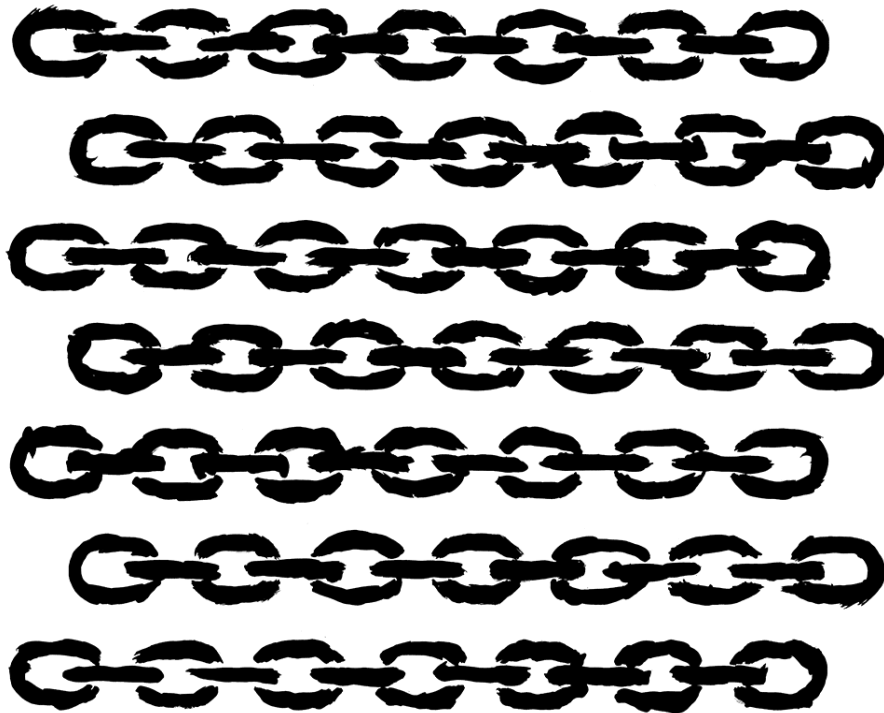


MORE THAN MONEY

THE LOGIC OF SLAVERY REPARATIONS



It's not just about payment. **It is about engaging in good faith with the descendants of enslaved people and addressing inequalities** - to make a better future possible

WORDS
Olivette Otele

ILLUSTRATIONS
Mawuena Kattah

Fri 31 Mar 2023 04.00 EDT

A

ll over North America and Europe, universities, businesses and other organisations are investigating their historical connections to slavery. Some of these institutions once owned plantations or enslaved people. Others were established or maintained through donations from enslavers or their descendants. When an institution uncovers such histories, a question arises: **what should the institution do to address the wrongs of the past, wrongs with consequences that continue to be felt today?**

This question is part of a much larger debate: what does society owe the descendants of enslaved and colonised people? How can we measure the harms caused by the slave trade, slavery and colonialism when these harms span centuries and still shape our lives? Who can decide what ought to be done to repair these harms, and who should pay?

As a historian who specialises in the legacy and memory of slavery, these questions often land in my inbox. I have sat in dozens of meetings with board members of various institutions over the past few years - including those of the Scott Trust, which owns the Guardian - discussing how they should respond after discovering a historical link to slavery.

“

Groups that advocate for reparations almost never seek only money ... The social, the political and the economic are bound together and must be addressed together, creating the possibility of a better world.

”

All these organisations wanted to publicly acknowledge that enslavement had led to a stratified society in which race and class intersect. However most of them were wary about facing demands for financial compensation, or a potential backlash from those who felt we should have moved on from slavery.

The idea of reparations is controversial, especially in countries that have failed to acknowledge that centuries of racial inequality have produced the stark social and economic inequalities of the present. Reparations start with this acknowledgement. The term “restorative justice”, which I use interchangeably with “reparations”, is **usually associated with the legal system, as a method of dealing with crime**. It prioritises repairing the harms suffered by the victim of an offence rather than punishing the perpetrator. It also seeks to understand the issues that caused the offence to happen.

