



# Should the USA Offer Reparations to Africa for the Transatlantic Slave Trade?

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## Abstract

This article begins with background information on the international social movement for reparations for the transatlantic slave trade. I then propose that the USA ought to offer reparations, including participation in and financing of a truth commission on the slave trade; apology for the harms caused by the trade; and symbolic financial assistance to establish monuments to the slave trade, museums exhibits, and educational programs. The article concludes with a discussion of whether the USA would have the political will to offer reparations to Africa.

**Keywords** United States · Transatlantic slave trade · Truth commission · Apology · Reparations · Political will

## Introduction

Calls for reparations to Africans and people of African descent have been accelerating in the twenty-first century. This article discusses only one aspect of that call, whether the USA should pay reparations to Africa for its participation in the transatlantic slave trade.

I am the author (with my then research assistant, Anthony P. Lombardo) of *Reparations to Africa* (2008). This volume considered the claims for reparations from Western countries to Africa for the periods of the slave trade, colonialism, and post-colonial relations. It included chapters on a possible truth commission on Western-African relations; on Western apologies to Africa; and on the possibility of financial reparations to Africa. The book draws in part upon lengthy interviews with 74 Africans conducted from 2002 to 2004. Among the respondents were three members of the original Group of Eminent Persons established by the then Organization of African Unity in 1992 tasked with pursuing reparations to Africa (see below), and eight African ambassadors to the USA. The rest were either human rights activists or scholars. My thinking about reparations draws heavily on these interviews.

Since 2008, and especially during the racial reckoning since the murder of George Floyd in 2020, I have given more

thought to what ought to be my normative stance on reparations to Africa, especially for the slave trade. I propose that the following ought to be reparations offered by all Western powers, including the USA, that engaged in the slave trade. Reparations should include participation in and financing of a truth commission on the slave trade; acknowledgement of and apology for the harms caused by the trade; and symbolic financial and other assistance in establishing monuments to the slave trade, museums exhibits, and educational programs, both in Africa and the USA. The specifics of these attempts to repair past damaging relations with Africa must be negotiated with African representatives.

I begin with some background information on the social movement for reparations for the transatlantic slave trade. I then address my recommendations in detail, as well as many objections to them. I conclude with a discussion of whether the USA would have the political will to offer reparations to Africa.

## The Movement for Reparations for the Transatlantic Slave Trade

A 2005 United Nations document discusses Basic Principles of reparations. It includes in particular, “Verification of the facts and full and public disclosure of the truth,” in part as a prerequisite to a “Public apology, including acknowledgement of the facts and acceptance of responsibility.” (United Nations General Assembly 2005, Basic Principles..., par. IX,

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20, 22, (b) and (e)). Responsibility includes the possibility of financial reparations. These Basic Principles were originally produced in response to crimes against humanity, including torture, murder, and “disappearing” of victims, committed by states such as Chile and Argentina in the 1970s and 80s. The Principles’ provisions for financial reparations were meant to apply to actual survivors of maltreatment or, in case of disappearance or murder, to their immediate families. The Principles were not written to apply to historic wrongs such as the slave trade. As Moffett and Schwarz note, “The intergenerational nature of claims relating to historic injustices erodes the basis of reparations claims [in law]. Identifying a causal nexus between the continuing suffering of contemporary descendants and the original wrongdoing becomes increasingly difficult as time passes.” Legal claims are also limited by the principles of non-retroactivity; moreover, reparations under international law are not limitless (Moffett and Schwarz 2018, 251, 253–4). Nevertheless, activists frequently refer to these Basic Principles as guidelines on how to apologize, take responsibility for, and perhaps pay financial reparations for grievous past harms, including the slave trade.

At approximately the same time as the Basic Principles were first being drafted in the 1990s, the then Organization of African Unity (now African Union) established a Group of Eminent Persons whose mandate was to seek reparations to Africa. This Group was composed of several African and West Indian elders, whose activities were mainly confined to offering lectures on reparations, for example at the annual meetings of the African Studies Association (Howard-Hassmann with Lombardo 2008, 26–30). The AU’s 2004–07 strategic plan called for a debate on slavery, with the intention of declaring slavery a crime against humanity and discussing the nature of reparations (Howard-Hassmann with Lombardo 2008, 29). However, since then the AU appears to have turned to discussion of internal mechanisms of transitional justice, in the light of several wars and episodes of genocide that have sadly occurred in that continent (African Union 2019).

