Technologies of Recovery and Discovery: The Poetics of “Artefacts”

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Technologies of Recovery and Discovery: The Poetics of “Artefacts”

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Abstract
This article discusses the ways that objects, specifically personal belongings, held in British collections have their stories muted to become imperial signifiers. Using two pieces of jewellery acquired in 1859 by David Livingstone, British missionary and traveller (1813-1873), a lip ring from a Mang’anja woman in present day Malawi and a bracelet from the Kafue valley in present day Zambia, this article evidences how digital tools can be used to layer, in a palimpsestic way, the information available about colonially collected objects, to locate them physically, in the space they inhabit, and narratively, in the space they create.

Resumo
En este artículo se plantean las distintas formas en las que los objetos, especialmente objetos personales, recopilados en colecciones británicas han cambiado su significado de origen para adquirir uno imperialista. Usando dos joyas adquiridas en 1859 por David Livingstone, un misionero británico y viajante (1813-1873), un anillo labial de una mujer Mang’anja en la actual Malawi y un brazalet del valle Kafue en la actual Zambia, este artículo evidencia cómo las herramientas digitales pueden ser usadas para disponer en capas, de forma palimpséstica, la información disponible acerca de objetos coloniales coleccionados, para ubicarlos físicamente, en el espacio que habitan, y narrativamente en el espacio que crean.

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Introduction

BLTDL 20583 (809) SC7 LOAN and BLTDL 20584 (810) SC7 LOAN are unique identifiers (IDs) assigned to two items of jewellery, objects in a museum collection that might seem innocuous. The sets of letters and numbers reveal nothing about the original makers or owners of the jewellery or the circumstances of the objects’ circulation. We do know both items to be on loan from the family of the great granddaughter of David Livingstone, a British missionary and traveler (b. 1813–d. 1873). But, fundamentally, the letters and numbers in the unique ID serve as markers of the objects’ home in a museum collection, and as de-humanising and even violent evidence of a lack of acknowledgement that the jewellery once belonged to specific people whose names and histories often are overlooked in museums’ presentations. By leveraging digital tools and methods, in keeping with what digital humanist Kim Gallon calls the “technology of recovery” and discovery, I aim to bring to the fore overlooked names and histories.1

In this article, I focus on two pieces of jewellery acquired in 1859 by David Livingstone, specifically a lip ring taken from a Mang’anja woman in the Shire valley region of present-day Malawi and a bracelet perhaps from or intended for an unidentified individual in the Kafue valley in present-day Zambia.2

I explore the ways in which stories of personal belongings are often muted, distancing the objects from their original contexts and rendering them as imperial signifiers.3 I demonstrate generative possibilities in the use of text mining, image searching, catalogue analysis and textual encoding to identify specific objects, places and women. I also engage in what I call spatial poetics, an effort to layer, in a palimpsestic way, scattered information available about colonially collected objects, in order to locate them physically, in the spaces they have inhabited, and to locate them narratively, in the spaces they allow us to glimpse. Attention to the spatial poetics of the belongings fuels understanding of different types of spaces surrounding an object at different times as well as prompts reflection on strategies for contextualising an object and the location or locations an object comes to represent. Anthropologist James C. Faris talks of “the privileged modalities of Western attention”, that we, in these museums, are unable to see beyond a specific interpretation that comes out of our own disciplinary formation.5 The meanings and places that we attach to an object impact how we see the object itself and understand it. The display of objects in collections reflect, as art historian Susan Vogel says, “the philosophies and attitudes of their organisers from the time they first began.”6 My ultimate aim is to consider ways to critically renegotiate objects that have been displayed as ‘artefacts’ within imperial constructs. Throughout this article, I place ‘artefact’ consistently within single quotation marks to signal that it is a word with strong ethnological and cultural assumptions built into it. When applied to objects and belongings, ‘artefact’ situates the thing within the visual representations and knowledge biases of nineteenth-century British imperialism.

Throughout the nineteenth century, European travellers to the African continent and elsewhere often returned to an imperial metropole and published about their experiences. They wrote narratives that supported their socio-cultural beliefs, and they often corroborated their stories with geographically and ethnically coded objects that they had acquired on their travels. David Livingstone was one of the most well-known nineteenth-century European

1 I would like to thank Susan Gagliardi for the initial discussion in a cafe in Edinburgh in 2019 that led to the development of this article. I would like to thank Reviewers 1 and 2 for their thoughtful, critical, and kind support in developing this work. My deepest thanks are reserved for my colleagues in the Marginalised Marys digital research network; Lois Burke and Heather F. Ball, for their ongoing labour in developing and maintaining the databases and critical structures out of which such research comes.


3 I use the term bracelet throughout as that is the identifier written on the object itself, although I note that the specifics of the object itself, including not having a clasp, suggest it should be called a bangle. I do not wish to add a further layering of European labelling to an object that we should ideally be referring to by the language of its source creator, owner or region it came from.

4 Where ‘Mang’anja’, the name for a group of Bantu people, has been incorrectly written in quoted text, the author has not amended the original writing but identified the misspelling with [sic].
travellers to the African continent. Livingstone’s three books *Missionary Travels* (1857), *Narrative of the Zambezi Expedition* (1865) and *The Last Journals of David Livingstone* (1874), had a profound impact on how people in Anglophone nations understood people and cultures from southern and central Africa. Livingstone also brought back to Britain a wealth of objects, including items that had belonged to people he met and that he purchased or acquired. Many of the objects he gathered refied imperial ideas around cultural alterity, otherness and difference. Here I argue for the reclaiming of belongings, not as ‘artefacts’ that are geographically sited and that augment European beliefs about the other but as a material link to the original creator, owner or wearer. I consider how objects and texts used together can evidence the present but unarticulated narratives of African women who encountered the travel parties of David Livingstone. While I focus on two items of jewellery acquired in 1859, during Livingstone’s Second Zambezi Expedition of 1858 to 1864, and held by the David Livingstone Museum in Blantyre, Scotland, my findings and the methods used therein suggest possibilities for uncovering information about other objects and African individuals involved in the objects’ creation, use, or ownership held in British collections.