When it comes to addressing the harms of slavery and colonialism, “restorative justice” is often a more **palatable** term than “reparations”. Perhaps the latter seems coldly transactional, nothing more than a transfer of cash, whereas “restorative justice” implies collaboration and healing. But whichever term they use, groups that advocate for reparations almost never seek only money. Their work is grounded in an understanding that the social, the political and the economic are bound together and must be addressed together, creating the possibility of a better world.

Calls for such reparations have grown louder since 2020. The killings of [Breonna Taylor](#), [George Floyd](#) and [Ahmaud Arbery](#) in the US, followed by [Black Lives Matter protests](#) across the world, highlighted how often people are deemed dangerous and disposable, and how often the [justice system fails them](#). Discussions about school and university curricula have revealed that certain aspects of the past are persistently obscured: both the inhumanity of colonial regimes and the longstanding and valuable contributions of minority ethnic communities.

Debates about reparations are both urgent and longstanding. Enslaved people have been demanding reparations since the 15th century, not long after European colonial enslavement began. One of the earliest recorded cases of reparations in the US (though “reparations” was not yet the term used) dates to [1783](#), when the state of Massachusetts ordered that a formerly enslaved woman, Belinda Royall, should receive a pension from the proceeds of her enslaver’s estate, in acknowledgement of her unpaid labour.

“

After the Slavery Abolition Act in 1833, British plantation owners were granted huge compensation for having their ‘property’ - enslaved people - taken from them.

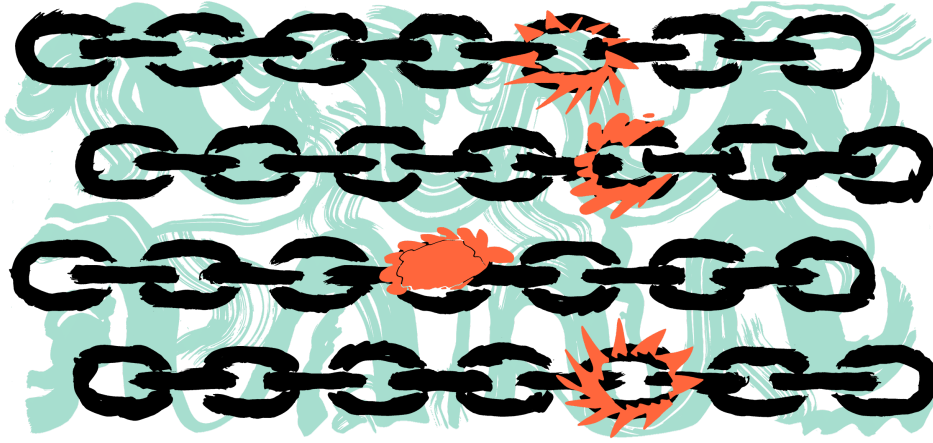
”

Ironically, in the 19th century Britain and France voted that those who needed reparations were not the formerly enslaved but the enslavers. After the [Slavery Abolition Act](#) in 1833, British plantation owners were granted huge compensation for the injury of having their “property” - enslaved people - taken from them.

At the heart of demands for reparations is the understanding that the past cannot be erased, and must not be ignored. Former colonial powers cannot undo the damage they inflicted on enslaved and colonised people, but [they can engage in good faith with the descendants of those people, and work to address the systemic inequalities that exist today.](#)

Yet 21st-century European and North American governments have resisted discussing reparations. When they do take steps to address present-day inequality and racism, they do so without explicitly connecting these problems to the legacies of slavery and empire. And so it is left to individual institutions to decide whether to investigate their histories, and what kind of reparations might be appropriate.

The efforts of these institutions, which are often beholden to shareholders, donors or alumni, are inevitably partial and constrained. However, there are reasons to be hopeful. Disorganised, insufficient and slow-paced as some of these initiatives may be, there are reasons to believe the debate will continue and intensify. There are grounds to trust in young people’s demands for a fairer society. A post-reparations society may be on its way.



MAKING THE CONNECTIONS

Greene King, which operates more than 2,500 pubs, restaurants and hotels in Britain, was founded by Benjamin Greene in 1799. He later became the owner of several plantations in the West Indies and was a vigorous supporter of slavery. In the 1830s, after the Slavery Abolition Act, he received compensation from the British government for having owned 225 enslaved people.

