

# REPARATIONS, TIME AND STRUGGLE

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Political struggles take place in changing intercultural landscapes where meanings are always up for grabs. Movements speak in many voices, translating the significance of events into others’ terms and reinterpreting them for themselves. They enlist and modify different, even mutually antagonistic, sets of cultural practices. They take what they need, shaping it to mobilizations at hand, keeping in mind that struggle has to start from where people are, in the “unfolding of a field of relationships among persons who attend to one another in what they do,”<sup>1</sup> not from where some master-planner wants them to be. And keeping in mind that this attention to other voices means crossing into multiple pasts as well as multiple futurities.

Experienced movement groups may well agree when they get together among themselves that the world needs to be remade along principles stressing self-determination, non-domination, solidarity, reciprocity, complementarity, justice, sovereignty over territory, plurinationalism and the overcoming of accumulation and of colonialism and the centrality of money, and so forth. But these concepts are nothing more in themselves than little paintings done on the fly, then abandoned at various waysides in various states of completion while work begins on others. They’re only a small part of getting ready to make things happen, and don’t predate what happens any more than a person’s gait precedes their footprints.<sup>2</sup> Brain work in movements mostly happens *after* any meanings that might have crystallized during get-togethers of the like-minded are swept into the more varied flow of the tasks where they are eroded, incorporated, discarded or recreated day to day in the hard graft of retranslation in unforeseen historical situations involving a diversity of communities past, present and future. Any practice that movements might take up brings unpredictable frictions owed to the distinctiveness of its own multiple, spiky histories. Here the kind of typically white Northern imagination that elevates form above process and holds that action consists of the implementation of plans runs up against its limits.

There’s no exception for movements that are demanding reparations for the centuries of colonialist and patriarchal looting, despoliation, abuse and exploitation, racist and otherwise, that are intrinsic to contemporary capitalism. Incorporating reparations practices (or even just the “reparations” vocabulary) into liberation work means contending with their histories and contexts and reworking assumptions at the promptings of practical daily politics, like the proverbial ship’s crew rebuilding a vessel at sea. It means confronting the ways that, as a result of those histories and contexts, reparations practices can and will be retranslated and modified both by friends and by enemies, as well as all the movement impacts that result. And it means understanding that, as has been well said, “reparations” is also a “call that allows people to begin to talk about other things.”

In order to help triangulate the inherited terrain on and against which today’s reparations movements are laboring, this note will intermittently refer to at least three different struggles that often involve calls for reparations. These are struggles over

- White supremacy in the Anglo world of the US and the UK.
- Colonialist extractivism in Latin America and the “climate debt” owed to the South.

- Male sexual predation, as exemplified in the Korean and Filipina comfort women struggles, the #MeToo movement, and many others in the Americas and elsewhere.

Engaging in reparations conversations, each of these struggles has to engage with whatever reparations history is already present and whoever and whatever is embedded in that history.

What is this history? Here is some experience.

In English, one association of the word “reparations” is with is with legal cases following wars and often advertised as aimed at bringing “closure” of one form or another. Here demands for economic compensation for damages accompany (sometimes-contested) moral condemnation. Statistically, the English word “reparations” reached peak frequency of published use worldwide in 1947, 1923 and 1661 in the periods following World War II, World War I and the English Restoration.<sup>3</sup> Famous cases of war reparations include payments made by West Germany to Holocaust survivors and to Israel, by the Japanese government to comfort women in World War II and by Germany to the victors in World War I. Reparations payments have also been mooted or made in the aftermath of civil wars or armed domestic conflicts, as in Latin America, the US and Aotearoa.

