

THE SUNKEN PLACE

What secrets lie in the holds of slave ships?

BY JULIAN LUCAS



On the way down I saw nothing. The water was a blur of teal fringed with rusty shadows, darkening, about twenty feet below, to a sickly emerald. I followed a rope strung between a buoy and a stake in the seabed, pausing occasionally to pinch my nose and adjust my sinuses to the pressure. Just beyond the thermocline, where the temperature abruptly drops, a hand emerged from the murk and grabbed me by the wrist, dragging me the last few inches to the bottom. The silt was as soft as tapioca pudding. It swallowed my hand, then my arm and shoulder; the deeper I pushed, the more I suspected that it might go on forever. Finally, I touched wood, feeling a chill colder than the water's as I ran my fingertips over the

grooves and splinters of submerged planks. This was the slave ship *Camargo*, which carried five hundred souls across the Atlantic before it burned.

It was the sixth of November, and I was diving with a group of maritime archaeologists in Angra dos Reis. A verdant bay three hours from Rio de Janeiro, it's a kind of Brazilian Hamptons, where yachts fill the marinas and *Vogue* once sponsored a party for New Year's Eve. But in the nineteenth century it was mostly plantations—sugarcane near the water and coffee just beyond the jagged mountains that ring the area like snaggleteeth. They thrust up around me as I resurfaced, pressing a button to inflate my scuba kit's buoyancy-control device. The researcher who'd guided me

to the wreck showed me the soot under our fingernails. Then we swam back to the dive boat, a creaky, flat-bottomed rental whose Portuguese name meant "With Jesus I Will Win."

On board, preparations were under way to disinter the *Camargo*, a two-masted brig that sank in 1852. A storm had buried the ship shortly after its discovery the previous December; now it was time to clear away the mud. Divers had spent the morning setting out buoys, running submarine guidelines, and surveying the site, working creatively with modest tools. Two men assembled a dredge from a PVC pipe and a household grease trap. Another hailed a nearby megayacht to borrow its "sub-bottom profiler," a costly sonar device that exposes buried features. "We're using the rich," he said. "It's reparations."

Ten years ago, not one ship that sank in the Middle Passage had ever been identified. The African diaspora's watery cradle was an archeological blank, as though the sea had erased all trace of what the poet Robert Hayden called a "voyage through death/to life upon these shores." Then, in 2015, a Portuguese ship called the *São José* was discovered off the coast of Cape Town. Three years later, the *Clotilda*, America's last known slave ship, turned up in Alabama's Mobile River. The most recent find is believed to be *L'Aurore*, a French vessel that sank off the coast of Mozambique after an attempted uprising. Meanwhile, in Dakar, researchers are closing in on the *Sénégal*, which exploded after its capture by the British Navy, in 1781.

Behind this fleet of revenants is a network called the Slave Wrecks Project. Coordinated by the Smithsonian—along with George Washington University, the Iziko Museums of South Africa, and the U.S. National Park Service—the S.W.P. combines maritime archaeology with reparative justice, tourism, and aquatic training in Black communities. Its work is too new to gauge its impact on scholarship, but it has already made a meaningful contribution to public history. Artifacts from the *São José* have become a centerpiece of the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture (N.M.A.A.H.C.). The *Clotilda* inspired a Netflix documentary and a new museum in Africatown, Alabama, and similar hopes are

The Slave Wrecks Project aims to reconnect Black communities to the deep.

riding on the Camargo in Angra dos Reis. The enthusiasm reflects an oceanic turn in understandings of heritage among diasporic writers, artists, and scholars, who are increasingly preoccupied with what the influential theorist Christina Sharpe calls slavery's "wake."

Before my descent, I spoke with Gabrielle Miller, a maritime archeologist at the Smithsonian, whom I found strapping a stainless-steel knife to her muscular calf. A thirty-two-year-old with cowrie shells in her long box braids and a pierced septum, she teared up describing her underwater work. "There was a hush over it, almost like a church," she said of her first dive to a slaver's wreck. Feeling the Camargo was even more uncannily intimate: "The black stayed on my hands for a long time." Miller works for the N.M.A.A.H.C. and contributed to an ongoing exhibition, "In Slavery's Wake," which features beads and shells that enslaved Africans likely carried to Brazil. But she'd rather talk about being in the water than about what divers can retrieve from it. "It's very antiquarian to put all of the emphasis on a physical object," she said. "The ship is a catalyst."

