# Raising the Dead
## Walls of Names as Mnemonic Devices to Commemorate Enslaved People

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The article examines walls of names commemorating the victims of Atlantic slavery and the slave trade in US heritage sites and museums. By exploring how, during the twentieth century, memorials of wars and genocides in Europe, Africa, and the Americas have featured walls of names to honor the dead, this article proposes a genealogy of the walls of names, by emphasizing the various contexts in which this device has been employed. Whereas naming has been a long-standing practice to honor the dead since antiquity, naming enslaved individuals in ship manifests or farm books was part of a process of dehumanization. Yet, during the last 30 years, emerging initiatives commemorating slavery incorporated walls of names to recognize the humanity of enslaved men, women, and children. By looking at a few case studies in the United States, the article seeks to understand how effectively this specific kind of memorial has been employed to recognize and pay homage to the victims of slavery.

For many years, the tragic history of Atlantic chattel slavery remained concealed from the public space of former slave societies and societies where slavery existed. Yet, in the last three decades an increasing number of organized groups and social actors have engaged themselves in activities to commemorate the victims of these human atrocities. This article examines how walls of names have been employed as mnemonic devices in memorials and museums commemorating the victims of Atlantic slavery and the slave trade. I explore how slavery has been commemorated in the United States over the last three decades, while situating this trend in the international context. Relying on the study of various initiatives and the public views of activists, curators, government officials, and other organizations, I examine examples of museums, memorials, and heritage sites that use walls of names as mnemonic devices. By focusing on the United States, I establish connections between these memorials and name-listing practices retrieved in other memorials. I underscore how these initiatives establish intentional and unintentional connections between the commemoration of slavery and the Atlantic slave trade and the memorialization of the Holocaust and other genocides, reinforcing dialogues embodying the idea of multidirectional memory (Rothberg 2009). I argue that although paradoxically drawing from ancient plantation inventories, documents that dehumanized enslaved individuals by listing them as commodities, walls of names of slavery and the Atlantic slave trade are designed to establish a link of empathy between visitors to these memorials and the deceased victims of slavery. Ultimately, although not always successfully, by individualizing the victims of the Atlantic slave trade and slavery, the creation of walls of names attempts to humanize enslaved men, women, and children. Therefore, by naming the victims of the Atlantic slave trade and slavery, the creation of "walls of names" can be conceived as a form of symbolic reparations, here understood as "redress of physical, material, or moral damage inflicted on an individual [or] a group of individuals" (Araujo 2017:2).

## Transnational Commemoration of Slavery

Different social groups, racialized either as Whites or Blacks, have shaped the collective memories of slavery and the Atlantic slave trade in the United States. Whereas the personal and collective memories of individuals and groups remained alive for a very long time in the private realm, during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries they started occupying the public sphere by eventually shaping a public memory and, occasionally, an official memory of slavery and the slave trade.

Unlike other areas of the Atlantic world, starting in the eighteenth century the United States championed the publication of memoirs by former slaves, leading to the emergence of the Black slave narrative as a literary genre (Davis and Gates 1985:xxii). In 1935 during the Great Depression, as part of the New Deal, US president Franklin Delano Roosevelt launched the Federal Writers' Project, an initiative aimed at funding written works and supporting writers. From 1936 to 1938, men and women employed in this project were assigned to interview former slaves in 17 Southern states. Despite the biases of the interviewers, this ambitious and unprecedented initiative produced the most comprehensive collection of slave testimonies in the Americas, therefore providing instruments to understand the collective memory of former slaves in the United States (Stewart 2016:4).

On the eve of the Second World War, slavery became the object of representations in US popular culture as well. Embodying elements of the collective memory of slavery carried out by White descendants of slave owners, novels (Mitchell 1936)

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and movies such as *Gone with the Wind* (1939) conveyed a nostalgic image of the old slaveholding South. Reinforcing depictions of enslaved men and women as submissive subjects, the United States exported these representations of slavery to other former slave societies such as Brazil (Araujo 2014:180). Yet, with the rise of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s, African American activists, writers, artists, and other social actors challenged White renderings of passive enslaved persons. Probably one of the most successful examples of this transformation is Alex Haley's novel of 1976 *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* and its television adaptation aired on ABC in 1977. Both the book and the television series promoted new African American representations of enslaved men and women that emphasized resistance and resilience. As Alondra Nelson has shown (2016:71), Haley's book contributed to the increasing interest of African Americans in genealogy. Both in the novel and the television adaptation, the central character Kunta Kinte (Haley's alleged ancestor), refuses to adopt the name Toby imposed on him by his owner, by continuously asserting his African name (Haley 1976:275). *Roots* emphasized that for enslaved Africans as for anybody else, the names they received by their parents while on African soil were deeply connected to their history and identities. By claiming and naming Kunta Kinte as his ancestor, Haley recovered a story that was doomed to be lost. To some extent, the issue of naming present in the novel (and the television series) was in dialogue with Haley's previous coauthored book, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, published in 1964. The book told the story of civil rights activist and leader of Nation of Islam Malcolm X (1925–1965), who chose to replace his last name with the letter X by noting that it "replaced the white slavemaster name of 'Little' which some blue-eyed devil name Little had imposed upon my paternal forebears" (Haley and Malcolm X 1964:229). Unlike Malcolm X, Kunta Kinte knew his name, and decided to not forget it. Ultimately, the novel and the series underscored that by keeping and remembering their names, enslaved Africans resisted against enslavement.

