

Honors Thesis

Bridging the Gap: Updating Representations of Slavery in Museums in the Southern United States



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## Abstract

Museums are cultural institutions that preserve our history, but whose story exactly are they telling? In a country like the United States with a variety of diverse cultures, not all of these communities have received equal representation in museums. As places that people trust as a source of information, museums owe it to their audiences to tell a narrative that is historically accurate. This study investigates how museums are changing in order to better reflect members of minority communities. One of the communities of focus is the Black community. There have been distinct phases of disregard and misrepresentation when it comes to representing Black history in history museums. This essay is centered specifically around the evolution of the portrayal of slavery, in southern history museums. Though the events of slavery itself have not changed, the story museums tell about it (and therefore the perception of it by the public) has. Through examining museums, their websites, conferences and other materials, one is able to gain a closer glimpse as to how the field has changed over the years to become more inclusive and the ways in which it still needs to change. The implications of this project have a broader impact as to how the history of any historically marginalized group is portrayed in a museum setting.

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**O G L E T H O R P E**  
U N I V E R S I T Y

## Introduction

Chains, cotton and cooking utensils. These seemingly random items are just a few examples of what one might see in a history museum exhibit on slavery. Chains represent the bondage that stolen Africans, and their descendants, were held under. Cotton shows an example of the economic reasons that motivated the spread of slavery. Cooking utensils show just how closely tied the lives of the enslaved were to their masters. But what do these objects really say about the lives of the people who were enslaved? Other than offering a generalized description of their existence, do these objects really do justice in telling the story of the millions of Africans who were taken from their homeland and brought to America with no choice in the matter? Through this kind of representation, what is the United States really saying about the significance of traumatic historical events like slavery?

In 1619, the first captured Africans were brought to the continent of what would become the United States.<sup>1</sup> For the next almost 250 years the system of slavery would remain in place, especially in the south whose agricultural economy demanded a large labor force.<sup>2</sup> In 1865, the civil war concluded with a northern victory over the south.<sup>3</sup> In addition to this, the 13th amendment was passed which abolished slavery, except as a punishment for a crime.<sup>4</sup> These actions freed around several million formerly enslaved people and moved the US into the brief period of Reconstruction.<sup>5</sup> So what do we know about these people over 150 years after these events? Much of what could have provided important insight into the lives of these people has

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<sup>1</sup> John Hope Franklin and Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African Americans*, 9th ed. (New York, NY: McGraw-Hill, 2011), 51.

<sup>2</sup> Samuel Wilson, *An Account of the Province of Carolina*, in Alexander S. Salley, ed., *Narratives of Early Carolina, 1650-1708*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1911, 174.

<sup>3</sup> John Hope Franklin and Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *From Slavery to Freedom*, 234.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, 214-215.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, 236.

been lost over time. As a group that was not considered fully human, the recording of enslaved African history in the United States was not considered particularly important. A lot of the material culture from this period- actual objects enslaved people used- does not remain today. So how do Americans learn about slavery today? There are a variety of ways from school to family stories passed down through the years, but there is another important source for learning about history: Museums. A study found that Americans are willing to trust museums as a source of information over many other sources such as local papers, books, and teachers.<sup>6</sup> The question is: Just how well are museums representing the story of slavery? After all, though museums may seem to some to be unbiased bastions of knowledge, at the end of the day they are created by people with their own perspectives and agendas. Historically, museums have not had the best track record with presenting the stories of historically marginalized communities in a way that these communities feel is accurate. This can be seen in the stories of Indigenous, Latinx, Africans, and Asians/Pacific Islanders are represented in museums. In this essay I will argue that history museums have helped contribute to a divide in the collective memory of US citizens. By analyzing the portrayal of slavery in history museums, it becomes clear that based on regional, racial, and other socioeconomic lines, people have very different interpretations of the same historical events based on the experiences they have had in museum spaces. This is a situation for which museums are partly responsible, yet if they make improvements, they stand to become a major force in changing the way that people think of important historical events like slavery.

Why does this matter? Many people simply visit museums as a stop on a family vacation, so what does it matter if everything is not accurate? If all people are biased when it comes to

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<sup>6</sup> *Museum Facts & Data*, American Alliance of Museums, August 10, 2020, <https://www.aam-us.org/programs/about-museums/museum-facts-data/>.

these fundamental events, then why should a site even bother attempting to create a better exhibition on slavery or other difficult topics like it? The answer to these questions, and others like them, lie in the proclaimed missions of most museums. Museums at their simplest level are cultural institutions where we as a society share narratives about the pieces of our culture that we deem most valuable to us.<sup>7</sup> People expect museums to share their specific stories. These stories will be told not just to community members, but also for visitors from outside the community and the successive generations that will use them to learn about the past. The part of this that becomes difficult for museums is that the people they represent are not homogenous. America is known as a cultural salad bowl, a place where cultures combine, but can still be separated into distinct groups, for this reason. American museums therefore owe it to their audience to reflect as many diverse perspectives as possible. The expectation to have an accurate story told is not just something that should be reserved for the people who make up majority groups. This is particularly important as the demographics of the US continue to shift with trends showing a possible majority non-white United States by as early as 2050.<sup>8</sup> This means there will be a new audience of museum goers to appeal to. If these audiences cannot be compelled by what museums have to offer, it could lead to a decline in museum attendance. For these reasons, it is essential that museums are telling the “right” story. But what exactly is the right story to tell? Every story has more than one side and it can be difficult to please everyone in a public setting like a museum. An example of this difficulty can be seen in the portrayal of slavery in history museums in the United States. This portrayal has continued to transform through the years even

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<sup>7</sup> John E., Fleming, “African-American Museums, History, and the American Ideal,” *The Journal of American History* 81, no. 3 (1994): 1020.

<sup>8</sup> “2017 National Population Projections Tables: Main Series,” The United States Census Bureau (US Census Bureau, February 20, 2020), <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/2017/demo/popproj/2017-summary-tables.html>.

though the events of slavery themselves have not changed at all. It is essential to track the distinct phases that it has gone through and where it still has to go in the future to offer a more complete version of history. This project will help identify gaps in the museum field's portrayal of the history of marginalized communities, particularly the Black community. The value of this project does not simply lie within the African American experience either. It has the potential to inform the ways in which any historically underrepresented group is represented in museum spaces from ethnic minorities, to women, to members of the LGBTQ+ community. Therefore, it is worthwhile to know exactly how museums are educating the public and how the public is receiving the message. What does it mean for the country as a whole if people are learning different versions of history? In these representations of culture, a lot more is at stake than meets the eye.

