



SYMPOSIUM: USING WORLD HISTORY TO INFORM WORK FOR REPARATIONS

Introduction

World History and the Work of Reparations

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The murder of George Floyd and the subsequent upsurge of worldwide resistance to racialized police violence and structural racism have generated extraordinary attention in mainstream U.S. and global discourse to the plight of people of African descent. There is far more consciousness that to be Black in the present world is to face a constant vulnerability to violence, premature death, incarceration, environmental havoc, and impoverishment. To be Black in the present world is to bear the weight of the irreparable loss and lingering physical and emotional scars caused by the abduction and enslavement of more than 15 million African people and their descendants. To be Black in the present world is to contend continually with the afterlife of slavery (Hartman 2007). And significantly today, it has become much more obvious that racism constitutes a “pre-existing



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societal condition” that now obstructs efforts at national and global levels to contain the COVID-19 pandemic.¹

George Floyd was murdered by Minneapolis police exactly two months after the United Nations International Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade, commemorated each year on March 25th. The “Day of Remembrance” is a day for George Floyd and all other ancestors victimized by the violence of systemic racism. Linking the brutal history of the slave trade with today’s lived realities of people of African Descent is essential to the work of repairing our society and transforming the institutional legacies of slavery. At this particular moment, we’re seeing the noteworthy global advance of social movements for reparations, along with important counterhegemonic alliances across movements and state leaders.

This work for reparations requires interventions by world historians to bear witness to the brutalities of the past as part of a process that seeks truth and reconciliation, along with some measure of accountability and restitution, however imperfect. We began plans for this symposium over a year ago, hoping to inspire renewed engagement by scholars in the complex task of reparations. Today’s uprisings have made this intervention more timely, and suggest that realization of some forms of reparation is well within reach. But much work remains, and we hope these contributions can inspire more widespread and unswerving engagement in this struggle.

It is impossible to contemplate reparations without a world-historical perspective. The slave trade involved the forced separation of people from their traditional lands and cultures, followed by not just physical cruelty, but also brutal cultural genocide and repression that denied displaced Africans their history. This displacement of peoples from land and culture has lasting impacts on survivors’ mental and physical health, disrupting lives of individuals and communities both in Africa and the diaspora. At the same time, colonialism on the African continent and in the diaspora transformed and distorted local cultures and societies as it integrated occupied populations into a globalizing capitalist economy. The institutionalized remnants of slavery continue to extract wealth and well-being from the world’s varied peripheries for the benefit of those in core countries and social positions.

Neither the abolition of the trade, nor the emancipation of the enslaved, nor national independence of the colonized lands could ever suffice to heal the wounds caused by the slave trade over a millennium. Thus, this task remains, despite the passage of centuries. As Black studies and slavery scholar, Saidiya Hartman writes:

The demands of the slave on the present have everything to do with making good the promise of abolition, and this entails much more than the end of property in slaves. It requires the reconstruction of society, which is the only way to honor our

¹ See, e.g., “Racism is a Public Health Crisis” *Public Health Newswire* May 29, 2020, <http://www.publichealthnewswire.org/articles/2020/05/29/racism-a-public-health-crisis>; and “The Impact of COVID-19, and the Response to the Pandemic, on the Human Rights of People of African Descent,” International Coalition of People of African Descent Submission to UN Working Group on People of African Descent, May 2020, <https://ushrnetwork.org/uploads/images/sliders/ICPAD%20-%20The%20Situation%20of%20PAD%20in%20the%20context%20of%20the%20COVID-19%20pandemic.pdf>

debt to the dead. This is the intimacy of our age with theirs—an unfinished struggle. To what end does one conjure the ghost of slavery, if not to incite the hopes of transforming the present? Given this, I refuse to believe that the slave’s most capacious political claims or wildest imaginings are for back wages or debt relief. There are too many lives at peril to recycle the forms of appeal that, at best, have delivered the limited emancipation against which we now struggle. (2007:170)

The struggle for reparations for slavery has always been about repairing the irreparable. To engage in the “reconstruction of society” is a political project that must begin by drawing our attention to the history of the modern world-system and its inescapably violent foundations. That’s why reparations must be a global project and process. It must be considered a verb and not a noun, as the Black Autonomy Network argues.² Reparations cannot be a discrete event, but an ongoing attempt to *destroy the world that made the brutality of slavery possible*. It is less about the transfer of resources—although that is a crucial component—as it is about the transformation of *all* social relations. Reparation is thus about re-envisioning and reconstructing a world-system based not upon human and ecological exploitation, but upon relationships of solidarity, cooperation, and mutual support; both among people and between people and the earth.