Miller started off in terrestrial archeology and once worked for the Nez Perce Tribe in Idaho. But a research trip to St. Croix, where her family originated, led her to become a scuba diver, and to apply her skills to the histories of her own people. In 2021, Miller enrolled in an S.W.P.-affiliated internship program, which she now helps to run. She also teaches the basics of maritime archeology through the Slave Wrecks Project Academy, which works with archeology graduate students in Senegal and Mozambique. The academy's two-pronged goal is to diversify the ranks of archeologists, a minuscule fraction of whom are Black, and to include people from across the diaspora in the study of its history. Yet it's also a kind of exorcism—an exercise in dispelling history's haints.

"They say that the African diasporic relationship to water equals 'trauma,'" Miller told me, alluding to an all too familiar tale of Middle Passage drownings, contaminated taps, and segregated beaches. It wasn't exactly false, she conceded. But didn't Black people also have a privileged connection to the sea? She spoke rapturously of coral architecture

in the Caribbean, of water spirits venerated by Senegal's seafaring Lebu, and of work by the artist Ayana V. Jackson, who was inspired to learn diving by the Afrofuturist myth of Drexciya. Created in the nineties by a Detroit electronica duo, it imagines a Black Atlantis populated by the water-breathing issue of women who drowned in the crossing. The idea fortified me when I sat on the dive boat's rail and prepared to fall overboard. Within the siren call of the sunken place is an invitation to courage, Miller suggested: "Our ancestral relationship to water is not one of fear."

"The slaver is a ghost ship sailing on the edges of modern consciousness," Marcus Rediker writes in his harrowing history "The Slave Ship." The vessels were floating torture chambers that devoured more than twelve million lives, and their finely calibrated cruelties—lightless holds fetid with vomit and excrement, sick people bound to anchor chains and thrown en masse to waiting sharks—fuelled the global economy for half a millennium. They left a psychic imprint so deep that Black people still speak of them in terms of personal experience. "I remember on the slave ship, how they brutalized our very souls," Bob Marley sings in "Slave Driver."

One might have assumed that a handful of these vessels, at least eight hundred of which are known to have wrecked, would have turned up long ago. But those equipped to search for them have lacked incentives to do so. In 1972, commercial treasure hunters stumbled on the wreck of the Henrietta Marie, an English ship that sank near the Florida Keys after a slaving voyage—and moved on as soon as they realized that it wasn't the Spanish galleon they were seeking. (It was later excavated.) Maritime archeologists, meanwhile, largely ignored the Middle Passage. Stephen Lubkemann, a professor at George Washington University, told me, "There were more archeological studies of cogs in bogs in Ireland than of slave ships."

Lubkemann conceived of the S.W.P. in 2003. Slavery wasn't his field, but he'd long marvelled that historians, who'd recently unveiled the monumental Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database, were so far ahead of his social-science peers. Because of its expense, maritime archeol-

ogy is reliant on funding from governments, few of which wanted to pay for the exposure of their historical crimes. An exception was post-apartheid South Africa, where Jaco Boshoff, a researcher at the Iziko Museums, was looking for a Dutch slaver called the Meermin. He and Lubkemann joined forces and expanded the search to other ships, shuttling between nautical archives and Cape Town's wreck-strewn littoral.

For years, both dollars and discoveries eluded them. Then, in 2008, Boshoff encountered a scholarly citation about a Portuguese ship that sank en route from Mozambique to Brazil, carrying two hundred Africans to their deaths. Further research led to the captain's testimony, which indicated a spot under a mountain known as Lion's Head. Soon, Boshoff and his team were diving at what he called "one of the worst wreck sites I've ever worked on." The archeologists were dashed against the very reefs that had sunk the vessel; one almost drowned. Still worse, the wreck was itself a wreck, having already been stripped by treasure hunters in the nineteen-eighties. (They found human remains, which have since disappeared.) Just enough remained to identify the vessel: crumpled copper sheathing from the period; iron ballast blocks that were mentioned in the manifest; and, most crucially, timber from a tropical hardwood that grew in Mozambique. By 2015, Boshoff and Lubkemann were confident enough to announce that they'd found the São José—the first known wreck of a ship that sank during a slaving voyage.