This essay will be structured following a chronological timeline. First, it is necessary to investigate the history of museums in general in the United States to learn the foundations of how they function and their overall purpose. History museums in particular are greatly centered around education. What happens when this history is controversial? How does one effectively display and educate about difficult moments in history? Next, one must look at when African Americans became incorporated into museums and how they were represented. Then, it becomes crucial to identify distinct periods of black representation in museums. Museums have moved in response to social change. They also follow the movement of absence, misrepresentation, and refreshed perspective when it comes to Black culture. At first museums simply chose not to engage with African American history at all. There were many reasons given for why such as a

lack of historical artifacts.<sup>9</sup> Nowadays we know this is not true. The next period that followed was one of misrepresentation. This period was marked by good intentions that nonetheless fell short of what they needed to be. The next period which is where modern representations fall and where museums will continue to go as they embrace further change. What factors led to these periods and what did they mean for the field as a whole. Finally, what remains is to examine is the future of this field. The enslavement of Africans in the United States of America is a multilayered societal issue that comes with a lot of emotional baggage attached to it. Nowadays, there are guides and conferences centered around being sensitive to complex issues in museums. Is this enough or do museums need to take further action. If so, what steps need to be taken to ensure a fuller version of history.

The scope of this essay is limited to history museums in the southern United States. First, there are several reasons for the distinction as far as the type of museum. Although some people may believe that all museums function in the same way, there are in fact differences in museums based on the subject being discussed. Most depictions of slavery in museums in the United States today can be found in history museums or historic house museums. The major difference between the two being that the former was with the intention of being a museum, while the latter is a location where a historical event occurred or a historical figure resided, with the museum aspect coming as an afterthought.<sup>10</sup> This is not to say that museums centered around other topics like art or science do not include discussions of slavery or the Black experience. In fact, these other types of museums have a history of their own with struggles to portray Black Americans accurately. Recently, some art museums have begun to include slavery captioning in their

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<sup>9</sup> Christy S, Matthews, *Where Do We Go from Here? Researching and Interpreting the African-American Experience.* *Historical Archaeology* 31, no. 3 (1997): 107-13.

<sup>10</sup> Tara Young, *So You Want to Work in a Museum?* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019), 5-6.



galleries to provide guests with more information about the people that they are looking at in paintings.<sup>11</sup> However, because this essay is centered around slavery it makes the most sense to focus on history museums and historic sites which 1) have more material culture related to this subject and 2) tend to interpret more historical background than museums of other subjects.

Secondly, many of these museums are in the southern United States as this is where the highest concentration of enslaved people lived.<sup>12</sup> The majority of these slaves were sent to the southern United States to work on plantations for cash crops such as cotton, rice, and tobacco.<sup>13</sup> The reason that this essay is focused on the south is because of the south's unique relationship with slavery. The southern economy was entirely built off of black labor. That is not to say that exhibitions on slavery do not exist outside of the south. They exist across the country and around the world. To be clear, slavery was not just a southern institution. It very much permeated every corner of the continent from enslaved blacksmiths in the North to people who were enslaved in the west as their masters expanded across the country.<sup>14</sup> America is not the only place that struggles with this representation either. Countries with difficult ties to colonization like England face similar issues.<sup>15</sup> The way that slavery is represented in an English museum differs from one in the US south which will also differ from one in the Caribbean. For the sake of space in the

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<sup>11</sup> Peggy McGlone, "In Baltimore, the Walters Art Museum Confronts the Confederate History of Its Founders," *The Washington Post* (WP Company, March 16, 2021), [https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/museums/walters-museum-founders-confederate-history/2021/03/15/8655ddca-85c2-11eb-82bc-e58213caa38e\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/museums/walters-museum-founders-confederate-history/2021/03/15/8655ddca-85c2-11eb-82bc-e58213caa38e_story.html).

<sup>12</sup> John Hope Franklin and Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *From Slavery to Freedom*, 104.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, 140.

<sup>14</sup> Kristin Gallas and James DeWolf Perry. *Interpreting Slavery at Museums and Historic Sites*. Rowman & Littlefield. Lanham. 2015. 3

<sup>15</sup> Jessica Moody, *Performing Memory: Local Slavery Memory in a Globalizing World*, In *the Persistence of Memory: Remembering Slavery in Liverpool, 'slaving Capital of the World'*, 181, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2020.

essay however, this project will center on trends in how African Americans are portrayed in southern history museums/ historic homes.

## Key Terms

Before diving deeper into this discussion of how slavery has changed within history museums in the southern United states over time, there are a few essential terms that are worth defining. These terms are crucial because without a cohesive definition of what they mean, it would be impossible to decipher their progress, positive or negative.

The first term is museums. It is necessary to spell out the history of museums in the United States. Initially they started out as cabinets of curiosity. It was a way for wealthy elites to share goods they had collected (and at times stolen) with their friends of similar status.<sup>16</sup> Historically, museums have existed as majority white only spaces.<sup>17</sup> First kept away by slavery, then Jim Crow, then the civil rights era, black people have been excluded from being both the primary audience and in the narrative of museums. Even today many black people lack access to museums whether it be because of cost, location or even just time. Though museums have ostensibly gotten better in their representations of BIPOC (Black Indigenous and People of Color) communities in recent years, some feel that there is still a lot left to be desired. This is not a phenomenon unique to history museums. Black people have campaigned for accurate representations in the public sphere. This can be seen in the Whitney Art museum protests. Another way that museums lack access to communities of color has been in their workforce. Those creating the exhibits have mostly been white meaning they are telling these stories from

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<sup>16</sup> Johnnetta B. Cole and Laura L. Lott, *Diversity, Equity, Accessibility, and Inclusion in Museums* (Lanham, MD: American Alliance of Museums Press, 2019), 34.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid

their perspective based on their identity. The issue is not that they are telling this story; it can be important as well. The issue comes when other stories are excluded at the sake of telling the same story over and over again. Museums all over the country have struggled with representations of African American people. As museums reflect society, they have historically reflected the issues Americans have with race. People have protested exhibitions in history museums.

The next term to define is slavery. This is difficult because it means a lot of different things to different people. There was a heavy intertwinement in a lot of the south between the daily lives of enslaved people and those who were enslaving them which differs from the north where less people were interacting with black people on a daily basis. How has this particular culture influenced the representation of slavery in these museums?

The last term to define is public history. Public history is a field dedicated to the study of how history is displayed to the public. Although the historical events themselves have not changed, often our perception of them has based on how they have been presented to us. How much has public history influenced our perception even when we are not consciously aware of it?