How History Matters

Our intention with this symposium is to show the value of *world*-historical analysis for contemporary movements and policies, and we invite scholars to engage in this vital struggle. Understanding the reparations question in world-historical terms is more than a mere academic question. Shifting our lens to encompass world history exposes the varied effects of slavery and the slave trade, and it allows us to interrogate national boundaries and hegemonic histories. It also makes visible the myriad forms of resistance to the capitalist world-system, nurturing the radical imagination of alternatives to a social order based upon racial and other hierarchies. Given the operation of hegemony in schools and in scholarship, creative and bold interventions by scholars and activists are needed to help support reparations struggles and inform local and global dialogues about reparations and how to realize them. True reparations involves far more than institutional reforms: it requires wholesale reorganization of all of our institutions and the social relations they reflect and reproduce.

As Walden Bello points out, “providing the legitimacy necessary for capitalist democracy to function necessitated the radical ideological denial of its racial structures” from the earliest days of U.S. empire (Bello 2020). Transforming state structures whose very existence depends upon a false historical narrative is work that must take place both beyond the boundaries of a particular state and in the realms of culture, discourse, and consciousness as much as institutions and policy. W.E.B. Dubois and other Black liberation advocates realized this when they brought their “Appeal to the World” to the United Nations General Assembly in 1947.³

² <https://itsgoingdown.org/reparations-as-a-verb/>

³ <https://www.blackpast.org/global-african-history/primary-documents-global-african-history/1947-w-e-b-dubois-appeal-world-statement-denial-human-rights-minorities-case-citizens-n/>

Professor Sir Hilary Beckles, chairman of the CARICOM Reparations Commission (CRC), recently referred to this historical moment as “the time of the Black Lives Matter movement,” naming the twenty-first century “the age of reparations” (Beckles 2020). His bold call for accountability and restitution from former colonial states comes after decades of efforts to advance the reparations movement on the world stage. Below we trace some key developments in the recent history of anti-systemic resistance within inter-state institutions that have unfolded mostly outside the media spotlight and mainstream scholarship in most of the core states of the world-economy.

At this period of U.S. hegemonic decline, new counterhegemonic challenges are emerging in the world-system. While many have focused on the rise of China as a state competitor to U.S. economic dominance, the story we outline below shows how leaders in African and other states—often represented by people who were active in or deeply affected by earlier anti-colonial struggles—are helping bring the transformative claims of social movements for racial justice into global policy debates. African states—pressed by popular movements—are uniting in new ways to advance claims for reparations from former colonial powers. Significantly, these claims are for not only economic compensation and recognition: they threaten the basic social relations of this world-system. This inter-state dimension of today’s reparations struggles shapes the character of the wider discourses and frames used by activists today, and also signals the availability of new resources for the movement in terms of legitimation, political leverage, and possibilities for alliance-building.

The Organization of African Unity issued its first resolution on reparations, Resolution 1339,⁴ in mid-1991; establishing a group of Eminent Africans and Africans in the diaspora “to set out clearly the extent of Africa’s exploitation, the liability of the perpetrators and the strategies for achieving reparation.” This led to the first Pan-African Conference on Reparations for the Enslavement, the Colonization and the African Neo-Colonization in 1993. This Conference issued the Abuja Proclamation,⁵ which stated that claims for reparations are “well grounded in International Law,” and charged the Organization of African Unity with establishing a legal Committee on the issue of Reparations.⁶

In the Caribbean region, CARICOM nations established a regional Reparations Commission in 2013 to:

establish the moral, ethical and legal case for the payment of Reparations by the Governments of all the former colonial powers and the relevant institutions of those countries, to the nations and people of the Caribbean Community for the Crimes against Humanity of Native Genocide, the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade and a racialized system of chattel Slavery.⁷

⁴ <http://www.africa-union.org/root/au/Documents/Decisions/ExeCoundecisions.htm>

⁵ <http://www.ncobraonline.org/the-abuja-proclamation/>

⁶ <https://www.colonialismreparation.org/en/compensations/african-union-colonialism.html>

⁷ <https://caricomreparations.org/about-us/>

CARICOM member countries have subsequently established national reparations commissions to support this regional process.

