CONTESTED HISTORIES

MEMORIAL TO ENSLAVED PEOPLE

Lisbon, Portugal

38.7223, -9.1393



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Executive Summary

The Memorial to Enslaved People was scheduled to be inaugurated in the second half of 2020 in Lisbon, but had to be delayed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In mid-2023, the municipality of Lisbon proposed relocating the monument. The Association DJASS accused the municipality, now governed by a right-wing social democratic administration instead of the previous socialist one, of not wanting to build the monument at all. While this project has not been met by significant pushback, more critical voices have urged caution when it comes to the framing of the associated narrative. This case study explores Portugal's colonial past, the decision-making process of the memorial from its beginning in 2017 and the challenges associated with Portugal's dominant narrative surrounding its colonial past and its involvement in the slave trade.

Introduction

A collaborative effort from the *Associação de Afrodescendentes* (Association of Afrodescendents) in Portugal, also known as DJASS (an NGO whose mission is to defend the rights of Black and Afro-descendant people in Portugal), and the Lisbon City Council helped cultivate a monument to enslaved people. Originally scheduled for the latter half of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has delayed its construction and inauguration. Proponents of the monument view it as a crucial step towards confronting Portugal's historical participation in the Atlantic slave trade and contemporary racism towards those of African descent in Portugal. Furthermore, it would challenge the dominant narrative present in Portugal regarding the Age of Discoveries, which is often regarded as the Golden Age of Portugal's history. However, critics argue that Portugal has sufficiently acknowledged its racist past, rendering the monument unnecessary. Contestation over the monument reflects fundamental disagreement over how to present the past and its impact on the present.

Background

Remembering the Atlantic Slave Trade

The mid-fifteenth century marks the beginning of the Portuguese slave trade, when Prince Henry introduced the sale of African slaves to Lagos, Portugal.[1] Following that, Lisbon became the centre of the Portuguese slave trade in 1486.[2] In 1512, King Manuel I declared that any enslaved peoples brought to Portugal must arrive in Lisbon, which further cemented the city's role within the slave trade.[3] From the late fifteenth to the sixteenth century, the crown held a monopoly over gold, ivory, and slaves in Africa. By the early seventeenth century, Portugal was responsible for shipping an estimated 3,000 to 4,000 enslaved persons annually, exemplifying the crown's ties to the transatlantic slave trade – a period (1500s-1880s) during which an estimated eleven million Africans were transported from Africa to the Americas as enslaved persons.[4]

Most historians avoid focusing exclusively on this aspect because it would be too reductive of Portugal's History. While the slave trade is important to acknowledge and emphasise its significance, the history of the period encompasses much more and cannot be fully understood by considering this alone. For instance, the period between the early fifteenth and sixteenth centuries has since been dubbed Portugal's 'Golden Age' or the 'Age of Discoveries'.[5] Lisbon's official

[1] Joaquim R. Magalhães, "Africans, Indians, and Slavery in Portugal," *Portuguese Studies* 13 (1997): 143.
[2] John L. Vogt, "The Lisbon Slave House and African Trade, 1486-1521," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 117, no. 1 (1973): 2.
[3] Arlindo Manuel Caldeira, *Escravos E Traficantes no Império Português*, 1. ed. ed. (Lisboa: Esfera dos Livros, 2013). 156
[4] Herbert S. Klein, *The Atlantic Slave Trade* (Cambridge University Press, 2010), 76-77.
[5] Anthony R. Disney, *A History of Portugal and the Portuguese Empire: From Beginnings to 1807*, vol. 1, *Portugal* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 143.

tourism website describes the *Padrão dos Descobrimentos* (Monument to Discoveries), a major tourist site, as a sculpture 'commemorating the golden age of Portuguese history'.[6] The monument, which stands at around 50 metres in height, illustrates a group of men on the prow of a square-rigged caravel (a fifteenth- and sixteenth-century sailing ship). Leading this group is Prince Henry, nicknamed 'the Navigator', who is regarded as one of the main initiators of the Age of Discoveries. Behind him stand other influential Portuguese navigators, including Bartholomew Dias, Vasco de Gama, and Pedro Álvares Cabral.[7] Another example of the glorification of the Portuguese 'Golden Age' can be found in Lagos, Portugal, where a statue of Prince Henry is found alongside the first slave market in Europe.[8] It was likely not the intention when the statue of Henry the Navigator was placed in Lagos; however, considering Prince Henry, as administrator of the Order of Christ, held a monopoly on the slave trade between 1443 and 1460, he was indeed a slave trader and, therefore, associated with that specific market.

