

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Archival Patchwork: Stitching Social Relationships in Colonial South Africa

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Abstract

The recovery of subaltern experiences in colonial contexts requires more than reading against the grain and interrogating silences. This paper describes “archival patchwork,” a way of working across diverse sources from multiple repositories, collecting small scraps of evidence about subordinated individuals, reconstructing social relationships, and stitching together patterns of daily life that aren’t visible otherwise. Archival patchwork accommodates present-day ways of working in neoliberal universities, acknowledges north-south disparities, and opens collaborative possibilities. The paper, pinned to South African history, enumerates digitization, transcription, and duplication projects that make archival sources for the colonial Cape more widely available. Although this paper’s evidence is focused in time and place, the methodology is broadly applicable.

Résumé

Retrouver les expériences subalternes dans les contextes coloniaux nécessite plus qu’une lecture « contre le grain » et une analyse du silence des archives. Cet article décrit le « patchwork archivistique », une méthode de travail qui consiste à exploiter diverses sources provenant de multiples centres d’archives, à collecter de petits fragments de preuves sur des individus subordonnés, à reconstruire des relations sociales et à assembler des modèles de vie quotidienne qui ne seraient autrement pas visibles. Le patchwork archivistique s’adapte aux méthodes de travail actuelles dans les universités néolibérales, reconnaît les disparités entre le Nord et le Sud et ouvre des possibilités de collaboration. Cet article, axé sur l’histoire sud-africaine, énumère les projets de numérisation, de transcription et de duplication qui rendent les sources archivistiques sur le Cap colonial plus largement accessibles. Bien que les preuves présentées dans cet article soient limitées dans le temps et dans l’espace, sa méthodologie est largement applicable.

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Mots-clés: Patchwork archivistique : rassembler les relations sociales en Afrique du Sud pendant la période coloniale

What does “method” mean to humanistically inclined historians? As a graduate student I watched my friends in the social sciences learn and apply named approaches to their research: quantitative and statistical analysis, experiments, survey design, qualitative studies, and ethnography, for instance. These approaches are, of course, applicable to historical inquiry. I felt, though, that there was no singular name for what I was learning to do: sit in an archive, open a big book, read, turn a page, and read some more. I learned languages and associated paleographies for the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries. I navigated finding aids and distinct government policies for accessing materials in five countries on three continents. I manipulated book stands, foam blocks, map weights, and cotton gloves. My skin even erupted in blemishes until I learned not to touch my face after handling pages stained with 250-year-old mold. But none of these skills had a name that fit neatly in the small box on grant applications allocated for “Research Method.” “Archival inquiry” was too vague. “Look for needles in haystacks of old paper” seemed too flippant. “Read through a lens of developing expertise” was accurate, but hardly distinctive or even disciplinarily specific. All scholars read and work with interpretive frameworks.

Historians use recognized methodologies and develop new ones. Collectively, though, we’re not as successful at defining and branding our methods as colleagues in allied disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, political science, or literary criticism.¹ Theories of historical interpretation and basic practices for working with primary sources, such as dating, provenance, and authorial bias receive explicit attention in both scholarly and pedagogical publications. Hands-on archival methods, though, receive less attention. Other methods, such as historical linguistics, oral traditions, and oral histories offer a counterpoint as examples of well-defined methods of inquiry into the past which have been especially resonant for Africanist research, but we lack similarly clear methods for working with documentary evidence. The specifics of archival work tend to be described anecdotally, either in collections such as Antoinette Burton’s evergreen *Archive Stories* or as research notes in this journal and specialist time and clime publications.² But the process remains generalized: read the sources carefully and skeptically, note your observations, triangulate through the relevant historiography, and develop conclusions.

¹ Edward Hallett Carr, *What Is History?*, 40th Anniversary edition (Palgrave, 2001); Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge University Press, 1988); Geoff Eley, *A Crooked Line: From Cultural History to the History of Society* (University of Michigan Press, 2005); Robert H Bates, V. Y. Mudimbe, and Jean F. O’Barr, eds., *Africa and the Disciplines* (University of Chicago Press, 1993).

² Antoinette M. Burton, ed., *Archive Stories: Facts, Fictions, and the Writing of History* (Duke University Press, 2005).

This paper reflects on three decades of working with archival materials about colonial South Africa. Unlike many of our Africanist colleagues – even elsewhere in South Africa – historians of the Western Cape benefit from abundant, well-preserved written records. The overriding commercial concerns of the Dutch East India Company as a colonial ruler generated a thick paper trail dating to 1652.³ The shift to British imperial rule produced an amalgamated archival legacy in the Cape that continued early-modern Dutch concerns with property registration – in sources such as detailed census and tax rolls (the *opgaaf*), the Receiver of Land Revenue records, and rich probate papers compiled by the Master of the Orphan Chamber (MOOC) – and added the modernizing impetus of English bureaucracy that's also characteristic of colonial archives in the rest of South Africa.⁴ Most of these documents, whether official or personal, are colonial sources so are admittedly biased and problematic. Historians have developed interpretive tools, though, to deal with the legacy of uneven power embedded in archives.⁵ Graduate education and ongoing debates among historians of Africa give these theoretical frameworks plenty of attention.

