

Healing the Wounds of the Past: The Long History of Demands of Reparations for Slavery

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Abstract

This article explores the long history of demands of reparations for slavery in the Americas. The article establishes a distinction between symbolic, financial, and material reparations. It emphasizes that activists who fought for reparations historically were often framed as radicals, and were often persecuted by public authorities, especially in the United States. By offering an overview of the various social actors who over time have made call for reparations, the article also emphasizes the variety of demands addressed to former slave owners, governments, churches, companies, and more recently to universities. Overall, the article shows that despite the new recent wave of calls for reparations, there is little consensus on what form should reparations take. Yet, the article also underscores that as far as racism and racial inequalities remain ravaging former slave societies and societies where slavery existed, calls for reparations will persist.

Introduction

From 1517 to 1867, slave ships transported nearly 12.5 million enslaved Africans to the Americas. In West Africa and West Central Africa, African men, women, and children were killed in the wars that produced captives for the Atlantic slave trade. Nearly 2 million Africans also succumbed during the journeys walking from the hinterland to the coast and through the long waiting period of confinement in slave depots. Approximately 1.8 million were killed in the hold of slave ships during Middle Passage. Current estimates, indicate that 10.7 million enslaved men, women, and children disembarked alive in the Americas.¹

A growing number of scholars studying the history of slavery and the Atlantic slave trade have attempted to understand how these human atrocities shaped slave societies (those where slavery was the central engine of the economy), societies where chattel slavery was present but not as a central mechanism, as well as societies that provided captives for the Atlantic slave trade. Either in the United States, Brazil, France, England and African countries such as the Republic of Benin or Ghana, starting in the 1990s, the period inaugurated with the end of the Cold War, initiatives memorializing the Atlantic slave trade gradually emerged. In great part, commemoration activities that were developed around heritage sites like the African Burial Ground in New York City (United States) and the Valongo Wharf in Rio de Janeiro (Brazil), now listed in the UNESCO World Heritage list, responded to the calls of black social actors who demanded to make the past of slavery visible in the public space.² These initiatives, although only carrying a symbolic dimension, have encouraged debates about the slave-trading past of the two countries. The rise of these two sites exposed the annihilation of black populations whose history remained largely untold in the public space of the two cities. The process of unearthing these sites brought to light one more time, the persistence of racism that in the two countries operates in a variety of forms, but especially through disparities that maintain the populations of African descent socially and economically excluded. In this paper, reparation and healing are conceived as perpetual processes that can never fully achieved. Inspired by the work of Paul Ricoeur, I establish a connection between history, memory, and healing. I suggest that through the recovery of these sites and through public demands for financial and material reparations for slavery, very often materialized through the passing of legislation, black communities are promoting healing not as a religious process of sort but rather as a process of growing racial consciousness.³ Based on my previous works and using examples from the United States and Brazil, this article discusses how a growing knowledge about the history of slavery and the implementation of reparation initiatives can contribute to heal the wounds of past human atrocities, not through passive acceptance of this past, but rather by instigating awareness and promoting the fight against racial injustice.⁴ Yet, despite the healing potential offered by

¹ Emory University, "Slave Voyages: Explore the Dispersal of Enslaved Africans Across the Atlantic World: Transatlantic Slave Trade Database," 2019, accessed March 4, 2021, www.slavevoyages.org

² UNESCO World Heritage Centre, "Valongo Wharf Archaeological Site," 2021, accessed March 5, 2021, <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1548/>

³ Paul Ricoeur, *History, Memory, Forgetting* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 79.

⁴ Ana Lucia Araujo, *Reparations for Slavery: A Transnational and Comparative History* (London, New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017); *Shadows of the Slave Past: Memory, Heritage, and Slavery* (New York: Routledge, 2014); *Public Memory of Slavery: Victims and Perpetrators in the South Atlantic* (Amherst: Cambria Press, 2010).

demands of reparations through the denunciation of present-day racism and the construction of markers recognizing how enslaved men, women, and children contributed to the construction of the Americas, I also argue that in a variety of contexts, public debates about past atrocities can be instrumentalized by groups carrying specific political agendas. This dynamic, that also creates division, remains challenging the premise of healing potential of reparations debates.

Symbolic and Financial Reparations

Over the twentieth century and during the two first decades of the twenty-first century, black men, women, and children who have been historically identified as descendants of enslaved people have continued to struggle to occupy the public spaces of cities built with slave labor. Maintaining this presence has always been a difficult challenge. In countries like Brazil, the state and its institutions, such as the courts of justice and the police, have criminalized the participation of Afro-Brazilians in carnivals, samba parties, capoeira circles, and African-based religious ceremonies. Many decades after its end, the violence of slavery still marks many cities in the Americas. In other words, there is a connection between the demands to memorialize slavery in the public space and the persistence of racism as one of the expressions of white supremacy, which, according to philosopher Charles Mills, is as an ideology, a “power structure of formal or informal rule, socioeconomic privilege, and norms for the differential distribution, of material wealth and opportunities, benefits, and burdens, rights and duties.”⁵

