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Descendants and Ethical Considerations when Documenting the Names of Enslaved People in Datasets on the Internet

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Abstract

This paper examines the ethical implications of public, internet-based history projects that list enslaved people by name. It does so by considering the appropriateness of the ethics statement written by the Principal Investigators at Enslaved: Peoples of the Historical Slave Trade (or Enslaved.org). Enslaved.org directly addresses the urgent call to document the history of people of African descent more fully. Housed at Michigan State University, the project centers the Black experience globally, with most projects to date focused on North America. Contributors to Enslaved.org tell the stories of named enslaved individuals by extracting what is often fragmentary information (names, ages, skills, injuries, African ethnicities, etc.) from a vast range of primary source documentation and by assembling that data into datasets. The Enslaved.org team makes the datasets available, searchable, and understandable on its open-source platform (https://enslaved.org/) and through its peer-reviewed journal, *The Journal of Slavery and Data Preservation* (https://jsdp.enslaved.org/). The Principal Investigators are committed to identifying by name as many enslaved people as possible and to representing individual and collective experiences in an international, humane, and ethical frame and to working collaboratively with researchers and descendant communities to continually develop and follow practices that respect the lives of enslaved people. The paper considers the appropriateness of the Enslaved.org ethics statement for datasets focused on slavery in a variety of places and concludes with a call for historians to work closely with descendant communities in compiling and publishing data that names enslaved individuals.

1 In March 1870, a committee of the State House of Representatives in Columbus, Ohio, convened to decide the legitimacy of the election of Elijah Glover to the office of Representative from Scioto County. Glover had bested his opponent by twenty-three votes. However, forty-five of those who cast ballots were suspected of being “negroes or colored persons” who had been brought to the polls by Glover's party. Therefore, an elector in Scioto contested the election, which resulted in the forty-five voters being questioned to determine if each had “a preponderance of white blood”. If they did not, they did not have the right to cast a ballot. During the hearing, one such voter, Henry Wilson, was asked if he had been qualified to vote. “I think I was”, he stated. “All the reason I have to know is, I was told my father was a white man, and my mother, I suppose, about half-and-half”. Mustering up the courage to reveal more, he said of his father, “I knew him; he was a white man; he was my former master”. He explained that it “never was disputed in the neighborhood” that the man was his father “but always believed, on account of the resemblance between my father and me”. Asked how the white man responded to talk about his being Wilson's father, Wilson replied, “He did not say anything because they did not say it in his presence” [Ohio General Assembly 1871].

2 In testimony after testimony, contested genealogies were central to claims of voting rights in the Scioto election. And every case hinged on pseudoscientific ideas about race, race mixing, and racial purity. Power dynamics meant that the bloodlines of established “white” families were not questioned, but those of “negroes and coloreds” were. Unsurprisingly, no one who appeared before the committee had documents stating who their parents were. Most said they only had knowledge of their mothers. When asked about fathers, many responded with a variation of “I was told…”. Of this, Frederick Douglass had written fifteen years earlier, “Slavery does away with fathers, as it does away with families”. Like Henry Wilson, Douglass recalled that some “whispered that my master was my father”, but whispers were all he had.

Later, Douglass wrote in his autobiography, “The reader must not expect me to say much of my family. Genealogical trees did not flourish among slaves” [Fields 2022, 605]. This is to say that in the United States as elsewhere, dislocation, violence, and the threat of violence set limits on how enslaved people's families were constituted, severing connections to kin and rendering unknowable much of their genealogy.

3 However, since the 1990s, advances in computer technologies and the internet, along with the widespread availability of genetic testing, have facilitated the reconstruction of some branches of genealogical trees, making knowable now much of what was unknowable or only whispered about in the past. Computer and internet technologies allow for the mining of datasets containing information about hundreds, thousands, millions, and tens of millions of enslaved individuals. Assembled by researchers and corporations, online datasets have become foundational for professional historians undertaking research, and they aid genealogists in the construction of family histories, linking people of African descent to their enslaved and free forebearers.

4 This paper explores the ethics of creating scholarly, internet-based historical datasets that identify enslaved individuals by name.[1] In parts of the world, including the United States, descendants of enslaved people generally welcome the publication of such datasets because they feel empowered to shout names that in the past had been whispered or were lost. Today, many African Americans want to trace the branches, trunks, and roots of their family trees, and online datasets can facilitate this undertaking. Names, after all, are a tangible link to the past and are central to genealogical projects. However, elsewhere in the world, not all descendants of enslaved people want their family histories known. In some places, descendants of enslaved people encourage silences around family history since a family's historical links to slavery carry a stigma. By contrasting the United States and Africa, this paper urges scholars to consider the context-specific ethics of creating websites with historical data about named enslaved individuals. It also examines the role of online data platforms like *Enslaved: Peoples of the Historical Slave Trade* (https://enslaved.org/), which is also known as *Enslaved.org*.

