



## SYMPOSIUM: USING WORLD-HISTORY TO INFORM WORK FOR REPARATIONS

### Reparations, Restitution, Transitional Justice

The International Network of Scholars and Activists for Afrikan Reparations (INOSAAR)

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One of the guiding questions of this symposium is “Can world historical research provide a tool to help today’s communities provide just restoration [reparations, restitution, and atonement] for historically oppressed communities [and allow for a restructuring of] institutions that were founded upon slavery and genocide?” The answer might be to consider what is meant by history. If history does, indeed, function as an archive of human experience, then testimonies from communities that have been, and continue to be, negatively impacted by structures of systemic racism, inequality, and colonization become crucial for informing discourses around the oppression and dispossession of African-descended people and their claim for reparative justice. As this essay will explore, the importance of voice and testimony has been at the heart of the work of the International Network of Scholars and Activists for Afrikan Reparations (INOSAAR) since its inception in 2017.

Toni Morrison discussed the centrality of history in her address to the 2004 graduating class of Wellesley College. She reminded us of the crucial nature of historical narrative, but at the same time of history’s ability to construct lapses of memory that create a comfortable forgetting of those events that horrify us:



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The past is already in debt to the mismanaged present. And besides, contrary to what you may have heard or learned, the past is not done and it is not over, it's still in process...The past is already changing as it is being reexamined, as it is being listened to for deeper resonances. Actually, it can be more liberating than any imagined future if you are willing to identify its evasions, its distortions, its lies, and are willing to unleash its secrets (2004).

Pierre Nora's famous work, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire" (1989), offers a fitting complement to Morrison's observation on history and its power as an omnipresent feature of our present lives when he notes that memory is always in evolution and susceptible to the dialectic while history is a reconstruction of the past and thus lacking in the fact of its existence as a representation of the past. He goes on to say: "History's goal and ambition is not to exalt but to annihilate what has in reality taken place" (1989:9). Here, Nora seems to think of memory as suspect and appears to construct it in opposition to the empirical basis of history. In contrast, Morrison (2004) suggests that history is unstable and questions whether it can serve as an empirical referent since it is "already changing as it is being examined." Thus, the implication is that memory, though an unofficial factor in discourses of the past, must be engaged for its power to create a counter-narrative to official history by destabilizing its monologue.

In essence, then, history as a "usable past" can be viewed as a reservoir of sites of memory and, therefore of vital information when considering calls for reparation and transitional justice for the transatlantic trafficking in captive Africans and their subsequent enslavement as chattel property. We can hear the voices and memories of that struggle if we chart the historical trajectory of reparations activism. It becomes evident that the struggle for restitution and restorative justice for slavery, colonization, and Jim Crow segregation has a long and varied history, one that is interwoven into the legacy of African resistance to enslavement (and colonization). One of the earliest examples can be traced back to 1783, when Belinda Sutton, an African-born woman enslaved by the Royall family, petitioned the Massachusetts General Court to claim a pension/reparations for herself and her daughter from the estate of Isaac Royall (Winbush 2009). Four years later in the United Kingdom, the formerly enslaved African abolitionist, Attobah Kwodjo Enu (Ottobah Cugoano), became the first published African author in English to denounce the so-called "trade" and "to claim the African human right to resistance against enslavement and to advocate in writing the demand for reparations including restitution" ([1787] 1999). Viewed from a historical perspective, these former captives sought reparative justice and restitution for the damages suffered by a brutal system that was eventually abolished. However, some contemporary scholars and activists read the carceral nature of Black lives as an ongoing manifestation of the same forces; thus, the term the "Maangamizi," a Swahili word for the ongoing, intentional orchestration of the African Holocaust that chattel slavery, colonialism, neo-colonialism, and the "New Jim Crow" represent (Stop the Maangamizi 2016).

The International Network of Scholars and Activists for African Reparations (INOSAAR), created in 2017, offers a forum for exploring history as a useful tool for considering repair and restorative justice for the crimes against humanity that chattel slavery represents. INOSAAR is a trans-Atlantic project coordinated by two scholars: Dr. Nicola Frith of the University of Edinburgh

and Professor Joyce Hope Scott of the former Wheelock College (now Wheelock College of Education and Human Development at Boston University, United States). Their mutual commitment & interest in reparative histories is what first brought them together around the issue of reparations at a conference at Brighton University.

