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Guest Editorial: Mass Atrocity and Collective Healing: New Possibilities for Regenerating Communities

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Guest Editorial: Mass Atrocity and Collective Healing: New Possibilities for Regenerating Communities

Introduction

In the wake of large-scale atrocities, such as the transatlantic trade of enslaved Africans and slavery, genocide, and apartheid, human sufferings can haunt communities and societies for generations. The potential traumatic effects of such brutality may persist in different guises, including physical and psychological ill-health, intercommunal hostilities, polarization, and further violent conflicts. At the same time, whilst peoples, communities, and societies experience the harms associated with past barbarities, they may continue to be subject to the underlying root causes of violence and their prevailing legacies, such as social deprivation, economic exploitation, institutionalized discrimination, and other forms of injustice.

There has been recognition that mass atrocities can have long-term impact on individuals, groups, and communities in significantly damaging ways, including the resulting traumas, not least cultural trauma, and intergenerational trauma. Despite such harrowing effects, it is also suggested that a greater part of our global society tends to live with these harmful consequences of historical catastrophes, often unconsciously.¹ Communities can live with the aftermath of historical violence unconsciously for a number of reasons. It is either because these events had happened so long ago that it has become impossible to associate the present sufferings with the damage caused in the distant past; or due to a lack of an awareness of these connections; or owing to collective amnesia, which is a way to protect communities from continued anguish. Some have even suggested that living with and experiencing collective trauma unconsciously can be symptoms of prolonged traumatization.² This not only highlights the needs to reckon and learn from humanity's collective past, and to acknowledge the crimes committed and the wounds inflicted, but more importantly, recognizes the imperative of collective healing.

Despite this imperative, collective healing of mass trauma has not always been regarded as a significant pathway to community regeneration, global well-being, and lasting peacefulness. Healing practices, where available, tend to be patchy and limited, and seeking healing is often regarded as an individual's responsibility rather than a societal process. This individualistic conception of healing fails to recognize the systemic nature of mass atrocities and their structural roots. Therefore, traumatized communities and societies can be made to feel even more vulnerable, disempowered, and alienated by the continued culture of violence.

Although ongoing scholarship and research have attempted to bring forward theoretical debates from multifarious perspectives concerning historical trauma and collective healing, there remain severe limitations. For instance, little attention has been paid to interrogate the conspiring structural process of *wounding* that was strategically conceived, and systematically carried out by *actors* with the intention to benefit from the mass brutality, as in the case of transatlantic trade of enslaved Africans and slavery. Equally, there is a lack of focus on linking the different symptoms of trauma lodged in the national and regional geopolitical tensions and systemic injustice to the historical events that had resulted in the deep wounds in

¹ Tshombe Miles, "Reflecting on the Legacy of Brazilian Slavery and Reimagining Afro-Brazilian Agency," *History Compass* 17, no. 1 (2019), 8.

² Thomas Hübl and Julie Avritt, *Healing Collective Trauma: A Process for Integrating Our Intergenerational and Cultural Wounds* (Louisville: Sounds True, 2020).

the first place. As such, land inequality in Colombia,³ socioeconomic deprivation in Brazil,⁴ white supremacy suffered by African and indigenous Americans in the US,⁵ and ethnic fractionalization, fragmented political structures, and political fragility in some countries in Africa,⁶ can easily be treated as “issues” or “problems” in their own right, rather than tracing them to the dehumanizing acts of transatlantic slavery.