This paper redirects our consideration to practical, physical aspects of working with archival sources and brings into relief ways that historians think about archival collections. For both functional and intellectual reasons, many historical studies focus on a specific archival series or a defined set of records, such as official correspondence or criminal prosecutions. While acknowledging the general success of this approach, I advocate for including archival patchwork in our disciplinary repertoire.⁶ This paper starts with a brief discussion of historical method, then describes archival patchwork. I follow with examples from my own practice and an enumeration of digitization projects for Cape colonial records. A further section presents a case study with an analysis of affordances and limitations of patchwork. The paper concludes with a discussion of how archival patchwork intersects with existing scholarship on South Africa, elsewhere on the continent, and more broadly.

Intangible skills, or what is archival method?

Any archivally centered historian, regardless of region or period, gradually accumulates embodied knowledge. If you read enough ledgers or letters, you

³ On the practice and legacy of corporate colonial governance, see Philip J. Stern, *The Company-State: Corporate Sovereignty and the Early Modern Foundations of the British Empire in India* (Oxford University Press, 2011).

⁴ Clifton Crais, *The Politics of Evil: Magic, State Power and the Political Imagination in South Africa* (Cambridge University Press, 2009).

⁵ As one example, see Isabel Hofmeyr, *We Spend Our Years as a Tale That Is Told: Oral Storytelling, Literacy and Historical Narratives in the Changing Context of a Transvaal Chiefdom* (Wits University Press, 1993). For an expanded discussion, see the section, "Working a Patchwork into the Fabric of Social History in South Africa," below.

⁶ In thinking through metaphor as method, I'm inspired by Antoinette Burton, *Dwelling in the Archive: Women Writing House, Home, and History in Late Colonial India* (Oxford University Press, 2003); and Ann Laura Stoler, ed., *Imperial Debris: On Ruins and Ruination* (Duke University Press, 2013).

begin to develop a sense of what's typical and what stands out for its difference. This awareness is hard to explain to students or funders, though. I had the good fortune to take a graduate seminar with Marcus Rediker in which we did a close reading of his *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea*.⁷ How, I wanted to know, did the information from the sources cited in the footnotes relate to the interpretations in a given paragraph? What specific evidence convinced him that eighteenth-century sailors on English vessels in the Atlantic built solidarities across racial lines? Professor Rediker's answer – that an accretion of reading rather than a single smoking gun statement informed his conclusion – was frustrating to this apprentice historian. I wanted a how-to manual for decoding early-modern sources, not a gesture to professional intuition – because I didn't yet have any. How was I supposed to use it in my own paper?

The shape of that memory sticks with me, though the meaning I give it has changed over time. I can still conjure the frustration of a student who tried to hold in my hands something intangible, the performance anxiety of a people-pleaser who wanted to get all the steps of my grad school homework right. Three decades later, I also have empathy for Marcus trying to teach a group of first- and second-year graduate students how to feel the archive and how to trust the process of learning. Through repeated practice and accumulated experience, we too might be able to say something about the records of the past that was greater than the sum of iterated evidence. But we were unlikely to do that right out of the gate.

The visceral knowing of a time and place through deep engagement with its written legacy is a real thing. It's called expertise; it develops over time. But telling graduate students that they just have to grow into a method isn't encouraging or helpful. Advising colleagues who are exploring a new field that they just need a couple of seasons, or years, in an archive isn't practical. Scholars could move more directly toward expertise if those targets had names and descriptions.

Patchwork makes the process tangible: A description

Enter archival patchwork: a way of assembling colonial records – intentionally created in silos – to write histories for decolonized times. It is not new, whether in national or colonial histories, on the Continent or elsewhere in the world, to consult different kinds of records, compare them, cross-reference, corroborate, or call into question the information they convey. This is what historians do, whether their sources are oral, material, or documentary; environmental or human-made; relatively recent or from the distant past. Historians often develop projects focused on “an archive.” What can you learn from combing through criminal records, for instance?⁸ Or a police file, a cache of letters, or a set of

⁷ Marcus Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea: Merchant Seamen, Pirates, and the Anglo-American Maritime World, 1700–1750* (Cambridge University Press, 1987).

⁸ Nigel Penn, “The Fatal Passion of Brewer Menssink,” in *Rogues, Rebels, and Runaways: Eighteenth-century Cape Characters* (D. Philip Publishers, 1999).

journals?⁹ Of course the information in such studies is never entirely from one source or type, but the interrogation of a principal kind or collection of documents is a practical way to work and intellectually illuminating. Other approaches point historians toward a wide array of sources. Following a person through the past, for instance, tends to take a researcher across many collections looking for evidence of the subject's life; the connective tissue is baked into the genre of biography.¹⁰

Archival patchwork, by contrast, builds from scraps of evidence scattered across multiple collections with the aim of reconstituting communities that were either not seen as a collective entity at the time of colonial record keeping or were not deemed important enough to document in the eyes of those tasked with keeping track. My approach to patchwork started as piecework, intentionally conceived as research I could get done in a short visit of two to three weeks. That is time enough for me to survey part of a collection – say, five years of correspondence in the India Office Records at the British Library, reports from the protectors of slaves in the Colonial Office papers at Kew, or a criminal prosecution from the Council of Justice records in the Cape Archives¹¹ – identify key documents within a collection, digitally photograph relevant sources, then catalog my photos. Allocating time to organize and label the photos is key to being able to work with these archival scraps a year or two later.

