Icon

Description automatically generated Case Study

# ****Switching the Lens: Constructing Personal Narratives through Colonial History Datasets****

Citation: Ayers, Oliver, “**Switching the Lens: Constructing Personal Narratives through Colonial History Datasets**” in *AM Research Methods: Interrogating Colonial Archives and Narratives* (Marlborough: AM, 2023)

Text © AM 2023

Author(s): Ayers, Oliver (Northeastern University London)

# Overview

This case study gets students to use databases to create biographical profiles of figures from Britain’s domestic colonial history. By focusing on multiracial settlement in the UK from the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries, it counterbalances approaches that depict empire as a solely overseas phenomenon. The primary sources come from the London Metropolitan Archives’ ‘Switching the Lens’ database of parish records of baptisms, marriages and burials of people with African, Caribbean, Asian and Indigenous (e.g. Aboriginal Australian) heritage. The activities, however, can be readily adapted to other datasets. It is suitable for able sixth form level students and first year undergraduates. The exercise requires the availability of computers with internet access to use in class, but no preexisting technical knowledge is assumed or required on the part of either instructors or students. The emphasis is on student-led enquiry, with groups working together to explore the database, making notes of surprising or exciting discoveries. They will consider the technical and methodological challenges that emerge, examining what evidence is missing and how the perspectives of those creating the sources can distort what is recorded. In lesson two, students write short biographical profiles of an individual they have found. Created as a team, these 500 word personal narratives will require students to seek out additional information on the person and consider contextual questions of geography and chronology. In the process, they will reflect on the challenges historians encounter when dealing with the fragmentary but important evidence of Britain’s longstanding multiracial past.

# Author(s)

Dr Oliver Ayers is an Associate Professor of History at Northeastern University of London. He specializes in histories of race and place, and has published books and articles on the civil rights movement in the USA and on black settlement in the UK. He is the Co-Principle Investigator on the digital history project *Mapping Black London* which uses historical databases and interactive mapping techniques to explore multiracial settlement in the capital city from the sixteenth to twentieth centuries. The *Mapping Black London* team were the lead development partners at the London Metropolitan Archives’ 2023-24 exhibition, *Unforgotten Lives,* which featured life stories and interactive exhibits based on over 3,000 people of African, Caribbean, Asian and Indigenous (e.g. Aboriginal Australian) descent who were recorded across several centuries of parish records. Professor Ayers has taught a range of undergraduate and postgraduate courses on these themes, as well as Master’s level courses on historical methodology, and leads Northeastern University London’s research cluster on *Cities: Past, Present and Future.*

# Context

It is now well-established that European colonial expansion from the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries was not just an overseas phenomenon. Scholarship has made clear the many ways colonialism was directed from, and had consequences that reverberated back to, imperial powers like Britain. Scholarship detailing the prevalence of slave-ownership among the political and mercantile elites of the eighteenth and nineteenth century, for example, offers one important example of the growing attention paid to the ‘empire at home’.[[1]](#endnote-1) Yet when it comes to the ‘subject’ people whose lives were impacted by colonialism, attention is still often placed on a series of ‘great lives’ – figures like Oloudah Equiano who overcame enslavement to spur the fight for abolition.[[2]](#endnote-2) Without downplaying the importance of these iconic figures, attention also needs to be placed on the less familiar people who came to the UK from all over the world as a result of colonial expansion. Digital databases, such as the London Metropolitan Archives’ ‘Switching the Lens’ catalogue, have painstakingly combed baptismal, marriage and burial records to unearth some of these lives. The historical perspectives on multiracial settlement that result are especially valuable in the UK context where race and ethnicity was not recorded in the decennial census until the late twentieth century. The growth of digital research projects using online databases and geospatial technology like interactive maps, meanwhile, offers new research methods to interrogate these life stories. In this context, this case study challenges students to work in groups to use online databases to create biographical profiles of some less familiar figures that shed light on Britain’s longstanding multiracial heritage.

The case study can be situated within larger courses of study covering colonial history, British immigration or indeed local history. It can also operate as a standalone unit that introduces students to digital historical research for the first time. The wide chronological sweep of the data from the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries allows activities to be tailored to specific moments in the British colonial experience, while the global range of places of origin in the data allows the activities tie in with specific units of work on the Americas, Asia and Pacific. With student-led enquiry at its core, the activity is suitable for able sixth form students and first year undergraduates. No preexisting technical knowledge is required on the part of either instructor or students, but several computers with internet access will be needed for use in class. In the process of querying the database and researching and producing their biographical profiles, students will learn about the opportunities and problems inherent to this method of investigation. Indeed this process of discovery and reflection is just as important as the research findings students will make along the way.