The notion of reparation addresses the idea of making amendments for past wrongdoings.⁶ In the first half of the twentieth century, the idea of reparation emerged in international law and in the human rights field to conceptualize the redress of physical, material, or moral damage inflicted on an individual, a group of people, and even an entire country. In customary international law, reparation has been associated with actions designed to indemnify nations for wartime damages.⁷ Reparations carry a moral or symbolic dimension, usually consisting of apologies and measures to help those who were harmed. Reparations can also encompass a financial and material scope.⁸ In other words, the victim of past wrongs also obtains money or other possessions, such as land, as compensation for the misconduct inflicted. But ultimately, reparation can carry only a symbolic component, notably through recognition of the harm inflicted, apologies, and symbolic measures that can include the construction of a monument or a memorial, the creation of plaques, the renaming of buildings in recognition of the victims of wrongdoing.⁹ In the last three decades, symbolic reparations to past atrocities have dominated in the international context. witnessed a wave of apologies and the creation of commemorative dates, monuments, memorials, and museum exhibitions for past human atrocities, starting with the Holocaust, the Apartheid, the Rwanda genocide initiatives that can be conceived as symbolic reparations. The social actors making these demands either individually or organized in associations and other groups often employed the term reparations, and

⁵ Charles Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 3.

⁶ Alfred L. Brophy, *Reparations: Pro & Con* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 11.

⁷ Richard Falk, “Reparations, International Law, and Global Justice: A New Frontier,” in *The Handbook of Reparations*, ed. Pablo De Greiff (New York: Oxford University Press), 481; Araujo, *Reparations for Slavery*, 128–129.

⁸ Araujo, *Reparations for Slavery*, 2.

⁹ *ibid.*

occasionally referred to financial and material reparations. Still, scholarly works discussing memory, slavery, and reparations would refer to the history of reparations as having emerged in the 1990s, when a group of African intellectuals, politicians, and artists created a group demanding reparations for the Atlantic slave trade and colonization or as having emerged in 2001 the United Nations World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia, and Related Intolerance held in Durban in 2001 recognized slavery and the Atlantic slave trade as crimes against humanity, and advanced the debates on the issues of reparations.¹⁰

Clearly the idea that the demands of reparations were so recent was intriguing. Indeed, a closer examination of the history of slavery and the period that followed emancipation in the Americas shows that demands of reparations for slavery and the Atlantic slave trade have a very long history. Starting in the eighteenth century, enslaved and freed individuals started conceptualizing the idea of reparations in correspondence, pamphlets, public speeches, slave narratives, and judicial claims, written in English, French, Spanish, Dutch, and Portuguese.¹¹ In different periods, despite the legality of slavery, enslaved and former slaves showed how conscious they were of having been victims of wrongdoing. In other words, they were aware they provided unpaid labor to their owners contributing to their wealth. Moreover, as the internal slave trade continued to be active in countries like the United States, Brazil, and Cuba, many free individuals were also unlawfully enslaved and sometimes beyond national borders. Drawing from this consciousness, the pioneers who addressed the first demands of reparations to governments and former slave owners clearly asserted that not only had to be freed, but that they were owed financial and material restitutions.¹²

First Demands of Reparations for Slavery

During the era of gradual abolition, a small number of former slaves demanded that either the government or their old masters to provide them with pensions or some kind of financial reparations. The American Revolutionary War fueled antislavery discourses. By the late eighteenth century, in the colonies of the North, an early abolitionist movement emerged. In this context enslaved men and women actively petitioned their masters to obtain freedom and in some cases rewards for past services, requests that can be conceived as pioneer demands of reparations for slavery.¹³ Inspired by the Enlightenment ideals of liberty and equality, the revolutionary movement contributed to challenge the existence and the morality of slavery, which at least in theory was opposed to republican values.¹⁴

In this context, one of the first demand of reparations for slavery was formulated by an

¹⁰ Among these works is, Rhoda E. Howard-Hassmann and Anthony P. Lombardo. *Reparations to Africa* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania University Press, 2008).

¹¹ Araujo, *Reparations for Slavery*, 83–118.

¹² Araujo, *Reparations for Slavery*, 49–51.

¹³ Manisha Sinha, *The Slave's Cause: A History of Abolition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 41–44; Roy E. Finkenbine, "Belinda's Petition: Reparations for Slavery in Revolutionary Massachusetts," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 64, no. 1 (2007): 100.

¹⁴ Joanne Pope-Melish, *Disowning Slavery: Gradual Emancipation and "Race" in New England, 1780–1860* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 56.

elderly freedwoman who petitioned the legislature of Massachusetts.¹⁵ Belinda Sutton is the first known case of an African-born woman who demanded pensions as reparations for slavery. Owned by the wealthy Isaac Royall Jr. of Massachusetts. Royall Jr. left Massachusetts during the American Revolutionary War and in his will, he instructed his grandson to pay Belinda 30 pounds for three years. After his death in 1781, one assumes that Sutton was paid the sum indicated in the will, but in 1783 when the payments stopped, Belinda petitioned the Massachusetts legislature requesting a pension as reparations for the unpaid work she provided to the Royalls. Her petition, certainly written by her attorney, told her story. According to the narrative, she was born in a West African village where she was captured before the age of twelve years and sold into slavery. Her actual place of birth is uncertain. The petition's account refers to River Volta, which could suggest a location in the interior of the Gold Coast, but she also mentions the Orisha. This reference suggests that her ethnicity may have been Yoruba and that she was born either in the Bight of Benin or perhaps in the Bight of Biafra.¹⁶ Arrived in the Caribbean, Belinda became the slave of the wealthy Isaac Royall, who was born in Maine and by the age of twenty-eight years old settled in Antigua, where he established a sugarcane plantation.

