

“From Cape Town to Chicago to Colombo and Back Again: Towards a Liberation Theology for Memory Work”

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We are a group of U.S.-based memory workers - an archivist, a public historian, and a scholar of information studies (all of whose work significantly overlaps with each of those roles) - committed to using traces of the past to shape a more just future.<sup>1</sup> The U.S. is rarely thought of as a post-conflict society and participation in the [Mandela Dialogues](#) has been a rare opportunity to place American human rights violations within the context of state-sponsored violence internationally. However, we remain skeptical of the “post-conflict society” framing for the American context. For us, the “post” of “post-conflict” is a luxury that we cannot claim; it is “prematurely celebratory” to use Anne McClintock’s apt phrase regarding postcolonialism.<sup>2</sup> Instead, we see the U.S. as a conflict society that, most dangerously, does not acknowledge that such a conflict existed in the past, nor that it exists in the present, with grave consequences.

The United States was founded on and is framed by two human rights violations: the slaughter and displacement of Indigenous Peoples and the enslavement of African Peoples. For centuries, extensions of these original sins have reinvented and manifested themselves with the same results: Indigenous Peoples have been removed from their land and depopulated without intervention, and people of African descent have been exploited for their labor, and treated as still enslaved - without the ability to fully enjoy citizenship as human beings. This legacy is made manifest in systems of white supremacy that dictate virtually every aspect of American society, including ongoing disparities in property ownership, wealth, educational levels, incarceration rates, and life expectancies. The recent media attention to the state-sponsored mass murder of Black people by the police is one embodied aspect of this legacy that we can directly trace to the history of the enslavement of African peoples, Jim Crow, lynching and the history of white impunity for such violence.

Europeans commissioned nearly 39 000 slave ships to forcibly remove roughly 18 million Africans from their motherland to the “New World”, beginning in the 16th century and continuing through the 19th century, to serve as chattel slaves. Many historians believe roughly only 80 percent (including 20 percent children) survived the transatlantic trip. The Middle Passage forever changed the Atlantic ecosystem: predatory sharks followed slave ships and

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<sup>1</sup> We are indebted to Verne Harris’s construction of “memory for justice” and for his insistence on using memory work as a tool for liberation.

<sup>2</sup> Anne McClintock, “The Angel of Progress: Pitfalls of the Term Post-Colonialism,” *Social Text*, No. 31/32, Third World and Post-Colonial Issues (1992): 87.

began moving dangerously close to African coasts and a new food source, African bodies.<sup>3</sup> The slave economy set up the super-powerful allied countries, and now 200 million Africans live in the Diaspora. The United Nations says they are largely politically, economically and culturally oppressed and a recalibration is necessary to provide relief and restoration.

As memory workers, we believe that memory about these historic human rights violations is a crucial component of both justice work in the present and imagining more just futures. For us, memory work is not just about remembering the past, but about reckoning with it - that is, establishing facts, acknowledging, apologizing, stopping ongoing violence, and repairing the harm that was done through both material and immaterial forms of reparation.

One of the most important reflections we had from our participation in the Mandela Dialogues is paradoxically both the utility and futility of putting American atrocities against African American and Indigenous people in international context. On the one hand, doing so acknowledges our shared global histories of colonialism, capitalism, patriarchy, and racism and rightfully draws crucial attention to American domestic human rights violations, putting them on par with other such atrocities in the international arena. On the other hand, context and specificity matter. Sometimes we found it difficult to relate to our colleagues and to glean lessons from site visits in South Africa and Sri Lanka without more specific knowledge of the historical, cultural, social, and political contexts of their societies. We were particularly cautious about offering advice or suggestions forward for people whose contexts we did not fully understand. At the same time, we felt a visceral recognition of and uncanny familiarity with the racial disparity that we saw in Cape Town. For us, the lesson was to continually strive towards strategically leveraging our commonalities, while at the same time resisting being seduced by easy metanarratives of the success of post-conflict dialogue and healing. Such universal success stories flatten important differences and obfuscate the difficulty of our own work ahead.

The Mandela Dialogues also underscored for us the importance of holding action, critique, and vision in tandem. Action allows us to achieve material change. Critique ensures we do not become the metanarratives we aim to resist. Vision enables us to imagine otherwise. All three are essential for the work ahead. Yet we felt at times that the appropriate balance was absent from our Dialogue experiences. In particular, we felt that constructive critique - of the goals of the dialogue, of the processes and methods employed, of each other's practices and views - was sometimes missing. This was an important learning experience for us moving forward as we seek to build memory work processes that incorporate critique without inducing inaction or squashing imagination.