By concentrating on a specific period in time, in this instance a single year, I favour a slow digital critical practice to recover individual women’s names, biographies, and agency. Thus, I work to bring multiple digital tools to bear on a single issue instead of attempting to assess a broader set of data. I also resist practices that could result in over-reach, flattening synthesis or homogenisation of results. While computational methods allow for analysis of large data sets, the decision to embrace a narrow focus forces me, as the researcher, to engage more deeply with each of my available data sources and the digital tools I use. I shift back and forth between computational methods and my sources to find details that a first glance at a source, with or without the aid of digital tools, might suggest are absent entirely. My insistence on combining computational analysis with reflective time allows me to engage with the spatial and temporal layers that an object moves through or resides within. And slowness as both practice and critical medium generates more nuanced understandings of movement, space, history, narrative and process.

My reliance on a slow digital critical practice to identify in collections centred around Livingstone, and in his writing, individuals behind the objects, showed me that the people whose experiences I was seeking to uncover fall into two distinct categories. They are:

- women with a strong archival memorial weight, meaning that their names, ability to own things, and abilities to act in the world are recognized in the collection records and travel writing; and
- women with an archival memorial weightlessness, meaning they exist more as phantoms behind objects with their being and agency largely occluded in the collection records and written narratives yet still detectable enough to identify them as individuals in the world and recognize their connection to a particular geographic location.

The latter women, whose belongings have often ornamented idealised imperial narratives, are almost lost to us. They are ancestors in an object’s history and separate or separated from the western rationalist explanation given to an object, but traces of them still hold to the object.7

The space between those women who have more archival weight and those who are weightless, almost phantasmal, is vast. But acknowledgement of their more difficult-to-discern position is not to suggest that the women are not find-able. People like myself—in positions of privilege and with overt levels of access to resources, including archives, collections, and digital capabilities—must take advantage of our position and access to do more to disrupt imperial structures. I seek to contribute to the critical reckoning of the ‘artefact’ and its ties to British imperialism. Instead of continuing to overlook or omit stories of individuals who created, owned, or used objects, I look for them to point at complicated entangled histories.

7 Faris, ‘ART/Artifact’.
Why 1859?

In March of 1858, Livingstone left Britain to begin his second expedition along the Zambezi River, and he returned in July of 1864. A group of twelve men from Sierra Leone and Liberia and six men from Britain joined Livingstone at the start of the expedition. At various stages of the expedition men from the Kololo people originating in southern Africa, a group of male slaves from Sena just above the confluence of the Shire and Zambezi rivers in northwestern Mozambique, "Johanna" men—David Livingstone's "name for porters from the Comoro Islands working in east Africa", and men from the place of Shupanga, now known as Chupanga in Sofala Province in Mozambique also supported or were part of the expedition. Whilst there is no mention of women in the party in Livingstone or his companions’ journals and in the official published accounts, the same sources show that the group frequently interacted with women as they travelled. For example, the geologist Richard Thornton notes that when the group was based at what he called 'Expedition Island' at the mouth of the Zambezi, women made bread on a door. He writes:

First process was to unhinge the door, wipe it clean & lay it on the floor, then the head woman put the flour on the door & sat down in front of it. Others strained the 'pombe' (native beer made from durra=guinea corn), then the pombe was mixed with the flour; a little at a time till a dry paste was formed. 2 women now worked this as well for some time. Then more pombe was added, till it was of the same consistency as English bread paste.

This anecdote about bread making evidences critical logistic support that the group received from people they encountered as they travelled. It also shows that women, perhaps even without asking permission, dismantled part of one of the expedition's temporary structures to create a work surface for themselves. The act of bread making, an activity found all over the world and frequently the task of women within small community settings, is not hidden from or overlooked by the travellers. The few lines show us women at the mouth of the river who were visible and not submissive even within a narrative space where the names and agency of European men tend to prevail.

David Livingstone’s wife Mary Moffat Livingstone and their son Oswell, who was seven years old in 1858, had also been part of the original group of travellers. However, when the group arrived in Cape Town, on South Africa’s southwest coast, to begin their travels on the African continent, Mary found she was pregnant. She separated from the group and went to her parents’, Robert and Mary Moffat, mission station in Kuruman, a town in northern South Africa. There she gave birth to her sixth and final child, Anna Mary. By the time the British government recalled the expedition at the end of 1863, of the original party, Thomas Baines, Norman Bedingfeld, and Richard Thornton had been dismissed from the group for poor behaviour; Richard Thornton as well as Mary Livingstone had died; and all of the Krumen had been dismissed due to their efforts to secure better conditions for themselves. In the end, the expedition, or rather David Livingstone, has also been blamed by the British media with the death of five other Britons, three of whom were children, who had established a mission station in Magomero, a Mang'anja village in the Shire highlands, in present-day southern Malawi, after having been inspired and supported by Livingstone to set up a mission.