Enslaved.org

5 Launched in 2020 and funded by donors (Michigan State University [MSU]; University of California, Riverside; University of Maryland; the National Endowment for the Humanities; and Mellon Foundation), *Enslaved.org* is a scholarly website housed at Matrix: Center for Digital Humanities & Social Sciences at MSU (https://matrix.msu.edu/). The platform publishes datasets that contributors construct by extracting data from a great range of primary sources. Each dataset is concerned with identifying people of African descent who were enslaved in any part of the world before state-legislated abolition. Among the sources contributors have consulted are books of marriage and baptism, runaway advertisements, inventories, wills, sales records, arrest records, court cases, and coroners' reports. The intake for the project is an online journal, the *Journal of Slavery and Data Preservation* (*JSDP*; https://jsdp.enslaved.org/). After a peer- or in-house review process and, if requested, revisions, contributors' datasets and data articles (essays that contextualize the data) are published on the open-source platform. They are housed on Matrix servers and copies are also preserved at Dataverse at Harvard University (https://dataverse.harvard.edu/).

6 Each contributor is expected to submit a dataset (spreadsheet) in which each line has information about a person and each column or field has information about a characteristic, such as name, age, sex, ethnolinguistic indicator, location, children, skills, injuries, and enslaver name. The nature of the primary source(s) shapes the fields that are contained in a dataset. On the *Enslaved.org* platform, a technology called linked open data allows users to search, aggregate, and analyze datasets' contents. Users may also download datasets in a variety of formats to analyze on their computers. Among other things, the project offers a controlled vocabulary and information about best practices for dataset construction (https://docs.enslaved.org/), as well as an ethics statement (https://enslaved.org/statementofEthics/).

7 The *Enslaved.org* team designed the site with a variety of audiences in mind. University researchers are one audience, and from experiences with *Slave Biographies* (http://slavebiographies.org/), which was the precursor to *Enslaved.org*, the team knew that educators, students, genealogists, descendant communities, and a host of people interested history and the study of slavery would visit the site. They have, and the *Enslaved.org* team constructed and continues to modify its platform to be user friendly for non-scholarly audiences. In addition to datasets, the site features short biographies of

enslaved individuals about whom there is considerable information (https://enslaved.org/stories/all/). To date, the site contains information about more than 600,000 named individuals in North and South America.

8 To be sure, there are many steps necessary to connect a person living today to an enslaved person in a dataset published in *JSDP*. Nonetheless, Black genealogists have made discoveries through *Enslaved.org*. For example, while searching across datasets on the platform, Meghan Wilson of Detroit found information linking her to Hannah Johnson, who was enslaved in Louisiana, and was, Wilson learned, her great-great-great-great-grandmother. “There is a power in knowing”, Wilson told Krystal Nurse, a reporter for the *Lansing State Journal*. “I'm not sure what will come of that, but to know that there is a person that lived on the [John] Johnson Plantation in New Orleans in the 1860s gives me a history and access to history I didn't know before” [Nurse 2021].

9 What made Wilson's discovery possible was the fact that Hannah Johnson is named in an *Enslaved.org* dataset. When it would do no harm, *Enslaved.org* is committed to naming as many enslaved people as possible in the datasets that it publishes. Why? Names facilitate discoveries and emphasize the humanity of those who enslavers commodified. With the humanity of the enslaved in mind, *Enslaved.org* seeks submissions from those who recognize that primary source material reflects the biases of its authors; it was shaped by the systems of power — by the violence — under which enslaved people suffered. In Jessica Marie Johnson's apt description, a “devastating archive” resulted from enslavers' commodification and quantification of Black bodies [Johnson 2018, 58]. The challenge, then, is to construct datasets with an eye toward reading against the grain of the racist perspectives of enslavers and presenting enslaved people as individuals about whom something can be known from the primary sources in which shards of information about them were recorded. That is, the challenge is presenting them as more than numbers.

10 *Enslaved.org* addresses this challenge in part by encouraging submissions that allow users of the platform to do more than dwell on numbers. To be sure, studies that have quantified various aspects of the trade in and lives of enslaved people have advanced knowledge about slavery and slave systems. Such studies have revealed, among other things, that approximately one million enslaved people were sold across state lines in the United States from 1801 to 1860. But numbers do not get at the lived experiences of people. Behind every number derived from statistical and quantitative analyses are individuals whose stories are worth exploring because there is a power in knowing. Detailing the lives of the enslaved can honor them and inform us.

11 This is to say that it is important to know that among the one million traded across state lines in the United States were the twenty-year-old Harriet and her two-year-old daughter, Julia Ann. They were sold in 1831 in Orleans Parish, Louisiana, by Franklin & Armfield, a trading company that had arranged for their shipment from Sumner County Tennessee. Beside the mother and child were Delosia, William, Peter, Washington, and Aaron, along with dozens of others from Sumner, who were scattered among different buyers in and around New Orleans. Fragmentary details, including the names of 1,600 enslaved people sold by Franklin & Armfield in the 1820s and 1830s, are available in the *JSDP* and through *Enslaved.org* in a dataset dataset published by Joshua D. Rothman [Rothman 2022]. The dataset and accompanying data article respond to Johnson's call for digital humanists “to infuse their work with a methodology and praxis that centers the descendants of the enslaved” and that “grapples with the uncomfortable, messy, and unquantifiable” [Johnson 2018, 71]. That is, the dataset is about more than numbers. It focuses on the lives of named individuals whose stories might otherwise go untold.