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<sup>3</sup> Marcus Rediker, "History From Below the Water Line: Sharks and the Atlantic Slave Trade," *Atlantic Studies*, (2008), 5:2: 285-297.

In fact, it is because of our commitment to imagination that we are called to enumerate the ways in which dialogue also serves as an instrument of democratic denial and an impediment to justice. Dialogue's enshrinement within the U.S. stems from a perverse misconception of the First Amendment's protection of free speech, a misconception that holds all voices within a dialogue are equally valid and valuable, even those of the most vile and violent variety. This perversion both obfuscates the raced, gendered, and classed inequality of those with the means to "speak" in a democracy and it implies that an embrace of that inequality in the form of dialogue is a pathway towards justice, a notion we find demonstrably disingenuous. The two original sins of the United States have yet to be cleansed not because they have yet to be dialogued but because they have yet to be "ceased", and one of the reasons they have yet to be ceased is due to the dilemma that disingenuous dialogue - endemic to U.S. democracy - further entrenches the legacies of those sins, including the inequality that begets them.

The limitations of dialogue in the pursuit of memory work for justice indicts democratic processes in the aggregate for their collective limitations in delivering justice to Indigenous and African peoples. Trials, tribunals, and truth commissions may well form part of the fabric to justice-seeking memory work but they must not constitute the whole. Reformational inputs cannot birth transformational outputs. In this sense, the denials of Indigenous genocides (past and present) and Black enslavement (past and present) are not antithetical to American democracy but rather central to it. It follows that memory work aimed at justice for these communities must imagine new methods of memory work that extend beyond standard modes of memorialization that receive state funding, university support, or capitalist endorsement. These new methods might involve approaches that are guerilla in nature yet grand in purpose. Democracy cannot repair what democracy damaged. We invoke the same question posed by Audre Lorde: "What does it mean when the tools of a racist patriarchy are used to examine the fruits of that same patriarchy?" Our response, in the context of memory work for justice, mirrors Lorde's response: "It means that only the most narrow parameters of change are possible and allowable."<sup>4</sup>

Wide are the changes needed to fulfill the promise of this country's creed, and in the context of unresolved and ongoing trauma, that chasm commands memory work to become justice work, for a scar cannot take shape on the flesh where the wound still flows red with blood. At stake are not only the memories of ancestors kidnapped, raped, tortured, and killed but also the futures of children not yet born who may face a familiar fate. One cannot memorialize that which is present and that which is yet to come, a reality that reinforces the requirement that memory work in these contexts becomes bullets for liberation. Memory work of this sort might center restitution of confiscated lands, reparation for actual and potential losses, and reconciliation within and between communities. To engage in memory work within ongoing conflicts is to step in the line

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<sup>4</sup> Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Trumansburg, NY: Crossing Press, 1984): 111-112.

of fire with a vest and a vision to advocate for justice over peace and for truth over reconciliation.

In our own work, we have seen the ways in which people, movements, and objects that were considered to be radical and/or dangerous in their own presents become safe with time as they are memorialized, archived, and lionized. We caution against such crystallization and instead are compelled by the energies of infinite and infinitely nuanced competing, contradictory, and co-existing micro-narratives.

The past was never singular, nor will the future be. In order to generate these futures, memory work should be dangerous. It should seek not only to acknowledge past trauma, but to repair it. It should aim to upend hierarchies of power, to distribute resources more equitably, to enable complex forms of self-representation, and to restore the humanity of those for whom it has been denied.

The Mandela Dialogues inspired us to begin forging a **liberation theology for memory work**, which we envision as an ethics of practice fundamentally dedicated to animating traces of the past for social justice activism in the present and to envision and enact radically just futures. This will look different in different contexts building towards different futures. In our immediate context, in the wake of a disastrous American election, this means using our skills as archivists, public historians, and academics to end the state-sponsored murder and mass incarceration of Black people and the continued genocide and displacement of Indigenous peoples, to dismantle systems of white supremacy, to actively resist the oppression of the most vulnerable amongst us, and to re-envision forms of justice that repair and restore rather than violate and harm individuals and communities.

This work is risky and messy and arduous, but the alternative is untenable; our futures depend on it.

### **About the Authors**

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