Another key association of “reparations” in English, ironically, is with compensation paid to slave *owners* for relinquishing their rights to human property. Historically, this is one of the few contexts in which reparations to an entire supposedly “wronged” class within a society have actually been paid out. In 1833, as part of the agreement to abolish slavery, the current equivalent of around £17 billion was paid out to British enslavers. British taxpayers, including millions of black taxpayers, continued to service the Bank of England loan that was used for the payment until 2015, some 182 years later, or perhaps even longer, depending on how this public debt had become bundled with others.<sup>4</sup> Between 1825 and 1947, France forced Haiti to pay reparations for property in human beings that its colonists lost as a result of the successful fight for Haitian independence, resulting in irreparable damage to Haitian economy and ecology. In 2002, France rebuffed a Haitian initiative to recover this “independence debt,” and following a US-backed coup in 2004 the claim was abandoned. Compensation had also had to be paid to the owners of slaves working the oil fields when slavery was declared illegal in Qatar in 1951, although the word “reparations” was not used.<sup>5</sup>

But maybe the most important general connotation of reparations in English – and this is again owed to a lumpy history that cannot be avoided – is the “settling of accounts.” This concept of “settling” is significant and this note will concentrate heavily on it.

“Settling accounts” implies a bounded process that balances items that have been made commensurable with one another. It implies, without quite stating, a process that comes to a halt or end point when everything is completed, “closure” has been achieved, “healing” is finished, relevant disputes have been “resolved finally and irreversibly”,<sup>6</sup> “reconciliation” has been attained, responsibilities have been discharged, apologies have been accepted, pledges not to do it again have been acknowledged and recorded and provisions made for their enforcement, externalities have been internalized, no business remains unfinished, and 0 is the remainder. Of course, the *number* of such possible “settlements” is not limited. Calls for new settlements can arise whenever new outrages are committed, uncovered or quantified or old ones reconceptualized, just as calls for “internalization” can be expected to multiply indefinitely in step with the new “externalities” that incessantly emerge from capital accumulation. The point, however, is that there is a bit of an implication that each discrete settlement process itself is considered to be bounded and “finishable.” (The connotations of the term “settler” in contemporary discussions of colonialism are not irrelevant here.)

This particular political custom of interpreting “reparations” is connected to traditions of linear time. Under the terms of these traditions, the past is something behind us, done with, unalterable: something that has been “conquered by history,” a string of dead facts to be discovered and tabulated and not a crowd of live beings to be engaged in respectful, open-ended conversation. This past does not talk and no one talks to it. Nothing has been silenced<sup>7</sup> in it because it never had the power to speak to begin with. This is the past that elites often elevate into a “history” that has to be defended against disrespectful and ignorant protesters who tear down statues of slavers or question the official commemorations that transform overlapping processes of struggle into a line of bounded, equalized, sanitized, unalterable “events” created and batted upon by state and corporate power and a “memory industry.”<sup>8</sup> The future, meanwhile, becomes something that lies in front of us, on an indeterminate nonfactual path yet to become real. That leaves the present as the only moment, however fleeting, in which actual conversations, with humans or the more-than-human, can take place. As Christine Jill Winter points out, even the most radical Western thinking about intergenerational environmental justice tends to be “infiltrated” by this conception of time, excluding, for example, Māori understandings.<sup>9</sup> The same goes, I think, for much radical Western thinking about reparations.

The entrenched affinity between this linear time and the varied practices of “settling accounts” that have multiplied so enormously over 500 years of capitalism, moreover, is not something that reparations movements can just wish away. For example, Bertholt Brecht’s purported view that the past “has to be bared to settle all accounts, so that one can move towards the future”<sup>10</sup> is probably shared by many reparations advocates, not to mention truth-and-reconciliation schemes in countries such as South Africa, Chile and Cambodia. The same assumptions are shared by many reparations opponents as well. Take Mitch McConnell, speaking on Juneteenth 2019: “I don’t think reparations for something that happened 150 years ago for whom none of us currently living are responsible is a good idea”. Or Todd Stern, one of Bill Clinton’s climate negotiators, speaking on 9 December 2009: “I completely reject the notion of [climate] reparations. For most of the 200 years of the Industrial Revolution, people were blissfully ignorant of the fact that emissions could cause a greenhouse effect.”<sup>11</sup> (John Kerry has more recently, and equally emphatically, rephrased this denialism.) Or Richard Grosvenor Plunkett-Erle-Drax, British Member of Parliament and heir to a fortune made off Barbados and Jamaica plantation slavery, where as many as 30,000 Africans died in bondage, speaking on 11 December 2020:<sup>12</sup> “No one can be held responsible today for what happened many hundreds of years ago.” Or Rishi Sunak, British Prime Minister, on 25 April 2023: “Trying to unpick our history is not the right way forward. What I think our focus should now be is making sure that we have a society which is inclusive and tolerant of people from all backgrounds.”<sup>13</sup> Or Kevin D. Williamson, *National Review* columnist, responding to Ta-Nehisi Coates on 24 May 2014: “The people to whom reparations were owed are long dead; our duty is to the living, and to generations yet to come, and their interests are best served by liberty and prosperity [read: capitalist accumulation].” There is also the recent attempt, which takes its cue from Coates’s provocations, to individualize reparations according to membership in a particular genetic lineage – a move that functions to divide reparations advocates from one another by assimilating the whole debate into a conventional legalistic individual damages framework.<sup>14</sup> The principal disagreement between these figures and Brecht is not over conceptions of time but rather over the *ways* in which responsibility should be assigned and an unruly past considered to be “settled” or “conquered.”