12 With a broad range of users, including descendants of the enslaved, in mind, the *Enslaved.org* team is also committed to ethical and sustainable practices in data stewardship and digital accessibility. That is, to limit barriers to the access of data, the team relies on open-source software and utilizes accessibility tools, so that anyone with a computer and internet connection can access the site and its data. The team stresses that information about people who were bought and sold should not, itself, be commodified. Such information should be available for free to anyone who wants to learn and teach about the lives of enslaved individuals, families, and communities — to anyone who wants to dwell on a name.

13 But is it always appropriate to make available on the internet data that allow people to dwell on names of enslaved people and, possibly, link those names to people living today? That is, do all descendants want knowledge of their

genealogies to be facilitated by searches of public websites? If the answer is no, what should digital historians do when their desires to make known previously unknown details about vulnerable populations from the past collide with the desires of descendants in the present?

14 Some influential scholarly organizations have grappled with related questions. For example, the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) offers valuable guidance (https://aoir.org/reports/ethics2.pdf). Related to the study of enslaved people, the AoIR stresses in the first point of its ethics statement, “The greater the vulnerability of the community / author / participant, the greater the obligation of the researcher to protect the community / author / participant”. The statement continues, “Because all digital information at some point involves individual persons, consideration of principles related to research on human subjects may be necessary even if it is not immediately apparent how and where persons are involved in the research data” [Markham and Buchanan 2012]. Apropos to the databasing of named enslaved individuals from the past, it may not be immediately apparent to researchers how living descendants of the enslaved are connected to our data, but researchers should consider the implications of their research on broad human populations and particularly on vulnerable populations. A consideration of living human subjects is also part and parcel of the guidelines of the American Anthropological Association (AAA; https://ethics.americananthro.org/ethics-statement-1-do-no-harm/). Listed first in the AAA's statement is that the researcher's primary obligation is to “do no harm”, including harm “to dignity, and to bodily and material well-being, especially when research is conducted among vulnerable populations”. This obligation, the association's statement emphasizes, “can supersede the goal of seeking new knowledge” [American Anthropology Association 2012].

15 Following the AoIR and AAA, to ensure that we do no harm through the publication of online datasets that detail the lives of named enslaved individuals, digital historians must understand the history of descendant communities and how they are affected by the legacy of slavery today. That is, we must develop an understanding of how and why descendants want their histories told or silenced. To be sure, our tellings of history will not be embraced by everyone. In print and online publications, we can and should spark debate, challenge beliefs, and cause discomfort. We historians build arguments based on evidence and are under no obligation to tell histories as others want them told. But we are obliged to do no harm to vulnerable populations and that obligation supersedes goals to advance new knowledge.

16 As the 1870 hearings over the Scioto election make clear, power dynamics and violence wrought upon people color meant that before 1865 African Americans both silenced and were denied knowledge of aspects of their family histories. Online datasets that list the names of enslaved people have the potential to make known some of what has long been unspoken or unknown. The questions researchers should answer before they publish such datasets are: Given power dynamics that operate today, does our research place descendants at risk? That is, do our online scholarly datasets have the potential to do harm? If so, are there ways we can structure datasets to ensure that they do not harm? If not, are there ways that we can structure online scholarly datasets so that they serve broad audiences that include descendants?

17 The remainder of this paper examines how and why descendants of enslaved people in two parts of the world — North America and Africa — have wanted their family histories made known or silenced. The paper concludes with thoughts about the creation of online historical datasets about enslaved people in both geographic locations.

Black Genealogists in the United States

18 Those descended from enslaved people in the United States have long sought and made public information about their forebearers. This desire was expressed in the decades following the adoption of the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution in 1865. Then, African Americans were part of what François Weil describes as a “genealogical mania” that swept across the country [Weil 2013, 139–140]. The motivation of white Americans who participated in this mania was clear. Family trees rooted in Western Europe justified the place of a white family in the racial hierarchy of the United States. This was, after all, a period when racist theories about heredity were foundational to ideas about intelligence. Whiteness also brought with it a variety of rights and opportunities [Morgan 2021, 20–51]. A family's claims to whiteness and greatness were buttressed by what was often fanciful evidence of bloodlines stretching to important European forebearers, especially those allied with the first Norman king of England, William the Conqueror. Thus, the 1871

genealogy of the Lee family of Virginia, which included Robert E. Lee, stressed, “In the eleventh century, we find the name of Laucelot Lee, Loudon, France, as an honored associate of William the Conqueror” [Mead 1871, 9]. In 1888, Adin Ballou published his family's history, stating, “The very strong probability, if not absolute certainty, is that we are the remote descendants of a Norman Chieftain, who, in 1066, came over from France into England with William the Conqueror” [Ballou 1888, v].