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8 Unpublished records and published accounts of the expedition provide fuller identifications of the men from Sierra Leone and Liberia in the group. The men, referred to as Krumen, are identified by names which we cannot say are their actual names and may be nicknames. They were 'Tom Toby', 'Tom Coffe' (the engineer’s mate), 'Tom Jumbo' (the leader of the group), 'Jack Williams', 'Tom Davis', 'Tom Toby', 'Tom Wilson', 'John Grandol', 'Black Will', 'Tom Peter', 'Tom Walker', 'Jack Sabe'. All bar one had originally been fishermen; they were recruited on 26 March 1858 in Free-town. The British men were John Kirk (a physician and botanist), Richard Thornton (a geologist), Norman Bedingfeld (a naval officer), Thomas Baines (an artist and store-keeper), George Rae (an engineer) and David Livingstone’s younger brother Charles Livingstone (a photographer and purported moral agent).


11 Richard Thornton, The Zambezi Papers of Richard Thornton: Geologist to Livingstone’s Zambezi Expedition (Chatto & Windus, 1963), 51. Inconsistent punctuation in Author’s original text.


imperial prerogatives of Christianity, commerce and civilisation, was traumatic and traumatising for the many people involved in it. There are limited written accounts providing details about African experiences of the expedition, and what is available is fragmentary, across multiple sources, and with varying degrees of accuracy, but from the little that is written it is evident the expedition did not result in kinder outcomes for African individuals.¹⁴

1859—the year of my focus in this study—was the first full year of the expedition. It is also the year when Livingstone’s personal ideas about European colonisation came to the fore publicly. As part of publicising and maintaining interest in the work of the expedition, Livingstone wrote many letters to those in positions of government, journalists, family, church figures, scientists and societies in Britain propounding the many commercial opportunities for commerce in the region.¹⁵ Furthermore, he proposed “government sponsored emigration and the creation of a new colony.”¹⁶ Central to his attempts to persuade government leaders and broader publics in Britain of the benefits of his scheme was acquisition of evidence. The taking of objects, which through possession and standards of the time became “British ‘artefacts’” and thus were imperially claimed, provided people in the imperial metropole with evidence of potential gains for Britain through its colonisation of the Zambezi and tributaries. Yet, the objects that became “British ‘artefacts’”—here a lip ring belonging to a Mang’ anja woman and a bracelet that came from a woman somewhere in the Kafue valley—were involved in other histories as well. I want to see how the objects’ histories can be renegotiated to tell individualised African-centric stories, stories that no longer centre on the European interloper.

Through text mining via Voyant and WordStat, image searching and reverse image searching via Google Image and TinEye, data visualisations via Exploratory and Observable, catalogue analysis via scrapping and the creation of data sets in CSV formats, and forms of textual encoding such as TEI XML, I identify objects, places and women in extant documentation to try to pair or layer instances of a specific woman or known event, or to expand upon the information available about colonially collected objects and try to locate them in physical and narrative spaces with the intention to put them on, with or near their original creator, owner or wearer.

The focus on one person’s collecting and one year of that person’s collecting creates constructive limiting barriers and forces me to delve deeply into all aspects of a collected object and its paratextual content. Livingstone’s enduring popularity and his historical reputation are such that his extant writings and acquisitions are abundant and many researchers have already consulted them. But there are still ways to investigate objects and records on display or stored in museum collections and in archives as well as information in digital format in order to spot details researchers had previously overlooked or dismissed. We can look for voices that have been part of the object’s story, voices occluded in the narratives of European travel, voices that have not yet been brought to the fore, and realise that to deny them is to deny the fullness of the historical event.

**Method and Implications**

Digital tools and corpora now proliferate. We could continue to develop new tools and digitise more sources, but we must also think about how to work responsibly with the tools and sources already available to us. Utilising these tools, the time is ripe to delve into archives and collections in order to show that the records and objects in them can still teach us much about the socio-cultural makeup of nineteenth-century European travel in Africa. For example, the information about the African

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¹⁵ *Livingstone Online* which has the most comprehensive catalogue to date of Livingstone’s letters, field notes, diaries, journals and notebooks, shows that between March 1859 and December 1859 Livingstone sent 121 letters that we know of that still exist in either physical or digital form. [https://livingstoneonline.org/in-his-own-words/catalogue?%5B%5D=dateRangeYear_ms%3A%221859%22&%5B%5D=creator_ms%3A%22Livingstone%22&%5B%5D=David%2C%2C1813-1873%22&%5B%5D=genre_ms%3A%22letters%22](https://livingstoneonline.org/in-his-own-words/catalogue?%5B%5D=dateRangeYear_ms%3A%221859%22&%5B%5D=creator_ms%3A%22Livingstone%22&%5B%5D=David%2C%2C1813-1873%22&%5B%5D=genre_ms%3A%22letters%22)

members of the expedition mentioned above involved cross referencing multiple sources to find individual and group names: the digital library of Livingstone Online; sources from digital scholar portals; online journals via institutional access; the physical archive of the David Livingstone Museum; self-published online texts and blogs; the mining of letters that had been transcribed and digitised for keywords; the text on online images of old catalogues and digitised newspapers; and, reading physical texts in the National Library of Scotland’s Special Collections Reading Room. A process that, though it sounds unwieldy, in fact allowed me a level of access to sources previously unheard of.

Importantly, this type of work continues the drive to disassemble the notion that a single white European man like Livingstone trudged across the globe uncovering things at every turn of the path and then returned safely home with little to no acknowledgement of the people encountered, their vital role on these travels and whose lives were significantly affected by the European presence. I contend that the digital library, digital archive, digitised image, online catalogue and critically reinscribed thick metadata attached to material traces of the expedition allow technologies “of recovery” to extend and expedite processes of representation. Kim Gallon says that what she calls a ‘technology of recovery’, [is] characterized by efforts to bring forth the full humanity of marginalized peoples through the use of digital platforms and tools. Digital tools allow one to read objects and texts against the hegemony of traditional approaches to European repositories. With them, one can intentionally direct one’s attention to uncovering the appropriation of local resources and finding the “historically excluded” in the active processes of narrative construction as well as in other technical, knowledge and material-based contributions embedded in words and images.

