Global Anti-Blackness and the Legacy of the Transatlantic Slave Trade

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Symposium Report
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Carr Center for Human Rights Policy
Co-sponsored by UNESCO and the U.S. Special Representative for Racial Equity and Justice at the Department of State

This symposium focuses on the legacy of the Transatlantic Slave Trade, coinciding with the tenth year of the UN’s International Decade of Peoples of African Descent and the UN’s annual International Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade on March 25th.

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The Carr Center for Human Rights Policy at Harvard Kennedy School, alongside UNESCO and the U.S. Special Representative for Racial Equity and Justice at the Department of State, Desirée Cormier Smith, presented a major event on global efforts to prevent modern slavery and combat anti-Black racism in March 2024.

The Global Anti-Blackness and the Legacy of the Transatlantic Slave Trade Symposium coincided with the tenth and final year of the UN’s International Decade for People of African Descent and the UN annual International Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade.

The Symposium consisted of several moderated panels covering the status of global racism and anti-Blackness in the twenty-first century, considering questions of the modern legacy of the Transatlantic Slave Trade, reparative justice, the work of international organizations to improve civil rights, and more.

In this summary report, you will read excerpts of the conversations that occurred during each of the three panels, alongside closing remarks from our distinguished guests, Epsy Campbell Barr and Desirée Cormier Smith. What follows has been edited for space and clarity and captures much, but not all, of the panel discussions during the Symposium. We hope you take the time to engage with this publication and learn from the stories that were shared that day.

To our panelists and attendees, please accept our most grateful thanks for your part in making this Symposium truly memorable, impactful, and gratifying.

Sincerely,

Mathias Risse
Faculty Director, Carr Center
1. Carr Center directors Mathias Risse and Maggie Gates with Desirée Cormier-Smith, Special Representative for Racial Equity and Justice, U.S. Department of State
2. Mariagrazia Squicciarini, Chief of Executive Office, Social and Human Sciences Sector at UNESCO
3. Harvard Kennedy School professor Cornell William Brooks addressing attendees
4. Audience members during panel discussion
5. Keynote speaker Siddarth Kara, discussing research from his new book, Cobalt Red
6. Opening remarks from Harvard Kennedy School Dean Doug Elmendorf
The Legacies of Transatlantic Slavery

Panel Overview

The legacies of the Transatlantic Slave Trade continue to impact the world profoundly. Persistent issues include structural racism, stark economic disparities, and cultural trauma among people of African descent. Structural inequalities, discriminatory practices, and racial injustice can all be traced back to this historical atrocity. The ongoing struggle for racial equity, reparative justice, and acknowledgment of historical injustices reflect the enduring challenges stemming from the Transatlantic Slave Trade.

During this discussion, panelists focused on ways to address these issues and how to encourage international commitment to justice, education, and dismantling systemic barriers working against members of the African diaspora.

Leslie Alexander
Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.
Professor of History,
Rutgers University

Dominique Day
Chair, United Nations Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent

Sandy Placido
Assistant Professor of History,
Rutgers University–Newark

MODERATED BY
Roeshana Moore-Evans
Executive Director,
Harvard and the Legacy of Slavery Initiative
Key Takeaways:

1. The legacy of enslavement still runs deep, through casual and unchecked racism in public forums and the normalization of white supremacy and anti-Blackness throughout our societies.

2. Reworking the terminology that we use when speaking about history can help correct the narrative. Rather than calling it the “Transatlantic Slave Trade,” which implies that these people were already enslaved, historians are shifting it to “The Transatlantic Trade in Humans” to emphasize the reality that these individuals were born as humans and free people and became enslaved through an immoral and inhumane system.

3. Having difficult conversations is key toward building solidarity in diverse communities, acknowledging that we have not been taught a truthful version of history but one that legitimizes injustices—and having these conversations will encourage more people to think differently about history.

Q:

Which aspects of your personal life inspired you to pursue racial justice and this field of work?

Dominique Day {DD}:

Our work is constantly informed by our personal journey and the ways that people impact us. I’ve spent a lot of time having conversations about affirmative action thrust upon me. I remember attending a cocktail party once [where the attendees were] debating my very existence. That space that white supremacy creates and reinforces in the elite of our society was introduced to me by surprise.

That space of being asked to justify my existence, not as an actual inquiry, but as something to talk about while having a drink, gave me not just a look at casual racism, but also a reminder of how deeply normalized white supremacy and anti-Blackness are in our society. The idea of Black folks as labor and not leadership was perfuming the air all around, and it was constantly being reinforced.

Leslie Alexander {LA}:

So rarely do we have the opportunity to talk about the relationship between our personal lives and what we do professionally. As a sophomore in undergraduate school, I took my first African American Studies class. I had gone to college thinking I was going to be a lawyer, but one of the first lectures in that class was about the Transatlantic Slave Trade. It was mesmerizing, riveting, profoundly traumatic, and enraging, but I came away with a distinct feeling of “why has no one ever told me this before?”