In collaboration with activists based in Europe, West Africa and the Americas, the two scholars spearheaded the creation of the INOSAAR, which was established with funding provided by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) through their Research Networking Grant related to the United Nations International Decade for People of African Descent (IDPAD, 2015-24). Since its inauguration, INOSAAR's central purpose has been to create an international network of scholars and activists dedicated to advancing the academic and activist legacy of redress for reparations and other forms of transitional justice for the enslavement, colonization and genocide of peoples of African descent. The crucial concern was the importance of listening to testimonies and memories of the marginalized and oppressed. This is particularly crucial in the United Kingdom, where the work of activists and their approaches to world-historical research in relation to reparations has historically marginalized the insights of those from grassroots and activist communities.

Specifically, the official establishment of the organization was the outgrowth of a historic international conference, entitled "Repairing the Past, Imagining the Future: Reparations and Beyond" (2015). Coordinated by Hope Scott and Frith, this conference marked the two hundred year anniversary of the first international agreement to abolish slavery during the Congress of Vienna of 1815, and the 150th anniversary of the Thirteenth Amendment abolishing slavery in the United States. They identified the two anniversaries as a timely occasion in which to discuss the subject of reparations from a range of disciplinary backgrounds. Despite their open intentions, however, it was pointed out that the format, because it was "fee-paying," risked marginalizing the grassroots stakeholders in the matter of Reparatory Justice and excluding "the majority of voices which ought to be an indispensable part of this...cross-fertilizing dialogue" (PARCOE letter 2015).

PARCOE's appeal and the positive response provided by the organizers was the catalyst for creating the INOSAAR as it aimed to eliminate the chasm between academics and activists on an international scale around the subject of reparations and restorative justice for African slavery and colonization. The strategy for achieving this goal was a series of open workshops and seminars, which concluded with a major international conference held in the Republic of Bénin, during which time INOSAAR explored the challenges of building solidarity around reparations in multiple ways. The key outcome of that conference was the adoption and signing of the *Porto-Novo Declaration* (2018) by his majesty Kpoto Zounmè Hakpon III, King of Porto-Novo (now deceased) on behalf of the Bénin Conseil des Rois (Council of Kings). This Declaration is a historical landmark in that it is the first of its kind in history. The Declaration is an invitation for "African states and their diplomatic leadership to join with civil society to formulate policies and establish operational committees in order to institutionalize and advocate the claim for reparatory justice" (*Porto-Novo Declaration* 2018).

The first focus through these events was on expanding our collective understandings of the possible meanings of reparation. This involved, first of all, addressing some important gaps in current research on reparations by expanding the orthodox focus on legal and economic arguments for repair through the incorporation of cultural, spiritual, environmental and psychological approaches. Second was the focus on encouraging cross-community collaborations by working alongside grassroots activist groups and state and non-state actors from Europe, America, Africa, and the Caribbean who are engaged in the movement for reparatory justice. The participation and contributions of these diverse groups have been central to shaping INOSAAR's agenda of promoting academic and community engagement that is rooted in the praxis of decolonization, pluriversality, and cognitive justice; i.e., the equity of all knowledges.

Thus, by definition, INOSAAR subscribes to a variety of alternative approaches like those proposed by activists and others from the arts and humanities that have emerged from historical discourse out of the gaping breach in justice and the failure to address reparations for crimes against humanity. This is supported by recent scholarship on reparations that has underscored the need to expand the definition of reparations for African enslavement to take into account the agential nature of some of the historical activities by Black people and their communities in their quest for restitution. These include the founding of all-Black towns and settlements in the United States, slave rebellions, in particular the Haitian war of liberation, and formation of maroon communities like the quilombolas, Black freedom communities of Brazil (Farfan-Santos 2016) and the Seminole wars of Florida where escaped African captives and Indigenous Americans fought the U.S. army to preserve their free communities (Missall and Missall 2016; Dixon 2014; Field 2009).

