Introduction: The Politics and Ethics of Naming the Names of Enslaved People in Digital Humanities Projects

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Abstract

This introduction provides a broad overview to the context of digital humanities projects dealing with enslaved people and frames the debate over the ethics and politics of using the names of enslaved people. For some descendant communities, listing the names of enslaved people contributes to searches for genealogical connections; for other communities where the stigma of enslaved descent still prevails, such projects may do harm. This introduction explores these issues in relationship to the articles included in this special collection.

"Say their names" became one of the central chants of the Black Lives Matter movement following the murders of Trayvon Martin, George Floyd, and Breonna Taylor. Naming names has always been about remembrance, connections, relationships, and identities. "The act of naming is an act of power", writes Katja Guenther. "Parents naming children, conquerors naming new lands, and organizations naming themselves all involve the assertion of author and control. Names allow us to communicate through the development of shared meanings" [Guenther 2009, 412]. Naming names has also always been seeped in power. The power to name is the power to claim, which is why naming and renaming practices seem central to enslaved people and their descendants. [1]

This collection of essays explores the politics and ethics of listing on open-source, internet-based platforms the names of people of African descent who were enslaved before states mandated abolition and those who were liberated by policies restricting the slave trade. The authors in this special issue raise issues that resonate with internet-based historical studies of other oppressed and vulnerable populations considering several key questions: do historians face unique ethical considerations when making named enslaved people known on publicly accessible websites? When publishing historical findings about enslaved people on the internet, what are our obligations to the subjects of our studies? Should historians who identify enslaved historical actors by name online be concerned about the thoughts and feelings of their descendants today? Should we consult with descendant communities? In brief, the authors of this collection examine some of the ethical implications of studying enslaved people in the Internet Age. [2]

Since the early 2000s, internet platforms that name people of African descent who were enslaved as the result of historical processes rooted in the rise of oceanic trade and growth of capitalist economies have proliferated. Gwendolyn Midlo Hall authored the first such study, *Afro-Louisiana History and Genealogy, 1719-1820*, which was first published online in 2001. Hall extracted data from archival sources from colonial Louisiana and presented her findings in a searchable dataset. Each line of the dataset has information about one enslaved person, with columns arranged according to characteristics such as name, location, gender, age, skills, value, and more. [3]

Hall's dataset inspired other researchers who have created or are creating a great many internet-based projects that list and tell the histories of named enslaved people of African descent. Most do so through datasets arranged similarly to [4]

Hall's. Those include *Kinfolkology*; *Legacies of British Slavery*; *Freedom on the Move*; *Le Marronnage dans le Monde Atlantique*; *Esclavage & Indemnités*; *Universities Studying Slavery*; *The Senegal Liberation Project*; *Voyage of the Slave Ship Sally*; *An Online Database of the Enslaved on the Sugar Plantations of Robert Cunyngham, 1729-1735*; *Runaway Slaves in Britain*; *Slave Societies Digital Archive*; *Liberated Africans*; *Texas Slavery Project*; *Freedom Narratives*; *Last Seen: Finding Family after Slavery*; *Take Them In Families*; *Evergreen Plantation*; *Historic Haile Homestead*; *Andrew Jackson's Hermitage*; *Destrehan Plantation*; *(Un)Silencing Slavery*; *Slavery in the President's Neighborhood*; *Unknown No Longer*; *African Nova Scotians in the Age of Slavery and Abolition*; *Slave Biographies*; *Legacies of Slavery in Maryland*; *Louisiana Slave Conspiracies*; *Monticello Enslaved Community Database*; *Database of Mount Vernon's Enslaved Community*; *Oceans and Continents*; *African Origins*, which is a part of a larger project titled *Slave Voyages*; and *Enslaved.org* and its *Journal of Slavery and Data Preservation*.

Scholars taking their studies of named enslaved people to the internet display a commitment to values long espoused by social historians. As a field of study, social history emerged in the 1960s and 1970s in reaction to fields that focused on politics, diplomacy, and "great men", while ignoring the lived experiences of ordinary people. Social historians embarked on studies of populations across the world. Among the histories they sought to tell were those of Africans and people of African descent in diaspora. In so doing, they responded to the demands of Black activists and university students, who spearheaded the Civil Rights Movement, to create a more inclusive history of the United States and the broader Atlantic world. In studies of enslaved populations, social historians examined resistance to oppression, social lives, family structures, cultures, labor, suffering, and resilience. They debunked myths rooted in racist ideologies and showed that Black populations contributed to the creation of the world we have inherited [Stuckey 1969] [Zunz 1985] [Hawthorne 2018] [Stanziani 2023].