Almost two centuries later, in the summer of 2020, Greene King publicly acknowledged this history. The company announced a partnership with the International Slavery Museum in Liverpool; it promised to fund Black History Month initiatives, create opportunities for young people from Black and minority ethnic communities, and to develop a diversity strategy.

Its acknowledgement came the month after the murder of Floyd. On both sides of the Atlantic, demands to address centuries of racism were loud and heartfelt. But these demands were not new. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), a leading American civil rights group, has been calling for reparations from the US government since the mid-2000s. The Pan-Afrikan Reparations Coalition in Europe was established in 2001.

Some of the calls for reparations have focused on the financial industry. Many banks founded before the 19th century had close connections with the slave trade, funding plantation owners or merchants who invested in slave voyages. In 2004 a group of descendants of enslaved people filed a lawsuit against the insurance market Lloyd's of London for financing the ships that transported their ancestors to North America. Lloyd's denied the claim, and it was dismissed the following year.

“

Making clear the connections between the past and the low numbers of employees from minority ethnic backgrounds is central to the work of reparations. Without them, we can never have a full understanding of the consequences of slavery.

”

Years later, on the same day Greene King made its acknowledgement, Lloyd's publicly apologised for its role in the slave trade. It pledged to work on increasing diversity among its employees, and in 2021 appointed an archivist to research the company's involvement in slavery.

The terms "reparations" and "restorative justice" were absent from the announcements by Greene King and Lloyd's. Instead, both companies used the language of multiculturalism and diversity. Hiring more staff from Black and minority ethnic backgrounds was a priority.

Royal Bank of Scotland and Barclays have similarly recognised their links to slavery and stated their support for "diversity and inclusion". But they have done so without making any clear connection between the past and the low numbers of their employees from minority ethnic backgrounds. Making these connections is central to the work of reparations. Without them, we can never have a full understanding of the consequences of slavery.

Some institutions have not progressed much beyond simply acknowledging the past. In 2020, the National Trust released a report on its buildings' links to slavery, attracting ferocious criticism from those who continue to celebrate the British empire, or who regard the trust as an institution outside of politics.

The Bank of England, which owned enslaved people in several Caribbean plantations in the late 1700s, details this past in its current exhibition [Slavery & the Bank](#). Some of the display materials mention that descendants of enslaved people have called for reparations, but there is no suggestion that the Bank will pay reparations, or that the effects of slavery still exist today.

A better model is offered by the Rowntree Society, an educational charity. In February 2020, it decided to study the Rowntree family's connections to slavery (I served as an external consultant). A little over a year later, the society and its various trusts released a statement recognising the "lasting damage inflicted by the colonial global economy in countries where the Rowntree businesses operated". In referring to this damage as ongoing, and in declaring that history is "not closed" and that its "legacies ... continue to shape the present", the Rowntree Society departed from the approach taken by many other institutions: **it acknowledged that its actions in the past continue to cause harm in the present.**

In North America, some of the first private institutions to consider reparations were universities, hundreds of which have links to slavery. In 2003, Brown University's first Black president, Ruth J Simmons, commissioned an investigation into the institution's connections to slavery. Three years later, the report made a number of recommendations, which included memorialising the past, creating a research centre for the study of slavery and providing support - financial and otherwise - to local communities negatively affected by Brown's past. Most of these recommendations were put into practice. But in 2021, undergraduates voted that Brown should give reparations to the descendants of enslaved people affiliated with the university. Nearly two years later, the university has revealed no plans to do so.

\$100m

Amount pledged by Harvard University to carry out recommendations from its 2022 report into its links to slavery

In the past few years, many more American universities have studied their links to slavery. In April 2022, Harvard released a report representing three years of research. The university's president pledged \$100m (£80m) to carry out the report's recommendations, which included building relationships with the descendants of enslaved people who laboured within the university, or were enslaved by Harvard associates.