This hints at why adopting reparations advocacy as a tool of struggle is far from straightforward in its disruptions and may demand more homework than many movements have so far had time to do. The concept of “settling accounts” and its connotations of linear time are heavy with the complex

baggage of capitalist tradition. To take just a few examples of this baggage at random: the discount rate; compound interest; International Development Banks' stated policies of not interrogating their past failures on the ground that the future will be different; many sexual predators' self-defense that "standards were different in those days," discharging them from present responsibility; and also the more defensible convention that children can't be held culpable for their parents' debts. Capitalist traditions of "settling" and of linear, compartmentalized time can even come to permeate the ways that reparations advocates understand landscapes. For example, to demand in-kind reparations for previous seizure, extraction and destruction of *resources* is to leave untouched the colonialism structuring the affected more-than-human landscapes. The landscape continues to be seen as a collection of objects "given ready-made" in the present for the use of capital rather than long-term, continuing performances or patterns of activities "collapsed" into an "array of features"<sup>15</sup> with deep and extremely diverse temporalities. Movements of "radical place-making"<sup>16</sup> in "abolition geographies"<sup>17</sup> risk getting ignored, endangering many possibilities of radical alliance.

No surprise that all this baggage weighs heavily on many movements calling for reparations. Ashis Nandy notes that millions of South Asians, for whom it is common to regard the past-present-future sequence not as "given or pre-formatted" but rather as "an open-ended enterprise," embody a "spirited negation" of, for example, Brecht's belief and the concepts it appeals to – on which, Nandy insists, "modern, organized violence heavily depends."<sup>18</sup> What might that mean for efforts to build global support for reparations demands? Similarly, how does the idea of "settled accounts" sit with Indigenous perspectives, such as those of the Aymara and many others, according to which the past is never behind, but always *ahead* of us?

From one Korean feminist point of view, meanwhile, the long-delayed "settlement" of the comfort women issue was provocative insofar as it was concluded without Japan taking legal responsibility.<sup>19</sup> Thinkers like Katharine Franke, for their part, are concerned that processes of acknowledging the trauma of sexual violence against women so that "healing can occur" may also in some cases immortalize the violence by projecting it onto the nation's history in a way that appropriates women's stories, memories, and experiences into "projects of rebuilding nations through remasculinization."<sup>20</sup> By the same token, when in 1980 the US Supreme Court confirmed the claim of the Indigenous Oceti Sakowin nation that the Black Hills of South Dakota had been stolen from them and awarded them a US \$106 million settlement, the outraged response was the slogan: "The Black Hills are not for sale!" As the Oceti Sakowin activist/academic Nick Estes recounts, the Oceti Sakowin

"considered a full restoration of the illegally taken lands to be the only just solution. The Oceti Sakowin's struggle for its land is not about getting reparations, apologies, or reconciliation. It is about justice and ending the settler-colonial system."<sup>21</sup>

Estes hastens to add that "ending the settler-colonial system" does not in any way signify Indigenous people doing to settlers what settlers did to them. Instead, it involves an evolving cooperative effort bringing together a "diversity of forces" ranging from labor unions to farmers, environmentalists, ranchers and the oppressed. The objective is not to "settle settlers" (who could THEN stop them from seeking their own "settlement"?) but rather to transcend settlement altogether.