Activists and scholars link the history of Portugal's role in the transatlantic slave trade and present-day racial prejudice in Portugal. Beatriz Gomes Dias, current president of DJASS, explained that Portugal's past with slavery and forced labour impacts the treatment of Black Portuguese individuals.[9] Historian Fernando Rosas argued that Portugal's perception as a 'benevolent' empire evades conversations over historical atrocities and avenues for reconciliation.[10] One example of continued racial exclusion is Law No.37/81 established October 3, 1981. Scholars attribute the transition from *jus soli* citizenship (based on place of birth) to *jus sanguinis* citizenship (based on parental nationality) to racial prejudice seeking to exclude African descendants. Dr Bernd Reiter described this change in immigration law as a means for Portugal to '[welcome] all those able to claim Portuguese ancestry while, at the same time, blocking the integration of all those without it.'[11] Yet, some activists emphasise the validity of Portugal's tolerance, pointing out examples of racial mixing and the lack of far-right political parties.[12] Since March 2024, Portugal has shifted to the far-right politically, which, in turn, has reduced the validity of these activists' claims. Historian João Pedro Marques agrees with the reprehensible nature of slavery but controversially argues that Lisbon played a marginal role in the slave trade regarding its direct relationship with trading merchants in Angola and Brazil.[13] Against this background, the memorial to enslaved people raises questions over how the history of slavery in Lisbon and Portugal should be commemorated amidst debates over the historical impact of the slave trade on contemporary racism in Portugal.

[6] Visit Lisboa. "Monument to the Discoveries," Visit Lisboa, accessed September 8, 2020.
[7] Civitatis Lisbon, "Monument to the Discoveries in Lisbon", Civitatis Lisbon, accessed March 2, 2023.
[8] Paul Ames, "Portugal Confronts its Slave Trade Past," POLITICO, June 2, 2018.
[9] James Badcock, "Slavery Memorial Highlights Portugal's Racism Taboo," BBC News, July 29, 2018.
[10] Paul Ames, "Portugal Confronts its Slave Trade Past," POLITICO, June 2, 2018.
[11] Bernd Reiter, "Framing Non-Whites and Producing Second-Class Citizens in France and Portugal," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 38, no.7 (2012): 1077.
[12] Paul Ames, "Portugal Confronts its Slave Trade Past," POLITICO, June 2, 2018.
[13] Ibid.

Plantation - Prosperity and Nightmare

DJASS' proposal to create a memorial honouring people enslaved by the Portuguese empire won funding from the Lisbon City Council in 2017. After a call for submissions, DJASS selected Angolan artist Kiluanji Kia Henda's *Plantação – Prosperidade e Pesadelo* (Plantation – Prosperity and Nightmare) as the winning design.[14] The memorial will feature 540 feet of sugar cane, each three metres high and made of black aluminium, and will be located at Largo José Saramago in the historic centre of Lisbon.[15] Kia Henda explained that his intention for the monument is 'to deal with the memory of slavery as the presence of an absence, as [he does] not believe it is possible to represent such a 'transnational trauma' in a direct and realistic way.'[16] To do this, he looks to sugar cane, one of the driving raw materials in the slave trade. The canes stand for the 'white gold' which drove demand for the slave trade - 'a symbol of prosperity…and violence of the terrestrial nightmare.'[17]

The President of DJASS, Beatriz Gomes Dias, explained '[t]he memorial should use a contemporary artistic language…that is capable of ensuring a meaningful urban presence and of representing slavery broadly, including the aspects of memory, resistance and the legacies and historical continuities, to establish a link between past and present'.[18] In line with this vision, the memorial will be accompanied by an interpretive centre featuring regular exhibitions and educational events.[19] Similarly, the memorial's downtown location is deliberate - Gomes Dias notes that an essential concern was 'to ensure…that the work be placed in a privileged space, downtown, so as to break with the segregation that the African and Afro descendent populations are subjected to in the city of Lisbon'.[20] In November 2020, it was announced that the memorial will be completed by the first quarter of 2021.[21] Yet, as of this article's publication, the monument remains unbuilt.