In September 2001, the United Nations held a World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia, and Related Intolerance in Durban, South Africa, at which there was much discussion about reparations for the slave trade (World Conference [Durban Conference] 2001). While the official, government delegations did not release a call for reparations, the parallel NGO conference did so (Howard-Hassmann with Lombardo 2008, 34–38). Unfortunately, the discussions at Durban were overshadowed by the 9/11 attacks on the USA, which occurred only a few days after the conference ended. In any case, the USA withdrew from the World Conference, objecting to its focus on Israeli-Palestinian relations and to proposals for reparations to African-Americans (Howard-Hassmann with Lombardo 2008, 38).

In December 2007, the UN General Assembly designated March 25 as an annual International Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade (United Nations General Assembly 2007). In 2009 the United Nations conducted a review of the Durban conference. That review “Recall[ed] that slavery and the slave trade, including the transatlantic slave trade ... must never be forgotten... and welcome[d] actions undertaken to honour the memory of victims” (United Nations, Outcome Document, 2009, par. 62).

The question of whether reparations should be paid to the continent of Africa for the transatlantic slave trade is still being debated (Chutel 2020). In 2019, the UN Special Rapporteur on racism, Tendayi Achiume, called on States to make reparations to victims of slavery, noting that “in one North American country,” presumably the USA, there were significant wealth disparities between whites and blacks, which presumably necessitated reparations to Black Americans (United Nations, Office of the High Commission on Human Rights 2019). The UN General Assembly conducted a further review of the Durban Declaration on the Declaration’s twentieth anniversary in September 2021. At that meeting, there was considerable discussion of the idea of reparations for the transatlantic slave trade, with many officials speaking in their favor. These speakers included the representative from China, who urged “all countries to adopt a zero tolerance policy against racism” (United Nations General Assembly 2021). Unfortunately, 38 countries, many of them Western and including the USA, boycotted this meeting because of allegations of anti-Semitism at the original Durban conference and the several follow-up meetings (World Jewish Congress 2021).

The UN Human Rights Council issued a report in 2021 as part of the UN International Decade for People of African Descent. It said that “States should initiate comprehensive processes to halt, reverse and repair the lasting consequences” of past racist actions. The “processes should be designed to seek the truth, define the harm, pursue justice and reparations and contribute to non-recurrence and reconciliation,” including “formal acknowledgement and apologies, memorialization, and institutional and educational reforms.” (United Nations, Human Rights Council 2021b, pars 62 and 64).

The CARICOM Reparations Commission (CRC) was formed by Caribbean governments in 2013 to advocate for reparations from the United Kingdom and other European governments. (CARICOM Reparations Commission, n.d.; see also Rauhut 2018) Jamaica demanded 7.6 billion pounds, the approximate sum (adjusted for inflation) that was paid to slave owners in compensation for freeing slaves in Jamaica in 1833 (Caribbean National Weekly 2021). Prime Minister Mia Mottley of Barbados said in 2020 that Britain should offer “a written and clear apology to say ‘we were wrong,’ ‘we will not do it again,’ and...we must pay recompense for what was

done” (Cowry News 2020). In lieu of material reparations, The CRC requested technological transfers and debt relief (CARICOM Ten Point Plan, n.d.). The CRC did not list any demands against the USA, however, despite US involvement in Caribbean slavery via its exports to and imports from the Caribbean colonies.

The European Parliament held a day for the abolition of the slave trade on December 2, 2020. The event included panel discussions on recognizing the past, repairing the present, and building the future (European Parliament 2020). Both France (République Française 2001) and the European Parliament (United Nations General Assembly, Human Rights Council 2021, par. 58) have declared slavery a crime against humanity. The European Commission has an anti-racism plan for 2020–2025 that includes “making amends for centuries of violence and discrimination, including through formal apologies, truth-telling processes, and reparations in various forms” (Bachelet 2020).

