

ANETA DYBSKA

THE REPARATION GENERATION: TRUTH TELLING IN PURSUIT OF RACIAL JUSTICE IN THE U.S.

*...our past will continue to haunt our present,
until we agree to face that past with all its
shame and address it.*

Bongani Finca's address at the Swearing
In Seating In Ceremony, Greensboro, NC

The Black reparations movement in the U.S. is a broad, diverse, multi-pronged approach to securing redress for historical injuries, including slavery, Jim Crow segregation, and importantly, their enduring legacies in American society today. Reparations activism and advocacy tends to be associated with demands for restitution and compensation, and, indeed, in the last two decades popular support for monetary reparations for slavery has doubled from 14% in 2002 to 29% in 2019 (Younis 2019).¹ By contrast, my paper highlights the non-material aspect of reparations, namely the truth telling projects. An equally important yet understudied element of reparations activism, these projects grow out of the restorative thrust similar to that of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission established in the mid-1990s to investigate the apartheid-era human rights violations. My investiga-

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The title of my paper is inspired by a grassroots Black reparations initiative, Reparation Generation, which exemplifies a larger trend of organizing towards racial justice and equality. To find out more about the project go to <https://reparationgeneration.org>.

¹ Some battles against corporate entities that benefited from the slave economy have led to reparative gestures. For more see Nelson 2016, esp. chap. 7; Associated Press 2000.

tion of emblematic truth telling initiatives at the federal, civic, and grassroots levels aligns with Pablo de Greiff's (2006) understanding of reparations as a political project set on bringing about a new community of equal citizens, restoring civic trust by reaffirming shared norms and values, and generating social solidarity by "having an interest in the interest of others" (464).

1. TRUTH COMMISSIONS PAST AND PRESENT

Truth commissions are a mechanism of transitional justice created in the period of transition from the authoritarian regime to democracy, from conflict to peace, from a human rights violation regime to a rule of law.² Between the mid-1980s and 2000s numerous truth commissions convened in countries like Argentina, Ecuador, Chile, Peru, Uganda, and Nigeria, but the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (1996–2000) was the most popular and widely covered; its hearings were publicly broadcast and rich video footage of the hearings can be accessed online. Transitional justice scholars agree today that truth commissions can serve as an effective tool of justice also in post-transition societies and consolidated democracies (Llewellyn 2006, 85). In the U.S., which is a stable democracy, the surge in truth commission initiatives, particularly those at the subnational level, can be explained in terms of what Stephen Winter calls a "transition between regimes of legitimation" (qtd. in Posthumus and Zvobgo 2021, 517). The Civil Rights era can be seen as such a transitional moment from a human rights violating regime to a rights respecting regime. Still, despite the commitment of federal institutions to respecting African Americans' basic citizenship rights, racial divisions, segregation, and structural racism have not gone away. Nor have reparations been offered (Valls 2018, 37).

The nationwide controversy over The 1619 Project,³ an initiative of *The New York Times* marking the 400th anniversary of American slavery, brought to the surface deep divisions within the U.S. society over cultural memory and the understanding of its collective past. It is against the backdrop of controversies over historical truth that the U.S. has seen a proliferation of truth telling initiatives that foreground restorative justice and racial

² The transitional justice process includes complementary mechanisms such as reparations, guarantees of non-recurrence, institutional reform, and criminal prosecutions. See United Nations 2008.

³ Available at <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/08/14/magazine/1619-america-slavery.html>.

healing. The numerous state, county-, and city-level truth initiatives grow out of political expediency to address and redress continuing systemic discrimination and violence (in the criminal justice system, education, health care, etc.) as well as political polarization rooted in conflicting understandings of the nation's past.