As global communities continue to be confronted with racism, a truly harmful consequence of transatlantic slavery, a great deal of research has been devoted to peoples’ and communities’ experiences of racial injustice and discrimination. This focus on racism *per se* can present us with two kinds of undesired phenomenon. One is that the more scholarships and grassroots efforts lay emphasis on the “racialized” experiences of peoples of color, the more their victimhood is accentuated, and the more the segregation is reinforced between the “races” and peoples of different skin colors. The other is that when “race” becomes the center of investigation and inquiry, and notwithstanding the critique to institutional racism, the systemic roots of racism, i.e., capitalist economy, and associated instrumental mentality and the ideology of human hierarchy, can remain unquestioned. Hence since the abolition of slavery, and the end of colonial occupation, slavery has prevailed, albeit in different garbs, and colonization has continued, not limited to those who live in non-self-governing territories, but through more subtle, and more deeply seated form of colonization, from educational system, to language and discourse, from epistemic foundation, to our ways of perceiving justice.

Therefore, for the UNESCO Slave Route Project (SRP), and the Guerrand-Hermès Foundation for Peace (GHFP),⁷ the challenges of confronting mass atrociousness include addressing the need to acknowledge historical acts of violence, understanding the harmful impacts of legacies sustained by continued social injustice, and examining the very structure that has perpetuated systemic dehumanization. To confront these challenges, the UNESCO SRP and the GHFP developed a partnership initiative, seeking to investigate the connection between past large-scale atrocities, such as the transatlantic slavery, their harmful effects on successive generations of peoples and communities, as well as the wide-spread racism in contemporary western societies.

To this end, the UNESCO SRP/GHFP partnership launched two international symposia on the relevant topics in 2018 and 2019; a research to propose a conceptual framework for understanding the notion of healing wounds in 2019, and a desk review to map out existing approaches to and practices of collective trauma healing in 2020–2021. The interdisciplinary dialogue, philosophical investigation into key concepts, and exploration of relevant literature and findings in the intersecting fields of research and study have not only resulted in rich insights into general questions concerning mass brutalities and trauma, but also deepened the partners commitment to further expanding our understanding of collective healing.

Accordingly, this Special Issue brings forward six articles from the above process. It aims to contribute to emergent critical voices in research about collective trauma and collective healing by introducing novel perspectives and inviting further debates on the relevant issues evoked. For this reason, the Special Issue focuses on collective healing through a number of prisms. First, it delves into the notions of *wounding* and trauma, with a view to advance a well-

³ Daron Acemoglu et al., “Finding Eldorado: Slavery and Long-Run Development in Colombia,” *Journal of Comparative Economics* 40, no. 4 (2012), 534–564.

⁴ Ibrahima Thiaw and Deborah L. Mack, “Atlantic Slavery and the Making of the Modern World: Experiences, Representations, and Legacies: An Introduction to Supplement 22,” *Current Anthropology* 61, no. 22 (2020), 151; Daniela Issa, “Reification and the Human Commodity: Theorizing Modern Slavery in Brazil,” *Latin American Perspectives* 44, no. 6 (2017), 96.

⁵ Moon-Kie Jung, *Beneath the Surface of White Supremacy: Denaturalizing US Racisms Past and Present* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015).

⁶ Graziella Bertocchi and Andrea Guerzoni. “Growth, History, or Institutions: What Explains State Fragility in Sub-Saharan Africa?,” *Journal of Peace Research* 49, no. 6 (2012), 769–783.

⁷ UNESCO SRP and GHFP have jointly supported the research and symposia from which this Special Issue has emerged.

argued theoretical framework for understanding collective healing. Second, it identifies underlying ethical pillars for collective healing, especially the principles of equality and well-being that affirm human dignity founded on our intrinsic non-instrumental value as persons. Third, it interrogates one of the deeply seated root causes of transatlantic slavery, and establishes a connection between capitalist expansion and systematic subjugation of human beings to brutal forces for the sake of materialistic production and wealth accumulation. Thus this Special Issue attempts to survey historical dehumanization in some of the mass atrocities, probe their continued legacies in contemporary societies in Africa, Europe, and the Americas, and highlight some of the promising political, psycho-social, and grassroots approaches to collective healing in various contexts. In doing so, it further reflects on the conceptual, methodological, and structural challenges involved when moving towards collective healing.