[14] Memorial de Homenagem às Pessoas Escravizadas - Lisboa", Início," Memorial de Homenagem às Pessoas Escravizadas - Lisboa.
[15] Kiluanji Kia Henda, *Design Proposal for Memorial* (N.d., ca. 2019).
[16] Ibid.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Translation by author. Beatriz Gomez Dias, interviewed by Giselle N. Fernandes, *In Conversation with Beatriz Dias - Memorial in Lisbon: Recovering History That was Made Invisible*," Contemporaryand, April 10, 2020.
[19] Beatriz Gomez Dias, interviewed by Giselle N. Fernandes, *In Conversation with Beatriz Dias - Memorial in Lisbon: Recovering History That was Made Invisible*," *Contemporaryand*, April 10, 2020
[20] Ibid.
[21] "Slavery Memorial in Lisbon Will be Completed in the 1st Quarter of 2021,"*Ver Angola*, November 9, 2020.

History of the Contestation

Criticism

President Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa's remarks at Gorée Island, a former port for slave ships in Senegal, regarding the notion that Portugal had recognised the injustice of slavery through its introduction of limited abolition laws in the 1760s sparked conversation over how Portugal should acknowledge its involvement in the transatlantic slave trade.[22] Since the memorial's announcement, doubt has been cast on whether the monument - and those who push for it - have portrayed Portuguese society fairly. For instance, in 2018, historian João Pedro Marques said:

> The slavery memorial is based on a fair idea... What is important to underline is that the memorial is adequate, even though Lisbon was not the capital, much less the monopolistic and hegemonic capital, of the Portuguese slave trade as we could be led to think.[23]

Similarly, political commentator and former Socialist Party lawmaker António Barreto wrote in the *Diário de Notícias* newspaper that the memorial was an 'excellent idea' with some reservations. He said:

> a memorial of self-flagellation that, for reasons of historical opportunism and political demagogy, intends to affirm that [Portuguese colonialism] was crueller than that of the others...and also not a memorial which, as suggested by some proponents, will have to be made by African artists or descendants of Africans... This is racism! Pure and simple![24]

More broadly, the claim that racism persists in Portuguese society is itself contested. Renato Epifânio, academic and founder of the International Lusophone Movement, said in 2017 that 'Anyone who has any knowledge of Europe has to agree with us: Portugal is probably, if not definitely, the least racist country in Europe'.[25]A 2020 report by *Al Jazeera* notes several examples of members of mainstream media outlets responding with disbelief and/or denial to claims of racism in Portugal.[26]*Al Jazeera* followed up on this report a few months later by interviewing sociologist and activist Cristina Roldão in which they discussed the growing, yet still marginalised, anti-racist movement in the country. Roldão says that, in Portugal, racism is often understood as something that occurs in foreign contexts, such as with Jim Crow laws in southern US states which legalized racial segregation or the Holocaust, rather than linked to Portuguese colonisation that was seen as 'benevolent'. She goes on to say that these understandings of racism and Portugal's colonial past 'make it difficult for us to have antiracist policies'.[27]

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[22] Paul Ames, "Portugal Confronts its Slave Trade Past," *POLITICO,* June 2, 2018.
[23] João Pedro Marques, "Lisboa e a escravatura," *Publico,* April 5, 2018.
[24] Translation by author. António Barreto, "Os Escravos em Portugal: um Memorial," *Diário de Notícias*, November 26, 2017,.
[25] Translation by author. Renato Epifânio, "Portugal, um país racista?," *Publico*, July 18, 2017.
[26] Al Jazeera, "Racism in Portugal: A Blindspot for the Media?" *Al Jazeera*, January 19, 2020.
[27] Al Jazeera, 2020. *Can Portugal Confront Its Racist History?*. [podcast] The Take.

Challenging the Dominant Narrative

The monument directly implies that racism does exist in Portugal. Gomes Dias argues that in-depth discussions about structural and systemic racism in Portuguese society are impeded by 'a hegemonic discourse, a fictional narrative, a fantasy that celebrates discoveries as being the most important enterprise of Portuguese society'.[28] She points to Eurocentric history textbooks as an example of this hegemony. In a 2012 study of Portuguese history textbooks, Marta Araújo and Silvia Rodríguez Maeso suggest that textbooks utilise a master narrative consisting of a power-evasive discourse on history, which naturalises core processes such as colonialism, slavery and racism.[29]