The decolonization of Africa and the Caribbean also transformed the memorialization of slavery. If until the first half of the twentieth century most monuments conveyed submissive representations by often portraying crouched and bent bodies of enslaved men, women, and children (Araujo 2010, 2014), starting in the 1960s an emerging public memory of slavery favored the commemoration of the enslaved who resisted bondage. Yet, figurative representations of bondspeople dominated such initiatives. Especially in the Caribbean, several monuments rendered representations of men and women who resisted bondage and fought against slavery. But despite the exception of the Caribbean and South American contexts, the presence of ordinary enslaved men and women tended to be erased from heritage sites such as former plantations or urban settings where slavery existed. Either in Brazil, Colombia, or the United States, the crucial role of the slave workforce and their numerical importance in slave societies were rarely recognized. But in the last three decades this context started to gradually change. The end of the Cold War disrupted the isolation of Eastern European countries and was decisive for the end of dictatorial regimes in Latin America and Africa. This process favored the visibility of historically excluded groups that now could assert their identities in the public space. This general framework also propelled international exchanges between these groups, increasing global connections among Black organizations and populations of African descent that during the Cold War were often prevented from denouncing racism under the threat of being charged of involvement in Communist activities. On the one hand, Black social actors and activists progressively started occupying the public space to claim the history of men and women who resisted slavery. On the other hand, historians were pressured by this new activism and began paying more attention to individual trajectories of enslaved men and women who coped with the hardships of slavery by emancipating themselves or by negotiating better work and living conditions. These scholars started relying on a myriad of firsthand narratives and testimonies by enslaved people, especially in the United States, by giving a central place to their lived experiences (Berlin 1998; Berlin, Favreau, and Miller 1998).

Former plantation heritage sites remain the most important and popular venues associated with the US slave past. Still today these sites of work, torture, and terror attract thousands of tourists to Southern states every year. During the 1990s, heritage sites of old plantations of tobacco, wheat, and cotton open to visitation in the United States also started giving more visibility to the institution of slavery, a dimension once totally evacuated from these spaces that have been rather designed to underscore the luxurious lives of slaveholding elites (Butler 2001; Cook 2015:4). During the tours of Southern plantations, docents often made references to slavery by using the passive voice (Eichstedt and Small 2002). Still, despite older timid attempts and more recent robust efforts to put emphasis on how slavery was central to these plantations (Cook 2015:2; Modlin et al. 2018:3–4) that often utilized the workforce of many dozens of enslaved persons, these men, women, and children continued to be portrayed as nameless individuals. Even visitors to richer plantation sites such as Thomas Jefferson's Monticello, which over the last two decades made considerable efforts to interpret slavery, continued the outcry about how these sites whitewashed its history (Leflouria 2018; Melton 2015). Ultimately, to a greater or lesser extent even the sites that brought slavery to light continued perpetuating the dehumanization and the invisibility of enslaved men and women (Modlin et al. 2018) by rarely seeking to display their personal lives and trajectories and the ways they lived, coped with, or fought against slavery.

## A Genealogy of Walls of Names

Thomas A. Laqueur (2015:79) argued that the work of the dead "is possible only because they remain so deeply and complexly present and because they share death with its avatars:

ancestors, ghosts, memory, and history." Therefore, because the work of memory is rooted in bringing the past to the present, the places where the dead were put to rest over the centuries, such as tombstone-covered floors and walls of churches, churchyards, and cemeteries, constitute exemplary sites of memory and commemoration.

Since antiquity, the concern with burying the dead is perceived as a right imposed on humanity (Laqueur 2015:93; Lawers and Zemour 2016:12). Pre-Columbian societies in the Americas interred their deceased members by often using sumptuous ceramic funerary urns. West African and West Central African societies that provided enslaved men, women, and children brought to the Americas also developed elaborate mortuary ceremonies and burial practices to honor the dead (Jindra and Noret 2011:18). With the emergence of written systems among different societies came the practice of adding names and inscriptions to tombstones. These epitaphs were a means of keeping the dead as a permanent part of the world of the living, reflecting the desire of giving them humanity and immortality (Laqueur 2015:372). In ancient Greece, listing names of war victims in poems, monuments, and tombstones was intended to pay homage to those who died in battle (Laqueur 2015:377).

In Brazil, as in other parts of Latin America, freedpeople as well as enslaved men and women joined Catholic brotherhoods to have access to a dignified burial service (Kiddy 2002:157; Soares 2000:144–145). Yet in most cases slave owners and slave merchants carelessly discarded enslaved bodies in common burial grounds and unmarked graveyards. In 1991, dozens of remains of enslaved individuals were unearthed in Manhattan in New York City, giving birth to the African Burial Ground (Araujo 2014:93; Frohne 2015). In 1996, the Cemetery of New Blacks, where the dead bodies of enslaved Africans recently disembarked were disposed, was also uncovered in the Brazilian city of Rio de Janeiro (Araujo 2014:98). In the United States, slaveholders consented to provide corpses of enslaved individuals for dissection in medical schools of the most prestigious universities in the country (Berry 2017:159–160; Wilder 2013:200). To this day, newspaper articles monthly report newly found unmarked slave graves in cities involved in the Atlantic slave trade such as Lagos (Portugal), São Paulo (Brazil), and Annapolis, Maryland (United States).