## **Literature Review**

The study of how Black people are represented in museums has been undertaken by many. This includes discussion in historical journals and articles of course. For example, in a 2004 article from of the *Journal of American History* titled "American Slavery in History and Memory and the Search for Social Justice", Dr. Ira Berlin investigated a large range of sources from Presidential speeches to museum interpretations to see what the public relationship to

slavery was and if the field was being done justice which he determined it was not, at least not completely. While there is some benefit to discussing the variety of ways in which slavery is called to public memory, I also believe that there is something to be gained from separating the areas where slavery has been discussed on a national level. In a similar vein in an article from the *American Anthropologist* in 2011 titled “Shattering Slave Life Portrayals: Uncovering Subjugated Knowledge in US Plantation Sites in South Carolina and Florida”, Antoinette Jackson discusses her experiences looking into plantation slavery and how best to represent it today, concluding that descendants of these once enslaved persons should be brought into the conversation. Her focus seems to be more on a potential solution to this problem. Additionally, it only focuses on plantations specifically in two states. In other sources, this discussion is centered in k-12 education since it is the first and most common place where people are confronted with this history. Though this is important, it fails to recognize the role of museums as teaching institutions. As far as I have found my research question has not been asked or addressed entirely in recent scholarly literature. I think it is important to bring these elements together so that the understanding of this impact is not lost in translation. I am interested in how the public has been informed and misinformed by these representations. While conducting my research, I noticed several gaps in the field. There is not a comprehensive overview of the portrayal of slavery in history museums overall in the south and the impact it has had. Also, there is not much recent scholarship on this particular topic- post 2000’s and especially not post 2010’s even though this is a hot topic socially. Additionally, there is more of a raising of the problem and less of an offered solution. I see myself as recognizing the most recent trends into this narrative, in a particular part of the country. What I am not finding is a comprehensive timeline that shows shifts in the portrayal of slavery. I am also not finding a clear starting point for when this topic

first appeared in museums. However, there has been a lot of discussion lately around the ways that slavery is taught as a historical subject. This fits into a broader conversation about the field of museology. People question what role museums will play in the future. Museums are historically white owned upper-class places- by nature they are exclusive. Current research is centered on these topics that relate to K-12 education or the future of the museum field. How can you know where you're going if you don't know your past? How can we properly educate? Or if things are good, how can we keep them that way?

## **Methodology**

My primary source base will be objects related to the interpretation of slavery in history museums and historic sites. First, I will investigate museum websites to see what these sites have to say about their interpretation of slavery. Next, I will look at conferences that focus on the topic of slavery in museums. I will also listen to any resources for the field on interpreting slavery such as podcasts, books, etc. To get a professional view and get into the specifics of museums versus education in general, I will primarily look into the archives of museums to see what prior exhibitions were like including notes from curators. Along with newspaper articles of the time to gauge both professional opinions in the field of museology along with public opinion of the time. Additionally, for help on how to investigate this I turned to historians, museum professionals, and of course similar studies. Each gave me a piece of what I needed to further research this topic. I was recommended to split the time period I had chosen into smaller chunks to note time period specific changes. I have split my research to be pre 2000s, 2000-2020, and the future. The method I will primarily be using is case study. I will choose a few museums that are best suited to answer my question. My factors for deciding which museums will be multiple. First, I am focusing on history museums. Although I will briefly mention other types of

museums or public monuments, I felt that including all museums would be too expansive for one essay. Additionally, how long they have existed. Preferably I am looking for museums who have existed through all these time periods OR ones that I feel exemplify the era. Next, I will look to museums that are focused on or include a significant portion of their museum that are dedicated to the discussion of slavery. I will also take into consideration museums that are accredited versus ones that are not. All of these sources should offer a comprehensive view of how slavery's representation in museums has changed over the years.

### **As Told by Themselves**

To fully understand how slavery has been represented in museums we must look first at the institution of slavery itself. But how do we do this today over 150 years after slavery was abolished (except for as punishment for a crime)? As with a lot of our history we do not have as many perspectives from a marginalized point of view because their thoughts were not deemed as noteworthy as those of the elite class. What we have is an uneven perception where there is more material culture relating to the oppressor than the oppressed. Over time these perspectives dominate public thinking because that is what has survived. Although their thoughts and feelings were not recorded as much, enslaved people existed as much more than just what can be seen on a surface level. A great source of information for what the experience of slavery was like is the WPA slave narratives. These interviews recorded in the 1930's by the Works Progress Administration sought to record what slavery was like from the perspective of the enslaved. Although they must be taken with a grain of salt, they provide some of the best information about the conditions of slavery in America. In addition to this there are many autobiographical accounts by former enslaved people such as *The Autobiography of Frederick Douglass* and *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. No one today will ever be able to experience slavery in the

same way that it existed in the Americas from 1619-1865, so how do museums portray it to the public accurately? By tracking how museums have changed their presentation of slavery over time, one is able to compare it to the viewpoint of the enslaved and see just how correctly, or incorrectly, these stories have been shown.

## **Past**

The first representations of slavery in museums in the southern United States cannot be traced to one museum in particular. Although it is unknown exactly what the first exhibitions that included slavery looked like it is fair to assume that they would have mirrored the ones that would come later which are largely from the perspective of white, land owning families. These representations come after the civil war when the south was left in ruins and morale was low. To restore order and a sense of identity, a group named the Daughters of the Confederacy was responsible for perpetuating what they saw as “southern heritage.” The Daughters of the Confederacy are a group of women who descend from men who fought for the Confederacy during the civil war. Their idea of southern heritage centered the lives of white men and women and largely left out other perspectives, namely from the Black community. The DOC are responsible for many southern textbooks that refer to the civil war as “The War of Northern Aggression” and the erection of statues of confederate generals that continue to dot the southern landscape today. Their ideas about society were shown in museums of the time as well. These first stories can be seen in plantation museums across the southeastern United States. The stories created on these grounds are largely pro south and pro confederate. Many museums of this time do not mention the contributions of the Black community. If they did tell stories of the enslaved,

they were often filled with myths such as enslaved life not being too bad or that a particular slave owner was benevolent. These stories sought to soothe southerners who were looking for a dream of a past time. Another example of this can be seen in the beginnings of the famous Colonial Williamsburg Historic Site. Colonial Williamsburg is a mile long street of historic homes that are set in the colonial time period. This site was started in the 1930s by William A.R. Goodwin. In his discussions on what the site will be like, he never discusses the idea of slavery at all. Instead, he centers his ideas of what the site should be on the positive memories that will be remembered.<sup>18</sup> These museum representations persisted and many still do even today. Many people resonate with these stories and continue to believe the narrative that these institutions perpetuate. But what about those who cannot find comfort in these narratives?

