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# *In Slavery's Wake: Making a Globally Collaborative Exhibition*

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**Abstract:** *In Slavery's Wake: Making Black Freedom in the World* is a first-of-its-kind exhibition developed by a group of international curators, historians, and cultural practitioners, and is the product of a multi-year collective called the Global Curatorial Project (GCP). The GCP formed in 2014 to address key questions on how we think about, interpret, and discuss the histories of global racial slavery and colonialism with broad publics in institutions around the world. The subsequent exhibition developed by the GCP, *In Slavery's Wake*, opened at the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, D.C. in December 2024. The creation of the exhibition centered the voices of descendants of enslaved and colonized people, through which an archive titled *Unfinished Conversations* was developed with more than 150 oral history interviews from around the world. The members of the GCP sought to create a model of the vital role that museums and public-facing institutions can play in fostering and advancing conversations around the legacies of slavery and colonialism on both local and global terrain that reach past conventional boundaries of race, nation, and language. This article explores the transformative process of exhibition creation and collaboration that worked to decolonize the exhibition-making process, push institutional boundaries, and forge pathways for future work that decenters the nation-state toward a global understanding of how we continue to live in the wake of racial slavery and colonialism.

**Keywords:** slavery; colonialism; museology; museum studies; anticolonialism; exhibitions

## 1 Introduction

In 2014, at the invitation of Dr. Anthony Bogues, professor at Brown University and director of the Ruth J. Simmons Center for the Study of Slavery and Justice, a group of staff from museums across the world gathered at Brown University to address the topic of telling the story of racial slavery and colonialism as a world system and core element of modernity.<sup>1</sup> Representing institutions from Belgium, the Netherlands, South Africa, and the United States, the group posed several key questions, among them: how do we contribute to the work of transforming institutions, particularly museums, that were built as part of the colonial project? How can we use the telling of histories of racial slavery and colonialism to work sensitively across diverse linguistic, economic, racial, and cultural contexts while practicing a politics of equity between organizations and individuals? (Figure 1).



**Figure 1:** *In Slavery's Wake: Making Black Freedom in the World* at NMAAHC. Credit: National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC).

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**1** In addition to Anthony Bogues and Paul Gardullo, founding members of the Global Curatorial Project included Geri Augusto, Richard Benjamin, Nancy Bercaw, Anna-Karina Caudevilla, Bambi Ceuppens, Shanaaz Galant, Krystel Gualdé, Bertrand Guillet, Catherine Hall, Wayne Modest, Ibrahima Thiaw, Paul Tichmann, and Tsione Wolde-Michael.

This convening would begin a decade of collaboration called the Global Curatorial Project (GCP). Historians, curators, and cultural practitioners representing institutions in Belgium, Brazil, Senegal, South Africa, the United Kingdom, and the United States joined together to collectively and collaboratively face these questions. Together, the GCP's members confronted the urgent need for useful conversation about how the past – particularly that of racial slavery and colonialism – relates to our present. We sought to create a model of the vital role that museums and public-facing institutions can play in fostering and advancing those conversations on both local and global terrain that reach past conventional boundaries of race, nation, and language.

This article is the story of this collaboration and our reflections on ten years of learning, innovating, and relationship building. As members of the collaboration, the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC) was uniquely positioned to lead the development of the traveling exhibition. Through this collaboration, we utilized the transformative nature of this partnership to develop an exhibition that pushed our institutional boundaries, temporal dimensions, and geographies. This article joins a collection of outcomes created by this collaboration: a transnational exhibition called *In Slavery's Wake: Making Black Freedom in the World*, an edited collection of essays related to the exhibition by the same name, both led in development by the NMAAHC; and an oral history archive called *Unfinished Conversations*, led by Brown University – all of which are imbued with possibilities for international and institutional transformation. Our hopes are that this project – and the many ways it will continue to materialize – will inspire further reckonings about repair and reconciliation, alongside actions that build on the freedom-based dreams of enslaved and colonized people that have shaped our present and guide our future.

## 2 A Global Curatorial Project

*In Slavery's Wake* is the product of a decade-long collaboration called the Global Curatorial Project (GCP), which was founded by the Ruth J. Simmons Center for the Study of Slavery and Justice (Simmons Center) at Brown University<sup>2</sup> and the Center for the Study of Global Slavery (CSGS) at the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture.<sup>3</sup> GCP co-director Dr. Anthony Bogues convened the initial

meetings of the GCP in 2014 with curators, historians, and cultural theorists from around the world. Dr. Bogues, along with the other early members of the GCP – including GCP Co-Director Dr. Paul Gardullo from the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture – recognized the need for a reframing of the conversations and engagements with publics around the histories of racial slavery and colonialism. The collaborators ultimately decided that they would convene public discussions about these histories and their contemporary resonances in the present. These public convenings would inform a first-of-its-kind exhibition that explored the histories and legacies of racial slavery beyond the boundaries of the nation-state.

GCP members at the initial meetings included curators and historians from Belgium, the Netherlands, Senegal, France, South Africa, the United Kingdom, and the United States. The outcome of the first GCP meeting in February 2014 was the decision to collaboratively curate an exhibition that approached the exhibition-making process through the lens of racial slavery as a worldwide system and a core element of modernity. Transnationality was of key importance for the development of this exhibition, as this global collaboration sought to undermine the inherent coloniality of museum exhibitions and the ways in which exhibitions on the histories of racial slavery tend to be through the lens of the nation-state. Key themes were identified, including showcasing the knowledges of the enslaved through the perspective of the enslaved; examining cultural expressions that persisted through the African diaspora; the exchange of beliefs, traditions, and other cultural expressions through the history of the transoceanic trade in enslaved Africans, while taking care to show that this exchange was not always on equal footing; and the ways in which colonialism impacted Africa, while also ensuring visitors understand the ways in which Europeans *and* Africans were co-creators of the modern world.

A number of core questions were raised during the early meetings of the GCP that challenged our existing modalities of exhibition creation and curation, as well as the broader museological frameworks that undergird global cultural institutions. These included questions such as: how do we engage with a global audience, with particular care towards impacted communities around the world? How do we upend the ideas of intellectual authority and give primacy to the voices of descendants and communities? How do we break down the definitions and classifications of terms like 'descendant,' which are still defined through the lens of colonialism, and complicate the definition of descendant communities through a global framework? How can we show both the destruction of slavery and colonialism, while also ensuring visitors understand the ways in which

<sup>2</sup> Ruth J. Simmons Center for the Study of Slavery and Justice (Simmons Center) at Brown University, <https://simmonscenter.brown.edu/>.

<sup>3</sup> Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC), <https://nmaahc.si.edu/>.

enslaved and colonized people created a universe of freedom-making practices and embodied resistance?

In the years between 2014 and 2017, the GCP members met yearly or bi-yearly to begin to discuss both the ways in which these questions would be addressed, as well as the logistical challenges of creating an international, traveling exhibition. In late 2016, members gathered at Brown University for a three-day conference called “Slavery and Global Public History: New Challenges,” co-convended by Drs. Bogues, Gardullo, David Blight, and others at the Simmons Center, NMAAHC’s Center for the Study of Global Slavery (CSGS), and Yale University’s Gilder Lehrman Center, respectively. In early 2017, the group met again in Amsterdam at the Wereldmuseum Amsterdam (formerly known as Tropenmuseum) at the invitation of Dr. Wayne Modest on the topic of Slavery, Colonialism, and their Legacies. The GCP members ultimately decided that a main traveling component of the exhibition would be supplemented by local curatorial teams leading the development of a connected exhibition that answered the question, “How did slavery and colonialism shape this place?” This framework allowed a central exhibition to explore core themes across wide geographic and temporal dimensions, while giving the host institutions the opportunity to more directly engage with the needs of their constituencies by addressing histories and contemporary legacies unique to each place.

