

Liberated Africans in West Africa and Beyond

Liberated Africans and the Abolition of the Slave Trade, 1807–1896

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Two hundred thousand. That is the astonishing number of men, women, and children who through their engagement with British naval courts, international mixed commissions, and colonial intermediaries became known as ‘Liberated Africans’. The 19 essays contained within this hefty 465-page collection represent a deep dive into the development of this ‘new social class of people’ and their varied responses to the imperial policies, tools, and rhetoric that dramatically shaped their lives. As many of the contributors demonstrate, Liberated Africans were frequently ‘recaptured’ only to enter into fraught economic relationships through indenture, apprenticeship, and military service that often resembled the slavery from which they were meant to be freed. Although Liberated Africans only made up an estimated 6 per cent of the total slave trade leaving Africa, their stories represent a significant moment in the global history of colonialism and capitalism. As Lovejoy and Anderson remind us, ‘The legal process through which captives on board slave ships became liberated Africans was simultaneously an act of emancipation and colonization’ (4). Contributors show how the settlement of Liberated Africans bridged the era between the Age of Revolution/Emancipation and the ‘scramble for Africa’ and allow us to ponder the meaning and limitations of the ‘freedom’ Africans were supposedly granted. While this transition is by no means a new topic of scholarship, the benefit of a collection like this is its ability to, as the editors write, ‘provide a unique African perspective on responses to abolition and the meaning of ‘freedom’ (5). The essays toggle between macro- and microhistory, revealing how diverse groups of Africans negotiated the colonial policies and plans their unique path to ‘liberation’ propelled them to confront.

Liberated Africans and the Abolition of the Slave Trade 1807–1896 brings together essays by both established and early-career scholars who participated in a conference and digital workshop held at York University (Toronto, Canada) in June 2017. Essays within include case studies on the African continent, the Caribbean, and Latin America. While this book will certainly be of interest to scholars, it will definitely be a welcome addition to any undergraduate or graduate class. The essays are fairly short in length, with accessible prose, and the use of a wide range of sources and methodologies will make for stimulating class discussions and debates. For example, several essays, such as Daniel B. Domingues da Silva and Katelyn E. Ziegler’s exploration of seven decades of correspondence between abolitionists from the Foreign Office Slave Trade Series, utilize big data and ‘text mining’ to help us ‘visualize abolition’ in new ways. Other essays show how original data sets can be useful for unearthing the lives of underrepresented historical subjects like women and children. In her essay, Laura Roseanne Adderley uses searchable datasets to identify five previously obscured women whose ‘various familial arrangements’ with African and European men reveal how liberated African women negotiated ‘coercion, necessity, exigency, convenience, and also desire and consent’ in the British Caribbean (175). Her essay pairs well with Allen M. Howard’s exploration of the Freetown census of 1831, which shows how both work and the distribution of wealth were highly

gendered in Sierra Leone. Erika Melek Delgado's essay also uses data sets of Liberated African Registers to explore the ramifications of how, upon debarkation, 'children' was defined primarily (and shockingly) through height alone. The use of digital history, something the York University program and other associated scholars have become well known for over the years, will no doubt provide methodological inspiration for other scholars looking to reclaim African humanity from the volumes of ledgers, registers, and balance sheets we have all encountered in the archives.

Data sets aside, many other essays give voice to individual Liberated Africans. Paul Lovejoy, Randy J. Sparks, and Laura Rose Adderley use biography to show how forced migration presented opportunities and challenges for specific individuals. Other authors show how small communities of liberated people brought together through circumstances beyond their control attempted to carve out new lives and identities in strange places. Shantel George uses oral history collections to show how liberated Africans who were resettled in Grenada drew on Yoruba, Islamic, and other practices to forge a new collective identity as 'Africans'. In Cuba, Ines Roldan de Montaud reveals how the emergence of a new group of legally 'free' people known as *emancipados* were forced to negotiate new contracts of apprenticeship that resembled the slavery they had just been 'liberated' from.

Other essays explore these themes in both well-known locations such as Cuba (Randy S. Sparks, Ines Roldan de Montaud) and Sierra Leone (Suzanne Schwartz, Allen M. Howard, Paul Lovejoy), as well as more obscure ones like Gambia (Kyle Prochnow), St. Helena (Andrew Pearson), and British Honduras (Tim Soriano). The inclusion of multiple case studies from the Lusophone Atlantic was a welcome addition to a topic that is so often dominated by the British Empire. However, while the inclusion of Matthew S. Hopper's essay on the experiences of the approximately 22,000 Liberated Africans in the Indian Ocean is similarly appreciated, a few more essays on this neglected — and as Hopper himself points out, rather distinct — site of liberation would have allowed for a more balanced and truly 'global' volume (273). An additional critique regards the organization of the six sections of the volume itself. Although in their introduction the editors assert their desire to overcome silos between 'between historians of Africa and the Americas, and between scholars of the Atlantic and Indian Ocean worlds', at times the book's structure reproduces these very divisions. Thematic rather than largely geographic sections might have helped better to unify the volume. Despite these minor issues, however, this book will be a welcome addition to any bookshelf and syllabus on Africa, the African diaspora, abolition, slavery, and global history in general.

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