# Sources Used

London Metropolitan Archives. “Switching the Lens: Rediscovering Londoners of African, Asian and Indigenous Heritage, 1561 to 1840.” Accessed September 8 2023. [https://search.lma.gov.uk/scripts/mwimain.dll?GET&FILE=[WWW\_LMA]through-the-lens.html](https://search.lma.gov.uk/scripts/mwimain.dll?GET&FILE=%5bWWW_LMA%5dthrough-the-lens.html)

Mapping Black London. “Unforgotten Lives Interactive Map.” Accessed September 8 2023. <http://mappingblacklondon.org/unforgotten-lives-exhibit/>

# Learning Outcomes

After completing this exercise, students should be able to:

* Use a database to find information about historical individuals of African, Caribbean, Asian and Indigenous (e.g. Aboriginal Australian) heritage who lived in Britain
* Create micro biographies that set these historical figures’ lives in context
* Demonstrate understanding of the limitations of historical source material on colonial history, and reflect on the gaps in our knowledge that result

# Assignment/Activity Brief (Instructor)

Teacher preparatory work: 1 hour

In-class activity:

Lesson 1: 1 hour

Lesson 2: 2 hours, or 1 hour if students set research tasks outside of class time

[Note: the following guidance is tailored to the the LMA’s Switching the Lens project, but can readily be adapted to other datasets. The database includes insensitive and offensive language and instructors should be prepared to facilitate discussions on the roots of this racialized terminology and the challenges this poses for the study of colonial history. More broadly, a ‘How To’ guide in the Further Resources section contains guidance on how to deal with distress when working with colonial documents.]

Teacher preparation:

* Begin by familiarizing yourself with the database students will be using in class. Read the website’s explanatory notes explaining the provenance of the sources, how they have been collated into a database and context regarding racialized language. Examine the drop-down menus for categories such as ethnic grouping and date range. Browse the entries for occupation, borough, street and place of origin. Note that when browsing you have to click twice to display results – once to select a category and again via the ‘search’ button to display results. Familiarize yourself with the general format of entries to the database, for example: title, scope, reference code, type of entry, level, date, name of parish. Click on a selection of entries to display the clipped image of the original document.
* Decide if there are specific categories of people that you want students to focus on in the activity. For example, you can focus on individuals from a specific place captured in the database, such as West Africa, or on certain occupations such as servants or sailors. This might depend on which topics have already been covered in previous class, thereby allowing students to consolidate knowledge, or which new areas of study you wish to introduce.
* The emphasis in this activity is on student-led learning and discovering, but instructors should have a general awareness of the key contours of British colonial history, for example the settlement of North America, expansion into Asia and the transatlantic slave trade. There are various online resources, such as the Oxford Reference Timeline of the British Empire, that can be consulted as part of preparation.

Lesson 1: Using the Database (1 hour)

Introduction (10 minutes)

* Begin by giving students a brief introduction to the history of ethnic and racially diverse settlement in the UK. Key points to include are the fact that, despite the importance of post-war emigration associated with the arrival of the SS Empire Windrush in 1948, Britain has been a destination for immigrants from all across the world for centuries, in particular as its empire expanded from the sixteenth century onwards. This precipitated a series of free and unfree migrations from colonized lands back to the imperial centre. Instructors should emphasize that, far from being confined solely to the Americas, the ‘triangular trade’ in enslaved people meant many people of African descent arrived in Britain either as temporary visitors or permanent residents. There are also records of native peoples from the Americas and Oceania arriving in the UK, as well as from across the Asian continent. However, the census did not systematically record information on race and ethnicity until 1991 and there were no standardized censuses at all before the mid-nineteenth century. Explain that parish records collected by churches offer one possible route to understanding the history of multiracial settlement. The *Switching the Lens* database, for example, comes from a project operating at the London Metropolitan Archives since the early 2000s that has gone through parish records of churches in the city looking for people of African, Caribbean, Asian and Indigenous (e.g. Aboriginal Australian) heritage.
* Briefly explain what a historical database is, i.e. a method of storing large quantities of information in a format that can then be searched (queried) and browsed by the categories into which is has been sorted. You can give a quick demonstration of the website on a screen visible to the whole class but – in order to promote student-led discovery – deliberately do not give detailed guidance or advice about what to look for or how to find it.