I didn’t know at the time how people became professors, and I had not even imagined the possibility of getting a PhD and becoming a professor, but I knew I needed to be part of something where I was working toward creating a society where we no longer had generations of people who knew this struggle.
As for my first impetus toward becoming a scholar and activist, I want to acknowledge my parents. I think they did play a significant role in that. Every night, we sat down to dinner and discussed what was happening in the world. That played a profoundly important role in creating an environment that made us feel we had a right to an opinion, a voice, and we had a responsibility to create and shape the society we want to live in. It’s up to the individual person to help change and mold society. ■

Sandy Placido {SD}:

As the daughter of migrants from the Dominican Republic in the Bronx, today I identify as Afro-Latina, but when I was growing up, I didn’t have that terminology for it. I grew up in a community where all my neighbors were Black and Latinx, but when you turned on the TV, everyone was white. As a bilingual young child whose parents were working class migrants, trying to situate yourself in the United States was very hard. It wasn’t until graduate school that I learned enough vocabulary to situate my experience.

When I was young, there was a synergy and solidarity in my community. Earlier in my career, I was working as a community organizer in Washington Heights, where many people were facing deportation due to the way their immigration status intersected with the criminal justice system. In that role, it was important to make the connection with the larger struggle of mass incarceration in the country.

Being the daughter of people who are migrants and being part of a diaspora has helped me to be more sensitive to the questions we see of migration diasporas, and ultimately of the Transatlantic Trade in Humans. As someone who is the daughter of migrants, those themes of diaspora, cultural transmission, what gets left behind, and how people preserve their language and traditions have become very important to my work.

How do you engage with the Transatlantic Slave Trade in your professional endeavors?

{DD} In my work at the United Nations, I am often confronted with explicit connections to the Transatlantic Slave Trade and its subsequent legacies that are very robust and direct.

When my team went to Peru… mango growers there told us that the mangoes were brought to Peru during the Transatlantic Slave Trade, with the technology brought across the Middle Passage. Africans were tending to mango plants as they were trafficked across the Atlantic Ocean, and to this day, the people who grow the mangoes in Peru are growing them the way their ancestors had—without irrigation and electricity.

These mango growers want us to help them be able to produce mango jellies to sell at farmers market—they are trying to access an economy that is barely half a step above where they are. It is in that space where you can see a direct legacy of the Transatlantic Trade… that space came to define for me what it looks like to have a present-day legacy that no one really thought about. We also did a county visit in the United Kingdom, where there is a massive amount of research and data on the exploitation of Blackness. One thing that is done in the UK is what is called joint enterprise prosecution, where they prosecute a group of children around a murder by looking at text chains and the people who were on that chain, or investigating who are making music videos together and if their rap lyrics suggested violence. These children were all being gathered, allowing them to be prosecuted for murder or accessory to murder.

One child who was accepted into a law university was on a text chain where he had said that someone should do something about a recent murder—and this was used in a prosecution against him, saying he was a gangster, a thug, and so on. This method was being used to capture a huge number of Black kids in public housing, showing the deep intractability of unfair prosecutions. Using rap lyrics and artistic expression as de facto evidence of criminal liability—this didn’t strike people as fundamentally unfair, illegitimate, or compromising of the legitimacy of the justice system. And that is a legacy: categorizing Black people as dangerous, criminal, and suspect, and as needing to be kept from rising too high, and the overall normalization of that—just like the ways we normalized race, racism, hierarchy in the Transatlantic Trade. ■

{LA} Even though I don’t write and research specifically on the Transatlantic Trade, so much of the work I do comes back to the trade in humans. What this boils
down to is the ideology that came into being in order to justify the institution of slavery.

Using the terminology of “The Transatlantic Trade in Humans” is a mouthful, but historians are trying to use that terminology to emphasize that this was about “human” back into the terminology. It’s always important to reinsert human and were somehow born as slaves, when in reality they were born as humans and free people, and that it was only through a grotesque, immoral, and inhumane system that they became enslaved.

It’s always important to reinsert “human” back into the terminology to emphasize that this was about the buying and selling of human beings. When you remove “human” from the terminology, you can forget we are talking about human beings with lives, families, and souls, who were bought, sold, traded, and commodified generation after generation strictly for the purpose of profit. This is a system that went on for centuries—it is one of the greatest human atrocities that has ever happened in human history. It enslaved and killed tens of millions of people—it’s important we put “people” at the center of that.

It flew in the face of all basic human morality, and an entire ideology had to come into being to justify and perpetuate it. It is important in Massachusetts that we emphasize the fact that it was Massachusetts that was the place in the British colonies that first legalized the institution of slavery in 1641, ironically in a document called the Body of Liberties. There’s one stipulation in the Body of Liberties that describes what liberty looks like for everyone else, but describes that there is a group of people that are enslaveable, whom they call “strangers” and use passive language such as “those who are sold to us”—not “those who we buy.” Using the terminology of “strangers” tells a lot of the psychological distancing between us and them; it is coded language, and people don’t realize that “strangers” means Africans.

From that first piece of legislation unfolds a whole chain of policy practices, legal statutes, and ideological beliefs that emerged to under-gird and justify the existence of this system. It is predicated on the idea that people of African descent are not fully human, we are trading slaves—not humans—and we are imprisoning non–human peoples. We still live with the legacy of that today.

Later on, it became “this is an inherently dangerous and criminal race of people against which we need to defend and protect ourselves”—this thinking is rooted in the ideology of the Transatlantic Trade in Humans, and it exists upon the insistence of African inferiority. It is an ideology that does not go away with the blink of an eye or the passage of a very flawed 13th Amendment, or even 14th and 15th Amendments, it doesn’t go away with legal abolition of slavery on a global scale, and it does not go away with the overthrow of colonial forces on the African continent and elsewhere around the world. It’s baked into the American pie, the global pie—this idea that African peoples are inherently inferior, and it has become a toxic contagion that has not been able to be overthrown through legislation or any other practices. It is still so deeply ingrained in the psyche, not just of non–African peoples, but in the consciousness of African and African-descended peoples as well. That is the work we have to do: to transform what we actually believe about the humanity of Africans.