In 1737, Royall moved to North America with his family. He brought with him twenty-seven slaves. Settled in Massachusetts, he acquired a farm in Medford.¹⁷ After his death two years later, his son Isaac Royall Junior inherited his assets, including a large estate with a mansion and twenty slaves, becoming one of the richest men in the colony. Among these slaves was Belinda. Baptism records of August 14, 1768, reveal that she had two children, a son named Joseph, and a daughter, named Prine.¹⁸ In 1775, during the American Revolutionary War, because of his strong connections with the Loyalists, Royall Junior was forced to escape to Nova Scotia and then to England, leaving behind his business, real estate, and enslaved property, including Belinda. In his will of May 26, 1778, Royall Junior instructed his grandson and executor William Pepperel to pay Belinda "for three years, £30."¹⁹ He also bequeathed Harvard University with land to endow a professorship of law, physics, or anatomy. Eventually the Ivy League university utilized the funds to create a professorship of law that marked the foundation of Harvard Law School.²⁰

¹⁵ On Belinda's case, see Finkenbine, *Belinda's Petition*, and Araujo, *Reparations for Slavery*, 49-51.

¹⁶ Harvard College, "Petition of Belinda an African, to the Honourable Senate and House of Representatives in General Court Assembled, February 14, 1783," Digital Archive of Massachusetts Anti-Slavery and Anti-Segregation Petitions, Massachusetts Archives, Boston, MA, v. 239—Revolution Resolves, 1783, SCI/ series 45X, 239, fl. 12.

¹⁷ Royall House & Slave Quarters, located in Medford, MA, is a National Historic Landmark and is open to public visitation. See Royall House and Slave Quarters, "Welcome to the Royall House and Slave Quarters", 2021, accessed March 5, 2021, <http://www.royallhouse.org>

¹⁸ Medford (Massachusetts), *Vital Records of Medford, Massachusetts, to the Year 1850* (Boston, MA: New England Historic Genealogical Society, 1907), 173, accessed March 5, 2021, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/coo1.ark:/13960/t02z1t227>.

¹⁹ Harvard University, "Hand-copied Will of Isaac Royall, Jr., May 26, 1778." Corporation: Records of gifts and donations, 1643–1955, UAI 15.400, Box 4, vol. 1, HOLLIS 1708738, accessed through Harvard Law School, "Exhibit Addenda: We Must Remember," 2021, accessed March 5, 2021, https://exhibits.law.harvard.edu/we-must-remember?admin_panel=1#Will. See *Royall House & Slave Quarters*, "Belinda Sutton and her Petitions," 2021, accessed March 5, 2021, <http://www.royallhouse.org/slavery/belinda-sutton-and-her-petitions/>.

²⁰ For the section of the will bequeathing land to Harvard University, see Charles Warren, *History of the Harvard Law School and of Early Legal Conditions in America* (New York, Lewis Publishing Company, 1908), vol. 1, 281–282.

In 1778, the state of Massachusetts confiscated Royall Junior's properties. Several of his bondspeople were manumitted, including Belinda. Soon after she was emancipated, at approximately sixty-five years of age, she moved to Boston where she lived in poverty. After Royall Junior's death in 1781, it is likely that Belinda received the amount determined in his will. But three years later, as expected, the payments stopped. Thus, on February 14, 1783, Belinda petitioned the Massachusetts legislature for the first time. She requested a pension as reparations for the unpaid work she provided to the Royalls. Although certainly written by her attorney, the petition emphasized how Belinda had contributed to the wealth of her deceased former owner.²¹

The legislature accepted her request, and Belinda obtained an annual pension of £15 12s. extracted from the revenues generated by Royall's estate.²² Obviously the petition's successful outcome can be explained because her late owner had already determined in his will to pay her a pension for three years. In addition, Belinda's successful case must have been favored by the fact that Royall Junior was a Loyalist.²³ Already in the eighteenth century, the political context deeply oriented not only the demands of reparations for slavery but also the responses obtained by the petitioners. Belinda's petition had an impact in the public sphere. The Quakers widely disseminated Sutton's story. In 1783, the antislavery newspaper the *New Jersey Gazette* in the United States, as well as British newspapers and magazines published transcriptions of her first petition.²⁴ Although not advocating reparations to former slaves as a policy worth pursuing, upon freeing their slaves many Quakers provided them with financial restitutions.²⁵

However, after the first year, the estate suspended the payments.²⁶ In 1785, Belinda submitted a second petition to continue the payments authorized two years earlier. In 1787, she again petitioned the legislature and obtained the pension for only one year.²⁷ In 1788, she submitted another petition. Using for the first time her widow's last name (Sutton), she requested an annual pension of \$52.²⁸ Then when Royall's estate refused to pay the pension, on February 25, 1793, she once again petitioned the government, who determined that the payments should continue.²⁹ Up to this date, this is the last known petition submitted by Belinda Sutton, who may have died in the 1790s. Although only partially successful, Sutton was the first known successful case of individual reparations awarded to a former enslaved person.

²¹ Harvard College, *Petition of Belinda*, ff. 2–13.

²² *Ibid.* fl. 14v. See also Finkenbine, *Belinda's Petition*, 102.

²³ Finkenbine, *Belinda's Petition* 95.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 102–103.

²⁵ Sinha, *The Slave's Cause*, 66.

²⁶ Harvard College, "Belinda Royall," Digital Archive of Massachusetts Anti-Slavery and Anti-Segregation Petitions, Massachusetts Archives, Boston, MA, House Unpassed Legislation 1785, Docket 1707, SC1/series 230.

