Editorial
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Editorial
Political Uses of the Past: Public Memory of Slavery and Colonialism

Ana Lucia Araujo* and Ynaê Lopes dos Santos**

Over the past thirty years, debates about the transatlantic slave past and the European colonization of Africa, Asia and the Americas have found fertile ground in the public spaces of African, European, Asian and American countries.[1] Since 2013, with the rise of the #BlackLives-Matter movement in the United States, and with the Rhodes Must Fall movement in South Africa and the United Kingdom since 2015, these debates have become even more heated and have spread far beyond the United States to countries including Canada, Brazil, France, Portugal, the Netherlands, Belgium, Spain, Senegal, Nigeria, the Republic of Be-

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1 Many works have focused on the memorial turn that began in the 1990s. See, for example, Christine Chivallon, "L'émergence récente de la mémoire de l'esclavage dans l'espace public: enjeux et significations," *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine*, 52-54 (2005): 64-81; Christine Chivallon, *L'esclavage, du souvenir à la mémoire: Contribution à une anthropologie de la Caraïbe* (Paris: Karthala, 2012); Ana Lucia Araujo, *Shadows of the Slave Past: Memory, Heritage, and Slavery* (New York: Routledge, 2014); Renaud Hourcade, *Les ports négriers face à leur histoire: politiques de la mémoire à Nantes, Bordeaux et Liverpool* (Paris: Daloz, 2014); Crystal Marie Fleming, *Resurrecting Slavery: Racial Legacies and White Supremacy in France* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2017); Jessica Moody, *The Persistence of Memory: Remembering Slavery in Liverpool 'Slaving Capital of the World'* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2020), Erika B. Arantes, Juliana Barreto Farias, and Ynaê Lopes dos Santos, "Dossiê: Racismo em pauta: A história que a história não conta," *Revista Brasileira de História*, 41, no. 88 (2021): 15-32; and Paulo Pachá and Thiago Krause, "Derrubando estátuas, fazendo história," *O Globo*, June 19, 2020, https://oglobo.globo.com/epoca/cultura/artigo-derrubando-estatuas-fazendo-historia-24487372.

nin, Japan and Australia.[2] On the one hand, activists and citizens racialized as Black or African Europeans, with the support of their white allies, have called for the toppling of monuments commemorating slave traders, Confederates, and white supremacists.[3] On the other hand, individuals racialized as whites also began to organize to defend the symbols of slavery and the colonial past, especially in the United States and in European countries.[4]

After the murder of George Floyd in March 2020, these movements spread to several countries with activists calling for the removal or actually individually taking down statues of white men who traded enslaved people and who defended African and indigenous slavery, such as Robert E. Lee, Edward Colston, Robert Milligan, James McGill and Borba Gato.[5] Protesters racialized as Black, white, and indigenous, sometimes supported by white activists, also attacked monuments honoring the founding fathers of the United States who owned slaves such as George Washington and Thomas Jefferson and even other hitherto practically untouched figures such as Winston Churchill and Christopher Columbus for their role as symbols of European colonialism.[6]

In addition to the removal of monuments, other debates emerged and increasingly provocative actions took place in the public sphere. During a period of polarization epitomized by Donald Trump's presidential election victory, the commemoration of the symbolic date of 1619, the year of the arrival of the first documented enslaved Africans in the colony of Virginia,

2 Roseanne Chantiluke, Brian Kwoba, and Athniangamso Nkopo, ed. *Rhodes Must Fall: The Struggle to Decolonise the Racist Heart of Empire* (London: Zed Books, 2018).

3 On African Europeans, see Olivette Otele, *African Europeans: An Untold Story* (London: Hurst, 2020). On monuments to white supremacists and confederates, see Adam H. Domby, *The False Cause: Fraud, Fabrication, and White Supremacy in Confederate Memory* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2020); Karen Cox, *No Common Ground: Confederate Monuments and the Ongoing Fight for Racial Justice* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021).

4 Ana Lucia Araujo, *Slavery in the Age of Memory: Engaging the Past* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020).

5 Erin Thompson, *The Rise and Fall of America's Public Monuments* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2022). Araujo, *Slavery in the Age of Memory* and Cox, *No Common Ground;* Arantes, Farias, and Santos, "Dossiê: Racismo em pauta: a história que a história não conta."