In her meditations on responses to past slavery, Saidiya Hartman<sup>22</sup> raises related questions about the extent to which "monumentalizing the past" and "commemorating" slavery in universal history might help prevent future atrocity, pointing out that they might succeed instead only in "framing these crimes against humanity from the vantage point of contemporary progress and reason" (and their assumptions of linear time), "turning history into one great museum in which we revel in

antiquarian excess.” “Is there a necessary relation between remembrance and redress?” she asks. Can we “fashion an emancipatory vision *not* premised on recovery or disentangle mourning from overcoming the past?” Alana Lentin, meanwhile, notes the movement divides caused by the “failure of white anti-debt campaigners” in the Occupy movement not only to see the raced nature of debt itself, but to “understand the inextricability of social movements from racialised processes.”<sup>23</sup>

In short, when social movements, while demanding full recompense in material terms for past wrongs, also set themselves in some part against the grain of the history of capitalist-style practices of reparations as the mere “settling of accounts” or debts, it is not a quibble or an attempt to make intellectual trouble, to be swept aside by the exigencies of the latest NGO campaign or the need to prepare for the next UN conference. It is, rather, essential to their struggles and identities – not to mention being as difficult as any other attempt to break through the crust of middle-class convention. The work that such movements are doing suggests that reparations, if they mean anything, should mean not settling but rather *unsettling* the relations that corporations and the state would like to see us holding between a present that speaks and a past that is supposed to keep quiet. And they emphasize the need to take more seriously the need for constant dialogue between both and the future. As Robin D. W. Kelley puts it, reparations should never be “solely about the past,” but rather should consist of a “future-oriented call for political action that, when paired with abolition, can animate visions on how to ‘radically transform society’ in ways that benefit all peoples” and help provide education about how labor, including women’s unpaid labour, creates wealth and how both “wealth and poverty are made.”<sup>24</sup> Reparations cannot be a separate “goal” or “end in itself” that can be lopped off from liberatory struggles against racial capitalism and then added again later as circumstances allow.

Indeed, to intimate that they are can alienate many who might otherwise support them. When in 1952 Frantz Fanon affirmed that “I as a man of color do not have the right to lock myself into a world of retroactive reparations”<sup>25</sup> (or for that matter when Ice-T asked in 2023: “What good is reparations gonna do, if you’re still gonna fuck us with the banking system?”),<sup>26</sup> they were not taking the side of individuals like Mitch McConnell, Todd Stern, Rishi Sunak or John Kerry. They were expressing an oppositional experience of time and history. This is why the redistribution-oriented reparations strategy of philosopher Olúfemi Táíwò, say, which involves “putting money in the Green Climate Fund or reallocating Special Drawing Rights at the IMF,”<sup>27</sup> as well as postulating imaginary “just” forms of carbon capture and storage and abstract thermodynamic energy as attractive destinations for capital investment, would probably divide more movements than it could unite. Few people with on-the-ground experience of the sharp end of MDB practice or of geoengineering schemes are likely to sign up to a campaign that defines the ends and means of reparations in such parochial temporal terms. Or, for that matter, to a campaign that puts the reduction in the number of molecules of greenhouse gas emissions in a separate column from the redefinition of climate change as an issue of labor, race, gender, colonialism, industrial and digital machines, and the ever-developing coercive structure of debt; and then confines itself to talking about “climate debt” or “climate reparations” in chemical or financial units.

So what materials might become available for taking the reparations debate forward in a different way in the face of entrenched associations with “settling accounts” and segmented time? Whatever they turn out to be, they will mostly be found in active struggle rather than prior planning. All that this note can do is to point to one or two too seldom-used sources of experience that might come in handy in the hard work of taking a step back from the current capitalist-oriented structuring of many reparations discussions.