19 The motivations of most African Americans who made public information about their genealogies were different. Before the Civil War ended and for decades after, African Americans spread information in print publications such as the *Christian Advocate* about their parents, grandparents, children, siblings, aunts, uncles, and grandchildren as they searched for relatives who had been traded away under slavery or had dispersed in the chaos of war. Hence, in 1883, Easter Carding posted a note in the *Advocate* asking for information about her relatives: “Father was Shearfe, grandmother Gracey, Aunt Cheney, grandmother and father left East Tennessee with the Indians, nearly forty years ago, sold to Jesse Mayfield. Aunt Easter was sold to Austin Ryder, near the same time”. And, in 1894, Robert Brown, who was the son of Harriett Brown of Stafford County, Virginia, sought information about the whereabouts of “his grandfather, Elijah Brown; [and] his grand uncle, Edward Brown; his brother Wm. Brown”. Each of these relatives had “belonged to Mrs. Cornelius Lucas”. These and other powerful stories of named formerly enslaved individuals who were seeking loved ones are available on the website *Last Seen: Finding Family After Slavery* [Last Seen n.d.].

20 Further, after the Civil War, those identified as “colored” sought rights by making known aspects of their genealogies. This was evident in Scioto, Ohio, where “colored” men traced what they knew of their genealogies to prove that they had the right to vote. Similar cases sprung up in other states in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries as “coloreds” sought rights under a dizzying array of laws about the mixture of blood that made a person white or “negro” [Mangum 1940, 1–17]. In 1866, a majority on the Michigan Supreme Court defined white as less than one-quarter Black blood [People v. Dean 1866]. Elsewhere, “negro” was defined as, among other things, “mixed blood within three generations”, “one-sixteenth or more African blood”, “one-eighth or more African blood”, and “anyone with any trace of Negro blood”. Proving any of this required a knowledge of genealogy, which was disputed in case after case [Harris 1993, 1738–1740]. Knowledge of genealogy was also necessary to prove descent from Indigenous Americans, whose rights were different from those of Black Americans. So, when Cyril P. Sunseri sought the annulment of his marriage to Verna Cassagne because he had come to suspect that her deceased great-great-grandmother had been Black, the court heard testimony about Verna's family tree. Verna prevailed by arguing that her great-great-grandmother had been a slave, but one of Indigenous descent imported from Santo Domingo. This meant that Verna did not have any trace of “negro blood”, so there were no grounds for an annulment [Sunseri v. Cassagne 1938].

21 Wealthy, established African Americans, particularly in the northeast, had other motivations for exploring their family history. “Enamored of royalty and nobility”, Willard B. Gatewood, Jr., writes, “many black aristocrats were experts in genealogy and drew up family trees whose roots and branches included an assortment of African princes, European royalty, Caucasian statesmen, Madagascan noblemen, and Indian chieftains” [Gatewood 1988, 9]. Some established Black genealogical societies, such as the Society of New York (1884), the Society of the Daughters of New York (1886), and the Society of the Descendants of Early New England Negroes (1920s). Prominent among this Black elite was Daniel Alexander Payne Murray, the youngest son of enslaved parents who had been freed in Maryland. Murray went on to become a librarian and bibliographer at the Library of Congress. He compiled biographies of influential people of African descent for a planned encyclopedia and researched his family's genealogy, serving as a model for others who wanted to do the same [Cole n.d.]. As part of his research for “Lives of World-Famous Quadroons and Octoroons”, which he never published, he set out to amass “as much genealogy as can be obtained”. In so doing, he made assertions about the family trees of some influential “white” Americans, such as Judah P. Benjamin, a prominent lawyer in New Orleans who defended Southern succession and the trade in enslaved Africans. Through an attorney, Benjamin threatened a lawsuit over Murray's claim that his family tree included people descended from Africans [Benjamin 2014, 210].

22 Evidence for Black enthusiasm for genealogy after the emancipation can also be found in the fact that commercially printed family tree templates were marketed to both Black and white consumers in the period. These colorful lithographs contained empty spaces for family member's names and birth, marriage, and death dates. The Library of Congress

displays one such lithograph on its website. Dated ca. 1880 and printed by the Krebs Lithographing Company in Cincinnati, Ohio, it depicts three scenes of Black family life, one “Before the [Civil] War” and two “Since the War”, and contains spaces for purchasers to fill in their family records [Krebs Lithographing Company, ca. 1880].

These examples make clear that in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries African Americans researched and made known their genealogies and histories as an expression of pride in their families' accomplishments and to claim rights, unmask injustices, and reconstitute families. 23

Historian Carter G. Woodson was no exception. As Pero Gaglo Dagbovie notes, Woodson “often instructed black youth during Negro History Week to interview their elders and document the histories of their families and communities” [Dagbovie 2012, 12]. Woodson also worked with the Research Department of the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History to compile a historical dataset with information from the period before emancipation. After mining the 1830 U.S. Census for data, Woodson and the Research Department published the dataset, “Free Negro Owners of Slaves in the United States in 1830”, in 1924. The goal was for names derived from the census to “serve as a link between the past and present”. Woodson and his team arranged data into fields or columns, each with a heading — name, number of enslaved people owned, total number of people in the household, and the age range of people in the household. The dataset was divided by state and county. In the journal, a short article explains the methodology and importance of the dataset. Further, from names in the dataset, Woodson and his research group developed short biographies, such as that of Samuel Gibson, “a Negro of Mississippi, in 1844, when he brought his six slaves to Cincinnati, Ohio, and settled them on free territory” [Research Department of the ASNLH, 60] [Hawthorne 2024, 309–318]. 24

