Thus, Shadd-Cary articulated a diasporic politics of freedom that inscribed Black women across the Atlantic as citizens, workers, wives and mothers into an ostensibly color-blind, antislavery British empire ruled by a female sovereign. She relocated the “liberating” promise of westward migration in Canada West, which she portrayed as a promised land for all manner of Afro-Atlantic refugees, in stark contrast with an American Southwest shrouded in the mantle of inhuman bondage. She strategically embraced the Whiggish discourse of imperial abolition – of “freedom” defined as equal opportunity, self-sufficiency and a free market for labor – to challenge proslavery allegations that free societies descended into “pauperism” and revolution.

By comparison, Indian Ocean “subalterns” profiled in the foregoing pages staged complicated, often contradictory relationships with British campaigns against international slave trades. The sheer variety of slavery and subordinate statuses along the Swahili coast, the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea, and within South Asian societies, shaped a range of reactions by marginalized figures to the language, the symbols, and the institutions of colonial antislavery. Enslaved women and children interacted with colonial police stations, law courts, cruisers, depositions, rhetoric and policy to assert claims to work, community, mobility, and security from poverty and violence. Such interactions however, often interrupted linear and universalist narratives of liberty’s progress under the British flag, while exposing the limits of antislavery imperialism during the 19th century. At the same time, these encounters prompt reflections on connections between slavery and diaspora. The scope of this work does not of course extend to extrapolating conclusions about African diasporic consciousness in present-day South Asia and the Middle East based on evidence of these 19th century contacts. Nevertheless, it does become possible to think through subaltern quests for belonging beyond the boundaries of nation and imperial states on terms that invite comparison with contemporaneous Afro-Atlantic articulations of diaspora.

We might begin such comparative diasporic analysis by asking why enslaved secondary wives and concubines like the Indian-born Fatima and Turkish-Arabian-born Halima chose their Arab enslavers over British “emancipators,” why the Ethiopian Yacoub hoped to impress his Omani master by traveling to India to learn a trade, or why rescued Southeastern African children like Mariannah preferred Indian Muslim custodians over European guardians upon their arrival in Bombay. As scholars of Afro-Asia have noted, group affiliation conferred empowerment but for our protagonists, who or what constituted the “group” with which they identified? What shared historical experiences cemented their ties to these communities?