The brutal police killing of George Floyd on May 25, 2020, reinvigorated the public discussion of white supremacy's hold over the lives of Black people and gave a momentum to the Black Lives Matter movement, which organized protests across the country against racism and police violence. As millions of Americans were mourning the victims of police violence, opinion-making periodicals and other media outlets generated a broader discussion about a need for a national truth and reconciliation process to deal with spiraling racial injustice and systemic violence. Articles titled "Does America Need a Truth and Reconciliation Commission?" (by Sarah Souli in *Politico*, and by Christina Lu in *Foreign Policy*), "Healing U.S. Divides through Truth and Reconciliation Commissions" (*NPR*), and "The USA Needs a Reckoning: Does 'Truth and Reconciliation' Actually Work?" (*Mother Jones*) introduced the American public to the truth and reconciliation process, foregrounding transformative, empowering as well as healing outcomes.⁴ They all put up as an example the Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission, NC (2004–2006), modelled on the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (1996–2000). The American grassroots initiative investigated the November 3, 1979 Greensboro massacre, which resulted in the killing of five anti-racist Communist Workers Party activists by white supremacists during a political rally in a Black neighborhood of Greensboro, NC. Another initiative, the state-led Maine Wabanaki-State Child Welfare Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2013–2015), also received media recognition for their truth-seeking process on the forcible removal of Native American children from tribal homes by the state foster care system since 1978 until the present moment.⁵

The public discussion over whether to hold a nationwide truth and reconciliation process went hand in hand with actual truth commission proposals that, according to Daniel Posthumus and Kelebogile Zvobgo, reflected the government actors' and policy makers' increased interest in investigating,

⁴ See Souli 2020, Lu 2021, Martin 2020, Keating and Assael 2021, and Morris 2020.

⁵ The Commission of Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians, set up in 1980 by the U.S. Congress, was another truth commission investigating racially discriminatory federal policies. See "Check the CWRIC for Public Hearings and Testimonies (Record Group 220)."

documenting, and disseminating truth about racial discrimination, systemic racism, as well as economic and political inequality. The Truth, Justice, and Reconciliation Commission initiative, launched by district attorneys in the cities of Boston, San Francisco, and Philadelphia on July 1, 2020, as well as a resolution urging the creation of a United States Commission on Truth, Racial Healing, and Transformation, introduced in Congress on July 4, 2020, are two examples of truth telling initiatives put forward in the weeks following the murder of George Floyd.

Posthumus and Zvobgo's research on the rising popularity of truth commissions in the U.S. reveals an interesting tendency in their scope and mandate.⁶ Over the last years truth commissions have shifted focus away from individual instances of anti-Black violence, such as urban race riots, lynching, property destruction, and forced displacement (Kerner Commission, 1967⁷; the 1923 Rosewood Massacre, Florida, 1993; the 1921 Tulsa Race Riot, Oklahoma, 1997; and the 1898 Wilmington Race Riot, North Carolina, 2000) towards institutional racism, most significantly within the criminal justice system, and over longer timespans. The Maryland Lynching Truth and Reconciliation Commission, created in June 2019, can serve as an example of this observable change. It was established to investigate documented and undocumented lynchings of African Americans in the state and to determine the role of the local, county, and state governments in legitimizing racial terror in the years 1854–1933 (Maryland Lynching Truth and Reconciliation Commission Act; Posthumus and Zvobgo 2021, 528). Likewise, the Truth and Healing Commission proposed in Congress on September 29, 2020 would conduct an inquiry into a century-long practice of human rights violations within the boarding school system between the 1860s and the 1960s, which resulted in the cultural uprooting and forced assimilation of indigenous children (Truth and Healing Commission on Indian Boarding School Policy Act).⁸

⁶ For a broader discussion of the trend see Posthumus and Zvobgo, "Democratizing Truth: An Analysis of Truth Commissions in the United States" (2021).

⁷ The Kerner Commission's official name was the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders.

⁸ The bill's coauthors were Sen. Elizabeth Warren (D-MA) and Rep. Deb Haaland (Laguna Pueblo, D-NM). It was reintroduced in the Senate on May 18, 2023 (118th Congress) and, with bipartisan support, passed out of the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs on June 7, 2023.

2. RESTORATIVE TRUTH TELLING

Truth telling projects, such as truth commissions, are usually rooted in restorative justice, which is a theory of justice and a process (Llewellyn 2006, 91) in which crimes are understood as “a violation of a *person* by another person (rather than a violation of legal rules)” (Johnstone 2002, ix). The process is bound to restore the victim’s dignity and renew social relationships between the parties involved but also their respective communities. By creating a platform for the victims to speak in public and give testimony in the presence of the witnesses, a truth commission does not seek the return to a *status quo ante*, which might be imagined as a prior state of harmony. Rather, the restorative process pursues “relationships of social equality in which all parties enjoy and accord one another equal dignity, respect, and concern,” Jennifer J. Llewellyn explains (2006, 102). Unlike retributive justice, where a person guilty of a crime is punished, restorative justice treats any wrongdoing as a harm for which the wrongdoer should provide redress, but it also safeguards the reintegration of the offender into the community. Apart from the moral and political dimension, the truth telling process can be therapeutic, particularly when it brings up trauma and a need for healing through the cathartic effect of public truth sharing (Borer 2006, 32).