In his 1924 publication, Woodson and the Research Department foreshadowed an influential methodological approach that involved applying computer-aided analyses to larger and larger datasets in the study of slavery. However, what Woodson did that was different from many who followed was to use datasets as a tool to examine the lives of named individuals. In much dataset-based scholarship of historians and economists in the 1960s, individuals were not present. Indeed, cliometricians of the period stressed quantification and statistical analyses to derive estimates for the size over time of large trades in enslaved people and to draw conclusions about broad populations' origins, productivity, and living conditions. Historical debates among scholars engaged in numbers-driven approaches to the study of slavery have sometimes been dubbed a “numbers game” [Curtin 1969, 3]. The approach had its critics, including Herbert Gutman, who wrote that it tells “us nothing of importance about the beliefs and behavior of enslaved Afro-Americans” since it does not explore the lives of individuals [Gutman 1975, 227]. As Gwendolyn Midlo Hall wrote, “Historical databases are wonderful, innovative tools…. But there are some questions that are simply beyond their capabilities” [Hall 2010, 138]. 25

Hall's cautionary note is particularly important since she, herself, was a pioneer among those taking data-informed approaches to the study of the history of slavery. But Hall forged a path like that of Woodson. In her work, she dwelled on individuals and sought ways to humanize the experience of the enslaved. Hall began work on a dataset in the 1980s, deriving data from archival sources that provided insight into the lives of named enslaved individuals. From books of marriages and baptisms, runaway advertisements, inventories, sales records, arrest records, court cases, and other documents produced in colonial Louisiana, she extracted data and transcribed them into a spreadsheet. Each row represented one person. Each column had standardized information about a characteristic: the enslaved person's name and, when available, their age, sex, marriage partner, children, skills, injuries, illnesses, ethnolinguistic group, monetary value, and more. 26

Containing information about more than 100,000 people, most of whom are named, Hall's dataset had a significant impact on the study of slavery. It was the evidentiary base for, among other books, her *Africans in Colonial Louisiana: The Development of Afro-Creole Culture in the Eighteenth-Century* [Hall 1993]. She also published the dataset as a CD-ROM with the Louisiana State University Press [Hall 2000], as well as on a website sponsored by the University of North Carolina and I-Biblio under the title *Afro-Louisiana History and Genealogy* http://www.ibiblio.org/laslave. Later, she published a revised and updated version on *Slave Biographies*, a project at Michigan State University that she was co-principal investigator on (http://slavebiographies.org). Under a grant from the Mellon Foundation, Hall advised Dean Rehberger, Daryle Williams, and me as we refashioned *Slave Biographies* into *Enslaved.org* and launched it in 2020 27

with the first issue of *JSDP*, which included her dataset (https://jsdp.enslaved.org/fullIssue/volume1-issue1/.

28 To be sure, Hall's dataset has been of great use to historians exploring slavery in Louisiana. Further, much to her delight, the dataset attracted the attention of African American genealogists writing their family histories, and many made public declarations of their excitement for the fact that Hall listed the names of enslaved people to whom they might trace their ancestry. A transcript from 1999 of the Ancestral Digs Conference Room of an African American genealogical group reveals the enthusiasm in Black genealogical circles for Hall's work (https://www.afrigeneas.com/library/hall091499.html). One of the organizers began the meeting by exclaiming, “Dr. Hall has a brand new CD of Louisiana slaves coming out with almost 100,000 names of slaves! ... The CD will be of inestimable value to researchers” [Afrigeneas 1999]. And, in 2018, the Kongo SQ West Kinship Society wrote of Hall on Facebook:

> Her book *Africans in Colonial Louisiana: The Development of Afro-Creole Culture in the Eighteenth-Century* names names of people, ethnic groups, languages spoken and gives a relational glimpse of their lives. A CD-ROM database was first published in 2000 and is now available free on the internet.… We remember, venerate and continue to preserve in service... and say their names...Kongo, Mandingo, Mina, Senegal/Wolof, Igbo, Bamana, Chamba, Yoruba, Kissi, Nago and more. [Hall 2021, 203]

In a recent tribute to Hall, Erin M. Greenwald wrote on the *64 Parishes* website that her online dataset was used by genealogists because it “provided unprecedented access to the identities of individuals of African descent who lived in the Lower Mississippi Valley between 1718 and 1820” [Greenwald 2022].

29 Hall's dataset tapped into a groundswell of interest in genealogy in the United States, particularly in Black genealogy, which has roots stretching to the late-nineteenth century. In the mid- and late-twentieth century, Black genealogists were energized by the Civil Rights Movement and the publication of Alex Haley's *Roots*, which opened the possibility of tracing African American ancestry to enslaved forebearers and beyond to Africa itself [Haley 1976]. The following year, Black and white Americans were captivated by the *Roots* television miniseries [Roots 1977]. The same year, Charles L. Blockson published *Black Genealogy*, which served as a guide for African Americans wanting knowledge of their families' pasts [Blockson 1977, 2]. Black interest in genealogy spiked again in 2006, when Harvard professor and public intellectual Henry Louis Gates, Jr. first aired the *African American Lives* series, which traced the ancestry of influential African Americans. That series later morphed into *Faces of America* and then *Finding Your Roots*, which has aired since 2012 [Gates 2006] [Gates 2010]. Each of these genealogical projects is aimed, at least in part, at identifying named enslaved individuals in the past, which is something scholarly data projects can facilitate.

