate the stories of the individuals described in them. A remarkable recent example of such a study is Sue Peabody's microhistory of liberated Africans taken from a French slave ship called the *Succès*, which was captured by the HMS *Menai* and taken to Mauritius in 1821. By tabulating the details from the register of 324 Africans removed from the *Succès*, Peabody is able to draw general conclusions about the average ages and heights of the people on board as well as their survival rates and employment records. Even more intriguingly, she is also able to link the entries of names in the register to personal stories that she traces through other archival sources, including two men, Akoïsira and Songore, whom she follows longitudinally for over a decade using colonial records such as the reports of the Protector of Slaves. And (with appropriate caveats about the limitations of the sources) Peabody also uses the names and detailed drawings of facial scarification in the registers to make preliminary conclusions about the ethnic origins of some of the people held captive aboard the *Succès* [Peabody 2022].

Registers of liberated Africans provide personal details that are essential for my research but that would also potentially benefit other historians as well as genealogists and descendants seeking information on their ancestors. If these registers were made widely available to the public in a digital format, they may generate popular interest, and for these reasons I have considered creating a public digital humanities project. However, I have not done so in part because I

have been weighing some of the ethical challenges that these registers present. In this article, I explore some ethical considerations for using the registers of liberated Africans, and I look to an example of scientific work from Australia for a possible model for working with these unique sources. I ask whether historians' use of these registers, which contain what might be considered biometric data and sometimes include drawings and photographs, should follow ethical guidelines designed by population geneticists or other scientists who work with other forms of biometric data, particularly when this research may involve making the registers publicly available online through digital humanities projects.

Registers of Liberated Africans and Biometric Data

Historians of the slave trade have long highlighted the problematic nature of the term “liberated Africans”, since the conditions they experienced in no way resembled what we might today consider liberty. They labored for colonial governments or for colonial subjects for periods of up to 14 years in coercive conditions with little if any compensation. In recent years, a substantial body of literature has emerged exploring the lives of “liberated Africans” around the Atlantic world, with particular attention focused on Sierra Leone. The term “liberated Africans” was coined as a phrase that was intentionally passive, and it reveals less about the conditions of people themselves than it does about the troubling perception among nineteenth-century British officials who assumed that by preventing Africans' enslavement, Great Britain was entitled to their labor and their gratitude [Scanlan 2017] [Anderson 2020] [Anderson and Lovejoy 2020]. In the Indian Ocean, liberated Africans were transported to seven main port cities — Cape Town, Mauritius, Zanzibar, Mombasa, Aden, the Seychelles, and Bombay (and smaller numbers were taken to Muscat, Reunion, Suwakin, and Durban) — places where there was often significant demand for their labor. Drawing on archival research in Zanzibar, Mauritius, Cape Town, the Seychelles, and the UK, my project aims to trace the lives of liberated Africans (hereafter used without quotations) from their origins in East Africa to their final destinations around the Indian Ocean.

Although ending the East African slave trade became Europe's *cause célèbre* by the second half of the nineteenth century, the stories of liberated Africans themselves were largely lost amid the fanfare of the Royal Navy's antislavery campaign. Assigned to labor as field hands or domestic servants in British colonies, liberated Africans appear only marginally in colonial sources and rarely in the histories of slavery in the Indian Ocean. At times, liberated Africans tested the limits of British imperial attitudes toward slavery, and at other times they provided symbolic justification for imperialism [Anderson and Lovejoy 2020]. The question of “disposing” (a revealing term used by colonial officials at the time) of liberated Africans presented a persistent problem for imperial officials who were equally wary of releasing survivors near the sites of their capture, where they might be re-enslaved, as they were of paying for their upkeep. Throughout the nineteenth century, mortality rates among liberated Africans remained high — in the 1860s, at least a third died within a few years of arrival. And in each of the places they were taken, the lives of liberated Africans often mirrored the lives of enslaved Africans. They were renamed, re-clothed, converted to foreign religions, and taught new languages, and many labored to produce cash crops for export to global markets. This paradox was not lost on local populations. In Zanzibar, liberated Africans at Christian missions were popularly known as *Watumwa wa Waingereza* — slaves of the British [Saunders 1985] [Carter, Govinden, and Peerthum 2003] [Bromber 2001].