Their discovery was perfectly timed. In the early twenty-tens, Lonnie Bunch, the founding director of the soon-to-open N.M.A.A.H.C., was determined to acquire a relic of the Middle Passage. "The slave trade was where the modern world began," Bunch, who is now the secretary of the Smithsonian, told me. "I needed to be able to tell that story in an intimate way." After realizing how few existed, he negotiated a partnership with the S.W.P. and supported its search for the São José. The museum opened, in September, 2016, with artifacts from the ship showcased in a subterranean gallery evocative of a slaver's hold. Bunch attended a ceremony to honor the São José's victims in Mozambique, where traditional rulers presented him with a

container of earth to scatter over the wreck. When a young Mozambican tearfully thanked him for bringing her kidnapped countrymen home, Bunch had a revelation: "What we were looking for wasn't about yesterday but today."

Every morning before diving, and every evening afterward, the team excavating the Camargo dined on a local historian's back porch. Her mint-green house in Frade, a gated condominium on the bay, served as a base for the expedition, whose members would relax around a table near a pool and a tree with fuchsia blossoms. Leaving their wetsuits to dry on the patio furniture, they'd feast on *feijoada* and other Brazilian specialties, speaking in a mix of Portuguese, English, French, and Spanish that they'd christened "Portuglaisesol." Having no common language was no obstacle to camaraderie. Miller entertained the table with the story of the "Notilda," a wreck mistakenly identified as the Clotilda. I was teased for having studied with the "wrong" dive federation. The expedition's genial young field coordinator, Luis Felipe Santos, drew the most laughs, because he couldn't pronounce "buoy."

Santos is a stout thirty-five-year-old tattooed with nautical motifs, orisha symbols, and a demon's head captioned "TROPICAL PUNK." He's a professor of maritime archeology at the Federal University of Bahia and serves as the president of AfrOrigens, a nonprofit established to find the wrecks of slave ships. (Having found the Camargo, they've begun surveying near the town of Maricá for the wreck of the Malteza, which

was sunk by the British Navy.) A self-identified Afro-Indigenous Brazilian, he co-founded the country's first organization of Black archeologists. But his work hardly touched on slavery until he was invited to join a yearlong search for the Camargo, which then began appearing in his dreams. Several other archeologists experienced similar visions, and he speculated, half playfully, that "African cosmology" was responsible: "The energy of the wreck called all of us."

Nothing so dramatic had befallen me. Yet the prospect of coming so close to an "unknowable" history, which my own ancestors had survived, did inspire me to learn scuba. Just a month earlier, I'd enrolled at a hole-in-the-wall school in New York, where the instructor taught me and two white bankers to "maximize our bottom time." Surrounded by decorative shark plushies, I couldn't have felt farther from the grim story of the Camargo. I didn't yet know that Manhattan was where its captain financed his slaving expeditions—and, eventually, met an unexpected end.

Of the thousands of vessels involved in the Atlantic slave trade, the Camargo has two distinctions. It's the last slaver known to have reached Brazil, which outlawed the slave trade, though not slavery, in 1850. And its captain, Nathaniel Gordon, an American from Portland, Maine, was the only man ever executed for slave trafficking in the United States. Gordon had absconded with the Camargo while transporting ordinary merchandise from San Francisco to New York. He then set a more profitable course for Mozambique, where he purchased his human cargo. Pursued by the

British Navy, he torched the ship after unloading its five hundred captives, who were sold to local plantations. Brazilian authorities arrested several crew members, but Gordon managed to escape, disguised in women's clothes.

He made two more slaving voyages before the U.S. Navy finally caught him, in 1860. Even then, he likely expected to go free. Although the international slave trade had been illegal for decades, the ban was hardly ever enforced—especially not in New York, which Horace Greeley described as "a nest of slave pirates." Wall Street investors regularly financed slaving expeditions, and bribery of customs officers and juries was rife. But Gordon was tried by Lincoln's Justice Department, whose attorneys were eager to make an example of a brazen trafficker as the Civil War got under way. Gordon was convicted and sentenced to death.

The ruling sparked a nationwide argument. Was it fair to execute a man for violating a dead-letter law, particularly when the domestic slave trade was perfectly legal in much of the country? Ralph Waldo Emerson lobbied for the captain's execution; Gordon's wife presented Mary Todd Lincoln with a rhyming plea for clemency. The President decided to let the captain hang, telling one petitioner that "any man, who, for paltry gain and stimulated only by avarice, can rob Africa of her children to sell them into interminable bondage, I never will pardon." After an unsuccessful suicide attempt, Gordon was duly executed at the Tombs on February 21, 1862. He insisted, from the gallows, that he was an innocent family man, who'd never intentionally harmed another human being in his life.

