



The Original Sin: Slavery, America and the Modern World

By Paul Tiyambe Zeleza



Four hundred years ago, in late August 1619, a slave ship named *White Lion*, landed on the shores of Point Comfort, in what is today Hampton, Virginia. On board were more than 20 African women and men, who had been seized from a Portuguese ship, *São João Bautista*, on its way from Angola to Veracruz in Mexico. Virginia, the first English colony in North America, had only been formed twelve years earlier in 1607.

Thus, the two original sins of the country that would become the United States of America, the forcible seizure of the lands of the indigenous people, and the deployment of forced labor from captive and later enslaved Africans, began almost simultaneously. The Africans were stolen people brought to build stolen lands, as I noted in the lead short story in my collection, *The Joys of Exile*, published in 1994.

I attended the First Landing Commemorative Weekend in Hampton, Virginia on August 23-24. Partly for professional reasons as a historian who has done extensive work on African diasporas. And partly in homage to my acquired diaspora affiliations, and the diaspora identities of some key members of my immediate family including my wife and daughter.

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remembrance. And I was inspired by the powerful invocations of resilience, the unyielding demands for responsibility and reparations, and the yearnings for redemption and recovery from what some call the post-traumatic slave syndrome.

The emotions of the multitudinous, multiracial and multigenerational audiences swayed with anger, bitterness and bewilderment at the indescribable cruelties of slavery, segregation, and persistent marginalization for African Americans. But there was also rejoicing at the abundant contributions, creativity, and the sheer spirit of indomitability, survival and struggle over the generations. We still stand, one speaker proclaimed with pride defiance, to which the audience beamed and chanted, "Yes, we do!"

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The scholars brought their academic prowess as they methodically peeled the layers of falsehoods, distortions, and silences in the study of American history and society. They unraveled the legacies of slavery on every aspect of American life from the structure and destructive inequities of American capitalism to what one called the criminal justice system rooted in the slave patrols of the plantations, as well as the history of struggles for democracy, freedom and equality that progressively realized America's initially vacuous democratic ideals.

The artists and media practitioners assailed and celebrated the 400 years of pain and triumphs. They exhorted the power of African Americans telling and owning their stories. A renowned CNN pundit reminded the audience that there are four centers of power in the United States, namely, Washington (politics), Wall Street (finance), Silicon Valley (digital technology), and Hollywood (media), and that African American activists have to focus on all of them, not just the first.

The politicians implored the nation to confront the difficult truths of American history with honesty and commitment. The two former governors and the current governor of Virginia paid tribute to the centrality of African American history and their role in bridging the yawning contradiction between the claims of representative democracy and the heinous original sin and exclusions of slavery. They proceeded to promise various policy remediations. Black members of Congress bemoaned the incomplete progress made in the march to freedom and inclusion and denounced the resurgence of hate, racism and white supremacy. An eleven year orator electrified the crowd with his passionate plea for fostering a community of care and kindness that would make the ancestors proud.

Two hundred and forty one years after the arrival of the first Africans in Hampton, in the summer of 1860, the last ship that brought African captives to the shores of the United States landed north of Mobile, Alabama. The *Coltilda* brought 110 women, men, and children. The Senegalese historian, Sylviane Diouf has told their story with her characteristic care, compassion and eloquence in her book, *Dreams of Africa in Alabama*.

The following year, in April 1860, the American Civil War broke out primarily over the institution of slavery. The abolition of slavery finally came in 1865. By then, hundreds of ships had plied the Atlantic and brought nearly half a million African captives to the United States. They and their descendants endured 246 years of servitude and slavery, a century of Jim Crow segregation, and another half a century of an incomplete and contested civil rights settlement.

The African men and women who landed as captives in Hampton arrived out of two confluences of

pillage: in Angola and in the Atlantic. They were pawns in the imperial rivalries and internecine wars engendered by the burgeoning slave-based Atlantic economy enveloping what became the insidious triangle of western Africa, western Europe, and the Americas that emerged from the early 1500s.

But even in their subjugation they were history makers. They became indispensable players in the construction of Atlantic economies and societies. In short, their history of servitude that before long calcified into slavery, is the history of the United States of America, of the making of the modern world in all its complexities and contradictions, tragedies and triumphs, perils and possibilities.

