



## Evaluating the success and social impact of the UN Permanent Memorial to Honour

### the Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade

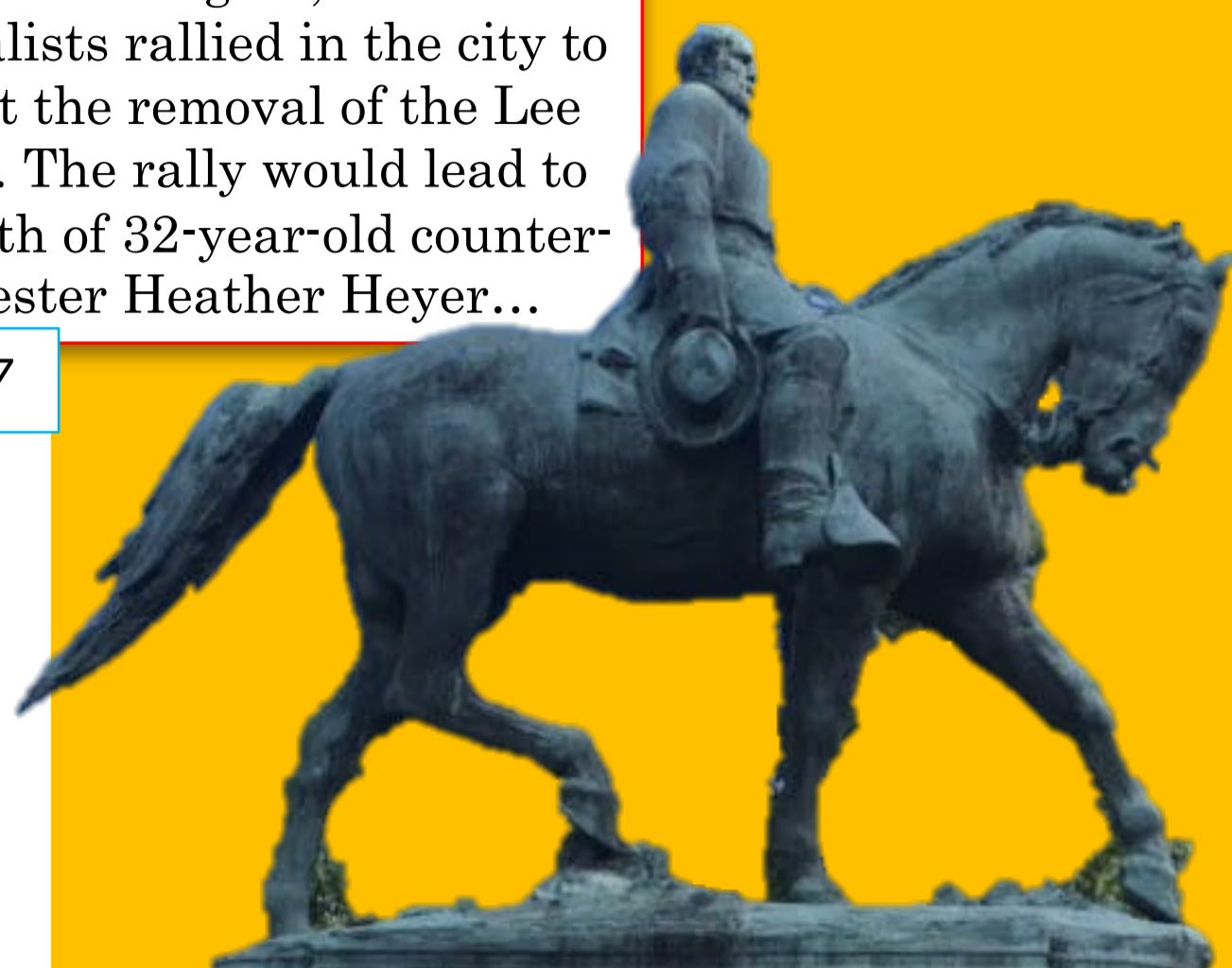
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In 2017 Charlottesville's city council voted to remove the two statues [of Confederate generals], saying they were examples of racism.