If truth telling is essential to any truth and reconciliation process, as expressed in numerous recent initiatives in the U.S., and if by design truth commissions follow the restorative justice framework, what specific type of truth does the process seek to discover/recover? The *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report* introduced four notions of truth as they emerged during the commission’s hearings. Truth could be 1. factual/forensic, 2. personal/narrative (e.g., submitted through witness testimony), 3. social (emerging out of multiple voices, perspectives, and debates), 4. healing/restorative (110). While the “‘healing truth’ [is] the kind of truth that places facts and what they mean within the context of human relationships—both amongst citizens and between the state and its citizens,” the restorative quality of truth stems from the process through which it was established and the purpose for which it was revealed. Truth is restorative when it publicly acknowledges and validates “a person’s pain” as “real and worthy of attention,” when it restores the victim’s dignity. Truth is restorative when it helps repair the past damage and prevents repetition of similar damage in the future (114).

The discussion that follows gives an overview of selected truth seeking initiatives undertaken at various levels of American society. These include the federal, state, and municipal truth and reconciliation projects as well as civic/grassroots projects that, despite furthering their own goals, mobilize broad social support for a national truth process.

Several federal-level initiatives have been involved in foregrounding national truth telling. Apart from the 2020 bill to establish the Truth and Healing Commission on Indian Boarding School Policy in the United States, two other reparations projects have generated interest and built advocacy for truth telling in pursuit of racial healing and transformation. One of them is H.R. 40 (Commission to Study and Develop Reparation Proposals for African Americans Act), the longest legislative effort at federal reparations for slavery, dating back to 1989, when Rep. John Conyers (D-MI) first introduced it. Since then, it has been reintroduced in every Congress, most recently on January 9, 2023.⁹ The other one—a resolution urging the establishment of a United States Commission on Truth, Racial Healing and Transformation (H. Con. Res. 100)—is an anti-racist project put forward in the weeks following George Floyd’s murder on May 25, 2020. Both documents expressly recognize each other’s existence and see each other as complementary legal efforts.

If passed, H.R. 40 would establish the Commission to Study and Develop Reparation Proposals for African Americans. Its mandate would involve the study and analysis of federal and state governments’ role in supporting slavery, the Jim Crow-era laws and institutions that allowed discrimination to persist, and the lingering negative effects on these on African Americans today.¹⁰ The Commission would “compile and synthesize” factual truths and hear the narrative truth of witness testimonies. This stage would prepare the ground for reparations recommendations including, but not limited to, restorative truth telling in the form of an official apology and education projects aimed at a “return of dignity and racial healing, and reconciliation” (H.R. 40).¹¹

⁹ The bill’s title refers to Gen. Sherman’s Field Order No. 15, which made an unfulfilled promise of forty acres of land to each freedmen family as reparation for slavery. In 2017 Rep. Sheila Jackson (D-TX) took over as the bill’s sponsor but it seems to have lost momentum. The number of co-sponsors dropped significantly from 196 (117th Congress, April 14, 2021) to 101 (118th Congress, as of September 17, 2023).

¹⁰ These enduring consequences include redlining, unequal access to educational opportunities, and unfair access to mortgages, banking, and other financing opportunities.

¹¹ H.R. 40 follows the reparative framework rooted in International Human Rights Law and articulated in “Basic Principles and Guidelines on the Right to a Remedy and Reparation for Victims of Gross Violations of International Human Rights Law and Serious Violations of

In the last few years, as the support for the bill grew stronger given the expediency of calls for racial justice, the U.S. House Committee on the Judiciary held public hearings titled “H.R. 40 and the Path to Restorative Justice” (June 19, 2019) and “H.R. 40: Exploring the Path to Reparative Justice in America” (February 17, 2021). In both cases, the committee heard the oral testimony delivered by public intellectuals, scholars, religious leaders, lawyers, politicians, and celebrities making a case for/against Black reparations. The hearings, which were streamed online and made available to a broad public, provided a forum for competing perspectives on the nation’s past and created an educational opportunity, similar to that generated by the controversies over The 1619 Project.¹² More than three decades after it was first introduced, H.R. 40 received a historic mark-up (April 14, 2021), which may be indicative of a gradual shift in the public sentiment towards the necessity of redress for past injustices.