Colonial officials in each major destination liberated Africans were taken created registers in some form, and many of these registers are preserved today in archives around the Indian Ocean world. Registers served two primary purposes: as a form of surveillance and as a method of accounting. First, registers of liberated Africans served as a form of surveillance for newly introduced African laboring populations in British colonies. Before photography, registers created a way to identify Africans and track their movements. When a captured slave ship arrived in a British port city, responsibility generally fell upon the Collector of Customs to record the arrival of each African. In some early cases from Sierra Leone, liberated Africans were kept aboard the captured slave ship in port until the local Vice Admiralty Court or Court of Mixed Commission could adjudicate the case with a trial, which could take days or weeks depending on the complexity of the case and the availability of the judges. Once the slave ship was condemned as a “legal prize”, liberated Africans were disembarked and placed in a yard where they were arranged in separate rows of men, women, boys, and girls. A similar method was likely used at each of the sites of disembarkation in the Indian Ocean. The recaptive Africans would then have their names and personal details entered into registration books with each individual assigned to separate line with a unique number on a page below the name of the ship on which they were carried. In

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Sierra Leone, the numbers advanced sequentially from 1 to nearly 100,000 between 1808 and the 1860s. Africans who died prior to registration were usually listed nameless at the end of the ship's register. Larger slave ships contained entries that spanned many pages [Anderson 2020] [Scanlan 2017] [Schwarz 2020].

The personal details of each liberated African were recorded alongside their name and assigned number. In some places and in some periods, including Mauritius in the 1860s, liberated Africans were assigned new “Christian” (European) names alongside their birthnames. In the cases of some ships at Mauritius in the early 1860s, the new European names appear to have been assigned at random in alphabetical order. The arrivals from one capture by HMS *Sidon* on June 13, 1861, for example, included: Andrew Salimeen, Benjamin Mabrook, Charles Sadara, David Oolait, Ernest Chawawa, Frederick Cajoolajoola, George Dipeel, Henry Malizook, Isaac Matimbany, James Balzook, and Leonce Avalevalay (MGI, PE 161). These men appear to have been assigned European names in alphabetical order based on their random placement in line. Elsewhere, and in Mauritius in earlier periods, only Anglicized spellings of African names are recorded, and these are occasionally accompanied by the names of fathers or mothers, which could serve as surnames. In some of the earliest registers from Mauritius, only a single African name is given for each captive. Such is the case with the schooner *Aglaé* captured by the colonial schooner *Magnet* in 1815 (CO 167/133) as well as with the 97 personal names enumerated on the register for the English schooner *Les Deux Amis* captured by the HMS *Liverpool* near Mauritius in 1819 (HCA 37/5). These earliest registers were prepared in manuscript form, but registers by the 1860s used printed pages following standard templates.

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Alongside their names, collectors of customs also listed the particular physical details of each liberated African. After the names, the next data entry on some registers was an ethnic identification of the individual — although usually these entries included only the vaguest of estimations, either “Mozambique” or “Malagasy”, indicating whether the African captive was assumed to come from Southeast Africa or Madagascar [Alpers 2001]. In some registers this category is listed as “tribe” or “caste” — a possible reflection of the British colonial experience in India. An ethnic category of “cast” is used at least as early as the register of the *Aglaé* in 1815 (CO 167/133). By the 1860s, in Mauritius, this entry had been replaced with “Name of Father” as a secondary identifier, although registers for Mauritius and the Seychelles both ultimately settled on “Name of Mother” as a more meaningful secondary identifier as most enslaved Africans in the Mascarene islands came from matrilineal societies.

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Other data listed in the registers included age, height (in feet and inches), date of landing, date of registration, distinguishing marks, and an entry usually listed using the revealing terminology of the time: “How Disposed Of”. This final entry included the name of the British subject in the colony to whom the particular liberated African had been consigned for a period of indenture (up to 14 years) and often the type of work they would be doing. For example, in the case of the Africans aboard the HMS *Sidon* mentioned above, Andrew Salmeen was “Apprenticed to Mm Bouton as General servant”, and George Dipeel was “Apprenticed to Mm. N. Bestel as House servant” (MGI, PE 161).