²⁷ Harvard College, "Resolve in the Memorial of Belinda an African, granted, November 23, 1787," Digital Archive of Massachusetts Anti-Slavery and Anti-Segregation Petitions, Massachusetts Archives, Boston, MA, Passed Resolves, Resolves 1787, c. 142, SC1/series 228, petition 1.

²⁸ Harvard College, "Petition of Belinda Sutton," Digital Archive of Massachusetts Anti-Slavery and Anti-Segregation Petitions, Massachusetts Archives, Boston, MA, Council; Council Files March 13, 1788, GC3/series 378.

²⁹ Harvard College, "Petition of Belinda Royall for a continuation of the bounty of I. Royall," Digital Archive of Massachusetts Anti-Slavery and Anti-Segregation Petitions, Massachusetts Archives, Boston, MA, Senate Unpassed Legislation 1795, Docket 2007, SC1/series 231, February 25, 1795, fl. 1.

Between 1804 and 1888, all societies in the Americas abolished slavery, but its demise was a lengthy and gradual process. From Cuba to Brazil, public debates among abolitionists and proslavery groups reveal many common features. In these societies, on the one hand, slaveholding elites emphasized that slavery and the slave trade were legal activities and that property rights should prevail above all rights. But since the emergence of the abolitionist movement, although some antislavery activists occasionally made calls for reparations to former slaves and their descendants (through land redistribution, wages, and education), what prevailed in these public debates were how governments would indemnify slave owners for property loss.

On the other hand, abolitionists also utilized legal arguments to denounce that thousands of enslaved persons were imported to the Americas illegally, and that keeping these Africans and their descendants in bondage was unlawful. This was particularly true in Brazil. Moreover, as the internal slave trade continued active until the abolition of slavery in countries like the United States, Brazil, and Cuba, many free individuals were also unlawfully enslaved even beyond national borders.

In the United States, three cases can be highlighted. In 1841, Solomon Northup, a free African American was kidnapped and enslaved. His case became famous because of the narrative *12 Years a Slave*, adapted to the screen by Steve McQueen in 2013. After Northup was eventually freed, with the support of a number of abolitionists, several petitions were submitted requesting the US Congress to pay him reparations for his illegal enslavement. Despite these calls, the US Congress did not hear the petitions requesting financial reparations to Northup. Although timidly, Northup's case encouraged US abolitionists to defend financial reparations to former slaves in several occasions before the beginning of the Civil War. Likewise, in 1848, the case of John Lytle also gained public attention. Lytle was born free in Philadelphia approximately in 1817.³⁰ He worked on board of the ship *Jupiter* that sailed the Atlantic Ocean. After a shipwreck, he ended up in Sierra Leone. By 1837, slave merchants had sold him and transported him to Cuba, where for eleven years he was maintained under slavery in a plantation. In 1848, Lytle denounced his unlawful enslavement to journalist John L. O'Sullivan, who was visiting the island. Consequently, the Consul of the United States in Havana, Robert B. Campbell, supported Lytle's demand for freedom. In addition to be freed, the Cuban government paid Lytle as reparations for the eleven years he was maintained in slavery. Liberated, he returned to the United States and joined the abolitionist cause in New York City.³¹ Similarly, Henrietta Wood, a freedwoman unlawfully enslaved in Ohio, sued her kidnapper and obtained restitution in 1870.³² The outcome of these two incidents are among the few cases of reparations to individuals illegally enslaved. Unfortunately, many other men and women unlawfully enslaved had not the same fate.

Ultimately, gradual end of slavery in the Americas during the long nineteenth century was planned to protect the interests of slaveholders and planters. One of the most tragic examples of this trend is Haiti that in 1804 ended French colonial rule by becoming independent and

³⁰ According to other sources consulted by Gerald Horne, Lytle was born in Charleston, South Carolina and sold into slavery when he was still a child. See Gerald Horne, *Race to Revolution: The US and Cuba During Slavery and Jim Crow* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2014), 277, n4.

³¹ Dale T. Graden, *Disease, Resistance, and Lies: The Demise of the Transatlantic Slave Trade to Brazil and Cuba* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana University Press, 2014), 174–176.

³² On Wood's story see W. Caleb McDaniel, *Sweet Taste of Liberty: A True Story of Slavery and Restitution in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).

abolishing slavery. In 1825, the new black nation agreed to pay to France 150 million francs in five installments in order to the disbursement of indemnities to former colonists. The calculation of this amount was based on the annual revenues obtained by Saint-Domingue's planters from sugar, coffee, cotton, indigo, and other commodities during the colonial period, and also included the value of the urban properties they lost in 1789.³³ Although not included in the initial calculations, historians agree that slave property was considered in the evaluation and the distribution of the indemnity to the French planters and slaveholders.³⁴

In Brazil, where the abolitionist movement emerged late in the 1870s, there existed another layer of problem. The slave trade from Africa was banned in 1831, but not fully enforced. As a result, just between 1831 and 1850, nearly a million enslaved Africans entered Brazilian ports, this number alone is almost three times the number of enslaved Africans that were brought to the United States. As a result, most of these men, women, and children and their descendants were kept illegally enslaved until 1888, when slavery was abolished in Brazil. Brazilian black abolitionists were conscious of these crimes. During the 1870s and the 1880s, they were among the few activists defending reparations to former slaves. In 1883, for example, black abolitionist Luiz Gama calculated the amount due in salaries to slaves in Brazil to 1,5 million slaves as 135 *contos de réis* which in today's currency would correspond to 50 billion dollars.³⁵