By the time the first captive Africans arrived in Virginia, more than half a million Africans had already crossed the horrendous Middle Passage to the incipient Portuguese, Spanish, and English colonies of South America and the Caribbean. In fact, they were preceded in several parts of North America itself by Africans who came with the conquistadors from the Iberian Peninsula both in servitude and freedom. For example, the first recorded person of African descent to reach Nova Scotia, Canada in 1604 was Mathieu Da Costa, a sailor and translator for French settlers from Portugal.

It is critical to remember that the Iberian Peninsula had been conquered in 711 by northwest Africans who ruled parts of the region for eight centuries (in Eurocentric textbooks they are often referred to as Moors, Muslims, or Arabs). Later, the descendants of Africans brought as captives to Spain from the 1440s, sometimes referred to as Afro-Iberians, plied the Atlantic world as sailors, conquistadors, and laborers in the conquest and colonization of the Americas. For the United States, it appears in 1526 enslaved Africans rebelled against a Spanish expedition and settlement in what is today South Carolina.

This is to underscore the importance of placing the arrival of Africans in Virginia in 1619 in a broader historical context. Their horrendous journey, repeated by 36,000 slave ships over the centuries, was embedded in a much larger story. It was part of the emergence of the modern world system that has dominated global history for the last five hundred years, with its shifting hierarchies and hegemonies, but enduring structures and logics of capitalist greed, exploitation, and inequality. I found the broader trans-Atlantic and global contexts somewhat missing from the commemorations in Hampton.

The new world system that emerged out of the inhuman depredations of the Atlantic slave trade and slavery, and the economic revolutions it spawned, was defined by its capitalist modernity and barbarism. It involved multiple players comprising political and economic actors in Europe, Africa, and the expanding settler societies of the Americas. Scaffolding it was the ideology of racism, the stubborn original fake news of eternal African inferiority, undergirded by physiological myths about African bodies. Racism was often supplemented by other insidious constructs of difference over gender and sexuality, religion and culture.

Much of what I heard at the Commemorative Weekend and read in the American media, including the searing and sobering series of essays under "The 1619 Project" in *The New York Times* powerfully echoed the academic literature that I'm familiar with as a professional historian. Befitting the nation's most prestigious paper, *The 1619 Project* is ambitious: "It aims to reframe the country's history, understanding 1619 as our true founding, and placing the consequences of slavery and the contributions of black Americans at the very center of the story we tell ourselves about who we are."

The essays paint a complex and disturbing picture of American history. One traces the shift from forced labor, which was common in the Old World, to the rise of commercialized, racialized, and inherited slavery in the Americas, and how this ruthless system generated enormous wealth and

power for nation states in Europe and the colonies, institutions including the church, and individuals. As the plantation economy expanded, the codification of slavery intensified into a rigid system of unmitigated exploitation and oppression.

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Another essay underscores how the back-breaking labor of the enslaved Africans built the foundations of the American economy, how cotton became America's most profitable commodity, accounting for more than half of the nation's exports and world supply, which generated vast fortunes. Yet, the enslaved Africans had no legal rights to marry, or to justice in the courts; they could not own or inherit anything, not even their bodies or offspring, for they were chattel, property that could be sold, mortgaged, violated, raped, and even killed at will; and they had no rights to education and literacy.

One contributor to the series states categorically that "In order to understand the brutality of American capitalism, you have to start on the plantation." Key institutions and models that have come to characterize the American economy were incubated on the plantation. They include the relentless pursuit of measurement and scientific accounting, workplace supervision, the development of the mortgage and collateralized debt obligations as financial instruments, and the creation of large corporations. Slavery made Wall Street, America's financial capital. In short, slavery is at the heart of what one author calls the country's low-road capitalism of ruthless accumulation and glaring inequalities.

But the contributions of African Americans went beyond the economic and material. Several essays discuss and applaud their cultural contributions. Music is particularly noteworthy. Much of quintessential American music exported and consumed ravishingly across the world is African American, from jazz to blues to rock and roll to gospel to hip hop. Forged in bondage and racial oppression, it is a tribute to the creativity and creolization of diaspora cultures and communities, the soulful and exuberant soundtrack of an irrepressible people.