My collection of such scraps is hardly random, but I'm not always aware of the detailed information available on every page I photograph, or the use I'll make of that information once I'm able to read and think about it. It was only over time that I could conceive of this piecework as demonstrably building toward a larger whole, a possible paper on the colonial administration's response to slave rebellion at the Cape of Good Hope giving way to a larger understanding of the messy, uneven fabric of a slave society. I began to stitch together the historical evidence I collected, no longer just discrete pieces but part of a larger pattern.

In giving a name to this process I intentionally invoke patchwork ethnography, which responds to the changing workplace and life-cycle demands of scholars who reside far from their research sites, acknowledging that extended fieldwork is currently impractical for many academicians and may no longer be an intellectually or morally tenable position for those in the Global North who

⁹ Jacob Dlamini, *The Terrorist Album: Apartheid's Insurgents, Collaborators, and the Security Police* (Harvard University Press, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.4159/9780674245587>; Shula Marks, ed., *Not Either an Experimental Doll: The Separate Worlds of Three South African Women* (Indiana University Press, 1988); Joel Cabrita, *Written Out: The Silencing of Regina Gelana Twala* (Wits University Press, 2023); Adam Ashforth, *The Trials of Mrs. K.: Seeking Justice in a World with Witches* (University of Chicago Press, 2018).

¹⁰ Lauren V. Jarvis, *A Prophet of the People: Isaiah Shembe and the Making of a South African Church*, (Michigan State University Press, 2024).

¹¹ Early nineteenth-century British Colonial Office correspondence with the Cape is part of the India Office Records (IOR) housed at the British Library (BL). See BL IOR/G/9 series. Protector of the Slaves reports, The National Archives (TNR), Kew, Colonial Office (CO) 53/48 – 53/58. The Trial of Galant and Others, Western Cape Archives and Records Service (WCARS), Council of Justice records, CJ 633.

study the formerly colonized world.¹² As an American citizen employed by a public university in the United States, I am aware of institutional and financial advantages I have compared to colleagues in South Africa. I also share with Günel, Varma, and Watanabe an experience of how the changing landscape of neoliberal universities constrains research time, limits extended travel, is “profoundly and irrevocably changing knowledge production.”¹³ Like work described in the patchwork ethnography manifesto, my archival practice morphed from necessity to a virtue. The conglomerate sources I collected during short archival visits – all focused generally on enslavement, resistance, and government response – enables a unique reconstruction of slave society in rural South Africa.

Archival patchwork also shares with patchwork ethnography an emphasis on sustained connections, rather than a grab-and-go document photo safari. Correspondence with archivists, other scholars, local graduate students, and community members informs my interpretation of documents that I read at home and shapes the targets of my next collecting trip. I remain engaged in “research efforts that maintain the long-term commitments, language proficiency, contextual knowledge, and slow thinking that characterizes so-called traditional fieldwork.”¹⁴ This method requires time and dedicated labor, along with significant financial outlay for scholars who don’t live near their research site. Such labor, and the attendant slow germination of publications, is not well rewarded in academic personnel reviews centered on measurable output – whether collaborative or single authored.¹⁵ But the process uncovers information and enables interpretations that would not be possible without research that connects disparate archival sources.

Archival patchwork in action

My approach to archival patchwork might not be possible everywhere in Africa, since it depends on a constellation of sources – written, material, or oral – with a degree of overlapping content. The specter of South African exceptionalism actually applies here, since the legacy of two colonial states, five centuries of visitors, and the apparatus of apartheid bureaucracy left an extraordinarily thick and diverse paper trail.¹⁶ Mahmood Mamdani, Achille Mbembe, and Carolyn Hamilton, among others, have shown that thinking from South Africa outward

¹² Gökçe Günel et al., “A Manifesto for Patchwork Ethnography,” Society for Cultural Anthropology website, 9 June 2020. <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/a-manifesto-for-patchwork-ethnography> (accessed 10 July 2024).

¹³ Günel et al., “Manifesto.”

¹⁴ Günel et al., “Manifesto.”

¹⁵ Maggie Berg and Barbara Seeber, *The Slow Professor: Challenging the Culture of Speed in the Academy* (University of Toronto Press, 2016).

¹⁶ On exceptionalism and South African historiography, see Jacob Dlamini et al., “South Africa, 1994 + 30: A Conversation About History After Apartheid,” *Journal of African History*, 24 April 2024, 1–18, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021853724000070>.

transcends many of the differences with the rest of the continent.¹⁷ This suggests that a method described in terms of South African sources can apply elsewhere, even when the continuity of written records doesn't have the time depth available in South Africa. Despite disparities in the written record between South Africa and the rest of the continent, archivally South Africa is more similar to the rest of Africa than to the nation-states of the global north because of the ways the Dutch, British, and apartheid regimes systematically excluded the majority of the population from state and religious record keeping.

My archival patchwork relies on on-site engagement in short bursts, punctuated by longer periods of working from a distance. This approach is supported by the availability of digital photography and various digitization efforts. Consequently, I categorize resources by availability in addition to thinking about them by type. First, I identify what's in each repository, including copies. For example, even manuscript records from as early as the seventeenth century exist in duplicate at the Cape and in the Netherlands. By being informed and flexible, I can add an opportunistic week of archival work to conference or other travel. Second, I consider what must be used on-site. Some large-format series, like the census and taxation rolls, are hard to photograph with a general-use digital camera.¹⁸ The Laboratory for the Economics of Africa's Past (LEAP) at Stellenbosch University is in the process of digitally transcribing the *opgaaf* series, but until that work is publicly available, I prioritize working with these and other hard-to-photograph sources. Third, I keep a running list of sources that can be photographed – both in terms of physical condition and what's permitted by the repository. That way I can use downtime during archival trips to capture additional material to read at home.