The reigning order of the world developed historically there, with the colonization of the Americas—and enslavement was the literal foundation of global capitalism. The Caribbean is ground zero of all of that. The amount of silver and gold mined out of Latin America bankrolled the Iberian Peninsula, and the English caught on to that and jumped on the bandwagon in the 1600s. European powers realized it was a business opportunity, and this ideology has persisted because the world still loves capitalism. For this financial system to run, you need the justification for it and classes of people to exploit who will die for the dollar. In our global economy, it is still very much the darker–skinned nations, our comrades in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, who are exploited.

What are some effective ways to promote solidarity in diverse communities?

{ DD } Solidarity is a process and an investment. It requires awkward conversations and acknowledging that we have not been taught a truthful version of history; instead, we have been taught a history that
“Solidarity is a process and an investment. It requires awkward conversations and acknowledging that we have not been taught a truthful version of history.”

— Dominique Day

legitimizes all sorts of injustice. There is a legal justification in the United States and overseas that the enslavement of people was a business necessity until it wasn’t. We are living the realities of that history without ever knowing the truth of it, and I didn’t learn about any of it in school. Black folk identify ourselves with the struggle of our ancestors. Having the awkward conversations—not that it will necessarily win you awards or make you friends—means that more people will be thinking differently about this.

When I was in law school 20 years ago, critical race theory was dismissed and not called a legitimate academic theory. I’m not going to say discourse is the solution to everything, but saturating our culture with the truths of anti-Blackness and pushing a correction of history actually can create space for meaningful cross-cultural solidarity and dismantling of systemic racism.

{ LA } We have a tendency to think about the struggle from a very U.S.-centered perspective, and as long as we continue to do that, we are going to lose. We need coalition building, transnational solidarity, and pan-African solidarity, and it needs to become more expansive to build coalitions with other marginalized and oppressed people around the globe. We have to do that hard work. What’s interesting is that Black activists in the 19th century very clearly understood their struggle as a global one and moved beyond the boundaries of just people of African descent. They were in solidarity with some of the revolutionary movements happening in that moment, and had an idea of what broad solidarity movements could look like.

One of the earliest collections of free Black organizations all called themselves variations of “The African Society.” If you look in the constitutions of these organizations where they lay out the rationale for the organization itself, they start with a critique of colonialism and the attempted genocide of the Indigenous population. They don’t just begin with their own enslavement, but first acknowledge whose land they’ve been enslaved upon and the holocaust of the process of settler colonialism. They start with that sense of solidarity with the Indigenous people. Why can’t we do that? We must be thinking in broader, coalitional ways with other oppressed peoples. That does not mean we need to marginalize or sideline the struggle of our own people, but we must open spaces to interact with others with whom we are in solidarity.

{ SP } Speaking to the power of discourse and the power of writing and publishing: so many activists I research from the 19th and 20th centuries explain how important this really is. Historically, there were many conferences happening across Africa and Asia to talk about the themes of colonization and decolonization—there was the Tri-Continental Conference in Cuba in 1966 that did just that. But, more broadly, simply having a five-minute conversation with someone about these issues is an essential part of our political education. We have to educate ourselves, talk to each other, and figure out what to do together.

In what ways do you think public and private sectors, alongside higher education institutions and government, can work together to dismantle barriers?

{ SP } Dismantling barriers requires redistribution: providing funding, and not being stingy about it. If you are at the administrative level and you hear a student group of young Black, Latinx, or Asian students demanding more faculty of color or more diverse curriculum, you need to recognize that higher education is crucial to movements. With the rise of the far right who want to ban books, increase censorship, and cut off funding—we need to stand up to that and let our commitment to racial and social justice is what it looks like to create meaningful allyship and equitable coalition building. We must work with anyone and everyone who is on board with creating a global vision of the kind of society we want to live in.
people know it’s not scary or bad to talk about this history.

We should not be afraid of the truth. Providing the historical facts and describing the actual reality is essential. The only way to confront something is to face it. We need to get over the fear of facing the reality and the truth, even if that reality destabilizes someone’s sense of self, security, or resources.

Another important part of this is bringing communities of people together so we can get to know each other and start imagining together. We need to consciously and intentionally bring communities of people together who typically operate in their silos and get them in conversation with one another. One thing academics can do to help is to make the work we do more accessible, relatable, and translatable to the broader public.

“‘We need to get over the fear of facing the reality and the truth, even if that reality destabilizes someone’s sense of self, security, or resources.’”
—Sandy Placido

“‘If everyone commits to showing up and doing something, we can begin to make meaningful change.’”
—Leslie Alexander

It feels overwhelming to fight on all these different terrains as just one person. But remember: you just need to do something. Join an organization, attend a rally—wherever you are, just commit to doing something. Recognize that we can’t change everything all at once, and one person alone can’t change everything. If everyone commits to showing up and doing something, we can begin to make meaningful change. We just have to be willing to play the long game.

{LA} As for higher education institutions, we need academics to climb down from their ivory towers and become willing to have meaningful conversations that bring together academics, policymakers, and activists that can have a tangible impact. Sometimes, we do need to just do the talking—that’s where we get the ideas to bring together a Symposium like this, by speaking things into existence.