Student Activity (30 minutes)

* Put students into small groups of 2/3 people. Each group will share one machine to use, with members of the group also writing down notes about what they find. Give the groups 30 minutes to explore for themselves how to use the database. They will have the opportunity to try out certain keywords in the search box, and browse by various categories (e.g. place of origin, parish, record type). Students will be asked to note down the things they find, including the language used, what information is present and – crucially – what is missing.
* Circulate between groups while students are working. Encourage them to look at a range of examples, for instance guiding them to the earliest and latest entries in the database, or any unusual or unexpected occupations (e.g. pirate) or places of origins. Be available to help them navigate the database, but emphasize the students should note down more substantive questions or problems they encounter for discussion as a whole class.

Class Discussion (20 minutes)

* Bring the class back together to discuss each group’s findings. Students may well have been frustrated at the limited information contained in the records, or the difficulty of seeing the ‘big picture’ when looking at individual records. The emphasis should be placed on being frank and honest discussions about the opportunities for historical study that come with using the database – namely getting a glimpse into lives otherwise lost or deliberately obscured from historical view – and also the problems that emerge. The discussion should also address the problems with applying ethno-racial categories to periods that considered these questions differently to ours, including the potentially offensive nature of this terminology, and the partial and incomplete nature of the evidence.
* Teachers should prompt the class to identify particular trends, for example the prevalence of baptisms in the late eighteenth century – a period when baptism was widely (but erroneously) thought to guarantee people’s status as free citizens. The class should be encouraged to reflect on what this means for our wider understanding of colonial history, namely that the evidence is often patchy, partial and potentially even misleading about the true nature of ethnically diverse historical settlement.
* Instructors should point out that databases are not suited to seeing all the evidence together in the aggregate; for that we need other approaches such as data analytic tools or geospatial techniques like interactive maps. Show students the interactive map of the ‘Switching the Lens’ data (available at <http://mappingblacklondon.org/unforgotten-lives-exhibit/>) and how you can click on a point to browse the data and see where particular hotspots of settlement occurred.
* Finish lesson one by explaining students’ next task will be to write micro biographies of people contained in the database. At this point you can set students specific individuals from a pre-selected list where additional information is most readily available (see section on ‘Adaptation’), or give them freedom to choose their own person. Their task will then be to conduct research on their own to try and create a biographical profile. You can set students homework to begin the research process in their own time, or use an extended classroom session for lesson 2.

Lesson 2: Creating Micro Biographies (2 hours, or 1 hour if students set research as homework)

Students will work in groups to complete biographies of around 500 words. To help, they will be given a template that asks them to consider the seven questions below. Students should be given freedom to decide how they want to work as a group, for example by dividing certain questions between them, but the emphasis should be on working collaboratively to discuss how the answers relate to each other in order to produce a coherent biographical portrait. As students are working, the instructor should be available to give guidance on some of the typical questions that might arise as students conduct their enquiries:

* What does source itself contain?

This will include, for example, the name of someone being baptised, their age, location and ethnic identity. Encourage students not to skip over this basic but important information, considering for example whether the age is likely to be accurate and whether the name has been accurately transcribed. The final biography can include the JPEG image of the original source.

* What additional information about this person exists?

Students should see if they can find other information on this person from a range of online sources, for example the records of the Old Bailey Online or a general internet search. Instructors should encourage students to be wary of possible mis-identifications of people, for example if searching for people with common first and second names. Information like date and place of birth can help to positively identify individuals, as can looking for figures with more unusual or distinctive names.

* How typical was the source?

Encourage students to use the database to see if their person/record was one of many similar entries or comparatively unusual. In either case, the question is important to deciding what wider conclusions might be drawn from the specific example.

* Where was source created?

Students should think about the geographical context of their subject, for example by using information on historical parish churches and old maps of the city, both of which are readily discoverable from online sources. In the case of *Switching the Lens,* an interactive map of the whole database is available at [www.mappingblacklondon.org](http://www.mappingblacklondon.org)

* When was it created?

Encourage students to consider chronology, setting their person’s life story in the context of the long-term sweep of colonial history. Online timelines can be used to help.

* What don’t we know?

This is especially important: encourage students to consider the many aspects of that person’s life we might never has answers to, for example whether they were free or enslaved, whether they were a permanent resident or temporary visitor, whether they had other kin or ancestors that were not recorded.

* What does this all mean?

Based on the answers to the above, the groups should conclude their micro biographies with a final reflection about what this person’s life might tell us about colonial history more broadly. This might only constitute the final sentence or two of the biography, but students should be encouraged to think about how all the answers to the questions above collectively help inform their final historical judgements.