6 Caroline Elkins, *Legacy of Violence: A History of the British Empire* (New York: Knopf, 2022) and Thompson, *The Rise and Fall of America's Public Monuments.*

sparked a wave of commemorations as well as the publication of the *1619 Project*, a journalistic supplement to the *New York Times Magazine* (recently also published as a book) aiming to recontextualize the history of the United States by refocusing slavery and the contributions of African Americans as core dimensions of the country's history.[7] Shortly after the publication of the supplement, some academics criticized the project for factual errors and for putting "ideology" above historical understanding. Several months after the publication of the *1619 Project* supplement and book and this initial wave of criticism, US historian James H. Sweet, then the president of the American Historical Association, criticized the project in an essay in which he used the term "presentism", without establishing any clear distinction between history and memory, as two related, even though different, modes of discourse for engaging with the past.[8] Such belated criticism denouncing the politicization of the writing of "history" generated a major impact in the public sphere, and created polarization both on social media and in newspaper and magazine articles. With the support of the *New York Times*, the *1619 Project* was widely disseminated in the media. Moreover, the project's creators promoted the distribution of the supplement in schools as well as its introduction into the curriculum of American schools, where teachers began adopting it to teach the history of slavery, racial inequalities, and mass incarceration, which disproportionally affects African Americans. In response to the project, a right-wing group of white scholars launched the 1776 Project to promote ideals of "patriotism and pride in American history." Moreover, they attacked the *1619 Project*, and what they framed as "critical race theory," a broad intellectual movement that emerged in the 1960s that emphasizes the idea of race as a historical construct, and that racism is correspondingly a product of legal and political systems.

Despite the prevailing specific nuances, similar debates have been taking place in other countries in the Americas, especially in Brazil with

7 Nikole Hanna-Jones, *The 1619 Project: A New Origin Story* (New York: One World, 2021).

8 James H. Sweet, "Is History History? Identity Politics and Teleologies of the Present," *Perspectives on History,* August 17, 2022, https://www.historians.org/research-and-publications/perspectives-on-history/september-2022/is-history-history-identity-politics-and-teleologies-of-the-present.

pseudo-movements such as the "school without a party", which aims to introduce conservative and religious values into Brazilian schools, and consequently even questioning the concept of slavery. Contrasting with this far-right reactionary movement, there is also a historical and visible movement to recognize the legacy of the slavery past, especially evident with the inscription of the Valongo Wharf on the UNESCO World Heritage Site following a long process that involved broad public debate within different social groups. These debates about sites associated with slavery also gained new visibility in the city of Salvador, Bahia, through the *Salvador escravista* project and in the Paraíba Valley through the project *Passados Presentes*.[9] Such issues are also finding resonance elsewhere. For example, a growing number of readers are interested in Black men and women authors and in works that debate racial issues in Brazil (a new editorial niche in the country).

In Europe, the battles of the public memory of slavery and colonization have also become increasingly visible in the public space. On the one hand, these debates not only address the removal of pro-slavery monuments but they also appear in the debates regarding the teaching of the history of slavery and racism.[10] On the other hand, several museums in the United States, the United Kingdom, France, and the Netherlands have increasingly addressed the history of slavery. Yet, the role of these museums has increasingly come in for questioning as their collections house thousands of objects looted whether during the wars of conquest of the African continent or the subsequent period of European colonial rule in Africa.[11] In this context, several African nations such as the Republic of Benin, Senegal, and Nigeria have made official requests for the repatriation of looted objects. In some cases, such African heritage restitution requests have gained some success.

9 Carlos Silva Jr., "Monumentos e as memórias da escravidão no Brasil contemporâneo," *Portal Geledés*, August 11, 2021, https://www.geledes.org.br/monumentos-e-as-memorias-da-escravidao-no-brasil-contemporaneo/. See also *Salvador Escravista*, www.salvadorescravista.com and *Passados Presentes*, http://passadospresentes.com.br/.

10 Ana Lucia Araujo, *Museums and Atlantic Slavery* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2021).

11 Gaëlle Beaujean, *L'art de la cour d'Abomey: Le sens des objets* (Paris: Presses du Réel, 2019) and Dan Hicks, *The Brutish Museums: The Benin Bronzes, Colonial Violence, and Cultural Restitution* (London: Pluto Press, 2020).