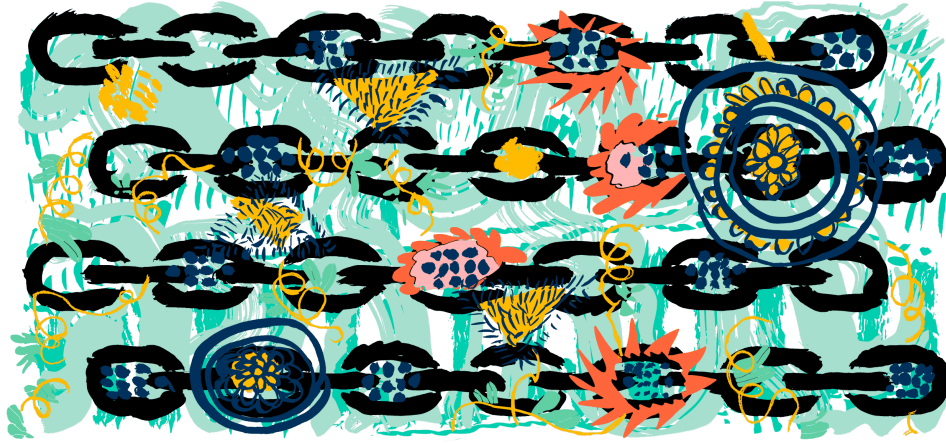
In 2019, Glasgow University became the first British university to set up a restorative justice scheme, pledging £20m to build a research centre in partnership with the University of the West Indies, for the study of public health and economic growth in the Caribbean, and the relationship between Caribbean and African countries. After Glasgow's commitment, other universities began to examine their past.

The University of Cambridge's main report into its involvement with slavery was released in September 2022. This report, for which I served on the external advisory board, is the product of rigorous research. Its recommendations are grouped into four themes: **funding further research, memorialisation, engaging with Black British communities and developing links with universities in west Africa and the Caribbean.** These recommendations are far less ambitious than Brown's or Harvard's, and the timeframe remains vague. Nevertheless, they leave open the door for further discussions, and for engagement with communities throughout Britain.

Earlier this month, following the recommendations of the University of Cambridge Legacies of Enslavement inquiry, the university's Trinity College **announced** plans to appoint an academic to work on its legacies of slavery. It also pledged to allocate £1m over five years to scholarships, including those specifically for Caribbean students. The college did not explicitly state that these initiatives were forms of reparations or part of any restorative justice plan. Nor did it mention any consultation with reparation groups in the UK or the Caribbean.

In February, the Trevelyan family, who are said to have once enslaved 1,000 people in Grenada, made a public apology. The family, who were awarded £34,000 in compensation after slavery was abolished in 1833, once owned Wallington Hall. The Northumberland country house stayed in the family for 150 years before being passed on to the National Trust. The Trevelyans announced that they planned to assign a community fund of £100,000 to the economic development of the island of Grenada. This extraordinary move raised questions about the sum allocated and how closely the family worked with other Caribbean groups such as the **Caribbean Community** (Caricom). However, the Grenada National Reparations Commission described the attempt at addressing the wrongs of the past as commendable.

This kind of engagement is absent from many institutions' efforts. Such absence, as well as the vastly different approaches taken by universities and organisations across Britain, reflect a lack of comprehension of what restorative justice requires: both an acknowledgement of continuing harm and sustained discussions with communities who have been shaped by slavery.



REGRET IS NOT EQUAL TO APOLOGY

Calls for compensation for victims of slavery began centuries ago, initiated by enslaved and formerly enslaved people themselves. In 1778, after slavery had been outlawed in the state of Vermont, Pompey Brakkee, an enslaved man, sued his “master” for refusing to free him. Towards the end of the American civil war, Gen William T Sherman ordered that freed families should receive a plot of land and the means to farm it (“40 acres and a mule”). This radical plan for land redistribution emerged from Sherman’s discussions with Black Christian ministers. The order was reversed by President Andrew Johnson months later.

In the century after the 1833 Slavery Abolition Act, European powers were less concerned with compensating formerly enslaved people than with establishing and maintaining their own empires. During the first half of the 20th century, European countries looked back on their colonial enterprises as philanthropic and “civilising”, rather than as exploitative and economically motivated. But after the second world war, as more colonies declared independence, groups across the world put pressure on European governments to address the harms they had caused.

In 2001, reparations was one of the key questions of the UN [World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance](#), held in Durban, South Africa. Even having the subject on the agenda was hugely controversial, and participating countries disagreed fiercely about the language of the final declaration, which ultimately left each to make up its own mind about whether to pursue reparations.