...That August, white nationalists rallied in the city to protest the removal of the Lee statue. The rally would lead to the death of 32-year-old counter-protester Heather Heyer...

2017



2019

The New York Times Magazine

The 1619 Project is a major initiative from The New York Times observing the 400th anniversary of the beginning of American slavery. It aims to reframe the country's history, understanding 1619 as our true founding, and placing the consequences of slavery and the contributions of black Americans at the very center of the story we tell ourselves about who we are.

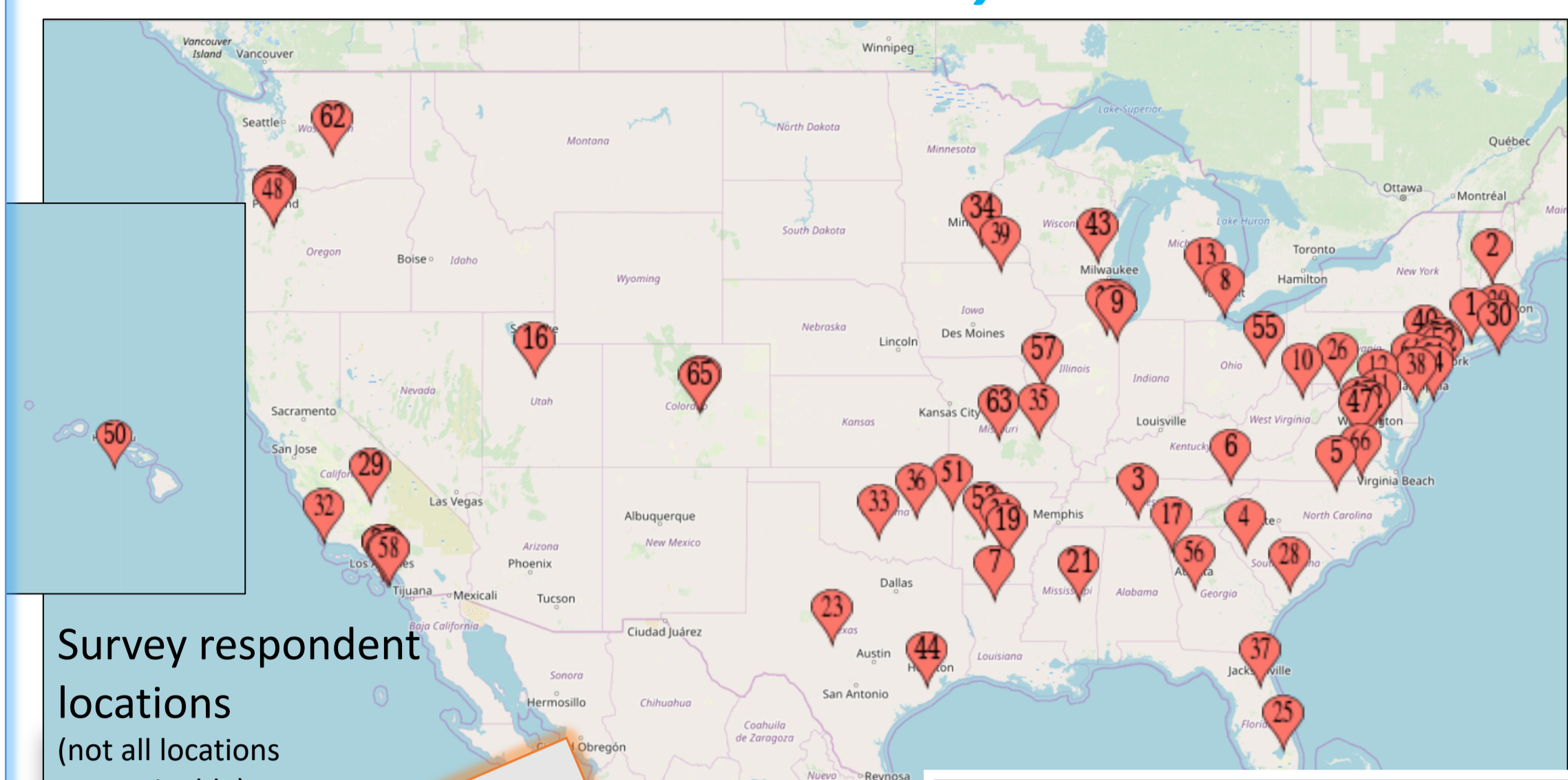
#### Introduction

The Transatlantic Slave Trade lasted circa 4 centuries (1514-1866). It alone precipitated the deportation of approximately 17 million enslaved peoples, of a 25 to 30 million deported from their homes in different slaving systems. In 2001, the Durban Declaration acknowledged **"that slavery and the slave trade are crimes against humanity"**. Entire nations – Western Europe, the Caribbean, and the Americas – sustained the trade and were built off this system of mass human enslavement and destruction.

Currently, in both scholarship, and, to a significant extent, in the wider social psyche, unresolved and ongoing pains related to slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade, and resistance to processes of atonement have come to the fore. Indeed, as in the USA "the intense engagement over the issue of slavery signals — as it did in the 1830s, and the 1960s — a crisis in American race relations", too.

In this struggle, memorials are a battlefield. The US Confederacy, synonymous with slavery, and its monuments have become fatal sites. For, **"the messages monuments tell are inherently understood as part of a society's collective social and political values."** Yet, despite the violent inextricability of slavery and the Trade from the worldwide past and present, in places such as the "United States, the original sin of slavery and its victims are erased. There are no monuments to slavery, no human face for its victims".

#### The Survey



#### Demographics

Survey Category	% (count)
18-29	16.33% (24)
30-44	23.81% (35)
45-59	31.29% (46)
60+	28.57% (42)
Female	58.50% (86)
Male	39.46% (58)
Prefer not to say	1.36% (2)
Other	0.68% (1)
White	70.75% (104)
African-American/Black	7.48% (11)
Hispanic/Latinx	4.08% (6)
Other	4.08% (6)
White Hispanic	3.40% (5)
Mixed	2.04% (3)
East Asian	2.04% (3)
Prefer not to say	2.04% (3)