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The accounting of distinguishing marks was essential as a method of surveillance in these Indian Ocean colonies. In an era before photography, the biometric data including age, stature, and distinguishing marks could help identify liberated Africans who could (and frequently did) abscond from their indentures and adopt new identities. The distinguishing marks included permanent body features that could be used to help identify individuals when ambiguities arose. These marks included patterns of facial scarification, tattooing, and other forms of body modification widely used in Southeastern Africa as cultural markers of particular ethnolinguistic groups. In some cases, the collectors of customs summarized these features in general terms (e.g., “scars all over”, “large scars on belly”). However, some collectors of customs took great care to record specific patterns of scarification. Hart Davis, Collector of Customs at Mauritius from 1819 to 1824, made several detailed registers from captured slave ships in the early 1820s such as the *Succès* and *Industry*. These detailed registers appear to have emanated from Davis's frustration with the registers created by his predecessors, who frequently used the ambiguous phrase “country marks”, which was too vague to help him in cases of contested identity (MNA, Z7B/3 ff. 147-149, Davis to Chief Secretary, 31 Aug 1821). At the Cape of Good Hope, Collector of Customs William Swan Field, who oversaw the registration of liberated Africans in the 1840s, drew the specific patterns of facial scarification and body modification of Africans from Mozambique in careful detail. Field considered the inspection of liberated Africans “a loathsome part” of his duty but also a necessary one, as the logbook he kept listing each recaptive's distinguishing marks proved to be most helpful in identifying those who would later die,

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be accused of crimes, or abscond prematurely from their indenture [Hopper 2020, 217–294].

Second, registers of liberated Africans provided the necessary documentation for the Royal Navy to receive “prize money”, the cash bounties provided to the commanders, officers, and crew of the naval vessels that captured slave ships. In this sense, registers of liberated Africans also served as a method of accounting, not dissimilar to the ledgers used by slave traders and enslavers. Beginning in 1808, crews of Royal Navy vessels were financially incentivized to pursue and seize slave ships in the Atlantic and Indian Ocean with the promise of cash bonuses for each captured slave ship and for each enslaved African removed from slave ships. In the earliest days of the Royal Navy's anti-slave trade campaign, these cash bounties were quite large. The commander, officers, and crew would divide cash bounties between them according to a formula designed for maritime prizes of war during the Napoleonic Wars. The *Act of Abolition* (1807) provided for bounties of £40 for each man, £30 for each woman, and £10 for each child removed from slave ships, resulting in sizable sums for naval crews. In 1812, the Treasury paid out £36,620 in prize money bounties (well over \$2 million today). But cash bounties would only be paid if sufficient documentation could be produced to confirm that the seizure occurred, that the ship was a legal prize, and that it was duly condemned in a Vice Admiralty Court or Court of Mixed Commission. A key component of this documentation was the register of liberated Africans, which confirmed the arrival of these captives in the colony. Registers were therefore necessary elements of the payment process for naval officers and crew and other colonial officials [Grindal 2016] [Howell 1987].

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Not all registers of liberated Africans have survived, but many have. Some are duplicated in the National Archives (UK), and many are preserved in archives in the original colonies where liberated Africans were taken. Although the originals of the earliest registers of liberated Africans for both Mauritius and Cape Town do not appear to have survived locally, many registers are duplicated in the High Court of Admiralty Records or the Colonial Office records, including some copies made from the originals at the request of the Commissioners of Eastern Enquiry (1826-28). But for the period after about 1843 in Cape Town and 1856 in Mauritius, registers preserved in the Western Cape Archives and Mahatma Gandhi Institute carefully record the vital information of liberated Africans landed at both courts.

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In some cases, such as the meticulous registers kept by W.S. Field and Hart Davis, facial scarification, tattoos, and branding have been painstakingly drawn beside each liberated African's entry. These registers provide potential for correlating particular patterns of scarification with particular ethnic groups in Tanzania, Malawi, Zambia, and Mozambique as Sue Peabody does in her important study of the *Succès* [Peabody 2022]. These markings, along with the personal names of individuals, allow for some correlation of ethnic and regional origins of captives of otherwise unknown background. Intriguingly, among Field's registers, only the volume labeled “Negroes, 24 Oct. 43 to 23 Mar 51” survives in the Western Cape Archives. Each group of captives is listed below the name of the ship on which they were captured, and each ship is assigned a sequential letter from the alphabet. The volume begins with the list of 249 captives delivered by the *Arrow* on 24 October 1843, which is assigned the letter “R”. The volume continues through letter “Z” and then on through “AA” and “BB”, before finally ending with “CC”, the *Eolo*, a Portuguese slaver captured by the HMS *Orestes* and adjudicated at the Court of Mixed Commission on May 23, 1851. Presumably, letters “A” through “Q”, another 17 ships, would have been recorded in a similar volume, which has not yet been discovered. Historians such as Christopher Saunders and Jake Richards have estimated that Cape Town received at least 3,500 liberated Africans between 1839 and 1852, including a number transferred from St. Helena. The missing volume presumably contains their names and descriptions as well and may yet be uncovered [Hopper 2020, 271–294] [Saunders 1985] [Richards 2018].