The first portrayals of slavery in history museums by Black people can be seen in the exhibits of museums on the campuses of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU's).<sup>19</sup> One of the earliest examples can be seen at the Hampton University museum which was founded in 1868. I have separated pre 2000s representations of slavery into categories.<sup>20</sup> The first category is no representation. This is when museums do not depict African Americans at all. The second category is problematic interpretation. These are depictions which were controversial in their time, often for how far they went to be accurate. The final category is misrepresentation. These are depictions which purposefully or otherwise depict slavery in an incorrect or ahistorical fashion. Move from Object based to narrative. Museums have always told a story whether that was their intention or not. -moonlight and magnolias is a similar concept wherein people

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<sup>18</sup> William. A. R. Goodwin, *The Restoration of Colonial Williamsburg*, in *The Phi Beta Kappa Key* 7, no. 8 (1930): 514-20.

<sup>19</sup> Amina J, Dickerson, *Afro-American Museums: A Future Full of Promise*, in *Roundtable Reports* 9, no. 2/3 (1984): 14.

<sup>20</sup> Kristin L Gallas and James DeWolf Perry, eds., *Interpreting Slavery at Museums and Historic Sites* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), XIII.



romanticize the civil war and post war. Followers maintain that slavery was not that bad and even that black people were happier as slave. -lost cause- Lost cause mythology is just that-mythology. It is a mistaken idea that the south was fighting for a good and noble cause. In actuality, the south's actions were traitorous. Spanish Moss, farm animals, and plantations. When riding through the southern United States, there are certain things you are guaranteed to always see. You will certainly see long sprawling stretches of land with something growing such as corn, rice, or cotton. These acres of farmland are often accompanied by a huge house that looms over it. Antiquated behemoths that remind some people of a more romantic and distinctly southern time. Sometimes you can even go into these places and sometimes it costs to enter. You can hear a tale of a time long past. But just how accurate is this story going to be to true historical events? And more specifically how true is it going to be for a representation of black people? History museums are meant to represent the history of all Americans Therefore the question becomes what have museums been doing to ensure that they are not "reaffirming a racialized, racist order."<sup>21</sup>

### **Divided Museum Experiences**

Four African Americans step onto the auction block in Virginia. One by one they are sold in an effort to repay the debts of their master who has fallen on hard times. This harrowing scene may sound like the beginning of a story that takes place in the antebellum south however it

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<sup>21</sup> Jennifer L. Eichstedt and Stephen Small, *Representations of Slavery: Race and Ideology in Southern Plantation Museums* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2002), 8.

actually happened much more recently than that. In 1994, Colonial Williamsburg, a living history museum in Williamsburg Virginia, held a mock slave auction as a part of the museum's programming.<sup>22</sup> This decision was made by then chief of programs as a way to incorporate African American stories into the living history aspect of the site. Hundreds gathered to watch this scene. Some saw this as a learning experience. Others in the crowd, protesters, saw the "show" as making a mockery of Black history. Was this an effective representation of slavery or something that should never happen again?

White Experience.



The white southern experience is not monolithic. Historically there were not many white people who actually held a particular number of enslaved people. In the early 2000s, Jennifer Eichstedt and Stephen Small conducted a study of how slavery was being represented at plantation museums in the US South. In this study they investigated 122 such sites in the states of Virginia, Georgia, and Louisiana.<sup>23</sup> What they found is that plantation museums in these states were portraying a "white-centric" view of history.<sup>24</sup> What this means is that the narratives were focused on the experience of white people while completely ignoring/misrepresenting the lives of those who were enslaved at these locations.<sup>25</sup> One white visitor visiting an exhibit on African American history left a comment that he simply "didn't know" about all the issues that were

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<sup>22</sup> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1994/10/11/living-history-or-undying-racism-colonial-williamsburg-slave-auction-draws-protest-support/5a6ec396-e6f8-4a71-a185-8ece86afa166/>

<sup>23</sup> Jennifer L. Eichstedt and Stephen Small, *Representations of Slavery: Race and Ideology in Southern Plantation Museums* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2002), 3.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, 4.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, 7.

facing the Black community.<sup>26</sup> Identity is formed around being in a group. This is something that can be as small as a family or as large as a nation. To admit that the line of people one descends from are not all “good” people, may diminish one’s sense of pride. It becomes easier to instead build these people up and by proxy oneself. But why should segments of the population be free to escape this story when Black Americans never can?

Black Experience.

The African American relationship to museums is a complex one. Museums were created for people of status to show off their objects to other people of status. Since Black Americans have not historically been “people of status” in the United states, they have typically been excluded from these spaces. This is done on both an explicit and implicit level. On the explicit level, there were museums that only allowed black visitors one day a week. On the implicit level, there was a lack of inclusion of African American stories. When they were being told they were being told through the viewpoint of someone who was not Black and did not have that lived experience. As is often seen in situations like these African Americans sought to create their own place where their stories could be told accurately, the result of this is African American museums.<sup>27</sup> These museums are run by teams of mostly Black people and feature content relevant to the stories of Black people in America. Just like any other type of museums, these institutions can vary greatly based on location, budget, and any other number of factors. Still

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<sup>26</sup> John E, Fleming, “African-American Museums, History, and the American Ideal." *The Journal of American History* 81, no. 3 (1994): 1026.

<sup>27</sup> John E, Fleming, “African-American Museums, History, and the American Ideal," *The Journal of American History* 81, no. 3 (1994): 1020-1021.

museums can be intimidating spaces for those who are not familiar with them. In the 1980s, Amina Dickerson, a museum professional, was hopeful about the future for African American museums despite all of the challenges facing them.<sup>28</sup> At the time she writes this, she estimates there are around one hundred African American museums in the United States.<sup>29</sup> These museums were a response to being excluded from the mainstream.<sup>30</sup> Similarly to how James Lujan, a Native American filmmaker critiques the National Museum of the American Indian for being for others and not the indigenous community, museums of Black history must do the same.<sup>31</sup>

Museums have created different versions of the past for different groups of people. There are a multitude of historical events in museums that are centered around the minority experience that could benefit from a new telling. Even today as museums begin to document the protests of Summer 2020, they must be watchful of what story they are portraying. Scholars, everyday people, and everyone in between has sought to analyze America's, (particularly the South's), relationship to slavery. However, most people who are not scholars of African American history are not doing this type of research. For years there have been calls to update the portrayal of slavery in history museums in the US. What factors have led to the updates to the way that slavery is represented in US history museums?

For this investigation there are many questions which arise. The largest being the question is: how exactly are they being told? In this essay I will investigate the ways in which museums of the 21st century have represented slavery in museums. What messages do they portray? Who is

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<sup>28</sup> Amina J, Dickerson, *Afro-American Museums: A Future Full of Promise*, in *Roundtable Reports* 9, no. 2/3 (1984): 14-18.