At the United Nations, the 2001 World Conference Against Racism (WCAR), held in Durban, South Africa, was a significant event in the struggle to confront racist hierarchies and violence.⁸ Like other global conferences since the early 1990s, it not only provided a space for governments to confront historical injustices but also contributed to the development and strengthening of antiracism movements and networks around the world (Falcón 2016).⁹ WCAR led to the creation of the International Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent, which conducts fact-finding missions and prepares advisory reports for UN and member government officials to advance and support implementation of the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action.¹⁰ The Working Group is comprised of unpaid experts who contribute their time and expertise to advance a global analysis of the African diaspora's experiences and inform international debates and policy recommendations. The Working Group and its reports have helped expand popular consciousness about the lasting global impacts of slavery and the slave trade while fostering grassroots knowledge of the workings of the UN system.¹¹

The United Nations International Decade of People of African Descent (2015-2025) grew from this earlier work, aiming to promote “recognition, justice and development”—that is, reparations—for people of African descent. Such international decades invite governments and other actors to engage in cultural and other work to advance historical truth-telling as part of a larger process of repairing communities. This series of developments in the UN is significant in that it has helped support and empower collectivities of people of African descent as important counterhegemonic global actors, in parallel with states. At the same time, it is helping build the

⁸ This was the third World Conference Against Racism, and the first held on the African continent. Two others were held in Geneva in 1978 and 1983, and these emphasized a narrower focus on South African apartheid. <https://www.un.org/WCAR/e-kit/backgrounder1.htm>

⁹ We note, too, that the United Nations also provided spaces for exchange and cross-fertilization between movements advocating for people of African descent and growing networks of other Indigenous people's struggles advocating for rights, recognition, and restitution.

¹⁰ According to its website, the Durban Declaration and Program of Action (DDPA) “is a comprehensive, action-oriented document that proposes concrete measures to combat racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance. It...embodies the firm commitment of the international community to tackle racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance at the national, regional and international level. Recognition that no country can claim to be free of racism, that racism is a global concern, and that tackling it should be a universal effort, is an important achievement. Although the DDPA is not legally binding, it has a strong moral value and serves as a basis for advocacy efforts worldwide.” <https://www.un.org/en/durbanreview2009/ddpa.shtml>.

¹¹ For example, the vice-chair of the current Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent, Dominique Day, participated in a recent webinar organized by U.S. human rights activists working to help activists in that country better understand how the United Nations human rights machinery works to help movements challenge racism in institutions and policies.

https://pitt.zoom.us/rec/share/9JAqMerJ6m9IQaf2zk3vX4gcPr_aaaa81yFP8_cFmhyJa0HhhYNh6uGGw5YsSQG4

political will needed to dismantle White supremacy and repair past injustices.¹² Sylvana Falcón quotes a U.S. activist at the WCAR in 2001 who exclaimed, “we went to Durban as Blacks and left Durban as African descendants” (2016: 143). The radical significance of this transnational identity was not lost on WCAR participants. As one of Falcón’s research participants explained: “to assert that you are African descendants, to use that word, well, the states were very resistant...because you are talking about Africa, about the slave trade and trafficking, and you’re talking about reparations” (2016: 143).

Using a strategy similar to that of Indigenous movements, activists of the African diaspora are working to use the International Decade to achieve a *Permanent Forum on People of African Descent* in the United Nations, which would continue to build the collective, global agency of people of African descent and challenge the monopoly of national governments in this world body.¹³ Indeed, a core demand for many in the reparations movement is for the “power to determine [their] own destiny as a distinct group of people.”¹⁴ This can really only be achieved through the active engagement of a world-historical imagination in which the people whose ancestors and ancestral culture are situated on the African continent are emancipated from their colonial histories and supported in remembering and enacting African cultural expressions. The reconstruction of society requires the agency of people who are free to consider political and economic paths that transcend the racialized modern world-system, which includes the system’s varied hierarchies among people and between people and the Earth and the states and other institutions designed to reproduce these hierarchies.

The *JWSR* Reparations Symposium

This special symposium of *JWSR* contributes to a rich array of scholarship in world-systems on the links between global capitalism and institutionalized racial discrimination and exploitation. The following contributions help illustrate how world history can inform contemporary debates and guide policies that promote reparations, healing, and justice. We hope they inspire further critical engagement and scholarly advances in this journal and beyond.

Patrick Manning’s essay celebrates the current progress toward gaining reparations for race-based oppression, setting it in the context of other cases of payments for reparations. Reparation

¹² Pan Africanism helped nurture global African identity and supported anti-colonial and decolonization efforts in the 19th and 20th centuries. The UN initiatives described here built upon this work and help broaden and expand that identity and increase its salience in contemporary global politics. Kiyoteru Tsutsui traces a similar process of identity formation and emergence of “global movement actorhood” in his analysis of Indigenous mobilizations in Japan (2018).