I would like to encourage academics to have the courage to speak in relatable words and be willing to think about how we can talk to each other and imagine the kind of society that we want.

But most importantly, we have to continue to struggle, wherever we are. We’re fighting the many-headed hydra, and it feels like every time we chop away at one head, another head pops up.
The historical injustices of the Transatlantic Slave Trade and colonialism resulted in systemic violence, exploitation, discrimination, and vast socio-economic disparities, negatively impacting Black people globally. Addressing these issues through reparative justice initiatives is a way to acknowledge and rectify the lasting impacts on Africans and people of African descent.

Does the international community have the political will and ability to use multilateral frameworks and institutions to protect and advance human and civil rights for people of African descent and members of other marginalized racial and ethnic communities? In this discussion, the panelists explored creative ideas for redressing past and present injustices.

Panel Overview

The African Diaspora and Post-Colonial Reparative Justice

Charity Clay
Research Fellow, The Hutchins Center for African & African American Research, Harvard University

Tiffany Florvil
Associate Professor of History, University of New Mexico

Mariagrazia Squicciarini
Chief of Executive Office, United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)

MODERATED BY
Alex Johnson
Deputy Director of U.S. Foreign Policy, Open Society Foundations
Key Takeaways:

1. Reparations and reparative justice do not simply encompass financial reparations—there is also a need to repair and recover from the psychological trauma that endures to this day from the legacy of enslavement and colonialism, while restoring the humanity and dignity of Africans and African-descended people.

2. Colonization and capitalism are inherently linked and marked by controlling the resources and the genius of the people in the land who understand how those resources can be the most valuable, while locking them out of participating in these economic markets.

3. Parallel to our work in raising awareness on the history of enslavement and its consequences that are still present today, we must also look toward the future to ensure that we do not create new avenues for discrimination, such as in new developments in artificial intelligence.

Q:
Can you speak to the possible opportunities that exist within the practice of reparative justice?

Tiffany Florvil {TF}:
Reparative justice for me means a variety of things. In the German context, reparative justice has a lot to do with acknowledging the colonial past in Germany. One aspect of German reparation in particular is regarding the repatriation of bones from the Namibian genocide that occurred between 1904–1908.

For Black Germans who were living in Germany from the 1970s and onwards, there has been an effort to repatriate those bones to Namibia and Tanzania. Many of the bones from the genocide were shipped to scientific universities in Germany. Bringing our ancestors back and honoring those Namibian cosmologies and burial practices are all reparative justice. Now, we have many more people pushing for a reckoning with colonialism. Germany had colonies not solely on the African continent, but also in the Pacific.

Black German activists and Tanzanian activists in Germany are fighting for reparative understandings of colonialism and the repatriation of ancestors.

Charity Clay {CC}:
When we think about reparations and reparative justice today, we have to be committed to understanding the magnitude and the various ways that suffering existed, has existed, and can continue to exist, as well as the impacts that it has, so we can make sure that the initiatives that are created to repair are actually targeted to where the harm is.

There is often a sole focus on monetary reparations, but that doesn’t consider the concept of psychological reparations. When we talk about repairing, healing, restoring, and recovering, there’s this idea that you can simply throw a bag of money at it and
“When we talk about repairing, healing, restoring, and recovering, there’s this idea that you can simply throw a bag of money at it and have everything be absolved. But what can you really restore?”

— Charity Clay

have everything be absolved. But what can you really restore? Some of the things I lost, mentally, I may not be able to restore.

Approaching this as a data scientist, I think about: what is the damage that has been done? How has it been done? How does it impact us? How do we stop continual issues? We can’t have post-traumatic—anything if we are still experiencing trauma. Instead, two things are going to happen without considering psychological reparations: 1) people who have committed the harm will feel absolved; and 2) when it doesn’t work, is there anything that is going to give you a deeper, internal repair?

We must also make an effort to understand how communities are harmed in ways that expand beyond our own localities. The United States is not the center of the diaspora, and there are many ways that this internalized anti-Blackness manifests amongst us that are direct consequences of the legacies of colonization and enslavement. We need to understand what it is that we need to repair: we need to build connectivity and understanding, despite our location. We have a lot of repairing to do within the way that we see each other, and the problem of how we don’t see ourselves in each other. There is difficult but essential work to be done to talk about the forces that caused this harm, how it has impacted us, how we address the healing that we need, and how we set up better infrastructures that allow us to stop engaging in the current infrastructures that are harmful to us, such as the public education, healthcare, and criminal justice systems.

In the process of reparations, we must recover the humanity and dignity of Africans and African-descended people. Systems of oppression allow everyone else to be mediocre and still be recognized, while there is an undue pressure on Black youth that they must be amazing to be recognized as worthy. That’s a conversation I have with my students, who have a constant sense of “will I ever be good enough? Can I be good enough?” On the campuses of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), multi-billion-dollar imperialist-backed companies want to recruit Black excellence, so we start seeing our students wrapping their sense of self in being in service to those capitalist structures. It’s critical that we acknowledge that those are the entities that have the influence to change policy.

I refuse to believe, in their enslavement, that my ancestors ever believed they were less than human. There has to be a parallel process of reckoning with white folks that is normally left out of the conversation about reparations; we still face questions like, “how can these formerly enslaved people be in service to white dominance?”