These actions by other Western countries suggest the USA might also wish to consider various forms of reparations to Africa. So far, the American reparations movement has focused primarily on reparations to descendants of enslaved Africans in the USA (for background on the US reparations movement, see Araujo 2017; Darity and Mullen 2020). In June 2009, both the US House of Representatives and Senate passed a resolution to acknowledge “the fundamental injustice, cruelty, brutality, and inhumanity of slavery and Jim Crow laws,” and apologized to African-Americans. But the resolution also stated that “Nothing in this resolution authorizes, supports, or serves as a settlement of any claim against the United States” (United States, Congress.gov 2009–2010). In any event, President Obama did not sign this motion, rendering it null (Johnson 2014), possibly because, as he has since stated, he thought that there would be too much white resentment and resistance to any form of reparation to African Americans (Moore 2021).

In 2021, the House of Representatives was considering H.R. 40, advocating a “Commission to Study and Develop Reparations Proposals for African Americans Act.” The commission was intended to consider a national apology and proposals for reparations, and the impact of slavery and subsequent de jure and de facto discrimination on living African Americans (United States Congress, 2019–2020; see also Human Rights Watch 2021). Notably, this Act did not call for reparations: it merely called for a commission to study the idea of reparations. (For an influential discussion of this and other recommendations for reparations to African Americans, see Coates 2014).

The Democratic Party will have to consider the likelihood of a backlash in the 2022 elections to a positive vote in Congress for a bill to establish a commission to consider reparations (Lillis 2021). In the meantime, many sub-state entities and private institutions in the USA have offered reparations to

descendants of enslaved Africans. For example, Georgetown University has identified descendants of the 272 slaves whom it sold in 1838, and offered them preferential admission (Rothman 2021). Brown University also acknowledged that it was built partly on funds from the slave trade, and planned memorials and educational initiatives on the trade (Szep 2007). Corporations have also offered reparations; JP Morgan Chase apologized for its involvement in slavery in 2005, and set up a scholarship fund for Black Louisiana students (Moffett and Schwarz 2018, 258, note 60).

Finally, it should be noted that neither activists nor political leaders who are adamant about the need for the West, including the USA, to pay reparations to Africa present the same argument about the Arab countries that took slaves from east and central Africa. Perhaps this is because descendants of slaves are less visible in the Arab world, having been integrated more fully in Arab than in Western society. Perhaps it is dangerous for those descendants to speak their minds in Arab autocracies and kingdoms. Perhaps activists and African leaders are so persuaded by the politics of identity that they are much more resentful of the white West than of “brown” Arabs. Or perhaps reparations activists know full well that Arab countries are less susceptible to moral suasion than are citizens of the democratic West. A very few Western, democratic countries have offered the vast majority of political apologies in the last 20 years (Zoodma and Schaafsma 2021).

## A Truth Commission on the Transatlantic Slave Trade

I propose a scholarly truth commission to try to arrive at an agreed narrative about who conducted the transatlantic slave trade, who endured enslavement, and how the trade affected both Africa and the West. Only such an authoritative truth commission could serve as background for negotiations on apologies and symbolic reparations from the US or any other Western country. The commission should cover the time period between the beginning of the trade and the end (approximately) of the illegal trade, generally thought to be about 1860 in the USA. It should cover all enslavement in Africa, by Arab as well as by European and American buyers, and by African enslavers and sellers as well as outsiders.

In its 2021 report on Africans and people of African descent, the UN Human Rights Council argued that a commission on the transatlantic trade should be organized by “people and communities of African descent” (United Nations, Human Rights Council 2021b, par. 63). But without participation by individuals from former slave-trading powers in its design and implementation, the commission might be perceived as biased. Such a commission might be seen as a show trial to blame the West only, resulting in “truth” as revenge rather than reconciliation.

Commissioners should, therefore, be a mix of African, Arab and Western scholars, activists, private citizens, politicians or other trusted members of society. If the commissioners were only Africans or people of African descent, this might result in adverse reactions from Western governments from whom reparations are requested. If the commissioners were only scholars, activists might object to some scholarly findings. For example, several official and unofficial representatives at the Durban conference vastly overestimated the number of enslaved people shipped across the Atlantic, sometimes citing a figure of 100 million people (Howard-Hassmann with Lombardo 2008, 62). Commissioners should be assisted by journalists and professional writers and communicators who could make the commission's finding accessible to the public. A historically accurate, narrative truth would need to be widely publicized and distributed via print, electronic and other accessible media.