In late 2017 and 2018, the network coalesced across two main meetings. The GCP convened a crucial meeting in Liverpool, England, where the group’s key questions and definitions continued to be refined. (Figure 2). A second meeting held in Washington, D.C. at the NMAAHC in 2018 coalesced the network around the two convening partners of Brown’s Simmons Center and NMAAHC’s CSGS with the leadership of the overall project to be directed by Drs. Bogues and Gardullo. The GCP decided that the exhibition would explore themes related to racial slavery, capitalism, and migration; belonging and citizenship; race-making, gender-making, and anti-Black racism; slavery and the institutionalization of inequality; and knowledges of enslaved people and their legacies. The team concluded this would be enacted through an exhibition that utilized three-dimensional storytelling that linked the past with the present through objects, artifacts, art, and narrative panels. All areas of the exhibition would privilege the perspectives of enslaved and colonized people. The goal of these thematics would be for visitors to understand the ways in which slavery and its legacies continue to shape our world.

In addition to the continued refinement of the exhibition and its goals, the group decided on the central importance of creating a new archive of oral histories that would shape the exhibition’s development, content, and impacts. By engaging people who are living in and navigating the



**Figure 2:** Visual notes from the GCP convening in Liverpool, 2017. Credit: Global Curatorial Project.

aftermaths of slavery and colonialism throughout their daily lives, the exhibition could more fully grapple with these legacies. Titled *Unfinished Conversations* (UC), this new archive would center the perspectives of enslaved and colonized people, their descendants, and other communities directly impacted by this history. Inspired by the work of late cultural theorist Stuart Hall, who stated that cultural identity and history are not fixed, but rather the subject of an “ever-unfinished conversation,”<sup>4</sup> this program would initiate a series of workshops, programs, and recordings around the world. It was decided that these oral history interviews would be conducted in each location that the exhibition would ultimately travel to, in addition to other locations around the world. Conventional museum practice centers the creation of object-based exhibitions. And while artifacts importantly materialize histories of Black communities, we recognized the need to highlight varied sources – material and intangible – in the telling of this history. By interviewing descendants of enslaved and colonized peoples from around the world, the GCP worked to privilege stories and communities whose material culture has not been well-preserved, due to the inherent bias toward the preservation of material culture of colonizing peoples in the archive. UC challenges conventions about whose stories should be preserved and how they should be told; the archive creates possibilities for narrative-based curation and allows the stories of contemporary people, told in their own voices, to inform fuller, more complex histories of slavery and colonialism – and how they continue to impact peoples’ lives today.

<sup>4</sup> *The Unfinished Conversation*, directed by John Akomfrah, (2013, London, United Kingdom, Smoking Dogs Films), <https://vimeo.com/65409141>. See also Stuart Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” in *Selected Writings on Race and Difference*, eds. Paul Gilroy and Ruth Wilson Gilmore, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021), 257–71.

In 2018, the GCP convened at the NMAAHC and “In Slavery’s Wake” was suggested as a potential title and organizing metaphor for the exhibition’s development. In her provocative and important book *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, theorist Christina Sharpe describes the wake as the multitude of ways that Black lives across the world are impacted by the afterlives of slavery.<sup>5</sup> Using the metaphor of waves emanating from behind the thousands of slave ships to traffic people across the Atlantic, she shows how these waves have rippled through time and space, accumulating to create the tumultuous and destructive character of contemporary cultural, environmental, and economic systems. Yet, for Sharpe, the wake is both a site of disaster and possibility.<sup>6</sup> For as long as there has been Black subjugation, there has been Black resistance and freedom-making. The collective drew on the metaphor of the wake to connect people’s stories and systemic patterns, local places and global processes, and the past and the present. Importantly, we decided that the exhibition would simultaneously confront the devastating and planet-altering legacies of racial slavery and colonialism, *and* uplift people’s equally impactful and generative acts of resistance and resilience. Ultimately, it was decided that the exhibition would begin at the NMAAHC; we would lead the development of the traveling exhibition and manage the logistics due to the large undertaking related to funding, object loans, exhibition fabrication, customs, and other practical needs of this project. In addition, the group strongly believed in the importance of a multi-lingual exhibition and decided that the exhibition would be in local languages of the audiences of the host institutions.

In 2019, exhibition development began in earnest. Several GCP teams from the Simmons Center and the NMAAHC traveled with other international collaborators to Senegal for a research trip and a pilot filming of *Unfinished Conversations* interviews in Saint-Louis and Orkadiéré, Senegal with local partners from the Université Cheikh Anta Diop. The collaborators discussed themes related to slavery and colonialism present in French West Africa, including historical issues related to the transoceanic trade in enslaved Africans, the intra-African trade in enslaved Africans, and colonialism and its lasting legacies in the present, including environmental racism, financial exploitation and injustice, and other forms of neocolonialism. The resulting research and filming led to a larger expansion of the *Unfinished Conversations* series, and local curatorial teams in each additional filming location led the steady expansion of the archive in subsequent years. This work resulted in the

selection of key stories and objects to be featured in *In Slavery’s Wake*.

Throughout this time period, there were shifts in the global collaborators as the group began to solidify amongst a set of collaborating institutions and contributing curators, including: the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture and the Ruth J. Simmons Center for the Study of Slavery and Justice in the United States; Museu Histórico Nacional anchoring a broad network in Brazil;<sup>7</sup> Iziko Museums of South Africa in South Africa;<sup>8</sup> Institut Fondamental d’Afrique Noire in Senegal;<sup>9</sup> AfricaMuseum in Belgium;<sup>10</sup> and International Slavery Museum in the United Kingdom.<sup>11</sup> Over the course of the exhibition’s development, more than three hundred individuals have contributed to this exhibition, including curators, historians, researchers, interns, descendants, *Unfinished Conversations* participants, artists, designers, and exhibition development teams – spanning four continents and dozens of cities. This collaboration truly became a global project that was a massive undertaking, one that contributors hoped would have a lasting impact.

### 3 Navigating and Designing the Wake

The Global Curatorial Project’s contributors have included dozens of curators, historians, cultural practitioners, and others from around the world. However, by 2020, a core set of curators representing the host institutions of *In Slavery’s Wake* were identified and began to meet regularly. These curators, curatorial teams, and historians comprised a group that we have defined as the exhibition’s ‘Contributing Curators.’ This group was selected due to their subject area expertise in the global histories and legacies of slavery and colonialism, their connections to *In Slavery’s Wake*’s host institutions, and their collective desires to create new practices for exhibition creation around the histories of slavery and colonialism with decolonizing museology as a core goal. Exhibition directors and lead curators Drs. Anthony Bogues and Paul Gardullo – who represented the Brown University Ruth J. Simmons Center for the Study of Slavery and Justice and the National Museum of African American History and

<sup>5</sup> Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 2.

<sup>6</sup> Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 134.

<sup>7</sup> Museu Histórico Nacional, <https://mhn.museus.gov.br/>.

<sup>8</sup> Iziko Museums of South Africa, <https://www.iziko.org.za/>.

<sup>9</sup> Institut Fondamental d’Afrique Noire, <https://ifan.ucad.sn/en/>.

<sup>10</sup> AfricaMuseum, <https://www.africamuseum.be/en>.

<sup>11</sup> International Slavery Museum, <https://www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/international-slavery-museum>.



Culture's Center for the Study of Global Slavery, respectively – recognized the need for this central body of curators to represent their global constituencies within the traveling exhibition.