How digitization is changing the patches

The fast-changing digital landscape also influences how I plan and gather materials. The digital publisher AM offers the India Office Records, but I need travel to a subscriber intuition to consult this source, since my university currently doesn't offer it.¹⁹ Still, I can get at this without leaving the United States. Other resources pop up on third-party sites such as Family Search, a genealogy clearinghouse that offers access to all the Cape slave registers along with fast – though incomplete – searches for birth, death, and marriage records. The web citations for the slave registers on Family Search don't correlate to the finding aids for the original documents, but the site provides legible copies of all the registers, which means I don't have to spend time on-site with those records.

¹⁷ Mahmood Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject* (Princeton University Press, 1996); Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* (University of California Press, 2001); Carolyn Hamilton and Jacques Derrida, *Refiguring the Archive* (Kluwer Academic, 2002).

¹⁸ WCARS, *Opgaaf*, J-series.

¹⁹ The AM website provides a description of the available documents: <https://www.eastindia.company.amdigital.co.uk/Introduction/BritishLibrary> (accessed 15 July 2024).

Wikitree's data for colonial South Africa is less comprehensive, but it offers more suggested connections among people recorded on the site.²⁰

Finally, there are digitization projects undertaken by other scholars. The challenge here is that few are published or generally available. Access is typically not restricted, but a scholar new to the field must know who to ask. Starting in the 1980s, the geographer Leonard Guelke transcribed the loan farm permits recorded in the Receiver of Land Revenue records.²¹ As a graduate student in the 1990s I received three floppy disks, each one's memory maxed out with a portion of a massive spreadsheet, gifted to me through a network of Cape historians. It was a precious resource for me, but not clandestine or the equivalent of a secret handshake. Rather it was the consequence of on-site research and old-fashioned networking – getting to know scholars with similar research interests. At some point in the second half of that decade I got a laptop with enough memory so I could combine all three files into a single spreadsheet and store it on my hard drive! This seemed to me the epitome of technological breakthrough. A copy of that file still lives in my active research folders, transferred to each new computer, but not available to another researcher without having to ask several historians who might have a copy.

Rob Shell also did pioneering digital history. A long-time advocate for the restoration of Cape Town's old Slave Lodge as a museum, Shell compiled a wide range of primary and secondary sources, including maps, images, and a comprehensive bibliography of Cape slavery on a CD, which facilitated research from afar.²² The meticulous references to archival sources that aren't included on the CD help to plan time-efficient on-site visits to the Cape Archives. *From Diaspora to Diorama* has an ISBN number and is held by several libraries worldwide.

More recent digitization efforts spawned several partnerships to produce accessible, searchable transcriptions of Cape sources.²³ It took two decades, from 2004 to 2024, to transcribe all forty-seven volumes of household auction records, a monumental labor spearhead by the Tracing History Trust, a Cape-based NGO.²⁴ This work started through a partnership with the Dutch government in a program called TANAP: Toward a New Age of Partnership, which maintained a website that offered searchable access to archival materials from the Cape and other former Dutch colonies. The website is now defunct with no obvious successor, meaning that once again valuable materials are not available to researchers who haven't made connections with scholars who still have copies of old CDs.

²⁰ The Family Search website is maintained by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. <https://www.familysearch.org/en/united-states/> (accessed 15 July 2024). Wikitree is a crowd-sourced genealogy resource: <https://www.wikitree.com/> (accessed 15 July 2024).

²¹ WCARS Receiver of Land Revenue (RLR) series.

²² Robert Shell, compiler, *From Diaspora to Diorama: The Old Slave Lodge in Cape Town* (NagsPro Multimedia, 2013), ISBN-978-0-620-55581-4.

²³ For a discussion of the analysis possible with large-scale transcriptions, see Johan Fourie et al., "Auction Records, Consumer Culture, and Social Networks in the Cape Colony, 1701–1825," *South African Journal of Cultural History* 39, no. 1 (2025): 27–49. <https://doi.org/10.54272/sach.2025.v39n1a2>

²⁴ WCARS, Master of the Orphan Chamber series, MOOC 10. Helena Liebenberg, "Cape Auction Rolls Transcription Project Final Report." Tracing History Trust, 2 April 2024. Author's possession.