Writing as a white female scholar who works within the museum sector, I find that a strong impetus for this work comes from the ambition to utilise the privilege of my position to unsettle white privilege and its dominance of narratives of objects. As art historian Mathodi Motsamayi notes:

today the majority of collectors and keepers working in established museums are not black women. Because of the socio-historical background of material culture, it is often males and institutions that have the power to determine the classification of, inter alia, collections in the custody of museums.

To be clear, I do not wish to ventriloquise central and southern African history or to take the limited female museal space which is not mine to occupy. Instead, I endeavour through my research to renegotiate and advance the critical practice around African women’s belongings held by British museums, archives and collections as a result of my access to the latter. My aim is to take on the responsibility of returning to African women the narratives of ‘artefacts’ stolen by my ancestors, held in galleries and museums in my country, and “collected” to bolster my nation’s imperial history.

My work engages with objects often presented as “British ‘artefacts’” in an effort not to uphold their Britishness but to restore them to more specific African contexts. To understand belongings as Bantu or Zambian again is to view them as connected to the feelings, beliefs, desire, culture and aspirations of the person on the African continent who originally created, owned, or used the objects. And yet, even as I attempt to highlight individual voices, I remain acutely aware of the subjugation of countless African caravan workers, cooks, stokers, assistants and porters upon whose labour Livingstone and others relied. Even if their names and agency are often occluded in extant records and in storerooms,

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*18* Ibid.

*19* Ibid.


*21* As a postcolonial female researcher and European museum professional I am aware that I must situate myself and my scholarship; and that I cannot presume to know the site of the inter-cultural encounter from the side of one of the oppressed. I am not Zambian, Malawian or Zimbabwean and will never be able to experience the subjective power dichotomy from the side of the colonised.
African individuals are central to any story of expedition on the African continent.

I have no desire to see my research support the status quo. A non-violent object such as a piece of jewellery becomes a signifier of a violent act once we confront and present for view the object's history. It is in its display as a non-violent object that it sustains fear, inequality and unsureness. We must continue to challenge the unacknowledged brutality and injustice of claiming objects. Radical new ideas can take a long time to develop, and one could wait for more information. But no matter how large a dataset is or how advanced the technology is, technology cannot recover details that were never recorded. Thus, we must accept that we have lost much information about individual people and the objects they created, owned or wore forever. Yet we can harness the data and technology available to us to find details we had not previously considered. An anecdote, a lip ring, an inscribed bracelet, a sketch, a letter, and a published book all serve as fragments that we can use to begin to construct more informed and fuller understandings of our past.

Scholars who study European travel beyond Europe have recently sought to foreground the indigenous actors who inhabited the environments where European journeys took place. As historians of exploration Peter R. Martin and Edward Armston-Sheret note, such work extends postcolonial approaches “a stage further by re-examining and re-evaluating western travel and exploration with the purpose of identifying the complex array of actors who were involved in these processes.”¹² Through my research, I similarly intend to identify a complex array of actors, and I begin with a focus on two objects, working slowly and critically with the objects and texts in order to catch all of the details and nuances I can. To choose to begin the story with an object and not text, is to tell the story through an image, series of images or moving images, thus preferring narrative visualism, one separate from written histories, historiographies or narratives. Whereas Livingstone sought to present objects as evidence of words he had uttered and written, I start with the objects and then find words to explain them. I ultimately aim to evidence the effectiveness of using multiple digital tools to source fragments of information on an object to create meaning outside of its colonial context; this building of information is not predicated on one canonical source of information, such as an exhibition catalogue, but looks to new ways of engaging with, and representing, the site of intercultural encounter. New digital histories are based in interdisciplinary communities of practice which are not divorced from traditional and canonical histories, or representations, but instead expand upon them.

Efforts to understand and address grievous histories of colonisation and imperial domination can start by changing the histories we tell and how we tell them. We can utilise digital tools to shatter exploitative historical frameworks and constructs. And as museum professionals and heritage scholars Jesmael Mataga, Farai Mudododzi Chabata, and Charity Nyathi show,

> Museums must allow for the diversity of narratives, fluidity, and happenstance nature to be part of breathing life back to the sepulchered objects. Object biographies can empower and create space for voices from outside of the institution.²³

The narrative visualism I propose, combined with a thoughtful presentation of an object’s story of acquisition, would allow us to bring more attention to the original creator, owner or wearer of objects, and as Mataga, Chabata, and Nyathi note, “empower and create space for voices from outside of the institution”, even when those voices are fragmentary.

Curators in the Anglophone world have repeatedly privileged documents in our assessments of objects and their histories. Yet, we also know that any written document contains bias and distortion. One way to counter bias and distortion is to expand the

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types and number of sources we consult. I argue that even if Livingstone sought representative accuracy in his writings, accuracy is subjective, a learnt behaviour shaped by one’s contexts. While attempts at accuracy may assume a fixed truth, the ambition for detached exactness derives from social and cultural norms promoted by white European men, what art historian Anthony Alan Shelton calls “one principal paradigmatic position.”24 As a mid-nineteenth-century British traveller, Livingstone was inseparable from the colonial circumstances of his geography and moment. As the first European curator of the representation of his encounters with people, he fashioned narratives and gathered objects to become “British ‘artefacts’” in order to ready, support, and substantiate his original narrative. My aim is not to replace one account once considered authoritative and accurate with another but to attend to the subjective nature of any record.