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Sporadic registers are preserved for Aden, Zanzibar, Mombasa, and Bombay, although these appear not to have been as systematic as those in Cape Town and Mauritius. Aden registers appear occasionally in slave trade records preserved in the British Library's India Office records. Bombay registers do not appear in the India Office records and may survive in a separate police archive in Bombay yet to be explored. Some records for both Bombay and Mombasa are preserved in the Church Missionary Society Archives in Birmingham (UK). The registers for the Seychelles are notable as the only registers of liberated Africans to have systematically employed photography. Each page contains passport-size photographs of liberated Africans delivered to the Seychelles. These registers are preserved in the Seychelles National Archives, except for four leaves that ended up at the Witwatersrand University Research Archives in South Africa.

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Some Ethical Problems of Research with Registers of Liberated Africans

The promise of digital humanities projects to democratize information and advance social justice stems in part from the potential of these projects to make information far more accessible to the world online, well beyond the limitations of the archives, libraries, or print media. Many registers of liberated Africans are already available in public archives, but only a few specialized researchers are likely to journey to many of the repositories that hold these records, so they are not widely known or available. The digitization and widespread dissemination of the registers through digital humanities projects holds out the promise for new horizons for research. Reproducing the names of liberated Africans through digital humanities projects could allow life stories to be told, descendants to be traced, and connections between individuals, past and present, to be identified. But reproducing these names also poses potential ethical questions. In this section, I identify three such problems. The first is the issue of whether the use of serial data related to enslaved Africans reduces African bodies to numbers and reenacts violence toward African people.

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Historians of the African diaspora have highlighted problems associated with treating Black bodies as objects of analysis and recounting scenes of violence against enslaved Africans in histories of slavery that apply quantitative methodologies. Saidiya Hartman observes that the archive is “a death sentence, a tomb, a display of the violated body, an inventory of property”, inundated with scandal and excess — “libidinal investment in violence is everywhere apparent in the documents” [Hartman 2008, 2, 5]. We know, for example, of Thomas Thistlewood's grotesque violence on Jamaican plantations, but, as Hartman explains, “the more difficult task is to exhume the lives buried under this prose” [Hartman 2008, 6]. Hartman reminds us of the challenges for historians who seek to “recount the violence that deposited these traces in the archive . . . without committing further violence” with our narratives [Hartman 2008, 2]. Hartman asks profoundly, “How does one revisit the scene of subjection without replicating the grammar of violence?” [Hartman 2008, 4].^[1]

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Likewise, Jessica Marie Johnson cautions against “replicating the surveilling actions of slave owners and slave traders”, and identifies “an unsettled relationship among data, slavery's archive, and the impulse to commodify black life”. In an important critique of early digital humanities projects — including some that purport to promote social justice — Johnson shows how “[t]he legacy of commodifying black bodies and truncating black life infuses and informs digital design and execution” [Johnson 2018, 60]. Johnson argues that “[t]he brutality of black codes, the rise of Atlantic slaving, and everyday violence in the lives of the enslaved created a devastating archive”. She continues, “Left unattended, these devastations reproduce themselves in digital architecture, even when and where digital humanists believe they advocate for social justice” [Johnson 2018, 58]. Digital humanities projects risk reproducing devastation unless they are designed conscientiously, guided by ethical considerations, and center the descendants of the enslaved. Johnson suggests that “[h]istories of slavery offer digital humanists a cautionary tale, a lesson in the kind of death dealing that happens when enumerating, commodifying, and calculating bodies becomes naturalized” [Johnson 2018, 71].

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Not all uses of biometric data for historical studies of slavery are necessarily problematic. For guidance on more appropriate methods for using colonial sources such as ledgers, registers and runaway slave advertisements that provide biographical as well as physical descriptions and biometric information, historians may look to work by Marissa Fuentes. In her poignant analysis of the life of Jane, an enslaved woman on the run in eighteenth-century Barbados, Fuentes notes that the fragments of Jane's life that appear in the archive — a brief description in a runaway advertisement — tell us “all that her owner wanted the public to know about her — scarred and running in a few sentences” [Fuentes 2016, 14]. Jane's body had been marked by scars including “a fire brand on one of her breasts” [Fuentes 2016, 13]. Fuentes argues that this description “represents one of the points at which black bodies became racialized objects, and their scars produce multiple axes of meaning” [Fuentes 2016, 14]. Fuentes refers to the phenomenon of “body memory” — the permanent marks and meanings inscribed on the body”. She argues convincingly that these scars became “a different type of ‘country mark’, produced by a ritual of violence that identified a person to other enslaved people not by their ‘ethnic’ origins but by their dishonored condition that branded them as commodities”. Fuentes refers to “the violent condition in which enslaved women appear in the archive disfigured and violated” as “mutilated historicity”. These symbols communicated slave status to others, both enslaved and free, “and these flesh injuries are the remains with which we must reconstruct their history” [Fuentes 2016, 16]. In Fuentes's work,