The evolving digital landscape has changed the way I work. My dissertation research, undertaken from 1995–2000, consisted entirely of evidence from paper documents consulted on site, with the help of Len Guelke’s RLR transcriptions to point me to specific records.²⁵ To expand my dissertation into a monograph, I relied on Guelke land tenure records to build comparative examples. By the late 2000s, the first batch of household probate inventories and auction rolls were published on the TANAP website, meaning I could begin to access detailed content from afar, a development that greatly enhanced my ability to meet my university employment obligations in the United States and continue to pursue archival research relevant to South Africa.²⁶ Now, scholars can consult genealogies online, search for personal names in some of the *opgaaf*, and read colonial newspapers no matter where they are in the world. These changes facilitate research but should not be understood as an exhortation to work faster.²⁷ Finding information may be more efficient; figuring out what to make of it remains time-consuming. What’s more, many scholars using digitized sources still have to read fragmentary materials and rely on self-generated data sets – another laborious step, but one that produces data that other scholars can subsequently use.²⁸

Stitching the patches together: A case study at *Hou Den Bek*

For my research, archival patchwork is the melding of scraps of documentary information that I collect with intention, with sources made available through other scholars’ initiative and generosity, plus the patience to sit with a laptop full of disparate information and work it into legible patterns. The process is slow but intellectually rewarding, offering visibility into the past that a single source or series could not provide.²⁹

To see this process in practice, let’s look at the colonial farm *Hou Den Bek*, located about 200 km north/northeast of Cape Town in the Koue Bokkeveld district. Like all Western Cape rural households in the early nineteenth century, we see a multiracial, mixed status community on one farm. *Hou Den Bek* was a microcosm of colonial settlement, statistically typical of its neighbors. Its residents shared intimate bonds of friendship, marriage, and parenthood as well as the violently enforced hierarchy of a slave society. The farm residents – enslaved and indentured laborers and settlers alike – also had significant relationships with

²⁵ Laura J. Mitchell, “Contested Terrains: Property and Labor on the Cedarberg Frontier South Africa, 1725–c.1830” (PhD diss., UCLA, 2001).

²⁶ Laura J. Mitchell, *Belongings: Property, Family, and Identity in Colonial South Africa: An Exploration of Frontiers, 1725–c. 1830* (Columbia University Press, 2008)

²⁷ Günel et al., “Manifesto”; Berg and Seeber, *Slow Professor*.

²⁸ For example, see Karl Bergemann, “The Runaways: A Study of Enslaved, Apprenticed and Indentured Labour Flight at the Cape in the Emancipation era, 1830–42” (unpublished PhD thesis, Stellenbosch University, 2024).

²⁹ For an example of a research paper constructed from archival patchwork, see Laura J. Mitchell, “Domestic Space, Intimate Surprises: The Bonds and Bondage of Enslaved, Khoisan, and Settler Women in the 1825 Koue Bokkeveld Revolt.” *South African Historical Journal*, 76, no. 3 (2024): 263–83. doi:10.1080/02582473.2024.2423182.

Table 1. Twelve adult laborers at Hou Den Bek

Indentured Khoisan laborers				Enslaved laborers			
Men	Boys (under 16)	women	Girls (under 16)	men	Boys (under 14)	women	Girls (under 14)
2	8	4	3	3	1	3	1

Source: *Opgaaf*, Worcester District, 1824; WCARS J/421.

neighbors. It’s possible to glean this aggregate picture of the farm from a careful reading of a criminal trial summary. Four enslaved laborers and two indentured Khoisan from *Hou Den Bek* were among the thirteen subordinated workers who staged a revolt on the farm on 2 February 1825.³⁰

Previous scholarship on the revolt relies only on the trial summary to describe social relationships on the farm.³¹ My experience with archival patchwork prompted me to take a different approach to understanding the volatile relationships on *Hou Den Bek* that might explain why this farm incubated one of only two revolts in the 180-year history of chattel slavery at the Cape.³²

I started with the *opgaaf*, or census and taxation rolls, to see how the head of the household, Willem Nicolaas van der Merwe, reported the livestock, grain production, and people of *Hou Den Bek* to the local government.³³ As expected, Willem and his wife, Elsje du Plessis, were listed alongside their neighbors. Their children – two girls and three boys – were enumerated, as were their bonded laborers: those formally enslaved in chattel servitude and displaced Khoisan on long-term contracts which amounted to lifetime indenture for most families.³⁴ Like most farms in the outlying districts, Khoisan laborers outnumbered the enslaved. Table 1 presents the laborers reported in the 1824 *opgaaf*, taken four to six months before the revolt. This is evidence from a single source.

³⁰ George McCall Theal, “The Trial of Galant and Others,” *Records of the Cape Colony from February to April 1825 Copied for the Cape Government from the Manuscript Documents in the Public Record Office, London*, Printed for the Government of the Cape Colony, vol. 20 (William Clowes and Sons, 1904), 188–34. Hereafter RCC.

³¹ Robert Ross, *Cape of Torments: Slavery and Resistance in South Africa* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983), 105–16; Mary Isabel Rayner, “Wine and Slaves: The Failure of an Export Economy and the Ending of Slavery in the Cape Colony, South Africa, 1806–1834” (unpublished PhD thesis, Duke University, 1986), 174–89; R. L. Watson, *The Slave Question: Liberty and Property in South Africa* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1990), 49–59; Patricia van der Spuy, “‘Making Himself Master’: Galant’s Rebellion Revisited,” *South African Historical Journal* 34, no. 1 (1996): 1–28, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02582479608671862>.

³² Nigel Worden, “Revolt in Cape Colony Slave Society,” in *Resisting Bondage in Indian Ocean Africa and Asia*, ed. Edward A. Alpers et al. (Routledge, 2006), 10–23. Nigel Penn is working with the trial records from an episode of mass violence in 1800 on a farm in the Roggeveld that will likely disrupt scholarly consensus that just two revolts occurred at the Cape.