One source is intercultural encounter. Ivonne Yanez points out that associations between “reparations” and “settling accounts,” so troublesome in English, are not such a big burden in Spanish-language movement debates, with which English-language discussions need to come into closer contact. The Spanish *reparaciones* encompasses many dimensions that *reparations* tends to leave out: not only apologies, atonement, legal responsibility and promises not to do it again but also rehabilitation, acknowledgement of the incommensurabilities surrounding debt, and the cultivation of the possibility of further critique and demands, as well as, in Latin America at least, an openness to different conceptions of time. Still, much of the burden of practices of “settling accounts” remains. For example, does the Spanish *deuda* – typically also a part of the *reparaciones* discussion in Spanish – hold a similar advantage over the English *debt*? Not so much. Here there may be a need to move beyond modern European languages altogether in the direction of open-ended interlinguistic encounters – assisted by translators who are not made “invisible”<sup>28</sup> but rather acknowledged to be active participants – between European languages on the one hand and Indigenous, African, and Asian languages on the other. For example, languages in which, as for the Aymara, the past is in front of us rather than behind us, so that interaction with it can never be closed off.

One part of this strategy might be to multiply interchanges with traditions that have concepts that might be translated into English as “settlement” but in fact bear an antagonistic relationship to the “settlements” more familiar to European-language speakers. In Japan, for example, some kind of ongoing rather than “finishable” settlement is necessary with the newly dead; otherwise they become ghosts.<sup>29</sup> In Thailand, horror movies like *Laddaland* portray middle-class individuals who reckon they have succeeded once and for all in settling their beloved families into a gleaming modern life in gated communities and high-rise shopping malls a million miles removed from the world of impoverished villages, rural land expropriations and immigrant labor exploitation – that is, until assorted, manifestly disgruntled ghouls dripping blood and entrails start showing up in their designer kitchens. Hollywood zombie movies testify to a similar persistence, even “within” the West, of such “unsettled” matters within the “settled,”<sup>30</sup> as writers such as David McNally and Jack (Judith) Halberstam have pointed out at length. No matter how hard you try, it’s hard to keep the zombies down once you’ve dissed them by talking shit about “closure.” More generally, the whole post-Freud tradition featuring the return of the repressed serves as a caution to reparations movements not to place too much faith in stretched but entrenched analogies with “settling accounts.” Not only Marx but also Octave Mannoni and Jacques Lacan, as well as Lacanians like Slavoj Žižek and Žižekians like Japhy Wilson,<sup>31</sup> have performed the extremely valuable movement service of stressing that in the capitalist world, it is the unspeakable ghosts and ghouls and unappeased spirits of place who are best classified as what Lacan calls “the Real,” while all the shiny skyscrapers and edifices of neoclassical economics and “settled” accounts and what Ulli Brand and Markus Wissen term the “imperial mode of living”<sup>32</sup> are better understood as matters of fantasy, even if it is a fantasy that structures life itself.

Another possible way of helping to open up and rejuvenate reparations discussions is the extensive history and theory that various radical academics have worked hard to put around the whole idea of “settling accounts” and compartmentalization of time. Out of hundreds of examples, you might take the sociologist of science Michel Callon,<sup>33</sup> the scholar of the Middle East Timothy Mitchell,<sup>34</sup> and the historian Mary Poovey.<sup>35</sup> Following Marx and Karl Polanyi at a distance, all have helped open our eyes to how oddball entities like assets, owners, money, profit, debt and capital itself have become partly solidified (or not) in socionatures over the history of capitalism through a combination of repeated ritual, incantation, enforced fantasy and ingrained superstition. Accordingly, such authors furnish inspiration about how various brittle edifices like “settling accounts” might once again be made more liquid and “swimmable” by popular movements. By

laying bare the historical, provincial nature of some of the practices of closure, completion, and internal containment and control that loom so large in reparations conversations, they might help make that conversation more self-aware.