In November 2021, France returned 26 treasures stolen by colonial troops during the conquest of Dahomey to the Republic of Benin. Although these objects correspond to only a minor fraction of the looted artifacts, this case does represent an example of the possible success of such repatriation requests even though Portugal continues to avoid debating the problem of restitutions on the grounds that the country has not yet received "any demand of repatriation."[12]

These debates demonstrate how we are living unique times when the intersection between memories of the slavery and colonialist past, as well as the intensification of racial inequalities, is increasingly visible in the public space and the public sphere. With the goal of articulating debate on the public memory of slavery and colonialism from a transnational and comparative perspective, the current issue "Political Uses of the Past: Public Memories of Slavery and Colonization", the first of a two issue series, explores these debates drawing from five countries on four different continents: Haiti, the United Kingdom, Portugal, Fiji, and Mozambique.

The article by sociologist Jerry Michel, "Les habitations coloniales entre politiques, récits et représentations en Haïti", examines the old manor houses of Saint-Domingue's (present-day Haiti) plantations as sites of slavery and colonialism memories in this former French colony that became both the first independent Black nation and the first country to abolish slavery in the Americas. Although this study focuses on Haiti, it certainly serves as a model for interpreting the memorialization of former plantations in other areas of the Americas, whether in Brazil or other Latin American and Caribbean countries.

Complementing Michel's study, in the issue's second article, "Displaying Caribbean Plantations in Contemporary British Museums: Slavery, Memory and the Construction of Britishness", the art historian Matthew Jones examines representations of the Caribbean and its plantations in various British museums. Jones shows how these museums effectively

12 João Carlos, "Arte africana em Portugal: 'Não há pedido de devolução'," *DW,* March 14, 2023, https://www.dw.com/pt-002/obras-de-arte-africanas-em-portugal-não-há-pedido-de-devolução/a-64976706.

offer only a homogeneous representation of the Caribbean world, often portraying acts of resistance against slavery as the product of the male world and ignoring the role of enslaved women. Once again, although focusing on the British case, Jones' study can also serve as an example for analysis of other spaces in the Atlantic world where museums continue to present resistance against slavery as an essentially male action.

Still within the framework of representations of slavery and the colonial past, in her article "Reparar, reparando: a memória colonial na Casa da História Europeia", the art historian and cultural critic, Inês Beleza Barreiros, analyzes the little-known case of the House of European History in Brussels, Belgium, inaugurated in 2017. Starting out studying the institution's history, as well as discursive analysis of the texts, images, and objects presented in the House of European History's permanent exhibition, Barreiros discusses how the new institution fails to approach European colonialism as a common experience in European history. The article also interrogates how the new initiative responds to recent reparation demands for slavery and colonialism.

Leaving Europe for Asia, in the article "Reconceptualisation of Girmit Memory: Fiji's Response to the Re-evaluation of the Colonial Past", Masaki Kataoka examines how the collective memory of Fiji's colonial era reconstitutes itself in response to the global wave that currently challenges the memory of this painful past. Applying the notion of "cosmopolitan memory", Kataoka interrogates memories of the colonial past carried by two distinct groups: the descendants of the archipelago's indigenous inhabitants and the descendants of those who immigrated to Fiji from India as indentured workers. In the last article in this issue, "Prevalência de traços do escravismo e colonialismo em práticas coletivas no cotidiano moçambicano", through an ethnographic study of the Mozambican state, historian Martinho Pedro explores the traces of the slave and colonial past in the current daily practices of present-day Mozambique, a region that supplied thousands of enslaved Africans to the Americas and to the Indian Ocean slave trade.

In the roundtable "Reparar o futuro", Patrícia Martins Marcos, Pedro Schacht Pereira, Rui Gomes Coelho, Víctor Barros and Inês Bele-

za Barreiros discuss the history of slave and colonial exploitation and requests for reparations for these atrocities based on the Portuguese example. The issues discussed in the roundtable draw on discussions that the authors have addressed in published articles and public events since 2020. Despite the focus on the Portuguese world, this roundtable raises questions in dialogue with debates about the atrocities of the Atlantic slave trade and colonialism eras and their present legacies that took place in other countries. We close this special issue with an essay by the late sociologist Fernando Ampudia de Haro (1975-2022), "O paradoxo da sociologia histórica", and an interview with sociologist Michael Löwy.

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