To different degrees slave owners received at least some kind of monetary compensation in the British Caribbean, in Washington DC, the Dutch Caribbean, the French Caribbean, and even in Brazil during the process of gradual abolition. Likewise, even after slavery ended, either in the British Caribbean or in Cuba, the creation of apprenticeship systems indirectly rewarded many former slave owners who kept freedpeople under their control by paying them symbolic wages. The debates on reparations during the period of emancipation shed light on how a variety of social actors conceived property rights and how they envisioned the future of the freed populations in the public sphere.³⁶

In the United States, the period that followed emancipation known as Reconstruction brought hopes of land redistribution to freedpeople and access to full citizenship, but these projects ended up failing as well. With the premature end of Reconstruction, the prospects of obtaining land and full citizenship were replaced with disenfranchisement and increasing racial hatred. This context led former enslaved individuals to gather and collectively request pensions as financial reparations. During the 1890s, these freedmen and freedwomen created associations to petition the government of the United States to pass Bills providing them with pensions for the time they were enslaved. The Bills demanding pensions to ex-slaves generated great mobilization and debates, but never passed. Moreover, federal authorities persecuted the

³³ Outre-mers, "L'ordonnance de Charles X du 17 avril 1825," *Outre-mers* 90, nos. 340–341 (2003): 249.

³⁴ Frédérique Beauvois, "Monnayer l'incalculable? L'indemnité de Saint-Domingue, entre approximations et bricolage," *Revue historique*, no. 655 (2010): 613–614; Anne Ulentin, "Garantir leur avenir: Les gens de couleur libres de Saint-Domingue et l'indemnité de l'indépendance de 1825," *Bulletin de la Société d'Histoire de la Guadeloupe*, no. 173 (2016): 70.

³⁵ Confederação Abolicionista, "Abolição imediata e sem indemnisação," Pamphleto no. 1 (Rio de Janeiro: Typ. Central, de Evaristo R. da Costa, 1883), 10.

³⁶ On the debates among abolitionists associated with property rights, see Sinha, *The Slave's Cause*, 65–96, and Araujo, *Reparations for Slavery*, 45–82.

leaders of one association who requested its members to pay a small fee to join the organization, by accusing them of using the postal service to defraud freedpeople. One of its greatest leaders, the freedwoman Callie House spent one year in prison. Ultimately, the members of the movement never achieved their goal.³⁷

In the second half of the twentieth century, freedpeople were no longer alive to fight for reparations, but the children and grandchildren of enslaved persons continued calling for reparations. In the period that followed the end of the Second World War, Jewish survivors of the Holocaust obtained restitution.³⁸ This context brought new hopes to groups and individuals fighting for reparations for slavery. Although constantly associated with Communist activity, several groups advocating reparations surfaced in the period of the Cold War.³⁹ In the 1960s, during the Black Power Era, the calls for reparations gained new blood with the rise of several organizations such as the Reparations Committee for the Descendants of American Slaves, led by Audley Eloise Moore (Queen Audley Moore), the Republic of New Africa, and the Black Manifesto authored and disseminated by James Forman and demanding financial reparations to churches and synagogues in the United States. These leaders and organizations conceived symbolic and material reparations as a path to redress past wrongdoings and remedy racial inequalities. Yet, despite their different approaches, these groups conceived reparations as just a first step towards a long process of healing the harms caused by slavery and racism. Their demands, similar to those of the end of the nineteenth century, were met with such hostility by public authorities.⁴⁰

During the early period of her activism, Audley Eloise Moore, for example, who became a prominent, black nationalist, Pan-Africanist, and civil rights activist, was greatly inspired by Marcus Garvey, who under the Jim Crow era, advocated that the only path for remedying the harms inflicted during slavery and the continued exclusion of populations of African descent was return to Africa.⁴¹ Moore, however, also considered the potential of symbolic reparations. In 1962, she saw the approach of the one hundredth anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 as an occasion to discuss the legacies of slavery.⁴² She believed that blacks in the United States should learn about the history of slavery and African history. To this end, she created the Reparations Committee for the Descendants of American Slaves (RCDAS) that filed a claim demanding reparations for slavery in a court of the state of California.⁴³ She also authored a

³⁷ To know more about the ex-slave pension movement see Mary Frances Berry, *My Face is Black is True: Callie House and the Struggle for Ex-Slave Reparations* (New York: Vintage, 2006), and Araujo, *Reparations for Slavery*, 99–108.

³⁸ On the Jewish case, see Ronald W. Zweig, *German Reparations and the Jewish World: A History of the Claims Conference* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

³⁹ Numerous activists and organizations associated with the fight for reparations were persecuted for alleged involvement with the Communist activity. See Araujo, *Reparations for Slavery*.

⁴⁰ Araujo, *Reparations for Slavery*, 121–152.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 137.

