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Kardux, Johanna C.

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Auteur/Author: *Johanna C. Kardux*

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Secretariaat/ Secretariat:

Doelensteeg 16
2311 VL Leiden
The Netherlands
071-5277205
redactie@leidschrift.nl
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Slave Heritage and Black Civic Activism: Memorializing the African Burial Ground in New York and the President's House in Philadelphia

Johanna C. Kardux

In the 1990s, slave descendants across the Atlantic world became actively involved in grassroots movements that lobbied for the establishment of monuments in remembrance of slavery. In the Netherlands, the Afro-Dutch organization Nationaal Platform Slavernijverleden successfully petitioned the parliament for a national slavery monument, which was unveiled in the Oosterpark in Amsterdam in 2002 and a national research institute dedicated to the study of the Netherlands' slavery history (NiNsee) opened its doors a year later.¹ In the United States, it was the accidental discovery of an eighteenth-century African burial ground in Lower Manhattan in 1991 that rallied African-American New Yorkers behind the effort to preserve the site as a memorial to the city's forgotten history of slavery. Though the site was designated as a national historic landmark two years later, it took a decade and a half of grassroots efforts before in 2007 a national monument was established at the site. In Philadelphia it was the reconstruction of Independence Mall, the most important national heritage site in the U.S., that mobilized the local black community and scholars against attempts to whitewash the history of the nation's first capital. While African American groups in New York were outraged by what they saw as attempts to desecrate their ancestors' remains and memory, black Philadelphians denounced plans to build over what had been the nation's first 'White House' and erase the links of the site with slavery. Through petitions to local and federal governments, protest demonstrations, ritual reburials, and other media events, African-American groups in both cities revitalized the waning spirit of the civil rights movement and gave a new impetus to African-American civic activism.

¹ For a discussion of the development of the Dutch national slavery monument, see J. C. Kardux, 'Monuments of the Black Atlantic: Slavery Memorials in the United States and the Netherlands' in H. Raphael ed., *Blackening Europe: The African American Presence* (New York 2003) 87-105. This article was republished online with a postscriptum in *Journal of Transnational American Studies* 3.1 (2011). http://escholarship.org/uc/acgcc_jtas?volume=3;issue=1.

‘Agitate, agitate, agitate!’ With these words, Frederick Douglass shortly before his death in 1895 exhorted a young man who had asked him what to do with his life.² Almost 40 years earlier, Douglass, a former slave who was to become the greatest African-American leader of the nineteenth century, had told an audience of fellow abolitionists in 1857:

Those who profess to favor freedom and yet deprecate agitation, are people who want crops without ploughing the ground; they want rain without thunder and lightning; they want the ocean without the roar of its many waters. The struggle may be a moral one, or it may be a physical one, or it may be both. But it must be a struggle. Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will.³

Douglass delivered this speech on the occasion of the 23rd anniversary of the abolition of slavery in the British West-Indies, but his call for civic activism must also be read in the context of the notorious Dred Scott decision of the U.S. Supreme Court, handed down a few months earlier in March 1857, which denied U.S. citizenship to people of African descent. Though Martin Luther King cited Gandhi and Thoreau as the main sources of inspiration for his strategy of nonviolent resistance and civil disobedience, African-Americans’ protest demonstrations against their second-class citizenship during the modern civil rights era were equally indebted to Douglass’s call for action in the black struggle for full citizenship and racial justice. The civic activism surrounding the memorialization of slavery that emerged in the U.S. in the 1990s thus followed in a long African-American tradition of racial protest and political engagement. Though its key issues were identity, memory, and respect rather than segregation and voting rights, I will argue that this new form of black civic activism, no less than the civil rights struggle of the 1950s and 1960s, was aimed at social integration and political empowerment.

² N. Buccola, *The Political Thought of Frederick Douglass: In Pursuit of American Liberty* (New York 2012) 101.

³ F. Douglass, ‘Address on West India Emancipation’, delivered August 4, 1857, in Canandaigua, New York, reprinted in: J. W. Blassingame ed., *The Frederick Douglass Papers Series 1: Speeches, Debates, Interviews, 1855-63* vol. III (New Haven, CT 1985) 204. Also available online: <http://www.lib.rochester.edu/index.cfm?PAGE=4398>.