American Indian/Alaskan Native	1.36% (2)
South Asian	1.36% (2)
Southeast Asian	1.36% (2)

#### Research Outcomes

Do you believe that more public memorials commemorating (7) victims of the Transatlantic Slave Trade/(8) the Transatlantic Slave Trade should be built? Please expand on your answers to questions (7) and (8).

"Past is the past": Hostility to the perceived 'rehashing' of a long dead phenomenon bearing no relationship or effect on the present. Answers at times vented frustration & derision: "get over it"; memorial-building was "guilt-tripping".

Building of memorials would have a negative effect, particularly in the current political climate. Answers seemed to demonstrate how the nexus of present-past-sociopolitics is actualised in debates over memorialisation.

Scepticism re. memorials as correct/ most efficacious means for raising important awareness. Youth education; ability to access the memorial; America's "other" issues raised as areas needing focus/emphasis. Alternatively, memorials seen as one element of a much larger process of learning which needs repeated intervention to be efficacious.

Respondents could not comment because had no awareness of UN Memorial (survey first they'd heard of it at times), believed there was a need for more publicity.

More awareness and education were key to lessening racism and to preventing the repeat of the past's wrongs; victims of suffering were deserving of honour. One respondent suggested that memorials should be built in all cities in which slavery had been present.

General conclusions/thematization of participant responses

In 2015, however, the United Nations erected the *Ark of Return* or the *UN Memorial to Honour the Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade*. As per the UN's Mission Statement, the Memorial "will serve as a reminder of the legacy of the slave trade", and "raise awareness about the current dangers of racism, prejudice and the lingering consequences that continue to impact the descendants of the victims today". **Is, and if so, in what ways is the Memorial successful in its aims?** To study and pose this question to those who engage with sites such as the Memorial is important and necessary, for if they are deemed as necessary and powerful by those who visit them, we can provide empirical evidence to bolster the cause for building such memorials around the world, or alternatively, understand and locate why this particular memorial has failed in its powerful aims.