*In Slavery's Wake's* development was led by a core team from the National Museum of African American History and Culture. Exhibition development was led by Johanna Obenda, who was the primary exhibition developer and writer, and all global research was coordinated and led by Dr. Kate McMahon. Ivie Orobato served as primary exhibition researcher. The traveling exhibition development is managed by NMAAHC project manager Dorey Butter. Primary contributing curators representing the geographies of the traveling exhibition and *Unfinished Conversations* included: Dr. Bambi Ceuppens from Belgium; Dr. Keila Grinberg and Aline Montenegro Magalhães from Brazil; Fatoumata Camara and Dr. Ibrahima Thiaw from Senegal; Shanaaz Galant and Paul Tichmann from South Africa; and Miles Greenwood from the United Kingdom. As many of the partnering institutions also exist within colonial frameworks and legacies, this work of decolonizing the exhibition process has a broader institutional and intellectual framework and impact beyond the NMAAHC in each host and partner institution. The complexity of this process – because of the histories of racial slavery and colonialism across the world, which vary from place to place; institutional resources available to each host; and the ways in which each constituent audience understands their entanglements with the present legacies of these histories – all exemplify the complicated ways in which anticoloniality is enacted in museum work. However, these meaningful collaborations not only serve to create transatlantic conversations but to exemplify the nuances that are expressed through the lived experiences of people living in the wake of slavery.

Between 2019 and 2024, the contours of the traveling exhibition and its stories took shape through a deeply collaborative process. Exhibition Developer Johanna Obenda and the NMAAHC team worked in close partnership with the Contributing Curators to define the exhibition's scope, select objects and images, and craft interpretive stories and interactive experiences. This effort was marked by collaboration as well as critical debate: how to illuminate centuries-long processes of Western European colonial domination while uplifting the agency and resilience of Africans and people of African descent; how to name and challenge systems of oppression without replicating them; and how to tell a geographically expansive story that remains rooted in local histories and specific lived experiences.

Our process began with an expansive set of ideas, topics, and possibilities, which were gradually formed into a focused interpretive framework. We moved from broad conceptual

mapping – using schematic bubble diagrams, research dossiers, historiographies, and cross-collection object lists – toward increasingly detailed content outlines. At each phase, we invited and integrated feedback, revised, and refined direction. The exhibition script emerged following this process and was reviewed by GCP partners and external scholarly advisors. This iterative and responsive approach ensured that the content reflected multiple perspectives.

In one instance, the curatorial team from NMAAHC proposed featuring the story of Mansa Musa, ruler of the Mali Empire in the early 1300s. They believed his story showed audiences the power, wealth, sophistication, and international prestige of African kingdoms, offering a corrective to dominant narratives that reduce and simplify African histories and providing an example of a person who defied the racist imagination that would eventually animate and justify slavery, colonization, and anti-Black racism. The team was excited that Mansa Musa exemplified so many important ideas for the exhibition at a critical inflection point in Africa-Europe relations. However, when the curatorial partners from Senegal were presented with the idea, they were critical. “They told us that this was not the full story [of Mansa Musa],” reflects Orobato. Camara and Dr. Thiaw explained that the emperor:

... devastated local economies and left a trail of repression and ruin as he accumulated massive amounts of wealth. So bringing that nuance to a character that is often venerated across history and time, that is upheld as a beacon of hope, that among African Americans is an emblem of inspiration ... so many stories in the exhibition are more nuanced and complicated because of the many perspectives behind the project.<sup>12</sup>

This conversation, and many others like it, characterized the dynamic exchange of place-based knowledges and perspectives that enlivened the curatorial process.

The Contributing Curators met regularly via Zoom during the most active period for exhibition development. In addition to the challenges posed by the nature of collaborative curation, the team had to navigate the changing nature of the global pandemic, which was particularly challenging for the *Unfinished Conversations* oral history filming. However, utilizing tools such as Zoom, online whiteboards, shared documents, and interpretation services, the team was able to successfully collaborate while navigating this new reality.

NMAAHC's exhibition designers were part of these meetings beginning in 2020. Led by exhibition designers Michael Biddle, Dawn Neuendorffer, and Jeannine Fraser,

<sup>12</sup> Ivie Orobato, Reflections on Curating *In Slavery's Wake*, interview by Aaryan Morrison, April 9, 2025. Edited for clarity.

the exhibition designers embedded themselves into the early meetings with the Contributing Curators to understand how to depict this global history in a meaningful way, while also meeting the logistical needs of the host institutions. The design of the exhibition reflects the centrality of water and wake lines, which are evident throughout the exhibition. The design process was iterative, with feedback from the Contributing Curators and main content team guiding design choices. In addition, the overall design was created to be flexible, with all cases, panels, and artistic elements designed to fit the highly variable spaces in each host location. It was also designed to travel as efficiently as possible and to be packed and unpacked several times over the span of its four-year tour. The team decided that, after the exhibition's opening at the NMAAHC in Washington D.C., it would travel to Museu Histórico Nacional in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil; Iziko Museums South Africa in Cape Town, South Africa; Musée des Civilisations Noires in Dakar, Senegal; and close at the Walker Art Gallery in Liverpool, England.

Other exhibition design needs were addressed and planned for early in the development process. The multilingual nature of the exhibition was a new challenge for NMAAHC designers. In addition to planning for two languages on each panel, the fabrication of the panels themselves was designed to be easily swapped, as the two languages of the exhibition vary depending upon the site. For example, in the United States, the exhibition was in English and Spanish, while in Brazil, it will be printed in English and Portuguese, and in South Africa, isiXhosa and English. These choices reflect critical aspects of anticolonial practice to center the language of the host institutions' constituencies to have the broadest impact locally as the exhibition travels.

Due to the complexity of language, the exhibition was first translated by a translation service. After their initial work to translate the bulk of the exhibition, the NMAAHC contracted with a native-language speaker and subject matter expert who did a close read of the translation to account for nuances in translation and impact, cultural sensitivities, and overall accuracy of the translation. Translation is often not one-to-one; certain terms, such as 'the wake,' do not have a singular word with the same meaning across languages. To address this, the team worked with the Contributing Curatorial teams to create a style guide across languages to meet these various challenges of translation. This work of careful translation – which incorporates a deeper understanding of the sensitivities around language and history – is central to the polyvocality of the exhibition and a key modality of our anticolonial museology. All the while, the team continued to reckon with the limitations of the written word and the confines of colonial languages; we

began to think about developing a broad visual vocabulary with an artist that could 'speak' to these histories.

As such, the Contributing Curators embraced art and visual communication as part of our curatorial ethos of repair, breaking artificial boundaries established through the process of creating our modern world, centering the voices of African and diasporic people, and bridging the divide between past and present. Rather than working with a commission, each artist collaborated with the curatorial team to organically conceptualize and create each piece. Artist Daniel Minter's multimedia installation,<sup>13</sup> the *Universe of Freedom Making*, was a central component of the exhibition and serves as a place of both respite and a way to imagine freer futures for visitors. His artistic vision also was imprinted throughout the exhibition, with his illustrations serving as design elements. The *Universe of Freedom Making* is a key element of this exhibition and serves as a central metaphor through which the exhibition may be interpreted as both the history of disaster and dehumanization, and also of freedom-making and rebirth. His presence in the curatorial team – embedded within the exhibition's development early in 2021 – was an iterative exchange that allowed for his vision of freedom to be interpreted and reimaged throughout the exhibition, both in content and design.

Collaborating with Minter paved the way for collaboration with other artists. Due to the absences in the archive of images of enslaved and colonized people, and the lack of material culture directly associated with the histories of racial slavery and colonialism, artists helped us intervene. Silences created and sustained by colonial violences became opportunities for inspiration, reparation, and reclamation. Nyugen E. Smith,<sup>14</sup> an interdisciplinary artist from New Jersey, United States, was tasked with recreating eight "Flags of Freedom" (Figure 3). Each flag is inspired by historic flags once used in anti-slavery rebellions and movements, but that have ultimately been lost to history.

Utilizing historic accounts and descriptions provided by the content team, Smith reimaged these flags through his own artistic lens and practice, making his own contribution to the project's larger work of reimagining the archive related to enslaved and colonized people. Pola Maneli,<sup>15</sup> an artist and illustrator from South Africa, also worked carefully to create a set of illustrations that address gaps in the visual archive of enslavement. Using historical research, Maneli brought his unique interpretation and approach to visualizing the actions of enslaved people and their fight for

<sup>13</sup> Daniel Minter. <https://danielminter.net/>.

