

# A Story of Bones

A FILM BY JOSEPH CURRAN AND DOMINIC AUBREY DE VERE



POV

DISCUSSION GUIDE







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# Film Summary



As construction environmental officer for Saint Helena's troubled airport project, Annina van Neel learns about an unmarked mass burial ground of an estimated 9,000 formerly enslaved Africans. Haunted by this historical injustice, she and African American preservationist Peggy King Jorde fight for their proper memorialization, exposing the United Kingdom's colonial past and present.

# Using This Guide

This guide is an invitation to dialogue. It is based on a belief in the power of human connection and is designed for people who want to use *A Story of Bones* to engage family, friends, classmates, colleagues, and communities. In contrast to initiatives that foster debates in which participants try to convince others that they are correct, this document envisions conversations undertaken in a spirit of openness in which people try to understand one another and expand their thinking by sharing viewpoints and listening actively.

The discussion prompts are intentionally crafted to help a wide range of audiences think more deeply about the issues in the film. Rather than attempting to address them all, choose one or two that best meet your needs and interests. And be sure to leave time to consider taking action. Planning the following steps can help people leave the room feeling energized and optimistic, even in instances when conversations have been difficult.

For more detailed event planning and facilitation tips, visit <https://communitynetwork.amdoc.org/>.

## A NOTE TO FACILITATORS

Dear POV Community,

We are so glad you have chosen to facilitate a discussion inspired by the film *A Story of Bones*. Before you facilitate, please prepare yourself for the conversation, as this film invites you and your community to discuss experiences of enslaved Africans and their descendants. These conversations require learning truths about society, culture, and political motivations that typically have not been taught in schools. We urge you, as a facilitator, to take the necessary steps to ensure that you are prepared to guide a conversation that prioritizes the wellbeing and safety of Black and Indigenous people of color, and youth in your community. Importantly, this film shares experiences through a lens of joy and resilience, rather than focusing on trauma, and we hope this guide will aid you in conversations that expand understanding while maximizing care, critical curiosity, transformation, and connection.

## Tips and Tools for Facilitators

Here are some supports to help you prepare for facilitating a conversation that inspires curiosity, connection, critical questions, recognition of difference, power, and possibility.

# Share Community Agreements

## Community Agreements: What Are They? Why Are They Useful?

Community agreements help provide a framework for engaging in dialogue that establishes a shared sense of intention ahead of participating in discussion. Community agreements can be co-constructed and created as an opening activity that your group completes collectively and collaboratively. [Here is a model](#) of community agreements you can review. As the facilitator, you can gauge how long your group should take to form these agreements or whether participants would be amenable to using pre-established community agreements.

## Opening Activity (Optional): Establishing Community Agreements for Discussion

Whether you are a group of people coming together once for this screening and discussion or a group whose members know each other well, creating a set of community agreements helps foster clear discussion in a manner that draws in and respects all participants, especially when tackling intimate or complex conversations around identity. These steps will help provide guidelines for the process:

- **Pass around** sample community agreements and take time to read aloud as a group to make sure all participants can both hear and read the text.
- **Allow time** for clarifying questions, make sure all participants understand the necessity for the agreements, and allow time to make sure everyone understands the agreements themselves.
- **Go around in a circle** and have every participant name an agreement they would like to include. Chart this in front of the room where all can see.
- **Go around two to three times** to give participants multiple chances to contribute and also to give a conclusive end to the process.
- **Read the list aloud.**
- **Invite** questions or revisions.
- **Ask** if all are satisfied with the list.
- **Ask** all participants to sign the list of agreements. Leave it where all can see. As the facilitator, be mindful of the agreements throughout your session, noting if someone speaks or acts in a way that runs counter to them.



## Grounding in the Past and Present

Histories of colonization and American slavery are deeply intertwined, as are their enduring structures. While the experiences of settler colonialism and chattel slavery are unique to place, peoples, and communities, we all inherit and hold different relationships to this inheritance. We must recognize this past and its ongoing human, environmental, and structural implications in order to commit to change. We encourage your community to acknowledge openly the legacy and inheritance of both and to open this discussion with a [Land Acknowledgment](#).