The most fitting sponsor of a truth commission on the transatlantic slave trade would be a trusted international organization such as the United Nations High Commission for Human Rights. Sponsorship by the African Union might be perceived as resulting in bias, as would sponsorship by the EU or the USA alone. Possibly larger, trustworthy NGOs could be involved, or private foundations such as the Ford Foundation. The co-operation of former slave-trading powers at later stages of the full reparations process would be contingent on what they considered to be the comprehensiveness and fairness of the truth commission.

It should be noted that the UN Human Rights Council, which called for a truth commission on the transatlantic slave trade, is a body of representatives of States. Many of the State members of the Council have abysmal human rights records. In 2021 these included Cameroon, China, Cuba, Eritrea, Mauritania, Uzbekistan and Venezuela (United Nations, Human Rights Council 2021a). As of 2018, caste-based slavery still existed in Mauritania (Guardian 2018). The members of this Council may very well have had their own geo-strategic interests in pursuing accountability for the slave trade from Western powers, but not from others. They also have propaganda interests in portraying themselves as human rights protectors, rather than violators.

Within Africa itself, the island nation of Mauritius conducted a Truth and Justice Commission, whose report in 2011 contained sections on the slave trade and slavery, as well as on Indian indentured labor (Mauritius 2011). And in Europe, President Macron of France decided in 2021 to hold a "Memories and Truth" commission on France's role in colonized Algeria (Economist, May 15, 2021; June 26 2021). Thus the idea of truth commissions on various aspects of Western-African relations is gaining traction.

The first prerequisite to negotiation about any reparations from the USA for the transatlantic slave trade would have to be an agreed-upon narrative about how many African people

were shipped from Africa as slaves; who participated in the trade; who benefited; and who suffered because of it. Only on the basis of an agreed-upon truth could the USA thoroughly repair relations with African countries that are still affected by the slave trade.

A truth commission on the slave trade should discuss all actors in African enslavement, not only actors in the transatlantic trade. According to the authoritative slave trader voyages database, about 14 million people were taken from Africa in the transatlantic slave trade, while another 10 million were taken by Arab slave traders. Approximately a quarter million of these enslaved Africans disembarked in the USA between 1626 and 1875, whereas, for example, 5.1 million disembarked in Brazil between 1501 and 1875 (Slave Voyages Database 2021).

Africans also held their own slaves and participated in the transatlantic slave trade. The father of the famous nineteenth century freed slave, Olaudah Equiano, was himself the owner of many slaves in Africa (Araujo 2017, 25). The Nigerian writer Adaobi Tricia Nwaubani was shocked to learn that her great-grandfather was a slave trader, selling slaves to Cuba and Brazil after the trade was abolished by Great Britain in 1807 and the US in 1808. When her great-grandfather died, six slaves were buried alive with him (Nwaubani 2018). The American philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah is of mixed Ashanti (Ghanaian) and British ancestry. Both his British and Ashanti ancestors traded in slaves (British Museum 2022).

The truth about internal African versus American slavery is another matter that a truth commission would need to address. One argument is that internal African slavery was generally much more benign than American slavery. Enslaved people within Africa were frequently incorporated into the families of their owners and could be upwardly socially mobile. Similarly, some argue that Arab slave-owners were more likely to free their own enslaved children than were Western owners, were more likely to encourage upward mobility and manumission among slaves, and less likely to have racist views of Africans than Western owners. On the other hand, some scholars have argued that as the slave trade became more entrenched and the transatlantic trade more profitable, African slavers engaged in harsher practices, raiding other groups for slaves and selling them directly to European buyers with little concern for their well-being (On the debates about Western vs. African and Arab slavery, see Howard-Hassmann with Lombardo 2008, 71–75). It would be up to the commissioners of a truth commission on the transatlantic slave trade to sort out these arguments and recommend whether not only Western countries, but also Arab countries and possibly some African societies should acknowledge, apologize for, and offer financial reparations for their part in enslaving Africans.