One could also mention the indelible imprints of African American cuisine, fashion, and even the aesthetics of cool. We also know now, through the work of African American historians and activist scholars and others, such as Craig Steven Wilder's groundbreaking book, *Ebony and Ivory: Race, Slavery, and the Troubled History of America's Universities*, that the growth of America's leading universities from Harvard to Yale to Georgetown and some of the dominant intellectual traditions are inextricably linked to the proceeds and ideologies of slavery.

No less critical has been the massive contributions by African Americans to defining the very idea of freedom and expanding the cherished, but initially rhetorical and largely specious ideals of American democracy. Juxtaposed against the barbarities of plantation economies was the heroism of slave resistances including rebellions. It is the generations of African American struggles that turned the United States from a slavocracy (10 of the 12 first presidents were slave owners) to a democracy.

It is they who turned the ideal and lie of democracy into reality, paving way for other struggles including those for women's, gay, immigrant, and disability rights that engulfed 20th century America and still persist. The struggles were both overt and covert, militant and prosaic, episodic and quotidian. They started among the captives enroute to the slaveholding dungeons on the coasts

of western Africa, through the Middle Passage, on the plantations, and in the mushrooming towns and cities of colonial America.

The African American struggles for human rights peaked during Reconstruction as electoral offices opened to them and the 13th, 14th and 15th amendments were passed outlawing slavery, guaranteeing birthright citizenship, and the right to vote, respectively. But these advances soon triggered a backlash that ushered the racial terror of Jim Crow that reinstated the caste system of American racism for nearly a century.

After the Second World War the country was convulsed by the long crusade for civil rights that resulted in the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts of 1964 and 1965, respectively. But as with every victory in America's treacherous racial quagmire, a racist counteroffensive soon erupted, which intensified during and after the historic Obama presidency. And the struggle continues today in myriad ways and venues.

The Atlantic slave trade and slavery in the Americas have generated some of the most heated debates in the historiographies of modern Africa, the Americas, Europe, and the world at large. A trading and labor system in which the commodities and producers were enslaved human beings cannot but be highly emotive and raise troubling intellectual and moral questions.

The controversies centre on several issues, five of which stand out. There are, first, fierce debates about the total number of Africans exported; second, the demographic, economic and social impact of the slave trade on Africa; third, the impact of Africans and slavery on the development of economies, societies, cultures and politics in the Americas; fourth, the role of the Atlantic slave trade and slavery in the development of industrial capitalism in the western world generally; and finally, the contentious demands for reparations for the slave trade and slavery that have persisted since abolition.

In so far as the Atlantic slave trade remains the foundation of the modern world capitalist system and the ultimate moral measure of the relationship between Africa, Europe, and the Americas, between Africans and Europeans and their descendants in modern times, the amount of intellectual and ideological capital and heat the subject has engendered for the past half millennium should not be surprising. Predictably, also, all too often many scholars and ideologues hide their motives and biases behind methodological sophistry, rhetorical deflections, and outright lies.

Many of the contemporary disputes are as old as the Atlantic slave trade itself. Two approaches can be identified in the debates, although there are considerable overlaps. There are some, especially those of European descent, who tend to minimize the adverse impact that the slave trade had on Africa and Africans on the continent and on the enslaved Africans in the diaspora. Others, mostly of African descent, tend to emphasize the role of the slave trade in the underdevelopment of Africa, development of the Americas and Western Europe, and the marginalization and reconstruction of African diaspora cultures and communities in the Americas.

The Atlantic slave trade began slowly in the 15th century, then grew dramatically in the subsequent centuries, reaching a peak in the 18th and 19th centuries. The trade was dominated first by the Portuguese in the 15th and 16th centuries, then by the Dutch in the 17th century, the British in the 18th century, and the Europeans settled in the Americas (e.g., USA, Cuba, Brazil, etc.) in the 19th century.

The bulk of the enslaved Africans came from the western coast of Africa covering the vast regions of Senegambia, Upper Guinea Coast, Gold Coast, Bight of Benin, Bight of Biafra, Congo and Angola. In short, West and Central Africa were the two major streams of enslavement that flowed into the

horrific Middle Passage to the Americas.