In between the two H.R. 40 public hearings and in the midst of nationwide protests against anti-Black police violence, a resolution to convene a United States Commission on Truth, Racial Healing and Transformation was tabled in the House on June 4, 2020 (H. Con. Res. 100).¹³ Unlike H.R. 40, the resolution sponsored by Rep. Barbara Lee (D-CA) and Sen. Cory Booker (D-NJ) speaks on behalf of all non-white people in the U.S. and does not mention financial reparations. Its “Whereas” section, which is an act of truth telling itself, enumerates the “egregious injustices” of the past, as well as the continuing effects of racial hierarchies and institutional racism on all racial minorities, African Americans included. Chattel slavery, Jim Crow racism, and multiple other grievances are listed: the U.S. imperial policies and conquest in the Pacific, the loss of indigenous tribal lands guaranteed by federal treaties, the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, boarding schools for Native American children, large-scale deportations of Mexicans and Mexican Americans between 1930 and 1950, discriminatory lending policies of the Federal Housing Administration, and subprime lending aimed at families of

International Humanitarian Law” (United Nations 2005). Full reparations include the following forms: restitution, compensation, rehabilitation, satisfaction, and guarantees of non-repetition. Education projects and official apologies fall under satisfaction.

¹² The recordings of the hearings can be found here: <https://www.youtube.com/live/lfEe1MRxSgI?si=rF1-TYNswelpIQ9I> and https://www.youtube.com/live/KoWfexyi84?si=A2C_aFvKycOyVWOX.

¹³ The original 2020 resolution had a strong support of 169 cosponsors. When reintroduced on May 17, 2023 as H. Con. Res. 44, it attracted 117 sponsors (as of September 17, 2023). The dwindling support for the initiative may be temporary and indicate the changing priorities of the political class and their constituents or the instability of political alliances.

color. The truth commission's ultimate goal would be to acknowledge the victims of past racial oppression and pay a "long-overdue debt of remembrance," both of which are forms of reparations achieved through restorative/healing truth telling and commemorative actions. These reparative measures would then serve as "catalyst for progress" towards a society without racial hierarchies or inequalities (H. Con. Res. 100)

3. TRUTH TELLING WITHIN THE CIVIL SOCIETY AND AT THE GRASSROOTS

Rep. Lee's and Sen. Booker's concurrent resolution was supported by hundreds of organizations, among them the U.S. Truth, Racial Healing, and Transformation Movement, which is a coalition of 255 civil rights and human rights, community, and faith-based reparations advocacy organizations.¹⁴ The movement is a broad network of actors who work to consolidate public sentiment and build support for the national truth, racial healing and transformation resolution.¹⁵ They stand united in the belief that a truth-led "transformation must happen at all levels of society, from the streets of our towns and cities to the campuses of our universities, from the pages of our newspapers and magazines to the halls of local, state, and national government" ("Supporters"). This vision reflects Eduardo Gonzalez's belief that a truth commission should be linked to a specific social movement, characterized by "capillarity," that is, comprising a dense, decentralized network of individual and collective actors dispersed throughout the social body, bound by shared values and social change objectives (Foucault 1995, 197; della Porta and Diani 2020, sec. 1.2).

Importantly, the movement draws direct inspiration from the Truth, Racial Healing & Transformation (TRHT) framework¹⁶ developed by the W. K. Kellogg Foundation to facilitate grassroots initiatives committed to fighting

¹⁴ The institutional partners of the U.S. Truth, Racial Healing and Transformation Movement are: African American Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles; the John Mitchell Jr. Program for History, Justice, and Race at Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter School for Peace and Conflict Resolution, George Mason University, Virginia; the National Collaborative for Health Equity; and #BreatheWithMe Revolution. For the full list of supporters see "Supporters of the Movement."

¹⁵ See for example Frisby and Associates 2020.

