

# Confronting Legacies of Racism and Injustice

By Debra Bradley Ruder

**Brown's Center for the Study of Slavery and Justice and Center for the Study of Race and Ethnicity in America are catalyzing critical conversations and change.**

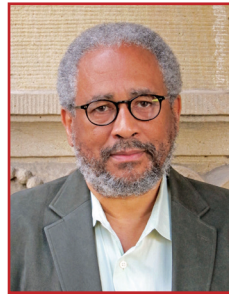
As the nation confronts anti-Black racism and other pervasive injustices, two leading-edge academic centers at Brown are expanding understanding about the impact of systemic racism and racial slavery, with the goal of helping to build a more just and equitable society.

The Center for the Study of Race and Ethnicity in America (CSREA) and the Center for the Study of Slavery and Justice (CSSJ) bring together creative minds to address some of this century's most complex human rights issues, including racial profiling, health disparities, mass incarceration and voting rights. These long-established centers have different foci — CSREA studies race and ethnicity in U.S. culture and everyday life, while CSSJ examines the history of racial slavery and its local and global legacies today. Together, they're advancing Brown's leadership in catalyzing debate, discovery and action through collaborative research, scholarship, lectures and the arts.

## Slavery's Indelible Legacies

As Black Lives Matter demonstrators filled the streets last spring, the Center for the Study of Slavery and Justice launched a virtual series called "This is America," convening scholars and activists to discuss the meaning and potential impact of the protests, both nationally and internationally.

This was an ideal role for CSSJ, which is shaping pivotal conversations about racial justice, freedom and equality, says center Director Anthony Bogues, Asa Messer Professor of Humanities and Critical Theory



and professor of Africana Studies (left). Amid a pandemic that has transitioned conferences to virtual meetings — and that is disproportionately harming Black and other communities of color — the center has continued its mission

of bringing together scholars, museum curators, policy makers, activists and students through programs that pose questions like, What should happen with Confederate monuments? How to reform policing? How do we understand the contemporary global Black Lives Matter movement?

CSSJ has become one of the world's premier centers for studying the history of racial slavery and its legacies, such as modern-day human trafficking and anti-Black racism. Founded in 2012 as an outgrowth of Brown's 2006 investigation of the University's historical ties to the trans-Atlantic slave trade, the pioneering center offers insights to colleges and universities across America examining their own slavery histories. It is helping educate the next generation around these critical issues; incoming Brown students will read the landmark 2006 report of the Steering Committee on Slavery and Justice as their communal "First Reading."

"Slavery was a human experience that shaped the modern world from the late 15th century to today," Bogues notes. "It was a crime against humanity. The historical fact of racial slavery is an issue the country needs to have a hard conversation about in order to understand the present."

The center is changing the way the Brown community and world learn about the consequences of human bondage. It was instrumental in efforts to place port markers where slave ships docked in Rhode Island. It has partnered with award-winning filmmaker Stanley Nelson on a forthcoming PBS documentary film about the Atlantic slave trade, is working on a major scholarly book project, and collaborates with global museum curators seeking to tell this important story. And closer to home, CSSJ created a high school curriculum on racial slavery with the University's Choices Program, while inviting campus visitors to explore how the tragedy of slavery shapes art and culture today.

## Spotlighting Systemic Racism

The Center for the Study of Race and Ethnicity in America, meanwhile, is one of the nation's first academic centers dedicated to research, scholarship and academic exchange on race and ethnicity.

As the pandemic spread last spring, CSREA produced a video series about how COVID-19 has intensified the daily struggles of groups already facing unequal access to food, safe living conditions and health care. Dedicated to sharing its research widely, the center also released timely e-newsletters drawn from its extensive archive of recorded programs. One focused on anti-racism and another showcased the arts, "to remind people," says center Director Tricia Rose, Chancellor's Professor of Africana Studies, "that extraordinary beauty and hope are still happening during this time of incredible stress and despair."

Since its 1986 founding, CSREA has fostered rigorous cross-discipline research, meaningful conversations and new approaches to critical issues affecting African American, Latinx, Asian and other communities of color.

"Although many Americans have recently grown acutely aware of anti-Black racism, we were aware of it, and many scholars have been aware of it, for a very long time," Rose says.

The pandemic has not impeded the center's roster of academic activities, including a new program — funded by a four-year grant from

the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation — that will enable Brown faculty wishing to add a hands-on "humanities lab" to a course on race and ethnicity.

For the past five years, the center has spotlighted systemic racism: the discriminatory practices that influence opportunities and hurdles in life and drive inequality in such areas as housing, education and employment. The center enables faculty, students and others to investigate some of today's most entrenched societal problems — from white supremacy to immigration policies to ethnic stereotyping and police aggression — through research projects, seminars and internships. And it provides a dynamic portal for the Brown community and public to explore challenging issues through art exhibits, films and lectures featuring respected scholars.



CSREA Director Tricia Rose (left) discusses the heightened impact of COVID-19 on incarcerated populations with Brown Associate Professor of Sociology Nicole Gonzalez Van Cleve.

## Increasing Their Impact

Expanding and amplifying the impact of CSREA and CSSJ is a priority in the University's 10-year strategic plan, *Building on Distinction*, and its *BrownTogether* fundraising campaign. Both centers are also being strengthened by the hiring of more faculty from historically underrepresented groups under Brown's 2016 diversity and inclusion action plan.

Amid growing global interest in social justice, the University is committed to investing in and increasing both centers' capacity to spur faculty and student research, bring distinguished speakers to campus, and power new ways of approaching obstacles to a more just, free and democratic society. ■

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