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Since enslaved people of African descent penned precious little about their own lives, social historians developed new methodologies to tell their histories. The violence of enslavement ruptured Black life around the Atlantic. Enslavers tore Africans from their natal homes, transported them far away, renamed them, and structured their lives and the lives of their descendants around labor for capitalist economies. In records they kept, enslavers reduced the enslaved to commodities, erasing much of their history. Therefore, to understand changes in enslaved people's lives over time, social historians utilize methodologies centered on the collecting oral history, analyzing language, studying material culture, and quantifying data found in records recorded by enslavers. In the late 1960s and 1970s, quantitative approaches to the study of enslaved populations involved extracting and standardizing of data from records enslavers recorded and creating large datasets. Philip Curtin's seminal work, *The Atlantic Slave Trade: A Census* (1972), and Robert William Fogel and Stanley L. Engerman's *Time on the Cross: The Economics of American Negro Slavery* (1974) exemplified this approach. What resulted were studies of broad populations, but beyond a relatively small number of biographies of exceptional enslaved people, histories of slavery did not often lend themselves to a focus on named individuals. Observing this, Jennifer L. Morgan describes the "maddening synchronicity of erasure and enumeration" that has rendered enslaved individuals — especially enslaved women, in Morgan's account — silent and absent from the historical record and from written histories. Quantitative methods, she continues, have resulted in "prisons of meaning … [making] a certain kind of scholarship possible while rendering another quite impossible" [Morgan 2021] [Law 2022] [Miller 2014] [Klein 2014].

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Digital social historians of slavery are addressing the issue of the anonymity of enslaved people in historical studies and reconceptualizing the history of slavery. As they do so, they are challenged by ethical considerations that unique to publication on the internet. An obvious difference between publishing findings about enslaved populations — including lists of names — in print scholarship versus digital scholarship is that digital scholarship, assuming it is open access, is more readily available, free to anyone with a computer and internet connection. Digital projects about named enslaved people are also designed to be searchable — to facilitate the identification of people quickly and easily. Digital projects take history directly to the public, making information about slavery and the named individuals who suffered under it widely available in the United States and anywhere in the world. Further, digital dataset projects often allow researchers to download data that they can manipulate and analyze with digital tools. And internet-based dataset projects that apply linked, open data principles facilitate the rapid identification of people who appear in more than one dataset. These datasets can then be combined, which enables the telling of fuller life histories (for example, Enslaved.org).

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Many have applauded the proliferation of websites that provide open access information about named enslaved individuals. Such sites are important to African Americans undertaking genealogical research; names are tangible links to a family's past, giving people who have long thought that slavery erased their family history an opportunity to uncover aspects of that history. For some, proven descendancy from enslaved people has been the basis for claims for reparations. Further, educators seeking to diversify their lesson plans by relating the history of slavery through explorations of the lives of named enslaved individuals have benefitted from open-source scholarly websites. Internet sources for the study of slavery can also fill a void in places in the United States that have implemented laws banning books and pedaogy about race, racial oppression, and critical race theory. Teachers in Florida might be hesitant to teach their students about the named enslaved people who James Monroe sold from his plantation in Virginia to Florida to pay debts in the early nineteenth century, but through open-source internet-based datasets, students can explore the lives of Dudley and Eve McGuire, Toby and Betsy, Hope Douglas, and others who were uprooted by Monroe [Bon-Harper and Stetz 2022] [Burnett and Violette 2020] (see also *Take Them In Families*). Such websites tell histories that for some are empowering and for others uncomfortable, in part because they raise awareness of inequalities that existed in the past and might be used to show the persistence of inequalities based on descent through to the present.

By compiling data extracted from primary sources into datasets, digital historians of slavery have pursued some of the methods of quantitative and statistical historians. However, when sources reveal them, they have valued the recording of enslaved people's names so that datasets can be used for broad studies of populations and the writing of biographies and family histories. To be sure, source material usually provides only scant information — shards and fragmentary data — about enslaved individuals, so we will never be able to write rich, cradle-to-grave biographies about the overwhelming majority of those who toiled under enslavement. But the act of naming enslaved people in internet-based scholarship writes them into history; it centers them and indicates that their histories are as important as the histories of elite enslavers. Naming names is a small step toward countering racist narratives of Africans and their descendants as people without history. It makes clear that we can know more than that generalized "slaves" suffered under oppression and violence. Instead, we can know the names of the enslaved and, if other information is recorded in columns beside names in datasets, get a glimpse into the lives enslaved individuals forged under conditions that were not of their own choosing. Naming names can humanize those who enslavers sought to dehumanize. It advances a social agenda to "say their names" — to shout the names of those who have died as the result of violence stemming from racism and oppression.

That said, naming names raises thorny ethical and analytical issues. The names historians list in their datasets are not often names that enslaved Africans had been given in their homelands or that enslaved people of African descent in the Americas chose for their children. As wealthy Virginia planter Robert "King" Carter wrote in 1727 after purchasing enslaved Africans from a trader in the state, "I name'd them here & by their names we can always know what sizes they are of & would readily answer to them". When he handed the Africans over to his overseers, he instructed that the "negros both men & women… always go by the names we give them" [Berlin 1996, 251]. The stripping of enslaved Africans of their names happened around the Atlantic, as did the process of enslavers naming enslaved children born to women they held in bondage. This raises questions about the ends that historians achieve in listing the names of enslaved people in online datasets. To what extent does the naming of names that appear in sources recorded by enslavers obscure as much as it clarifies? Do names tell us more about enslavers' proclivities — about how they identified those they enslaved — than it does about how the enslaved themselves? If we see ourselves as ethically obliged to make the histories of our subjects known, are we fulfilling that obligation by listing names forced upon them by those who oppressed them?