After the Second World War, a growing number of heritage sites, memorials, and museums, especially those associated with the Holocaust, apartheid, and the Vietnam War, included walls of names listing the victims of these atrocities. Indeed, as early as 1945, pre-state Israel initiated Holocaust commemoration through projects aimed at creating permanent memorials (Ofer 2000:26). Starting in the 1950s, plaques displaying the names of victims of the Holocaust were unveiled in "synagogues, cemeteries, public buildings, and Jewish National Fund groves" (Ofer 2000:32). In 1957 the government of Israel unveiled the Yad Vashem in Jerusalem, labeled as the first official memorial especially constructed to commemorate the martyrs of the Holocaust and Second World War. Taken from a verse of the

book of Isaiah, in its literal translation from Hebrew to English the designation Yad Vashem, meaning "a monument and a name," evokes the practice of naming as the best way to perpetuate the memory of the Holocaust victims. Indeed, naming has been at the heart of Yad Vashem's mission. Since its inception Yad Vashem launched the project Pages of Testimony, a one-page form that allowed victims of the Holocaust to submit victims' names and biographical information. In 1968, Yad Vashem created a names room storing nearly 800,000 names and testimonies organized in alphabetical order. Eventually in 1977, Yad Vashem dedicated the Hall of Names building featuring the names of nearly 1 million victims of the Holocaust that in the next decades were gradually added to a database.

Renovated in 2005, Yad Vashem currently occupies an area of nearly 45 acres and is composed of multiple sections that include two museums, an archive, a library, and a synagogue, as well as monuments, memorials, and squares. Since the renovation, the Hall of Names was incorporated into the new Yad Vashem's Holocaust History Museum. Upon entering the memorial, visitors reach a circular ramp. The ceiling over the circular ramp, a 10-meter conic structure, displays hundreds of photographs and texts extracted from the Pages of Testimony. The space below the ramp also has a conic format carved in the mountain bedrock. Filled with water, this pool-like structure reflects the images displayed on the upper conic ceiling. In addition to visually displaying hundreds of victims' names and portraits on the upper conic wall, the memorial's outer walls consist of shelves holding the physical copies of Pages of Testimonies covering information for nearly 4 million of the 6 million Jewish victims of the Holocaust. At the exit of the circular ramp, visitors reach a computer center where they can consult the entire collection of Pages of Testimonies by accessing the Central Database of Shoah Victims' Names.

Nearly 925,000 tourists, including descendants of Holocaust survivors from around the world, visit the Yad Vashem on an annual basis (Yad Vashem 2017:7). Drawing from the ancient practice of listing names on memorial tombstones, the international outreach of Yad Vashem's Hall of Names may have influenced the emergence of similar commemorative devices remembering the victims of human atrocities. However, Yad Vashem introduces at least two new features to the conventional wall of names. If genocides are characterized by their massive dimension through the killing of large groups of nameless individuals, the memorial subverts this logic. By identifying each victim with a name and a portrait, as in an identity card (de Jong 2018:9), these victims of the Holocaust regain the humanity that was taken from them. Moreover, the memorial also complexifies and expands the notion of walls of names by offering the visitors a physical repository of biographical information as well as a digital archive accessible via the online database.

In the Americas the most iconic memorial embracing the concept of inscribing names on walls is the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, opened in 1982. Designed by Maya Ying Lin, an American architect of Chinese descent, the memorial emerged

as an initiative led by a group of US Vietnam War veterans through the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund. The memorial occupies a 2-acre area at the National Mall, a vast zone at the heart of Washington, DC, where many other national memorials, monuments, and museums are also established. The monument is an abstract structure that evokes a tombstone. The two walls form a V of approximately 75 meters in length (Sturken 1991:119). The structure is divided into 72 panels currently listing 58,220 names of US Vietnam War veterans according to the date they were declared dead or missing. Because of its bright surface, people walking along the pathway can see their own images reflected on the black walls. Podiums placed at both sides of the memorial allow the visitors to identify specific names. In contrast with the Yad Vashem's Hall of Names, the memorial embraces a more conventional approach of commemoration. Although its location in the National Mall gives it the highest national official status, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial is not visible from a distance. Likewise, its horizontal shape and black color contrast with many other nearby vertically oriented memorials and monuments (Doss 2010:129; Sturken 1991:120). Further, a number of conservative veterans contested the memorial's abstract design that, according to them, lacked heroic representations of Vietnam War veterans. In an op-ed article, veteran Tom Carhart denounced the jury that selected the memorial design for being composed only of civilians "who had seen no military service in Vietnam" and defined the memorial as a "black gash of shame and sorrow." According to the veteran, the winning design lacked "heroic figures rising in triumph" such as the ones found in the Marine Corps War Memorial depicting the raising of a US flag on Iwo Jima, and instead was an antiheroic representation featuring black walls, "the universal color of sorrow and dishonor" (Carhart 1981:23). Consequently, in 1984 a bronze statue depicting three soldiers conceived by artist Frederick Hart was added to the original memorial. Still, as Annie Coombes has pointed out, "it is the wall, and not the figurative group, that enables ritual reappropriation and animation" (Coombes 2003:91). Visitors to the memorial can personally engage with the deceased veterans whose names are engraved on the walls by seeing their own image reflected on the granite's surface. They can also leave notes, flowers, and other mementos at the memorial's foot. Nearly 3 million tourists visit the memorial every year. Yet, international tourists without any personal connections with American citizens killed during the war can hardly create a link of empathy with the deceased veterans.

Alternative memorials also incorporated a variety of versions of the wall of names as mnemonic devices to honor victims of war and other human atrocities. Starting in 1992, the German artist Gunter Demnig developed the project *Stolpersteine* (literally translated as "stumbling stones"). Again, borrowing from the prophet Isaiah (8:14), a *Stolperstein*, "a symbolic stone over which a wrongdoer or an entire people living in violation of God's law must stumble is a reminder to live life in fear of God and a gauge that tells whether one has lived a proper life or not"

(Harjes 2005:144). Contrasting with state-sponsored robust memorials like Yad Vashem's Hall of Names, a Stolperstein is a simple device paying homage to a single individual (Cook and van Riemsdijk 2014:139). It consists of a concrete cube bearing a brass plate memorializing a victim of the Holocaust and placed near the individual's last place of residence or work. Although the project started in Berlin and Cologne, to this day Demnig has laid nearly 70,000 brass plates in more than 280 cities across Europe. Containing the victim's name as well as the dates of birth and death, the plates fulfill the function of tombstones for murdered men, women, and children who never had access to a proper burial service.