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colonial sources designed to surveil can be revelatory. Biometric information originally recorded with the intent to limit Jane's mobility allows Fuentes to reveal otherwise hidden aspects of Jane's story. Fuentes's work shows how historians can, in Jessica Marie Johnson's words, "dismantle the residue of commodification that is slavery's legacy in the New World" [Johnson 2018, 66].

A second problem arises with the ethics of historians naming individuals who might otherwise remain in obscurity. Many of the individuals whom historians may wish to study and identify in their published work and public humanities projects may have descendants living today. Those descendants may prefer not to have the stories of their ancestors brought to light, particularly if the enslaved status of their ancestors may affect their own status or that of their family today. This consideration is especially poignant in the Indian Ocean world, where a heritage of enslavement may have direct implications on contemporary status and may otherwise remain hidden. In her book, *In the Time of Oil*, Mandana Limbert notes that, despite religious admonitions that race does not "officially" matter in Oman, real barriers remain for marriages between Arabs and the descendants of formerly enslaved people. She tells the story of a young Arab woman in the 1990s who, by family accounts, "almost 'accidentally' married a man of a servant family". The man had originally come from another town, and despite the initial blessing of the young woman's grandfather, the approval of neighbors, and the man's reputation as an educated, good, and hardworking person, the wedding was called off after someone from the groom's hometown informed the bride's family that the man was in fact from enslaved lineage. Limbert explains that while official discourses "maintain that rigid class and race separations are antithetical to Omani history and Ibadism, in practice, some notion of race, especially in reference to color, mattered" [Limbert 2010, 143–148].

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Jonathon Glassman identifies a significant reason for the obscuring of ancestral lineages in the Western Indian Ocean in his study of revolutionary Zanzibar. Glassman notes that in Zanzibar, islanders invoked real or imagined claims to foreign (Arab or Shirazi) origins in order to distinguish themselves from the more recent arrivals from the mainland, many of whom were enslaved. By invoking a heritage of Arabness or *ustaarabu* (the Swahili word translated as "civilization"), islanders invoked a conscious sense of difference from the *ushenzi* ("barbarism" or "unbelief") of the mainland interior. *Ushenzi* imparted a certain "slavish" quality on individuals which could be inherited and which was associated with lower social rank. Arab families who settled in East Africa reckoned their descent along the patriline and also, in theory, followed the principle of *kafa'a* or female hypergamy, such that "so long as women married only at their rank or above, Arab families would not lose children to families of lesser ranks". The twin principles of patrilineal descent and *kafa'a* marriage allowed Arab men in the Indian Ocean diaspora to "have children with non-Arab wives without endangering the Arab status of their 'creole' children" or being tainted by *ushenzi*, which was increasingly "understood in racialized or quasi-racialized ways" [Glassman 2011, 23–64, 141] [Glassman 2014] [Ho 2006].

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Pier Larson further argued that "experiences of enslavement...are not universal sites for historical memory and identity formation in the diaspora" [Larson 1999, 359]. Although "experiences and memories of enslavement and racial oppression are key to African identities in the Americas, similar trauma has been purposefully forgotten or differently remembered in many other parts of the diaspora". In other branches of the African diaspora, including much of the Middle East and the Indian Ocean world, there have been good reasons for descendants of enslaved Africans — as well as their enslavers — to employ what Larson calls "countervailing forces of historical amnesia". Although commemorating enslavement is characteristic of the Atlantic branch of the diaspora, we must be careful not to expect to find that characteristic universally throughout the global African diaspora [Larson 1999, 360]. Given these realities in the Indian Ocean world, there may be some descendants of liberated Africans who may prefer not to have the identities of their ancestors widely disseminated [Becker et al. 2023]. These concerns are not limited to the Indian Ocean world. Historians and archeologists of West Africa often encounter those who would rather forget both the legacy of enslavement and enslaving [Klein 1989] [Akyeampong 2001] [Bellagamba et al. 2013] [Greene 2011] [Greene 2003] [Greene 2017] [Engmann 2023].