The Atlantic slave trade was triggered by the demand for cheap and productive labour in the Americas. Attempts to use the indigenous peoples floundered because they were familiar with the terrain and could escape, and they were increasingly decimated by exposure to strange new European diseases and the ruthless brutalities and terror of conquest. And it was not possible to bring laborers from Europe in the quantities required. In the 16th and 17th centuries Europe was still recovering from the Black Death of the mid-14th century that had wiped out between a third and half of its population.

And so attention was turned to western Africa. Why this region, not other parts of Africa or Asia for that matter, one may wonder. Western Africa was relatively close to the Americas. If geography dictated the positioning of western Africa in the evolving and heinous Atlantic slave trade, economics sealed its fate.

The African captives were highly skilled farmers, artisans, miners, and productive workers in other activities for which labor was in great demand in the Americas. Also, unlike the indigenous peoples of the Americas, they were more resistant to European diseases since the disease environments of the Old World of Europe, Africa and Asia overlapped.

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Furthermore, the captives were stolen. Slavery entailed coerced, unpaid labor, which made both the acquisition of captives and use of slave labor relatively cheap. The captives were acquired in several ways, predominantly through the use of force in the form of warfare, raids and kidnapping. Judicial and administrative corruption also played a role by sentencing people accused of violating the rules of society and witchcraft, often capriciously, into servitude. Some were seized as a form of tribute and taxation.

Thus the process of enslavement essentially involved the violent robbery of human beings. The families of the captives who disappeared never saw them again. Thus, unlike voluntary European migrants to the Americas and contemporary migrants from Africa, the families of the captives never got anything for the loss of their relatives. There were no remittances.

And few ever saw Africa or the wider world again, except for the sailors who plied the Atlantic. The exceptions also include individuals like Olaudah Equiano, who left us his remarkable memoir, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*. There are also the striking stories of return to Africa among some of those whose memoirs are recorded in Allan D Austin's pioneering compendium, *African Muslims in Antebellum America*.

For their part, the slave dealers, from the local merchants and rulers in Africa to the European merchants at the hideous fortresses that dot the coasts of western Africa and slave owners in the Americas, shared all the ill-gotten gains of captivity, servitude, and enslavement. One of the difficult truths we have to face is the role of Africans in the Atlantic Slave trade, a subject that casts a pall between continental Africans and the historic diaspora in the Americas.

African merchants and ruling elites were actively involved in the slave trade, not because their societies had surplus population or underutilized labour, as some historians have maintained, but for

profit. They sought to benefit from trading a “commodity” they had not “produced,” except transport to the coast. The notion that they did not know what they were doing, that they were “bamboozled” by the European merchants is just untenable as the view that they generated, controlled, or monopolized the trade.

To assume that African merchants did not profit because their societies paid a heavy price is just as ahistorical as to equate their gains with those of their societies. In other words, African slave traders pursued narrow interests and short-term economic calculations to the long-term detriment of their societies. It can be argued that they had little way of knowing that their activities were under-populating and under-developing “Africa,” a configuration that hardly existed in their consciousness or entered into their reckoning.

However, Europe and European merchants bear ultimate responsibility for the Atlantic slave trade. It was the Europeans who controlled and organized the trade; African merchants and rulers did not march to Europe to ask for the enslavement of their people, in fact some actively resisted it. It was the Europeans who came to buy the captives, transported them in their ships to the Americas, and sold them to European settlers who used them to work on mines and plantations, and to build the economic infrastructure of the so-called New World.

Clearly, the consequences of the Atlantic slave trade varied significantly for Africa on the one hand and Europe and the Americas on the other. While much of the historiography focuses on the economic underdevelopment of Africa and the economic development of the Americas and Europe, this needs to be prefaced by the uneven and unequal demographic impact.

As noted earlier, there’s no agreement on the numbers of captive and enslaved Africans. The late American historian, Philip Curtin in his 1969 book, *The Atlantic Slave Trade: A Census* estimated that 9,566,100 African captives were imported into the Americas between 1451 and 1870. His followers proposed slight adjustment upwards as more data became available. In much of the western media including *The New York Times’* 1619 Project, the figure that is quoted is 12.5 million.

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In a series of articles and monographs, Joseph Inikori, the Nigerian economic historian, questioned the computation methods of Curtin and his followers and the quality of the data they employed, particularly the underestimation of the slave imports of Spanish, Portuguese and French America. He suggested a 40 per cent upward adjustment of Curtin’s figures which brings the Atlantic slave exports to a total of 15.4 million, of whom about 8.5 million were from West Africa and the rest from Central Africa.