³³ *Opgaaf*, Worcester District, 1824 WCARS J/421

³⁴ For general histories of slavery at the Cape, see Ross, *Cape of Torments*; Nigel Worden, *Slavery in Dutch South Africa* (Cambridge University Press, 1985); Robert C.-H. Shell, *Children of Bondage: A Social History of the Slave Society at the Cape of Good Hope, 1652–1838* (University Press of New England, 1994). On indentured labor, see V. C. Malherbe, “Indentured and Unfree Labour in South Africa: Towards an Understanding,” *South African Historical Journal* 24, no. 1 (1991): 3–30, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02582479108671684>.

Table 2. Enslaved laborers from tallies to individuals

3 Men	1 Boy	3 Women	1 Girl
Ontong van Madagascar, 39	Jacob, 2	Lydia van de Kaap, 23	
Phillis van Mozambique, 39		Pamela van de Kaap 29	Francina, 5
Galant van de Kaap, 24		Lea van de Kaap, 17	

Note: Shaded cells indicate families.

Sources: Slave register for W. N. van der Merwe, 1816–1825; WCARS SO 6/130 fo 34; RCC Vol. 20, 216.

Since the *opgaaf* only names the male household head and his wife or widow, I used the slave registers to individualize the eight slaves and published genealogies to find information about the Van der Merwe children – including the arrival of a sixth child only four months after the revolt. Elsje du Plessis was pregnant, something none of the witnesses at the trial thought to mention, even though she was gravely wounded.³⁵ Although some Khoisan labor contracts were recorded, not all were. It's also likely some contracts simply haven't survived. I haven't yet found documentation for *Hou Den Bek* or neighboring farms, but the absence of such records in the relevant Worcester magistrate's registers doesn't mean they don't exist. A downside to the abundant availability of old paper and engaging in only targeted archival inquiry means that many volumes remain unopened.

Table 2 cross-references the tallied number of enslaved laborers at *Hou Den Bek* with information from the slave register for Willem Nicolaas van der Merwe and a mention in the trial summary that Ontong and Lydia were a couple. The correlation is exact. The slave register was an evolving record that documents changes, such as births, deaths, and transfers. The *opgaaf* was a snapshot, so Pamela's second daughter, Lea wasn't tallied in 1824 since she hadn't been born. The slave register, in contrast, noted baby Lea's arrival.

Better informed about some of the farm's residents, I returned to the trial summary. Witness testimony provides more information about people on the farm who weren't recorded in the *opgaaf* and drops clues about relationships that weren't captured by administrative head-counting. The farm owner's nuclear family is at the core of colonial records, but other families lived at *Hou Den Bek*, too. The enslaved and indentured laborers who were part of Willem and Elsje's extended household also formed stable sexual unions and had children, creating families recognized by settlers and fellow bonded laborers. A table is an overly rigid depiction of families, but the columns in Table 3 serve to demarcate acknowledged relationships. Documenting Willem and Elsje's children, as well as the wife and baby of schoolmaster Johannes Verlee, who were staying at *Hou Den Bek*, is straightforward. Settler genealogy is well-developed and easily accessible. The *opgaaf* documents the presence of enslaved and Khoisan laborers,

³⁵ Slave register for Willem Nicolaas van der Merwe, WCARS Slave Office (SO) 6/136 fo. 34, 1816–1825; J. A. Heese and R. T. J. Lombard, *South African Genealogies* (Genealogiese Instituut van Suid-Afrika, 1999), Vol. 5, p. 566, hereafter GISA.

Table 3. Nuclear families at *Hou Den Bek*

Willem van der Merwe	Galant van de Kaap	Ontong van Madagascar	Achilles van Mozambique	Johannes Verlee	Johannes Dalree	Platjie Pas (Khoisan)
Elsje du Plessis	Betje (Khoisan)	Lydia van de Kaap	Old Stein (Khoisan)	Martha Swanepoel	Sally Dalree	Rachel (Khoisan)
Helena	David (deceased)	Jacob	Children unknown	Johannes Marthinus	Children unknown	Children unknown
Hester	Betje (deceased)	Child 2				
Charl Johannes	Jantje (deceased)	Child 3			Petrus Campher, overseer	
Jan Abraham	Galant				Campher's wife	
Willem Nicolaas	Lys				Children unknown	

Sources: *Opgaaf* Worcester 1824. WCARS J/421. Slave register for W. N. van der Merwe, 1816–1825. WCARS SO 6/130 fo 34; GISA. RCC Vol. 20, “Trial of Galant and Others.”

but it requires connecting that information to the slave registers and witness testimony to bring the families of bonded laborers into view.

In principle, the *opgaaf* should have captured the presence of tenant farmer Johannes Dalree, his wife, Dalree's German overseer, Piet Campher, and Campher's wife, along with any children they had. The *opgaaf* regularly documented landless settlers from at least the 1730s. The Worcester district records from 1824 – which otherwise correlate with the settler households mentioned in the trial and their related slave registers – clearly document other farmers in the Bokkeveld who didn't have their own farms. I don't have an obvious explanation for why Dalree, Campher, and their wives were not accounted for. Trial testimony suggests they had been living at the tenant house on *Hou Den Bek* for longer than a season.

The information in Table 3 is the result of archival patchwork, bringing together scraps of evidence from various sources – the *opgaaf*, slave registers, genealogies, and testimony from a criminal trial – to repopulate a single colonial farm at a moment in time. Such patchwork is not, however, self-evident. This table is the result not just of patient detective work, the archives simply revealing their secrets to a historian who spends enough time looking. Patchwork is the result of choices, akin to designs made by a quilter assembling pieces of fabric.