The African Burial Ground in New York

In the early fall of 1991, a team of archeologists hired by the U.S. government to analyze a construction site in Lower Manhattan before the construction work on a 34-story new federal office building could begin unexpectedly uncovered the contours of a grave, in which they found an intact skeleton and some artifacts, about five and a half meters under street level.⁴ By the time the discovery was made public a week later, nine skeletons had been exhumed and eventually 419 human remains were excavated at the site. From historic maps, archeologists had been aware of the presence of what on a 1755 map was called a 'Negros Burial Ground', but they had believed the cemetery to be too deeply buried to be disturbed by the excavation work needed for the office building and had not previously given public notice of its presence, which had been known to only a few local historians. The find revealed that from the 1690s enslaved and free blacks were banned from the cemeteries of colonial New York and were only allowed to bury their dead in the desolate, hilly area just north of the palisade wall that had been built by the Dutch to protect New Amsterdam and that was later to give its name to Wall Street. At the end of the eighteenth century the burial ground was covered by a massive landfill to level the ground and make possible urban expansion in northward direction.

The construction site constituted only a small portion of what soon came to be known as the African Burial Ground (ABG),⁵ most of which still remains buried underneath the office buildings of the city's civic center around Foley Square, including City Hall. After the find, it was estimated that some 15,000 (mostly enslaved) black New Yorkers were buried at the site in the eighteenth century. These numbers disclosed a neglected part of the city's history: enslaved Africans and their descendants had been part of the city's history from its foundation. The Dutch West India Company

⁴ J. Hansen and G. McGowan, *Breaking Ground, Breaking Silence: The Story of New York's African Burial Ground* (New York 1998) 1-5.

⁵ I have not been able to establish how the decision to name the site the *African Burial Ground* precisely came about. The word 'Negro' no longer being acceptable among most blacks (cf. the attempt of Afro-Dutch groups to eliminate the word 'neger' from the dictionary), the word 'African' was obviously meant to underscore the forced migration from Africa and reflected the Afro-centrism that has characterized black civic activism and memorial practices since the 1990s.

(WIC) had brought the first Africans to New Amsterdam in 1626, less than a year after the settlement's foundation, and by the mid-eighteenth century New York had the second largest black population after Charleston, South Carolina, including about 10,000 slaves, amounting to 15 percent of the city's total population.⁶

While white archeologists speculated about what the discovery might reveal about colonial black life and culture, Mayor David Dinkins, the first (and thus far only) African-American to hold that office in New York, noted its special symbolical meaning for black New Yorkers: 'Two centuries ago', he told reporter David W. Dunlap, 'not only could African-Americans not hope to govern New York City, they could not even hope to be buried within its boundaries.'⁷ Couched in triple negatives, Dinkins' words carried the weight of generations of black outrage over racial injustice and social exclusion. Deliberately invoking the civil rights struggle of the 1950s and 1960s to which Dinkins at least partly owed his political career, they also augured the turn to the politics of memory and identity that black civic activism was to take in the 1990s, not only in the U.S. but throughout the Atlantic world. Dinkins' comment implied that much had changed since the mid-1960s. Yet, although a rhetoric of recognition and respect came to replace the earlier era's rhetoric of rights, at the heart of the public contention and civic activism that were to surround the two slavery memorial projects under discussion was still the old politics of race, social place, and public space.

The discovery of the historic black cemetery became national news only when groups of concerned black citizens began to protest against what they felt to be disrespectful treatment of the human remains that were excavated at the site. The federal agency that owned the construction site, the General Services Administration (GSA), was accused of speeding up the excavations to minimize the costs of the delays of the construction work. Black politicians were quick to enter into the ensuing disputes. Democratic State Senator David A. Paterson, who represented the electoral district of Harlem, voiced his constituency's concerns when he told the *New York Times* two months after the find was made public: 'It's bad enough that some of the bodies that may be in those tombs were discriminated against

⁶ J. O. Horton and L. E. Horton, *Slavery and the Making of America* (Oxford 2005) 34.

⁷ D. W. Dunlap, 'Dig Uncovers Early Black Burial Ground', *The New York Times*, October 9, 1991.

in life. But now, they're being discriminated against in death.⁸ For African-Americans, Paterson's use of the word 'discrimination' not only powerfully resonated with the protests of the civil rights era, but also evoked a history of racial injustice and prejudice which did not quite end with the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts of the mid-1960s that were the civil rights movement's most important achievements. African-Americans might now possess legally sanctioned rights, but what many felt they still lacked were recognition and respect.