It is important to note from the outset that the original candidate articles covered a wider range of contexts and atrocities, including transatlantic slavery, genocides in the 20th century, violent displacement of aboriginal communities, ethnic cleansing, and intercommunal violence. However, due to peer-review decisions and spaces allowed, this Special Issue only contains a collection of articles that focus their explorations mostly on the wounds of transatlantic slavery, with one article which reflects and evaluates the effectiveness of healing in wider and more diverse contexts.

Given this narrow focus, by bringing forward the aforementioned dimensions of investigation and interrogation, this Special Issue attempts to make a case for the imperative of collect healing of large-scale dehumanizing atrocities and the resulting wounds. Whilst developing original ideas, and suggesting innovative perspectives, the articles included here have also actively built upon relevant ideas and perspectives of other scholars, researchers, and practitioners. In this way, the Special Issue truly creates a space for further dialogue.

Wounding and Collective Trauma

To understand the effects of past mass atrocities, and to address the harms of collective trauma endured by peoples of successive generations, communities, and societies, it requires a theoretical analysis on the notion of “healing wound.” Clearly, “healing” can only be derivative on “wound,” with reference to relevant concepts of “wounding” and “woundedness.” A normative inquiry can help investigate what constitutes “being wounded” and thereby “healing wounds,” and enable us to interrogate the different meanings that “collective healing” might have in various contexts of historical violence. In addition, a normative inquiry may also help propose a theoretical framework for understanding collective healing (of historical wounds) in all its dimensions. The theoretical framework further offers a conceptual compass for guiding collective healing practices in the communities, and for directing our evaluative appreciation and critical appraisal of these practices in contexts.

Take the analysis of the woundedness from the transatlantic slavery as an example. What was extremely pernicious about the kind of wounding inflicted during the transatlantic slavery is that these callously violent acts were *dehumanizing*. They were dehumanizing because they made peoples and communities at the receiving ends of such acts feel that they were robbed of their dignity as persons, not just being deprived of basic livelihood, but of any opportunity to live a full human life. No doubt there are other kinds of harm and mass damage, such as the huge losses during natural disasters, that can be extremely traumatizing. However, the kind of harm endured by the enslaved and the communities of their descendants (e.g., African and indigenous) was especially malicious owing to the fact that the woundedness was perpetuated calculatedly and strategically by *actors* (individuals, groups, corporations, and countries). These actors coordinated and channeled available powers and resources, including the powers of economic and political institutions, supported by epistemic, religious, ideological, and discursive resources, with a sole intention to enslave other human beings and to profit from the subjugation of their bodies, minds, and spirits.

Historically, the dehumanizing acts of the trade and enslavement of African and indigenous peoples had made transatlantic slavery a global economic institution through

coerced labor, forced migration, and violent displacement of peoples from their homelands. Notwithstanding the lives perished in these processes, the injuries have been experienced and sustained by the formerly enslaved, their descendants of many generations, and the relevant communities. The harms are multi-dimensional, i.e., material, physical, psychological, social-relational, and spiritual. Most observable are the dehumanizing and polarizing relationships between the communities and societies of the actors who have directly and indirectly benefited from slavery, and those who have suffered the pains and legacies of the historical wounds. All these harms are further perpetuated by the same structural and institutional conditions that have once permitted and even encouraged the dehumanizing acts of callousness.

This suggests that being wounded by mass brutalities can be perceived along these four dimensions, including the historical dehumanizing acts *per se*, the effects of the trauma on the injured communities, dehumanizing relationships thus propagated, and the continued structural dehumanization that perpetuates these the damages from these wounds. A common thread linking all four dimensions of collective trauma is dehumanization which represents a gravest form of harm. It is gravest because the woundedness can have prolonged damaging effects on many generations of peoples and communities.