This table's focus on nuclear families, for instance, intentionally creates parallels between settler social structures – that we know a lot about – and social bonds of enslaved and indentured laborers – which are much less well documented. I don't mean to imply that ideologies, morality, or the experience of family life was the same across all sectors of colonial society. The religious connotations and registration of Christian marriage mean there must have been big differences, even if we don't have the sources to tell us what that meant in terms of daily life in different parts of a farm. But by gesturing toward the similarities that did exist, the assemblage of data in Table 3 makes a case for the humanity of bonded laborers,

suggesting their histories are legible in a colonial context – even when some of them wanted to blow that context up through armed revolt.

Reconstructing a farm based on the many nuclear families who lived and worked there – no matter how unequally – leaves out a number of residents, though. Let's go back to [Table 1](#) and consider the seventeen Khoisan people associated with *Hou Den Bek*. Only two of the four adult women, Betje and Old Stein, are accounted for in my reconstruction of nuclear families. They were both wives of enslaved men. A third woman, Roos, testified at the trial. She mentions a child but not a husband. Was she partnered? Who was the fourth woman? The two adult men from the census were probably the teenaged Izaak Rooy and Izaak Thys, both involved in the revolt. Enslaved and Khoisan boys were counted as adult laborers at fourteen; at eighteen and nineteen, respectively, the two Izaaks were categorized as men. Demographically, they were more likely to be sons of the Khoisan women on the farm than their husbands. If that's the case, were their fathers living on other farms? Or dead? Moreover, it's a leap of normative imagination to suppose that the Khoisan women and children who I can't develop from archival tallies into people with more social context even organized themselves into nuclear families, or that they aspired to. The available evidence is just too thin to support critical fabulation.³⁶

[Table 3](#) also massages individuals into categories they may not have chosen for themselves, given a chance. From trial testimony we know that Galant and Betje were in a long-term relationship that produced five children. They used the terms “husband” and “wife” for each other, as did other residents of the farm. But it's not clear from the trial testimony that Galant and Betje shared living quarters. And then there's Galant's second wife, Pamela. Polygamy doesn't fit in an analysis based on nuclear families. The premise of [Table 3](#) and its organization illuminates some aspects of life at *Hou Den Bek* as it obscures others. Although it is imperfect, this reconstruction offers insights for foundational social history of the Cape Colony and opens opportunities for more nuanced analysis of the 1825 revolt than existing scholarship, which relies almost exclusively on the trial testimony, provides. The reconstructions embedded in [Table 3](#) are only part of a historian's work. This paper focuses on archival method: how to get to this reconstruction. It is an example of data patchworked into a representative whole – useful even though it still has some holes in it. This is a first step toward developing a broader interpretation.

Working a patchwork into the fabric of social history in South Africa

Historians of the colonial world in general, and Africa in particular, have decades of accumulated wisdom to lean on as we develop interpretations. Reading against the grain, centering silence and absence, and interrogating the mutual constitution of power retain their analytical value.³⁷ We have

³⁶ Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008).

³⁷ Vinayak Chaturvedi, ed., *Mapping Subaltern Studies and the Postcolonial* (Verso, 2000); Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Beacon Press, 1995); Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler, *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World* (University of California Press, 1997).

examples of how to assemble ephemeral archival traces into a meaningful narrative.³⁸ And provocations to disassemble structures of power that once seemed unassailable.³⁹ Feminist scholarship continues to innovate approaches that question everything, see power everywhere, valorize daily life, and interrogate the domestic rather than take it for granted.⁴⁰

Empirically rich social history has an equally long heritage in South Africa, dating from the benchmark *The Shaping of South African Society* and the work of the Wits History Workshop.⁴¹ Frictions between macro and micro approaches, and between aggregate data and lived experience surface in this body of work, as does a distance between the Western Cape and the rest of the country, exacerbated by divisions between the pre-industrial and post-mineral revolution past.⁴² The Cape benefits from a rich tradition of social history, from the ground-breaking work of *Shaping* and its robust aggregate data through the beautiful microhistories of Nigel Penn, Russel Viljoen, Candy Malherbe, and Gerald Groenewald to the powerful synthesis of Worden et al.⁴³ Within this work, aggregate reconstructions of big picture processes come mostly from government documents, while microhistories offer revealing portraits of lived experience, usually from a tight set of sources. Both synthesis and

³⁸ Clifton Crais and Pamela Scully, *Sara Baartman and the Hottentot Venus: A Ghost Story and a Biography* (Princeton University Press, 2010); Charles Van Onselen, *The Seed Is Mine: The Life of Kas Maine, a South African Sharecropper, 1894–1985* (Hill and Wang, 1996).

³⁹ Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (James Currey / Heinemann, 2011); Jonathan D. Jansen and Cyril A. Walters, *The Decolonization of Knowledge: Radical Ideas and the Shaping of Institutions in South Africa and Beyond* (Cambridge University Press, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009082723>.