The exact number of African captives exported to the Americas may never be known, for there may be extant sources not yet known to historians or others that have been lost. Moreover, it is difficult to establish the number of captives who arrived through the clandestine or “illegal” trade, and those who died between the time of embarkation and arrival in the New World in both the “legitimate” and clandestine trade. Even harder to discern is the number of captives who died during transit to, or while at, the coast awaiting embarkation, and of those who were killed during slave wars and raids.

As I argued in my 1993 book, *A Modern Economic History of Africa*, the “numbers game,” is really less about statistical exactitude than the degree of moral censure. It is as if by raising or lowering

the numbers the impact of the Atlantic slave trade on the societies from which the captives came and on the enslaved people themselves can be increased or decreased accordingly. There is a long tradition in Western scholarship of minimizing the demographic impact of the slave trade on Africa. It began with the pro-slavery propagandists during the time of the Atlantic slave trade itself.

There is now considerable literature that shows the Atlantic slave trade severely affected the demographic processes of mortality, fertility and migration in western African. The regions affected by the slave trade lost population directly through slave exports and deaths incurred during slave wars and raids. Indirectly population losses were induced by epidemics caused by increased movements and famines brought about by the disruption of agricultural work, and flight to safer but less fertile lands.

All the available global estimates seem to agree that by 1900 Africa had a lower share of the world's population than in 1500. Africans made up 8% of the world's population in 1900, down from 13% in 1750. It took another 250 years for Africa's population to return to this figure; it reached 13.7% of the world's population in 2004. Inikori has argued that there would have been 112 million additional population in Africa had there been no Atlantic slave trade.

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This is because the slave trade also altered the age and gender structures of the remaining populations, and the patterns of marriage, all of which served to depress fertility rates. The people who were exported were largely between the ages of 16 and 30, that is, in the prime of their reproductive lives, so that their forced migration depressed future population growth. Moreover they were lost at an age when their parents could not easily replace them owing to declining fertility.

The age structure of the population left behind became progressively older, further reinforcing the trend toward lower growth. Thus population losses could not easily be offset by natural increases, certainly not within a generation or two. The gender ratio was generally 60 per cent for men and 40 per cent for women. This affected marriage structures and fertility patterns. The proportion of polygynous marriages increased, which since it may have meant less sexual contact for women than in monogamous marriages, probably served to depress fertility as well.

The fertility of the coastal areas was also adversely affected by the spread of venereal diseases and other diseases from Europe. The Mpongwe of Gabon, for instance, were ravaged by syphilis and smallpox, both brought by European slave traders. Smallpox epidemics killed many people, including those at the peak of their reproductive years, which, coupled with the disruption of local marriage customs and the expansion of polygyny, served to reduce fertility.

Thus, for Africa the Atlantic slave trade led to depopulation, depleted the stock of skills, shrunk the size of markets and pressures for technical innovation. At the same time, violence associated with the trade devastated economic activities. It has been argued that the Atlantic slave trade aborted West Africa's industrial take off.

It was not just the demographic and economic structures that were distorted by the slave trade, social and political institutions and values were also affected, so that even after slavery in the Americas was abolished, the infrastructures developed to supply captives for enslavement remained,

and were now used to expand local labour supplies to produce commodities demanded by industrializing European economies. As the great radical Guyanese historian, Walter Rodney, argued in the late 1960s the slave trade contributed to the expansion of slavery within Africa itself, rather than the other way round as propagated by Eurocentric historians.

The sheer scale and longevity of the Atlantic slave trade generated cultures of violence and led to the collapse of many ancient African states and the rise of predatory slave states. Thus it has been argued that the slave trade was one of the main sources of corruption and political violence in modern Africa. The political economy of enslavement tore the moral economy of many African societies. Contemporary Africa's crass and corrupt elites that mortgage their country's development prospects are the ignominious descendants of the slave trading elites of the horrific days of the Atlantic slave trade.