Professor Bernd Reitner also identified academic traditions, like the relative absence of studies about the socio-economic situation of Portuguese minorities, as tools that 'help to consolidate the already widespread common sense that transforms black Portuguese citizens into foreigners'.[30]

The memorial's Facebook page seems to identify its principal mission as challenging the exclusionary narrative present in the country. It says:

> The main objective of the Memorial is to pay tribute to the memory of the millions of Africans and Africans enslaved by Portugal throughout its history, namely between the 15th and 19th centuries. A tribute to the victims and resisters of yesterday and today, which aims to promote the historical recognition of Portugal's role in slavery and in the trafficking of enslaved people and to evoke the legacies of this long period in current Portuguese society, from the rich African cultural heritage to the forms of contemporary oppression and discrimination.[31]

The memorial contests an unfair status quo and seeks to establish itself as a step towards reframing discourse on contemporary racism in Portugal.

Museum of Discoveries

Parallel issues were posed in 2018 upon the announcement of a museum dedicated to celebrating Portugal's 'discoveries', set to be called the Museum of Discoveries. Critics argue that the museum will whitewash the violence of Portugal's colonial history, while supporters of the museum argue that the critics are 'denying the triumphs of Portuguese explorers.'[32] The museum would continue cultivating a positive depiction of Portugal's colonial history and encourage a sense of pride in its

[28] Beatriz Gomez Dias, interviewed by Giselle N. Fernandes, *In Conversation with Beatriz Dias - Memorial in Lisbon: Recovering History That was Made Invisible*," Contemporaryand, April 10, 2020.
[29] Marta Araújo and Silvia R. Maeso, "History Textbooks, Racism and the Critique of Eurocentrism: Beyond Rectification or Compensation," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 35, no. 7 (2012): 1266.
[30] Bernd Reiter, "Framing Non-Whites and Producing Second-Class Citizens in France and Portugal," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 38, no.7 (2012): 1067- 1076.
[31] Translation by author. Facebook, "Memorial to Enslaved People." Facebook, accessed June 6, 2023.
[32] Jake Cigainero, "Black Portuguese Plan a Memorial to Honor Enslaved Ancestors," *NPR*, October 30, 2018.

'discoveries', representing a selective view of the past.[33] A collective of African and Afro descendant activists denounced the museum's creation, stating 'The absence of our perspectives in national institutions and in public discussions is naturalised and normalised, erasing us as historical subjects and as par excellence contributors to the building of Portuguese society'.[34]

Their statement points to a history of erasure of Black voices related to how Portugal looks to reckon with historical and enduring entanglements with colonialism and the Atlantic slave trade. This dominant narrative portrays Portugal as a 'good coloniser', one which was 'softer' than other European colonists.[35] According to Gomes Dias, this narrative needs to be challenged so there is space for both the discussion of institutionalised racism and for inclusive histories, memories, and identities in Portugal.[36]

Decision-Making Processes

Creating the Monument

The monument's creation utilised both government and community resources. After the Lisbon City Council named DJASS a winning proposal, the grassroots organisation formed a consulting group in March of 2018 consisting of 'activists with links to the Black and antiracist movements and researchers specialising in history, post-colonial studies, art and museology, to participate in defining the concept of the Memorial and in the selection process of the artists'.[37] Then, DJASS invited five artists to send designs for the memorial, out of which three submitted proposals. The designs were presented at six public voting sessions organised by DJASS in locations with a significant African and/or African descendant population.[38] The organisation wanted to ensure the process prioritised the participation of these communities. Kiluanji Kia Henda's design was selected after securing 77 out of 132 votes.[39] In mid-2023, the municipality of Lisbon proposed changing the monument's location. The Association DJASS accused the municipality, now governed by a right-wing social democratic administration instead of the previous socialist one, of not wanting to build the monument at all.

[33] Sofia Lovegrove, "Portugal's colonial denial: what are we really talking about?" *Heritage & Memory*, February 28, 2019.
[34] Público, "Não a Um Museu Contra Nós!" *Público*, Jun 22, 2018.
[35] Jenny Barchfield, "Lisbon Museum Plan Stirs Debate Over Portugal's Colonial Past," *The Guardian*, September 17, 2018.
[36] Sofia Lovegrove, "A call for recognition: Portugal's long-due slavery monument," *Heritage & Memory*, April 13, 2019.
[37] Beatriz Gomez Dias, interviewed by Giselle N. Fernandes, *In Conversation with Beatriz Dias - Memorial in Lisbon: Recovering History That was Made Invisible*," Contemporaryand, April 10, 2020.
[38] Ibid.
[39] "Votação," Memorial de Homenagem às Pessoas Escravizada - Lisboa, accessed September 8, 2020.