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Naming names in digital humanities projects that use registers of liberated Africans can illuminate long hidden identities in ways that could advance social justice. Claims to ancestry can even have financial benefits, as Preben Kaarsholm's study of Durban has shown. Land reserved for liberated Africans in Durban during colonial times is highly valued real estate today, and evidence supporting the claims of descendants could have financial implications [Kaarsholm 2014]. But as other papers in this collection confirm, creators of digital humanities projects must also grapple with the potential

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ethical problems introduced by naming names (see Roberts and Wall, Duke Bryant in this collection). Roberts and Wall highlight how the historian's ethical requirement to "do no harm" can be strained by contexts in which the stigma of enslaved descent persists and living descendants of the enslaved may prefer that their ancestors remain anonymous. Ideally, naming names could help fight against contemporary stigma associated with enslaved ancestry and therefore work toward social justice. But outing these "public secrets" online might also disrupt in more harmful ways. Roberts and Wall ultimately conclude that the naming of names in the online Senegal Liberations Project satisfies their ethical guidelines in part because the voluntary act of seeking to be registered was an expression of agency by formerly enslaved adults in Senegal who provided their own names as they wanted them recorded. In the case of these registers, the omission of names could negate the agency of enslaved peoples and silence their voices. But what about registers created not by adults willingly seeking registration, but by colonial officials for enslaved people — mostly children — under much more coercive circumstances? Placing names online in public digital humanities projects that were not given voluntarily by adults could arguably pose ethical problems surrounding consent (see Duke Bryant in this collection).

Finally, a third ethical problem emerges in the use of the registers of liberated Africans from the Seychelles, which is the only location in the Indian Ocean that made systematic use of photography in its registers of liberated Africans. Since slave ships ceased to be captured by the Royal Navy in the Atlantic in 1867, when photography was still in its infancy, historians have very few photographs depicting slave ships, groups of captives, or individuals removed from slave ships in the Atlantic world. For this reason, popular literature on the slave trade both in print and online frequently (and problematically) draws on photography from the Indian Ocean to illustrate conditions of the transatlantic slave trade. Groups of captives aboard Royal Navy vessels in the Indian Ocean are frequently depicted in books, articles, and documentary films about the transatlantic slave trade. One reason for the more voluminous photographic evidence in the Indian Ocean is the much later duration of both the slave trade and the anti-slave trade campaign in the region, which extended through the late nineteenth century when photography entered widespread global use. However, although photography documented the cruelty of slavery, it was also used as a tool of imperialism in Africa, as a method to promote subscriptions in Europe to missionary efforts in Africa, and to bolster the reputations of European explorers and authors. As a result, much of the early use of photography in Africa was abusive toward Africans and reinforced racist stereotypes. A significant literature has emerged in recent years critiquing the colonial uses of photography in Africa, and there is good reason for historians to be cautious about using the photography from Africa in the nineteenth century [Haney 2010] [Haney 2014] [Peffer and Cameron 2013] [Gupta 2020].

If the registers of liberated Africans from Cape Town to Mauritius contain intimate information about stature, age, and physical appearance, the Seychelles registers contain an even more intimate resource: photographs depicting the individuals themselves. Many of these photographs are haunting images of children who have experienced extraordinary trauma prior to being told to sit and pose for a portrait. Without question, reproducing these images requires tact and care on the part of the historian. A reasonable argument could even be made that these photographs should not be reproduced in any form because no semblance of informed consent could have been granted by these children to be photographed. Yet the same argument might also extend to the reproduction of their biometric data contained in the registers. After all, informed consent was presumed not given by any of those whom the registers sought to describe and surveil. Although the registers of liberated Africans are preserved in public archives, placing these records online through digital humanities project differs tangibly from publishing an academic book and presents ethical questions which are worthy of historians' consideration. It is perhaps helpful to ponder these questions in light of the ethical approaches of other disciplines.