In contrast to Africa, the Atlantic slave trade and slavery in the Americas became the basis of the Atlantic economy from the 16th until the mid-19th century. It was the world's largest and most lucrative industry. The crops and minerals produced by the labor of enslaved Africans such as sugar, cotton, tobacco, gold and silver were individually and collectively more profitable than anything the world had ever seen. This laid the economic foundations of the Americas, and the economic development of Western Europe more broadly.

Inikori argues persuasively in his award winning book, *Africans and the Industrial Revolution in England*, that Africans on the continent and in the diaspora were central to the growth of international trade in the Atlantic world between the 16th and 19th centuries and industrialization in Britain, the world's first industrial nation, and the leading slave trading nation of the 18th century. As Europe became more industrialized it acquired the physical capacity, as well as the insatiable economic appetite, and the ideological armor of racism to conquer Africa.

Thus, the colonial conquest of the late 19th century was a direct outcome of the Atlantic slave trade. Instead of exporting captive labor, the continent was now expected to produce the commodities in demand by industrializing Europe and serve as a market for European manufactures, and an investment outlet for its surplus capital.

There can be little doubt the Atlantic slave trade and enslaved Africans laid the economic, cultural, and demographic foundations of the Americas. It is often not well appreciated that it was only with the end of the slave trade that European immigrants, whose descendants now predominate in the populations of the Americas, came to outnumber forced African immigrants to the Americas.

For the United States the median arrival date of African Americans—the date by which half had arrived and half were still to come—is remarkably early, about 1780s. The similar median date for European Americans was remarkably late—about the 1890s. In short, the average African American has lived far longer in the United States than the average European American.

As Walter Rodney showed in his 1972 provocative classic, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, which became the intellectual bible for my generation of undergraduates hungry to understand why Africa remained so desperately poor despite its proverbial abundant natural resources, slave labor built the economic infrastructure of the Americas and trade in produce by slave labor provided the basis for the rise of manufacturing, banking, shipping, and insurance companies, as well as the formation of the modern corporation, and transformative developments in technology including the manufacture of machinery.

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The contributions of captive and enslaved Africans are greater still. African musics, dance, religious beliefs and many other aspects of culture became key ingredients of new creole cultures in the Americas. This makes the notion of the Americas as an autogenic European construct devoid of African influences laughable. The renowned Ghanaian-American philosopher, Kwame Anthony Appiah, correctly urges us in his book, *The Lies That Bind: Rethinking Identity* to give up the idea of the West and the attendant vacuous notions of western civilization and western culture, which are nothing but racially coded euphemisms for whiteness.

The Americas including the United States have never been, and will never be an exclusive extension of white Europe, itself a historical fiction, notwithstanding the deranged fantasies of white supremacists. Brazil, the great power of South America tried a whitening project following the belated abolition of slavery in 1888, by importing millions of migrants from Europe, but failed miserably. Today, Afro-Brazilians are in the majority, although their evident demographic and cultural presence pales in comparison to their high levels of socioeconomic and political marginalization.

The Atlantic slave trade, the largest forced migration in world history, had another pernicious legacy that persists. It may not have created European racism against Africans but it certainly bred it. As Orlando Patterson demonstrated in his magisterial 1982 study, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*, before the Atlantic slave trade began slavery existed in many parts of the world and was not confined to Africans. Indeed, studies show in 1500 Africans were a minority of the world's slaves.

The tragedy for Africa is that the enslavement of Africans expanded as the enslavement of other peoples was receding. By the 19th century slavery had become almost synonymous with Africans, so that the continent and its peoples carried the historical burden of prejudice and contempt accorded to slaves and despised social castes and classes. In short, it is this very modernity of African slavery that left Africans in the global imaginary as the most despised people on the planet, relegated to the bottom of regional and local racial, ethnic, and color hierarchies.

This has left the scourges of superiority complexes by the peoples of Europe and Asia against Africans and inferiority complexes among Africans and peoples of African descent in the diaspora. This sometimes manifests itself in obsessive colorism that can degenerate into mutilations of the black body through skin lightening and other perverted aspirations for whiteness.

It is also evident in inter- and intra-group antagonisms in diaspora locations between the new and historic African diasporas, between recent continental African migrants and African Americans so painfully and poignantly captured in the documentary film by Peres Owino, a Kenyan-American film maker, *Bound: Africans vs African Americans*. The documentary attributes the antipathies, antagonism, and anxieties that shape relations between the two groups to lack of recognition of the collective traumas of each other's respective histories of slavery and colonialism.