<sup>29</sup> Amina J, Dickerson, *Afro-American Museums*, 14.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, 15.

<sup>31</sup> James Lujan, *A Museum of the Indian, Not for the Indian*, in *American Indian Quarterly* 29, no. 3/4 (2005): 516.

their audience? What changes have they made if any? Why is this important to the collective memory of the United States as whole? Has the United States changed its portrayal of slavery in history museums any since the subject was initially put into them? If so, just how much progress has been made and how much further do we have to go as a country to ensure we are telling as close to the correct story as possible. When taking a closer look at the trajectory of the telling of these events it becomes clear that history is not as static as people think.

There is a noted “memory boom” which occurred in the late twentieth century.<sup>32</sup> This memory boom means that there is a desire to remember important historical events and study them further. This wave of apologies around the year 2000 was centered around these terrible marks on history.<sup>33</sup>

## Present

Many sites desire to separate slavery from both the plantation and the plantation owner. In the nineties, we continue to see trends of slavery being misrepresented in museums and at historic sites. No longer is the discussion of slavery avoided however there is an effort to absolve slaveowners of their sins. An example of this can be seen in Mark Bograd’s examination of several museum plantation sites in Virginia. In his study he noted that museums continued to discuss that although people like George Washington and Thomas Jefferson owned slaves, they were morally opposed to it.<sup>34</sup> This inner turmoil does not exempt these men from the real damage they inflicted no matter their intention. There is no such thing as a benevolent slave

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<sup>32</sup> Jessica, Moody, *Performing Memory: Local Slavery Memory in a Globalizing World*, In *the Persistence of Memory: Remembering Slavery in Liverpool, 'slaving Capital of the World'*, 181, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2020.

<sup>33</sup> Jessica, Moody, *Performing Memory*, 184.

<sup>34</sup> Mark, Bograd, “In My Opinion: APOLOGIES EXCEPTED: Facing Up to Slavery at Historic House Museums.” *History News* 47, no. 1 (1992): 20-21. [://www.jstor.org/stable/42655797](http://www.jstor.org/stable/42655797).

owner, and it is reductive to imply that the lack of action on the part of these men did not significantly impact the lives of the people they enslaved.

In the mid 2010's there was an uptick in the focus on representations of slavery in history museums. This is related to the fact that there were commemorations around the 150th anniversary of the civil war.<sup>35</sup>

The creators of museum exhibits on slavery are not homogeneous. People from diverse backgrounds have interpreted slavery in museums and at historic sites. As a study by the American Alliance of Museums shows, museums are overwhelmingly run by people who identify as white. Though this study was conducted in regard to art museums, it stands to reason that this would apply across all types of museums. How does this fact: that exhibits about enslaved people are often interpreted from the perspective of those who do not have direct ties to someone who descends from enslaved people? On one hand it can be useful. Hearing diverse perspectives on a historical topic is what makes American museums valuable. On the other hand, this representation often comes at the expense of sharing other stories explicitly namely those of formerly enslaved Black Americans. The goal of today's museum professionals should not be eliminating all perspectives about slavery that are not from Black Americans. That would simply give another one-sided portrayal of history. The goal should be to encourage more Black perspectives to balance the already prevalent stories of white Americans.

As Rex Ellis states in the foreword for *Interpreting Slavery at Museums and Historic Sites*, although slavery is ingrained deeply in American society, it “continues to be a

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<sup>35</sup> Jill Oglie, Titus, *An Unfinished Struggle: Sesquicentennial Interpretations of Slavery and Emancipation*, in the *Journal of the Civil War Era* 4, no. 2 (2014): 338.

conversation odious to many.”<sup>36</sup> Due to this odiousness, many historic sites and museums continue to perpetuate issues that come from the past. It is not that they are unaware of the changes to be made, but rather that they do not have the resources (time, budget, staff) to complete such a task. In Addition to this it is worth noting that some institutions have no desire to change the problematic ways they represent history. Slavery is a factor at more museums and historic sites than what they may currently admit.<sup>37</sup> Oftentimes in museums discussing slavery the story being told has been the viewpoint of the slave owner. Ironically, the slave owning aspect of their lives is often what is minimized. As a nation which is rapidly moving towards being a majority minority country this is no longer acceptable. In reality it never was. Can museums truly be lauded as cultural institutions while only portraying a few choice cultures?

The 2000s have represented an era of major change in museums as far as interpretations of African Americans. It is impossible to discuss the changes made to history museums in the 21st century without discussing the ways in which the internet has influenced them. Widespread access to the internet has allowed museums to offer more than just their in-person exhibitions. They have expanded to. So how exactly have museums used these critiques to change? One of the easiest ways to tell is through visiting the museums themselves. By visiting three popular southern historic museums, I was able to further study the changes that museums have implemented in their representations of slavery.

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<sup>36</sup> Kristin L Gallas and James DeWolf Perry, eds., *Interpreting Slavery at Museums and Historic Sites* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), XV.

<sup>37</sup> Kristin L Gallas and James DeWolf Perry, eds., *Interpreting Slavery at Museums and Historic Sites* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), XV.

Colonial Williamsburg has moved from being a place in the news regarding their lack of African American interpretation to a site that is known for it. On their tours. Still for the most part Colonial Williamsburg is self-guided meaning that if you did not want to attend a certain historic home or area you would not have to.

The Atlanta History Center is another museum that is using its platform to discuss representations of slavery. In their exhibit, the battle of Atlanta cyclorama they discuss what the lack of people of color, particularly black people, depicted means. The site that focuses on slavery the most out of these three is the Old Slave Market Museum in Charleston, South Carolina. Creaky floors. That's what you experience when you step inside an unassuming two-story building in Charleston South Carolina. The only thing that might tip you off is the Old Slave Mart title on the outside. 155 years after the abolition of slavery in the United States and museums like this are what inform public memory about the institution.

Similarities between these sites are multiple. They all facilitate conversation, use a narrative based format, and are at least in part contributed to by people from the black community.

A study by the Mellon academy in 2015 showed that 82 percent of essential museums staff is non- white. Although these numbers represent art museums it can be assumed that they apply more broadly across the museum field. There are many reasons why minorities are underrepresented in the museum field. For example, the American Alliance of Museums conducted a study which showed that only ten percent of museum staff is black. Looking closer into this statistic one realizes that the majority of this group is made up of security officers and janitors.



