



THE COUNCIL OF
INDEPENDENT COLLEGES

Legacies of American Slavery

Reckoning with the Past

Legacy Themes

The Legacies of American Slavery project will be multifaceted and national in scope, with opportunities for many of CIC's member institutions and the communities in which they are located to participate. The legacies are not just recipes for understanding losses, deficits, or even historic gains. Rather, they are ways of assessing the historical and lasting effects of a particular system of human exploitation as well as the many varieties of resistance and creative response to such systems. It is almost impossible to understand so much of American culture, the social geography and built environment of the United States, our political and legal institutions, our ways of seeing and learning historical narratives—not to mention countless pivotal events in the national story—without comprehending slavery's indelible marks on our past and present.

Six institutions in different regions of the United States will be selected to serve as Regional Collaboration Partners—that is, the coordinating hubs for a national network that will embrace many additional colleges and universities, cultural institutions, K–12 schools, and community-based organizations. Each Partner will focus uniquely on a single theme (or at most two closely-related themes) that addresses the legacy of slavery and that is especially relevant to its specific location or region of the country.

CIC and the Gilder Lehrman Center for the Study of Slavery, Resistance, and Abolition at Yale University have identified nine possible topics that will serve as focal themes for the Regional Collaboration Partners:

COMMEMORATION AND MEMORY

The selective commemoration and remembrance of slavery, the Civil War, the Confederacy, and segregation—as well as the expansion of Civil Rights and the celebration of African American history and identity—through memorials, architecture, place names, popular culture, the arts, or other expressions. This legacy has been a particular focus on many college and

university campuses in recent years, sometimes because of financial and political ties to slavery and the slave trade, and sometimes because of the historic roots or mission of a given institution.

ECONOMIC DISPARITIES

The economic legacy of American slavery is evident in persistent wealth and income disparities by race, gaps in home ownership related to predatory lending policies, persistent underdevelopment in parts of the South as well as urban centers across the nation, varieties of unfree and semi-free labor since Emancipation, and the underground economies of many African American communities. This legacy fuels arguments about economic reparations for the descendants of slaves. It reflects an old conversation in American society, but a conversation that calls out for renewal and new research as well as careful approaches to the ongoing reparation debates.

CONTESTED CITIZENSHIP

This theme embraces both the constitutional legacy of slavery (reflected in the ceaseless debates and jurisprudence initiated by the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments) and broader conflicts about rights, liberties, and civic responsibilities based on race. Voting rights, which are so intimately connected to Emancipation and its legacy, should be a particular focus. Ever since the transformations of the Civil Rights movement, but especially in recent years, the questions of voter suppression and general participation in political life have vexed American society and government. These issues need to be tackled at their historical roots to understand their current resonance.

CULTURAL CREATIVITY

Since slavery itself, and for more than 150 years since Emancipation, cultural expression in all its forms has been a way to cope with slavery and its aftermath—but also a way of *explaining* slavery, processing it through the Blues, sharing its tribulations through song, telling its endless stories in novels and epic verse, seeing its pain and transcendence in film. This theme embraces artistic legacies in theater, art, dance, music, poetry, and fiction, but also in popular culture, folklore and folkways, and foodways (including not just African-influenced cuisine but all the varied ways that food is gathered and prepared: gardening, hunting, foraging, fishing, etc.).

RACIAL VIOLENCE AND RESISTANCE

Political violence is a powerful legacy of American slavery, encompassing the history of lynching, contemporary hate crimes, and white supremacy movements as well as the organized and ad hoc efforts by African Americans and their allies to resist state and extrajudicial violence. This legacy has left a long mark in both rural and urban America, from the Reconstruction era through the 20th century and into the 21st century. Racial violence has left many historical markers across time, but it also has memorials in stone, bronze, and living institutions.

MASS INCARCERATION

Another legacy of slavery can be found in the disproportionate representation of African Americans and other people of color in the criminal justice system; the targeting of African American youth in the juvenile justice system (the “school-to-prison pipeline”); systematic racial profiling and racialized disparities in sentencing; the disparate impacts of incarceration on community life; and efforts to reform criminal justice, organize prisoners, and support former prisoners. This legacy has rapidly become a sub-field of study across many academic disciplines and the subject for many writers and filmmakers. It deserves a multifaceted approach—legal, political, moral, and economic—in order to engage a broad public understanding.

RACE, PLACE, AND MIGRATION

The system of slavery relied on both transatlantic and internal migrations and brought a new kind of diaspora in America. The end of slavery led to new forms of internal migration—such as the “Great Migration” of Southern blacks to Northern cities that began in the early 20th century—and spurred new forms of spatial segregation. These long-term developments are reflected in the consequences of “redlining” for many Northern cities, the history of busing as a means to implement the integration of public schools, and African American community-formation and place-making. This legacy of slavery affords an opportunity to see and study migration within the larger African American and American experiences, from its inception in the slave trade, through the internal domestic slave trade, through the Great Migration, to contemporary debates about immigration and gentrification.

ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

Environmental history, environmental ethics, and environmental studies are booming academic fields, offering new tools to explore slavery's lasting effects on the American landscape, agricultural system, and natural resources. Topics within this legacy might include the impact of the slave-based plantation-industrial complex on ecosystems and society; the racialized distribution of both environmental harms (pollution, floods, and other burdens of climate change) and amenities (wilderness areas, public parks, and beaches); food deserts and food sovereignty movements; urban farming and green-space movements; and African Americans' agricultural traditions and relationships with the natural world.

RACE, HEALTH, AND MEDICINE

The social and physical legacy of American slavery can be reckoned in persistent race-based inequalities in health care, childbirth, and early childhood outcomes. Understanding the biomedical history of the slave trade and slavery itself, as well as the 150 years of changing medical technologies and practices that followed Emancipation, can help us understand the many residues of human bondage on human health. These include the biomedical impacts of racialized stress and trauma as well as community-based healing and healthcare traditions.

For more information about the Legacies of American Slavery project,
please visit www.cic.edu/LegaciesofSlavery.