Through a normative inquiry into collective trauma and collective healing, this Special Issue joins other similar effort in examining the severity of the losses, e.g., the loss of meaningful life and the loss of human dignity. A working conclusion is that being subject to physical, psychological, and spiritual harm and being deprived of human dignity is in the direct consequence of the trauma of transatlantic slavery. It was a systematic denial of the enslaved and their descendants' human experiences, subjectivities, social relations, and cultural practices. Such woundedness is therefore collective in nature, and the trauma is likewise collective. Conceptualizing transatlantic slavery as collective trauma, including acknowledging the historical dehumanizing events, and continued structural dehumanization, can serve to strengthen our understanding of the methodological approaches to and the practices of collective healing.

The Non-Instrumental Value of Persons and Well-Being

To interrogate the pernicious nature of transatlantic slavery and continued exploitation, it requires the idea of equal non-instrumental value of all persons. In other words, humans should be respected as beings of intrinsic (non-instrumental) value. Such respect does not depend on who we are, where we are from, or what we have done. In this sense, no persons should be treated purely instrumentally. This is where human dignity truly lies, and enslavement, commodification, colonization, and objectification all fail to respect persons as beings of non-instrumental value because these acts treat human beings solely as means to an end.

Dehumanizing acts are particularly harmful because they can result in people feeling alienated from a self-conscious awareness of their dignity as beings who have non-instrumental value. This understanding of non-instrumental value of all persons also gives rise to the appreciation of equal worthwhileness of all people. Equality in this sense is more than equal access to opportunities, resources, political processes, and so forth. Equality thus conceived proposes that all lives should be respected equally. Following this logic, we can see that when actors (individuals, groups, corporations, and states) fail to respect other people as beings of non-instrumental value, and treat other human beings purely instrumentally, they are likewise alienated from a self-conscious awareness of their dignity. This suggests that collective healing must involve perpetrators or actors of violent atrocities.

When applying the lens of the equal worthwhileness of all persons in examining the harms of transatlantic slavery, it necessitates a conceptual bridge that connects such harms to the loss of dignity as persons. Here lies the notion of holistic human well-being,⁸ without which, life becomes unbearable, hollow, and futile. Well-being can help us understand that the brutality

⁸ Garrett Thomson et al., *Happiness, Flourishing and the Good Life: A Transformative Vision for Human Well-Being* (London: Routledge, 2020).

of enslavement is an element of ill-being, the opposite of well-being and human dignity. This way, well-being can also enable us to characterize conceptually what might ultimately constitute healing. In other words, collective healing is not merely to repair the damage, but more importantly, collective healing allows the emergence of a fuller and more enriched life.

Briefly, in this Special Issue, well-being is defined as being well, living well, and becoming well holistically, which involves our engaging in activities, processes, experiences and relationships that are meaningful for us, our appreciating these as non-instrumentally valuable in our life, and our self-conscious awareness that all is going well with our life.⁹ Well-being thus defined can allow us to see clearly how the effects of trauma impede on people's lives in different dimensions. It provides a lens for us to examine the quality of human life without reducing it to mere material wealth, physical health, or purely positive sensation. Indeed, well-being can enable the practices of collective healing to go beyond the focus of tackling poverty as if an economic problem, treating trauma as if a health problem, or dealing with racism as if an attitudinal problem. Through the perspectives of well-being, we are able to see that these so-called "problems" are in effect symptoms of a greater systemic *malaise*, which collective healing aims to *cure*.

Well-being can further help us orient collective healing practices. For example, the relational dimension of well-being points to the importance of other people in our own well-being. This suggests that the rifts between peoples and communities can only be healed by involving peoples and communities from both sides of the historical wounds of transatlantic slavery.