Mariagrazia Squicciarini {MS}:

Before we can work toward finding solutions, we need to better define the problems. In my role with UNESCO, I am always looking out for solutions, but the history of enslavement and its modern-day consequences are very complex problems. Simply looking at the cost of racism can be jarring: in the United States alone, the effects of racism cost $16 trillion USD over the last 20 years. If the U.S. was to improve on inclusion across key areas of discrimination, we see estimates of a $5 trillion USD boost to the economy over the next year.

Going back to the complexity of the problem, in addition to fostering concrete action, we want to deconstruct the way in which Black individuals are perceived and the inherent racism in all of us. At UNESCO, we have done this work for 30 years. The first part of this project is finding the hard evidence and mobilizing the researchers. History teaches us how we can understand the present and the future.

“I refuse to believe, in their enslavement, that my ancestors ever believed they were less than human.”

— Charity Clay
The other thing we are trying to do around the world is raising awareness of the history and the legacy of enslavement, as the consequences of enslavement are still very much present today. We are also trying to shift the narrative about African and African-descended peoples to how they have been active agents of change. Now, we need to think about what is going to happen next, such as making sure that new developments in artificial intelligence will not create new avenues for discrimination in the future.

In many ways, we are not in a post-colonial moment, and are in fact still experiencing colonialism through a variety of avenues. Can we discuss the current perception of colonialism, the potential remedies, and the stigmatization of even using the term “reparations” in the context of reparative justice initiatives?

**[MS]** If you do wrong, you must repay. At UNESCO, we launched a program that created a network of places of history and memory. Memories about this part of history need to be heard and told. The idea of this network is to use the memory to empower local communities that have been impacted. Leveraging the tools, education, culture, and the arts to foster memories helps us to move forward. This is key in fighting these kinds of battles, by approaching the issue from a number of perspectives. What we are trying to do is bring in people who are active in this campaign against global anti-Blackness and can talk, share their experiences, and synergize ideas with one another.

**[CC]** I have been fortunate because I’ve been able to travel through the African continent and diaspora to get a better first-hand understanding of the impact of colonization and colonialism in a way that is not accessible in the United States. The U.S.’s political and socioeconomic structures comes from British colonization and early capitalistic greed—a slaveocracy. Sometimes we forget that the United States’ nation-state came from European colonialism, and we are taught as Black people to consider ourselves in some way American.

As folks who know that we’re not Indigenous or fully Indigenous to the U.S., we don’t have a framework to know what it is like to be controlled in your own homeland. I’ve had to leave the U.S. to see what that looks like. Currently, the work that I do looks at coastal Black communities and tourism. Tourism is starting to be presented as an aspect of reparations for Black communities: open up your community to tourism, and that’s how you will repair the historical injustices. And this is done instead of allowing Black communities access to the market. There’s a specific tourism in places like New Orleans that is selling a specific type of African Black culture that requires a permanent underclass of Black people in the community to fuel it.

Colonization is fundamentally destroying the earth, it’s destroying the ancestral and historical ways that we had once communed with land and each other. There’s been a focus so long on urban struggles, especially in the United States, focusing on what is going on in city centers. But if we look at the impacts of colonization on the environment, on agricultural infrastructure, on spiritualities that require connections with land, we will understand that colonialism is the biggest threat to the Earth. This shifts the conversation where we’re not solely fighting for things that only benefit us. And that’s different from saying, “how can the uplifted Black people be in service of industry?” Instead, we are acknowledging the importance of restoring the ways we have historically been able to steward land. You have to get rid of colonialism in order to repair the land.

Colonization is fundamentally about controlling resources and the genius of the people in the land who understand how those resources can be the most valuable. The term “reparation” is bothersome to people who believe it requires them to admit personal fault—but it may require that. Personally, I’m not concerned with the apologies. I do think that the amount of reckoning that it takes for people to admit what they’ve done is a conversation that people don’t want to have. I don’t know if using a different word would make the conversation any more comfortable. Right now, some of the conversations about reparations are being leveraged to create anti-African and anti-Black identities, or an erasure of Indigenous oppression. I don’t know how we got here, but we do need to be intentional about how we’re using the term.

“Memories about this part of history need to be heard and told.”

—Mariagrazia Squicciarini
“There’s a reckoning with German colonialism and how it wasn’t as ‘bad’ as other colonizers, but no one gets a gold star for colonialism. It’s all bad.

— Tiffany Florvil

{TF} The ecological implications of enslavement are not only the continuing after effects of slavery and colonialism, but of wars and genocides that are taking place around the globe today. There are literal environmental impacts of genocide taking place in Palestine. We see that across the globe in Haiti, in Sudan, and elsewhere—we constantly see this ecological impact that has historical roots in colonialism.

There’s a reckoning with German colonialism and how it wasn’t as “bad” as other colonizers, but no one gets a gold star for colonialism. It’s all bad. We need to acknowledge how colonialism is so omnipresent in the German landscape. What civic organizers and grassroots activists show us are the contours of colonialism in the everyday. There’s something to be said about this longer lineage of involvement in these capitalist acts, and that’s why people are reluctant to talk about that.