Yuri Sanada, a filmmaker with an unruly salt-and-pepper bowl cut, found the story irresistible. "Nobody knows more about shipwrecks than I do," he told me. "I had my own." Although he lacks a degree in archeology, Sanada is a consummate adventurer who's done everything from sailing a replica Phoenician galley across the Atlantic to salvaging his own furniture from the wreck of the houseboat where he and his wife lived for twelve years. He read about Gordon's misadventures in a 2006 book by Ron Soodalter and immediately proposed a film adaptation. He also pitched



DINAPOLI

"I think we should go electric."

the author a daring idea. James Cameron had descended to the already discovered Titanic to research his “Titanic.” Sanada would out-Cameron Cameron by locating the wreck of the Camargo.

He teamed up with Gilson Rambelli, a maritime archeologist at the Federal University of Sergipe who had led an unsuccessful search for the Camargo in the early two-thousands and was trying to renew the effort. (He had come within a few yards.) Rambelli led the campaign, which the S.W.P. agreed to fund and support beginning in 2022. “We spent hundreds of hours poking the bottom with this big nine-foot iron rod,” Sanada recalled, as target after target revealed by a magnetometer survey let them down. One day, a passing fisherman boasted that he knew the wreck’s location. “It was the last dive of the last day of the last expedition,” Sanada explained, and they were desperate enough to invite him aboard. He took them to an island that his father had known as a popular spawning ground. Yet even he looked surprised when a diver resurfaced with fragments of charred wood.

“We came to legitimate something that was already legitimate,” Santos said of the discovery, which corroborated local lore about the wreck. He believes that archeology can be a tool for justice—particularly in Brazil, where the omissions of colonial archives have underwritten the displacement of Black and Indigenous peoples. Santos’s research hadn’t previously focussed on the African diaspora, but he began to feel an ancestral call. “For me, it’s not about the study of the other,” he told me. “I see myself in the artifact.”

Miller sat cross-legged on a paddleboard and rowed toward the mountains with slow, deliberate strokes. She dipped her face into the water at intervals; once or twice, she slid herself off the board, inhaled sharply, and dived to the bottom. But there was no sign of the Camargo in the “miasma,” she shouted back to Santos, who tossed her a plastic-wrapped G.P.S. Soon, the wreck found, Miller and another archeologist were descending to it with a dredge, which was attached, via fire hose, to a motor on deck. They signalled with a stream of bubbles once they were ready to begin. Sanada yanked a pull cord, and

the contraption roared to life. But the hose clogged with debris and popped off, soaking everyone on deck. Sanada grinned ruefully: “One point for the pump, zero for the archeologists.”

In the popular imagination, excavating a shipwreck is like exploring a ruin—an odyssey through a drowned world. The reality is that many shipwrecks are found in pieces. Looted by salvagers, gnawed at by shipworms, and damaged by passing vessels, they become hard to distinguish from anonymous debris. The difficulty is heightened by zero-visibility conditions; ensconced in a turbid bay, the Camargo had become a puzzle for “braille archeology,” the art of forensic reconstruction via touch.

“We have to feel for each metre,” Miller, back on deck, explained. The archeologists were using their hands, arms, and wingspans to map the site. They’d begun by outlining the wreck with twelve numbered stakes, each attached to a buoy on the surface. Then they had run a line between them, using two other lines to trace the axes of a rough grid. Now they were digging square-metre test pits in search of distinctive features, which they sketched, by feel, on waterproof slates. Eventually, a site plan would emerge from this collaborative hallucination, hopefully revealing the wreck’s orientation on the bottom.

The plan was already beginning to emerge on a sheet of Mylar graph paper—an oval, surrounded by arrows, with a handful of anomalous objects marked. Santos had found a huge hunk of metal near one end of the site. Miller, when she examined it, had felt a smaller one with the tip of her fin, which turned out to be hollow and cylindrical. She lay face down on deck to show the distance between the two to Sanada, who planned to photograph the objects by pressing a clear plastic bag of water against them. He invited me to watch; before long, we were feeling our way along the seafloor, pausing briefly where the two rope axes converged.