Callon, for example, points out that market exchange becomes possible only through the bracketing, “framing,” “cleansing” or “formatting” of disconnected spaces for calculation and transaction and the creation of brutally simplified, uncontroversial owners, products and modes of ownership. Accounting, meanwhile, requires the spinning of oversimplified fantasies about who is accountable and how and what and when to count and not to count. As Mitchell puts it, and movements such as Wages for Housework have confirmed, markets “would be impossible if people were made to account for every cost.” These attempts to disentangle and disconnect, moreover, have a flip side in what Callon calls “overflows” or “reentanglement.” As Mitchell explains, the “conventions and powers that enable the completion of an exchange” cannot contain all the human and more-than-human forces and interactions that would make it incomplete. (The destruction that accompanies extraction in what Maristella Svampa calls “sacrifice zones”<sup>36</sup> is one obvious example.) In fact, because it “mobilizes or concerns objects or beings endowed with an irreducible autonomy,” framing is itself, as Callon adds, a “source of overflowing.” “It is one and the same movement which causes calculative agencies to proliferate, while reinscribing them into spaces of noncalculability.” Today’s markets themselves can work only if individuals formatted as *Homo economicus* intermittently reassert themselves as persuasive negotiators with voices and relationships;<sup>37</sup> only if money, formatted as a unitary solvent of social ties, is constantly fragmented into discrete, incommensurate categories;<sup>38</sup> and only if the unpaid work of women can somehow be sustained in a commons. By the same token, resistance to reparations settlements such as that involving Korean comfort women or poisoned communities situated along oil pipelines always has to be quarantined to some extent while people at least get a bit of money out of the deal to pay their bills. But further resistance will always break out of that quarantine.

In an important complement to this picture, meanwhile, the work of Mary Poovey lays out some of the contingent hard work of, for example, patriarchal activity in Renaissance Italy that was necessary for structuring double-entry bookkeeping and the historical development of the modern “fact” that lurks invisibly in the background of many reparations discussions. Arguably, all this scholarship might well be useful to the reparations discussion if only by helping to make the persistent notion of “completable” exchanges weirder and more fragile and the omnipresence of overflows more obvious. What would a reparations conversation look like that thoroughly took on board such historical and sociological insights and integrated them with the advocacy of a Saidiya Hartman or a Nick Estes? At least we might have a better idea of what we are up against in struggling against some of the more “mainstream” notions of reparations that hold us captive.

Yet another, and final, complementary way forward (for Northerners especially) might be just to use a little more imagination in opening up various pasts and futures to and in dialogue. That would be to acknowledge, with Christine Jill Winter, that the “generations are co-existing, the past is always in the present, and the future is always in the past”<sup>39</sup> and, with Dipesh Chakrabarty, that we all unavoidably inhabit “time-knots” composed of traces and fragments of multiple pasts as well as the “futurity that laces every moment of human existence.”<sup>40</sup> Nor are social movements any different from the individual humans that Winter and Chakrabarty are referring to. Young Japanese feminists, for example, have found that their advocacy efforts in the present – whether about problems of present-day sexual violence, sexual harassment, sex tourism, or women’s inequality in the household – cannot but keep “bumping into the comfort women problem in one way or another.”<sup>41</sup>

That understanding can bring into sharper relief the reality that only by killing the past could you ever free yourself from its claims by falling back (as so many politicians, bureaucrats and aging sexual predators do every day) on the well-worn incantation that “standards were different then.” To snub or silence the activist ghosts floating into the present requires a lot more than a few Ghostbusters. Long ago, Walter Benjamin warned his fellow Europeans that “to articulate what is past does not mean to recognize ‘how it really was’” but rather to “take control of a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger” by delivering “tradition anew from the conformism which is on the point of overwhelming it.” But in the same paragraph he also warned that “not even the dead will be safe from the enemy, if he is victorious.”<sup>42</sup> Chipping in from contemporary India, Ashis Nandy says that anthropology and history differ in that while the victims of anthropology are capable of talking back, usually the victims of history-writing are not. But just for fun, let us question that “usually.” How are the dead to be respected? Is it to be by protecting them the way reactionaries and fascists want to protect statues of slavers? Or by looking for some other inviolate “essence” of a past rendered deceased? Or rather – as Nandy himself proposes – by experiencing the past itself as “rebellious”?

To put it another way, there’s not necessarily anything wrong with using latter-day concepts to examine the past. That’s how the art of history-writing goes forward. Nobody in their right mind would want to talk about another time using only the concepts current among the people who lived in that time any more than they would want to pass over those concepts without engaging them at all. But equally the figures of the past would hardly want to talk to us using only notions familiar to us, or only notions familiar to them. They would want to know what’s going on, like everybody else. They would want to know why we were talking such seemingly crazy shit to them just as we would want to take the time to figure out why they were talking such seemingly crazy shit to us. That’s just ordinary, everyday respect. If, as Winter suggests, intergenerational justice is “so hard to theorize within the Western canon because the individuals of the future have been made faceless,” maybe there are unanticipated ways of undoing that facelessness.