A Lip Ring, Women in its History, and the Fragments that Connect Them

In recent years, researchers have devoted growing attention to showing how engaged and complex western European and southern and central African working relationships on nineteenth-century journeys of so-called exploration were.25 But, it is noticeable that women are still rarely mentioned. This observation is not to lay blame on the researchers given that as Clendennen and Simpson noted as early as 1985, identifying women could often not be determined “by conventional research methods.”26 Reification of the idea of the heroic isolated English stalwart contributed to a style of writing that denied the agency of other individuals, including African men as well as women in central and southern Africa, whether indigenous, Portuguese, or British. For example, the lack of willingness to understand or even reflect on the presence and experiences of Livingstone’s wife Mary, or on their separation, the birth of their child, or her death, I posit may have as much to do with her femaleness as her not-quite Britishness. And yet even as David Livingstone’s published writings obscure the contributions and experiences of his wife to his endeavours, she contributed significantly to them.

Born in Griekwastad, a town now in the Northern Cape Province of South Africa, Mary gained fluency in multiple languages including Tswana. Her linguistic fluency, and the widespread reputation of her father as someone of honesty and integrity, aided Livingstone as he travelled as she was able to discourse with the people and groups they encountered and facilitate access to important people whose lands they travelled through such as Sebetwane, Chief of the Patsa in present-day Zambia, particularly in the early years of David’s career.27 And, Agnes, the second child of David and Mary, also contributed to David’s reputation working with, among others, James Chuma and Abdullah Susi, the men who transported his body from Chipundu to Bagamoyo in Tanzania, at Newstead Abbey in Nottinghamshire in England to realise her father’s last text, The Last Journals of David Livingstone in Central Africa, published in 1874, one year after the British traveller’s death. Was the English travelogue reader not interested in female influence in men’s travels afar, perhaps because readers imagined women waited in the home, where they took care of their families, for their men to return?

This sex-based erasure of women’s agency and their contributions to the journeys of European men becomes more pronounced within travellers’ unpublished and published narratives when one tries to identify the indigenous African women who lived in the regions in which European travellers stayed


and through which they passed. When European writers do mention southern and central African women, the writers often describe the women in ethnographic terms, treating the women as mute and immobile specimens present to satisfy male curiosity. The writers describe and map women’s bodies as sites of otherness, commonly reproducing preconceived stereotypes with a focus on the naked body of the woman, or in homogenised representations in which the individual is subsumed in her geographical or ethnic identity. For example, in a pencil drawing of a woman with a lip ring and plate of rice, Livingstone identifies the woman only as a

![Figure 1: Pencil drawing of woman with lip ring and plate of rice [cropped image]. Livingstone, David, 1813-1873. “Field Diary, 4 April-13 May 1859.” p. 57 Livingstone Online. Adrian S. Wisnicki and Megan Ward, dirs. 2022, accessed January 10, 2022, https://livingstoneonline.org/in-his-own-words/catalogue?%5B0%5D=dateRangeYear_mi%3A%221859%22&%5B1%5D=creator_ms%3A%22Livingstone%2C+David%2C+1813-1873%22&%5B2%5D=genre_ms%3A%22Field+Notes%22&page=0&sort.asc=Date%28s%29&order.Date%28s%29=asc&view.pid=liv%3A0030](https://livingstoneonline.org/in-his-own-words/catalogue?%5B0%5D=dateRangeYear_mi%3A%221859%22&%5B1%5D=creator_ms%3A%22Livingstone%2C+David%2C+1813-1873%22&%5B2%5D=genre_ms%3A%22Field+Notes%22&page=0&sort.asc=Date%28s%29&order.Date%28s%29=asc&view.pid=liv%3A0030)
'Lovumia woman,' the term 'Lovumia' referring to the name of a cultural or ethnic group (Fig. 1).

When, in 1873, American missionary Josiah Tyler wrote about Livingstone's travels in the Zambezi area, Tyler likewise presented people from the region as ethnographic subjects, offering that "A peculiar ornament—if it may be called an ornament—of the Manganja [sic] women is the pelele, or upper lip ring."28 An extract from Livingstone's journal, written in April 1859, while he was in the Shire river valley, home to many Mang'anja communities, evinces a similar focus on the jewellery people in the region wore. This attentiveness, evident across the drawings and writing in his journals, shows Livingstone's focus on women and their belongings from an overwhelmingly ethnographic perspective. Livingstone's extended description of the practice of wearing lip rings seems to revel in the physicality of the process, it is clear he is identifying the strangeness of lip rings to a British observer and the comment that follows the description below reinforces that when Livingstone calls the lip ring "uncouth."29 He writes:

The women perforate the upper lip close to the nose and enlarge the orifice till they can insert a ring of ivory or tin of from one and two inches in diameter. Some ladies of fashion have the upper lip so drawn out as to admit which with the outer edge of the lip hangs below the chin, and the mouth and under lip appears through the upper.30

Livingstone did not only write about lip rings. He also acquired them. The bag used to store one lip ring currently held in the David Livingstone Museum offers a researcher only BLTL 20583 (809) SC7 LOAN, the unique ID for the object as shown in Figure 2.