Depending on class time and ability level, the groups can submit their biographies at the end of the teaching session, or be given additional time to complete their write-ups and submit at a later date.

# Assignment Materials/Activity Guidelines (Student)

Lesson 1: Using the Database

You will work in groups to use a historical database to discover people whose lives were touched by British colonial expansion overseas, but who ended up living in the UK. Most of these people were not famous in their own lifetimes and are not well-known today, so it is up to you to explore and experiment with the database to see what you can find. There are two ways of exploring historical databases: searching and browsing. Searching requires knowing who or what you want to find, so in this first stage you are going to browse the website to see what you can uncover. You should note down what you find as you explore, taking special care to record questions or problems you encounter along the way. You will then discuss your finding with the rest of the class, before writing a short biography of one of the people’s lives.

Here are some things to consider as you explore:

* Who created the original source? Why?
* Ethnic grouping: examine what categories have been used in the database. Which groups have the most entries? Who has the least? Why are these categories used? What problems are there with trying to come up with appropriate labels for the different people contained in each group?
* Occupation: what occupations are listed? Which ones are the most popular? Do you think the occupations listed always provide an accurate record of what that person did? Why or why not?
* Place of origin: what different types of places are listed? Which places have lots of entries, or only a few? How reliable are these places of origin?
* Given what you already know about British history, what can you find that confirms what you might expect? On the contrary, what can you find that is surprising or unusual?
* How easy is it to use the historical database? What problems are you encountering?

Lesson 2: Creating Micro Biographies

You will create a 500 word ‘micro biography’ that pieces together pieces of information about one of the people’s lives you find in the database. To help, your biographies should address the following questions. Make sure you work in a group to discuss and decide how the answers all connect to and inform each other.

* What does source itself contain?

Closely read the individual source record to see what it reveals, analysing how and why it was created in the first place.

* What additional information about this person exists?

See if you can find additional information on this person from another source. As well as general internet searches, you can try specific databases and websites such as:

* “Black Lives, British Justice: Black people in London Criminal Justice Records 1720-1841.” Accessed September 8 2023. <https://zenodo.org/record/5304501#.YSzRDB0o-i4>
* “British History Online.” Accessed September 8 2023. <https://www.british-history.ac.uk/>
* “Layers of London.” Accessed September 8 2023. <https://www.layersoflondon.org/>
* “London Lives 1690-1800: Crime, Poverty and Social Policy in the Metropolis.” Accessed September 8 2023. <https://www.londonlives.org/>
* “Mapping Black London.” Accessed September 8 2023. <https://mappingblacklondon.org/>
* “Old Maps Online.” Accessed September 8 2023. <https://www.oldmapsonline.org/>
* Ancestry [subscription required]. Accessed September 8 2023. <https://www.ancestry.co.uk/>
* British Library, “South Asians in Britain.” Accessed September 8 2023. <https://www.bl.uk/asians-in-britain>
* Findmypast [subscription required]. Accessed September 8 2023. <https://www.findmypast.co.uk/>
* Old Bailey Online. Accessed September 8 2023. <https://www.oldbaileyonline.org/>
* How typical was the source was?

Use the database to see if you can find many similar entries, or whether your person seems to have been unusual, to assess how typical this person’s story might have been.

* Where was source created?

Use the location of the parish and the person’s address (if there is one) to see whereabouts the person lived. You can use these interactive maps to help you:

* <http://mappingblacklondon.org/unforgotten-lives-exhibit/>
* [www.layersoflondon.org](http://www.layersoflondon.org)
* When was it created?

Look at the date of the source to set the person’s life in chronological context. What other key events in British and colonial history were occurring at that time that might shed light on your subject’s life?

* What don’t we know?

What do we not know about the person’s life, for example whether they were free or enslaved, were they were a permanent resident or temporary visitor, and whether they had other kin or ancestors that were not recorded. Instead of speculating about the answers to these questions, consider in your biographies how significant these gaps in our knowledge might be.

* What does this all mean?

Use all the answers to the previous questions to conclude your biographies with a brief reflection on the overall significance of your subject’s story.

# Assessment

All the learning outcomes for the activity are assessed through the creation of the 500 word biographical profiles. As students are working in groups, they should also include an outline of what each person has contributed to the project. The instructor can decide whether to assign a whole group mark, or differentiate based on the quality of each person’s contribution. Attention should be paid to the following:

* Have all seven elements of the brief been addressed?
* What is the quality of response to each aspect?
* Does the biographical profile fit together coherently as a whole?