## What Is a Land Acknowledgment?\*

Land acknowledgments do not exist in the past tense, but rather recognize that colonialism is a current and ongoing process with enduring structures. Land acknowledgments are a way to combat systemic erasure and honor the traditional Indigenous inhabitants of the land you are currently living on, to offer respect, and to support larger truth-telling and reconciliation efforts. Acknowledgement is a small gesture that must be accompanied by continued education, action, and commitments to justice and repair. Here are some resources to learn more about land acknowledgments: [Native Land Resources](#).

To discover and learn about the Indigenous territories you currently inhabit you can:

- Visit <https://native-land.ca/> to see a visual representation and learn more.
- Text your zip code to (855)-917-5263

## Land Acknowledgment Model

I/We acknowledge that today we gather as [name of your community/group] on the unceded Indigenous lands of Turtle Island, the ancestral name for what is now called North America. Specifically, I/We acknowledge the unceded territory of the [Indigenous community/communities local to your zip code] past and present; as well as all the American Indian and Indigenous Peoples and communities who have been or have become a part of these lands and territories in [your state]. We honor, with gratitude, the land itself and the people who have stewarded and lived in relation to this land across generations.

## COMMON CONCEPTS & LANGUAGE

### Anti-racist

One who is supporting an antiracist policy through their continued actions and/or by expressing the idea that racial groups are equals and do not need developing. Anti-racism is a journey and not a destination—it is an orientation toward how we live our lives in pursuit of racial justice.

### Classism

Differential treatment based on social class or perceived social class. Classism is the systematic oppression of subordinated class groups to advantage and strengthen the dominant class groups. It's the systematic assignment of characteristics of worth and ability based on social class. Policies and practices are set up to benefit more class-privileged people at the expense of less class-privileged people, resulting in drastic income and wealth inequality—and the culture that perpetuates these systems and this unequal valuing.

### Colonization

Colonization can be defined as some form of invasion, dispossession, or subjugation of a people. The invasion need not be military; it can begin—or continue—as geographical intrusion in the form of agricultural, urban, or industrial encroachment. The result is the dispossession of vast amounts of lands from the original inhabitants. This is often legalized after the fact. The long-term result of such massive dispossession is institutionalized inequality. The colonizer/colonized relationship is by nature an unequal one that benefits the colonizer at the expense of the colonized.

Ongoing and legacy colonialism impact power relations in most of the world today. For example, white supremacy as a philosophy was developed largely to justify European colonial exploitation of the Global South (including enslaving African peoples, extracting resources from much of Asia and Latin America, and enshrining cultural norms of Whiteness as desirable in both colonizing and colonizer nations)

### Critical Race Theory (CRT)

Critical Race Theory (CRT) was coined by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw as a practice and approach to interrogating the permanent role of race and racism in society. Understanding the historical foundations of “race” as a social construction that has been central to the formation of American economic structures, institutions, laws, policy, and sociality, CRT recognizes that while race is not biologically “real,” institutionalized racism is a fundamental aspect of historical and contemporary American society and education that disproportionately impacts people of color.

CRT is intersectional in its framework, which means this approach to framing and teaching recognizes that other identities, such as sexuality, gender identity, ethnicity, and different ability levels, intersect with racism and racial prejudice and other modes of discrimination to cause harm to people and communities that have historically been marginalized.

CRT recognizes that racism is a permanent structure in American society and that the legacy of slavery, segregation, and legal imposition of second-class citizenship on Black Americans continues to shape American society and schooling.

### Discrimination

The unequal treatment of members of various groups based on race, gender, social class, sexual orientation, physical ability, religion, and other categories.

In the United States, the law makes it illegal to discriminate against someone on the basis of race, color, religion, national origin, or sex. The law also makes it illegal to retaliate against a person because the person complained about discrimination, filed a charge of discrimination, or participated in an employment discrimination investigation or lawsuit. The law also requires that an employer reasonably accommodates applicants' and employees' sincerely held religious practices, unless doing so would impose an undue hardship on the operation of the employer's business.