Within the museum, each object’s unique identifier helps museum staff find the object’s location and rank in the collection. All we knew from records at the museum before I started my research is that which was written on the lip ring, "Manganja [sic] lady’s lip ring May 1859,"31 and that the item was on loan. Outside of the museum context, the museum’s unique ID seems arbitrary and offers no information about the object’s original locations of creation, ownership, or use, its standing in those contexts, or the people involved in its creation, ownership, or use. The information in the museum’s object files and database offered little additional detail. Did a woman willingly take the lip ring out of her mouth to give or sell to Livingstone or someone else? Did Livingstone or someone else take it from her forcibly or otherwise coerce her to surrender it? Or did someone manufacture the lip ring as a souvenir to sell to travellers? As Matthew Battles, past Director of Scholarly Initiatives at metaLAB Harvard, argues, “A collected object is a kind of vessel, freighted with an irredeemable record of acts and things, inaccessible worlds of sense and event, a tissue of

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28 Josiah Tyler, Livingstone Lost and Found: Or Africa and Its Explorers: A Complete Account of the Country and Its Inhabitants, Their Customs, Manners, &C., of the Prominent Missionary Stations, of the Diamond and Gold Fields, and of Explorations Made: With a Comprehensive Biographical Sketch of Dr. David Livingstone, His Travels Adventures, Experiences and Disappearance; and a Most Interesting Account of His Discovery by the American Expedition, in Command of Henry M. Stanley (Mutual publishing Company, 1873), 295.


30 Ibid. Phrasing of quotation as in the original text.

31 There are a number of dates that are important for the lip ring: when David Livingstone acquires it in the village of Tingane on 5 January 1859; when he writes on the lip ring in ink to identify what it was, the date he was writing and the ethnic group it came from in May 1859; and, when he sends it in a consignment back to his family in Britain from the Kongone river with a member of the travel group on 28 February 1860.
phenomenal dark matter caught up in time’s obliterative machinery.” With its own “irredeemable record of acts and things,” “its inaccessible worlds of sense and event,” the lip ring only hints at its histories. The gaze, perspectives, methods of categorisation, and position of the European interloper loom large even when we seek to look beyond him.

Mataga, Chabata, and Nyathi assert that the “naming of the objects, which mostly acknowledge a tribe—or region, denied and erased the local authorship and ownership by the original owners, users, and custodians of the objects”33 Identification of the lip ring in the David Livingstone Museum’s collection as “Manganja [sic]” similarly acknowledges a group, denying and erasing individual agency. Sitting in a bag in a museum’s storage room, the lip ring is separated from its original context and points at a colonial understanding as an ‘artefact’ in someone else’s story. Or as Susan Elizabeth Gagliardi and Yaelle Biro acknowledge, labelling an object by a “tribe,” in this instance Mang’anja, combined with the anonymisation of the original creator, owner or wearer “distances viewers from individual objects and specific histories about them while pretending to offer insight into the objects and their histories.”34 It is this dehumanising and distancing aspect of museum practice that slow digital critical practice can work to subvert.

Whilst I may not be able to uncover the person, “Manganja [sic] lady,” behind the lip ring in the museum’s collection or anyone else involved in the object’s making, ownership, or use, digitised documents and tools enable me to find out that the object is likely the one that Livingstone mentions in a letter written to his daughter Agnes whom he called “Nannie,” on the 28 February 1860, when he was at the edge of the Kongone, a distributary of the Zambesi. The National Library of Scotland now holds the physical letter in its collections, and Livingstone Online has digitised it along with other documents. Livingstone Online’s central premise is that the digital library, and the aim of those that contribute to the site and digital library, use “digital technologies to foreground the often lost hands, voices, and sources that shaped Livingstone’s work and writing.”35 This means that the focus of the site is on accuracy and richness of documentation, signposting through the use of critical essays to problematic or misinterpreted information, and, importantly in this instance, the ability to search for the word ‘lip ring’ across 132 categories of objects, images and texts, and all its variants and co-locates,36 at a rate that far exceeds the researcher’s reading speed and their ability to read the handwriting of the original authors. The letter reads:

My Dear Nannie
I send this home By Mr Rae our Engineer whom probably you may see. I send at the same time a box with a few objects of natural history for Robert and Thomas and a few rings for you, one is a lip ring, and if you like to wear it as the women up the Shire do, Mr Rae will shew you how. I bought it and the woman took it out of a hole in her lip & gave it very sorry I thought to part with a thing that made her so “braw.”37

36 Such as ‘lipring,’ ‘ring,’ ‘lip,’ ‘face,’ ‘jewel,’ ‘jewellery,’ ‘jewelry,’ and so on.
Livingstone’s statement that the unnamed woman was “very sorry” to surrender her lip ring to him points towards the traveller’s awareness that the original owner was not eager to give him her belongings.

Having identified a time period and geographical location, I can return to Livingstone’s physical text, *The Zambezi Expedition of David Livingstone* (1956) and find an excerpt dated 5th of January 1859, more than a year before he wrote to his daughter, and located to the village of Tingane, named after its chief. Livingstone writes:

> The women appearing to have very large lip rings, I bought an ivory one which in size and shape was exactly like the rings for putting table napkins in. The poor have bits of reed or calabash only. The lady was loth to part with it, but the sight of the cloth prevailed.38

This same event is corroborated by John Kirk, in a digitised version of his book about the expedition, noting that the “Doctor [a reference to Livingstone] obtained one of these rings. It is of ivory and exactly like a ring for a table napkin.”39

The ability to search for terms in digitised texts avails us to more information about the circumstances surrounding Livingstone’s acquisition of at least one lip ring. It also provides access to different accounts we can read alongside each other. Notably, the story in Livingstone’s book hints at more pressured circumstances surrounding the traveller’s acquisition of the lip ring than the letter to his daughter does. Livingstone himself mentions the woman’s reluctance in giving him the ivory lip ring, presumably a high-status object. If we take Livingstone at his word, people in the region where Livingstone obtained the lip ring valued ones made from ivory over ones made from reed or calabash.