Another way to bridge the gap as it were between communities is to continue ensuring that people who tell the story of slavery understand the gravity of what they're doing. As Diedre Jones, programming lead at Colonial Williamsburg, shares in a video on the foundation's YouTube. The most important parts of interpreting slavery are to 1) find gratitude, 2) fight fear with love, and 3) even when things seem hopeless have faith.<sup>38</sup>

Guides have been mass produced by associations like the AASLH (American Association for State and Local History). These guides are written by museum professionals across the country. This has provided museums with a fast resource that provides insight into how best to represent these histories. These guides are not just limited to black Americans. They also include guides for how to represent indigenous history and LGBTQ+ history. One can assume that as the field continues to update these guides will continue to publish more volumes that will emphasize these best practices. Books are not the only resource, there are also conferences, podcasts, and museum websites themselves. Slavery is not a monolithic experience and therefore cannot be represented as such.<sup>39</sup> Each historic site must do its own research to see how they specifically are tied to slavery. Their representations will show the unique plight of the individuals there.

Updating how slavery is represented in museums to come to a “comprehensive and conscientious story of the past” is not something that happens overnight.<sup>40</sup> If a museum decides it wants to take action to do a better job in this respect, it becomes a dedicated effort that takes

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<sup>38</sup> Colonial Williamsburg, *Three Things I Learned from Interpreting Slavery*, 2020, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y3qskMf3xA&list=PLD5EGh4Ftc\\_FWMIgtX49QMx\\_rvQQbzMUp&index=3](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y3qskMf3xA&list=PLD5EGh4Ftc_FWMIgtX49QMx_rvQQbzMUp&index=3).

<sup>39</sup> Kristin, Gallas and James DeWolf Perry. *Interpreting Slavery at Museums and Historic Sites*. Rowman & Littlefield. Lanham. 2015. 5

<sup>40</sup> Kristin, Gallas and James DeWolf Perry. *Interpreting Slavery at Museums and Historic Sites*. Rowman & Littlefield. Lanham. 2015. xiii

time to come to fruition. Although the development of technology in the 21st century has assisted museums in how they represent difficult topics such as slavery, it has not taken all of the issues away. Slavery's representation in history museums of the south can in some ways be seen as a bizarre version of the children's game telephone. Telephone is a game where a group stands in a circle and someone creates a sentence, each player then whispers it to the next person until the sentence is all the way around the circle. By the time the phrase gets to the last person in the circle it is often completely distorted from what the original sentence was. The same can be said of slavery's representation. If we think of the Black people who experienced slavery as the original player and their experience as the sentence, we see how over time it became distorted as it got passed around the circle. So, the question becomes how do we get back to the original sentence? Is it possible?

### **Difficult but Important**

The interpretation of slavery is difficult because slavery is not a highlight of United States history. It is a dark stain on the country's past that many have tried to wipe away or change. It cannot be changed. It can however be represented correctly to pay proper respect to those who dealt with its horrors. What does this mean for us citizens- museums are institutions that depend on community support. Therefore, it is the responsibility of museum goers to demand better of the museums they attend. What should the reader do about it The United States and slavery. Forever bound together. Even though centuries have passed since the abolishment of the peculiar institution it still finds itself at the heart of many issues facing society today.<sup>41</sup> In this same vein we see the complete erasure of slavery from sites that cannot help but be inexplicably

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<sup>41</sup> John E., Fleming, *African American Museums, History, and the American Ideal*, In *the Journal of American History* 81, no. 3 (1994): 1026.

tied to pain. For example, the idea of plantation weddings has become popularized. Many couples even celebrities have chosen to make these locations the place to have the happiest day of their life. And why not? These places are hundreds of years removed from their history. Nobody from this time slaver, enslaved, or otherwise is alive today so why does it matter? As mentioned by Tony Hall, in his speech on why a Liverpool Congress should apologize for slavery “it is a transgressional polity that exists beyond the lifespans of individual people.”<sup>42</sup>

Slavery brings up strong emotions in a lot of people who visit slavery museums. What these emotions are differ along racial lines as well. For Black Americans, discussing slavery can be traumatizing. It is hard to want to engage with content that shows a time when people who looked just like you were in such a dejected position in society. As National Museum of African American History and Culture curator, Rex Ellis says in reflection of his time interpreting slavery in costume, white people feel important when they dress in eighteenth century clothing while for someone like him, it only makes him feel like a slave.<sup>43</sup> As much as Americans would like to think that slavery is a non-issue, the future cannot begin until these issues are confronted head on.<sup>44</sup> These stories are so essential because they give credit to those who toiled so America could become what it is today. 1) Showing how African Americans have tirelessly served a country that continues to not accept us and 2) helps understand modern institutions.<sup>45</sup> We currently live in an economy which has been deemed an “experience economy” which means

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<sup>42</sup> Jessica, Moody, *Performing Memory: Local Slavery Memory in a Globalizing World*, In *the Persistence of Memory: Remembering Slavery in Liverpool, 'slaving Capital of the World'*, 189, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2020.

<sup>43</sup> American History TV C-Span, *Interpreting Slavery at Colonial Williamsburg*, 2019, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RfMN3Re82N0&list=PLD5EGh4Ftc\\_FWMIGtX49QMx\\_rvQQbzMUp&index=5](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RfMN3Re82N0&list=PLD5EGh4Ftc_FWMIGtX49QMx_rvQQbzMUp&index=5).

<sup>44</sup> Kristin L Gallas and James DeWolf Perry, eds., *Interpreting Slavery at Museums and Historic Sites* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), IX.

<sup>45</sup> Kristin L Gallas and James DeWolf Perry, eds., *Interpreting Slavery at Museums and Historic Sites* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 4.

that now more than ever people are willing to pay to have experiences over just purchasing goods.<sup>46</sup> The experiences with the most success are those which are “memorable, participatory, and help individuals connect to others.”<sup>47</sup> Museums focused on representing slavery have the ability to meet all these criteria and can therefore increase societies interaction with this topic.

Ideally the audience for museum exhibits about slavery would be the American public in general. These institutions aim to represent the collective story of our nation, so anyone from any background should feel comfortable visiting. Unfortunately, this has not historically been the case. There are several reasons for this. Museums are a form of entertainment and topics like these often bring up too much heavy emotion. In these spaces white people can feel as though they are being targeted while black people feel they are being reminded of a generational trauma. Factors like these can lead to an avoidance of such types of spaces. Slavery is hard to make a family friendly exhibit out of while maintaining historical accuracy.