The reality that enslavers created the archive that we as social historians of slavery rely on raises other ethical considerations. Does the act of transcribing and making publicly available data from an enslaver's account book, which grouped the enslaved into racial categories meant to indicate inferiority based on descent, used demeaning and derogatory language, and assigned monetary values to people based on age, sex, skills, injuries, illnesses, and childbearing capabilities, perpetuate racism from the past into the present? Could our attempts to humanize the enslaved in studies we post online reify again the dehumanizing efforts of enslavers? If so, how can we read against the grain of our sources, explain to our readers the historical context in which they were produced, and use enslavers'

records to tell new histories of the enslaved? In the Internet Age, what are our obligations to the dead and especially to those who were marginalized?

A related question is what are our obligations to the living — to descent communities, many of which are marginalized today because of institutional racism that is rooted in the past? Following Jessica Marie Johnson's call, to what extent should historians who explore the lives of named enslaved individuals on the internet "infuse their work with a methodology and praxis that centers the descendants of the enslaved" [Johnson 2018, 71]? In some parts of the world, descent communities have applauded internet-based source material that facilitates research into and the teaching of Black history. And Black genealogists have benefitted from access to open-source data linking them to named ancestors. But, as the authors of articles in this collection show, not all descent communities welcome the telling of histories that link them to slavery. Indeed, in certain places a family's descent from named enslaved individuals carries today a social stigma that can cause harm in the present. With this in mind, to what extent should members of descent communities shape how professional historians tell — or purposely silence — the writing and dissemination of history in the Digital Age? What, if anything, should historians consider before making information abotu long-dead named individuals whose stories could give us some new insights into the past accessible and searchable on the internet? Should historians' scholarship first and foremost do no harm? Should we seek to protect the most vulnerable?

Ethics of Dealing with Vulnerable Communities in Digital Humanities Projects

As Kathleen Tierney writes, "people are not born vulnerable, they are made vulnerable… [as] different axes of inequality combine and interact to [generate] systems of oppression…" [Tierney 2019, 127–128]. The term vulnerability is derived from the Latin *vulnus*, which means "wound" and has come to refer to the condition of being susceptible to harm in a physical as well as social, psychological, moral, spiritual sense [Turner 2008, 656]. Both individuals and groups are vulnerable to harm, but systemic oppression is most often directed against groups. Groups most subject to systemic oppression are those who are defined by the dominant groups as "others" or as different. The United Nations section on Fighting Racism lists those groups considered most vulnerable. People of African descent, especially the descendants of the victims of the transatlantic slave trade or more recent migrants face "discriminatory structures and institutions, legacies of the injustices of enslavement and colonialism" that result in "the people of African descent being among the poorest and most marginalized groups who also face alarmingly high rates of police violence, and racial profiling". The UN's list of vulnerable groups includes indigenous peoples; Roma; Sinti; Travelers; persons belonging to national, ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities; migrants; refugees; asylum seekers; internally displaced people; people living in extreme poverty; LGBTQI+ people; and women. Because of their gender, women and girls face additional discrimination, making them "extra vulnerable" [UN n.d.] [von Benzon and van Blerk 2018]. Precisely because the descendants of enslaved ancestors are subject to systemic oppression, those of us working with digital projects dealing with these communities need to be especially engaged with the complex and often contradictory ethical issues involved.

By making evidence of vulnerable communities more accessible through digital methods, our work also "surfaces new moral quandaries" that demand deeper exploration of our moral commitments as researchers and our responsibilities to the communities we study. In engaging with these new moral quandaries, Nicholas Proferes draws a distinction between compliant and contemplative ethics. In Proferes's terms, compliant ethics are shorthand for compliance with the Institutional Review Boards at research universities and centers that provide a utilitarian baseline for the treatment and protection of human subjects in research projects. The IRB ethics compliance framework is derived from broader moral and legal discussions about the uses and abuses of human subjects. Compliant ethics also serve to mitigate risk and liability to the institution. Ethics as contemplation, Proferes argues, is an "ongoing practice of inwards reflection about our own actions and about what is right and just" to identify a plurality of values in order to promote respect for persons, justice, and beneficence [Proferes 2020, 416–418, 424][1]

Precisely because digital humanities provide the possibility of widely sharing data, they also raise a host of ethical issues that emerge from wider accessibility. Proferes identifies three areas where ethical considerations are paramount in digital humanities: data collection, data use, and data sharing. Data collection involves privacy issues; data use

involves interrogating the intentions of the creators of the data as well as reflections on its fair use; and data sharing involves reflecting on the original intent of the actors involved by means of sharing the output with the impacted individuals and communities, as well as assessing whether sharing may cause harm to those communities. Digital tools that promote wider sharing thus have their own embedded "values", which also need to be interrogated. Proferes calls for an "expanded practice of moral contemplation in relationship to digital humanities projects" to identify and confront these embedded "morally opaque practices" that surround the values of sharing versus the potential to harm [Proferes 2020, 420–426].