In addition, we learn that the woman wearing the lip ring Livingstone thought made her “braw,” for whatever unspecified reason, surrendered the jewellery at the sight of cloth. Livingstone’s statement implies he gave the woman the cloth in exchange for the lip ring. However, he does not comment in this passage on the quality of the cloth the woman with the ivory lip ring reportedly saw. Even if she did find appeal in the cloth, Livingstone informs us that he detected that “the lady was loth to part with [the lip ring].” He does not address whether she was or was not pleased with the terms of the exchange, and we are left to wonder at the dynamics or forces that came into play in the exchange.

When Livingstone sent his daughter the lip ring, it became a gift from a parent to a child and a memento of the father’s journey far from home. Another fifty-three years later, its status changed again, becoming a public sign of otherness in a 1913 exhibition at the Royal Scottish Museum in Edinburgh, to commemorate the centenary of the birth of David Livingstone. The lip ring, along with other objects, was loaned by Agnes’s son to the Royal Scottish Museum for the exhibition. A catalogue published in conjunction with the exhibition helps us see how the lip ring is offered as part of the presentation of a “vivid picture of Livingstone.”40

Furthermore, the exhibition catalogue shows its British authors’ ideas about the African continent at the time. They write:

> The warmest acknowledgements are due to Captain Livingstone Bruce … for the privilege of showing these objects to the public for the first time … so that by geographical and ethnographic means the passage of Africa from a régime of superstition and barbarism to an Africa where life is safe and the natural resources of field and forest are cultivated and exchanged is made visible.41

Here we see what I have already mentioned, an emphasis on the British traveller and the objects he collected as ‘artefacts,’ or specimens of distant places and people characterised as dangerous and uncultivated prior to British intervention.

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41 Royal Scottish Museum, 3.
The catalogue does not show us how the lip ring was displayed in the exhibition. However, as Figure 6 illustrates, the catalogue lists information about the lip ring just above information about a drawing presumably similar to Livingstone’s pencil drawing shown in Figure 1. The proximity of information about the two objects in the catalogue places them in close relation to each other and further suggests
that the actual objects may have been on view near each other in the 1913 exhibition.

The catalogue describes the illustration as a ‘Drawing of native woman, showing ring in lip, inscribed by Livingstone, “For Agnes [whom he also called “Nannie”], and tell her that she must come out and get her lip bored for the beautiful ornament.”’ The description of the jewellery is that it is an ‘Ivory Lip Ring, with inscription on outside by Livingstone, “Manganja [sic] lady’s lip ring, May 1859,” and on the inside “Agnes” (his elder daughter).’

The exhibition catalogue helps us connect fragments of information scattered in other sources, each one pointing at some detail about the lip ring, Livingstone and at least two women who may have called it their own.

By starting with an object and then bringing disparate sources with information about it together in a palimpsestic way we can begin to find and pay attention to individuals whose being and agency we had previously sidelined. We can also work to situate individuals and cross-cultural encounters in a personal, by which I mean emotive, space, as part of the display of individuals’ belongings in museum collections. I cannot reiterate enough the importance of understanding the lived experience of the people involved in these events as a way to give back agency to all those who are embedded in a museum object’s history, claim the moment in time and space, and classify or describe the object, away from the European interloper in Africa in the nineteenth century.

A Single Lip Ring combined with a desire to think about its original creators, owners, and wearers led me to fragments that digital tools allowed me to find and led me to think more specifically about the jewellery within contexts of personal adornment, coercive pressure, dismissive colonial arrogance and aggressive fiscal incentivisation. Now the unique ID assigned to the object and marked on the bag containing it in storage recedes to the background, and the seemingly straightforward description of the object as a “Manganja [sic] lady’s lip ring May 1859” is revealed as more complex.

**A Bracelet and Disconnected Fragments**

My study of a second object that Livingstone reportedly acquired in 1959 in Kafue, a valley in present-day Zambia, reminds me that not every effort to recover specific names and stories will yield the details we seek. A bracelet currently on loan to the David Livingstone Museum and recognized by the museum’s unique ID BLTDL 20584 (810) SC7 LOAN continues to raise more questions than I have been able to answer. Its small size suggests to me that it was never intended for high-status use. However, inscribed across its surface we read “Agnes Bracelet from Kafue 1859” and “810.” The inscriptions point at a location and date for Livingstone’s acquisition of the bracelet. We know that Livingstone gave the bracelet to his daughter Agnes at some point because of the writing on the bracelet itself, but we, as yet, do not know when and for what reason he chose to send this item back to his daughter in Britain.

The catalogue for the Royal Scottish Museum in Edinburgh’s 1913 *Livingstone Centenary Exhibition* records the jewellery, described as an “ivory bracelet, inscribed by Livingstone.” How can we learn more about the bracelet so our story about it foregrounds Agnes as well as its original creator and its earlier owners or wearers?

I have enacted the same research practices with the bracelet as I did with the lip ring to attempt to identify specific individuals or particular events connected to it. My efforts have not yet yielded any details, although I heed the words of Simpson and Clendennen, noted above, and ask whether it is just that I have not found the appropriate tool

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42 Ibid., 9.