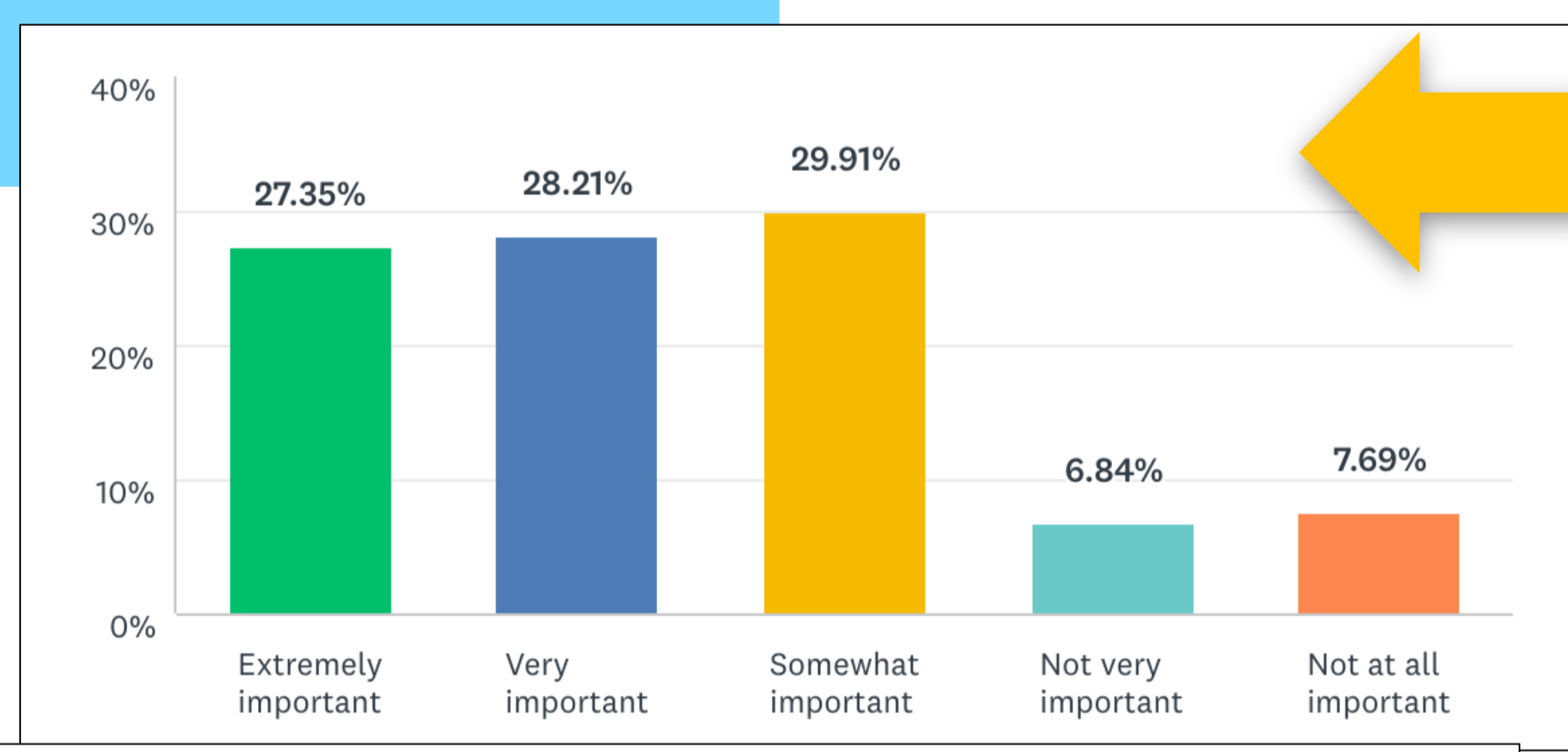