⁴² Harvard University, “Black Women Oral History Project, Interview with Audley (Queen Mother) Moore”, June 6 and 8, 1978, OH-31, 39. Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America

⁴³ Audley M. Moore, *Why Reparations? Reparations is the Battle Cry for the Economic and Social Freedom of More than 25 Million Descendants of American Slaves* (n.p, 1963), 7; Rhonda Y. Williams, *Concrete Demands: The Search for Black Power in the 20th Century* (New York: Routledge, 2015); Ashley Farmer, “Reframing African American

booklet underscoring that slaves provided dozens of years of unpaid work to slave owners. She emphasized the horrors of lynching, segregation, disfranchisement, raping, and police brutality. Even though the litigation was not successful, Moore continued building other avenues to fight for reparations. She contended that the unpaid work provided by enslaved Africans and their descendants led to the wealth accumulation that made the United States “the richest country in the world.”⁴⁴ Moore defended that all blacks in the United States and their descendants should receive financial reparations and each individual and group would decide what to do with the funds. During the 1960s, Moore continued participating in organizations defending reparations for slavery. In 1968, she joined the Republic of New Africa and later supported the efforts of the National Coalition of Blacks for Reparations in America (N’COBRA) created in 1987.⁴⁵

As the end of the Cold War approached, the government of the United States paid financial restitutions to the Japanese Americans who were unlawfully interned in camps during the Second World War.⁴⁶ With this precedent, the end of the 1980s and the 1990s provided a new ground for a renewed wave of demands of reparations for slavery. In the last two decades of the twentieth century, Brazil, Colombia, and Ecuador enacted new constitutions recognizing the right of land ownership for their black communities.⁴⁷ In Brazil, during the 1990s, a group of black students organized petitions demanding reparations. In the United States, new organizations combining activism and litigation requesting reparations emerged as well. The echoes of this movement were also heard in Africa, where the Group of Eminent Persons gathering intellectuals, artists, politicians, and activists issued a document calling for reparations for the Atlantic slave trade and colonialism.⁴⁸

Recent Calls for Reparations

In the last twenty years, demands of redress acquired a new strength. The United Nations World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia, and Related Intolerance held in Durban in 2001 recognized slavery and the Atlantic slave trade as crimes against humanity. As recently as March 2014, the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) accepted a plan focusing on reparations for slavery and native genocide. The program consists of ten points comprising material, financial, and symbolic demands addressed to various European governments including the United Kingdom, Spain, France, Netherlands, Denmark, Sweden, and Portugal.⁴⁹ CARICOM’s call for reparations received great attention from the media in European and Caribbean

Women’s Grassroots Organizing: Audley Moore and the Universal Association of Ethiopian Women, 1957–1963,” *The Journal of African American History* 101, no. 1–2 (2016): 88.

⁴⁴ Audley M. Moore, *Why Reparations?* 5.

⁴⁵ Araujo, *Reparations for Slavery*, 159–161.

⁴⁶ Congress.Gov, “H.R. 442- Civil Liberties Act of 1987,” accessed March 5, 2021, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/100th-congress/house-bill/442>

⁴⁷ Araujo, *Reparations for Slavery*, 154–158.

⁴⁸ Rhoda E. Howard-Hassmann, “Reparations to Africa and the Group of Eminent Persons,” *Cahiers d’études africaines* 44, 173–174 (2004): 81–97.

⁴⁹ See CARICOM Reparations Commission, “Ten Point Action Plan,” accessed March 5, 2021, <http://caricomreparations.org/>. See also Ed Pilkington, “Caribbean Nations Prepare Demand For Slavery Reparations,” *The Guardian*, March 9, 2014, accessed March 5, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/mar/09/caribbean-nations-demand-slavery-reparations>

countries, as well as from newspapers in the United States and Brazil. Few weeks after its announcement, the debate on reparations for African Americans reemerged in the *New York Times*. Weeks later the conversation about reparations reemerged in an article by the acclaimed journalist and writer Ta-Nehisi Coates published in the magazine *The Atlantic*, as well as in a series of essays published in the *New York Times*.⁵⁰

Other public debates regarding symbolic reparations recently surfaced as well. In 2015, a wave of demonstrations, in great part associated with the activities of Black Lives Matter, emerged in universities all over the United States. In addition to protest racism and racial exclusion, students of color also demanded the removal of markers associated with slavery which are still displayed on several buildings on university campuses. These demands were associated with previous and ongoing debates concerning the connections between white elite universities and slavery. As a result, several universities created study groups and produced reports examining the ties of these institutions with slavery. In 2015, an organization titled “Universities Studying Slavery” (USS) was created. The organization gathers Brown University, Emory University, Georgetown University, University of North Carolina, University of Mississippi, Hollins University, Clemson University, University of South Carolina, the College of William and Mary, University of Virginia, and other universities in the state of Virginia, several of which created special commissions to study their ties with slavery and produced reports resulting from these investigations. Other universities such as Harvard University, Princeton University, Yale University, Columbia University, and University of Maryland also recognized their ties with slavery.