I couldn’t help but think of the crossroads: a geometric figure, common throughout the African diaspora, that symbolizes the boundary between the living and the dead. According to certain cosmologies, their souls take on the guise of marine creatures—an idea that struck me as strangely comforting.

During my certification dive, at a flooded quarry in eastern Pennsylvania, I’d felt surreally out of place, balking at the vast darkness around me as I stared into the eyes of a bass who’d taken up residence in the cockpit of a submerged Cessna. Here, though, I could imagine myself surrounded by kindred spirits.

We swam on to the object that Santos had found earlier. It was barrel-shaped and about the diameter of my wingspan, with a pocked and pitted texture that prompted intrusive thoughts of tetanus. For a few seconds, the water cleared enough to see something that resembled a cross between a hairball and a meteor. It’s what’s called, in maritime archeology, a “concretion,” which forms when an iron object corrodes in salt water. Ferrous ions precipitate around its dissolving form, which is preserved as though in a mold. The result is exceedingly fragile and disintegrates if allowed to dry. But, when X-rayed, concretions yield manifold secrets. The renowned Canadian maritime archeologist Marc-André Bernier told me that he’s watched cannons, kettles, muskets, and even a finely wrought scale emerge from lumps of “nothing.”

Later that day, Bernier led a discussion of the concretion in the historian’s living room. He clicked through reference images of nineteenth-century brigs as the other archeologists nursed beers and hazarded hypotheses. Could it be the anchor? Santos thought it might be the hatch. Bernier asked Miller about the tubular object that she’d found nearby. He suspected that it was the hawsepipe, an outlet for the anchor chain. In that case, the bigger object was likely the windlass, a winchlike machine used to hoist the anchor.

Bernier tested his hypothesis the next day. He dived to the wreck several times and sketched the bigger object, which seemed to have two barrels and a shaft in between, before resurfacing with a triumphant announcement. “The widths are the same size, the holes are the same size, the shafts are the same size,” he said, outlining each shape with his hands. “It’s the windlass.” Miller closed her eyes and extended her arms like a mystic: “He sees the ship in his *mind*!”

Given how much is known about slave ships, it’s fair to ask if excavating them will fundamentally alter conceptions

of the Middle Passage. Rediker, the historian, praised maritime archeologists for retrieving palpable traces of what the enslaved suffered, but doubts that they will learn much from the vessels themselves. “It’s one thing to have plans,” Bernier said of such skepticism. “But a ship is a living thing.” Most slavers were ordinary vessels that crews modified en route, adding features like the barricado—an anti-mutiny fortification—and the cramped compartments belowdecks where captives were stowed. In Alabama and Mozambique, researchers are excavating such holds for the first time and hope to retrieve objects that captives smuggled across the Atlantic.

Their ultimate goal is to link these discoveries to slavery’s contemporary legacy. Studying the São José has taken researchers to the ruins of its owner’s palace in Lisbon. The excavation of L’Aurore is proceeding in tandem with field work in rural Mozambique; in one village, an oral tradition pointed to a ruin on a nearby island, which had once been a barracoon. Members of a Black scuba nonprofit called Diving with a Purpose, which joined the S.W.P. in 2014, recently led a delegation to Liberia, where they met with descendants of escapees from the Guerrero, a slave ship that sank in the Florida Keys.

Diving with a Purpose was established, in the mid-aughts, to find the Guerrero, which remains at large. But the group’s annual searches have become a floating school for Black scuba divers, including teens from Florida high schools. “African Americans have a particular connectedness to the ocean,” Jay Haigler, a lead instructor with the program, told me. “How the hell did we get over here? On a goddam boat. And it wasn’t the Niña, the Pinta, or the Santa Maria.” An affable, mustachioed former real-estate developer, Haigler joined the group after meeting some Black scuba divers at a wedding. Now he has worked on wrecks all over the world, including the Clotilda and the downed planes of Tuskegee Airmen in the Mediterranean. To him, it’s not an accident that recent breakthroughs in the archeology of the Middle Pas-

sage have involved the participation of Black divers: “If we’re not part of the ocean, our stories are never told.”

Overlooking the bay from the foothills of the Serra do Mar is the Quilombo Santa Rita do Bracuí. Situated between a muddy river and a tropical forest, it’s a historically Black community that is home to three hundred and seventy-three families, many of whom live in unfinished houses with corrugated roofs. The *quilombo*—a term for a rural settlement established by the formerly enslaved—is less than ten minutes from the water. Yet it’s practically unknown to the area’s more affluent residents. “Like a lot of people from Rio de Janeiro, I had never heard of them,” the historian Martha Abreu, who vacationed

nearby in her youth, recalled. “I was a white person with a white family who came to have pleasure in Angra dos Reis.”

