

The Grammar of Reparation: A Creative and Research Symposium

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What is the lexicon of reparation? Can stories repair (and be repaired)? Engaging with grammar and lexicology seems almost frivolous when paired with the urgency of reparation, the need to make colonial institutions and postcolonial societies accountable for the crimes and the consequences of systemic dispossession and organized plunder. And yet, “who tells what story where” does matter, for several reasons. For one, one of the main arguments against claims for reparation is that they are excessive and economically unviable. This argument is driven by a drastic incapacity to address the future—that is, to address the future as something different from the present, beyond extractive violence and racial capitalism, in which the process of reparation will have an effect. This negative view reproduces the mechanistic and ownership-driven ethos that generated colonial extraction in the first place.

Contrary to such view, contemporary narratives (in the form of what we conventionally call “literature”, but also in the form of songs, curated projects, collaborative performances, activist mo(ve)ments, dreams, interventions in social media and a long etcetera) are clearly proving that reparation has a lexicon that can be mobilized and conjugated by many, in collective, not always obvious forms. In this symposium, the grammar of reparation is reimagined as a productive site of future-thinking, one that does not finish with the act of physically returning human remainders and “cultural objects” to their rightful owners, but rather sees such act as the point of departure of a radical sociality, a productive and experimental zone of interdependence in which colonial violence, but also divisions between human/nature, object/subject, etc., are actively confronted and fought against. Importantly, our focus on narrative (literature, but also “something else”) does not imply a movement away from real, tangible claims for reparation. On the contrary; our aim is to explore the ideologies and rhetorics that make reparation thinkable and unthinkable, the politics and hierarchies and inertias that place reparative justice inside and outside the frame.

The title of this symposium playfully engages with Roland Barthes' *African Grammar*, but also aims at challenging and provincializing the eurocentrism and the universality of grammars and lexicons as well as the long held language of "impossibility" around restitution, which often operate by establishing a "norm" and "zone of normality" and organizing everything else hierarchically from there. From this angle, we understand the grammar of reparation as a flexible and future-oriented site, one that has the virtue of defamiliarizing stable things, such as authorship, autonomy, and lineage.

The symposium is mainly concerned with four overarching and interrelated topics and provocations:

1. Reparation as a grammar, as something that only works when conjugated/when spelt out, when sounding out the depths of the abnormal normally known as common sense, which is a distribution of the sensible that establishes a boundary between subject and object, the observer and the observed. Reparation becomes then transitive justice. In thinking through the present and future tense, the subjunctive, or what if ...? It makes space for the transitional action of agential forms that were relegated to the non-space of the inert and declared beyond repair. To repair = to call the violence of being broken into question, while questioning the conditions of possibility of mattering as resurfacing from brokenness.
2. Reparation as the opposite of sustainability. Reparation as a principle that emerges from within the cracks of sustained privilege and unsustainable lies. Restoration emerges here as the opposite of the sustainable, for the latter is always predicated upon the desire and the fantasy of inexhaustible otherness always already available as fuel (available and disposed of as part of the process of fuelling the fantasies of privilege and separation of the few as well as the unsustainable project of white privilege).
3. *Reparar* in Portuguese has two meanings: to repair and to realise (thanks to Luisa Coelho and Simon Park for this idea). These two things are deeply interconnected. Narration therefore plays a central role, for it is only when reparation is seen as the point of departure of alternative imagining (to realise and to repair) that understand what is really at stake in reparative gestures. Gesturing towards reparation as realisation democratises the practices of materialising potential futures. By doing so, it becomes possible to challenge the fantasies of technological privilege that foreclose reparative action under the excuse of mastery (only certain people with

certain expertise can do certain things). From this angle, reparation makes evident that mastery is a fiction strategically mobilised to generate differentiated zones susceptible of being plundered and turned into places of exception and selective vulnerability. Everything follows from here.

4. Finally, if reparation involves reimagining the future by calling into question the special and spatiotemporal demarcation where exceptionality comes into being as Being, it follows that any thought on the topic will necessarily involve an productive inhabiting of a wilderness, an out there calling into question the “cultured” in-here of the museum, proving that museums are lifted—and lighted—platforms artificially delimitating and enabling the workings of time and being understood as exceptional reality, as museum and touristic highlights. In other words, reparation involves counting again and otherwise by destabilising stories about what counts (the agential violence of colonialism becoming subject by the calculations that render everything else countable and susceptible of being apprehended) and distributing regimes of not being and hierarchies based on differential degrees of proximity to being-beyond-repair.

About the Conveners

Wayne Modest is Director of Content of Wereldmuseum, with locations in Amsterdam, Leiden, and Rotterdam and head of the Research Center for Material Culture. He is also professor (by special appointment) of Material Culture and Critical Heritage Studies at the Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam. His most recent (collaborative) projects include Pressing Matter: Ownership, Value and the Question of Colonial Heritage in Museums, with Professor Susan Legene and Worliding Public Cultures: The Arts and Social Innovation, with Professors Ming Tiampo and Paul Goodwin.

Carlos Garrido works as Professor (Scale 2) and Head of the Department of Spanish, Portuguese and Latin American Studies at University College Cork. He is also Senior Research Associate at the **Visual Identities in Arts and Design Research Centre**, University of Johannesburg; Review Editor of the MHRA Journal *Portuguese Studies*; Series Editor of the De Gruyter book series "Towards a Global Understanding of Cultural Work"; and co-covenor of the CASILAC **Memory, Commemoration and Uses of the Past** research cluster.

Carine Zaayman As an artist, curator and scholar, she is committed to critical engagement with colonial archives and collections, specifically those holding strands of Khoekhoe pasts. Her work focuses on the afterlives of slavery and colonialism, particularly in the Cape, by bringing intangible and neglected histories into view. Her research aims to contribute to a radical reconsideration of colonial archives and museum collections, especially by assisting in finding ways to release their hold over our imaginations when we narrate the past, as well as how we might shape futures from it.

Esmee Schoutens holds an MA in Critical Studies in Art and Culture from VU University Amsterdam and has worked for several modern and contemporary art institutions such as the Amsterdam Museum, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, and Marres, where she has worked on exhibitions such as *In the Presence of Absence* (2020-21) and *The Golden Coach* (2021-22). Schoutens is interested in art/technology collaborations, financial infrastructures in the arts, darkness, and art activism. Her writing has appeared, among others, in *Metropolis M* and the *Journal of Curatorial Studies*. She is a member of the board of Platform BK.

Beatriz Dantas Vieira is a PhD candidate in the Department of Spanish, Portuguese and Latin American Studies at University College Cork under the IRC Laureate Consolidator project ARTFICTIONS. Beatriz holds a master's degree in Women's Studies from UCC, and her research interests include Gender, Black Brazilian Literature and Art, Decolonial and Cultural Studies. Engaging with the concepts of *Escrevivência* by Conceição Evaristo and *Aquilombamento* by Beatriz Nascimento, in her current research, Beatriz analyses today's art novels in *literatura negra brasileira*, focusing on the reading experiences of racialised readers.