“

Other countries, led by Britain, refused to issue a formal apology, fearing that to do so could result in a legal obligation to pay reparations. Regret was deemed a safer response.

”

France declared slavery a crime against humanity and began a programme of memorialisation and education. Other countries, led by Britain, refused to issue a formal apology, fearing that to do so could result in a legal obligation to pay reparations. Instead, regret was deemed a safer response. In 2006, the prime minister, Tony Blair, expressed “deep sorrow” for the slave trade. His statement included a call to “rejoice at the different and better times we live in today”. These words obscured the fact that the times are still profoundly shaped by the existence of slavery.

In 2014, Caricom, which is composed of 15 member states, put forward a 10-point reparations plan. Among other demands, it called for a formal apology from European governments; a repatriation programme for people of African descent in the Caribbean wishing to return to Africa; European investment in Caribbean public health and literacy programmes, and debt cancellation. Britain, France, the Netherlands, Spain, Portugal and other former colonial powers rejected the plan.

The nearest example we have of a state undertaking reparative justice measures, and acknowledging them as such, is the Netherlands. Last December, the government apologised for the country’s role in slavery and established a fund of €200m (£170m) to raise awareness of the Netherlands’ history as a colonial power, as well as “fostering engagement” and “addressing the present-day effects of slavery”. However, the apology was seen by some descendants of enslaved people in Suriname and the Dutch Caribbean as having been sprung on them without warning and little collaboration. The Netherlands government said it would consult on future plans with descendant communities.

We cannot allow countries to leave the work of reparations to individual institutions, which will naturally have their own priorities and agendas. Not only do governments have the capacity to offer reparations on a far larger scale but, most importantly, countries, not just institutions and individuals, invested in and benefited from slavery.

Pro-slavery laws were passed in the British parliament; Britain’s wealth, like that of many European countries, derives in part from slavery and empire. Regret is not equal to apology, but when Blair expressed regret on behalf of the UK, he at least made it plain that if you live in the UK, your life has been shaped by the legacies of slavery - even if you have never been to a Greene King pub, visited a National Trust property or invested with Barclays.



GIVING UP POWER AND CONTROL

Some institutional efforts seem little more than a public relations exercise. Others simply repurpose a company's existing diversity policies. One could reasonably argue that such corporate initiatives can and should be part of a reparations strategy. But too often reparative agendas begin and end in the institutions that develop them, with little consideration for the work that must be done in society as a whole.

The wider political context also shapes institutional thinking, especially for those institutions whose funding derives partly from the government. Last year, the minister for women and equalities, Kemi Badenoch, announced a history curriculum overhaul, under which children would receive a so-called balanced account of the British empire, learning about its "benefits" as well as its horrors. Given such announcements, it is unsurprising that universities and cultural institutions produce reports that sound progressive but are not too ambitious or contentious.

“

Those who have suffered most from the brutality of slavery and colonialism should determine the restorative justice agenda.

”

Controversies over how we should remember the past, such as rows over statues as well as the school syllabus, can paradoxically distract from the inequalities and discrimination that exist in the present. Worsening income inequality, growing poverty, hunger and homelessness are, of course, experienced disproportionately by the descendants of enslaved and colonised people.

Those who have suffered most from the brutality of slavery and colonialism should determine the restorative justice agenda. This requires institutions to give up control and power - something that many are unwilling to do. Even scholarly research into communities affected by slavery can be exploitative, with few research grants going to academics from these communities.

Restorative justice, in the context of the legal system, divides participants into victims and perpetrators. Some reparations groups challenge this division, pointing out that it positions enslaved Africans and their descendants as powerless. We know that people of African descent, forcibly transported across the ocean, were instrumental in their liberation. We know that today, marginalised communities continue to share histories on their own terms, and to push for reparations. The Pan-Afrikan Stop the Maangamizi campaign has called for a parliamentary commission of inquiry for truth and reparatory justice in Britain. The Black Curriculum works to bring Black British history into schools, while in Wales an inclusive curriculum is on its way. Restorative justice is inherently a collaborative process, one that requires institutions to share some of their power.