¹⁶ Visitors to the movement's homepage, now only available via Internet Archive, are directed to (i) a journal article on the Kellogg Foundations' Truth, Racial Healing & Transformation process, and (ii) a link to a publication on the U.S. Truth, Racial Healing & Transformation Campus Centers, a joint initiative with the American Association of Colleges and Universities.

racism and promoting racial healing, but also to challenge institutional forms of racism. The impetus for the TRHT process came after the 2016 presidential elections, which led to deep social divisions and a heightened need for the country to heal.¹⁷ The Kellogg Foundation's process emphasizes racial healing and future oriented transformation but its authors are wary of using the term reconciliation since they believe it

connotes restoration of friendly relations—"reuniting" or "bringing together again after conflict." It also implies a preexisting harmony and unity among groups, which is not the case in the United States amid a deeply entrenched system of racial hierarchy and colonization. There is no time period in our collective, national history that we could return to and experience racial equity and wholeness. ("Is the THRT the Same As")

This narrow view of reconciliation stands at odds with the more capacious meaning adopted by many truth initiatives and understood broadly as the process of arriving at a peaceful relationship after the harm has been repaired to allow basic social trust to develop between the conflicted parties and the larger society (Nordquist 2017, 23).

Healourcommunities.org, run by the Kellogg Foundation, is a website devoted to the Truth, Racial Healing & Transformation process. Described in language of rights-based liberalism, which underscores "the inherent value of all people" and validates "authentic relationship building across real and perceived differences" ("US Truth"), the process would result in narrative change. Through educational projects, the news media, the entertainment industries, and everyday life, the social and healing truth would also emerge, encouraging solidarities across racial and ethnic lines ("US Truth").¹⁸

The Kellogg Foundation has established 48 Truth, Racial Healing & Transformation Campus Centers and sponsored pilot programs in 14 cities. The latter include truth telling initiatives such as: discovering one's ancestors role in history and a reenactment of the Middle Passage (Selma, AL); collecting the racial history of the community (Dallas, TX); artistic projects

¹⁷ The initiative builds on America Healing, Kellogg Foundation's earlier program, which worked to eliminate structural inequalities. See "Truth, Racial Healing & Transformation Enterprise Critical Response to Bridging Communities, Nation" (2016).

¹⁸ My focus here is narrative change and racial healing, the two areas of the TRHT process related to truth telling, but the whole process also entails systemic solutions to problems in the area of law (addressing discriminatory laws and public policies), economy (working to improve equal opportunities and access to financial resources) and separation (addressing such problems as concentration of poverty or residential segregation).

telling truths about the community's past and revealing unknown histories (Richmond, VA); truth telling workshops and oral history projects (Flint, MI); racial healing circles and storytelling for healing and justice (Lansing, MI); revising school curricula for fairness and creating a database of local history (Kalamazoo, MI); and commemorative initiatives (Los Angeles, CA) ("Truth, Racial Healing").

Truth telling projects require a disclosure of personal truths about one's racial advantage and racial harm relating to the legacies of slavery. One such project, Coming to the Table (CTTT), brings together African Americans and European Americans who would like to jointly work towards Taking America Beyond the Legacy of Slavery and racial healing. The CTTT was designed in 2006 at Eastern Mennonite University's Center for Justice and Peacebuilding in Harrisburg, VA. Since 2019, it has been part of Restorative Justice for Oakland Youth (<https://rjoyoakland.org>)—a pioneer of race-conscious restorative justice practices in the East Bay Area schools, communities, and the juvenile justice system. The program has around 6,000 members and 50 local affiliate groups in 18 states.¹⁹

The CTTT approach rests on four pillars, which structure the racial healing process: (i) uncovering, sharing, and acknowledging histories of race (national, local, personal) with honesty and openness, (ii) making connections and friendships across racial lines, (iii) healing wounds through dialogue, apology, reunion, the arts, etc., and (iv) taking action to dismantle racism and racial injustice (Coming to the Table n.d., "The CTTT Approach").²⁰

I would like to foreground the work of the CTTT's Reparations Working Group as an example of restorative truth telling. The process is not essentially different from the TRHT framework, except that the discovery of truth about one's ancestral ties to slavery becomes a path that leads towards assuming personal responsibility for the historical harm and a reparative commitment. Taking the position of the subject implicated²¹ in the legacies of

¹⁹ Coming to the Table takes its name from Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech, in which he predicted that there would be a time when "the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners would be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood" (Hooker and Czajkowski n.d., 11). See <https://comingtothetable.org/local-groups>.