Particularly when dealing with vulnerable groups and communities, the potential for harm must be central to ethical considerations. Vulnerability is not necessarily fixed or static, but rather changes over time. We have to understand vulnerability on two levels: the designation of a vulnerable group and when the individuals in the group *feel* vulnerable. Even for individuals within vulnerable groups, their experiences of vulnerability may wax or wane depending on their changing relationships to inequality and power [Shaw et al. 2020, 279]. In our collection of essays, Kelly Duke Bryant raises the special situation of unaccompanied minors in colonial Senegal, many of whom were likely trafficked. Duke Bryant argues persuasively that this group merits special protections precisely because they were most vulnerable (see also [Moitt 2024]). Matthew Hopper, in his essay, focuses on another group of vulnerable people: those who were forcibly liberated from slave ships in the Indian Ocean by European anti-slave-trade squadrons. Hopper argues that these liberated Africans did not consent voluntarily to being liberated, although we can assume that many did not fully understand that their "liberation" often meant entering into long periods of indenture or apprenticeship (see also [Anderson and Lovejoy 2020]).

Compliant ethics provides a one-size-fits-all tool kit for doing no harm: informed consent and confidentiality. When researching living subjects, informed consent certainly mitigates potential harm, and some informants feel empowered by their inclusion in research projects. However, it would be naïve to assume that all subjects granting informed consent do so in situations not marked by significant power imbalances [White, Miescher, and Cohen 2001]. The compliant ethical commitment to confidentiality thus also needs to be interrogated. Katja Guenther argues that one of the basic principles in the social sciences is protecting individuals through the use of pseudonyms, which Guenther refers to as the "politics of naming". Far from feeling protected by confidentiality, Guenther's research subjects, a group of vulnerable and marginalized activist women in a male-dominated society, "wanted to be heard…. Yet by guaranteeing their confidentiality, I was in effect denying my respondents the right to be heard; in renaming them through the use of pseudonyms, I was denying them the basic right to be who they are. Equally problematic, I was silencing their challenges of systems of oppression and injustice" [Guenther 2009, 411, 414]. In a contemplative section of her essay, Guenther writes that her interest in protecting her subjects from a range of harms that they could not possibly imagine was a "patronizing concern". Guenther concludes that scholars need to better recognize the complexities of the politics of naming and question the general assumption that confidentiality is always the best practice [Guenther 2009, 414, 420]. Similarly, Shaw et al. underscore the risks of doing no harm:

> [W]e want to emphasise that risk is a common feature of research engagement and that curtailing or avoiding studies involving sensitive topics may prevent injury, but would also silence people's accounts of their experiences…. Taking a view that vulnerability is a universal feature of the human condition, we think that ethical, emotional and psychological risk is a normal part of doing research with human participants, who voluntarily and openly disclose information about their lives. [Shaw et al. 2020, 289]

In ideal research situations, research participants would be empowered to negotiate the issue of naming or anonymity contextually. Empowering participants would also challenge notions of what constitutes vulnerability and what it means to protect the vulerable. Niamh Moore addresses the harm actually done in invoking the "do no harm" principle, writing that "[f]or much of history anonymity did not protect the vulnerable, but excluded women and others from authorship and ownership of their own words, erasing them from the archive, even from history, and in the process creating vulnerability through rending people nameless" [Moore 2012, 332]. Particularly in regard to the potentialities of re-using data so crucial to digital humanities, Moore notes that one of the consequences of anonymization in the presentation of primary data is an abstraction of the data that have lost their situatedness or context [Moore 2012, 336]. It falls to the researcher

to take seriously the intentions of the actors in historical primary sources and those of human subjects in ongoing research.

The issue of naming names in vulnerable and marginal groups has significant political as well as ethical ramifications. To ensure confidentiality and to disguise or change the settings or context may protect vulnerable people from potential harm, but it also leaves intact systems of inequality and oppression. In his research on the discrimination racial minorities face in higher education, Benjamin Baez notes that "the failure to disclose important information may have perpetuated the kinds of experiences racial minorities 'keep having again and again'". Baez likens confidentiality to secrets; both imply concealment. He writes: "[A]s with all secrets, there were negative consequences. In failing to expose racism and sexism at the institution, I contributed to the many ways in which the institution and their colleagues harmed the very 'persons' I sought to protect" [Baez 2002, 41]. In his call for making research socially transformative, Baez further argues that "transformative research, if it is possible, must expose and resist oppression, which is often hidden. To do so, it requires openness and risk-taking" [Baez 2002, 46]. By adhering to compliant ethical standards of "doing no harm" — essentially by keeping secrets — researchers may actually be complicit in maintaining systems of oppression, which entail their own "constitutive vulnerability" for vulnerable and marginal groups [Bok 1989].