Those approaching reparations from the perspective that the humanities have had a powerful impact in history on societal events also characterize some activist or grassroots actions as reparatory. To begin with, the Black Arts Movement can be reassessed by defining it, as Larry Neal suggests, "as the aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept...that proposes a radical reordering of the western cultural aesthetic and entails the creation of a separate symbolism, mythology, critique, and iconology" (1968:29). Neal's platform connects to a major liberatory concern of reparation scholars and activists today relating to the health of the African mind and spirit. That is his affirmation that his "primary duty [was to speak]...to the spiritual and cultural needs of Black people" (Neale 1968:29). Several years later, Ibekwe Chinweizu echoed this concern for repair of spiritual grounding of African people on the continent and in its diasporas in his address on the idea of reparations, saying: "Reparation is mostly about making repairs, self-made repairs, on ourselves: mental repairs, psychological repairs, cultural repairs...repairs of every type that we need in order to recreate and sustain black societies" (Chinweizu 1993).

What emerges from this very brief historical overview is the need for 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 two current areas of focus of the INOSAAR grow out of this area of need. The first relates to "rematriation," meaning the process by which the descendants of those who were forcibly

displaced from Africa as a result of European-led enslavement return culturally and spiritually to African knowledge banks. This notion acknowledges that slavery was not only theft of the body and its creations but also, and equally important was the impact of enslavement on severing of the African captive from the metaphysical knowledge and connection that informs the very foundation of human identity; in this case, of the Black self. African cultural knowledge legacy is clearly an important issue in considerations of historical repair and transitional justice. The enslavement and colonization experiment caused incalculable psychological and spiritual damage to the sensibilities of African-descended people. Ray Winbush argues that “The psychological damage of the transatlantic Slave Trade is traceable throughout the African World” (2005:vii). He continues by noting the inadequacy of language to capture the depths of that loss:

Words such as “Black Holocaust” are inadequate in their attempt to describe what happened (is happening) to Africans whose ancestors were victims of enslavement, colonialism, cultural theft and exploitation. In an attempt to describe this horrific experience, Marimba Ani, author of *Let the Circle Be Unbroken* offers the Kiswahili term *Maafa* to emphasize the continuing impact of enslavement on African people’s thought patterns and behavior. Joyce DeGruy Leary coined the phrase “Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome” which also describes this impact...In this sense, the struggle for reparations is not only economic but psychological as well. (2005:vii)

Winbush affirms that “this internal repair is a vital step and should be recognized as such” (2005:vii). Further, according to him, it is a need that transcends the “classroom and the therapy session and...[becomes] overtly political since white supremacist systems continue the legacy of damaging African people” (2005:vii). Sowandé M. Mustakeem (2016) also writes of this psyche violation that captive Africans suffered in her text *Slavery at Sea: Terror, Sex and Sickness in the Middle Passage*: “Psychologically scarred from their forcible exile...[the African captives] found themselves insulated within yet another violent world of disorienting trauma – this time off ship” (2016:173).

Following repatriation, INOSAAR’s second focus relates to “planet repairs;” that is to say, the ways in which the struggle for reparative justice is linked to concerns with environmentalism, ecocide and sustainable development. In this initiative, INOSAAR seeks to develop some of the most creative and original ideas that emerged as priorities during the events organized as part of the AHRC-funding [AH/P007074/1]. INOSAAR envisions moving forward with its goal of embracing the disparate voices of this movement, their histories embellished by their memories. A future goal is to facilitate a series of community-based and culturally innovative projects around reparations; the nature and format of these will be determined in collaboration with the identified beneficiaries – African and African descended communities.

Ultimately, what the legacy of the Transatlantic Slave Trade is for the African continent is still in debate. Historiographers agree that many millions of its population were forced into the barbarity of enslavement followed by lingering racial injustices, and current realities reveal continuation of historical, neocolonial economic systems which find many African countries still entrapped in structurally-dependent ties to Europe. The INOSAAR’s ongoing commitment is to



facilitating exchanges about what repair and transitional justice would entail for the wrongs of a “past [which] is not done and...is not over,’ [but is] still in process” (Morrison, 2004).

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