⁴⁰ Donna Haraway, "Teddy Bear Patriarchy: Taxidermy in the Garden of Eden, New York City, 1908–1936," *Social Text*, no. 11 (1984): 20–64, <https://doi.org/10.2307/466593>; Pamela Scully, *Liberating the Family? Gender and British Slave Emancipation in the Rural Western Cape, South Africa, 1823–1853* (Heinemann, 1997); Helen Bradford, "Women, Gender and Colonialism: Rethinking the History of the British Cape Colony and Its Frontier Zones, c. 1806–70," *Journal of African History* 37, no. 3 (1996): 351–70, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021853700035519>; Carina E. Ray, *Crossing the Color Line: Race, Sex, and the Contested Politics of Colonialism in Ghana, New African Histories* (Ohio University Press, 2015); Rachel Jean-Baptiste, *Multiracial Identities in Colonial French Africa: Race, Childhood, and Citizenship* (Cambridge University Press, 2023).

⁴¹ Richard Elphick and Hermann Giliomee, *The Shaping of South African Society, 1652–1820* (Longman Group United Kingdom, 1980).

⁴² Laura J. Mitchell and Gerald Groenewald, "The Pre-Industrial Cape in the Twenty-First Century," *South African Historical Journal* 62, no. 3 (2010): 435–43, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02582473.2010.519895>; Dlamini et al., "South Africa, 1994 + 30."

⁴³ Penn, *Rogues, Rebels, and Runaways*; Russel Stafford Viljoen, *Jan Paerl, a Khoikhoi in Cape Colonial Society, 1761–1851* (Brill, 2006); Vertrees C. Malherbe, "Christian-Muslim Marriage and Cohabitation: An Aspect of Identity and Family Formation in Nineteenth-Century Cape Town," *Journal of Imperial & Commonwealth History* 36, no. 1 (2008): 5–24; Vertrees C. Malherbe, "Born into Bastardy: The Out-Of-Wedlock Child in Early Victorian Cape Town," *Journal of Family History* 32, no. 1 (2007): 21–44; Gerald Groenewald, "'Een Spoorloos Vrouwspersoon: Unmarried Mothers, Moral Regulation and the Church at the Cape of Good Hope, circa 1652–1795," *Historia* 53, no. 2 (2008): 5–32; Groenewald, "'A Mother Makes No Bastard': Family Law, Sexual Relations and Illegitimacy in Dutch Colonial Cape Town, c. 1652–1795," *African Historical Review* 39, no. 2 (2007): 58–90. Nigel Worden, Elizabeth van Heyningen, and Vivian Bickford-Smith, *Cape Town: The Making of a City* (New Africa Books, 2011).

prosopography bridge the gap, leaning toward a collective representation of the past.⁴⁴ My approach to archival patchwork affords a middle ground, offering a way to tell a community story in the pre-industrial period that, unlike prosopography, brings individual actors into relief.

Conclusion

This paper focuses on text-based archival sources at the Cape of Good Hope, reflecting the rich body of evidence available there, along with the particular role of writing and the colonial literary legacy in the region.⁴⁵ Archival patchwork is applicable to other regions and periods for which there is a diverse array of sources. My engagement with archival sources is not intended to preclude weaving in other forms of evidence, be it visual, material, or oral. While I focus my attention on the method's utility for reconstituting fragments of lived experience torn apart by colonial process and forms of record keeping – making the method relevant for other imperial settings – the foundational practice would work in national or local contexts.

Situating reconstructions of *Hou Den Bek* and the neighboring farms of the Koue Bokkeveld within this intellectual heritage and using the array of available theoretical tools to develop a fully-fledged interpretation of the revolt is the next step of scholarly production. Such a framing, though, implies that archival method is one discrete step of historical research, followed by theoretical interpretation. But it's wrong to think that method and theory can be disentangled: method first, to collect and organize the evidence, then theory to make sense of it. As I showed in my description and critique of Table 3, reading against the grain, interpreting archival silences and absences, thinking through frameworks of colonial power, and thinking with both feminist and decolonial examples of how to question the very premise of social organization is as embedded in archival work as it is in the writing of analytical historical narrative.

This paper offers an example of what's empirically possible with archival patchwork and acknowledges its limitations. Putting this all together requires working along the seams, as Carina Ray has said,⁴⁶ to see where method and theory come together, to notice points of friction and sites of tearing. Archival patchwork offers an original composite image where the seams are visible, inviting future intervention. Patchwork, as home seamstresses of the nineteenth century well knew, can make durable new fabric from worn scraps. It can also be picked apart and repurposed as the need arises.

⁴⁴ Groenewald, "Een Dienstig Inwoonder: Entrepreneurs, Social Capital and Identity in Cape Town, c. 1720–1750," *South African Historical Journal* 59, no. 1 (2007): 126–52; Groenewald, "Dynasty Building, Family Networks and Social Capital: Alcohol Pachters and the Development of a Colonial Elite at the Cape of Good Hope, c. 1760–1790," *New Contree* 62 (2011): 31.

⁴⁵ Nigel Penn, "Written Culture and the Cape Khoikhoi: From Travel Writing to Kolb's 'Full Description,'" in *Written Culture in a Colonial Context: Africa and the Americas 1500–1900*, ed. Adrien Delmas and Nigel Penn (University of Cape Town Press, 2013), 171–93; Nigel Penn and Adrien Delmas, "Peter Kolb and the Circulation of Knowledge about the Cape of Good Hope," in *Science, Africa and Europe: Processing Information and Creating Knowledge*, ed. Martin Lengwiler et al. (Routledge, 2018).

⁴⁶ Ray, *Crossing the Color Line*, 23.

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