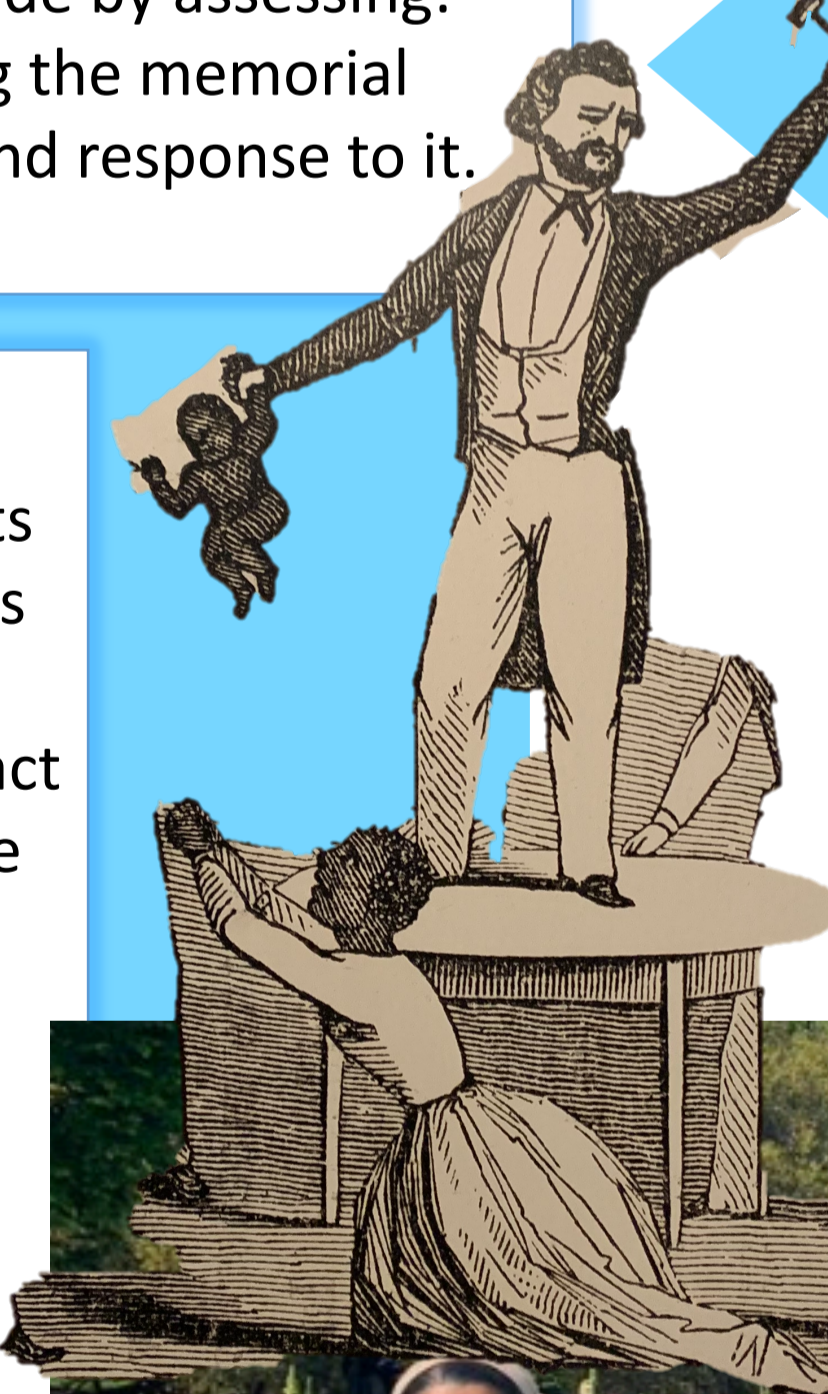
#### Research Aims