<sup>14</sup> Nguyen E. Smith. <https://www.nyugensmith.com/home>.

<sup>15</sup> Pola Maneli, <https://www.polamaneli.com/>.



**Figure 3:** Nyugen E. Smith’s reimagined Flags of Freedom in Section Three: *Navigating the wake of In Slavery’s Wake*. Smith reimagined eight flags, of which three were displayed at NMAAHC alongside a historic flag of the early Haitian Republic from NMAAHC’s collection. The remaining flags can be viewed through an interactive touch screen, which includes histories as well as process images and videos of their creation. Credit: NMAAHC.

freedom. His new archive spans actions, communities, and stories from the mid-1500s to the early 1900s, and includes illustrations of Maroon communities, revolutions inspired by the Haitian Revolution, and rebellions aboard slave ships at sea. The artists helped us to transcend disciplinary boundaries, combining history and art to visualize acts of freedom that have shaped our world.

The design of *In Slavery’s Wake* centers the histories of both racial slavery and colonialism and the histories of Black freedom-making. Visitors are brought through the exhibition via its layout, and the design of the exhibition itself centers the role of art as a practice of decoloniality and reclamation. The collaborative and global process of creating the exhibition led to the primacy of art and design in this process and was one way that the curatorial teams sought to reclaim, repopulate, and repeople the material culture archive of racial slavery and colonialism. As with creating a new archive of oral histories via *Unfinished Conversations*, so too can the artistic contributions of the global artists in the exhibition critically engage with the process of a new praxis of museum curation and exhibition-making.

## 4 *In Slavery’s Wake: Making Black Freedom in the World*

Telling complex, full stories of Black lives necessitates a framework that transcends disciplinary boundaries, welcomes risk and debate, and, importantly, demands care and creativity. Rather than following a strict chronology, the



**Figure 4:** The passageway in Section Two: *Roots of Inequality* at NMAAHC features pairs of images that show the relationship between past and present. Credit: NMAAHC.

exhibition unfolds across six thematic sections, weaving together personal vignettes, historic and contemporary works from artists across Africa and the diaspora, object displays spanning Black Abolitionist to Black Lives Matter, and multimedia films and interactives. This kind of curatorial practice was not always easy – disagreements and negotiation were part of the process – but it resulted in a shared authorship that no single institution could achieve alone.

Section One: *The Wake* introduces visitors to the central themes of the exhibition through evocative displays. A film by Washington, D.C.-based filmmaker Tiffany McNeil opens the exhibition.<sup>16</sup> Layering archival footage, contemporary video from several communities that participated in *Unfinished Conversations*, and imagery of water, her film visually explores the accumulation of histories alongside Black folks’ myriad connections to water. Visitors are subsequently guided through a passageway in which images of past and present exploitation, resistance, and self-expression are projected. The pairs of images (Figure 4) further highlight the inextricable connections between the past and present to reinforce the deeply historic roots of racism, resource extraction, poverty, and resistance.

The passageway leads to Section Two: *Roots of Inequality*, the most didactic and historically oriented section of the exhibition. It explains the global context of the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth centuries, particularly the dynamic and unequal trading relationships between kingdoms in Africa and Europe. Dr. Thiaw was adamant about accurately representing the role – and prominence – of African societies in this history:

<sup>16</sup> Tiffany McNeil, <https://breakfastlunchanddinnerattiffany.com/>.



When we put Africa at the center of this discussion and listen carefully to the archives of the African past, we can say – very easily actually – that African societies had always [been] connected to the rest of the world. There was some ordered system prior to what we know as the Transatlantic Slave Trade that was brought in by the Europeans.<sup>17</sup>

Section Two describes the economic, political, and social transformations that facilitated the rise of the Transatlantic Slave Trade: particularly Europe’s desire for Africa’s gold, natural resources, and eventually people, and the ways in which the Catholic Church, scientists, colonial governments – and yes, museums – colluded to invent race and justify chattel slavery.

While these descriptions of the structural and intimate violences slavery caused millions of people are essential context, *Roots of Inequality* is relatively small. The subsequent sections – dedicated to acts of resistance and freedom-making – are intentionally larger in floor space and conceptual breadth.

Section Three: *Navigating the Wake* consists of nine stories of everyday people who found ways to subvert and resist slavery. These stories, spanning times and geographies, show that making freedom was a daily experience that manifested in myriad ways. The stories also show both the vast diversity within experiences of enslavement and freedom-making, and how people across space and time developed connections with each other.

For example, Tahro was a man taken from the Kongo Kingdom and enslaved in South Carolina in 1858. He, along with other Bakongo people trafficked on board the slave ship *Wanderer*, was to work the vast pottery manufacturers in Edgefield, South Carolina. While Tahro and other enslaved Edgefield potters crafted stoneware purchased by white customers, they also created vessels for personal use, some of which were cups with distinct and vivid facial features. These face vessels have been linked to Kongo ritual objects, specifically *minkisi* – figures of spiritual power that are often carved from wood using metal and other materials to imbue ritual properties – and are one way enslaved Africans remade their culture; as such, Tahro’s artistic practice connected him both to his faith and the spiritual realm, and to his community and traditions in Kongo Kingdom.<sup>18</sup> Obenda, Dr. Bambi Ceuppens, and Maneli highlight the global



**Figure 5:** Congo Square Park in New Orleans, Louisiana, was a gathering place for enslaved and free African and Indigenous people in the United States. Its name comes from the large number of enslaved people of Kongo descent who gathered to play music and dance. Congo Square, considered a birthplace of American Jazz, remains an important communal space. Illustration by Pola Maneli.

significance of Tahro’s story by illustrating the myriad other ways Kongo culture shapes religion, language, music, and art across the Americas, from capoeira across Brazil to Congo Square in New Orleans, Louisiana (Figure 5).

Tahro is a striking example of the inherently global nature and connectedness of Black identities and the liberatory possibilities of art – indeed, his story in the exhibition is the product of collaboration from scholars and artists in the United States, Belgium, and South Africa. Even in our present, Tahro continues to exemplify connections.

Another important set of connections are illuminated by the story of Jan Smiesing, a man born in and enslaved on the Cape Colony in 1679 at the southernmost tip of the African continent. Jan was raised and attended school at the Dutch East India Company’s Slave Lodge, becoming a teacher there at seventeen-years-old and eventually the headmaster. While Jan was emancipated in 1731, he chose to remain and worked as a healer and teacher until his death. Shanaaz Galant points to him as an example of medical learning and early literacy among enslaved people in the Cape Colony, and a testament to the ways enslaved

<sup>17</sup> Global Curatorial Project: Unfinished Conversations oral histories and records, Ms.2022.010, Brown University Library. Edited for clarity.