Dynamics

The decision-making process centred around community participation, evident by the relationship between DJASS and the Lisbon City Council and the subsequent voting process for the final design. In an interview with Gisele Navaro Fernandes from *Contemporary And* magazine, Gomes Dias said 'One of our objectives was to make this a participatory process from the beginning. We have to remember that this came from a proposal that DJASS proposed to the Participatory Budgeting of Lisbon and it was one of the winning proposals of this initiative of the Lisbon City Council'.[40] Despite the project's origins depending on government support, the collaborative relationship between the Lisbon City Council and DJASS ensured the communities felt heard.

Contemporary racism in Portugal remains difficult to verify and quantify, leading to debates amongst scholars, activists, and politicians over the prominence of racial prejudice. Claims about racism or the lack thereof in Portugal might be difficult to verify because of Portuguese laws on data collection.[41] Under Art. 35(3) of the Portuguese Constitution, '[c]omputerized storage may not be used for information concerning a person's... ethnic origin, except where there is express consent from the data subject'. Under Art. 7(1) of Law No. 67/98 on personal data protection, the processing of data referring *inter alia* to racial or ethnic origin is prohibited. Natasha Donn from the *Portugal Resident* newspaper reported on Portugal's National Statistics Institute pilot study, which surveyed participants on their ethnic-racial origin, amongst other questions, for the first time.[42] Despite the lack of historical statistical data, scholars have used qualitative methods to track racial discrimination in Portugal. Dr Celeste Vaughan Curington argues that African-descendant women in Lisbon experience quotidian acts of racism, creating a feeling of 'non-belonging'.[43] The debate continues as the nation grapples with the most effective avenues to acknowledge its controversial history.

Summary and Conclusions

The upcoming Memorial to Enslaved People brings to light divided opinions regarding Portugal's role in the slave trade and its current relationship to race. The memorial itself acts as a site of unresolved contestation. Despite experiencing delays due to the COVID-19 pandemic, as of January 2023, DJASS and the Lisbon City Council are meeting to discuss construction dates and the expected timeline.[44] The partnership between DJASS and the Lisbon City Council highlighted

[40] Beatriz Gomez Dias, interviewed by Giselle N. Fernandes, *In Conversation with Beatriz Dias - Memorial in Lisbon: Recovering History That was Made Invisible*," Contemporaryand, April 10, 2020.
[41] Badcock, "Slavery Memorial."; Reiter, "Framing Non-Whites," 1074-1076.
[42] Natasha Donn, "First ever national survey of residents' ethnic-racial origins begins," *Portugal Resident*, January 5, 2023.
[43] Celeste Vaughan Curington, "'WE SPEAK BACK' Challenging Belonging and Anti-Blackness in Portugal," *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race* 17, no. 2 (2020), 337.
[44] Isabela Salema, "O memorial à escravatura está parado? – perguntou o historiador Lonnie Bunch (e nós também)," *Publico*, January 15, 2023.

marginalised voices of African and/or African descendants that had been previously excluded from mainstream consciousness. Furthermore, contestation over the memorial speaks to the nonlinear nature of social progress, particularly regarding the impact of the slave trade on contemporary Portuguese society and the enduring presence of structural racism.

Research contributed by Celine Ng, Kelia Brooks, Daniel Morais Coimbra, Anna Farronay, and Ava Galbraith.

Last updated December 2025

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Figures

About Contested Histories

Many contestations have been over memorials, street names, and other physical representations of historical legacies in public spaces in recent years. These contestations often reflect deeper societal tensions, whether triggered by political transitions, demographic shifts, inter-ethnic strife, or a growing awareness of unaddressed historical injustices.

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To cite this publication:

Contested Histories, "Memorial to Enslaved People in Lisbon, Portugal", *Contested Histories Case Study* #131 (December 2025), Institute for Historical Justice and Reconciliation (IHJR) at the European Association of History Educators (EuroClio), retrieved from [link], CC BY 4.0.

Contested Histories is funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the authors only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). Neither the European Union nor EACEA can be held responsible for them.

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Co-funded by the European Union