In the twenty-first century, ordinary citizens and governments sponsored many other initiatives paying homage to victims of atrocities that also include walls of names. For example, in 2005, the Shoah Memorial in Paris dedicated its wall of names listing 76,000 Jewish victims, including 11,000 children, who were deported from France during the Second World War. The memorial is composed of three massive limestone walls. The victims' first names, surnames, and dates of birth are inscribed on both sides of each wall, all of which are divided into 30 rectangular sections organized by year of deportation. In 2006, the Wall of the Righteous was unveiled along the Allée des Justes de France (France's Righteous Alley), a walkway alongside the memorial. Inscribed in the landscape of a neighborhood where other markers remind passersby of the incarceration and deportation of Jewish men, women, and children, the wall bears the names of 3,900 men and women who helped save Jews in France during the Second World War. On a weekly basis, survivors of the Holocaust and their descendants visit the memorial, look for the names of their relatives, and leave them notes, mementos, and flowers.

In 2011, the National September 11 Memorial was dedicated in Lower Manhattan in New York City to commemorate the victims of the terrorist attack against the two towers of the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001 (Young 2018). Occupying the area where the twin towers were once located, the memorial commemorates the 2,977 victims killed in 2001 and the six victims of the site's bombing carried out on February 26, 1993. Reflecting Absence, as the memorial was named, consists of two reflecting pools, each one measuring nearly 4,000 square meters. The two pools are placed within the footprints of the two destroyed towers, and their edges are composed of bronze panels where the engraved names of each victim killed during the attacks offer a different format for the wall of names. Visitors to the memorial include the relatives and friends of the victims of the two terrorist attacks, but also millions of tourists from around the world. More than a site of meditation, visitors can find the names of those who were killed and engage with the written representation of each victim in a more personal way. Here, because of significance of the tragedy for the city of New York and the world, the names allow visitors to personally engage with the enormous memorial that not only corresponds to the size of the buildings destroyed but also to the numbers of lives taken by the terrorists.

## Walls of Names: Paying Homage to the Enslaved

Naming became a major trend in memorials unveiled during the second half of the twentieth century (Doss 2010:150–151). Gradually recognized as the best means to honor victimized men, women, and children, walls of names break with the long-standing tradition of figurative structures representing human figures. Yet the creators of memorials and the communities behind their conception did not fully abandon figurative representations but, rather, incorporated them into the walls of names, suggesting a persisting perception that abstract structures and names alone are not always sufficient to mobilize visitors to engage with slave memorials. Although naming invests honored victims with the humanity taken from them, in the context of the Atlantic slave trade (as Malcolm X's case is an example), naming enslaved individuals was also a dehumanizing act. Slave merchants and slave owners stripped away the original names of African-born enslaved individuals by imposing on them new Christian names. Likewise, the practice of recording names of enslaved individuals reinforced dehumanization. Bondspeople very often carried the same names. Identified through physical characteristics, enslaved people were listed in ship manifests and farm books as ordinary commodities. Yet lists of names of enslaved men, women, and children appear in Catholic churches' baptism books and death records.

Despite the problems associated with the practice of listing names, the establishment of walls of names as mnemonic devices in slave heritage sites, memorials, and museums emerged as a response to social actors who demanded making slavery visible in the public space. Problematizing long-lasting historical narratives in which enslaved individuals have been portrayed as nameless victims, public historians, designers, curators, heritage site managers, and docents labored to acknowledge the presence of slavery in these sites' grounds, to emphasize the humanity of enslaved individuals and to perpetuate their memory.

The United Kingdom is among the first European countries to engage with its Atlantic slave-trading past. The economic prosperity of slave ports such as Liverpool, London, and Bristol was deeply associated with the wealth produced by the work of enslaved men, women, and children, especially in the West Indies. During the 1990s, when the public memory of slavery started surfacing in societies involved in the Atlantic slave trade, Black activists pressured the city council of Bristol to put in place initiatives aimed at acknowledging the city's involvement in the human trade. In 1997, the Georgian House Museum (that occupies the old residence of the slave merchant John Pinney) unveiled in one of its upper floors the small exhibition *Slavery and John Pinney* (Chivallon 2001:353). The exhibition, updated in 2018, consists of one long horizontal panel displaying texts and images that narrate Pinney's involvement in the Atlantic slave trade. One long vertical panel, "Enslaved People of the Pinney Plantation," features the names of 903 enslaved individuals who, between the 1670s and 1834, lived on Pinney's estate (also known as Mountravers Plantation) on the island of Nevis in the West Indies. Intended to acknowledge the crucial role of slavery in building Pinney's wealth, the decontextualized list of names instead reproduces the model of plantation inventory. By listing first names and unnamed individuals, this first attempt to give bondspeople an identity fails to honor men, women, and children who lived in slavery.

One of the first walls of names that dignifies enslaved individuals was unveiled in the Iziko Slave Lodge Museum in Cape Town, South Africa. Although Cape Town did not export enslaved people to the Americas, the colony was not dissociated from the mechanisms of the Atlantic slave trade. The Iziko Slave Lodge Museum is a seventeenth-century building where the Dutch East India Company accommodated its slaves. In 2006 the museum unveiled *Remembering Slavery* (North 2017:87), a new permanent exhibition telling the local history of slavery. The new exhibition features the Column of Memory, an interactive lit cylindrical structure composed of several rings bearing the names of most of the enslaved men, women, and children who were held at the Slave Lodge. Likewise, on the Church Square, just behind the museum, nine blocks of black granite of different heights commemorate slavery by presenting various dimensions of life under slavery. Again, two additional granite blocks pay homage to the enslaved kept at the Slave Lodge by displaying their names.