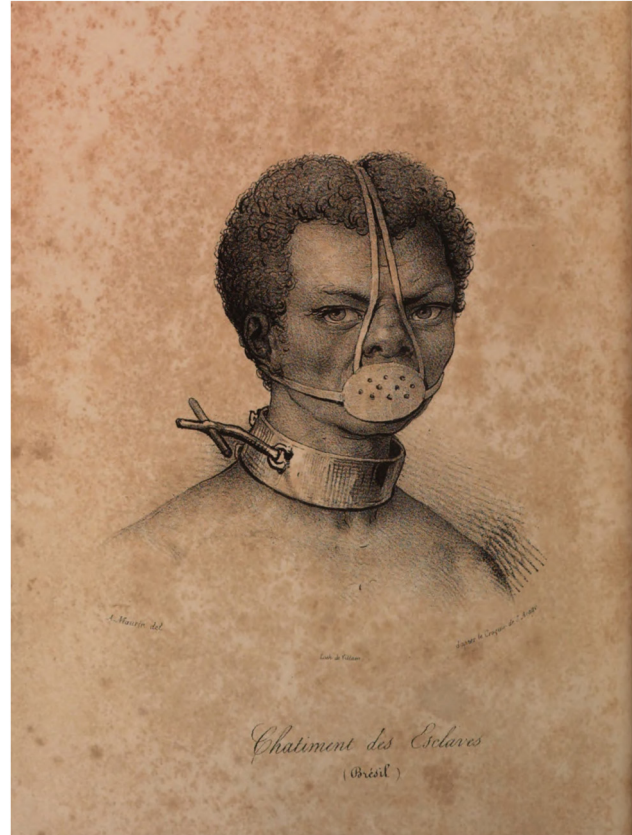
<sup>18</sup> Johanna Obenda, “Tahro: Shaping Spiritual Vessels,” in *In Slavery’s Wake: Making Black Freedom in the World*, eds. Paul Gardullo, Johanna Obenda, and Anthony Bouges (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Books, 2024), 86–7.



people brought humanity into an inhumane place.<sup>19</sup> Importantly, Jan’s life and identity challenge Americas-centric conceptions of racial slavery, complicating dominant conceptions of Blackness to engage with identities and cultures typically excluded from definitions of Black identity. Jan’s mother was an enslaved Malay woman, and his father was a Dutch employee of the Dutch East India Company; he kept his personal journal in Tamil. The South African curatorial team’s case for including Jan’s story – aside from his revolutionary acts of care – broadened the exhibition’s engagement with Blackness. Indeed, *In Slavery’s Wake* does not provide a definition of Black identity. Rather, in opting for polyvocality, Black identity is represented as a diverse, complex, and ever-shifting subject formation. The importance of international collaboration, conversation, and curation is evident here; the process and the stories it brings forth – like Jan’s – broaden perspectives and shift paradigms for inclusive storytelling about race, slavery, colonization, agency, and resistance.

These themes also feature in the story of Anastácia. In 1817, a French artist created a series of drawings from his time in Brazil, including one of an enslaved person in Rio de Janeiro who was tortured with a Flanders mask – a neck iron and bit that prevented eating, drinking, and breathing (Figure 6). This drawing circulated throughout the century and gained a lasting popularity. The person in the image began to be called Anastácia and was, and continues to be, venerated as a saint. Devotees celebrate her resilience in the face of physical punishment. She is a familiar figure in many Afro-Brazilian religions. Believers place her statue on altars and carry her image on prayer cards (Figure 7).

Aline Montenegro Magalhães writes that “Anastácia returns from the past, transcending space and time and the forces that silenced her, offering us a chance to use our own voices to speak against injustice.”<sup>20</sup> And indeed, Anastácia is just one example of the myriad ways that the past is an active site of engagement and renegotiation in contemporary Rio. In 2019, artist Yhuri Cruz created a new image of Anastácia in which he removed the bit from her face – restoring her dignity, smile, and voice.<sup>21</sup> In 2011, construction work in Rio uncovered Valongo Wharf, the main port of entry for African captives in Brazil from 1811 to 1832. The site has since become a place of pilgrimage for Afro-Brazilians, a tangible link to



**Figure 6:** Illustration of an enslaved woman wearing torture devices, 1790. Credit: Universidad Complutense de Madrid.



**Figure 7:** Altar to Anastácia at the Church of Nossa Senhora do Rosário dos Pretos in Salvador, Bahia, Brazil, 2023. Credit: Paulo Telles.

<sup>19</sup> Shanaaz Galant, “Jan: Notes from a Healer,” in *In Slavery’s Wake*, 114–15.

<sup>20</sup> Yhuri Cruz and Aline Montenegro Magalhães, “Anastácia Freed,” in *In Slavery’s Wake*, 158–59.

<sup>21</sup> Cruz’s reclamation of Anastácia is on his Instagram profile @yhuricruz: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CY9x1WgJwSs/?igsh=bWpjaWZjdGp6eDNn>.

the horrors of the Transatlantic Slave Trade and the resilience of the enslaved. These reclamations are popular, public-driven efforts to make visible histories of enslavement and resistance. In Brazil they are happening via art,

religion, archaeology, and tourism, but across the world the descendants of enslaved and colonized people are actively engaging with their own histories to create public images, spaces, and awareness of slavery and its legacies.

Indeed, the Global Curatorial Project is part of these efforts, and its impacts are most clearly demonstrated by the story of Marème Diarra. Her story came to the curatorial team through archeological excavations and *Unfinished Conversations* interviews with residents of Diel Mbam, a community in northern Senegal. In the late-nineteenth century, Marème fled enslavement in Mauritania, settled outside of Sanit-Louis, Senegal, and created a livelihood and community in exile. Her descendants and the residents of Diel Mbam continue to look to her example and glean lessons of generosity, bravery, and freedom. In 2021, UC participants helped archeologists from the Université Cheikh Anta Diop to identify the site of Marème's home. The buttons from soldiers' uniforms that they excavated at the site show that she cultivated a hostile plot of land into a space of refuge and hospitality for formerly enslaved people that had also fled bondage. After learning her story, Camara reflected on the role of African archaeology and memory for reconstructing and telling the stories of enslaved people in museum and university spaces.<sup>22</sup> She also stewarded the deep engagement and consultation between curators and the descendant community at Diel Mbam that resulted in them agreeing to Marème's story being featured in the exhibition, and the creations of portraits based on their memories of her that now live in the community and travel with the exhibition. Her story embodies the collaborative, generative, and community-oriented ethos of our project; it sheds light on the legacies of enslavement for communities in West Africa, vividly connects the impacts of slavery and colonialism, demonstrates the power of self-emancipation and resilience, and unquestionably shows how museums stand to be enriched and expanded by engaging with communities.

Section Four: *The Universe of Freedom Making* is the heart of *In Slavery's Wake*. It is a large, multimedia art installation by Daniel Minter. Motivated by the question "What is freedom and how it is made?", Minter worked with the international curatorial team to materialize a universe of freedom. Minter's immersive universe explores a diversity of freedom-making metaphors through constellations of actions, beliefs, and practices that provide a space for contemplation and imagination. Framed in the installation are a series of objects which, extending the themes of the previous section, were used by enslaved and colonized



**Figure 8:** Daniel Minter's *Universe of Freedom Making* and his framing of objects in the exhibition at NMAAHC. Credit: NMAAHC.

people to make freedom on a daily basis. One side of the installation shows the objects – which include a Yoruba herbalist's staff from Nigeria, a river paddle made in the Matawai Maroon community in Suriname, and a Candomblé altar piece from Brazil – with artifact labels, while the other side artistically reinterprets them through an elaborate frame fashioned from reclaimed wood, carved with intricate carved representations of freedom-making, and painted with vivid colors (Figure 8). Minter's art animates each object, reminding audiences of the ways freedom materialized through craftsmanship and self-expression.

My work for this exhibition is to give people a grasp on the universe of freedom-making. It is not a total definition of it, but it is to give a doorway, a window, into thinking about their personal universe of freedom-making and how they can strengthen their activities of freedom-making. Because this is the same work that our people have been doing for hundreds of years.<sup>23</sup>

In keeping with his own ethos and vision for the installation, Minter mobilized his unique artistic practice and intergenerational, familial connections to create the universe. His wife, Marcia, is a graphic designer and Minter's creative partner; together they conceptualized the large murals that hold the universe. He created a soundtrack featuring his mother – who passed away more than twenty-five years ago – singing an African American spiritual to reverberate throughout the universe. Minter also worked with his son, Azari Minter, to create a series of projections called *Hands of Freedom*, which depict a variety of traditions and ritual actions like capoeira, braiding hair, and chopping okra. Through these actions, enslaved and colonized people made

<sup>22</sup> Fatoumata Camara, "Marème: Footsteps to Freedom," in *In Slavery's Wake*, 80.