What was new about post-civil rights era black activism was that people of African descent came to closely identify themselves with the enslaved. Martin Luther King and other black civil rights leaders rarely referred to or reflected back on slavery, their dreams being focused on a color-blind future. Slavery was a painful and even shameful part of their history that African-Americans in the 1960s were eager to leave behind. However, as African-American writer and Nobel Prize winner Toni Morrison was among the first to recognize, 'In the push toward middle-class respectability, we abandoned the [slavery] past and a lot of the truth and sustenance that went with it.'⁹ It was only in the 1990s, and partly as a result of Morrison's internationally acclaimed historical novel on slavery *Beloved* (1987), that the repressed memory of slavery was widely reclaimed and recognized as crucial to black identity, not only in the U.S. but also in other parts of the African diaspora. The importance of slave ancestry to black diasporic identity became clear, for example, during the presidential campaign of 2008, when some African-American groups argued that Barack Obama was not black enough because he was not a slave descendant.¹⁰

⁸ D. W. Dunlap, 'Excavation Stirs Debate on Cemetery', *The New York Times*, December 6, 1991.

⁹ T. Morrison, 'Rediscovering Black History', *The New York Times Magazine*, August 11, 1974, 14.

¹⁰ Researchers for Ancestry.com have recently found evidence that suggests that Obama may in fact be a descendant of 'one of the first documented African slaves in the U.S.', surprisingly through his white mother. S. G. Stolberg, 'Obama Has Ties to Slavery Not by his Father but His Mother, Research Suggests', *The New York Times*, July 30, 2012. While according to the *New York Times* the significance of this (inconclusive) genealogical finding is the growing awareness among 'white' Americans of 'their own mixed-race heritage', a recent Op-Ed in the *Los Angeles Times* argues that 'in considering the president's background, we are forced to consider the uncomfortable details of race, sex, oppression and miscegenation that we as a nation would prefer to forget.' E. A. Kaplan, *Los Angeles Times*, August 8,

The discovery of the African Burial Ground was instrumental in breaking the silence about slavery within black communities and fostering a personal connection with the enslaved that amounted to kinship: throughout the Atlantic world slaves were reclaimed as ‘ancestors’ by blacks, who came to perceive and define themselves as the ‘descendant community.’¹¹ Black citizens’ and black politicians’ personal and emotional investment in the African Burial Ground, which they came to see as a sacred space, made its alleged desecration such a sensitive and contentious issue. As African-American Councilwoman Mary Pinkett of Brooklyn said to the *New York Times*, referring to the site being a parking lot before the construction work started:

the efforts to preserve and commemorate the burial ground amounted to a declaration by the city’s black residents. “This is enough. (...) You can’t walk over the bodies of our ancestors anymore.”¹²

However, here as elsewhere the personal was highly political. Under pressure from Mayor David Dinkins and U.S. Congressman Gus Savage, a black Democrat from Illinois who chaired a subcommittee that oversaw GSA projects, construction at the site was finally halted in the summer of 1992 to allow for the development of a research plan for the exhumed remains and modification of the construction plans to make space for a

2012. To my knowledge, Obama has not (yet) publicly responded to the discovery of his possible slave ancestry.

¹¹ In the Netherlands, for example, people of Afro-Surinamese descent started to call themselves by the somewhat archaic word ‘nazaten’. Few present-day New Yorkers can actually trace back their biological ancestry to enslaved colonial New Yorkers, many being descendants of black southerners who migrated to New York during the Great Black Migration after the First and Second World War or (children of) migrants from the Caribbean and Africa in more recent decades. The symbolic kinship with slave ancestors can be traced back to Alex Haley’s novel *Roots* (1976) and particularly the immensely popular television miniseries based on the novel, which spurred the genealogical craze (also among other ethnic groups) that persists today, now taking the form of African-Americans tracing their DNA to African ancestors.

¹² D. W. Dunlap, ‘African Burial Ground Made Historic Site’, *The New York Times*, February 26, 1993, B3.

proper memorial, for which federal funds were appropriated.¹³ In 1993, the burial site was officially designated a national historic landmark, and the GSA gave in to black community demand of substantial black involvement in the project: the remains found at the site were transported to the historically black Howard University in Washington, D.C. to be studied by a team of scholars led by the African-American biological anthropologist Michael Blakey.