Abreu, a tiny, ebullient scholar with a high-pitched voice, was the archeologists’ host. Her father had purchased the property where they were staying in the nineteen-eighties, when a new highway was transforming the bay into a tourism hub. With the assistance of Brazil’s military government, speculators seized valuable waterfront land from Black residents, who retreated to the hills.

Their *quilombo* dates back to the eighteen-seventies, when the owner of a sugar plantation bequeathed it to those he’d enslaved. He was one of the planters who’d illegally bought Africans from the Camargo, and they’d disembarked on his property, arriving on canoes in the dead of night as the ship was set aflame. The aftermath brought Brazil’s clandestine slave trade to a permanent end. As police scoured local plantations for the trafficked Africans, a number of their “legitimately” enslaved brethren ran away. (Some posed as new arrivals to avoid reenslavement.) The chaos stoked fears of “another Haiti” before it was quashed and forgotten.

When Abreu first visited the Quilombo Bracuí, in the early two-thousands, she’d already published an article about the incident—and was shocked to discover that its memory had endured in

the *quilombo*’s oral tradition. Certain aspects of the narrative had assumed legendary dimensions. *Quilombolas* told Abreu that Gordon, fearing discovery, had let most of those aboard the Camargo drown, while archival sources suggested that they’d landed safely. Other particulars were almost uncannily precise, she said: “They knew everything about slavery, the owner’s will, and the traffic.”

“This was a hidden story,” Marilda de Souza Francisco, a former leader of the *quilombo*, said when I visited. “Now we want everyone to know.” A subsistence farmer in her sixties, she and other community members set up a memorial to the brig’s victims near her house—an airy, low-slung building covered in old pink plaster, where dogs barked under the banana and palm trees. A sign on her wraparound veranda cites Brazil’s post-dictatorship constitution, which grants “the remaining members of the ancient runaway slave communities” ownership of their traditional lands. The provision was ratified in the late nineteen-eighties, but conservatives allied with the country’s agricultural lobby have long impeded its enforcement. Only a handful of the nearly three thousand communities that have applied for official status have been granted land titles. Francisco hopes that the attention brought by the Camargo’s discovery will make hers one of them: “We are in a hurry, but the law is very slow.”

The *quilombolas* suffer from unemployment, the illegal destruction of the mangrove swamps where they’ve traditionally fished, and the theft of land and water for wealthier neighborhoods on the waterfront. (Their access to the river was recently blocked.) Last May, Lonnie Bunch visited, bringing a burst of attention from government officials, who had previously neglected these problems. But the immediate hope is that the Camargo will create jobs and attract tourists. AfrOrigens recently constructed a small base in the *quilombo*, where it plans to exhibit artifacts from the excavation. The organization is training young *quilombolas* to scuba dive, with the aim of allowing them to become stewards of the wreck site.

Although the excavation has just begun, there’s also talk of commemoration. Francisco’s dream is a floating memorial to the Camargo. She recently



watched a documentary about the discovery of another slave ship, which had revived a small town on Alabama's Gulf Coast. Perhaps it would happen again.

Eight years after the Camargo's destruction, America's last slave ship met an identical fate. Returning from Ouidah, in present-day Benin, the schooner Clotilda stole into Alabama's Mobile River with a hundred and ten Africans—a victory for its owner, Timothy Meaher, who'd wagered that he could defy the country's slave-trade ban. The captain burned the ship and sank it in a bayou; the captives, nearly all Yoruba speakers from the same village, toiled on plantations for the next five years. After the Civil War, a few dozen survivors banded together to buy land from Meaher and established a community called Africatown.

The settlement's recent memory of enslavement was unique in the United States. In the late nineteen-twenties, Zora Neale Hurston interviewed one of its founders, Cudjo Lewis, née Oluale Kos-sola, who vividly remembered the terror of the crossing. (The sea growled "lak de thousand beastes in de bush.") But the town's cohesion frayed in the late twentieth century as factories shuttered, leaving behind dangerous pollution, and the construction of an interstate highway demolished the historic downtown. Africatown's population plummeted, and its singular history threatened to fade. Then, in 2018, a local journalist, Ben Raines, located the wreck of the Clotilda, whose identity was confirmed the next year by archeologists. It was the most intact wreck of a slave ship ever found.