²⁰ The process is informed by the Transforming Historical Harm framework designed to work through generational trauma, to heal the wounds and take action by changing systems of beliefs and structures of oppression. For more see Hooker and Czajkowski's *Transforming Historical Harms* (n.d.).

²¹ I am referring here to Michael Rothberg's helpful notion of the implicated subject: "Implicated subjects occupy positions aligned with power and privilege without being themselves direct

slavery entails coming to terms with one's own pain and/or denial of one's family's shameful past, and working to eliminate one's own racial bias to avoid future harm (CTTT Reparations Working Group 2021, 14–20). Americans of European descent can make a proposed pledge when engaging in race reparations:

I recognize, acknowledge and understand the terrible and long-standing injustices done to African Americans in this country during slavery, Jim Crow and beyond. I acknowledge that although I, personally, might not have caused these injustices, as a white American I accept that I and my ancestors have reaped the benefits that accrued to me as a result of these injustices toward African Americans. Because it is not possible for my ancestors to remedy any injustice today, I take responsibility for repairing the harms that still exist on their behalf and on mine. (CTTT Reparations Working Group 2021, "Our Pledge," emphasis added)

The pledge brings out what Margaret Urban Walker calls the "expressive burden" of recognizing the victims' harm and their needs, acknowledging the damage, assuming responsibility for the harm done, and intent to do justice (by apologizing, by making amends). Importantly, the expressive dimension in Walker's view operates on two levels: one pertaining to the past wrong and the wrongdoer's readiness to repair the harm, the other being "an exemplification of the right relationship in the future" (that is a renewal of trust, of a civic relationship, of national unity) (Walker 2010a, 529; Walker 2010b, 19–20).

The intellectual, psychological, and emotional investment in the discovery of truth among members of the Reparations Working Group entails openness to reparations proposals coming from African Americans themselves. Among the reparative acts put forward in the group guide to reparations are diverse initiatives relating to government, economic justice, criminal justice, media, community, history, and health. Examples of those related to restorative truth telling include support for a federal apology for slavery and its present-day legacies; endorsement of the congressional reparations bill H.R. 40; building support for a national Truth and Reconciliation Com-

agents of harm; they contribute to, inhabit, inherit, or benefit from regimes of domination but do not originate or control such regimes. An implicated subject is neither a victim nor a perpetrator, but rather a participant in histories and social formations that generate the positions of victim and perpetrator, and yet in which most people do not occupy such clear-cut roles.... In other words, implicated subjects help propagate the legacies of historical violence and prop up the structures of inequality that mar the present" (1). For more see Rothberg 2019.

mission; and campaigning for the establishment of the U.S. Commission on Truth, Racial Healing and Transformation (CTTT Reparations Working Group 2021).

Speaking Truth: Confronting Slavery, Pursuing Reconciliation, an online truth telling platform (<https://www.speakingtruth.org>), is more mediated and less interactive than the CTTT approach. Currently, fifty-one testimonies create a continuously expanding online archive of videos, which will be used for educational and artistic purposes in the future. Speaking Truth brings together the descendants of enslavers, who would like to share stories of how they have profited from their ancestors' investment in slavery. The testimony follows a template modelled on the restorative justice process. It begins with the participant's brief account of the ancestor's beliefs and actions, who then moves on to acknowledge and repudiate the past injustices (e.g., their ancestors' treating slaves as a piece of property, depriving them of humanity). Here is an excerpt from a testimony by Elizabeth L. Harris:

I grew up in Lynchburg, Virginia.... I have family *ancestors who enslaved* people in their rice fields in South Carolina and the sugar cane work camps in Louisiana.... *My family enslaved* men and boys in the coal pits in Chesterfield County, Virginia for at least 3 decades before the Civil War ... there were multiple explosions in these pits killing enslaved people ... the newspapers would not report the names of the people of color who had died in the pits. (emphasis added)

Once the factual truth is acknowledged, the person giving the testimony takes accountability for their forebears' deeds, confessing to feeling "responsible" or "culpable" of "carrying a burden," being "distraught," "angry" or "shocked." Through this personal confession, they position themselves as opponents of structural racism and commit to making amends in the present. This is how Harris narrates her own investment in repairing the harm:

I'm working with linked descendants, by which I mean people who are descended from people that were enslaved by my family, to do some restoration and preservation of enslaved graveyards in Chesterfield County, Virginia and to rectify markers and change and revise markers there to *record*, to *represent*, and to *tell the truthful story* of the coal pits and what really went on there in terms of the labor force and the accident explosions.