To investigate whether the UN Memorial fills a historical lacuna in our understanding of the Transatlantic Slave Trade by assessing:

- (1) The motivation and process behind realising the memorial
- (2) The public's interpretation, perception of, and response to it.

#### Methodology

- Qualitative paper-based survey.** Participants recruited via convenience sampling methods near site of the UN Memorial. Allows for an analysis of those near UN choosing to interact with memorial. Participants to self-complete questionnaire, minimising interviewer-interviewee bias, especially as asking potentially sensitive questions (racial/emotive, etc.)
- Academic literature review** examining scholarly writings/theories on different modes of commemoration of slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade; memorial aesthetics; the history of slavery in NYC/USA, etc.
- Attention to popular/media debates and discussion** regarding commemoration/memorials, etc.
- Visitation of other similar sites to build a comparative and richer picture of differing modes of commemoration in the USA:** highlighting similarities/site and locally-specific approaches to commemoration, etc.



How important is it that the victims of the Transatlantic Slave Trade are commemorated in public spaces?

#### Key Limitations

- Sample size limited. To verify and be able to isolate the effect of variables such as age/race/gender/location, a larger and more controlled study is needed.
- Respondents could not valuably comment on UN Memorial as had never visited & responses off-site.

#### Questions for Further Study

- Does the vehement language in some open-ended survey responses mirror that of dominant media outlets in the US? How are opinions formed? & as the reach of the UN Memorial, for one, seems significantly limited what are the most meaningful ways of increasing awareness?
- Comparative studies at other memorials would help deepen & build fuller understanding of memorialization/public responses.

It seems that memorials have great potential to be highly potent, emotive symbols. This suggests that serious efforts to analyse the reasons for their social meaning, and the best means to make them relevant should be necessarily undertaken in our times.

#### Survey Conclusions

Though 'somewhat important' may be analysed as an expression of ambivalence, if taken as an indication of a low-emphasis agreement with the questions posed to the survey respondents, we see that the majority of respondents affirm that it is important to commemorate both the Transatlantic Slave Trade and its victims. A greater number agree that victims should be commemorated as opposed to the Trade itself, suggesting that there is a certain focus and empathy (or at least, emotiveness) regarding victimhood as opposed to the processes of the Trade (economic, etc.).

- Though demographically, of the survey respondents, there was a larger number of white participants, it is key that no African-American responded in the negative (i.e. 'not very important'/'not at all important') when asked whether victims of, or the Transatlantic Slave Trade, should be commemorated in public spaces. Keeping to this trend, no African American survey participants responded 'no' when asked whether more public memorials commemorating the victims or the Trade should be built. Memorial-building seems to be of specific restorative value to this community in America.
- However, African American responses were not homogenous. The belief of some, for example, that they were descendants of perpetrators of the Trade to some extent, and the response by others that they did not all feel personally aggrieved (to a large extent) by the legacies of the Transatlantic Slave Trade reminds us – against some media/populist rhetoric – that issues of commemoration are not simple black:white equations.

Those identifying as female seemed more in favour for commemoration. 18-29 year olds were the age group most in favour of commemorative acts.

Whilst there was a trend supporting commemoration, the negative answers to questions asking whether the UN Memorial was successful in its aims seemed to demonstrate that the design and idiosyncrasies of a build/site are key. The mere presence of a memorial is not adequately cathartic to those who deem them important or valuable. Importantly, however, only (1) respondent had visited the UN site so these conclusions only reveal an imaginative not actual response to the UN site and Memorial itself.

**Challenge/Project re-iteration:** Despite correspondence and meeting with UN officials, as a non-UN personnel I was unfortunately not allowed to conduct surveys on premises of UN Plaza necessitating a re-working of Step 1 participant recruitment.

- Translated print survey to an online equivalent (with corresponding data protection guidelines) using SurveyMonkey platform. Its user-friendly interface/active participation in EU-U.S. Privacy Shield Framework/anonymisation tools were amongst reasons for choosing the platform.
- Distributed survey to Targeted Audience via the SurveyMonkey platform.
- Collected survey responses from focus group of 15 Barnard College (Columbia Uni.) students via online platform. (research ongoing, data-set not included in outcomes presented on this poster).