

# A Smithsonian Museum Sharpens Focus on the History of Slavery

Despite ambivalence from some on the topic, the institution's latest leader "knew that slavery had to be at the heart of the museum."

By **Ginanne Brownell**

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On a Sunday stroll up 16th Street in Washington, D.C., years ago, Lonnie Bunch got a hug and a gentle talking-to from an African American woman.

Mr. Bunch — who at the time was the director of the National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, which was still under construction, and now heads the entire Smithsonian Institution — had been very visible in the media discussing the newest of the Smithsonian museums.

"She came up to me and said, 'I know who you are,' and she hugged me," Mr. Bunch said with a chuckle. "And she basically said, 'I am so proud of what you are doing, but please don't talk about slavery. You have an opportunity not to have a generation tarred by slavery.' I thought that was very powerful."

What struck Mr. Bunch about this was that it echoed other conversations he had been having on the topic: Some people did not want the museum to talk about slavery, but others did.

"Every nation is ambivalent about slavery," said Mr. Bunch, the first African American to lead the Smithsonian. "The people of color are ambivalent: Is this something to be embarrassed by? Is this something that is better left unsaid? So basically, I knew that slavery had to be at the heart of the museum."



When the museum opened in 2017, so did the Center for the Study of Global Slavery within it. The center's work focuses on three international collaborative initiatives: the Slave Wrecks Project, the Global Curatorial Project and the Slave Voyages Consortium.

The Slave Wrecks Project helps coordinate searches for sunken slave ships and works on maritime archaeological research and historical recovery. This month in Senegal, the inaugural Slave Wrecks Project Academy's cohort of African and diaspora students are being trained in diving and learning about the global slave trade. The center also works with [slavevoyages.org](http://slavevoyages.org) to help expand data collection beyond the trans-Atlantic slave trade and is working to broaden research into both the Indian Ocean and inter-American slave trades.

Under the auspices of the Global Curatorial Project, a number of partner institutions — including Liverpool's International Slavery Museum, Iziko Slave Lodge in Cape Town and Belgium's Royal Museum of Central Africa — are in the midst of putting together *In Slavery's Wake*, a traveling exhibition that will open first at the museum in Washington in late 2024 and then move to Africa, Europe and the Americas.

The center will be hosting an event in Lisbon, Portugal in January with a tentative title, "Reckoning with Race: The social memory of the slave trade in our world," that will aim to bring more public attention to the role that Portugal played in the slave trade. Mr. Bunch will be one of the event's speakers.

"We wanted to crack open the sense that this is just a story that is limited to, as most Americans understand it, this period around the American South just prior to the Civil War," said Paul Gardullo, the center's director. "We don't have a great sense in America of the international complexities of this massive story that shaped our world.

"Even outside of the Atlantic world, the work of slavery and colonialism was shaping markets in Asia, it was building the capitals of Europe. These are things that need to be explored more fully."

The ethos at the heart of the center has always been about global collaborations and trying to tell a broader story of slavery. "As good as the Smithsonian is, it doesn't have broad enough shoulders to do everything," Mr. Bunch said, "and really it is such a complicated, nuanced story from so many lenses that it would only work if you had those lenses."

The Slave Wrecks Project lens grew out of an existing collaboration between Iziko Museums of South Africa, the U.S. National Park Service and George Washington University. At the time the Smithsonian, on the insistence of Mr. Bunch to find remnants of a slave ship, reached out to the group to see if any of the shipwrecks they were diving for were involved in the slave trade. (It is estimated that more than 12 million Africans were shipped across the Atlantic between the 16th and 19th centuries, and of those estimated 36,000 voyages, 1,000 ships likely sank).

Coincidentally, they were exploring the *São José*, a Portuguese slave ship on its way from Mozambique to Brazil that wrecked off Cape Town in 1794.

The Smithsonian was intrigued with their research. The Slave Wrecks Project now also includes *Diving With a Purpose*, which aims to find and document shipwrecks related to the slave trade, with a particular focus on training divers from the African diaspora.

Being connected with the center "opens up avenues of research that if I were to do stuff on my own could have been a lot more difficult," said Jaco Boshoff, a maritime archaeologist at Iziko Museums of South Africa and a co-founder of the Slave Wrecks Project.



Students from the Ship Wrecks Project Academy are spending most of October on Gorée Island, where they're diving underwater and taking part in seminars that look at how slave history has been documented and distributed. Madické Gueye

The Ship Wrecks Project Academy's goal is to create an international network of new maritime scholars — the first cohort includes students from Haiti, Senegal, Benin and the Ivory Coast — who can critically challenge some of the surviving colonial structures and also engage local communities in their research and work.

"It's part of the process of weaving a network of different parts of the world that may have been connected to the Atlantic system, and developing capacity to bring together all those scholars on issues and questions of common interest," said Ibrahima Thiaw, a professor of archaeology at the Institut Fondamental d'Afrique Noire in Dakar who is also involved with exhibition research for *In Slavery's Wake*.

Students are spending most of October on Gorée Island, taking diving field trips and seminars that examine the impact of how slave history has been written and disseminated.

"Across the diaspora of underrepresented scholars, it's very rare that we're all in the same space learning these skills together," said Gabrielle Miller, a program specialist and archaeologist at the center who is helping run the academy in Senegal. "So far, the gaining of these skills has looked at relying on institutions that have kept us out of the room of being able to tell our own stories."

The Global Curatorial Project grew out of conversations that came after a conference at Brown University's Center of the Study of Slavery and Justice.

According to Anthony Boggles, a professor of Africana studies and the director of the center at Brown, the project developed out of innovative curatorial practices around public history relating to "racial slavery and colonialism," Dr. Boggles said, "and the making of the modern world." The exhibition is intended to shift how people view both slavery and colonialism.

Part of that research will come from a series called "Unfinished Conversations." Researchers for the center are collecting oral histories in communities on four continents that not only were slaving centers historically, but that are also still affected by that history.

Liverpool, for example, has the oldest Black community in Europe, and more than 2,000 slaving ships were built in the city's docks between 1701 and 1810. "Those docks built the city, but the city also built Britain, and Britain built the world as we know it," said Ranmalie Jayawardana, the International Slavery Museum's community participation

lead. “So our In Slavery’s Wake program is to link what does this physical space mean here, but what does that mean globally as well?”

In South Africa, they had conversations with descendants of upward of 65,000 slaves who were brought from East Africa, Malaysia and Indonesia, some of whom worked on Groot Constantia, a wine farm that is still operational. Some of their descendants still work on the farm today.

The project is unique in “sewing that thread from the time of slavery all the way to the present,” said Shanaaz Galant, a curator at the Iziko Slave Lodge who will be collecting the oral histories in November and who, as a child, was told by her grandmother that their family was descended from slaves brought over from Java.

“People need to know who they are and where they come from,” she said. “They need to know what their forefathers and foremothers endured.”

Mr. Bunch agreed. “My notion is a great nation confronts its tortured past,” he said and, “that we are made better by knowledge.”

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