### Dominant Narratives/ Official Curriculum

In a paper titled “The Politics of Official Knowledge: Does a National Curriculum Make Sense?” Michael W. Apple discusses how decisions to define some groups' knowledge as more legitimate than the knowledge of others leads to the knowledge of the former group coming to be understood as “official knowledge,” while other knowledge is perpetually marginalized.

### Equity

In basic terms, to achieve equity is to treat everyone fairly. An equity emphasis seeks to render justice by deeply considering structural factors that benefit some social groups/communities and harm other social groups/communities. Sometimes for the purpose of equity, justice demands an unequal response.

### Hidden Curriculum

This phrase refers to the unwritten, unofficial, and often unintended lessons, values, and perspectives that students learn in school. While the “formal” curriculum consists of the courses, lessons, and learning activities students participate in, as well as the knowledge and skills educators intentionally teach to students, the hidden curriculum consists of the unspoken or implicit academic, social, and cultural messages that are communicated to students while they are in school.

### Institutional Racism

Institutional racism refers specifically to the ways in which institutional policies and practices create different outcomes for different racial groups. Institutional policies may never mention any specific racial group, but their effect is to create advantages for Whites and oppression and disadvantage for people from groups classified as people of color.

# Participants

## **Annina van Neel**

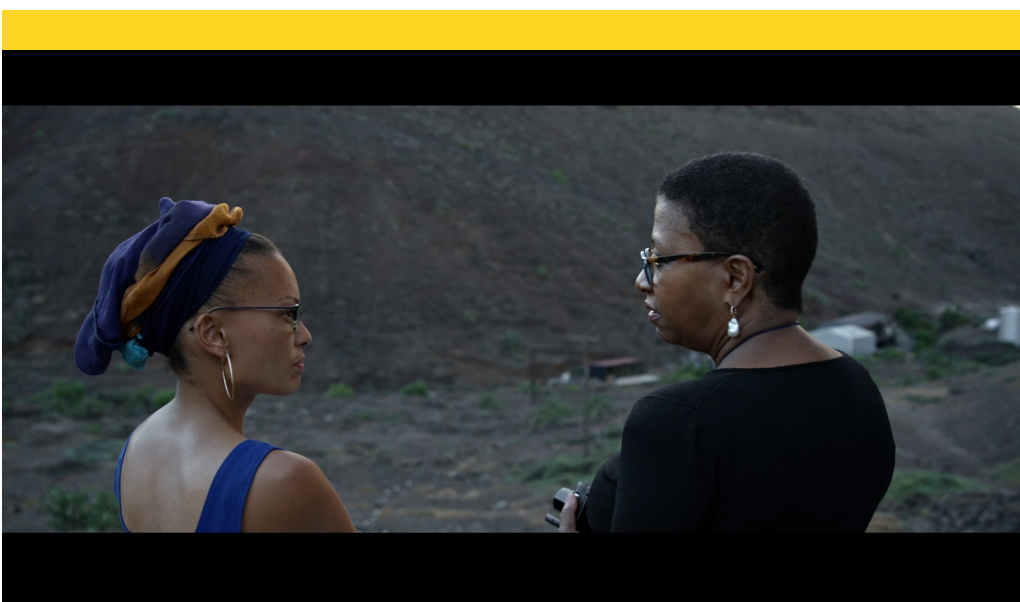
Protagonist, impact/consulting producer, activist, chief environmental officer, Saint Helena, UK resident

## **Noah Hayes**

Annina's son

## **Peggy King Jorde**

Protagonist, impact/consulting producer, cultural heritage preservationist defending marginalized communities and their histories, former director of memorialization of the New York African Burial Ground, Annina's mentor and adviser





# Key Issues

*A Story of Bones* is an excellent tool for outreach and will be of particular interest to people who want to explore the following topics:

- Enslavement, colonization, and diaspora
- Memory, race, and power of place
- African burial ground preservation
- Reparative justice/activism
- Cultural storytelling
- Descendant community identity, engagement, and interpretation
- Misconceptions about abolition and “liberated” Africans



# Background Information

## **African Burial Grounds and Cultural Resource Protection: A Global Movement**

*A Story of Bones* invites us to consider the history of the grounds upon which we stand, as well as the lives, and deaths, that came before us. Introducing the movement to protect and commemorate the African burial ground on Saint Helena, this film is a call to action for changing how African burial grounds and sites of conscience are treated and preserved, and how descendant communities are listened to during the process.

The move to protect the African burial ground on Saint Helena emerged in the wake of a similar struggle that began 30 years prior with the rediscovery of an African burial ground in New York City. Now a nationally protected historic landmark, the New York African Burial Ground advanced critical conversations and confronted unchallenged practices in historic preservation, interpretation, commemoration, and the resistance to descendant community participation. The lessons learned from New York continue to provide a framework for considerations involved in working to reclaim sacred sites; however, each community (and each history) is unique and presents a unique set of challenges. Importantly, the authorities and structures of power that deny resources or political agency to descendant communities are rooted in the legacy of slavery—the very same legacy responsible for these burial grounds.

## **Enslavement, Colonization, Diaspora, and Cultural Identity**

*“For people of African descent who were enslaved, the truth of slavery was suffering and death.”-Horton & Horton, 2006*

The enslavement and forced migration of millions of African children, women, and men spanned from the 17th through the 19th centuries across Cape Verde, coastal West Africa, East Africa, and later India and Asia (in limited numbers). Saint Helena, where *A Story of Bones* takes place, was founded in 1502 by the Portuguese, and occupied by the Dutch and British until the early 19th century. Under British rule, Saint Helena was a slave-keeping society. In 1808, Britain abolished the transatlantic slave trade, prompting the British Navy’s efforts to suppress illegal slave trading. The Navy primarily patrolled the North Atlantic, and it was not until 1840 that the Navy’s West African Squadron was stationed on Saint Helena to enforce suppression of the slave trade in the South Atlantic. Although the African coast was patrolled by the British, American, French and Portuguese, 90 percent of all captured slave vessels fell into the hands of the British. Nearly 200,000 enslaved Africans were taken from the holds of ships. Those who survived were forced to live their lives in British territories as peasants, indentured servants, and unpaid workers, and effectively remained enslaved and working on plantations.

Saint Helena was the designated depot in the South Atlantic for detaining enslaved Africans and ship captains and crews engaged in slave trading. Once captured by the British Navy, captains of slave-trading ships, and their crews were disembarked and tried in court. Thousands of Africans brought to Saint Helena had narrowly survived their journeys before being taken into custody by the British Navy.



Enslaved Africans who died in transit, or upon arrival, were thrown overboard before the practice changed to burying people on the island in Lemon Valley (and later in Rupert's Valley). Today, Rupert's Valley site is the unmarked burial place of an estimated 10,000 African men, women, and children.

By 1872 the number of illegal slave vessels crossing the Atlantic and captured by the British Navy decreased, and by 1874 the liberated African depot on Saint Helena closed; it remained deserted until 2008. An estimated 500 so-called "liberated" Africans settled permanently on the island. Despite making the island their new home, Africans did not enjoy the same rights and privileges as Whites. Today, Saint Helena is still home to descendants of liberated Africans. Over 18,000 Africans were transported onward from Saint Helena. There is no record of captives returning to their homes in Africa. The majority were brought west to Britain's Caribbean colonies.