Some scholars and activists argue that without the slave trade, Africa would be much more developed today. The

seminal book on this topic was by the late scholar (murdered in his native Guyana in 1980), Walter Rodney (Rodney 1972). How Africa might have developed depends in part on what kinds of societies existed in Africa before the slave trade, and how much they were affected by it. Slave trading empires, nomadic societies, agriculturalist, and entrepreneurial societies might have developed in different ways. Some parts might have developed into market economies resembling Europe, while others might have resembled pre-1949 China.

Many African countries endured the dual effects of the slave trade and colonialism, which further underdeveloped them. Nevertheless, most African countries have been independent since about 1960. Their underdevelopment is partly caused by the absence of efficient market economies, civil and political rights, the rule of law, sound bureaucracies, and institutional efficiency. Underdevelopment is also the result of internal conflict, ethnic favoritism, and corruption. While some might argue that none of these problems would have occurred were it not for the slave trade and colonialism, such an argument absolves leaders of independent African nations of any responsibility for their own underdevelopment. Indeed, some African leaders have instituted policies that actually de-developed their own societies.

Conversely, some scholars argue, the West could not have developed without the transatlantic slave trade. Here the seminal argument was by Eric Williams, later President of Trinidad and Tobago, in 1944 (Williams 1944, 1966). According to this argument, Western slave-trading states should compensate African states because the West developed while Africa was actively under-developed. It is certainly true that the trade contributed significantly to Western development. Not only the Southern, but also the Northern states of the USA relied heavily on the slave trade to produce and sell products such as cotton (Darity and Mullen 2020, 51–58). As a result, the American slave trade lasted several decades after the US government formally abolished it in 1808 (Oakes 2021).

A truth commission on the transatlantic slave trade could not possibly resolve the question of what either Africa or the West would be like had the slave trade never occurred. This is the problem of entering the realm of counter-factual history: the most a commission could do would be to present a range of hypotheses. My own view is that the slave trade contributed significantly both to African underdevelopment and Western development, but how much cannot be determined. Such tentative conclusions would not satisfy those reparationists who believe that the entirety of African underdevelopment is a result of the slave trade and colonialism, disregarding the policies and practices of post-colonial African governments. Nor would it satisfy those who believe that Western development is a form of unjust enrichment based on theft of African labor. Finally, it would not satisfy those who want compensation for their

ancestors' suffering, as well as for the inherited trauma that enslavement caused to descendants.

Too much memory can be a disease. It can result not in verification of the facts, as the UN Basic Principles on reparations asserted, but in anger and resentment, which can influence both citizens' individual decision-making and international relations. While one hopes that a truth commission and subsequent symbolic and financial reparations might overcome the moral injury to Africans of the entire relationship between the West and Africa, truth can be manipulated and used for political purposes. The best one might be able to hope for from a truth commission on the transatlantic slave trade is that its report might narrow the range of permissible lies (Ignatieff 1996, 113).

## Apologies

Western (former) slave-trading countries have a moral, if not legal, obligation to apologize to Africa. Even if a truth commission documents an Arab slave trade but Arab states refuse to apologize, that does not absolve Western states of their responsibilities. Similarly, documentation of African participation in the transatlantic slave trade does not absolve Western states. One does not normally suggest that party A should not apologize for a wrong-doing because parties B and C refuse to apologize for similar wrongdoings.

Some countries have already either apologized for the slave trade or expressed regret about it. In 2005, Brazil's then-President Luis Inacio Lula da Silva asked for forgiveness for Brazil's role in the slave trade while visiting Senegal (BBC News 2005). In 2006 British Prime Minister Tony Blair expressed "sorrow" that the slave trade had taken place, but did not apologize for Britain's participation in it (Howard-Hassmann with Lombardo 2008, 141: for more Western apologies see pp. 141–45). In 2015 during a visit to Jamaica, Prime Minister David Cameron ruled out reparations to the Caribbean for the slave trade and enslavement, urging his Jamaican counterparts to instead "move on" (BBC News 2015). In 2021 the delegation of the Netherlands told the UN Committee on Racial Discrimination that the Prime Minister had decided against an apology for Dutch participation in the transatlantic slave trade, rather choosing to express regret (United Nations, Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights 2021). Nevertheless, on July 1, 2021, the mayor of Amsterdam apologized for that city's involvement in the slave trade (Schaart 2021).