THE BRUTAL PAST, THE BLEAK PRESENT

For too long, we have been told lies about the past. Even during decolonisation in the second half of the 20th century, colonial powers scrambled to portray themselves as benevolently granting independence after centuries of enlightened rule. But over the past few decades, new narratives have emerged. These narratives challenge the old monochromatic tales of brave conquests and civilising missions. They reveal the brutality of the past and the bleak realities of the present: continuing discrimination, inequality, trauma and violence.

“

A post-reparations society could encourage us to rethink the notion of happiness, one that is not based on instant and individual gratification but on collective achievement. It would be a society able to build a reconciled collective memory.

”

Such realities must not be ignored. Without understanding the history of slavery and colonialism, we cannot understand the extent to which societies today are shaped by systemic racism, unfair distribution of assets, inequality and violence - and how all of these have led to despair, marginalisation and disenfranchisement in parts of the population.

Restorative justice, which recognises the role of marginalised groups, is key to enabling people to lead decent and dignified lives. A post-reparations world might acknowledge the complexity of the colonial past in its entirety, including the damage caused by racial hierarchy; it would not be afraid to discuss the ways in which race and ethnicity, class, gender, religion, ableism and age intersect. A post-reparations society would focus on education and civic participation so that current and future generations can address the challenges of climate change, health inequalities, systemic racism, gender-based violence and poverty; it could encourage us to rethink the notion of happiness, one that is not based on instant and individual gratification but

on collective achievement. It would be a society able to build a reconciled collective memory.

As the populations of North America and many European countries become more diverse, and as wealth inequality continues to grow and climate change disproportionately affects the descendants of colonised people, we can expect calls for reparations to become increasingly loud.

We will also hear loud objections, from those who benefit from the status quo or who cannot imagine a different world. But it is only through confronting the past that we can reimagine our future - and it is only through reparations that this new future can take shape.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Olivette Otele is distinguished professor of the legacies and memory of slavery at Soas University of London



BRITISH SLAVERY AND REPARATIONS IN NUMBERS

3.1 million

The estimated number of enslaved Africans Britain transported to its colonies between 1640 and 1807. This accounted for 50% of all enslaved Africans kidnapped and transported to the colonies during that period. About 2.7 million are thought to have survived the gruelling journey, known as the “middle passage”, and been forcibly resettled in the Caribbean, North and South America, and elsewhere. It was the largest forced migration in human history.

1787

The Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade was founded. The movement to abolish the slave trade grew in the decades that followed, drawing widespread support across the country.

1783

A formerly enslaved woman, Belinda Royall, won one of the first recorded cases of reparations in the US in the form of a pension.

1791

Thousands of enslaved people in the French colony of Saint-Domingue (now Haiti) rose up against slavery in a revolution that was pivotal for the global abolitionist movement.

1807

Britain passed the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act, which formally ended the country's involvement in the transatlantic slave trade.

£20m

The Slavery Abolition Act 1833, which abolished slavery in most British colonies, included a £20m compensation package for enslavers, approximately 40% of the government's total annual expenditure.

2013

Caribbean heads of state formally established the Caricom Reparations Commission. The 10-point plan called for debt cancellation as well as funding for a repatriation programme, cultural institutions, public health, a literacy campaign, psychological rehabilitation, and technology transfer.

2015

British taxpayers fully repaid the money borrowed by the government to compensate enslavers.

2019

The University of Glasgow became the first university in Britain to set up a restorative justice scheme, which pledges £20m to build a research centre in partnership with the University of the West Indies.

2022

The Dutch government formally apologised for its historical role in slavery.

0

The amount of financial compensation Britain has paid to enslaved people and their descendants still stands at zero.

Additional research by Aamna Mohdin

[Sign up for the Cotton Capital newsletter for a weekly look at the series and next steps, direct to your inbox](#)

A special Cotton Capital magazine will be published on Saturday 1 April. To order copies from the Guardian bookshop visit guardianbookshop.com/cotton-capital

More on this story

King Charles urged to 'take some responsibility' for royal slavery links

7 Apr 2023

'A necessary step forward': readers on the Guardian's Cotton Capital series

5 Apr 2023

Manchester urged to act on 'scandalous' lack of Black people in prominent roles

3 Apr 2023