Doing no harm is clearly neither easy nor ethical in all situations. Several of our contributors in this special issue disagree about the way forward in regard to naming the names of enslaved people in Senegal and Mali. On the one hand, Duke Bryant argues that enslaved and trafficked minors need extra protection, but Duke Bryant also argues that scholars should be respectful of the prevailing ethos in which raising issues about enslaved status or descent may cause harm. In their roles as scholars of education and pedagogy in Senegal, Mamadou Yéro Baldé, Djibrirou Daouda Ba, and Ismaïla Mbodji seek a middle ground in designing curriculum for middle-cycle students that balances the requirements of Senegalese national standards to train students in critical research, historical skills, and digital literacy that focus on the country's past with the "conservative" nature of Senegalese society that encourages social stability.

Encouraging social stability may, however, result in concealing social inequalities. In response to calls from marginal and subaltern groups to be included in the continent's history, Ibrahima Thioub, the recently retired rector of the Cheikh Anta Diop University in Senegal and a leading Senegalese historian, has called for the recognition of a new public space in Senegal and throughout Africa. In particular, Thioub sees these emerging public spaces as opportunities to "break the silence surrounding slavery [in Africa] and put on the defensive those in power and those groups who defend the status quo" [Thioub 2021, 20]. In their contribution to this collection, Marie Rodet and Mamadou Séné Cissé explore in part how descendants of enslaved people in Mali have been mobilizing politically to tell their history, to claim their dignity, and to assert their freedom (see also [Hahonou and Pelckmans 2011]). Roberts and Wall, in their essay in this collection, recognize the potential harm that naming the names of enslaved people may have on their descendants but argue that those enslaved people who actively sought their freedom in Senegal wanted formal certificates of liberty in their names and to be inscribed in a register of liberations. They conclude that naming the names of these people honors their actions and contributes to a more complex interpretation of French West African history.

Whose Name? Who Chooses?

Enslavement and the slave trade, as we have argued, were predicated upon the violence of rupture. Enslavement ruptured a person's connections to family, kin, and community and almost always involved the brutal transfer of the enslaved person far from home and homeland. On top of the physical violence of capture, enslavers subjected enslaved people to the symbolic violence of renaming. Renaming the newly enslaved person was a central part of asserting domination. Renaming also served to erase the previous identity of the enslaved person. Such erasure was not always absolute, and retentions of previous identities often persisted despite efforts to impose domination through naming. This was certainly the case in the classic slave narrative, in which Olaudah Equiano recounts how one of his enslavers gave him the name Gustavus Vassa. Equiano listed both names — Olaudah Equiano and Gustavus Vassa — as the authors of his *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, Or Gustavus Vassa, the African*, first published in 1789. The use of both names stimulated a lively debate regarding the author's birth, his identity, and the authenticity of the narrative [Carretta 2005] [Lovejoy 2006]. This debate led to a reassessment of the fixedness of names and identities in the Atlantic world during the early modern period. Drawing from his study of Domingues Alvares, James Sweet argues

that "the Atlantic represented a series of social deaths and rebirths, a repeating circuit of dislocation and dismemberment, marked by an unceasing desire to reconstitute the self through family, friends, and community. His was a history without end, quite literally a feedback loop of subjection and social subjectivities" [Sweet 2009, 304]. Far from being fixed and indelible, identities and names were "overlapping, shifting, and situational…." [Sweet 2009, 298].

Naming and renaming are about power, even where the power of enslavers was incomplete. In her study of enslaved people in central Mali, Lotte Pelckmans notes that renaming by enslavers "consisted of the imposition of a completely new, often degrading identity" [Pelckmans 2017, 257–258]. In the southern United States, enslavers regularly renamed newly enslaved people, but almost always by first names only. In a study of the largest same-day slave auction in South Carolina in mid-March 1835, the enslaved people being sold included Humphrey, Hannah, Celia, Charles, Esther, Daniel, Dorcas, Dye, London, Friday, Jacob, Daphne, Cuffee, Carolina, Peggy, and Violet [Hawes 2003]. These names were likely only temporary ones. As enslaved people were bought and sold, they were often subject to multiple renamings by their enslavers as acts of power and possession. Naming and renaming were thus part of the sequence of trauma that slavery imposed on people.

But the power to name did not always reside in the enslaver. We think that it is important to differentiate between who was renaming whom and under what conditions. Enslavers renamed enslaved people to claim ownership and to erase the genealogy of the enslaved. Enslaved people, however, were not entirely powerless in this process. Many, no doubt, retained their names and their genealogies despite what enslavers did, and such retentions became sites of struggle and resistance. Others used aliases, as Kelly Duke Bryant argues in this collection. Especially for enslaved people and their descendants, changing their names was central to a broad "repertoire of social possibilities", according to Gregory Mann's analysis of names and name changing in colonial French West Africa [Mann 2002, 309–312]. Moreover, Lotte Pelckmans refers to enslaved people's acts of changing names in Mali as providing "passports" for social mobility [Pelckmans 2017, 257–258].