A Possible Ethical Model for the Use of Historical Biometric Data from Registers

One possible ethical model for using historical biometric data comes from Australia. The Aboriginal Heritage Project (AHP) based at the Australian Centre for Ancient DNA at the University of Adelaide pioneered a consent model for another form of biometric data: DNA sourced from more than 5,000 hair samples collected by Norman Tindale and other ethnographic researchers associated with the South Australian Museum in the early twentieth century. Under the

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leadership of Dr. Alan Cooper at the Centre for Ancient DNA, the Aboriginal Heritage Project has used DNA to reconstruct the pre-colonial genetic history of Aboriginal Australia using ethnographic records and genetic information from hair samples preserved in the collections of the South Australian Museum. These genetic data have provided essential information for published research establishing the migration patterns of the earliest settler populations of Australia more than 50,000 years ago [Tobler et al. 2017]. However, the research team only sequenced DNA from hair samples for which it received the permission from donors themselves or descendants of donors. No other hair samples were used. The rationale for this policy is described on the website for the Aboriginal Heritage Project and is worth quoting in its entirety:

Until recently, there had been very little genetic research involving Aboriginal Australians as a direct result of their previous experience with dispossession and marginalization under colonial rule, leading to widespread distrust of Western institutions. Based on this background, it was clear that genetic research in Aboriginal Australia needed to be based on an ethical model that emphasizes active community engagement and the incorporation of Aboriginal values and interpretations of genetic information. Accordingly, the AHP has developed a consultation model that is informed by extensive Aboriginal community and repatriation work performed by team members from the SAM Archives and Aboriginal Australian Family History Unit ... since the late 1990's, along with knowledge gained from research performed with Aboriginal Australians during the Genographic Project ... including refinements from ethicists ... and senior Aboriginal community members

The combined experiences of the AHP team led us to develop a consultation model that acknowledges the primacy of the hair donors and their families, and places the consent in the hands of the original donors of the samples or, should they be deceased, their immediate living descendants. To implement this model, we have enlisted a consultancy team comprising Aboriginal community members with a history of living and working with Indigenous communities ... who provide the first point of contact for the hair donor or their descendants. The AHP consultation process sees Aboriginal Consultants use the BAR genealogical data and other public sources (e.g. Electoral Rolls, Facebook, White Pages, Aboriginal Community Councils/Organisations) to trace the original donors who are still living or descendants for informed consent. Importantly, each sample is provenanced and the genealogical data contains personal information, providing a starting point for tracing the donors or their descendants. In cases where the donor is no longer alive, the oldest living direct descendant is consulted instead. This is done on a case-by-case basis for each individual hair sample, with the participants' details (name, birthplace, location, etc.) only being accessed by the Aboriginal Consultants (i.e. the rest of the AHP research team do not have access to the personal details). Feedback from participants in the AHP have indicated their appreciation that contact was made with individuals directly.^[2]

Alan Cooper's team is not alone. Following a 2018 article in *Science* by Jessica Bardill et al. criticizing the use of ancient DNA in studies of Native Americans [Bardill et al. 2018], a team of archaeologists, anthropologists, curators, and geneticists representing 31 countries convened a workshop in 2020 and issued five "globally applicable guidelines" for ethical DNA research on human remains published in *Nature*. One of the guidelines states that "[r]esearchers must engage with stakeholders from the beginning of a study and ensure respect and sensitivity to other stakeholder perspectives" [Alpaslan-Roodenberg et al. 2021]. Today, conversations among geneticists surrounding "relational proxy informed consent" for studies involving ancient DNA are increasingly common [Gibbon, Thompson, and Alves 2024]. On the surface, the tangible work of extracting human DNA samples from hair and sequencing DNA to understand early human migrations seems distant from the historian's use of the registers of liberated Africans as a source for reconstructing the life stories of enslaved Africans from the nineteenth century. However, consider that both projects involve the use of biometric data of sorts, the genetic research using biometric data extracted through sequencing DNA, and the historian's craft using the biometric data preserved in the registers, including the physical descriptions of marks, facial scarification, tattooing, and brands, alongside measurements such as height in feet and inches and age.

Could historians and scholars in the digital humanities commit to an ethical program along the lines of Alan Cooper and the Aboriginal Heritage Project in Adelaide? To do so would involve a kind of work already of interest to many historians of the African diaspora: genealogy. In this case, tracing descendants might be motivated in part by seeking consent for the posthumous use of data of contemporary descendants' ancestors. Although the contexts of the research are markedly different, there are parallels between the experiences of Aboriginal Australians under colonialism and liberated Africans in the Indian Ocean world. Certainly, both groups experienced what the AHP identifies as "experience with dispossession and marginalization under colonial rule". Although undoubtedly challenging, perhaps historians owe the descendants of liberated Africans the same courtesy extended to the descendants of the Aboriginal Australians from whom Tindale obtained hair samples a century ago, and perhaps this Australian model for consent may offer one possible means for addressing the substantial ethical concerns raised by using sensitive sources that contain personal information about enslaved Africans in the nineteenth century. The Aboriginal Heritage Project had the advantage of working with data collected less than a century ago, and descendants may have only been one or two generations removed. Scholars using older sources, such as registers from the nineteenth century, may have a much more difficult time identifying living descendants or descent communities, and there are other challenges.