43 There is not space to engage in this article with what the bracelet and the lip ring mean for Agnes, as their imperial owner and daughter of their European colonial acquirer, to her understanding of the objects, where they came from, who originally created them and owned them, and as to whether she engaged or acknowledged the gendered histories of the objects. But this is an important question which needs further research especially when we know Agnes went on to found the Scottish Geographical Society, with John George Bartholomew (of the famous map-making family), on 21 July 1884. An organisation that specifically allowed women to join, 8 years before the Royal Geographical Society in London, England did.
to identify the fragments of information still extant. But as I continue to try to find them, I think of the lip ring, the women in its history, their experiences, and the fragments of information that connect them. Digitisation of sources and digital tools allowed me to locate scattered details and refocus attention on experiences of women. Even if I cannot recover the names of individuals involved in the creation, ownership, or use of the bracelet before Livingstone marked it with the name of a place, a date, and name of a person, I can remember that it had a history before a British traveller took possession of it. I can also continue to search for the names of and stories about individual women.

While I cannot yet connect any African women’s names or stories to the bracelet, I have learned that not all women are absent from or mute in accounts of Livingstone’s travels. Some representations of women as individuals have always been there, but they have somehow remained unseen. Therefore, we should return to sources to see what we can
find in them even if the sources are already familiar to many researchers, scholars and writers, or even broader publics.

For example, in his *Missionary Travels* of 1857, a book published shortly before he embarked on the 1858–1864 journey, Livingstone writes about Manenko, a woman he describes as a Lunda chief from a family of leaders. Apparently, Manenko facilitated Livingstone’s passage on the Zambezi. She also introduced him to the prominent leader, and her uncle, Shinte. Livingstone explains:

> My men succumbed to this petticoat government [a reference to Manenko] sooner than I did so, leaving me no power; - and being unwilling to encounter her tongue I was moving off to the canoes; - but she gave me a kind explanation, and with her hand on my shoulder put on a motherly look saying, now my little man just do as the rest have done.

Manenko was not the only female leader Livingstone reportedly met. Later in *Missionary Travels*, he notes:

> On the 6th January [1853] we reached the village of another female chief named Nyamoana who is said to be the mother of Manenko and sister of Shinte or Kabompo the greatest Balond chief in this part of the country.

Given the lack of specificity about individual women whose belongings he acquired, it is notable that Livingstone committed to writing details about individual African women in his first published book. And yet, despite his mentions of Manenko and Nyamoana, the two female rulers are barely visible in Anglophone archives, both physical and digital. The presence of Manenko’s and Nyamoana’s names plus the additional information about them Livingstone provides, allow us to expand how we think about the role of women in a British traveller’s journeys.

If Livingstone accurately reported on his experience, then Manenko offered him information critical for his passage. We can then start to imagine that European men at times consulted women, both African and European, to determine routes and make decisions about expedition management. Women must have also contributed to the interpersonal dynamics and general politics of any travel group. It is obvious that Livingstone relied on advice from the people around him to make decisions. But he and select others have controlled the Europe-facing representations of his travels. They have determined the words to use and objects to display in exhibitions and publications. As Johannes Fabian explains in *Out of Our Minds: Reason and Madness in the Exploration of Central Africa*, the nineteenth century that travel narratives promoted to “popular readership” at imperial metropoles “filtered out” much of the richness, complexity and individual names we now look to uncover. We must keep this filtering out in mind and recognize that we ourselves may filter out certain details, albeit unknowingly. The narrative of the collections and texts that made up the presented and published story of British imperial metropole and its colonial landscapes “filtered out” much of the richness, complexity and individual names we now look to uncover.

**Conclusion**

I began this article with mention of a single museum’s unique IDs for a lip ring and a bracelet to demonstrate a way in which information we retain and share about objects may strip them of the people who first created and used them as well as other details about their past. I then showed that we can look back at familiar sources to recover details that will help us arrive at fuller understandings, ones that also consider the role of women in the objects’ histories. Even while we may recover some details, we may not be able to find all the information we seek as my attention to the bracelet demonstrates. Whilst there will be no total recovery of information about the lip ring and bracelet,

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45 Ibid., 245.
as it seems likely that we will never be able to find the names of the original creators, owners or wearers, I have shown that even without the determination of a specific name, the phantoms of ownership and contact across space are still detectable.\(^{48}\)

As Mataga, Chabata, and Nyathi state, “[t]he calls for (re) questioning colonial collections in European museums, their biographies of movement and associated physical and cultural violence are mounting.”\(^ {49}\) The calls require researchers of European collections to pull apart and hold up for criticism the ways of knowing, recording, and presenting that have often lain unquestioned within them. Although forever changed as a consequence of their acquisition by the European interloper, the jewellery we have considered here continues to point at complicated histories.

Indeed, we have a responsibility to the next generation and also to the unnamed actors of the past, to tell as much of their stories as we can. The increasing critical awareness around continued structural, racial, sex-based, and gendered inequalities in contemporary society, heritage interpretation and historical representation should not be seen as something that inhibits the use of collected objects or historical written records weighted by their colonial labels. Instead, the awareness should energise studies that lead to different and counter hegemonic ways of reading records of the past. Having recovered fragments of information to help me understand anew objects that we had viewed as lacking in information, I am now working to develop fresh ways of presenting these objects in collections in British museums whose interpretation speaks to the full life and poetics of the object. I also seek to provide models for the use of open-access digital tools to support research into objects and their display. In the next phase of my research, and in partnership with Scottish and African museums and originator communities, I intend to design prototypes for alternative, ultimately more truthful, object labels in physical and digital formats. Our aim should always be to find ways to foreground richness and complexity in the stories about objects we hold.

\(^{48}\) It is important to note that in the writing of this article the David Livingstone museum has used the information gathered and the bracelet and lip ring are now on display in the main collection. https://www.david-livingstone-birthplace.org/collection.