Changing names was not without consequences, however. In many parts of the world, social knowledge resides in names. Surnames or patronyms are charters for social identity that link individuals to communities and communities to history. While in West Africa many newly enslaved people kept their patronyms, which served as markers of enslaved status in their enslavers' communities, children of enslaved people often carried the patronym of their enslaver, whether or not he was the father of the enslaved mother's children. In West Africa, enslaved men lacked rights of paternity, enslaved female lacked "legal husbands", and children born to enslaved women always belonged to their enslavers [Pelckmans 2017, 262] [Klein 1989, 213] [Mann 2002]. Carrying the patronyms of their enslavers did not mean that enslaved children born in their enslavers' communities were fully integrated. As Martin Klein writes, "[s]laves are often reluctant to talk about their origins if they know them at all. This means that any family the slave has is the master's family and any history is the master's history" [Klein 2005, 838]. Reflecting on Klein's argument twenty-five years later, Marie Rodet adds that if "slaves and their descendants preferred in some instances to forget their traumatic past", their efforts were incomplete because "colonial and local ideologies at the time of abolition prevented the stigma of slavery from disappearing" [Rodet 2013, 28]. Even if the descendants of enslaved ancestors may have preferred to forget their histories, many still retained vivid oral histories and memories. Rodet challenges scholars to learn how to listen better to their informants and ask better questions to elicit these memories. Similarly, Roberts and Wall argue in this collection that place matters in how persistent the stigma of former enslaved identity is: moving away from the community of former enslavers' risks subsistence security but provides for social mobility.

As James Sweet argues, in a world where identities were fluid, name-changing was political and personal [Sweet 2009]. The world of fluid identities was, however, gradually narrowed through the expansion and consolidation of nation states interested in the "conquest of illegibility". James Scott and his colleagues examine this in their exploration of the use of fixed names, a modern invention designed to suppress the "utter fluidity of vernacular naming practices" [Scott, Tehranian, and Mathias 2002, 6]. Emerging in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the use of surnames surrounded efforts to clarify grants of land and, for noble families, to protect their properties. Surnames also helped to register baptisms and payments of poll taxes. Precise names were essential to inheritance, especially inheritance of large estates and property, and to large-scale military conscription [Forrest 1989, ch. 2] [Scott, Tehranian, and Mathias 2002, 11, 15]. Entering such information into written registers emerged coincidentally with the consolidation of state

power (see, for example, [Scott 1998] and [Desalle 2018]).

During and after the Napoleonic Wars, the British aggressively pursued treaties with European powers to suppress the maritime slave trade, first in the Atlantic and then in the Indian Ocean. Mixed or so-called joint commissions sat in Freetown, Luanda, Cape Town, Boa Vista in the Cabo Verde Islands, Havana, Rio de Janeiro, Surinam, Spanish Town, New York, and Saint Helena. Their tasks were to adjudicate the capture of slave ships, liberate the enslaved people, and disperse the prize money to the captain and crew that captured the slave ship [Bethel 1966] [Martinez 2012] [Anderson and Lovejoy 2020] [Misevich 2019] [Lovejoy and Schwarz 2015] [Pearson 2012] [Lovejoy and Anderson 2020]. For the first time in over three centuries, registers of enslaved Africans containing names as well as individual demographic information were more or less systematically maintained.

To date, the most sustained research on registers of liberation of enslaved people from Africa have focused on those produced by these courts and commissions, which operated between 1808 and 1871 and presided over nearly 600 cases [Misevich 2019, 248].[2] According to Henry Lovejoy's compilation of evidence on liberated Africans, we can estimate that nearly 200,000 people were liberated by Vice-Admiralty courts and the Mixed Commissions. In addition, Lovejoy's network of ongoing research projects suggests that scholars may have access to records regarding 700,000 liberated Africans [Liberated Africans n.d.]. The courts and commissions kept records of individual liberated Africans because most were "freed" into various forms of indenture, military service, guardianship, or resettlement depending upon their gender, age, and perceived health. In Sierra Leone, the courts and commissions liberated 99,752 Africans. Nearly 72% of those liberated settled in Sierra Leone, and around 25% were indentured or conscripted to serve elsewhere in the British empire [Anderson 2020, 1, ch. 3].

Maintaining written registers meant creating both legibility and identity. In the Indian Ocean, as Matthew Hopper describes in this collection, the registers of liberated Africans were modeled on registers of indenture and served equally as forms of surveillance because of the individually identifying information collected for each enslaved African liberated. By collecting biometric evidence, including scarification, these registers provided a useful tool in cases when liberated Africans absconded from their indenture contracts. As such, the registers became, according to Kelly Duke Bryant, points of contact between the state and individuals.