### **Other Influences**

Even though slavery interpretation has improved, this is not representative of all historic sites.<sup>48</sup> All museums are not created equally. Despite the changes that a lot of major museums have made recently, they do not speak for all history museums in the southern United States. There are a lot of smaller museums, particularly historic house museums that are run in a much different way than most mainstream museums. These museums are often more at risk for the bias

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<sup>46</sup> Johnnetta B. Cole and Laura L. Lott, *Diversity, Equity, Accessibility, and Inclusion in Museums* (Lanham, MD: American Alliance of Museums Press, 2019), 61.

<sup>47</sup> Johnnetta B. Cole and Laura L. Lott, *Diversity, Equity, Accessibility, and Inclusion in Museums* (Lanham, MD: American Alliance of Museums Press, 2019), 61.

<sup>48</sup> Kristin L Gallas and James DeWolf Perry, eds., *Interpreting Slavery at Museums and Historic Sites* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), IX.

of a particular person just because there are fewer people around to verify content. People can create their own microcosms of history that perpetuate a narrative which can create a market for a specific audience. Since anyone can start a museum, it is fair to say that some people are less interested in the truth and more interested in perpetuating the narrative that they are comfortable with. Additionally, it is worth noting that aside from museums there are many Other Influences on Memory. Museums, of course, are not the singular place where people learn about historical events like slavery. As a result of this, there are many alternative tellings of history compared to the narrative featured in major history museums. These alternative histories which can at times be ahistorical create barriers to the change that many major museums are seeking to reflect. There are a lot of other influences on what people think of as history that museums have to contend with such as public monuments, school, literature, and movies. One of the most famous creators of southern memory when it comes to slavery can be seen in the popular novel by Margaret Mitchell titled, *Gone with the Wind*. In this romantic southern novel, antebellum life is idealized, and Black people are reduced to background players who are happy to be enslaved. Another popular alternative source is ghost tours. All across the south in historic towns, and sometimes at history museums, there are offerings for ghost tours that often document the experiences of African American enslaved peoples. Just how accurate these tours are is debatable. They often use stories of trauma as a way to gain more money. Companies can make up myths about slaves or histories and people continue to attend in an effort to have a good time. As far as education there has been just as much change as in the museum field. That is because over the years there have been many changes in the ways that slavery has been taught as a historical subject. This is another area where the Daughters of the Confederacy played a major role in how slavery was learned. Not only did they fund a massive number of monuments across

the south honoring confederate troops, but they also funded textbooks that promoted lost cause mythology. The lost cause is the notion that in the civil war the south was fighting for the noble cause of states' rights. The reason it is known as mythology is because the role of slavery in why the south went to war is often downplayed in this narrative. Another similar ideology held by southerners is the moonlight and magnolias mindset. This is close to lost cause ideas about the civil war because again there is a downplaying of how awful slavery was. These narratives ultimately seek to romanticize an ugly moment in US history. One of the most controversial elements of the southern plantation history museum is its field trips. Every year millions of children in the US get on a school bus and visit destinations outside of the classroom to supplement what they have learned. One type of location that kids of some schools' visit is plantation museums. Although these sites can be used to teach, it can also be a site of pain. Perhaps the most controversial element of trips like this are related to picking cotton.<sup>49</sup> Often on these types of visits students are encouraged or forced to pick cotton to experience it for themselves. The idea behind it is not inherently bad; what's the big deal about kids picking cotton for a few minutes? Often the narrative accompanying moments like this is that one will say to themselves "that's not so bad." It also doesn't bode well to have black children in the field doing something that their ancestors were forced to do. Generational trauma is the concept that trauma can be passed down through DNA. It is important to recognize these factors. For example, textbooks continue to be a source which has been criticized for their inaccuracy at times. Textbooks, like museums, change depending on the region they are meant for. In the past many textbooks have contributed to informing people's incorrect ideas about events like slavery.

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<sup>49</sup> Elizabeth Thomas, "Parents Outraged after 5th Graders in South Carolina Pick Cotton, Sing Songs on Field Trip," ABC News (ABC News Network, February 23, 2019), <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/parents-outraged-5th-graders-south-carolina-pick-cotton/story?id=61238078>.

In the south, some common textbook myths are related the idea that slavery was not that bad or that the civil war was not about slavery. This myth making continues in textbooks to this day. On these kinds of tours people can be looking to have a good time or simply seeking a story to tell when they go home. These places are predicated on making people not feel bad or awkward about a historical event. As a result of this people are able to exist in a bubble where they only consume content that agrees with their current worldview. Southern heritage creation in the south centered around family histories, plantation museums and inaccurate textbooks continues to influence how some people see themselves.

There will presumably always be small historic house museums that perpetuate stories that are not all inclusive. They will continue to survive in their insular communities who do not want to face the challenges that come with sharing the story of slavery in a full way with multiple perspectives. The only way to combat this is by putting forth other narratives and challenging these views. Although they might not convince everyone to change their views on history it at the very least forces them to grapple with the idea that there are other stories out there. Major cities that are interpreting slavery are those wherein which there has historically been a higher concentration of slaves. This is because these places hold a great deal of material culture related to this time period that other places lack.

## **Future**

By analyzing the guides that professionals in the field of museum studies are following today, it is possible to gain further insight into what is guiding their exhibitions and where they are headed in the future. Museums nowadays are seeking to embody what are called DEAI practices. These are practices set by the American Alliance of Museums. DEAI or Diversity,

Equity, Accessibility, and Inclusivity is all about ensuring that museums today are not the same as they have been in the past. Guides on these topics are especially important because they provide a resource not only for museums, but also the public. These books are accessible to a wide range of people and can serve any museum from the smallest to the largest. Many are dedicated specifically to interpreting hard histories surrounding events like slavery. An example can be seen in a series by the American association for state and local history (AASLH) Their series titled "Interpreting History" provides several guides on topics that museums have struggled to represent in the past. Podcasts are useful because they can be listened to wherever or whenever the user would like.

Another way that museums have changed is by implementing celebrations of black holidays like MLK Jr day, Juneteenth, black history month, and Kwanzaa. An example of this is the Atlanta History Center where MLK Jr day is a free day, which allows much more of the community to access it. As a result of this there have been many changes. One of the biggest is the push for a more diverse museum staff. The idea behind this is that as museums diversify their curators, educators, etc. the content of the museum itself will reflect this wider range of experiences. The way that this has been approached is by offering internships and fellowships directly targeted at minority students. An example of this can be seen in the development of the program at Spelman.<sup>50</sup> With this program museums have given black students more access to the museum field. Although this program is focused on art museums, its structure is more broadly applicable to the way that history museums can function to recruit more black people. This offers them the opportunity to gain experience in a career field where they have historically been

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<sup>50</sup> Johnnetta B. Cole and Laura L. Lott, *Diversity, Equity, Accessibility, and Inclusion in Museums* (Lanham, MD: American Alliance of Museums Press, 2019), 49-55.



excluded. The internet has been a major factor leading to changes in the telling of slavery's story in the US South.