In the United States other heritage sites created similar rooms to honor the enslaved people who lived and worked in their premises. The Royall House and Slave Quarters in Medford, Massachusetts, is one of these initiatives. A National Historic Landmark, the mansion is the only surviving built structure with urban slave quarters in the North of the United States. The house was part of a farm owned by Isaac Royall, a British planter established in Antigua, who moved to the United States in 1737, bringing with him 27 enslaved persons. Royall's son, Isaac Royall Jr., inherited his father's assets after his death and bequeathed land to Harvard University. Today the mansion, transformed into a museum, is among the few sites to highlight the importance of slavery in making the wealth of the North of the United States. In the last few years, one entire room of the mansion was reorganized to honor the enslaved woman Belinda, who is known as among the first freedpersons to petition the state to obtain finance reparations for slavery (Araujo 2017:49–50). The big building that once housed the slave quarters is preserved and features a large panel displaying the names of nearly 60 enslaved men, women, and children who lived and worked in the house.

A similar initiative can also be found at the Oak Alley Plantation in Vacherie, Louisiana. Made famous as a filming location for Hollywood motion pictures such as *Interview with the Vampire* (1994), for many decades the plantation's staff failed to display the history of slavery and the enslaved population who lived and worked in the estate, to focus instead on the lives of planters and slave owners. In the 1990s the staff started discussing incorporating slavery in the plantation's narrative, in part to respond to visitors' criticism (Hanna 2015:6). In 2013 the exhibition *Slavery at Oak Alley* was unveiled (Hanna

2015:1). Spread along six replicas of slave cabins, the exhibition comprises a Names Wall where the names of 198 enslaved men, women, and children who worked on the plantation are finally recognized and honored. In addition to the display is a statement that also acknowledges this past erasure (Hanna 2015:11). Like many other heritage sites and museums in the United States featuring similar panels that play the role of a wall of names, the displays at the Royall House and the Oak Alley Plantation are inspired by the inventory format of farm books that list enslaved individuals as simple commodities. Here, however, they are intended to humanize and commemorate these men, women, and children.

Despite these marginal initiatives, the Whitney Plantation Museum in Wallace, Louisiana, is the first and most significant US private initiative featuring not one but three walls of names honoring enslaved people. Nearly 35 miles from New Orleans (Amsdem 2015), the site was designated by its creator as a "plantation museum." The estate was originally named Haydel Plantation, for the name of its first owner, the German planter Ambrose Heidel, who settled in Louisiana in 1721. The Haydels (whose family name spelling changed to Haydel in the second generation) owned the property until the Civil War, but in 1867 they sold it to Brandish Johnson, who renamed it Whitney to pay homage to his grandson Harry Whitney (Seck 2014). In 1999, John Cummings, a retired trial lawyer and real estate magnate of Irish descent, purchased the property to diversify his investments. In the next few years, he decided to transform the estate into a plantation museum, and he made a total investment of more than US$8.5 million to restore buildings and purchase artifacts. With the support of historian Ibrahima Seck (Whitney's director of research), Cummings also fostered research about the site (Commander 2018:34). Large audiences also became familiar with the plantation because the site served as the setting for the film *Django Unchained* (2012) by Quentin Tarantino.

The Whitney Plantation opened to the public on December 7, 2014 (Amsdem 2015). The site comprises several original and newly built structures, including a visitor's center, a big house, several pigeonniers, a kitchen, a barn, a blacksmith shop, a reconstructed church, and slave cabins brought from other plantations. Like other Southern plantations, Whitney targets an audience of White tourists. A recent survey shows that most visitors to the Whitney Plantation are White college-educated women in their forties (Alderman et al. 2015). Still, African Americans visit the site in school groups or with family members, and they very often leave testimonies on social media about these excursions.

Between 2014 and 2017 the plantation welcomed 110,000 visitors, but today an average of 11,000 tourists visit the site every month. Contrasting with other similar sites that glorify wealthy planters and very often a nostalgic narrative of the US South slave past, Whitney Plantation seeks to present bondage from the point of view of enslaved children, who in this context become the "special carriers" of cultural memory of slavery (Assmann 2011:39). To achieve this goal, Cummings and his

staff used the narratives of former enslaved individuals from the Federal Writers' Project, a choice justified because these interviewees experienced slavery when they were children.

The selected approach is not new. In the US Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC, each visitor receives one of the 600 identification cards intended to create a link of empathy with individual Holocaust victims.[1] This narrative strategy is based on the idea that "behind every name there is a story," an effort to write biographical essays of each of these victims. Likewise at Whitney, visitors are assigned a card displaying the name of a former enslaved person who was interviewed as part of the Federal Writers' Project as well as a picture of one of the various clay sculptures representing children spread throughout the site. This approach assumes that the plantation can create empathy among racist and White supremacist visitors (Commander 2018:36).