Central to the process of creating legibility and identity, these registers included the names of the enslaved people. With the exception of Muslim societies and Abyssinia, most African societies during this period had tonal languages and did not utilize writing. Thus, the very act of rendering an African's phonetic name into a written form was an act of transformation. In the case of the registers of liberated Africans in Sierra Leone and Havana, literate clerks, most of whom were European, relied on African interpreters to help transcribe African tonal names into the registers. In his study of the Havana registers of liberated Africans, Henry Lovejoy argues that the names clerks entered into the registers reflected the tonal structures of their own native languages, rather than those of the liberated Africans [Lovejoy 2010, 107–135].

Central to the challenge of respecting the names but also the histories of enslaved people is listening to what they tell us. In reflecting on decades of research on slavery in French West Africa, Martin Klein notes that "[p]erhaps the most striking conclusion from these interviews is that in these societies those of slave descent do not like to recognize their slave origins even where the person's origins are well-known. This contrasts to the Afro-America quest for 'roots'" [Klein 1989, 211]. In West African societies where slavery was based on status rather than race, the persistent discrimination that those of enslaved descent faced was based on the sigma of their ancestors' enslavement. With the end of slavery, enslaved people the world over struggled against former enslavers for more autonomy, the means to secure and protect their families, and the right to work for themselves. Where former enslavers controlled the state and legal access to land and continued to shape social and political ideologies, the social mobility of recently freed people was sharply constrained. Even in West Africa, where enslavers did not control the colonial state, political ideologies and fears of social upheaval helped to sustain existing social hierarchies, the social mobility of the recently freed was also limited. In many cases, the stigma of enslaved status persisted, sometimes for generations, becoming as Benedetta Rossi notes a "public secret" that encouraged descendants of enslaved people to continue practicing subservience to descendants of former enslavers [Rossi 2009, 10]. Such conservative political ideologies persist to this day in many West African

societies, especially in rural areas. Mamadou Yéro Baldé, Djibrirou Daouda Ba, and Ismaïla Mbodji stress this issue in their discussion about how the conservative elements within Senegalese society set limits on the potential of new public-school curriculum regarding the history of slavery and the slave trade in Senegal to address issues of social inequality.

The very nature of maintaining the public secret of a person's enslaved past has harmful consequences not only to those suffering from the stigma of an enslaved past but also to the host society perpetuating these secrets. In her classic study of secrets, the philosopher Sissela Bok noted that "[l]ong-term group practices of secrecy … are especially likely to breed corruption and to spread…. When power is joined to secrecy, therefore, and when the practices are of long duration, the danger of [the] spread [of corruption] and abuse and deterioration increases" [Bok 1989, 110]. Long-term secrecy is also linked to self-deception. "[I]t is secrecy", Bok writes, "that lies at the center of such self-deception…. In deceiving ourselves… we keep secret from ourselves the truth we cannot face" [Bok 1989, 60]. The public secrets of enslaved pasts thus are complicit with perpetuating inequalities and discrimination that continue to harm all of society. 32

As digital social historians of slavery reconceptualize the social history of slavery by charting new paths in data preservation and data sharing, they must also confront the political and ethical challenges involved. Throughout the Atlantic and Indian Ocean worlds, archives detailing the lives of people of color have been neglected. This is in part because many such archives exist in parts of the world that struggle to fund them and because nowhere have archives been immune to the institutional racism that permeates the societies that created and maintain them [NARA 2021]. As a result of underfunding and neglect, much primary source material about the lives of enslaved people has been lost, and much that survives is uncatalogued and decaying. Digital social historians have often preserved primary source materials by digitizing them and making the images available on the internet with accompanying datasets, which can serve as a finding aid to facilitate the identification of individuals listed in the documentation (see especially [Slave Societies Digital Archive n.d.]). The preservation and dissemination of data help the community of scholars write social history today and could be foundational for writing social history for generations to come. 33

However, preservation efforts can be the basis for future research if and only if social historians implement data stewardship plans. In other words, creating datasets with information about named enslaved individuals and posting that information online accomplishes the historian's goals of data preservation and access if and only if websites are designed with an understanding of the questions users might ask of the data and if they are properly maintained and preserved so that data is not lost and remains findable. Historians can be reasonably sure that their published print scholarship will be maintained in libraries for generations. But do they have commitments from their institutions to maintain their digital scholarship into the future? Put another way, if we have a professional obligation to preserve endangered data about the lives of our subjects, are we taking steps to ensure that preservation continues after we are gone? Contrary to the cliché that "the internet is forever", in practice digital resources require continual maintenance, human effort, and financial resources. 34

Contributions to this Special Issue

In her examination of records of liberated minors in post-emancipation Senegal, Kelly Duke Bryant reflects on the ethical balance between accessible knowledge and avoiding transferring the colonial archive's hierarchical and reductive classification systems onto the digital realm. Taking these questions further, she contemplates the importance of the ethical considerations that the names and aliases of the minors themselves play in the research questions under examination. 35