So let’s go right ahead and imagine a conversation about the warming effects of CO<sub>2</sub> with the ancestors of Todd Stern or John Kerry. With enormous impatience, Stern and Kerry would say that that is self-evidently impossible because those old-timey guys didn’t know about global warming and must be left in their ignorance. But who knows what insights would result if Stern and Kerry had not taken upon themselves the authority to pre-empt such an exchange? Or imagine a conversation between a former sexual predator and his younger self. Such a sexual ex-predator might say (in an optimistic scenario) that he is not responsible for what were admittedly the misdeeds of his younger avatar because the latter didn’t know any better or couldn’t imagine struggling against the currents of the time. The question is how that kind of stance is any different from, say, one that claims that we need to protect Noble Savages from ourselves – a fetishistic claim that is acknowledged to be one of the keystones of hip modern colonialism. Similarly, how is it different from the imperialist discourse of some white climate activists who put Indigenous peoples’ patient explanations that they have already endured apocalypse down to scientific ignorance of what a “real” climate apocalypse would look like?<sup>43</sup>

In short, why would 19th-century workers in steam-powered factories *not* want to know about – and contribute to – the 21st-century climate modelling discussion, if they had the time and the opportunity? Why would peasants who resisted coal extractivism in 1600s England *not* want to know about – and exchange advice with – the Yasunidos, if only they could engage them in dialogue? Why would the young sexual predator want to wall himself off from the chance of interaction with his older self, if he had the chance? And by the same token, what taboo could there be against bringing up the concept of “settlement” of climate debt during a discussion of global



warming with, say, Indigenous peoples in West Timor or fisherpeople on Flores – as long as we were willing to follow wherever the discussion leads, even if it moves toward questioning the whole concept? The point is not to dismiss outright any reparations discussion that continues to contend with capitalist traditions of “settling accounts” or “beginning again from zero,” but rather simply to try to help that discussion along by broadening it to include other interlocutors from the past that it so centrally involves.

Such interlocutors might indeed hail from today’s outer islands of Indonesia, but they might almost as easily be found in the 18th-century Great Lakes region of North America. Given the power relations prevalent at that place and time, everybody knew that before you floated an idea like “reparations” – or even an idea like buying and selling – you first had to consider the different ways it would appear to both Indigenous and settler listeners<sup>44</sup> In the useful term concocted by the critic of nationalism Naoki Sakai,<sup>45</sup> you had no choice but to adopt a “heterolingual mode of address.” The only condition of this kind of learning from our forebears – and their learning from us – is that both sides refrain from restricting themselves to an imaginary binary choice of using either “our language” or “their language.” Here we probably are just going to have to go along with Sakai and the post-analytic philosopher Donald Davidson<sup>46</sup> in resisting the idea that there is even such a thing as a reified, countable “language.”

1 <https://annas-archive.org/md5/ff55a2b918710f8e8346965226f48b28>.  
2 Ibid.  
3 [https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=reparations&year\\_start=1500&year\\_end=2019&corpus=en-2019&smoothing=3](https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=reparations&year_start=1500&year_end=2019&corpus=en-2019&smoothing=3).  
4 [https://www.voice-online.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/The-Brattle-Report\\_compressed.pdf](https://www.voice-online.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/The-Brattle-Report_compressed.pdf).  
5 <https://annas-archive.org/md5/420546a3e5a138c5b93acf95cbe98fa0>.  
6 <https://scholarship.law.cornell.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=4726&context=clr>.  
7 <https://annas-archive.org/md5/9f7593e2de1d7b4f03259faedb07bde2>.  
8 <https://newrepublic.com/article/133017/must-remember-war-memorials-david-rieff>.  
9 <https://annas-archive.org/md5/32f496a8b03c45d3da52508f0b5d5017>.  
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