Today we see the effects of colonialism in the lack of swimming—I’m always struck by these narratives about how Black people are non-swimmers. But there’s this book that came out called *Undercurrents of Power* about west African swimmers and canoers, and how they brought that knowledge to the United States. There’s a strong lineage of people of African descent being swimmers, and this is a skill that was brought to the New World. This historical knowledge shows us a longer lineage of Black activism, survival, and a state of being that is not necessarily tethered to the climate of anti-Blackness. In African cosmologies, money is not the only way of functioning and being.
Panel Three

Using International Frameworks to Ensure Civil Rights

Adébissi Djogan
Founder and CEO, Public Affairs Africa

Roger-Claude Liwanga
Fellow on Human Trafficking and Forced Labor, FXB Center for Health and Human Rights, Harvard University

Anthony N. Morgan
Co-Founder, Sentencing and Parole Project

Moderated by Gay McDougall
Member, United Nations Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination

Panel Overview

The global community has generated international frameworks such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and states have signed treaties like the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination in an effort to establish shared standards, promote accountability, and encourage collaboration among nations in safeguarding and promoting human rights.

But what impact does this have on people of African descent and their everyday lives? During this discussion, the panelists contemplated ways to leverage diplomatic efforts, multilateral tools, and sustained multi-sector advocacy to protect and advance human rights and civil rights in a tangible way.
Key Takeaways:

1. International organizations can make recommendations to governments on how they should comply with international human rights standards, but it is up to civil society to demand that their governments take the appropriate action.

2. One of the most powerful tools for civil society in their push for the implementation of human rights frameworks is being “glocal”—simultaneously focusing on your work locally while building a global coalition.

3. Participation and being vocal around a cause is essential. The more you speak, the more you get the chance to be heard.

Panel Introduction

Gay McDougall {GM}:

When we discuss how international frameworks can be used to ensure human rights, we must note the division of the United Nations that deals solely with human rights issues. The way that it functions, largely, is that there are institutions that are peopled by individuals who have nothing to do with government or with the United Nations, and who are not beholden to anyone. This is necessary to the function that we are to play there. I sit on the UN Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, which oversees compliance by governments worldwide that have ratified a convention on racial discrimination that delineates the responsibilities of governments—as in, what they can and cannot do, and what they must and mustn’t do—to further racial justice and to end discrimination.

There is a newly formed mechanism, which I call the “George Floyd Mechanism,” that was developed shortly after George Floyd’s murder. It has a mandate to look at countries that have a history of colonialism and had participated in the Transatlantic Slave Trade, and because of that history have engendered a certain attitude toward Black people—and that attitude is a direct through-line to the murder of people like George Floyd. Their mandate is to find these countries, like Brazil, the U.S., Colombia, France, the U.K., and others, to visit these countries, interact with law enforcement, the government, and the community, and then report back on that.

There is also a Special Rapporteur on Racism who roams the world. All of our work involves looking at the situations on the ground or receiving testimonies from community members, and we look at that against the normative framework: is the government doing what it is obligated to do under international law to stop injustice? As members of these groups, we are independent, we have full-time jobs, but we use our time to be on these committees so we can try to lend our ear and our time to be a funnel for transmitting the views and the concerns of community members to the UN.
Ultimately, what we get to do that most community members never have the chance to do is to recount their stories to the governments. When recounting these stories, we can be as tough as we think we have to be, and that feedback becomes part of the government’s record in the UN with respect to racial justice.

At that point, implementation must lie with civil society organizations. I can write my recommendations for change in an evaluation document, and I can rake the governments over the coals, but when I hand that document over, it’s for civil society to take it and run with it and make it into an enforceable document that can be implemented in their home countries.

Q: **In your experience, what are some of the ways that work in getting governments to implement international human rights frameworks in their countries?**

Anthony Morgan {AM}:

In my youth, as a new lawyer, I wrote my first shadow report that identified all the violations the government of Canada was undertaking against Black communities. This was my second year of practice, and I saw what could come from participating in these international forums. Within Canada, we have a paradox of hyper-visibility when it comes to justice. Canada traffics on a narrative of being a liberal, democratic, human–rights–protecting champion of the world and because of this narrative, it becomes a challenge for Black Canadians to voice our struggle.

The attitude is that we do so well with racial justice in our country, that it is a non-issue.

Now, Canada has recently committed to developing a Black Canadian justice strategy. Black communities were able to rally and demand that Canada do this in order to keep its human rights stature internationally, to develop a justice strategy that addresses lethal force against Black people and over-incarceration in Canada.

Adebissi Djogan {AD}:

We live in a fractured world, in a world where the balance of powers has been shifted, and we are seeing alternative values emerging. We must look at the world in a global context, considering what is happening between Russia and Ukraine, in the Middle East, the Congo—we live in this current context, and we must keep this in mind when we are talking about how civil society has to interact with international organizations.

Another element I want to point out is the fact that all revolution and global changes have always been led by civil society. When we look at the history of the world—American history, French history—all of these revolutions have started with people and civil society.

More than ever before, we need civil society in this fractured world. Civil society is the last frontier of global outreach. My work has led me to interact with governments, with the private sector, civil society, and facilitating dialogues to help and advise policymakers in terms of what would be the best solution to current problems, and which tools can maximize the impact of public action. Very often, acting solely as civil society is not enough—we need to leverage governmental international organizations with success.

The second is being “glocal”—emphasizing the importance of collaboration, because as much as you focus on your work locally, you ultimately have to build a global coalition.

The third strategy is in terms of legal advocacy, to determine what could be leveraged, and the fourth is in terms of policy advocacy—to physically be in the rooms where policies are framed and become a part of that process. Participation is not power; the power starts with participation. Participation can be a very instrumental tool, especially through digital advocacy in a world where technology is changing the game. There are a lot of technological tools today that can help a

“Civil society is the last frontier of global outreach.”