The ABG memorial project remained a source of contention, however. In the next ten years squabbles regularly broke out between community activists and the GSA, but also within the descendant community. From the outset there was a tension between the historical and educational value of the burial site and the need to pay respect to those buried there. As Howard Dodson, Director of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in Harlem, put it, the ‘scientist-historian side of him’ was eager to learn what study of the remains could reveal about black colonial life and culture, but ‘the “roots” side of [him]’ worried about disturbing the peace of the dead and thereby disrespecting them.¹⁴ In the late 1990s, much of the controversy centered on the delays of the reinterment of the remains, which were still under investigation at Howard University. A group of activists who called themselves the Committee of Descendants of the Afrikan [sic] Ancestral Burial Ground demanded immediate release and reburial of the remains, arguing that ‘the way the remains have been treated is a direct reflection of the way Blacks are treated today.’¹⁵ Blakey, the head of the research team studying the remains, on the other hand, blamed the delays on inadequate government funding, which he too ascribed to continuing racism and a ‘pattern of disrespect’ on the part of the GSA.¹⁶

¹³ E. R. Shipp, ‘Black Cemetery Yields Wealth of History’, *The New York Times*, August 9, 1992.

¹⁴ Shipp, ‘Black Cemetery Yields Wealth of History’.

¹⁵ K. J. Carrillo, ‘Committee Calls for African Burial Ground Remains To Be Reburied’, *New York Amsterdam News*, October 5-11, 2000, 5. The *New York Amsterdam News* is a Harlem-based weekly; founded in 1909, it is one of the oldest African-American newspapers and it served as an important medium for black activists to voice their concerns regarding the ABG memorial project.

¹⁶ Interview with Blakey in M. S. Greene, ‘No Rest for African Burial Ground: Delays and Discord Trouble Howard’s Preservation Project’, *The Washington Post*, August 27, 2002.

When the remains were finally returned to New York and ceremonially reburied at the ABG site in 2003, a new element was added to the political discourse surrounding the ABG project when some speakers officiating at the reburial ceremony called for reparations for slavery: ‘They owe us,’ a presiding clergyman said to a cheering crowd: ‘It’s time to pay up.’ ‘Pay us our reparations,’ a black local councilman added bluntly.¹⁷ After the reinterment of the remains, the contention focused on the design of the monument that was to be erected at the site. The design chosen was created by African-American architect Rodney Leon. Consisting of two converging, almost eight-meter high black granite walls and a circular court about one meter below street level, the ABG monument was felt by some to be too large and invasive for a gravesite, while others argued that cemeteries should not be built on at all.¹⁸

Despite the continuing controversy, the African Burial Ground was designated a national monument and placed under the authority and management of the National Park Service in 2006. The African Burial Ground National Monument was unveiled in October 2007 and in February 2010, a new visitor center was opened in the adjacent federal office building at 290 Broadway, the construction of which had led to the discovery of the burial ground almost two decades earlier. Though it took almost twenty years for the memorial site to be developed and completed and though, or perhaps precisely *because*, the process was often divisive, the discovery of the African Burial Ground and the ensuing controversies greatly increased public awareness of the city’s and the nation’s slavery history.

African-Americans’ efforts to preserve and memorialize the African Burial Ground reflect their attempts to claim not only a place in history, but also a space in the public sphere. The symbolism of the cemetery’s location in the immediate vicinity of and partly underneath the present-day financial

¹⁷ M. Luo, ‘City’s Role In Slavery Is Recalled At Rites’, *The New York Times*, October 4, 2003. See also A. H. Maddox, ‘Reparations and the African Burial Ground’, *New York Amsterdam News*, October 18-24, 2007, 12, 31.

¹⁸ In the years between the announcement of the winning design in 2005 and its dedication in 2007, a flurry of articles appeared in the black press in which black community groups vociferated against the design. For example K. J. Carrillo, ‘Architect for ABG Memorial Picked; Activists Prefer Somber Design’, *New York Amsterdam News*, May 5-11, 2005, 4, and, by the same reporter, ‘Community Elders Don’t Want Any Buildings on African Burial Ground’, *New York Amsterdam News*, April 20-26, 2006, 11, 39.

and government center of the city was not lost on African-American activists and may, furthermore, contribute to the impact the ABG memorial has on visitors. The fact that the cemetery had to make way for urban expansion in the 1790s and again for construction work in the early 1990s symbolized both its erasure from public memory and another violent



Fig. 1: The African Burial Ground National Monument has become a pilgrimage site for African Americans. Here a group of freshmen from Howard University learn about the burial ground's history. A symbolic 'door of return' in the monument gives access to the commemorative space sunken into the burial ground (photo by the author).