... my *feelings* about this have evolved for so for so long on over of course *guilt and shame* ... I think we have to think more about some of the epigenetics in the

white experience which have worn down *our ability to empathize* ... encouraged us to compartmentalize and *tolerate injustice* and these things have all contributed to *systemic racism* and to the political environment we have today. (emphasis added)

As Harris's testimony shows, the act of enunciation itself is key to the truth telling process, but it does not entail direct apology to the survivors or "offer redemption" to the descendants of slaveowners ("Speaking Truth"). Rather, it shows concern with racial repair and relationship building as atonement for the past harm and its ongoing manifestations.

Whereas Speaking Truth reaches out to individuals descended from the slaveholding class, Mass Slavery Apology and the Grassroots Reparations Campaign address all European Americans as beneficiaries of white privilege implicated in maintaining structures of racial oppression. Mass Slavery Apology, put together by Racial Justice Rising, an all-volunteer organization in Massachusetts, is an online tool encouraging European Americans to pursue racial repair. This local, grassroots initiative, written with the assistance of African American and Native American activists, articulates historical and social truths about race relations in the U.S., centers marginalized voices, and recalibrates white Americans thinking about their own stake in perpetuating racial oppression. The apology's five hundred signatories come predominately from the Northern States but also represent California, Colorado, Indiana, Ohio, Kentucky, Texas, Georgia, and Louisiana. Racial Justice Rising hopes that the Mass Slavery Apology will inspire state-level formal apology for slavery and then spread to other states.²²

Establishing a link between the past the present, the Racial Justice Rising apology acknowledges: "The institution of slavery was both a crime against humanity and a profound moral wrong, yet the historic and present-day wounds of slavery have been largely unacknowledged by whites" ("Slavery and Its Legacy" 2009, 7). It recognizes the harsh truths about the nation's collective past, such as the post-Reconstruction governments' failure to protect African Americans' equal rights and the ongoing injury the group suffers at the hands of the police and criminal justice (murder and brutal policing, mass incarceration, unfair sentencing). The apology also has a personal, confessional aspect, which manifests in taking accountability for the harm inflicted on the descendants of the enslaved:

²² The online list of signatories can be accessed at <https://racialjusticerising.org/mass-slavery-apology>.

Words cannot express our *remorse* for the long history of unrelenting violence caused by our collective white ancestors. Nor can words describe our *sorrow* for the pain and suffering that continue today because of our destructive attitudes and behaviors and our failure to stop this ongoing devastation. We have a sacred *responsibility* to right these wrongs. (“Slavery and Its Legacy” 2009, 7; emphasis added)

This compassionate manner is indicative of both an awakening to an awareness of being implicated in historical injustice and racial privilege, and the subsequent commitment to righting the wrongs through work of racial healing:

We have lost any right to your *trust*. We realize that it will require many consistent, positive interactions and actions over a long period of time until we are able to earn your *trust and forgiveness* for our grave violations and wrongdoings. (“Slavery and Its Legacy” 2009, 7; emphasis added)

Speaking Truth and Mass Slavery Apology are just two of many civic initiatives that make European Americans active participants in the truth telling process and show willingness to work towards transformative justice.²³ For example, the Grassroots Reparations Campaign invites all willing European Americans to consider their “direct or indirect complicity in upholding systems of white supremacy.”²⁴ Their “Statement of Apology” is almost identical to the Mass Slavery Apology, and both originate from the grassroots Racial Justice Rising initiative.

CONCLUSIONS

Contemporary truth telling initiatives stimulate honest yet painful discussions about the nation’s collective past and the way inherited and inhabited positions of racial privilege and disadvantage continue to hold sway over the American society. This is an individual psychological process that requires a

²³ White Americans who would like to engage in racial reparations and trace their ancestral connections to slavery can begin by visiting the Reparations 4 Slavery website, which I find to be the most comprehensive repository of educational resources.