The visit to the plantation starts at the visitor's center, where guests can spend as much time as they want to visit an exhibition about the history of slavery. Following this introduction, the guided tour starts at the Antioch Church, a building constructed by freedpeople on the east bank of the Mississippi River in 1870 and whose original structure was donated to and relocated to Whitney Plantation. The building displays clay sculptures of enslaved children, a device that aims at giving back the humanity to those who were killed in the plantation and to create a connection with the slave narratives featured along the tour. After being introduced to these life-size figurative representations of enslaved children, visitors are led to the Wall of Honor (fig. 1), the first memorial featuring a wall of names at Whitney Plantation. A two-sided concrete wall nearly 2 meters high, the memorial pays homage to the 350 enslaved men, women, and children who lived and labored on the plantation. One side of the wall contains names of African-born enslaved persons, distributed along 13 vertical black granite panels and leaving a vacant space on one additional panel to evoke the names of those enslaved who remain unknown. The opposite side displays 14 panels with names of bondspeople born in the United States and who arrived at the plantation through the domestic slave trade. In addition to the first names in languages as varied as English, Spanish, and French, further information includes skills, date of birth, and region of provenance, especially for African-born individuals. Both sides of the wall also contain passages taken from the slave narratives of the Federal Writers' Project, even though none of the interviewees were ever enslaved at Whitney Plantation. Some engravings and photographs depicting enslaved individuals also illustrate the panels. Newspaper articles reported that the Wall of Honor memorial was inspired by the design of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial (Amsdem 2015). Yet Cummings, who designed the memorial, states the wall is, rather, intended to mirror the graves of slaveholders in Louisiana cemeteries that,

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1. US Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington, DC, "Behind Every Name a Story," https://www.ushmm.org/remember/holocaust-reflections -testimonies/behind-every-name-a-story.

Figure 1. Hall of Honor, Whitney Plantation, Wallace, Louisiana. Photograph by Elsa Hahne. Courtesy of the Whitney Plantation.

according to him, carry similar formal characteristics. Unlike the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, the Wall of Honor works as a pedagogic device that, although giving an identity to enslaved individuals, is only presented to the visitors after the introductory exhibition and the contact with the figurative sculptures representing enslaved children.

The second memorial presenting names of enslaved individuals is the Allées Gwendolyn Midlo Hall (fig. 2), named for the historian who created the Afro-Louisiana History and Genealogy database. The memorial is composed of 18 concrete L-shaped wall segments of nearly 2 meters each, evenly placed on both sides of a rectangular grass field. Each segment contains 12 horizontal black granite panels that together display the names of 107,000 Louisiana enslaved individuals currently stored in the database. Like the Yad Vashem's Hall of Names, this memorial draws from sources stored in physical and digital archives. But unlike these repositories that very often represent nameless and faceless slaves referred to as commodities, the Allées seek to give them back their humanity and make them permanently visible.

The third memorial featuring a wall of names at Whitney Plantation pays homage to enslaved children by following a trend visible in other initiatives such as the Memorial to the Murdered Children of Besieged Sarajevo. The emphasis on enslaved children at Whitney Plantation, whose statues are also dispersed throughout the estate and especially inside the reconstructed church, to tell the story of slavery at the property is an approach designed to move White and Black audiences. The Field of Angels (fig. 3) covers a quadrangle area surrounded by a low wall. Carrying formal features similar to the two previous

memorials, this third wall of names honors 2,200 children who were born into slavery in Louisiana and died before the age of three. The names engraved on the memorial's granite plaques were registered in birth records of the Archdiocese of New Orleans. Created by Rod Moorhead, the sculpture depicts a bare-breasted Black female angel carrying a baby in her arms, evoking angel figures found on opulent Southern tombstones.

Whitney Plantation introduces walls of names as commemorative devices to honor enslaved men, women, and children in unprecedented ways. As stated by Michelle Commander, establishing these memorials is certainly "a gesture of recognition that is unique given the dearth of records kept by those who bothered to refer to human property by name" (Commander 2018:37). But are these walls of names successful in humanizing enslaved individuals and creating empathy among visitors? Could the repetition of this mechanism end up trivializing the wall of names as a potent device to memorialize bondspeople? Moreover, because the plantation is a private site, several factors limit the visitors' engagement with the memorials featuring walls of names. Tourists must purchase a ticket costing US$22.00 and can only visit the plantation by following the 90-minute guided tour, allowing them to spend only a few minutes seeing each memorial. Visiting the Whitney Plantation's walls of names is also a ritualized experience. In contrast with other memorials in which the descendants of the victims participated in the creation process, the memorials of Whitney Plantation did not derive from an initiative led by the descendants of enslaved people. Unlike other plantation sites and other memorials in open spaces, because all visits are guided and have a limited duration, guests are not allowed to freely visit the

Figure 2. Allées Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, Whitney Plantation, Wallace, Louisiana. Photograph by user Redditaddict69, 2018/cc-by-4.0.

grounds, including the memorials, for as long as they wish. Although visitors can stop and read the names listed on the various walls, unlike a war memorial or a memorial of the Holocaust, which usually contains first and last names, most enslaved people who died in slavery had only their first names recorded. These gaps make it nearly impossible for any visi-tors who descend from individuals enslaved in Louisiana to recognize the names of their ancestors. Ultimately, the way tourists engage with the three walls of names largely depends on whether the tour guide can elicit emotions in them. Visitors make meaning of the walls of names because they are first exposed to the history of slavery in the introductory section of the



Figure 3. Field of Angels, Whitney Plantation, Wallace, Louisiana. Photograph by Elsa Hahne. Courtesy of the Whitney Plantation.

tour and then to the figurative representations of enslaved children in the Antioch Church, and finally they are led by a guide who contextualizes the names displayed. In addition, the widespread use of smartphones allows many visitors to expand their experiences beyond the time spent on-site by posting their personal reviews, photographs, and videos on the internet. At the same time, despite privileging naming as a memorial device, both the Wall of Honor and the Field of Angels also incorporate figurative images of enslaved individuals, suggesting that in the context of the 90-minute tour of Whitney Plantation, the creators of the memorial assessed that naming alone would not be sufficient to engage visitors with the victims of the Atlantic slave trade. Overall, despite introducing the wall of names as a device to memorialize enslaved people, the three memorials of the Whitney Plantation do not stand alone. They are part of the entire experience of visiting the only plantation site that was designed to tell the story of the enslaved and not that of the enslavers.