The Atlantic slave trade and slavery left legacies of underdevelopment, marginalization, inequality, and trauma for Africans and African diasporas. This has engendered various demands for restitution and redemption. Demands for compensation to the descendants of the enslaved Africans in the Americas and Europe have been going on from the time of the abolition of slavery in the Americas

captured in the United States in the prosaic claim for “forty acres and a mule.”

In the United States, Representative John Conyers started the reparations campaign in Congress from 1989. Every year he introduced a bill calling for the creation of a Commission to Study Reparation Proposals for African Americans. Not much had been achieved by the time he retired in 2017. But in the interim seven states proceeded to issue apologies for their involvement in slavery (Alabama, Delaware, Florida, Maryland, New Jersey, North Carolina, and Virginia). Some private institutions followed suit, such as JP Morgan Chase and Wachovia, so did a growing number of universities such as Georgetown.

Claims for reparations found a powerful voice among some influential African American intellectuals and activists. One was Randall Robinson the founder of the lobbying organization, Trans-Africa, who made a compelling case in his book, *The Debt: What America Owes to Blacks*. In 2017, the incisive commentator, Ta-Nehisi Coates reignited the national debate with a celebrated essay in *The Atlantic* magazine, “The Case for Reparations.”

In 2009, shortly after President Obama assumed office, the US Senate unanimously passed a resolution apologizing for slavery. The United Nations Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent encouraged the United States Congress to look into the issue of reparations. But Opposition to reparations remained among the majority of Americans; in a 2014 survey only 37% supported reparations.

In the charged political season of 2019 and the forthcoming presidential elections of 2020, reparations has risen to the national agenda as never before. Several leading Democratic Party presidential candidates (Elizabeth Warren, Cory Booker, Tulsi Gabbard, Bernie Sanders, Kamala Harris and Beto O’Rourke) have openly embraced the reparations cause. In the meantime, the reparations debate seems to be gathering momentum in more private institutions including universities buoyed by the unveiling of some universities’ links to slavery, the radicalizing energies of the BlackLivesMatter movement, and mounting resistance to resurgent white supremacy.

The Caribbean region boasts one of the most vibrant reparations movements in the Americas. This can partly be explained by the fact that the demands are not directed to the national government as in the United States, but to Britain the former leading slave trading nation and later colonial power over some of the Caribbean islands. Also, the Caribbean enjoys a long tradition of Pan-African activism.

The call by Caribbean leaders for European countries to pay reparations became official in 2007 and was subsequently repeated by various heads of state in several forums including the United Nations. Hilary Beckles became the leading figure of the Caribbean reparations movement (he is a former colleague of mine at the University of West Indies where we both joined the History Department in 1982 and where he currently serves as Vice Chancellor). In 2013, he published his influential book, *Britain’s Black Debt: Reparations for Caribbean Slavery and Native Genocide*. In 2013, the CARICOM (Caribbean Community) Reparations Commission was created.

In Europe, the reparations movement has been growing. Black British campaigns intensified and reached a climax in 2008 during the 200th anniversary of the British abolition of the slave trade. In 2007, Prime Minister Tony Blair and London Mayor Ken Livingstone offered apologies for Britain’s participation in the Atlantic slave trade.

In 2017, the Danish government followed suit and apologized to Ghana for the Atlantic slave trade. But apologies have not found favor in countries such as Portugal, Spain, and France that participated actively in this monumental business of human trafficking. But even for Britain and

Denmark reparations have not made much headway.

African states have exhibited a conflicting attitude towards reparations. On the one hand, they have shown eagerness to call on the Atlantic slave trading nations of Europe and slave holding societies of the Americas to pay reparations to Africa. The African World Reparations and Repatriation Truth Commission established in 1999 put the figure at a staggering \$77 trillion. At the global level, the issue of reparations was a major subject at the 2001 UN World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance held in Durban, South Africa.