Annette Joseph-Gabriel examines how a course centered on digital mapping, tracing the transatlantic movements of enslaved individuals, surpassed traditional boundaries of retrieval. Faced with accounts of an anonymous stowaway's quest for freedom, Joseph-Gabriel investigates the constraints of historical recovery and restoration due to the challenge of archival anonymity and "black geographies of flight". In reflecting on her work with her students in tracing the lives of enslaved individuals in the Caribbean and building a digital website entitled *Mapping Marronage*, Joseph-Gabriel proposes three analytical perspectives that not only explain her digital project but help frame the broader goals of digital projects about slavery. Joseph-Gabriel proposes that we think of these projects through the practices of 36

"recovery", "hesitation", and "unmapping", concepts that she explores more fully in her essay.

Matthew Hopper explores the ethical dimensions of naming while embarking on a project that delves into the trajectory of liberated enslaved people who transitioned into indentured servants in the Indian Ocean. Hopper leverages an extensive dataset encompassing details like children's names, parents' names, age, height, scarification, and even photographs. Given the distinctly identifiable biometric quality of the data, combined with persistent stigma attached to having enslaved ancestors in many parts of the Indian Ocean, Hopper considers aligning the ethical responsibilities of historians with the considerations associated with biometric data employed by geneticists. In doing so, he draws on an intriguing project pursued by ethically minded researchers in Australia.

Mamadou Yéro Baldé, Djibrirou Daouda Ba, and Ismaïla Mbodji examine pedagogical techniques for teaching about Senegal's slave trade in the Senegalese public school middle cycle (comparable to middle school and the first two years of high school in the United States), using digital humanities methodologies and evidence from the *Senegal Liberations Project*. Recognizing the potential divisiveness of explicitly naming enslaved individuals due to societal stigma, they suggest emphasizing ethics through a "patriotic perspective". This pedagogical approach prioritizes interactivity and ethical considerations in historical education.

Walter Hawthorne examines the ethics of publicly listing names in online databases, contrasting the balance that must be struck between the desire of descendants of enslaved people to learn about their family heritage in some regions with anxieties held elsewhere in the world about revealing enslaved ancestors. Looking closely at one project, *Enslaved.org*, Hawthorne considers how to approach naming and anonymity and urges researchers to be attentive to the specific ethical valences of their projects, particularly in terms of efforts to minimize the continued commodification of enslaved individuals through digital projects. Crucial to the goals of *Enslaved.org* is to eliminate as many barriers as possible to wide digital accessibility by relying on open-source software and establishing sustainable practices.

Richard L. Roberts and Rebecca E. Wall focus on an ongoing research initiative, the *Senegal Liberations Project*. Roberts and Wall discuss how different descendant communities might have vastly different preferences regarding the anonymization or naming of their enslaved ancestors and how living close to former enslavers impacts this preference. They argue that ethical considerations, while very real, should not deter research, but the preferences of the original enslaved or freed person should be paramount if they are discoverable. For the registers of liberation that they work with, Roberts and Wall conclude that because the enslaved people identified in the registers actively sought their freedom by presenting themselves before French colonial officials and receiving certificates of liberty in their names, they wanted themselves so recognized. To complicate matters, however, many enslaved people sought their liberation together with minor children, who could not give their consent.

In their reflections on a different kind of digital public history project — a web-based oral history project — Marie Rodet and Mamadou Séné Cissé explore the ethics and politics of collecting and making public the histories of enslaved people in western Mali who have and continue to struggle against the discrimination and stigma of enslaved descent. Describing their project as a "co-production" involving both well-funded researchers and struggling farmers, Rodet and Cissé discuss how they sought to overcome the asymmetrical relationships in the project, which were made sharper by the digital divide separating the north from the south. Despite the challenges posed by COVID, Rodet and Cissé conclude that their collaboration with the villagers of Bouillagui advances the goals of participatory history-making and the power of digital tools to achieve those goals.

Public-facing digital humanities projects dealing with enslaved people are rich with potentialities for revising the past and restoring human dignity to those who have been reduced to commodities or mere entries in aggregate data. But there are profound ethical, political, and analytical risks to such projects. Digital humanities projects dealing with vulnerable groups must be mindful that they have a duty to do no harm and that conforming to compliant ethics may further anonymize individuals who want to reclaim their histories. The contributors to this special issue do not agree on the best practices for naming the names of enslaved people in all digital slavery projects, but we all agree that project designers must clearly state their ethical practices. We hope that this collection of papers will help all practitioners of digital humanities articulate and address the ethical and political issues inherent in our projects.

Acknowledgements

Notes

[1] Rhonda Shaw et al. draw the distinction between "procedural ethics", which are involved in seeking formal approval from relevant ethics committees, and "ethics in practice", which refer to "everyday, situational, and unanticipated ethical issues that occur when doing research with others" [Shaw et al. 2020, 278].

[2] Because these registers are dispersed in different locations and often involved producing several copies of each, research on the full potential of these sources is ongoing.

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