This is an exercise where reflections on the process of investigation and its limitations are just as important as the historical discoveries being made. The best biographies, therefore, will not just be those which display ingenuity and thoroughness in their research, but which are able to discuss the wider opportunities and problems that arise when using datasets to research this area of colonial history.

# Further Resources and Reading

Colonial History Timelines:

Oxford Reference, “Timeline of the British Empire.” Accessed September 8 2023. <https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/acref/9780191737541.timeline.0001>

British Library, “Timelines: Sources from History.” Accessed September 8 2023.

<https://www.bl.uk/learning/histcitizen/timeline/accessvers/index.html>

Other Databases and Online Resources:

“Black Lives, British Justice: Black people in London Criminal Justice Records 1720-1841.” Accessed September 8 2023. <https://zenodo.org/record/5304501#.YSzRDB0o-i4>

“British History Online.” Accessed September 8 2023. <https://www.british-history.ac.uk/>

“Layers of London.” Accessed September 8 2023. <https://www.layersoflondon.org/>

“London Lives 1690-1800: Crime, Poverty and Social Policy in the Metropolis.” Accessed September 8 2023. <https://www.londonlives.org/>

“Mapping Black London.” Accessed September 8 2023. <https://mappingblacklondon.org/>

“Old Maps Online.” Accessed September 8 2023. <https://www.oldmapsonline.org/>

Ancestry [subscription required]. Accessed September 8 2023. <https://www.ancestry.co.uk/>

British Library, “South Asians in Britain.” Accessed September 8 2023. <https://www.bl.uk/asians-in-britain>

Findmypast [subscription required]. Accessed September 8 2023. <https://www.findmypast.co.uk/>

Old Bailey Online. Accessed September 8 2023. <https://www.oldbaileyonline.org/>

Further Reading:

Kathleen Chater, Untold Histories: Black People in England and Wales during the Period of the British Slave Trade, c. 1660-1807 (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009).

Norma Myers, Reconstructing the Black Past: Blacks in Britain, 1780 to 1830  (London: Frank Cass, 1996).

AM Publishing, ‘*how to deal with distress when working with colonial documents’.*

# Follow Up Activities

1. Students create another biographical profile of someone from the same time and place with a different story. Students then compare these contrasting experiences to reach conclusions about the diversity of historical life experiences captured in the database.
2. Students conduct further research into the local area of their subject, examining online maps of the other people and activities going on this historical place. Students then produce an annotated online map using open source software such as Google Maps.
3. All the groups work together to create an in-class display of their different biographical profiles. Their written work can be turned into posters, and the display can feature a large old map of either the city where they lived or of the globe to show where they lived or came from.
4. Students upload their biographical profile to a crowd-sourcing site such as Wikipedia or Layers of London.

# Adaptation

1. Make the activity easier by giving students the names of people in the database for whom additional information is most readable available. These include:

* Anne Osborne (Wife of Ignatius Sancho)
* John Satia
* Henry Edward Mahomed (son of Dean Mahomed)
* Katherine Auker
* Samuel Mansur
* James Somerset
* Jonathan Strong
* Dederi Jacquoah

1. Use ‘flipped learning’ and/or a Virtual Learning Environment to get students to work outside of class time when exploring the database for the first time. This will allow students to explore a much greater variety of life stories, allowing for an extended and in-depth class discussion.
2. Use an alternative database with a more specific focus, for example the ‘Black Lives, British Justice’ dataset, to examine the variety of experiences of people encountering the UK legal system.

# References

Hall, Catherine and Sonya O. Rose. *At Home with the Empire: Metropolitan Culture and the Imperial World.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

Hall, Catherine et al. *Legacies of British Slave-Ownership.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014.

Historic England. “5 Black Heroes of the Abolitionist Movement in Britain.” Accessed 8 September 2023, available at: <https://heritagecalling.com/2016/11/14/5-black-heroes-of-the-abolition-movement-in-britain/>

# Notes

1. See for example, Catherine Hall and Sonya O. Rose eds., *At Home with the Empire: Metropolitan Culture and the Imperial World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Catherine Hall et al., *Legacies of British Slave-Ownership* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. See for example Historic England, ‘5 Black Heroes of the Abolitionist Movement in Britain’, Accessed 8 September 2023, available at: <https://heritagecalling.com/2016/11/14/5-black-heroes-of-the-abolition-movement-in-britain/> In addition to Equiano, this highlights the contributions of Mary Prince, Ottobah Cugoano, Ukawsaw Gronniosaw and Louis Celeste Lecesne. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)