¹³ The political potential of the proposed Permanent Forum may be seen in the unprecedented UN Human Rights Council Urgent Debate on racially inspired human rights violations, held on June 17, 2020, which was held at the initiative of united African Union countries, who responded to a call from leading U.S. human rights organizations and from family members of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Michael Brown, and Philando Castile. For recordings of this session see: <http://webtv.un.org/meetings-events/watch/urgent-debate-on-racially-inspired-human-rights-violations-contd-41st-meeting-43rd-regular-session-human-rights-council/6165244245001/?term>

¹⁴ Campaign for Reparations and Self-Determination (U.S.) <https://campaign4reparationsandselfdetermination.wordpress.com/about/>

payments were made after each of the world wars. Reparations were paid after abolition of slavery, but more often to the former slave owners than to the ex-slaves. In 1961, Frantz Fanon laid out a brilliant restatement, demanding reparations for the victims of slavery and colonialism and for their surviving offspring. Still, even as consensus builds in support of paying reparations, great difficulties remain in deciding how exactly to allocate the compensation. Is it affirmative action? Restructuring memory? Is it to be addressed on a national level; on a regional level (the Caribbean); a global level (including Africa, Europe, and Asia)? Today's response to the inequality of race and slavery is a great test for humanity.

The contribution by Prentiss Dantzler and Aja Reynolds examines racial disparities in access to affordable and safe housing and its impacts on families over generations. Land, or access to the means of survival and subsistence, is central to most conversations about reparations, and indeed, the contemporary global distribution of land rights reveals the ongoing violence of slavery's forced dislocation of Africans from their homelands. These authors describe housing as a "colonial project" of racial capitalism, tracing how particular policies and practices in the United States have served to exclude Black residents from full citizenship and defined the racial politics of U.S. cities. They put forward concrete recommendations for how reparations around land and housing might look, including active state interventions to repair past damage and decommodify housing to ensure that all people have access to this basic human right.

Joyce Hope Scott describes the emergence and development of the International Network of Scholars and Activists for African Reparations (INOSAAR) in 2017 and its role in helping support and advance reparations work. Illustrating the importance of global spaces and platforms for promoting reparations, we learn that INOSAAR grew from a research conference organized with a grant linked to the above-mentioned UN International Decade for People of African Descent. INOSAAR's work challenges academic conventions, "promoting academic and community engagement that is rooted in the praxis of decolonization, pluriversality and cognitive justice, i.e., the equity of all knowledges." Hope Scott describes the contributions INOSAAR scholars have made in the humanities, psychology, ecology, and social sciences, revealing a "multidirectional and multidimensional definition of reparations that is open to a rich variety of approaches, while remaining focused on the need to repair the damage caused as result of slavery as a crime against humanity." The work of this network is undeniably essential to supporting and building the growing reparations movement.

For world-systems scholars, what is especially interesting in the contemporary political moment is that antisystemic movements advocating racial justice and reparations are employing the inter-state institutional and legal machinery—notably the United Nations, its human rights treaties and monitoring bodies, and the related legitimating ideology known as the world-system geoculture—that has helped consolidate and sustain U.S. hegemony since WWII. They are doing so at a time when U.S. hegemony—long in decline—is further threatened by the Trump administration's active and reckless abandonment of the very institutional apparatus that has been key to U.S. global dominance. As Trump officials defy global consensus and withdraw from multilateral bodies like the World Health Organization and the Human Rights Council, popular

movements for reparations and racial justice are strengthening their appeals to global norms of human rights and equality that emerged to legitimate the prevailing order by obscuring systemic, racialized violence. At the same time, these movements are challenging fundamentally state sovereignty and the hegemony of core states and the capitalist world-system.

Reflecting the dilemma of systemic crisis, core states' resistance to human rights claims ultimately serves to undermine the institutional basis of the existing world order. Reparations thus reflects the efforts of popular groups to leverage the unsustainable contradictions between a geoculture that celebrates democracy and the exploitative, exclusionary violence of global capitalism. Bold intellectual leadership, guided by perspectives from world history are essential to this growing movement for world-system transformation. We hope that this symposium's interventions inspire further scholarship and debate in the pages of *JWSR* and beyond and that they inspire our readers to support this vital work.

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