<sup>23</sup> Daniel Minter, *Universe of Freedom Making* (Portland, Maine and Washington D.C., 2024), 0:29–1:11, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FLRZ5rIVy38&t=478s>. Edited for clarity.



their own freedom and created indelible cultural practices which have been passed down through generations. Many visitors have shared that they see their own traditions in the projections, or that they hear their own mother's voice in the song.

Sections Five and Six – *Old Practices in a New Era* and *Building Futures*, respectively – showcase the ways in which histories of both oppression and resistance characterize the present. *Old Practices in a New Era* features a map which shows how the technologies that defined slavery and colonization, like plantation agriculture and exploitive labor, proliferated far beyond Africa and the Americas and the legal end of racial slavery. It also features several pairs of objects that, like the projections in the passageway before Section Two, show the continuity of violence and exploitation to the present day. A pair of restraints illustrates these connections with unambiguous clarity. A set of iron ankle shackles from the late-eighteenth century and a set of contemporary handcuffs were both manufactured – roughly 200 years apart – by Hiatt & Company. The long-time UK-based company is known for making handcuffs, leg irons, and collars for enslaved people in addition to the rigid handcuff design that is now the standard used by British police, as well as police and military forces worldwide. The pair of restraints demonstrates the continued profitability of technologies disproportionately used to restrain and police Black people across space and time – from the plantations in British colonial Jamaica to prisons in the United States and the United Kingdom. Miles Greenwood reflects that the pair of cuffs is also significant for public reckoning with Britain's legacies of slavery and colonialism.

While the United States' experience of racialized enslavement happened within its borders, the United Kingdom's colonial subjects were located out of sight, at its periphery. Products intended for the plantations of the British Empire, such as Hiatt & Company shackles, travelled thousands of miles across the Atlantic to restrain and control enslaved people. This happened largely out of the sight and minds of the British public... It wasn't until the large-scale arrival of people subjugated from across the British Empire [from the 1940s to the 1970s] that the legacies of slavery and coercion would coalesce within the boundaries of the British Isles.<sup>24</sup>

The object pair shows audiences the quotidian nature of racism and violence rooted in slavery. It also demonstrates the objects' proximity to legacies of slavery. Such stories begin to overcome local widespread ignorance and manufactured amnesia about Britain's lasting connections to transoceanic slavery, while also challenging global

<sup>24</sup> Miles Greenwood, "Control and Restraint," in *In Slavery's Wake*, 46–47.

audiences to re-examine the ways slavery and colonization manifest in their own lives.

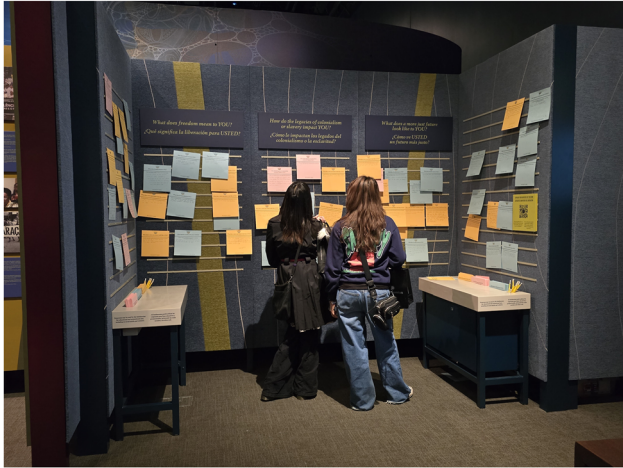
Relatedly, Section Six: *Building Futures* invites audiences to simultaneously connect with legacies of resistance and acts of freedom that surround them. Examples of protests, political organizations, fashion, music, and community-building are drawn from across the globe to showcase the varied ways new generations of Black visionaries build upon the legacies of their ancestors to imagine freer futures. Popular among visitors is *Songs of Freedom*, a playlist of Black freedom anthems compiled by the international curatorial team. Dr. Ceuppens added *Indépendance Cha Cha* by Le Grand Kallé et l'African Jazz from the Congo for its status as "the first Pan-African hit single";<sup>25</sup> Dr. Grinberg and Montenegro added *Fé Cega Faca Amolada* by Margareth Menezes to highlight the African roots of Brazilian samba; and Paul Tichmann added *We Shall Overcome* by Mahalia Jackson as a testament to the transcendent and unifying power of music, from the Civil Rights Movement in the U.S. to the Black Consciousness Movement in South Africa.<sup>26</sup> Visitors engage with the playlist via impromptu concerts, nostalgic and joyful dance-battles between intergenerational music-lovers, and eager scans of the QR code posted nearby so they can add the music to their own catalogues. The myriad visions for freedom embedded in the exhibition's final section intentionally bridge past, present, and future. While slavery and colonization have caused immeasurable damage to Black communities across the globe, individuals, communities, and nations have – and continue to – demand and create a world that is more equitable.

At the NMAAHC, *In Slavery's Wake* has been received with positivity and celebration. Since its opening on December 13, 2024, the exhibition has been visited by over 160,000 people. The exhibition has appeared in stories from *ShareAmerica*, *Smithsonian Magazine*, and WETA PBS, among others.<sup>27</sup> The *New York Times* celebrated the

<sup>25</sup> Alan Brain, *Les autres chevaliers de la table ronde*, 2021, <https://pan-african-music.com/table-ronde-independance-cha-cha>.

<sup>26</sup> Bambi Ceuppens, Venícius Natal, and Paul Tichmann, "Songs of Freedom," in *In Slavery's Wake*, 160–67.

<sup>27</sup> Kaila Philo, "The Vast Geographic Scope of Slavery Is Hard to Fathom. One Groundbreaking Exhibition Shows Its True Scale Around the Globe," *Smithsonian Magazine*, January 27, 2025, [https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smithsonian-institution/the-vast-geographic-scope-of-slavery-is-hard-to-fathom-one-groundbreaking-exhibition-show-its-true-scale-around-the-globe-180985911/?itm\\_source=related-content&itm\\_medium=parsely-api](https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smithsonian-institution/the-vast-geographic-scope-of-slavery-is-hard-to-fathom-one-groundbreaking-exhibition-show-its-true-scale-around-the-globe-180985911/?itm_source=related-content&itm_medium=parsely-api); "In Slavery's Wake' Is a Groundbreaking New Exhibit at the Smithsonian NMAAHC," *WETA Arts* (Washington D.C.: PBS WETA, February 2, 2025), <https://www.pbs.org/video/in-slaverys-wake-cw4efqj/>; *ShareAmerica*, "Global Connections at Heart of Exhibition on Slavery and Freedom," <https://share.america.gov/global-connections-at-heart-of-exhibition-on-slavery-and-freedom/>.



**Figure 9:** Two visitors read the responses left by other visitors in the Visitor Engagement area at the end of *In Slavery's Wake*. Credit: Dorey Butter.

exhibition for its ambitious, broad scope and simultaneously intimate, engaging character.<sup>28</sup> This is evidenced by the Visitor Engagement area at the end of the exhibition, where we worked with Candra Flanagan, an educator at the NMAAHC, to incorporate public engagement and education to extend the exhibition's impacts beyond its walls (Figure 9). Over 4,000 visitors have accepted the invitation to write and post a response to one of three questions: what does freedom mean to you? What does a more just future look like to you? How are you impacted by the legacies of slavery and colonialism? The responses reflect the diversity of visitors' ages, knowledge of slavery's histories, and lived experiences. A reflection of the multi-lingual nature of the exhibition, visitors pen responses in the languages most resonant with their identities and dreams: their responses have widened the exhibition's reverberations into English, Spanish, French, Haitian Creole, Amharic, Korean, Portuguese, Arabic, Swahili, and Serbian. They express desires for safety, justice, and self-determination; they reflect on the importance of telling histories of enslavement and resistance; they connect their own experiences to others across the world. The Visitor Engagement area expands and deepens the exhibition as visitors curate their own stories, co-creating the exhibition and rendering the museum a site of public education and transformation.