Africatown was deluged with attention. A filmmaker interviewed tearful residents for a documentary, which was subsequently acquired by the Obamas and Netflix. National Geographic made two others; for the second, Clotilda descendants travelled to Benin, where they confronted the king whose predecessor had enslaved their ancestors, scattered soil taken from their graves in Alabama, and visited the Door of No Return, a monument that frames the Atlantic. Back in Africatown, a modest museum, the Heritage House, opened in 2023, with fragments of the Clotilda exhibited in pH-controlled tanks.

Some descendants have begun run-

ning boat tours in the Mobile River. Others are receiving free swimming and scuba lessons through the S.W.P., in the hope of eventually visiting the wreck site. "I just want to touch it," Evelyn Milton, an I.T. professional who plans to earn her scuba certification this spring, told me. "If I could take a rose, or some type of pennant—something all the 'ologists' think is safe—to leave on the ship, as a way to say, 'Hey, I'm your fourth-great-granddaughter. You're never going to believe this, but I work from home. Thank you.'"

Anderson Cooper recently moderated an on-air reckoning between the Clotilda Descendants Association and two members of the Meaher family, which still owns a substantial amount of property in and around Africatown, and has rented it to the very factories that locals blame for occurrences of cancer. After the Clotilda was discovered, the family sold a plot of land to the community for a fraction of its market value; it has since become a food bank. During the interview, they also presented one of the descendants, Pat Frazier, with a silver-tipped cane that had belonged to the enslaver of her great-great-grandparents. It was a set-piece moment of racial reconciliation. Still, Frazier regarded the heirloom skeptically, as though she'd expected more.

"I thought I was going to see Montgomery again," Frazier told me, alluding to the National Memorial for Peace and Justice, which has revitalized the state's capital. The dream of "communal arche-

ology" is that communities might benefit from the excavation of their history; a few years ago, Bolivian Indigenous groups sued for salvage rights to a Spanish treasure galleon, arguing that its unprecedented haul of gold, silver, and emeralds had emerged from mines where their ancestors were enslaved. But it isn't easy to parlay excavations into reparations. Frazier believes that the effort has been hindered by friction between local and out-of-state descendants, and between those groups and non-descendant residents who feel excluded from the media bonanza. Others feel that the ship is a distraction from the community that its survivors established.

And then there's the question of what to do with the wreck. Initially, Africatown was abuzz with talk of raising and exhibiting the Clotilda, like the Vasa warship in Stockholm; perhaps it could be a tourist attraction, a memorial, and an implicit rebuke to conservative lawmakers who wanted to erase slavery from the state's textbooks. But this hope was dashed by a recent report from the Alabama Historical Commission, which concluded that the wreck was more fragile than previously believed, and that raising it would cost upward of thirty million dollars. The recommended alternative was to rebury the Clotilda in the mud, preserving its archeological integrity for future generations. (Scientists have already attempted to extract DNA from the ship's bilge.)

Many descendants were persuaded. "This community doesn't even have



"Rakish angles don't work for you."

a grocery store,” Frazier told local television, suggesting that thirty million dollars could be put to better use. But Raines, the ship’s discoverer, sees a missed opportunity to create a global landmark. “I hear a lot of people giving up,” he said of the descendants, many of whom he has taken to the site. Their reluctance hasn’t stopped him from launching a crusade to raise the wreck. (He wants to enlist Oprah.) “The Clotilda is an internationally important artifact,” he told me. “It’s not up to the descendants what happens to the ship. It belongs to the world.”

Darron Patterson—whose ancestor Polee Allen spoke of his yearning for home until he died, in 1922—wants to build a replica of the Clotilda, which he envisions facing east, toward Africa. “Yorubans are very ingenious people,” he said. “For my money, if they could have gotten their hands on a boat, they would have gotten back home.” He was surprised when I told him that a similar project was under construction at the other end of the Clotilda’s voyage. The Beninese government is building an enormous heritage-tourism complex in Ouidah, with a replica slave ship as its main attraction. Visitors will embark from a beach near the Door of No Return via small boats, then explore a hold crammed with more than three hundred resin sculptures of captives. Groans and rattling chains may play over a speaker system; the French company designing the experience previously worked on a themed restaurant for children, called Pirate’s Paradise.