dislocation of people of African descent. While the site's proximity to Wall Street may raise visitors' consciousness of the contribution of the slave trade and slave labor to the nation's wealth, its nearness to the government center may make them recall that enslavement and racial segregation were long legally and constitutionally sanctioned in the U.S. But activists also literally claimed the space of the burial ground, and the federal government's relatively swift decision, albeit under community and political pressure, to modify the construction plans and reserve part of the site for a

memorial (located on some of the city's most valuable land) marks its implicit acknowledgement of the black community's moral entitlement to the space. Moreover, activists claimed the public sphere not only by attending numerous public hearings on the future of the burial site and drawing media attention, but also by taking their case to the streets, holding midnight vigils and protest demonstrations at the burial site and elsewhere. The reinterment of the remains in 2003 was preceded by a six-day journey of four sets of the remains from Howard University in Washington to Baltimore, Wilmington (Delaware), Philadelphia, Newark and finally to New York. In each of these cities funeral processions were held and rituals were performed at highly symbolic public spaces, such as an intersection with Wall Street that had been the site of New York's colonial slave market.¹⁹ Refusing marginalization, African-American community groups thus staked their claim to a city and nation their ancestors helped build, but from whose privileged centers they had so long been excluded.

The President's House in Philadelphia

The symbolism of African-Americans' claims to public space was even more powerful in the case of the President's House on Independence Mall in Philadelphia. More than New York and even Washington, Philadelphia is the city where Americans go to imagine themselves a national community, to borrow Benedict Anderson's conception of the nation as an imagined community.²⁰ Here the Founding Fathers declared the American colonies' independence, signed the U.S. Constitution and founded the nation. Philadelphia had been the nation's capital from 1790 to 1800, before it permanently moved to Washington, D.C. In the Independence National Historical Park (INHP), which comprises most of the city's historic center, some of the nation's most important symbols are enshrined: the Declaration of Independence, the U.S. Constitution, and the Liberty Bell. In the 1990s, plans were made to create new housing for these iconic symbols and reconstruct Philadelphia's Independence Mall, making it a fit counterpart of the National Mall in Washington, D.C. While plans for the reconstruction

¹⁹ M. Luo, 'In Manhattan, Another Burial for 400 Colonial-Era Blacks', *The New York Times*, October 2, 2003.

²⁰ B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London 1991).

of Independence Mall were underway in the mid-1990s, it was discovered that the planned pavilion to which the Liberty Bell was to be moved, would partly cover the site of the mansion that had served as the official residence of the nation's first two presidents, George Washington and John Adams, from 1790 to 1800. The President's House, as it was called, had been demolished in the 1830s. In response to calls for reconstruction of the nation's 'first White House', as it was soon dubbed in the local media, the Philadelphian historian Edward Lawler researched the history of the house and made a striking discovery: during his presidency Washington brought a total of nine slaves from Mount Vernon, his home plantation in Virginia, to Philadelphia as servants. Because the state congress of Pennsylvania had passed a gradual abolition scheme in 1780, Washington deliberately circumvented the law by rotating his slaves, taking them out of the state every six months. If a slave stayed longer than six months in Pennsylvania, he would legally be free.²¹

Shortly after Lawler published his findings in January 2002, historian Gary Nash got wind of the plans for the new Liberty Bell Center that was under construction on Independence Mall. Nash discovered that the interpretive exhibits developed by the INHP were to focus exclusively on the history of the cherished Liberty Bell, without any references to the adjacent site of the President's House. Nor were these exhibits to refer to the links of the Bell with abolitionism, indisputable though those links were. The Liberty Bell, a national icon associated with the nation's foundation,²² actually received its name only in the 1830s when abolitionists adopted it as a symbol for the antislavery cause. In a local radio show, Nash called attention to the 'mingled stories of freedom and unfreedom' that the President's House and the Liberty Bell represented and that were

²¹ Lawler published his discovery of the presence of slaves in Washington's residence in the January 2002 issue of the *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*. A revised version appeared in the same journal in 2005. Based on these two articles, Lawler published a two-part online article on the website of the President House, which is my source here: E. Lawler, 'The President's House in Philadelphia: The Rediscovery of a Lost Landmark'. <http://www.ushistory.org/presidentshouse/plans/pmhb/>. Viewed on: July 29, 2012.