30 The power of naming enslaved people in North America is also on display elsewhere. Completed in the early 2000s, the African American Civil War Memorial includes carvings in stone of the names of all known African Americans, most of whom had been enslaved, who fought in the war. Since its opening in 2016, the National Museum of African American History and Culture has had exhibits that identify enslaved people by name. The Whitney Plantation, a museum outside New Orleans, also engages with the public through lists of the names of enslaved people. Their exhibit is comprised of stone panels into which the names of the enslaved who labored on the plantation are carved. Further, the Black Lives Matter movement has emphasized the imperative to “speak their names”, to honor the humanity and mourn the deaths of those whose lives have been unjustly taken because of the violence of racism. Their names, the movement urges, should be proclaimed loudly.

31 It is clear from the outpouring of support from the Black genealogical community in the United States that Hall's online dataset was embraced for detailing the lives of named individuals who suffered under enslavement in Louisiana. To help people find linkages to those made known in her dataset, Hall insisted that her dataset be available online in an open-source format, so anyone with a computer and connection to the internet can access this information. Other scholarly projects have done the same — insisting that data on enslaved people be free available for the benefit of professional historians, teachers, genealogists, and anyone who seeks understandings about slavery (see, for example, *Enslaved.org*, *Slave Biographies*, *African Origins Database*, *Kinfolkology*, *Slave Societies Digital Archive*, and *Freedom*

on the Move).

32 However, the rise in interest in genealogy has sparked explosive growth in the online commercial market, where for-pay access to genealogical data is the norm. A variety of commercial computer products gave access to ancestral data in the 1980s. In the 1990s, corporations moved their ancestral research products to the internet. There, *Ancestry.com* (https://www.ancestry.com/) controls the lion's share of the market, as it has under a variety of names since its founding. In 2020, the Blackstone Group acquired *Ancestry.com* for $4.7 billion. The company now controls access to 30 billion historical records and has data from more than 20 million DNA kits and 125 million customer-produced family trees [Robinson-Sweet 2021]. The other large organizations in the online genealogy space are *FamilySearch* (https://www.familysearch.org/en/united-states/), which does not charge a subscription fee for most services, and *FindMyPast* (https://www.findmypast.com/) and *MyHeritage* (https://www.myheritage.com/), which both charge subscription fees. These organizations have generated and are benefitting from an enormous interest in family history. Among other things, commercial genealogical companies offer online access to historical records that have information about millions of named enslaved individuals, and each company markets specifically to African American audiences [Thomas and Moss 2019, 145–150].

33 As the Scioto hearings demonstrated in 1870, knowledge of one's ancestors could bestow rights and opportunities in the nineteenth century. And, for some, knowledge of one's genealogy can do the same today. As colleges and universities across the United States have explored how their histories are entangled with slavery, conversations have turned toward atoning for the lasting damage done to the descendants of enslaved people who were bought, sold, and rented by institutions of higher education. Thus, Georgetown University has made descent from enslaved people who labored for the university a factor in admissions decisions [Georgetown University n.d.]. Further, in 2021, Virginia's governor signed legislation requiring five colleges in the state to identify and memorialize the enslaved people who labored at the schools and to offer scholarships to their descendants [LIS 2021]. Other universities and state legislatures are also grappling with the question of reparations for slavery. California recently set in motion a plan to require its state agencies to create a new category in employee data records. That category will have demographic data about African Americans who are descendants of enslaved individuals. Data will be included in reports starting in 2025. There is no obligation for Black Californians to undertake genealogical research and submit data to the state; data submission is optional [Diaz 2022].

34 African Americans, then, have long sought information about named forebearers, especially those enslaved in periods before 1865. Their reasons for doing so have included reconstituting families, challenging racism, advancing knowledge about their families' and the nation's past, claiming rights and opportunities, and honoring the humanity and memory of those who suffered because of injustices. Like all Americans, many Black families are also influenced by multi-billion-dollar corporations that advertise the value of undertaking genealogical research. Online scholarly datasets listing the names and a variety of characteristics of people subjected to enslavement have provided an avenue for African Americans to seek details about their family histories. In addition, such datasets have served as the evidentiary foundation for scholarly publications and been part of lesson plans in K-12 and university classrooms. Finally, they have helped scholars reframe debates around the “numbers game”, giving rise to scholarship focused on biography and the struggles of individuals whose lives can be pieced together from scattered bits of data found in multiple sources.

Descendants in Parts of Africa

35 African Americans have often sought information about their families' pasts, but the descendants of enslaved people the world over do not share this enthusiasm for genealogy. In parts of the world, the tracing of family trees that include enslaved people is difficult or impossible since slavery itself obliterated the families of the enslaved. As Martin Klein writes, enslaved individuals in West Africa were “people without history” since they “could neither bequeath to their children nor control them”. Enslavers could claim the children of those they owned, which kept the families of the enslaved “atomized and dependent”. This is to say that the nature of slavery in much of the region meant that enslaved people could not recite a genealogy, and neither can their descendants [Klein 1989, 212–213].