Two African Presidents have apologized for their countries' role in the trade. Ghana decided to apologize in 2006, at least in part because it believed that in doing so it could increase tourism by African-Americans. Benin's President, Mathieu Kérékou, apparently apologized in part as a means of improving his country's image after several corruption

scandals (Johnson 2014). There has also been some discussion in Nigeria as to whether traditional chiefs should apologize for their predecessors' role in the slave trade (Smith 2009).

The USA has not issued any official apology for the transatlantic slave trade. President Bill Clinton acknowledged the horrors of the slave trade in 1998 during a visit to Uganda, but did not apologize (White House 1998). On a visit to Senegal in 2003, President George W. Bush said that the trans-Atlantic slave trade had been one of the greatest crimes in history, but did not apologize (White House 2003). As discussed above, that the government of the USA has not yet seen fit to apologize for slavery even within the USA suggests that it is far less likely to apologize to foreign powers for its participation in the slave trade.

Normally, an apology consists of several parts, including acknowledgement of a wrong-doing, expression of remorse, apology for the wrong-doing and the harm it caused, and a promise of non-repetition. Frequently but not always, apologies include promises of material reparations. In the view of many Africans, an apology without material compensation is meaningless. For example, if one has wronged another person, he should pay him a goat or a cow (Howard-Hassmann with Lombardo 2008, 148–9). Such an approach to apology makes intuitive sense; without payment of the debt, the apology is meaningless.

Nevertheless, there remains the problem of how the USA might apologize for its participation in the slave trade, should it choose to do so. Normally, an apology should take place between equals. For example, the American President could apologize to an assembly of the heads of state of the African Union. Or, the President could apologize individually to the heads of state of African countries from whose territories it had been determined that large numbers of slaves taken to the USA had originated. Genetic testing, added to the already known data of where enslaved people were embarked and unloaded, could determine what countries these are. Another approach would be to have two formal apologies. One could be in the USA, so that not only the descendants of enslaved Africans, but also all other Americans, could witness the expressions of remorse and regret that the apology should entail. The second apology could take place within Africa, so that Africans could witness expressions of remorse and regret at how US participation in the slave trade disrupted their societies and impeded long-term economic progress. Each of these apologies would have to be surrounded by appropriate ritual, in an appropriately-chosen ceremonial venue, and the two parties would have to agree on the wording ahead of time. The President would have to express genuine remorse for the trade. The necessary promise of non-repetition would be easy to make, as it is over two centuries since the US outlawed the trade.

But even in the extremely unlikely event that the USA would offer an apology, financial reparations would remain a severe sticking point.

## Financial Reparations

In my earlier work, I suggested distributive economic justice as a better approach than retrospective justice to fulfil the urgent human rights needs of Africans today (Howard-Hassmann and Lombardo 2008, 184). I argued that all Africans are entitled to enjoy a life free of poverty, whether or not the causes of that poverty lie in the distant past of the slave trade. This requires some redistribution of the world's resources, for example in the form of foreign aid. In suggesting this, I was referring to the economic and social rights protected by the 1966 International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (United Nations General Assembly 1966). The USA, however, has never ratified that Covenant. Nor does American political culture view economic security as a matter of right, as do many Western social democracies. In any event, white and other Americans may have little sense of obligation to people living in Africa, as opposed to African-Americans.

If the USA were to agree to financial reparations, critics might ask who should receive them. Yet as noted above, it is now possible through genetic research and research on slave-trading ships to determine from which African countries the bulk of American slave-traders' captives originated (e.g. Ghana, Nigeria, Senegal or Angola). The USA could then compensate those countries, or organizations within them. Alternately, it could pay into a fund administered by the African Union.

Critics might argue that the USA has already partially compensated for its participation in the slave trade via its efforts to suppress the trade after declaring it illegal in 1808. Moreover, critics could argue that Western countries have already compensated for the slave trade via foreign aid. In the 50 years before 2009, over \$US 1 trillion in development-related aid was transferred to Africa from all rich countries (not only the USA) (Moyo 2009 xviii). Added to that has been much US "aid" for military purposes, to prop up allies in the battle for influence against the Soviet Union during the Cold War, and against China more recently.