²² Legend has it that it was rung to announce a public reading of the Declaration of Independence on July 8, 1776. G. B. Nash, 'For Whom Will the Liberty Bell Toll? From Controversy to Cooperation' in: J. O. Horton and L. E. Horton ed., *Slavery and Public History: The Tough Stuff of American Memory* (New York 2006) 74.

emblematic for the contradiction between the nation's avowed ideals of freedom and equality and its history of slavery and racial segregation.²³ The local media quickly picked up on this story. A months-long struggle followed in which a group of historians tried to persuade the Independence National Historical Park officials to expand the meaning of the Liberty Bell by incorporating slavery in the interpretation presented to the public in the Center's exhibits. The question was resolved only when the chief historian of the National Park Service, which supervises the INHP, intervened. As he wrote to the INHP staff, the experience of visiting the Liberty Bell would be much more meaningful if visitors were made to *'think'* about the concept of liberty, not just *'feel good'* about it.²⁴ The INHP finally gave in and, in cooperation with a racially integrated group of historians, redesigned and rewrote many of the interpretive exhibits in the Center, which was opened in 2003.

Alerted by the news media, black Philadelphians also became involved, adding 'brawn to brains', as African-American lawyer and activist Michael Coard described the two-pronged approach by historians and grassroots community groups when I interviewed him in Philadelphia in October 2007.²⁵ While Nash and other historians focused their attention on the inclusion of the story of slavery and abolition in the new Liberty Bell Center, Coard and other local African-Americans were more interested in the adjacent site of the President's House and its historical links with slavery. The black community's imagination was caught by the history of the nine slaves who served George Washington's Philadelphia household in the 1790s, especially when they learned that two of them escaped. The first slave who escaped was First Lady Martha Washington's slave Oney (or Ona) Judge, who was brought to Philadelphia in 1790 and took flight in 1796 when she was in her early twenties. In the 1840s, Judge's story was published in the abolitionist press: when Washington's agents tracked her down, she said she would return only if she were granted freedom, but Washington refused, fearing to set a precedent for his other slaves. Nine months later, Washington's cook named Hercules also ran away, preferring freedom to the relatively privileged place he held in the household. Neither

²³ Horton and Horton, *Slavery and Public History*, 82.

²⁴ Cited in Nash, 'For Whom Will the Liberty Bell Toll?', 87.

²⁵ The interview took place in the café of the Independence Visitor Center across the street from the site of the President's House, then still an archeological dig, on October 13, 2007. 'Brawn' means muscular strength.

of the two slaves was ever recaptured although Washington's agents persisted in their efforts to trace them down.²⁶

While the Liberty Bell Center was to tell the nation's interlinked stories of freedom and slavery, local black activists demanded that at the adjacent site of the President's House the story of the nine slaves in the nation's first White House be told. Calling for a slavery memorial at the site of the President's House, Michael Coard founded a local organization named Avenging the Ancestors Coalition (ATAC). When I asked Coard why he chose such a provocative name and acronym for his organization, he candidly admitted that it was a strategic choice: 'controversy sells,' he explained his campaign strategy. You first have to get people's attention, shake them up, and then you can engage in a dialogue with them. 'It worked perfectly,' he concluded with a shrewd smile.²⁷ Coard organized a march to the site of the President's House on July 3, 2002, drawing attention to the exclusion of slavery from Independence Mall and calling for a memorial to honor the forgotten slaves at the President's House. 'This is a crime scene,' Coard said provocatively to a predominantly black crowd of 500, including some African-American politicians. 'Slavery was a crime against humanity.'²⁸ Until the President's House memorial was finally realized in 2010, ATAC organized demonstrations every year on July 3, including a mock funeral procession with nine empty coffins in 2007 that was probably inspired by the reburial ceremony at the African Burial Ground, well aware that with thousands of tourists in town for the Fourth of July celebrations they could count on maximum media attention. They also profited from the fact that Philadelphia, like New York at the time of the discovery of the African Burial Ground, had a black mayor, John Street, who supported their efforts. Shortly before the Liberty Bell Center opened in October 2003, Mayor Street agreed to commit \$1.5 million to the effort of creating a memorial to

²⁶ E. Lawler, 'The President's House in Philadelphia: Revisited', <http://www.ushistory.org/presidentshouse/plans/pmhb2/index.htm>. Viewed on: July 29, 2012. Two articles in the abolitionist press about Judge are also available online: <http://www.ushistory.org/presidentshouse/slaves/oneyinterview.htm>. Viewed on: July 29, 2012. See also Nash, 'For Whom Will the Liberty Bell Toll?', 93-95.

²⁷ Personal interview with author, Philadelphia, October 13, 2007.