Major change can also be seen in the greater levels of communication with marginalized communities. Museums have done a better job of consulting the communities whose stories they are telling. This can be seen in relation to many communities such as Indigenous peoples and Latinx communities. For history museums portraying slavery it can look like talking to the descendants of the enslaved or conducting oral history interviews with locals. This is a part of a larger push to radically change museums. Decolonizing museums is an issue that has come up in museums around the world. It simply means recognizing that historically a lot of museums have received their objects through ill-gotten means. In addition to this many curators, those who are telling the story, have not been members of the communities which they seek to represent. This has had large consequences for minority groups who feel that their story has been misrepresented over the years. Furthermore, this has had an even larger impact when one considers how larger the audience that museums reach are. This is why it is critical for museums to be places rooted in truth telling because it can have a long-term impact on people who are looking to museums for educational purposes. Museums about a certain group should be run by that group or at least heavily consulted. The events have not changed but the environment has. And it continues to change. Museums are not what they were one hundred years ago or even fifty years ago. That being said there is still much further to go.

The future of black representation in history museums can be seen in museums like the International African American Museum (Charleston, SC) and the Whitney Plantation (Louisiana). These museums exemplify the standards of the field today. Upon first glance it becomes clear that these institutions are very different from ones of the past. Some people feel

that museums are not useful in modern times and that they do not have a purpose in today's society. Why in a digital age when everything is available in a single click would anyone need to visit a museum? Some even feel that it is exploitative to continue to profit off of the stories of people who were never given their dues in their lifetime.

So how exactly do we fix this division in what museum goers of different backgrounds experience? Museums should work to challenge their visitors. The positive response to museums studying slavery in new ways show that Americans are ready and open to these perspectives.<sup>51</sup> What is needed most in regard to history museums portraying slavery is revolutionary action. Museums must be held accountable for their actions. If they do not display the story that is fully representative of our story, they have no purpose. The main call is to members of the community being represented. It can be difficult with all of the issues plaguing the Black community to feel as though museum reform is one of the most important actions to take, but it is. Museums tell the story of who we are, not only this, but they also help create a context for Black Americans, who have historically been denied their right to a cultural history, to connect to their ancestors.

It is the duty of every museum goer to be conscientious of the content they consume. Gone should be the days of listening to a tour guide speak for an hour on a topic without questioning them. Part of the importance of these sites is in creating a space to engage in healthy dialogue and to learn. Visitors should question the institutions they visit and look to the primary sources used to learn about these events themselves. Museums are only one piece of the puzzle when it comes to understanding our rich complex history. If something that is said is questionable or uncomfortable, no one should just go along with it. That is the time to call these

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<sup>51</sup> John E., Fleming, "African-American Museums, History, and the American Ideal," *The Journal of American History* 81, no. 3 (1994): 1026.

institutions out in hopes that they can learn from their mistakes and improve. Only through the collaborative efforts of both museums and museum goers can real long-lasting change hope to be seen in these places.

Implementation of these practices and more in regard to Black Americans is a part of a larger project referred to as the decolonization of museums. Decolonizing museums is an effort to fundamentally change how museums operate to improve conditions for marginalized communities. Other groups like Indigenous peoples are also a major part of this movement to bring change to museums. Through hiring more Indigenous curators and returning stolen objects, the representation of this group has also continued to evolve. That said there is still a long way to go when it comes to represented groups like Black and Indigenous peoples because there is a legacy of pain surrounding these stories in America. Making changes in how we curate to move from a purely western mode of style will continue to improve the perspectives shown in these spaces.<sup>52</sup>

In addition to this struggle, work is also being done to link the struggles of other marginalized communities to the Black struggle. For example, more work is to be done for accessibility for the differently abled.<sup>53</sup> Much of the process for inclusion looks the same as far as consulting members from that community and hiring them as a part of the staff. By creating solidarity between movements like this, marginalized groups are able to consolidate some power and improve conditions for all. This is not to say that there are not some movements when one

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<sup>52</sup> Michelle McGeough, "Indigenous Curatorial Practices and Methodologies." *Wicazo Sa Review* 27, no. 1 (2012): 13-20.

<sup>53</sup> Johnnetta B. Cole and Laura L. Lott, *Diversity, Equity, Accessibility, and Inclusion in Museums* (Lanham, MD: American Alliance of Museums Press, 2019), 57-60.

group should be at the forefront but recognizing the similarities between oppressed groups can have a positive impact on creating lasting change.

People who support exhibits on slavery are those who are interested in telling the full story of the history that our nation has to offer. Some people may feel that too much time is spent on discussing slavery. They argue that if we keep discussing the past that we will never be able to move into the future. Other people believe that museums are no longer relevant in a world where most things are just a google search away. However, both of these ideas could not be further from what is needed most now in regard to public history. It is not possible to move forward without looking to the past. By acknowledging the role that slavery played in the founding of our nation, we are able to discuss solutions for reforming these systems.

## **Conclusion**

People have long noticed the issues that museums have in representing the Black community in museums. Through looking at the literature that has been written on the topic of slavery in southern history museums, both by scholars and visitors, it becomes clear that change is needed. Museums have evolved somewhat. More museums continue to adopt the practices of telling a story of slavery that is less centered on the slave owners. Reasons for these changes range from hopes of increasing revenue to a desire to educate the public or both. The reasons for these issues stem from larger societal issues such as racism and classism. Overall, museums have utilized many of the practices that were recommended by scholars to update their narratives. Yet they still have a long way to go. As recently as the summer of 2020, citizens still had issues with representations of black Americans particularly at plantation historic sites in the south. Museums are mirrors of where our society stands. They are meant to reflect the ideals and beliefs of the

community. As we continue to see the empowerment of more voices, these institutions will only grow in strength. By the year 2050, museum audiences may be mostly people of color.

Therefore, it is imperative that museums continue on the track they are on otherwise the audience could choose not to interact with the content they are offering. Though it seems there will never be one narrative about slavery that every museum follows to a tee and people can always choose to consume content that is ahistorical, these improvements are necessary. Every museum has its own purposes, audience, and perspectives that guide its decisions about what to display. Slavery ostensibly ended in 1865, but even today as the 150th anniversary has passed we are still seeing the lasting effects of this institution on our society today. However, it is clear that many museums are making the choice to move forward by becoming a space that is more open to more perspectives than ever before. As museums continue this trend, they will continue to grow their audience and be ever more representative of the blending of cultures that the United States is.



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I pledge that I have acted honorably. - Nyree Dowdy



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