36 In addition, in some parts of the world, including much of West Africa, a family association with slavery still carries a

powerful social stigma. In a study of the period since European colonizers abolished the institution of slavery in Francophone West Africa, Ibrahima Thioub explores how the legacy of slavery often relegates “descendants of slaves to the margins of society and into specific social roles”. The reasons for this center on cultural prohibitions, which are region specific and “built around the ideology of blood purity and differences in skin color” [Thioub 2012, 12]. Thioub notes that, in certain places:

> certain ceremonial tasks are reserved exclusively for descendants of slaves: the men have to slaughter, butcher, and distribute the meat of sacrificial animals; the women have to grind the grain, pump the water, prepare and serve the meals, and wash the dishes afterwards. The increasing refusal on the part of descendants of slaves to follow these roles is stigmatized by descendants of masters as harmful and misplaced pridefulness. [Thioub 2012, 12]

Thioub also observes “discrimination in the way death is handled” with descendants “of slaves and descendants of masters having separate ceremonies”. Genealogy, he writes, “is the main way of proving which social group one belongs in”. Thus, the descendants of enslavers perpetuate genealogical memory while the descendants of the enslaved are interested in silencing that memory so that they can change their social identity, thereby attaining a higher status in society [Thioub 2012, 12].

37 In a study of The Gambia, Alice Bellagamba draws similar conclusions. Until recently, she writes, “descendants of slaves were discriminated against, receiving burial in a segregated section of the cemetery on their decease” [Bellagamba 2012, 36]. She explains that after the British declared an end to slavery in The Gambia in 1930, formerly enslaved people, or *jong*, became a “pseudo-caste”. *Jong* have been associated with stereotypes by the larger society, which regards them as dependent and as beggars. Today, descendants of enslaved people “might rudely react to the attempts of others to qualify them as *jong* without their consent” [Bellagamba 2012, 38]. For them, and for others around them, “not all should be said” about matters of family history, since some details of a family's genealogy might bring pain and humiliation and therefore cause ruptures in a community. Historical knowledge is powerful; just as it can bestow rights and opportunities on some, it can deny them for others. In Bellagamba's words, “[i]n contemporary Gambia, slave ancestry continues to be a stain on the family pedigree which very few slave descendants are eager to display publicly” [Bellagamba 2012, 46].

38 Others have also observed how slavery, though long ago abolished, continues to shape social relationships in West Africa. Examining Niger and Benin, Eric Komlavi-Hahonou documents and analyzes the political marginalization that descendants of enslaved people face. When questions are asked about enslaved forebearers, respondents often exclaim something akin to “It is not appropriate to talk about this!” because of a collective taboo around the subject [Komlavi-Hahonou 2009, 156]. Similarly, in a study of Anlo, Ghana, Emmanuel Akyeampong notes that people “prefer not to discuss the legacy of slavery” since even “successful and enterprising individuals do not easily shake off the social stigma of slave descent”. Silences, Akyeampong argues, allow for the integration of people into a broader national identity [Akyeampong 2001, 1].

39 In Mali, USAID sponsors programs that offer free legal aid to descendants of enslaved people who today are discriminated against because of known links to long-deceased enslaved forebearers. A 2012 USAID study estimated that 200,000 people in northern Mali were kept under descent-based or hereditary slavery. USAID assists those who champion the cause of those under descent-based slavery systems, trains stakeholders in handling descent-based slavery cases, and advocates for national legislation to end discrimination against and the oppression of those descended from enslaved people. Among the local organizations that assist descendants of enslaved people in Mali is Gambana, which was formed to fight violence and discrimination, mainly among ethnic Soninke. Gambana activists discourage the use of the word *kome*, or *slave*, to describe descendants of enslaved people, and they assist those who flee regions where they suffer abuse because of their families' links to enslavement. Given this, it is understandable why descendants of enslaved people in Mali seek to suppress their families' histories [USAID 2023] [Camara et al. 2022].

40 In the Indian Ocean world, descendants of enslaved people are similarly discriminated against. For this reason, Pier Larson explains, there is “historical amnesia” around the subject of slavery. Families with slave forebearers do not, he

argues, foster memories of the trauma of their communities' pasts or commemorate enslavement, which stands in contrast to the commemorations found across the Americas [Larson 1999]. In a study of Madagascar, Luke Freeman observes something similar — “a systematic avoidance of the topic [of slavery] that is generalized throughout nearly all conversations”. Explaining this, he writes that an avoidance of the topic “is not just a symptom of the problem of slavery, an embarrassed silence about a difficult past…. [I]t is also a pragmatic response to that problem, loaded with people's strategies and intentions for dealing with it in their daily interactions as co-villagers” [Freeman 2013, 601–603].