²⁸ N. Achrati, '500 Seek Slave Memorial at Liberty Bell', *Philadelphia Inquirer*, July 4, 2002. <http://www.ushistory.org/presidentshouse/news/inq070402.htm>. Viewed on: July 29, 2012.

slavery as part of a larger President's House monument, a gesture Coard described as 'an important step toward racial healing in America.'²⁹ Street successfully lobbied at the state and federal levels for full funding of this project, and in 2005, U.S. Representative Chaka Fattah, a black Democrat from Philadelphia, announced that Congress had appropriated \$3.6 million to commemorate the nation's first executive mansion and the African-Americans held there in bondage during the 1790s.³⁰

The archeological excavation of the site in the spring of 2007 drew crowds of tourists and passers-by. An observation platform had been built, flanked by signs telling the history of the President's House and Washington's slaves, from which spectators could watch the archaeologists at work. Photographs of the dig in the local newspapers and on the website of the President's House show groups of visitors engaged in conversation with the archaeologists, not only about the latter's findings, but also, according to several witnesses, about race and slavery.³¹ The remains of the foundations of the original mansion, laid bare by the excavation, formed the basis of the monument that was subsequently built on the site and was inaugurated in December 2010. Roughly demarcating the footprint of the mansion's original structure, the brick-and-steel monument consists of partial brick walls with door and window frames but without a roof, featuring video displays in which actors impersonating Washington's Philadelphia slaves tell their stories, while the slaves' names are engraved in a commemorative granite wall. The design, created by a partly African-American owned architecture firm, and the interpretation it offers of the President's House were, and remain, controversial, also within the black community. Indeed, resembling an unfinished brick house, the monument detonates with the modern architecture of the adjacent Liberty Bell that it almost touches and the grand architecture of the other national heritage sites nearby. The monument's open structure, which was perhaps meant to

²⁹ M. Coard, 'Letter: Mayor Honors Memory of Slaves', *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Oct. 17, 2003. <http://www.ushistory.org/presidentshouse/news/inq101703.htm>. Viewed on: July 29, 2012.

³⁰ M. Dunn, 'Slave Memorial on Independence Hall Gets Federal Funding', <http://www.ushistory.org/presidentshouse/news/kyw090605.htm>. Viewed on: July 29, 2012.

³¹ A. Hahn, 'President's House Compromised', *Pbilly.com*, March 1, 2012. <http://www.ushistory.org/presidentshouse/news/pp030112.htm>. Viewed on: July 29, 2012.

symbolize the exposure of the site's hidden slavery history, also exposes it to all weather conditions, causing structural problems, such as water damage, defective video panels, and crumbling brick walls. Moreover, the monument's almost exclusive focus on slavery has rightly been criticized; Washington, as critics pointed out, surely deserves to be remembered as more than a slave owner.³² Moreover, John Adams, America's second president who resided here from 1797 to 1800, is hardly mentioned, perhaps because his staunch antislavery views complicate the site's dominant narrative. Though the site's ties with slavery deserve to be commemorated, the nation's first White House was not exactly, as one black activist called it, 'a house of horror.'³³ A more balanced view of the contradictory story of freedom and slavery in the making of America is offered in the exhibits in the Liberty Bell Center.

Civic and political engagement and conversations about race

The discovery of the African Burial Ground and President's House has brought to light what George Frederickson once called 'the skeleton in the American closet',³⁴ exposing the fact that slavery and racial segregation were not peculiar to the American South but also an integral part of the history of Northern cities like New York and Philadelphia as well as of the nation as a whole. The two monuments have significantly altered the memorial landscapes of these two cities, providing a more inclusive view of American national heritage by commemorating the unfree laborers who helped build a nation conceived in freedom. The impact these slavery monuments and the attending museum exhibits may have on visitors is exemplified in Nigerian-American author Teju Cole's critically acclaimed recent novel *Open City*. On one of his daily walks in New York City, the novel's protagonist stumbles upon the African Burial Ground National Monument, then still under

³² See, for example, two critical reviews by E. Rothstein: 'Reopening a House That's Still Divided', *The New York Times*, Dec. 14, 2010, and 'To Each His Own Museum, as Identity Politics Goes on Display', *The New York Times*, December 28, 2010.

³³ S. Salisbury, 'Critics Denounce Plans for President's House', *Philadelphia Inquirer*, May 10, 2010. <http://www.ushistory.org/presidentshouse/news/inq050810.htm>. Viewed on: August 15, 2012.