At the 2025 American Alliance of Museums Conference, *In Slavery's Wake* was nominated for two separate awards

from the Traveling Exhibits Community, Best Innovative Subject and Best New Traveling Exhibit; in May, Obenda accepted the award on behalf of the collaboration for Best New Traveling Exhibit. The exhibition's impacts will continue to expand as it travels. Each of the future iterations of *In Slavery's Wake* will be unique to the location in which it is displayed. Curatorial partners will adapt the exhibition to the size of the host institution's exhibition space and tell different stories based on the objects able to travel to and be displayed at each location. As a traveling exhibition that strives to be both globally and locally relevant, the core exhibition will also couple with a unique grounding, place-based experience in each location it lands. A separate exhibition or experience that is local in scope and content will focus on "How Slavery Shaped This Place & Why It Still Matters Here." This is a non-traveling component that is unique to each site where the exhibition is mounted, created by each host institution in collaboration with the co-convening institutions. A selection of visitor responses from previous exhibition locations will also be displayed at subsequent tour stops, encouraging further transnational connection and mutual identification among audiences.

## 5 Continuing *Unfinished Conversations*

The exhibition's ability to connect past and present and reflect contemporary events is also evidenced by *Unfinished Conversations*. Sections Five and Six feature individuals from the United States, Brazil, South Africa, Senegal, Belgium, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and the United Kingdom, as they discuss how legacies of both slavery and freedom-making impact their lives today. Several curators have noted the importance of *In Slavery's Wake* and *Unfinished Conversations* to historicize contemporary realities. In Senegal, the initial interviews took place around the same time that the former president called the incumbent a descendant of slaves – an insult that generated significant media attention (Figure 10). Amidst this discourse, Dr. Thiaw reflects that the interviews were important because "rarely are these people given the opportunities to openly, and in their comfort zone asked to, talk about these things. So, the stories that were brought in were basically current events."<sup>29</sup> While this applies to descendants of formerly enslaved people speaking about the social stigmas they face in Senegal, it is significant that this reflection also

<sup>28</sup> Jennifer Schuessler, "The Smithsonian Looks at How the Slave Trade Shaped the World," *New York Times*, December 13, 2024, [https://www.nytimes.com/2024/12/13/arts/slavery-smithsonian-african-american.html?unlocked\\_article\\_code=1.B08.tpej.CX1hoA5Efv\\_U&smid=url-share](https://www.nytimes.com/2024/12/13/arts/slavery-smithsonian-african-american.html?unlocked_article_code=1.B08.tpej.CX1hoA5Efv_U&smid=url-share).

<sup>29</sup> Global Curatorial Project: *Unfinished Conversations* oral histories and records, Ms.2022.010, Brown University Library.





**Figure 10:** Members of the *Unfinished Conversations* team based in Senegal interview Abou Mamadou Ba in Orkadiéré, Senegal, in 2021. Credit: Unité de Recherche en Ingénierie Culturelle et Anthropologie (URICA)/IFAN-UCAD, Global Curatorial Project (Ms.2022.010) sponsored by Abrams Foundation and Brown University.

applies to other *Unfinished Conversations*. The environmental racism facing residents of Africatown in Alabama in the United States and the struggle for just compensation waged by farm workers across vineyards in Cape Town in South Africa are challenges currently navigated by those who have descended from enslaved and colonized people. *Unfinished Conversations* both provides individuals the opportunities to reflect on their own histories and tell their own stories, while reminding audiences that slavery's wake is vast, dynamic, and present.

The international curatorial partners, Dr. Bouges, and his colleagues at Brown University continue to develop the UC archive. Beyond the locations of the exhibition, the archive also includes conversations with folks in the Caribbean, specifically Jamaica, about their experiences with the afterlives of slavery and colonization. The Caribbean's place in this archive speaks to world-making scope of sugar plantations, Maroon communities, and the Haitian Revolution – all of which are connected to myriad stories within *In Slavery's Wake*. The new archive of *Unfinished Conversations* was made public in early May 2025 on the Brown University Library website.<sup>30</sup> These interviews are accessible through a policy of shared stewardship and ownership with the local exhibition teams, communities, and interviewees. A documentary that utilizes interviews with many of the curatorial partners mentioned here and conversations with individuals in the United States, Brazil, South Africa, Senegal,

<sup>30</sup> Brown University Library. *Unfinished Conversations* archive, [https://bruknow.library.brown.edu/discovery/fulldisplay?&context=L&vid=01BU\\_INST:BROWN&search\\_scope=MyInst\\_and\\_CI&tab=Everything&docid=alma991043791821806966](https://bruknow.library.brown.edu/discovery/fulldisplay?&context=L&vid=01BU_INST:BROWN&search_scope=MyInst_and_CI&tab=Everything&docid=alma991043791821806966).

Belgium, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and the United Kingdom is in production. This documentary will accompany *In Slavery's Wake* at its future locations.

## 6 Reflecting on Our Wake Work

British anthropologist and archeologist Dan Hicks writes with important and unflinching honesty that “the museum will not be decolonised, but it can nonetheless be a place for thinking and doing.”<sup>31</sup> For us, this thinking and doing has taken on the form of wake work: the work that Sharpe says we do when we imagine new ways of knowing the past, work beyond the archive, and create new processes for memorializing and celebrating Black life.<sup>32</sup> The GCP has brought the NMAAHC into a community of scholars, curators, and educators, who are committed to creating innovative forms of public history about the historical social system of racial slavery and colonialism and the ways in which they continue to shape our world. Within this community, our museum seeks to create distinctive curatorial practices, understanding that curation is not only a technique but an intellectual practice of judgment and care. For us at the NMAAHC, addressing the GCP's core questions about anticolonial institutional transformation and equitable, transnational partnership have created profound opportunities for critical self-reflection and learning. In many ways, building *In Slavery's Wake* has been a continuation of our museum's founding goal: to explore and share the central role that slavery and the pursuit of freedom played in making the United States and the world by crafting stories and building collections directly with members of the American public. The GCP, with its ethos of shared stewardship, has continued to challenge and hold us accountable to being and becoming an institution that acts in concert with communities historically excluded by traditional forms of power and authority.

Through working on *In Slavery's Wake*, our curatorial partners have helped us acknowledge further opportunities for transformation and encouraged us to reflect on the roles of polyvocality and reparatory history for our curatorial practices. In sum, the project and exhibition focused on three main interventions: connecting geographies, bridging the past and the present, and centering the voices and histories of everyday people who were enslaved and colonized. These interventions necessitated key curatorial choices: to tell the histories of slavery and colonialism

<sup>31</sup> Dan Hicks, *The British Museums: The Benin Bronzes, Colonial Violence and Cultural Restitution* (London: Pluto Press, 2020), 236.

<sup>32</sup> Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 13, 18.

as intertwined, to recognize the absolute need for an international collaborative ethos and politics of institutional equity that allowed for disagreement and compromise, and to tell stories of freedom-making alongside stories of systemic violence and oppression to reclaim broader histories of freedom-making and their purpose in our present. At the NMAAHC, these choices contributed significantly to countering notions of American exceptionalism. Telling transnational stories rendered the NMAAHC a polyvocal museum, wherein multiple perspectives, experiences, and ideas were blended to welcome a variety of truths; the museum's own biases and national boundaries were challenged by histories that were participatory and diverse, yet comparable and connected.<sup>33</sup> We learned from disagreements about Mansa Musa's legacy, negotiations about the definition(s) of Blackness, and compromises about which objects should travel among host institutions. Even after *In Slavery's Wake* closes at the NMAAHC, we will continue to think deeply about the ways the importance of African American life and culture transcends their own lives and communities – telling stories that are national, transnational, and global.