Georgetown University, a Jesuit institution of higher education in Washington, DC was among these universities that started coming to terms with its own past of slave ownership. Unlike other institutions, Georgetown’s relation to slavery carries particular features. The Jesuits are members of the Society of Jesus, an order of the Roman Catholic Church that is the largest slave-owning institution of the Americas. As in other parts of the American continent, the Jesuits also owned plantations and slaves in the United States.⁵¹ In 1838, for several reasons but especially with the aim of paying a major debt contracted by Georgetown University, the Jesuits sold 272 enslaved men, women, and children to cotton and sugar plantations in Louisiana. The sale generated approximately \$3.3 million in today’s currency. As further research established many descendants of the enslaved men, women, and children sold by the Jesuits to save the university, the President of Georgetown University, John J. DeGioia called the formation of a Working Group on Slavery, Memory, and Reconciliation. The group’s mission was to examine in detail the ties of the university with slavery.⁵² Among the recommendations made by Georgetown’s Working Group was the suggestion “that the University offer a formal, public apology for its historical relationship with slavery.” Although stating that an “apology is a

⁵⁰ See Ta-Nehisi Coates, “The Case for Reparations,” *The Atlantic*, June 2014, 51–68, accessed March 5, 2021, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/06/the-case-for-reparations/361631/>; and The New York Times Company, “Are Reparations Due to African Americans?” *The New York Times*, June 8, 2014, accessed March 4, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2014/06/08/are-reparations-due-to-african-americans>

⁵¹ Thomas Richard Murphy, “‘Negroes of Ours’: Jesuit Slaveholding in Maryland, 1717–1838” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Connecticut, 1998).

⁵² Georgetown University, “Report of the Working Group on Slavery, Memory, and Reconciliation to the President of Georgetown University, Washington, DC,” Summer 2016, xi.

precondition for reconciliation” the document omits any reference to reparations to the descendants of the slaves sold in 1838.⁵³

Major newspapers around the world reported in several languages the main results revealed in the Working Group’s report announced by Georgetown’s President DeGioia on September 1, 2016. The formal apology is among the measures to be taken by Georgetown’s administration to come into terms with its slave past. Additional measures listed in the report include the creation of an institute to study slavery and the construction of a memorial to honor the slaves sold in 1838. The report also recommended the renaming of two university buildings after an African American educator and an African American enslaved man. Moreover, the university’s president decided to offer preferential admission to all descendants of slaves who worked for Georgetown. Despite the media’s positive reaction to the announced measures, it became clear that none of these initiatives included financial and material reparations to the descendants of slaves. One week after the DeGioia’s announcement, the GU272 Foundation, a group consisting of various descendants of the slaves sold in 1838, emphasized that the announced measures did not meaningfully contribute to the elaboration of the Working Group’s recommendations. According to Karran Harper-Royal, one member of the group, the descendants of slaves sold in Louisiana were disadvantaged in comparison to white children.⁵⁴ Consequently, they proposed that Georgetown University helps to raise \$1 billion to create a foundation to support the education of the descendants of those sold in 1838.⁵⁵ Yet, the university did not respond to these demands. In April 2017, during a religious ceremony held at Georgetown University, Timothy Kesicki, the president of the Jesuit Conference of Canada, offered an apology to the descendants of the men, women, and children sold in 1838. The university also renamed two of its buildings who were christened after presidents who led the sale of 1838, to honor Isaac Hawkins, an enslaved man sold in 1838, and Anne Marie Becraft, a nineteenth-century black educator. In 2019, as the university administration did not take action, in a nonbinding referendum, Georgetown University undergraduate students voted to create a fee to contribute to a fund to be made available to the descendant community.⁵⁶ This early outcome suggests that beyond symbolic measures as those adopted by Georgetown University, black social actors and organizations are fighting for concrete measures that will provide them with financial and material resources.

Meanwhile, reparations also continued to be debated in the international arena. On September 26, 2016, the UN Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent, which

⁵³ Ibid., 28.

⁵⁴ Terry L. Jones, “Georgetown Slave Descendants Ask University for Help Raising \$1 Billion For Foundation,” *The Advocate*, September 10, 2016, accessed March 4, 2021, http://www.theadvocate.com/baton_rouge/news/communities/westside/article_814c2770-76aa-11e6-a126-db8d1b99098e.html

⁵⁵ Susan Svruga, “Descendants of Slaves Sold to Benefit Georgetown Call for a \$1 Billion Foundation for Reconciliation,” *Washington Post*, September 9, 2016, accessed March 4, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/grade-point/wp/2016/09/08/descendants-of-slaves-sold-by-georgetown-call-for-a-1-billion-foundation-for-reconciliation/>

⁵⁶ Susan Svruga, “Georgetown Students Vote in Favor of Reparations for Enslaved People,” *Washington Post*, April 12, 2019, accessed March 4, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2019/04/12/georgetown-students-vote-favor-reparations-slaves/?arc404=true>

reports to the Higher Commissioner on Human Rights, presented the report of its mission to the United States, during the meeting of the UN Human Rights Council. The conclusions advanced by the committee composed of Ricardo A. Sunga III (Chairperson, Philippines), Mireille Fanon-Mendes-France (France), Sabelo Gumedze (South Africa), Michal Balcerzak (Poland), and Ahmed Reid (Jamaica) underscored the living legacies of slavery and racial segregation in the United States. Similar to the policies proposed by the Movement for Black Lives, in its conclusions, the Working Group report expressed several concerns. In particular, it stated that “the legacy of colonial history, enslavement, racial subordination and segregation, racial terrorism and racial inequality in the United States remains a serious challenge, as there has been no real commitment to reparations and to truth and reconciliation for people of African descent.”⁵⁷ In its recommendations, the report advises the erection of “monuments, memorials, and markers” to “facilitate the public dialogue.” It also stresses the need to acknowledge the “transatlantic trade in Africans, enslavement, colonization and colonialism,” as crimes against humanity, and address past and present atrocities with reparatory justice.⁵⁸ Moreover, the Working Group encouraged the United States Congress to pass the bill H.R.40 (“Commission to Study Reparation Proposals for African Americans Act” and to “consider applying analogous elements contained in the Caribbean Community’s Ten-Point Action Plan on Reparations.”⁵⁹ As expected, the US government had not responded to these recommendations.