³⁴ G. Frederickson, 'The Skeleton in the Closet', *New York Review of Books* 47.17 (November 2, 2000).

construction. The incident spurs an extended meditation on the layered history of the city. ‘The squabble about the construction of the monument did not interest me,’ he writes, ‘What I was steeped in, on that warm morning, was the echo across centuries, of slavery in New York.’³⁵ Though

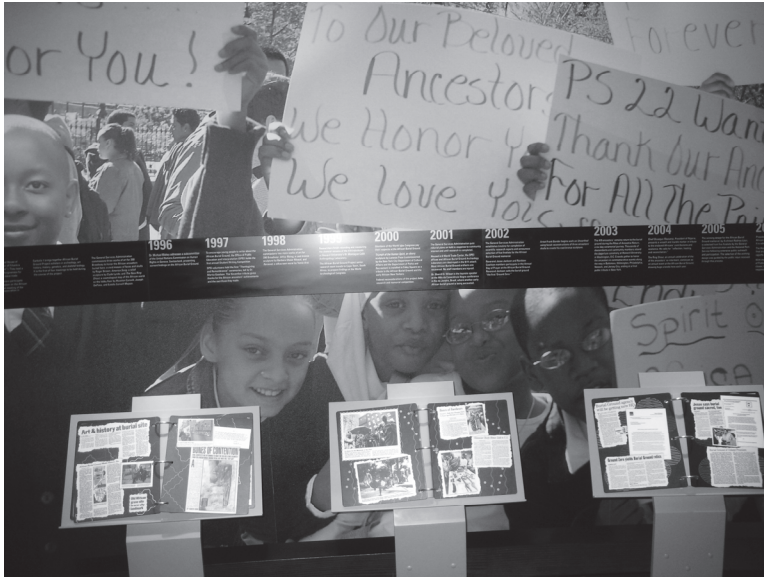


Fig. 2: The final exhibit as one exits the ABG Visitor Centre pays tribute to the descendant community, whose civic activism was crucial to the development of the memorial site. Competing voices and narratives are incorporated into the exhibit through recordings and videos of short interviews, allowing visitors literally to hear the public debates among the site’s various stakeholders (photo by the author).

Cole’s protagonist regards the ‘squabble’ about the burial ground as irrelevant to the memory of slavery it evokes, it may also be argued that the disputes, controversies, and raucous hearings were in fact a vital part of the project of working through a difficult history. Though the reclamation of the slavery past has produced its own historical misrepresentations, the debates it sparked have perhaps been more successful than Bill Clinton’s

³⁵ T. Cole, *Open City* (London 2011) 220-21.

townhall meetings in stimulating national (and international) conversations about race and the continuing legacies of slavery. Though there obviously is no direct connection with the memorialization of slavery, the 2008 election of Barack Obama as first African-American U.S. president was to some extent a result of the black empowerment and political integration to which black civic activism has contributed.

Controversy also created a public space in which coalitions had to be formed and power shared. During the long and difficult process of realizing the slavery memorials in New York and Philadelphia, grassroots initiatives were accompanied and reinforced by political action, while political interventions were legitimated by community involvement. For local, state and national black politicians, their successful efforts to preserve and appropriate funds for development of the slave memorial sites formed a highly visible way of serving their black constituency. As African-Americans these politicians seem to have felt a strong personal commitment to commemorating their ancestors' enslavement, but they also stood to gain politically from their lobbying efforts in terms of securing reelection, realizing political ambitions, or gaining political clout. Moreover, though African-American Congressman John Conyers has been trying in vain to put the issue of reparations for slavery on the political agenda since 1989,³⁶ the federal funding that black politicians under pressure from grassroots activists were able to appropriate for the slavery monuments can be seen as a (to be sure, unacknowledged) form of reparations and atonement on the part of the U.S. government.

By claiming control and public recognition of their past, African-American advocacy groups and their supporters developed new forms of civic and political engagement. As Gary Nash said when the President's House was inaugurated, 'the process of civic engagement (...) is a very important part [of the memorial project]. (...) It was messy. It was protracted. It was bloody sometimes, but it was in the end very democratic.'³⁷ In the wake of a long tradition of black activism, black

³⁶ See Conyers' official website:

http://conyers.house.gov/index.cfm?FuseAction=Issues.Home&Issue_id=06007167-19b9-b4b1-125c-df3de5ec97f8

³⁷ S. Salisbury, 'President's House – With Memorial to Enslaved Africans – Opens on Independence Mall', *Philadelphia Inquirer*, December 16, 2010. <http://www.ushistory.org/presidentshouse/news/inq121610.htm>. Viewed on: July 29, 2012.

Johanna C. Kardux —————

participation in efforts to memorialize a history of slavery as well as resistance to slavery gave rise to new forms of historically conscious and socially engaged democratic citizenship.