After all, slavery in the United States was one of several violent products of the Atlantic-wide systems of racial slavery and colonial violence. The GCP understands that the structures from the past which shape our present demand new forms of representation which reach for racial justice. This begins by bridging past histories with present realities, engaging with reparatory history to reconstitute the past in ways that enable thinking about responsibility in the present.<sup>34</sup> At the NMAAHC, we connect the histories of wrecked slave ships with repair work in the communities connected to them. In 1794, a Portuguese slave ship called *São José* wrecked off the coast of South Africa, killing hundreds of captives from Mozambique. In 2015, representatives from NMAAHC participated in a memorial ceremony at the (then) newly-discovered wreck site; in the years since, a cohort of Mozambican marine archeologists that have been trained by staff and partners of NMAAHC have led research, cultural heritage programming, and environmental conservation efforts in the Mozambique Island region.<sup>35</sup> Museums, the stories they tell, and the new finders, authors, and keepers of histories they empower can be conduits for repair. These stories and connections, and

many like them, fill *In Slavery's Wake*. Together, we have learned and confirmed that history is not just a collection of stories to be told, but a wellspring of knowledge that is actively used to substantiate contemporary efforts for justice. The GCP – in addition to its projects and initiatives – recognize that we have the shared responsibility to collaborate with museums and universities around the world in like-minded efforts bent on change, both outward-facing and inward-looking. Just as we share these histories, we also share these responsibilities.

## 7 The Future of the Global Curatorial Project

The GCP team continues to meet regularly, with its current focus on the traveling exhibition and how *In Slavery's Wake* can continue to have an impact after the exhibition finishes its tour in Liverpool, England in 2028. Currently, plans are underway with a host of institutional partners across Brazil to activate the exhibition in Rio de Janeiro for the upcoming opening in November 2025. The GCP team and contributing curators continue to plan for the arrival of the exhibition in its other host venues, including the development of the complementary local exhibitions, as well as accompanying educational materials, programs, events, and even offshoot exhibitions inspired by *In Slavery's Wake* at other institutions. Lifelong professional bonds have been formed across the curatorial teams, and with dozens of students who have interned and participated in the development of the exhibition, wake work will continue well into the future.

We hope that our collaboration – in all the ways it navigates languages, time zones, geographies, histories, intellectual experiences, and curatorial visions – can become a model. As histories of enslavement, colonialism, resilience, and resistance transcend generations and borders, so too should the work of telling them transcend boundaries. Equitable resource sharing, collective decision-making, and community engagement are the roots of this collaboration; innovative storytelling, curatorial transformation, and empathetic relationship are its fruits. Reflections from the Collaborating Curators show a future ripe for wake work that continues to connect us and materialize liberatory futures.

<sup>33</sup> Marianna Pegno and Kantara Souffrant, "Introduction," in *Institutional Change for Museums*, 1st ed. (London: Routledge, 2024), 1–13, 7–8.

<sup>34</sup> Catherine Hall, "Doing Reparatory History: Bringing 'Race' and Slavery Home," *Race & Class* 60, no. 1 (2018): 3–21, 8.

<sup>35</sup> Learn more about the work of the Slave Wrecks Project on the project's website, <https://slavewrecksproject.org>.

If you are going to talk about racial slavery and you're going to talk about colonialism, it might be just useful to actually get the perspective of those who were colonized and those who were enslaved. So my major takeaway from this project is a confirmation. Of the ways in which ordinary, everyday people recreate their own humanity in the spite of enormous domination. And in the face of confronting things like slavery, unfreedom, colonialism that we call it resilience.

– Anthony Bogues<sup>36</sup>

Very little history has been done on the Belgian involvement in the transatlantic slave trade. But what is even more striking is that no research has been done in Congo or anywhere else about the transatlantic slave trade in Congo. One of the things that we wanted to do when we started the Global Curatorial Project and *Unfinished Conversations* was to see whether there was still memories of the transatlantic slave trade in the region of the Kongo Kingdom in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. And it turned out indeed that there were – which means that there is a huge potential to actually do more research.

– Bambi Ceuppens<sup>37</sup>

The experience of the Global Curatorial Project was a negotiation of one's place, role, and identity within the global community. The Brazilian experience is not necessarily the same as the Senegalese experience or the American experience or the British experience. What I've learned the most was is that Atlantic slave trade is a system that continues to live on. We had these various experiences that are still transmitted within these present-day communities.

– Ibrahima Thiaw<sup>38</sup>

One of the key things that I really enjoyed about working on this project was how everyone was a contributor. There was no hierarchy in who could bring stories. It was very much a system of equality and sharing. I know that some of the stories were brought to us by interns. Some of the stories were brought to us by our contributing curators. Some of the stories were brought to us by the research team at the NMAAHC. And so there was a real element of community that went into building out what would become the narrative of *In Slavery's Wake*. And you can really see all the different fingerprints of all the different people that have come through and left their mark on the exhibition.

– Ivie Orobato<sup>39</sup>

I think, as a curator who is early on in their career, engaging with the Global Curatorial Project has been really powerful. It's been really interesting to learn how different curators in different countries work, and to learn about the stories that are important to people. For example, this exhibition has many stories of women. Our collaborators throughout Africa were really pushing us to include the stories of women and to include stories of difficult subject matter, from gender-based violence to sexual assault. And we had to push [the NMAAHC] a little bit into thinking about how we can still bring those things in and be respectful to our audience. But hearing and understanding what's important to our collaborators has definitely shifted some of the stories that I've been able to help craft here and some of the stories I want to tell as we move forward.

– Johanna Obenda<sup>40</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Global Curatorial Project: Unfinished Conversations oral histories and records, Ms.2022.010, Brown University Library. Edited for clarity.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. Edited for clarity.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid. Edited for clarity.

<sup>39</sup> Orobato, interview, 2025. Edited for clarity.

<sup>40</sup> Global Curatorial Project: Unfinished Conversations oral histories and records, Ms.2022.010, Brown University Library. Edited for clarity.

I like very much this idea that [the Global Curatorial Project] is an Atlantic project. The fact that there is a shared experience was created so many years ago, like centuries ago, but that this still exists. In one sense it's important, and on the other hand, it shows that those societies they have in common a racist structure that we still need to be aware of and fight against.

– Keila Grinberg<sup>41</sup>

I would say that another thing that the [Global Curatorial Project] and *Unfinished Conversations* project[s] do is that they disrupt the confines of space. Even though the interviews are done on the local level by local institutions with their local communities, it's part of a global network. And as part of that we are beginning to explore and piece together “Okay, what does this history mean to people in different settings? How is it similar? How is it different? How can we connect with these things?” And a key challenge for us in the UK is bringing this history closer. How can we shrink the distance between the port of Liverpool and the plantations of the Americas? And I think one way is connecting the people in those places that are still, if also differently, impacted by those legacies.

– Miles Greenwood<sup>42</sup>

The Global Curatorial Project and *In Slavery's Wake* are meant to be a beginning. In each place where it lands, it could grow a garden – plant seeds for a conversation that remains unfinished in our world today, conversations about history, slavery, freedom on local levels, national levels, and international levels.

– Paul Gardullo<sup>43</sup>

The Global Curatorial Project was very significant to the work that we were doing at the Iziko Slave Lodge Museum. It really just made us think very deeply about the question of enslaved knowledges, and it also reinforced the importance of linkages. It was quite enlightening to be part of the project and have this strong sense that this is a global narrative and it needs to be told in a way that really brings together the various threads across the world.

– Paul Tichmann<sup>44</sup>

With the Global Curatorial Project and my involvement in the process, it emboldened me to ask more questions about our slave history and my connection to it. It gave me many more tools to pursue change and transformation in Iziko Slave Lodge in order to break the silences and to make the history accessible to all that enter the space in our new exhibitions.

– Shanaaz Galant<sup>45</sup>

<sup>41</sup> Ibid. Edited for clarity.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid. Edited for clarity.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid. Edited for clarity.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid. Edited for clarity.

<sup>45</sup> Shanaaz Galant, Curator Q&A, interview by Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture Office of Public Affairs, November 2024. Edited for clarity.