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Challenges and Possibilities

Applying the Aboriginal Heritage Project model in other contexts and for the registers of liberated Africans in the Indian Ocean in particular may prove challenging for several reasons. In places such as Mauritius, privacy laws dating to the 1980s prevent searches of the Civil Status records by non-descendants, making genealogical research difficult for outsiders. On the door to the search room at the Mauritius National Archives, there is a sign warning that it is unlawful to conduct genealogical research in the archives on non-relatives on account of the Mauritius Civil Status Law of 1981. The law forbids the archives to provide "civil status" records without an official written request from a descendant, making the work of researchers very difficult. To complicate matters, the spellings of names from the nineteenth century often changed over time. Furthermore, surnames were generally only preserved along the patriline as a patronym, favoring the tracing of male descendants. This work is further complicated because records of births, marriages, baptisms, and deaths were only selectively recorded, and various factors, from bias to climate, have influenced which records have been preserved.

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Yet despite these challenges, there are some promising examples of researchers connecting with descendants and descendant communities of liberated Africans in Mauritius from the nineteenth century. Marina Carter connected with descendants of Koomanikooa, a liberated African who arrived in Mauritius in the 1860s, after tracing his genealogy through his children, who kept his name as their surname (patronym) and passed the name down over generations and up to the present [Carter 1998]. More recently, a remarkable study by Klara Boyer-Rossol in France has likewise connected Africans from the Mauritian past to the present. Boyer-Rossol obtained access to an extremely rare, private archive in France left by the nineteenth-century ethnographer Eugène de Froberville, who studied African languages and cultures of Mozambique through interviews and observations of liberated Africans in Mauritius in the 1840s. Between May and December 1846, Froberville conducted interviews with at least 50 liberated Africans who were part of a group of 265 Africans who had survived capture aboard the Portuguese slave ship *Jose* by the HMS *Lily* off the coast of Mozambique in 1840. Froberville spent many weeks recording detailed interviews with these liberated Africans and documenting their cultures, languages, musical and dance traditions, and appearance. He even made plaster casts of the faces of at least 46 of these liberated Africans, which have remained preserved in his personal archive and which are now featured in an exceptional exhibition at the Intercontinental Slavery Museum in Port Louis, Mauritius, curated by Dr. Boyer-Rossol [Boyer-Rossol 2019] [Boyer-Rossol 2022].

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The case of the liberated Africans taken to Mauritius from the *Jose* was extraordinary: no captured slave ships were taken to Mauritius for at least a decade before or after the arrival of the HMS *Lily*. Therefore, this particular group of liberated Africans became locally known as the "*Lily* Africans", and many of them took the name of the capturing vessel as their surname, "Lily". The descendants of these liberated Africans likewise kept the surname, and in Mauritius today, the "Lily", or "Lili" family name is still carried by descendants of the "*Lily* Africans" as a descent community. Boyer-Rossol was able to connect with several of these descendants and invite them to attend the inauguration of the exhibition at the Intercontinental Slavery Museum in 2024.

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The work of Carter and Boyer-Rossol highlights the possibility that contemporary researchers may find ways to identify individual descendants of liberated Africans, if not broader descent communities, in certain cases, despite the numerous challenges. I do not mean to suggest that such efforts should be considered an ethical requirement for all contemporary researchers of enslaved Africans and their descendants in the Indian Ocean world. The challenges working against tracing lineages from centuries past to today will make such efforts impossible for many scholars. Rather, I want to suggest that scholars working in the humanities, particularly the digital humanities, may find consent models pioneered in the sciences useful in cases when circumstances allow them to be practiced. At the very least asking the question of whether descendants or descent communities would support the dissemination of the personal and biometric data of their ancestors is perhaps a worthy goal for the consideration of any researcher, even if achieving that goal may be difficult or impossible.

Notes

[1] See also [Hartman 2016, 208–215]

[2] See <https://www.adelaide.edu.au/acad/research-strengths/aboriginal-heritage-project/consent-and-expeditions>.

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