Other recent initiatives aimed at making visible the lives of enslaved people in museum exhibitions in the United States also make use of walls of names. Unveiled on September 24, 2016, in Washington, DC, the National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC) is a Smithsonian Institution administered by the government of the United States. The museum features the permanent exhibition *Slavery and Freedom* curated by Nancy Bercaw and Mary N. Elliott. Chronologically and thematically organized, the exhibit starts in the African continent with the first contacts between Africans and Europeans and then explores the period of the Atlantic slave trade and slavery in the 13 colonies of what would become the United States. Following the section on the American Revolutionary War, the visitors enter a great hall titled "The Paradox of Liberty" that focuses on the persistence of slavery despite the Declaration of Independence. The hall is based on one section of an older traveling exhibition that opened in 2012 in the National Museum of American History (NMAH) in Washington, DC, 4 years prior to the NMAAHC's inauguration. This earlier exhibition, curated by Rex Ellis and Elizabeth Chew, focused on the lives of the enslaved persons who labored in Monticello, the plantation owned by Thomas Jefferson, one of the US founding fathers. In its opening section a full-body-size sculpture of Jefferson is featured in the middle of a circular platform. Also on the podium and behind Jefferson's statue is a large panel listing the names of nearly 600 enslaved persons who lived and worked in Monticello, obtained from Jefferson's farm books and other records. The panel acknowledges the existence of enslaved individuals whose names remain unknown. However, Jefferson is at the center of the display, and the wall of names honoring Monticello's bondspeople is limited to the background. This section of the exhibition appropriates and subverts the idea of a wall of names by reaffirming the slaveholder's centrality and maintaining the invisibility of enslaved men, women, and children.

The "Founding of America" section of NMAAHC's exhibition *Slavery and Freedom* (fig. 4) recreates the idea of a wall of
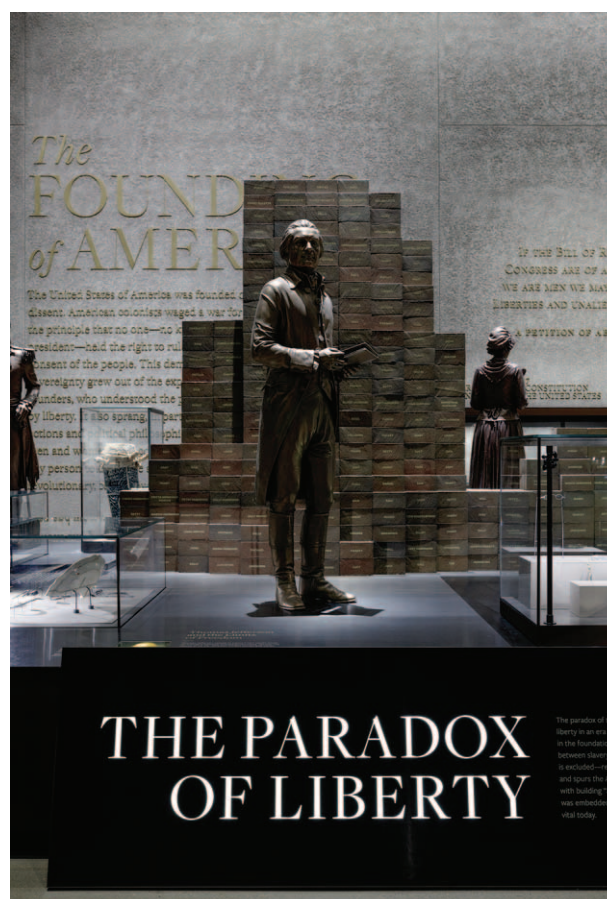


Figure 4. Exhibition *Slavery and Freedom*, National Museum of African American History and Culture, Washington, DC. Photograph by Josh Weillep, 2019. Courtesy of the National Museum of African American History and Culture.

names initially presented in the exhibition *Slavery at Jefferson's Monticello: Paradox of Liberty* (fig. 5). The section repeats the idea of a wall of names, though in a different context. With its high, open ceiling, the great hall of the new museum contrasts with the previous areas' dark and narrow rooms exploring the Atlantic slave trade and slavery. The segment focusing on the new independent United States provides the visitor with the illusion of grandness. A huge wall displays the words "The Founding of America" and reproduces a passage of the Declaration of Independence, with an emphasis on slavery's survival and expansion after the end of British colonial rule. Across from the great wall, a rectangular platform titled "The Paradox of Liberty" features a life-size, full-body statue of Jefferson facing the visitors who enter the room. Distant from Jefferson, statues of Benjamin Banneker, Phillis Wheatley, Toussaint Louverture, and Elizabeth Freeman also occupy the other section of the display. Behind Jefferson is a wall of bricks, each engraved with the name of one enslaved person owned by him. Although the structure evokes the idea that enslaved people built Jefferson's wealth, visitors can barely see any of the names of the enslaved individuals. In addition, this unusual wall of names

Figure 5. Thomas Jefferson statue, exhibition *Slavery at Jefferson's Monticello: Paradox of Liberty*, National Museum of American History, Washington, DC. Photograph by Michael Barnes, 2012. Courtesy of the Smithsonian Institution.

remains in the background of Jefferson's figurative representation, in a setting that evokes plantation displays that still privilege slave owners instead of the enslaved (Small 2013:418). Almost imperceptible to the many visitors who usually visit the exhibition, the bricks carrying the names of Monticello's bondspeople once again fail to place enslaved men and women in a central position. Yet this approach is not unique. In 2016 the temporary exhibition *Lives Bound Together: Slavery at George Washington's Mount Vernon* was unveiled in Mount Vernon, the home and plantation of the US president George Washington (fig. 6). Again, printed on a glass panel through which the visitors can see what is exposed in the other galleries, a wall listing the names of the enslaved persons who lived and worked in Mount Vernon opens the show. Overseen by a full-body, life-size statue of Washington, the wall of names functions as a transparent screen and overall is not effective in creating connections between Mount Vernon's enslaved population and the visitors. As in other initiatives, the founding father remains the main protagonist, reaffirming the usual invisibility of bondspeople.