—Adébassi Djogan
Roger-Claude Liwanga (RL):

I’ll focus on the international organizations that deal with the protection of children, like UNICEF. First, a quick background on the causes of child labor: poverty, a lack of free education, and a lack of law enforcement. Despite the prevalence of child labor, there is almost no prosecution of it. There is also an aspect of cultural acceptance of the situation, especially when it comes to cobalt mining, which is used in the production of our everyday technologies, such as smartphones.

I work with UNICEF, which at one point ensured that children in a particular community were given the opportunity to attend school rather than work. Yet, after a few weeks, all of those children went back to work after school, because those children have to eat. So, they go to school, and then they go back to the mine to work so they can make money to get food.

This was one of the problems of strategies of UNICEF. The Democratic Republic of the Congo has ratified most of the international instruments that protect children. In 2017, the UN Committee on the Protection of Children was looking at the DRC’s implementation on certain provisions, but there have been numerous gaps in terms of protecting children working in the mines. From 2017 until today, the number of children working in the mines has increased. As an academic, I need to think about what we can do better to incorporate international instruments that were ratified in these situations.

What are the tools that civil society can use to encourage their governments to further racial justice efforts in their home countries and comply with international standards?

AM We need to tell the Canadian government: if you want to retain your stature in the international sphere, you must be responsive to this. Black people represent just 3.5% of Canada’s population, and it’s hard to get the government to pay attention to the needs of such a small constituency. But we have a point of leverage with UN legislation: Canada can lose a lot of moral stature if it is engaging in anti-Black racism, specifically because it has usually done so well on these issues in the past. Things move forward if those in power see something that makes it valuable for them to make it move forward. Interest convergence has been key in pushing international findings.

When the recommendations of the UN’s different mechanisms pushed Canada to make changes, the government devoted tens of millions (CAD) toward addressing issues of anti-Black racism. This may not sound like a lot in America, but we are talking about a segment of the population of just around 1.7 million individuals across Canada. When we leverage the international system, it forces an action that we otherwise haven’t been able to get. Civil society has been critical in mobilizing communities by showing us that this is what the international community thinks should be happening.

AD Civil society is not the parliament or the government of a country, it is the watchdog. It’s very important to keep in mind that civil society is not meant to replace the role of a broken government and governance system.

“Civil society is not the parliament or the government of a country, it is the watchdog.

— Adebissi Djogan

It’s not just one tool, but a combination of tools that civil society must use to play this role of watchdog to help the government. For me, the number one tool is to identify the interest point for the government, by helping the government understand how it is in the interest of the country to implement international frameworks. Secondly, leveraging digital advocacy is key—digital tools are powerful and very instrumental nowadays when it comes to pushing certain causes.

Additionally, we must leverage local government. Sometimes we look at governments from a vertical perspective, but in a lot of political societies you have some levers of government where certain levels can be more efficient, more pertinent, and more receptive when it comes to implementing, even on a smaller scale, platforms that promote human rights equity and civil rights.
Finally, the last tool is being able to transform a cause and advocacy into a political platform. We all know how powerful the vote is and being able to use our voting power as a tool makes political leaders more accountable. However, another incredibly powerful tool is your voice—the more you speak, the more you get the chance to be heard.

{RL} In 2022, I developed a formula to assess the level of compliance of states with international decisions. I think that formula can be adjusted for the work that non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are doing in terms of seeing whether or not a particular state has been complying with certain recommendations.

The fundamental question when we think about assessing compliance comes from looking at the task the state was compelled to address by the recommendation of a UN group. Did the state fully implement it? Did it implement that specific recommendation? Or did it only implement it partially—or not comply at all? Based on that, there are some matrices we can develop for the NGO to say whether or not in these specific issues the state has only partially implemented.

“The fundamental question when we think about assessing compliance comes from looking at the task the state was compelled to address... Did the state fully implement it? Did it implement that specific recommendation? Or did it only implement it partially—or not comply at all?”

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“Participation is not power; the power starts with participation.”

—Adebissi Djogan
There is great potential if we work more strategically, and there is no possibility of truly sustainable development if the systemic exclusion of people of African descent continues.

Our goal is to resume a long fight for the rights and development of people of African descent. This requires us to continue our struggle globally and to recognize that our strength is when we place people at the center of our efforts and include other historically marginalized groups. As people of African descent, we are part of a history. You must recognize yourself as a part of global Africa.

Global anti-Black racism is an undeniable reality. It places people of African descent in the condition of victims of discrimination and at the mercy of institutions and a social order that promotes a colonial order. Reparations are an indispensable way to transform the future and recognize the atrocity of the past, the consequences it has in the present, and establish a framework that allows for a future of dignity. We must act strategically and to use the tools we have on hand to transform the realities
of African people and people of African descent—those of us that are part of global Africa. Growing up in a predominantly racist Latin American society, my mom and my dad gave me the tools to rejoice and vindicate my Black identity. I see in this generation of African descended men and women a generation that is more committed, more compassionate, and understands that the rights of all people are interconnected. They are willing to use their immense energy to eliminate discrimination and racism once and for all.

Let us amplify global voices in favor of racial justice and for reparation. Let us build new monuments, statues, and art that accounts for our story and perspective of the past, but mainly the future that we imagine. We must use our strong and resilient culture to promote dialogue among ourselves and with others. This will unite us with the past, connect us with the present, and allow us a better vision of the future.