## **Reclaiming Sacred Ground and Reparative Justice**

*"Archaeologists say that what in part defines us as human is how we bury our dead. We may sing over them, say words over them, pour libations, or place special objects in honor of someone. But imagine a community of people living in a society that defines them as less than human, having no rights that any person need respect.*

*Then on the occasion of the loss of a mother, father, sister, or brother imagine that community being permitted by their oppressors to gather in ceremony to honor their dead, you would bear witness to a people in the act of reclaiming their humanity, in fact, a community engaging in a revolutionary act, .....a revolutionary act of remembrance."*

- Peggy King Jorde, Closing remarks at Story of Bones Screening, London 2022

We use tangible reminders to keep ourselves close to important people, places, or events, and how we choose to acknowledge and engage with the tangible and intangible reminders in our cultural landscape is at the core of keeping their significance relevant and meaningful. In the wake of the rediscovery of the New York African Burial Ground, descendants and marginalized communities were inspired to reclaim within their own communities places of cultural and historical importance. Preservation is work toward repair. Agency in that work is repair.

## **Interpreting Slavery: Empowering Descendant Voices**

The transatlantic slave trade and the violence upon which it was founded are our collective global inheritance. Since the perpetrators of violence who benefited from colonization and slavery also had the power to frame the violence they enacted against Black people, the foundations of our contemporary understanding of colonization, White supremacy, and anti-Black racism were unequal from the beginning, particularly with regard to power and race. Importantly, we need to continue interrogating the methods through which we interpret the lasting implications for both those who are living and those whose lives were taken.

In February 2018, James Madison's Montpelier convened a summit of an interdisciplinary group of peers, including educators, curators, activists, scholars, museum and historic site practitioners, and descendants, to develop an assessment tool or rubric using best ideas and practices for teaching and engaging the public on the painful history of slavery. The group set out to develop a more inclusive way of incorporating the stories and experiences of enslaved people through the voices of their descendants. *Engaging Descendant Communities in the Interpretation of*

**Slavery at Museums and Historic Sites: A Rubric of Best Practices** provides a methodology for openly addressing the history of slavery, its role in shaping the United States, the legacy of race relations, and institutional disparities.

As the rubric states, “Empowering descendant voices challenges the public to consider their points of view, which until very recently have been marginalized from the dominant historical narratives offered in classrooms, textbooks, museums, and historic sites.”

By decolonizing the slavery narrative on Saint Helena, the participants in *A Story of Bones* expose misconceptions around “liberated” Africans, the island itself, and its colonial past. Their work provides a path to truthful conversations around the island’s history of slavery and further, proper memorialization for those subjected to its cruelty.

#### **Sources:**

Eltis, David and David Richardson. *Atlas of the Transatlantic Slave Trade*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010.

Horton, James and Lois Horton. *Slavery and Public History: The Tough Stuff of American memory*. Norton, 2006.

Museum of Saint Helena. *St Helena, Slavery and the Abolition on the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade*. Saint Helena: Museum of Saint Helena, 2012.

National Summit on Teaching Slavery. *Engaging Descendant Communities in the Interpretation of Slavery at Museums and Historic Sites: A Rubric of Best Practices*. Montpelier: James Madison’s Montpelier, 2018.



# DISCUSSION PROMPTS

The discussion prompts, which follow specific chapters of the film, are an invitation to dialogue. Please select discussion questions that are relevant to your community.

## Starting The Conversation

Immediately after the film, you may want to give people a few quiet moments to reflect on what they have seen. You could pose a general question (examples below) and give people time to jot down or think about their answers before opening the discussion. Alternatively, you could ask participants to share their thoughts with partners before starting a group discussion.

### Impact of Stories and Discourse

- How do stories like *A Story of Bones* help push the needle on societal discourse concerning decolonizing history?
- How do stories like *A Story of Bones* impact our collective memory of slavery?
- In what ways does *A Story of Bones* offer alternative ways of thinking about the importance of preserving marginalized cultural heritage?
- In *A Story of Bones*, What was an effective way of telling a story about histories of slavery in a contemporary context?
- What aspects of *A Story of Bones* were you able to connect with? What aspects did you find more challenging to connect with in regard to the past?