Much aid to Africa has been misused or stolen. When billions are dissipated by corrupt governments or deposited into safe bank accounts in foreign countries, there seems no reason to contribute more cash to the flow. Nigeria alone is estimated to have lost \$157 billion to corruption in the period 2007–17 (Ocheje 2018, 368). Whether reparations or aid, the same problems of mismanagement, lack of transparency, and corruption emerge. These problems also occur with regard to debt cancellation, as recommended by the CARICOM committee on reparations. Governments in Africa that have benefited from such cancellation have frequently run up new debts, or followed the cancelled debt with new swathes of foreign aid, resulting in even more debt (Moyo 2009, 26–27).

On the other hand, not all foreign aid is wasted. Carefully targeted aid could assist in commemorative and educational projects about the slave trade in Africa as well as the USA. The USA could donate funds to maintain African museums and historic sites of the trade. It could also fund educational programs to study the transatlantic trade, or fund a truth commission on the slave trade, as suggested above. In 2007, the 200th anniversary of its own abolition of the slave trade, the United Kingdom embarked on a program of education about, and memorialization of, the trade. Its Heritage Lottery Fund financed 280 separate projects, many in museums or as memorials, mostly in the United Kingdom but some also in Africa itself (Oldfield 2012, 248).

Similar programs financed by the USA would not be costly, but would result in acknowledgement of the horrors of the transatlantic slave trade, a form of (quasi) apology. Possibly funds formerly earmarked as foreign aid might also be rebranded, or added to, as a means of symbolic financial reparations. The small amounts dedicated to this type of reparation would not satisfy advocates who argue for reparations in the billions, even trillions, of dollars. For example, a “Truth Commission Conference” of private individuals in Accra, Ghana in 1999 determined that the rather magical number of \$777 trillion was owed as reparations (Howard-Hassmann and Lombardo 2008, 28). An African author/activist demanded \$100 trillion (Osabu-Kle 2000, 348: for a summary of various estimates of reparations owed, see Craemer 2018, 705) No country is likely to pay such huge and rather fanciful amounts as reparations, certainly not the USA.

### Will the USA Offer Reparations to Africa?

Despite my recommendations above, I think it very unlikely that the US government would offer reparations of any kind to Africa.

My first recommendation is that the USA should participate in, and partially finance, a truth commission about the transatlantic slave trade. But why would the USA, as a former slave-trading power, accept such a truth commission? Perhaps it would do so for pragmatic reasons, such as to improve relations with African countries, especially if the politics of resentment were mobilized to encourage African populations to become more anti-American or anti-Western. African anger at the West for the slave trade is compounded by decades of colonization by the UK, France, Portugal, Germany, and Spain, as well as by post-colonial relations. African activists tend to blame the West, rather than other exploitative regions such as the Soviet Union, the Arab world, and in recent decades China, for the seemingly debilitating economic policies that are frequently imposed upon them without any participation or representation on their part, including the current era of economic globalization. Indeed, to some Africans

globalization is an “airborne disease,” typifying the helplessness that many Africans feel in their dealings with the West (Howard-Hassmann 2009).

Thus, a truth commission might be seen as one means to overcome “civilizational” conflicts, so-called (Huntington 1996), and build trust of the US government among Africans and African slave descendants. It might partially overcome the moral injury to Africans of the entire relationship between the USA and Africa. Funding and participating in a truth commission would be an easy, symbolic way to show the USA is sincere about reparations.

My second recommendation is that the USA should apologize for its participation in the slave trade. Such an apology might partially alleviate the collective national trauma (Lerner 2019) allegedly suffered by African nations as a result of the transatlantic slave trade. This trauma is compounded by European colonialism and post-colonial relations. The post-colonial period includes proxy wars between the USA and the Soviet Union fought on African territories; Western, and especially US, support for various African dictators during the cold war; and exploitation of African resources in the present. That the Soviet Union participated in proxy wars, and that nowadays Chinese mining companies are as likely to exploit Africa as are Western, does not obviate the responsibility of the West in the centuries-long despoliation of Africa. Nor is the USA absolved by the fact that it did not have any colonies in Africa; it was an ally of the European powers who did.