Beyond recognition, writing and reading out loud the names of enslaved people can give them the humanity once stripped from them in the holds of the slave ships. Likewise, the establishment of a wall of names is not dissociated from the present struggles against the legacies of slavery. The Black Lives Matter movement that emerged in the United States in 2013

largely employed the hashtag #sayhername on social media as an instrument to resist police violence against Black women. New official projects continue the construction of walls of names to memorialize the victims of the Atlantic slave trade and slavery. In the United States, after researching its ties with slavery, both the University of Virginia and the College of William and Mary are planning the construction of memorials honoring the enslaved men and women who lived and worked at these institutions of higher education. However, in both of these cases, the inclusion of walls of names in slavery memorials is a response to the demands of communities of descendants of bondspeople who have determined that this kind of device is the most appropriate for reinstating humanity to their ancestors.

## Proliferation of Naming as Commemoration

The practice of name listing to honor the dead can be retraced to antiquity. Gradually incorporated to graves and tombstones, lists of names became important mnemonic devices to commemorate deceased individuals. The twentieth century witnessed the construction of a growing number of memorials and monuments to honor veterans of war. Especially in the aftermath of the Second World War and the revelation of the horrors of the Holocaust, memorial projects increasingly embraced the idea of walls of names. Writing the names of the dead on memorial walls not only gave life and humanity to millions of victims of genocides and human atrocities but also accorded to them a permanent presence among the living ones.

As the commemoration of the Atlantic slave trade and slavery gained ground over the last 30 years, monuments and memorials honoring enslaved men, women, and children, very often inspired by initiatives memorializing the Holocaust, adopted various versions of the wall of names. Although these early ventures drew from quintessential dehumanizing sources such as slave ship manifests and farm books, they are gradually making bondspeople more visible in slavery heritage sites and museum exhibitions. Yet, as I have shown, despite the growing popularity of walls of names, these devices alone seem to not always be sufficient in the case of commemoration of the victims of the Atlantic slave trade and slavery, because upon arriving in the Americas, enslaved Africans lost their original names. Most of those who died in slavery had only their first names recorded. The names of many more do not appear in historical records.

Unlike Yad Vashem's Hall of Names, the Shoah Memorial in Paris, or the World Trade Center Memorial in New York City, the connections between visitors and the deceased enslaved persons were broken a long time ago. In most cases, unlike the relatives of war victims and the survivors of genocides, descendants of the enslaved who are exposed to walls of names are often not able to recognize the names of their ancestors. Consequently, either for those who identify as descendants of enslaved people or other guests who usually constitute the majority of visitors to plantation sites and museums, the recognition of the humanity and identity of bondspeople requires the

Figure 6. Exhibition *Lives Bound Together: Slavery at George Washington's Mount Vernon*, Mount Vernon, Virginia. Photograph by Ana Lucia Araujo, December 2019.

inclusion of figurative visual representations. In many cases, the walls of names work as a reproduction of the written archive, as a mere inventory listing the names of enslaved persons. In a similar fashion, the proliferation of walls of names can also trivialize this as a commemoration device of the Atlantic slave trade and slavery in a context where it remains difficult to tell the stories of the men and women behind the displayed names. In the Whitney Plantation, the new excessive use of walls of names as an instrument to remember and honor enslaved people does not give visitors the required time to freely contemplate and engage with the bondspeople who worked in the site and all over Louisiana. Therefore, the three walls of names do not stand alone. Not only do they depend on the tour guide's words, but they also heavily rely on the use of figurative representations and narratives of enslaved people whose names are not displayed on the walls. In other initiatives, such as the exhibitions *Slavery at Jefferson's Monticello: Paradox of Liberty* originally presented at the National Museum of American History, *Slavery and Freedom* in the National Museum of African American History and Culture, and *Lives Bound Together: Slavery at George Washington's Mount Vernon* in Mount Vernon, the use of walls of names as a background to the immaculate image of the founding fathers fails to honor the enslaved. Instead, they still underscore the supremacy of Jefferson and Washington as dominant slaveholders.

Either on plantation heritage sites or in a national museum, wall of names displays have relied on historical research. Like Haley's *Roots*, ongoing memorial projects such as those led by the University of Virginia and the College of William and Mary not only draw on genealogy but also increasingly engage with descendant communities, better mirroring existing walls of names honoring veterans of war and victims of genocides and crimes against humanity. Overall, walls of names are valuable attempts to give back enslaved individuals their identities, by publicly recognizing the harm inflicted on generations of enslaved people and their descendants. Naming to pay homage to men, women, and children who were stripped of their original names and remained nameless even after their deaths can be conceived as a modest form of symbolic reparation in contexts where slavery has been only recently recognized as a crime against humanity. Ultimately, walls of names are powerful—although still imperfect—instruments for recognizing the victims of slavery and the Atlantic slave trade.

## Acknowledgments

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