In 2010, the renowned Harvard scholar, Henry Louis Gates, published an essay in *The New York Times* in which he raised the thorny question of whether reparations should be extracted from Africans who were involved in the Atlantic slave trade. Few African leaders have been prepared to apologize for their societies complicity in the slave trade. In 1999 the President of Benin was among the first to apologize to African Americans. Ghana followed suit with an apology to African Americans in 2006. In January 2019, Ghana's President Nana Akufo-Addo declared 2019 "The Year of Return" to mark the 400th anniversary of the arrival of the first captive Africans in Hampton, Virginia.

The responsibility for the Atlantic slave trade falls on the shoulders of many state and elite actors in Africa, Europe, and the Americas. The major benefits of slavery in the Americas accrued to the elites and states in the Americas and Europe. This suggests differentiated levels of responsibility for reparations and redemption. African governments in the regions involved in the Atlantic slave trade must seek the redemption of apology to the historic African diasporas in the Americas through the regional economic communities and the African Union.

Only then can the process of healing and reconciliation for the sons and daughters of Africa on both sides of the Atlantic begin in earnest. Acknowledgement and mutual recognition between Africa and its diasporas should be sustained through the transformative power of education. Teaching the history of the Atlantic slave trade, slavery in the Americas, and the contributions of the historic African diasporas must be incorporated in the curriculum at every level across the continent.

Deliberate efforts must also be made by African governments and institutions to facilitate and promote multidimensional engagements with the historic diaspora. The designation of the diaspora by the African Union as Africa's sixth region must be given teeth in terms of political, economic, social and cultural rights.

But the charge goes beyond governments. The private sectors and civil societies in African nations and the diaspora must also establish mutually beneficial and empowering modalities of engagement.

There are encouraging signs of new intellectual and artistic bridges being built by the new African diaspora, who straddle in their upbringing, identities, experiences, and sensibilities the sociocultural geographies and political ecologies of continental Africa and diaspora America. A few examples will suffice.

There's no better accounting of the divergent yet intimately connected histories between Africa and America from the 18th century to the present than Yaa Gyasi's sprawling and exquisite first novel, *Homegoing*. It tells the story of two sisters, one who was sent into slavery and the other who remained in West Africa, and the parallel lives of their descendants. Another skillful exploration and painful reckoning with slavery can be found in Ayesha Harruna Attah's *The Hundred Wells of Salaga* set in a bustling slave trading market for the Atlantic slave trade.

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Recounting the travails of an enslaved African traversing across the expanse of the black Atlantic is Esi Edugyan's soaring story in her novel, *Washington Black*. Coming to the contemporary African migrants, there is Imbolo Mbue's *Beyond the Dreamers* set in New York that captures the aspirations, anxieties, agonies, assaults, and awakening by the new diaspora to the routine hypocrisies, hardships, harassments, and opportunities of American life.

For me, my commitments to the project of reconnecting Africa and its global diasporas in truly transformative and mutually beneficial ways provide the inspiration behind my research work on diaspora histories that I've been engaged in for the past two decades. This work led to the establishment of the Carnegie African Diaspora Fellowships Program that facilitates the engagement of African born academics in Canada and the United States with universities in six countries (Ghana, Nigeria, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, and South Africa). The program is being expanded into the Consortium of African Diaspora Scholars Programs that seeks to promote flows between scholars from both the historic and new diasporas from anywhere in the world to anywhere in Africa.

As I left the Commemorative Weekend in Hampton to fly back to Kenya last night, I was filled with deep sadness at what our brothers and sisters have had to endure over the last 400 years of their sojourn in the United States, but also with immense pride in what they have been able to achieve against all odds. Let me put it graphically, as I did at a training seminar recently for African diplomats: in 2017, the 40-odd million African Americans had a purchasing power of \$1.2 trillion compared to \$2.2 trillion for the 1.2 billion Africans on the continent. If African Americans were a country they would be the 17th richest country in the world, richer than Nigeria, South Africa and Egypt combined.

Surely, the continent with its abundant human and natural resources can do better, much better. Africa and the diaspora owe each other principled, not transactional, solidarity if we are to navigate the complex and unsettling demands and disruptions of the 21st century better than we fared during the last half millennium characterized by the disabling histories of slavery, Jim Crow segregation, and white supremacy backlashes in the United States, and colonialism, neocolonialism, and postcolonial authoritarianisms in Africa. To echo Kwame Nkrumah's mid-20th century dream, let's strive to make the 21st century truly ours!

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