In any event, it is extremely unlikely that any US President would apologize for the transatlantic slave trade in the foreseeable future. Many American citizens might oppose an apology on the grounds that neither they nor their ancestors had anything to do with the slave trade: this was the attitude of many British citizens (Cunningham 2008). As for the many Americans descended from fairly recent immigrants or immigrants themselves, they could also argue that their ancestors had nothing to do with the trade. Against this is the principled stance espoused by the late Kenyan-American scholar and member of the AU’s Group of Eminent Persons, Ali Mazrui, who in an interview with me in 2002 said “if you don’t deny your asset side [of being an American citizen] why should you deny your liability side?” (Howard-Hassmann and Lombardo 2008, p. 33). That is to say, an individual who enjoys the benefits of being a citizen of the USA, which accumulated its wealth in large part because of its involvement in the slave trade, should also therefore accept their responsibility to repair relations with an Africa that was underdeveloped because of the trade.

My third recommendation is that the USA should pay limited symbolic financial reparations to Africa, to promote memorialization of and museums exhibits and education about, the slave trade. Again, though, Americans are very unlikely to support financial reparations to Africa, even the symbolic ones I suggest. The percentage of white Americans supporting

reparations even to African-Americans is very low. A 2019 poll revealed that 73% of non-Hispanic African-Americans, but only 16% of non-Hispanic white Americans, thought that the USA should make cash payments to African-Americans descended from slaves (Younis 2019). White Americans are more attracted by the idea of fairness to Black Americans than by the idea of reparations for past harms. They are most opposed to direct financial reparations to African-Americans (Reichelmann and Hunt 2021, 7). Given white Americans' attitudes to financial reparations even to their Black fellow citizens, it is unlikely that there would be much, if any, support for financial reparations to Africa.

Thus, it is unlikely that the USA will engage in reparative measures for its participation in the transatlantic slave trade in the near or even distant future. There are much more urgent matters to attend to in American-African relations. The most important is climate change, followed by persistent and seemingly intractable African poverty. In the short term, the USA is preoccupied with the Covid-19 pandemic and the lack of vaccines in Africa. These contemporary problems are far more pressing than a demand for reparations for past activities.

Nor does there appear to be any compelling strategic reason for the USA to offer reparations to Africa. Both resentment and perceived (inter) national trauma are easily manipulable by political leaders and by insurgent groups, whether or not their grievances are based on actual historical fact. This might suggest that the USA should take symbolic measures to ameliorate such resentment, in the interests of mutually-beneficial, if not actually cordial, relations between the USA and African nations. The question, however, is whether African resentment has any serious effect on American interests, rather than being an ephemeral phenomenon that such a powerful nation as the USA can easily ignore. No world power is pressuring the USA to offer reparations, and African nations themselves are not strong enough as a group to threaten the USA with any serious consequences if it does not repair relations damaged by a trade in human beings that, however horrendous, officially ended over two centuries ago.

On the other hand, resentment of the West by Africans and their leaders might in the future harm normal diplomatic, military and trade relationships; for example, if such resentment resulted in denial of naval bases in favor, perhaps, of the Chinese. The new multipolar world of international relations might give African leaders more room to maneuver than they had in the Cold War era. In such a case, the USA might consider using the carrot of symbolic reparations rather than the stick of economic and military threats, to further its interest in Africa.

In principle, all political entities and all citizens should be willing to offer reparations for activities that would now be considered horrendous crimes, even if they occurred in the far distant past. But few if any political entities make their decisions based on principle. Demands for reparations emanating

from African countries, from the United Nations, and from activists, might well be seen as often hypocritical attempts to extract even more from the USA than it already gives in foreign aid, even when that aid is stolen or wasted. Thus, the movement for reparations, including the normative suggestions I have made in this paper, may simply be wishful thinking. The USA and its citizens can easily ignore such thinking, no matter how many UN General Assembly resolutions, official opinions from UN human rights bodies, and international conferences advise the USA to offer reparations. The most one can hope for is that perhaps in a less politically and racially fractious future, the US government will agree to offer reparations not only to its own Black citizens, but also to the continent that it has so grievously wronged over several centuries.

## Declarations

**Conflict of Interest** The author declares no competing interests.

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