## Remembrance

- What do you think “collective memory” means?
- Why is remembering the past important? What does the past teach us about the present?
- When considering collective memory, history, and stories we tell about the past, who is the authority?
- In what ways can remembrance and storytelling be used to transform and heal?
- How are opportunities for healing impacted based on who is telling the story of a brutal past?
- How is remembrance marked, and from what perspectives?
- Do all perspectives have equal footing in a shared history and past?

## Interpretation and Historical Narratives

- Who are the legitimate voices in remembrance, and who leads?
- What is the danger when people with power are the perpetrators of violence and the ones who tell the story?

# Resources

## [African-American Burial Grounds Preservation Act](#)

is designed to create a specific program for African-American burial grounds under the National Park Service.

[African Burial Ground National Monument](#) in New York is the oldest known excavated burial ground in North America for both free and enslaved Africans.

[Equal Justice Initiative](#) works to end mass incarceration and excessive punishment in the United States.

[Hawaiian Burial Laws](#) relate to respecting prehistoric and historic Native Hawaiian burials.

[National Park Service](#) acts as a safeguard for special places and their stories.

[Say Their Names Cemetery](#) memorializes Black Americans killed by the police, as shown in this video.





# Teaching Guide

## LEARNING OBJECTIVE

Students will be able to consider whose histories and cultures are celebrated in their communities.

## MATERIALS

- PEN /PENCIL
- PAPER

## TIME REQUIRED

90 MINUTES IS THE SUGGESTED TIME, BUT THIS TIME CAN BE MODIFIED BASED ON THE DISCRETION OF EACH TEACHER/FACILITATOR.

## Essential Question

**Consider whose histories and cultures are celebrated in your community. Does the history provide an accurate representation of the past, and if not, what steps would you explore to take action?**

## Activity

### Memorial Design Development: A Distillation of Cultural/Historical Truth, Integrity, and Impact

Community Exercise-Visioning Portal and Memorialization:

Each community is different and comes to memorialization with unique priorities.

- **Truth:** What is the truth about your site (cultural, historical reality)? Engage in a brain dump. Write down everything significant about the truth/facts/central theme of what you're preparing to memorialize.
- **Integrity:** Distill from the list of truths the most unifying elements. What is the thread that weaves through all those truths? (That will shape the narrative. The integrity of those unifying elements is the power of that truth to carry forward for generations.)
- **Impact:** What is the most impactful thing that will carry integrity through generations?

# Credits & Acknowledgments



## About the Author, Peggy King Jorde

Peggy King Jorde is a Cultural Projects Consultant with a multidisciplinary practice supporting projects in cultural heritage preservation for marginalized & underrepresented communities. A Harvard Loeb Fellow recognized for her extraordinary activism to save New York City's African Burial Ground, King Jorde was named Special Adviser to Mayor David N Dinkins in 1991. Later, as Executive Director and on behalf of the Federal Steering Committee for the African Burial Ground Memorialization, Peggy prepared the master plan submitted to Congress. She subsequently accepted the position of Director of Memorialization to implement the design competitions for the nation's first African Burial Ground Monument & Interpretive Center. She consulted on the repatriation and burial ceremony for more than 400 ancestral remains under study at Howard University. Harvard Magazine's article "Life By Design" chronicles King Jorde's journey from her native Albany, Georgia, to her fellowship pursuits at Harvard School of Design. King Jorde served under three New York City Mayors, garnering extensive experience in civic project development and oversight of New York's most iconic cultural institutions, museums, and public art projects. She is a consultant, author, producer, and a protagonist in the critically acclaimed British documentary "A Story of Bones" featured at the 2022 Tribeca Film Festival about the fight to preserve a burial ground for thousands of enslaved Africans retrieved from slave ships during the Middle Passage and buried on the island of St. Helena, UK. In addition to project consulting, writing, producing, and lecturing, King Jorde is a recent committee appointee and adviser to the Kingdom of the Netherlands, Dutch Caribbean Island of Sint Eustatius. She guides community engagement, preservation, and memorialization strategies for African burial sites.

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## THANKS TO THOSE WHO REVIEWED AND CONTRIBUTED TO THIS RESOURCE

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