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This generation has convened millions of people to protest around the world after the murder of George Floyd. We must take joint action so this effort is multiplied. Let us involve our brilliant young Black minds in this movement. We require their creativity, energy, and demonstrated commitment. Let’s learn from them and use social media to our advantage, for promoting pride in who we are and promoting our fight for dignity and the elimination of anti-Black racial discrimination.

We need to engage in conversations to build proposals from diverse perspectives to demand reparation for descendants of enslaved Africans. A central theme in our action for the eradication of anti-Black racism is the understanding of diverse identities that make up our African-descended community. We have great opportunity to form alliances with various other groups fighting for their rights. We must work together in this global Africa to share resources and think of strategies to take next steps that will create dignity for all people without discrimination.

I am sure that we are in the middle of a profound generational change. The more it hurts, the more contradictions and advancements we see, the closer we are. Let us continue our struggle that our Black mothers, grandmothers, and great grandmothers gave to us and have brought us here together to create a good future. Let us reclaim the Ubuntu principle that demands we not only take care of ourselves, but that we recognize ourselves as a part of the greater community. I am, because we are.
Closing Remarks:
Desirée Cormier Smith
Special Representative for Racial Equity and Justice, U.S. Department of State

For more than three centuries, Africans brought to the western hemisphere and their descendants were bound and brutalized by an internationally organized system of human trafficking built on violence, exploitation, and dehumanization. The atrocities committed against enslaved Black people continue to reverberate, leaving an indelible mark on the collective consciousness of humanity. The suffering endured by enslaved Africans and their descendants cannot be quantified in mere words or numbers. It is a legacy of pain and trauma that continues to haunt us to this day, reminding us of the depths to which humanity can sink when fueled by greed and hate.

But even in the face of such horror, we must acknowledge the resilience and resistance of our ancestors, who endured unimaginable suffering. From the plantations of the Caribbean to the cotton fields of the American South, enslaved Africans and their descendants fought for their dignity, their freedom, and their humanity. They resisted oppression in several ways, from acts of rebellion and defiance to the preservation of culture, language, and identity in the face of relentless efforts to erase them.
The contributions of people of African descent to the development of the western hemisphere and the rest of the world cannot be overstated. Despite facing centuries of systemic discrimination and oppression, Black people have made indispensable contributions to every facet of human endeavor. From the arts to sciences, from literature to politics, Black people have enriched our societies immeasurably, shaping our cultures, our economies, and our collective consciousness.

As we confront the legacy of the transatlantic trade in human beings and the ongoing scourge of anti-Blackness, we must recognize that the struggle for racial equity and justice is far from over. In the United States and around the world, systemic racism continues to pervade every aspect of society, perpetuating disparities in education, healthcare, housing, employment, and criminal justice. It is a legacy that manifests itself in the form of police brutality, mass incarceration, economic inequality, access to education, and cultural marginalization.

The creation of my position and office at the U.S. State Department underscores our dedication to tackling anti-Blackness and other forms of racism on a global scale as we work to dismantle systemic racism here in the United States. In this role, our mission is clear: to ensure U.S. foreign policy, processes, and programs advance the human rights of individuals belonging to marginalized racial, ethnic, and Indigenous communities, including people of African descent, and to build global partnerships to combat systemic racism, discrimination, and xenophobia around the world—not because we have solved these challenges here in the United States, but because we recognize that these are global challenges that require coordinated and sustained global solutions.

To that end, the United States supports the creation and elevation of UN mechanisms working to address racial injustices and improve the livelihoods of people of African descent, including CERD, EMLER, WGEPAD, UNESCO, and the UN Permanent Forum for People of African Descent.

But let us be clear: the road to racial equity and reconciliation is long and arduous. It will require unwavering commitment, unshakable courage, and close collaboration from all sectors of society. We must dismantle the structures of oppression that continue to perpetuate inequality and injustice, and we must do so with great urgency and resolve. We cannot afford to be complacent or to shy away from difficult conversations. Each of us must work in concert from our own perches towards the shared goal of dismantling the systems of power and privilege that uphold white supremacy and anti-Blackness.

In closing, let us carry forth the spirit of solidarity and determination. Let us stand together, united in our quest for a more just and equitable world. Let us honor the memory of our ancestors who—despite enduring unimaginable injustice and inhumanity—never lost hope and never bought into the lie of their inferiority. Let us never forget that our actions today will shape the world of tomorrow, a world where every individual, regardless of race, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexuality, or physical ability can thrive and reach their full potential. Finally, let us use hope, inspiration, and connection as fuel to continue the struggle for justice, dignity, and the full enjoyment of our human rights.
Symposium Photo Captions
1. Harvard Law School professor Aminta Ossom asking a question
2. Leslie Alexander, Rutgers University professor, being thanked by conference organizers
3. Carr Center Fellow Amani Tom asking a question
4. Darius Edgerton (U.S. Department of State) and Alex Johnson (Open Society Foundations)
5. HKS MC/MPA student Jonathan Jayes-Green addressing the audience
6. Amara Enyia, President of Global Black
7. Gay McDougall (left); Alice Angèle Nkom, Member, UN Permanent Forum of People of African Descent; translator Atim Mackin
8. Justin Hansford, Member, UN Permanent Forum of People of African Descent; Professor of Law at Howard University
9. Mama Dzidoasi, Sub-Divisional Queen Mother of Gbi Traditional Area (left) and Portia Allen

Global Anti-Blackness
and the Legacy of the Transatlantic Slave Trade