The ways the demands of reparations for slavery and the slave trade have been historically addressed are connected to the particularities of the slave systems that prevailed in the societies where they emerged. These requests are linked to the processes that culminated with the abolition of slavery in several countries in the Americas and are also associated with the trails of development taken by these societies during the post-abolition period. Calls for reparations are also related to how former slaves and their descendants achieved or at least attempted to achieve citizenship in former slave societies. They are also associated with the ways black activists responded to the legal systems that imposed racial segregation and to the ruling ideologies that promoted racism and reinforced white supremacy.

In various periods of history, at least in the United States, reparations activism were radical movements that gathered thousands of supporters. These movements were recognized as radical by the federal authorities and its leaders were persecuted and their activities criminalized. Every year demands of redress continue to be the object of lawsuits and Bills and remain present in the public sphere through popular demonstrations, especially when approaching commemorative dates associated with the abolition of slavery. Scholars can surely illuminate the problem of reparations. The analysis of primary sources can reveal how some states, companies, and universities, as well as other individuals and their descendants largely benefited from the slave trade and slave labor. Also, historical research can bring to light how the descendants of slaves remained socially, economically, and politically excluded. Still, many questions remain unsolved. To organizations and activists, which kinds of reparations are due

⁵⁷ United Nations General Assembly, *Report of the Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent on Its Mission to the United States of America*, August, 18, 2016, Article 68, 16.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, Article 91, 19.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, Article 94, 20.

(symbolic, financial, or material, or all of them) remain unclear. Most proposals do not work well for the various former slave societies at stake. Even in the recent CARICOM ten-point program symbolic reparations predominate. Also, there is no consensus on who should give reparations and who should obtain them. Certainly there are several answers to these questions. Still, these answers must take into account the historical particularities of societies demanding reparations, and this is why it is important to historicize the demands of reparations, because they have been around for more than two centuries.

In this process, social actors demanding reparations have changed over time. Initially they were enslaved persons. Next, free individuals illegally enslaved, as well as freedmen and freedwomen called for reparations. Also, abolitionists in various European and American societies formulated rhetorical demands of reparations to governments. Later on, former slaves and slaves, individually or in small groups, demanded reparations to their former owners. Finally, when freedpeople were dead, men and women claiming the identity of descendants of slaves continued demanding reparations to governments and churches, as well as to companies who insured or profited from slavery.

Today, demands of reparations go far beyond requests of amounts of cash to particular individuals and groups. There are instead a variety of groups and even nations that collectively or individually demand financial and material reparations to other groups, companies, and governments. These groups put pressure on public authorities and governments, and their actions have been heard in the public sphere. If up to this day, no concrete and broad measure has been implemented to provide reparations to populations of African descent who have been historically associated with the stigma of slavery, the continuous demands for amend these past wrongs by black social actors is a reminder of the ongoing legacies of slavery and the post-emancipation period in the Americas. Although not successful, these demands have contributed to raise awareness about the past atrocities of slavery and the Atlantic slave trade. Here, healing is not an abstract notion, it is rather a concrete process, in which by voicing their claims, historically excluded groups take their destinies in their own hands.

Ongoing Calls, Persisting Divisions

Like never before, with the emergence of the Internet, groups in the three continents involved in the Atlantic slave trade have been creating ties in order to establish possible common grounds to fight for reparations. In the United States, propelled by the CARICOM ten-point plan, recent debates on reparations have gained new force. Moreover, the commemoration of 1619 (the four hundredth anniversary of the arrival of the first documented enslaved Africans in Virginia) encouraged conversations about reparations in the public sphere. Likewise, in 2019, with the approach of the 2020 presidential elections in the United States, and the growing space occupied by social media, pronationalist individuals who identify themselves as “America’s descendants of slavery” started establishing clear distinctions among those who should and should not receive reparations on the basis of national origin, very often promoting anti-African and anti-immigrant discourses.⁶⁰ As debates continued, the US Congress held a hearing panel to discuss H.R. 40

⁶⁰ Kevin Cokley, “Descendants-of-Slavery Movement Undermines the Spirit of Black History Month,” *UT News*, February 24, 2020, accessed March 4, 2021, <https://news.utexas.edu/2020/02/24/descendants-of-slavery->

legislation in June 2019. Since then, however, official debates seem to not have made progress.

No matter what is the outcome of these recent fights for reparations, from a historical viewpoint, as far as racism and racial inequalities persist in former slave societies and societies where slavery existed, demands of reparations for slavery and the Atlantic slave trade will continue to occupy the public sphere in the next years not only in the United States but also in other countries of the Americas, Europe, and Africa. As they did in the past, these long-lasting demands offer black social actors an opportunity to make their history recognized in the public arena. In other words, claims for reparations contribute to the understanding that healing the wounds of past human atrocities mainly consists in the ability of continuing fighting to transform societies historically grounded on slavery and racism.

[movement-undermines-the-spirit-of-black-history-month/](https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/which-americans-should-get-reparations/2019/09/18/271cf744-cab1-11e9-a4f3-c081a126de70_story.html); Wesley Lowery, "Which Black Americans Should Get Reparations?," *Washington Post*, September 18, 2019, accessed March 4, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/which-americans-should-get-reparations/2019/09/18/271cf744-cab1-11e9-a4f3-c081a126de70_story.html

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