²⁴ The Grassroots Reparations Campaign is a program of The Truth Telling Project conceived in 2015 after the brutal killing of Michael Brown, visit <https://thetruthtellingproject.org/grc>. Modelled on the South African truth commission, the project creates a forum where victims of racial oppression could give testimony in front of witnesses, achieve emotional support, and work towards healing.

recalibration of European Americans' perceptions of and biases against non-whites through intellectual and emotional work. This is also a social process, as Mariame Keba aptly puts it, of "being intentionally in relation to one another, a part of a collective, [since it] helps to not only imagine new worlds, but also to imagine ourselves differently" (part 1, sec. 1). While the federal truth commission proposals receive substantial media coverage and generate engaged public debate about historic harm, collective responsibility, and racial redress, the backbone of reparations as a political project resides at the grassroots. Restorative truth telling may be the most powerful tool of reparative justice that American society can accept today.

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THE REPARATION GENERATION: TRUTH TELLING IN PURSUIT OF RACIAL JUSTICE IN THE U.S.

Summary

The Black reparations movement in the U.S. is a broad, diverse, multi-pronged approach to securing redress for historical injuries, including slavery, Jim Crow segregation, and their endur-

ing legacies in American society today. While reparations activism and advocacy tends to be associated with demands of restitution and compensation, non-material forms of redress have become an important tool of building racial reconciliation and healing. My paper discusses recent truth telling initiatives which are rooted in the restorative justice process and draw on the experience of the 1990s South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission which investigated the apartheid-era human rights violations. This overview of emblematic truth telling projects at the federal, civic, and grassroots levels shows a growing and widespread willingness among European Americans to engage in honest yet painful discussions about the nation's collective past and persistent structures of white privilege. Whether an individual or a community-based process, truth telling entails intellectual and emotional work on one's own racial bias and prejudice, one's entanglement in webs of power and privilege, and a commitment to social transformation. These multiple and dispersed civic initiatives have, over the last decade, laid the foundation for a national truth telling process, which may be the most powerful reparative justice measure that Americans as a nation can accept today.

Keywords: apology for slavery; truth telling; truth and reconciliation commission; reparations for slavery; restorative justice

POKOLENIE REPARACJI: MÓWIENIE PRAWDY JAKO WYRAZ DĄŻENIA DO SPRAWIEDLIWOŚCI RASOWEJ W STANACH ZJEDNOCZONYCH

Streszczenie

Ruch na rzecz reparacji dla Afroamerykanów w Stanach Zjednoczonych obejmuje różnorodne podejścia do naprawy historycznych krzywd za niewolnictwo i segregację rasową oraz ich nieustające konsekwencje. Podczas gdy aktywizm na rzecz reparacji kojarzony jest zazwyczaj z roszczeniami do restytucji i kompensacji, na popularności zyskują niematerialne formy reparacji ukierunkowane na międzyrasowe pojednanie i uzdrawianie (*healing*). Niniejszy artykuł omawia aktualne, osadzone w procesie sprawiedliwości naprawczej inicjatywy związane z tzw. „mówieniem prawdy” (*truth telling*). Czerpią one z doświadczeń Komisji Prawdy i Pojednania w RPA, która w latach 90. XX w. badała naruszenia praw człowieka ery apartheidu. Przegląd wybranych federalnych, obywatelskich i oddolnych inicjatyw na rzecz mówienia prawdy, zainicjowanych w ostatniej dekadzie, odzwierciedla wzrastającą gotowość Amerykanów europejskiego pochodzenia do podejmowania szczerych choć bolesnych rozmów na temat zbiorowej pamięci oraz przywileju wynikającego z przynależności do białej rasy (*white privilege*). Bez względu na to, czy proces ten ma charakter indywidualny czy grupowy, mówienie prawdy wiąże się z emocjonalną i intelektualną pracą nad uprzedzeniami rasowymi, uwikłaniem w relacje władzy i przywileju oraz z zaangażowaniem w proces transformacji społecznej. Przedstawione w artykule inicjatywy budują podwaliny pod proces prawdy i pojednania na skalę krajową. Proces ten może się okazać najskuteczniejszą formą reparacji na którą obecnie gotowy jest naród amerykański.

Słowa kluczowe: przeprosiny za niewolnictwo; mówienie prawdy; komisja prawdy i pojednania; reparacje za niewolnictwo; sprawiedliwość naprawcza