Memorialization easily curdles into kitsch. There’s also a certain awkwardness in Ouidah marketing such “heritage” to tourists whose ancestors it sold into slavery. Yet a Beninese tourism official assured me that diaspora historians had consulted on the replica, which wouldn’t be “too Disney.” It might even educate his countrymen about slavery. “There was something missing after the Door of No Return,” he insisted. “For the Beninese, it wasn’t clear why those from the diaspora were crying in front of the ocean.”

My first memory of the Atlantic slave trade is of a childhood visit to the Freedom Schooner Amistad, in Sag Harbor, New York. I was dimly aware that I had enslaved ancestors. But see-

ing and hearing how they’d come to the country—even on a museum ship, built to commemorate the famous maritime slave rebellion—was a shock. It deepened when, as a teen-ager, I took up genealogy and realized that, although I could trace my white mother’s ancestry across centuries and continents, my Black father’s ended, conclusively, with a man named Moses, who’d escaped from slavery in Virginia, swam across the Rappahannock River to join the Union Army, and left whatever he knew of his forebears behind.

I’d arrived at what the poet Dionne Brand describes as “a rupture in history, a rupture in the quality of being” that is distinctive to the African diaspora. “We were not from the place where we lived and we could not remember where we were from or who we were,” she writes in “A Map to the Door of No Return,” recalling the childhood realization that her own grandfather was ignorant of their roots. The title evokes a watery void “where all names were forgotten and all beginnings recast.”

The archeology of slave ships has such appeal because it promises to fill this void. But it can do only so much to turn back time. Clotilda descendants are still waiting for DNA from the ship’s timbers. Residents of the Quilombo Bracuí were taken aback to learn that many of the Camargo Africans were dispersed throughout southeastern Brazil—contrary to their oral tradition, in which the majority were killed and a few survivors joined their community.

The emphasis on precise continuity may be self-defeating. In Brazil, conservative media outlets have attempted to expose “false” *quilombos* by casting doubt on their origin stories. In the United States, private reparations initiatives have been repeatedly undercut by debates over who, exactly, deserves to pay or be paid. During one of my Africatown calls, which I made from the lobby of a hotel in New Orleans, a white man who overheard me began shouting that the wreck of the Clotilda was a “scam” and a “hoax.”

The obsession with lineage is at odds with the solidarity of the Middle Passage, which created new forms of kinship. Africans who survived it had a word for those who travelled with them, whether or not they came from the same places or spoke the same languages: “shipmate.”

The poet Derek Walcott, in his masterpiece “Omeros,” describes this emergence from anonymity as a kind of grace:

But they crossed, they survived. There is the epical splendour.
Multiply the rain’s lances, multiply their ruin,
the grace born from subtraction as the hold’s iron door
rolled over their eyes like pots left out in the rain,
and the bolt rammed home its echo, the way that thunder-claps perpetuate their reverberation.

Last May, during a celebration of the Camargo’s discovery, a young priest from the *quilombo* went to sea to bless the excavation. A practitioner of *candomblé*, whose pantheon syncretizes Catholicism with various African cosmologies, he prayed to the spirits of his ancestors and those of others, and prepared a tiny ceremonial urn called a *quartinha* as a symbolic coffin for those who’d perished on board. He also scattered flowers for Iemanjá, orisha of the sea, as a way to conciliate her for the violation of the Camargo’s voyage.

The priest had learned to dive from the archeologists, who watched from the dive boat’s stern as he took a giant step overboard. A few moments later, he resurfaced, extending his hands to receive the *quartinha* from a man on deck. Then he released the air from his vest and dropped to the bottom, cradling the urn as he vanished into the murk. He was descending not just into the bay but also into *kalunga*, the watery underworld of Kikongo tradition, which fused, in the Americas, with memories of the crossing.

A few months later, one of the archeologists descended to the Camargo, searching for the buried cable that demarcates its location. Herself a devotee of the orishas, she describes herself as a “daughter of Ogum Marinho, whose point of strength is the bottom of the sea.” That day, she struggled to find the vessel and wasted precious minutes of air groping in the mud. Suddenly, she felt something and froze. It was the *quartinha*, with a string of rosary beads beside it, both sitting on what she soon realized was the hull. She took a moment to pray. Then she plunged her hand into the silt and swam on, feeling for the line that crossed and circled the wreck. ♦