41 The same holds true in Somalia, where Catherine Besteman observes that, even long after abolition, descendants of enslaved people have held “marked identities which stigmatized them”. She adds that “[o]vert signs of inequality, status distinction, and social differentiation were readily apparent to any visitors in the 1980s”, when she did her fieldwork. Where descendants of enslaved Bantu people reside, “[v]illagers could not avoid recognizing their heritage of slavery, but they also rarely discussed it among themselves, in public at least” [Besteman 1999, 36–37, 136].

42 Beyond Africa, in Arabia, scholars have noted a similar silencing of family histories tied to slavery. As Matthew Hopper observes, “Unlike many other branches of the global African diaspora, identification with Africa is not a common feature among the descendants of enslaved Africans in Arabia” [Hopper 2015, 212–213]. The reason for this is clear: Africans were brought to Arabia to be enslaved, and a link to an enslaved past can bring dishonor to a family. Thus, descendants practice what Hopper calls an “intentional ‘forgetting’” of their histories [Hopper 2015, 216]. In making this argument, Hopper draws on conclusions made by Jonathon Glassman about the propensity of people in communities on the island of Zanzibar to link their family history (real or imagined) to Arabs so as to distance themselves from mainland people, many of whom had been brought to Zanzibar as slaves. As on Zanzibar, in Arabia, Hopper concludes, the obfuscation of African lineages is today an “effort to disassociate with the *ushenzi* or ‘slavishness’ of the African interior and the legacy of the slave trade” [Hopper 2015, 219] [Glassman 2011, 23–64] [Glassman 2014]. Publishing data on the internet that could link people in Zanzibari and Arabian communities to an enslaved past would not, then, be celebrated as it has been in North America. It could bring disgrace to individuals, families, and communities, opening conversations that most seek to avoid.

Conclusion

43 To ensure that we do no harm through the publication of online datasets that detail the lives of named enslaved individuals, digital historians must develop an understanding of how and why descendants of enslaved people want their histories told or silenced. We would be naive to think that online scholarly datasets detailing the lives of the enslaved would necessarily result in many discoveries of familial lines to enslaved individuals, and we would be dishonest to proclaim to descendants that documentary evidence from the past can reveal all the branches of family trees. After all, in North America, slavery often did away with fathers, leaving no evidentiary trail. To be sure, scholars and corporations have been extracting data from written documentary evidence that African American genealogists have been making use of, but information housed in archives silences much of the past.

44 Nonetheless, as the experience of Meghan Wilson with *Enslaved.org* illustrates, scholarly online datasets have the potential to make genealogical connections between enslaved people in the distant past and living people today. This is true in North America, and it is true elsewhere, including in Africa, South America, the Caribbean, and the Indian Ocean world. Given this, researchers compiling and posting online datasets that list names are obliged to understand power dynamics that operate today and ask if their research places descendants of enslaved people at risk. Researchers must avoid doing harm, particularly to vulnerable populations. To ensure that we do no harm, we should come to terms with whether an online dataset that makes it possible to connect people today to enslaved family members in the past would be unwelcome because a family history rooted in slavery continues to carry a stigma, or if such a dataseet would be welcome because descendants desire knowledge of a past that has long been denied them.

45 Researchers should also avoid reproducing the violence that systems of slavery wrought upon the enslaved. In the construction of datasets, this involves reading against the grain of sources produced by enslavers and creating controlled vocabularies that humanize those held in bondage. It also involves the development of sustainable practices in data stewardship and technologies that limit barriers to access to data through the application of open-source

software and accessibility tools, so that anyone with a computer and internet connection can view our sites and data free of charge.

Though we study the dead, we are obliged to consider how the living are connected to them and whether knowledge of those connections could do harm. This is particularly true in the Digital Age, when computer programs facilitate rapid searches of ever-growing online datasets. All the information that we place online is accessible elsewhere. What we do when we create internet-based datasets is speed up accessibility, making public information, which had not previously been widely known, easily knowable with the click of a few buttons. Ease of access to information can be beneficial to societies and individuals, but it can also be destructive. Privacy groups in the United States and Europe have raised questions about the wisdom of making public court records available on the internet because, among other things, ease of access to details about personal lives can cause embarrassment and lead to discrimination. In the same way, we should raise questions about the potential harm *our* data could cause. When we are told, in the words of one of Komlavi-Hahonou's informants, “It is not appropriate to talk about this”, we could anonymize our data — structure our datasets so that we do not reveal names. It might be argued that such silencings of the record *are* acts of violence, reproducing the acts of violence that anonymized Black bodies in the past and often denied the enslaved familial connections. But, first and foremost, our obligation is to the living, particularly the vulnerable among us. To be sure, placing data on the internet is not the only — and not always an appropriate — way to bring dignity to the dead.

Notes

[1] I define scholarly, internet-based datasets as datasets created by public or private college or university researchers and housed on college or university servers. These datasets are usually open-source, free to anyone with a computer and internet connection. Funding for such projects is usually derived from universities, grants, and donations. I define corporate datasets as datasets created by for-profit or non-profit corporations (excluding private colleges and universities). These datasets are housed on corporate servers, and the funding for such projects is usually derived from subscription fees and advertising. Some corporate sites offer limited access to resources without a subscription fee and with the submission of identifying information.

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