Capitalist Economy and Slavery

The thesis arguing for the link between capitalist economic expansion in Europe and Americas and transatlantic slavery is well-supported.¹⁰ It points out that the labors of the enslaved had heralded the rise of capitalist global economy, followed by the extension of capitalist economy to Asia and the rest of the world through colonization, and other forms of violence. The thriving economic activities, and large-scale production of material goods served as the foundation upon which to build major economies of the Americas, especially the US economy, and economies in Western Europe, including Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch, and British economies, but also the growth of Scandinavian economies. The economic benefits were beyond the trade of the enslaved and the productions from coerced labor, and included stimulating trade between these colonizing countries, and their colonies on a global scale, preparing a fertile ground for Industrial Revolution.¹¹

Recognizing transatlantic slavery as a European and American economic institution was to acknowledge capitalist economic expansion as a root cause of the dehumanizing acts already discussed. It similarly concedes that other forms of violence, such as colonization, and continued instrumentalization, exploitation, and subjugation of peoples and communities worldwide, had stemmed from the same structural dehumanization. To fully comprehend such continued wounding, it is necessary to explore the capitalist tendencies in terms of, for example, the aims of economy, the mode of production, and relationships unfolding within such a system, and underpinning ideological pillars.

Indeed, the sole aim of capital accumulation for its own sake had already determined the mode of production to be purely instrumental, characterized by minimizing costs and maximizing productivity and profit. This instrumental tendency of capitalist economy means that there must be structural features in place to ensure such minimization and maximization, which further require that the relationships between economic, social and political institutions, corporations, and other institutions to be mutually beneficial. These institutions would

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ John Clegg, "A Theory of Capitalist Slavery," *Journal of Historical Sociology* 33, no. 1 (March 2020), 74–98.

¹¹ Joseph E. Inikori, "Atlantic Slavery and the Rise of the Capitalist Global Economy," *Current Anthropology* 61, no. 22 (2020), 159–170.

converge and contrive in pursuit of materialistic gains. Within such a structure, human beings are only valued in accordance with their role in the economic engine rather than appreciated as whole persons. The result is not only the impersonal nature of relationships within institutions but also that people are alienated from the meaningfulness of their work.

Furthermore, for the sake of minimizing costs and maximizing profit, capitalist system has already prefigured that some people must be exploited, where their needs and well-being are minimized, and their productivity maximized. The *raison-d'être* of capitalist economy requires the ideology of human hierarchy, fabricated using excuses, such as skin color, religion, ethnicity, gender, geographical location, cultural history, and more. This is the same ideology mobilized to enable the enslavement of Africans and indigenous communities, but now in different pretexts, beyond the colors of our skin. Hence, despite the abolition of slavery and the end of colonialism, the same structural force and institutional practices underlying slavery and colonization have remained.

The capitalist structure has a built-in mechanism to polarize, permitting those in the position of power to coerce and exploit those who are vulnerable. Many communities have been made vulnerable through capitalist manipulation, as we have seen through the transatlantic slavery, and colonial invasion and occupation. It is hardly surprising that the most economically developed countries in the West are those who have profited, during early modernity, from transatlantic slavery, and colonial occupations, albeit in different ways. The countries and lands from which the enslaved Africans and indigenous peoples were drawn, the regions from which the natural resources were looted, and the places that provided the enslavers and colonists with laborers and products, and commodities are the same countries that are economically under-developed, the same lands that are riddled with poverty and deprivation, and the same places dominated by violent conflicts and other communal challenges.

It is thus key to collective healing that we closely examine the root causes of mass trauma and the various manifestations of their legacies. Otherwise, all efforts would barely address the symptoms, rather than aim at treating or curing the “disease” as discussed earlier. For instance, the current climate emergencies and ecological crises are illustrations that the capitalist system has extended the structure of hierarchy to beyond the human realm. It treats all other beings in nature as means for the sake of wealth accumulation. This link between collective healing of the wounds of transatlantic slavery and healing the wounds humans have inflicted on our planet Earth can thus be proposed.

Collective Healing: Meanings, Opportunities, and Challenges

This Special Issue consists of five articles, each addressing a particular dimension of the theme explored.

The first is effectively a normative inquiry. In “Collective Healing: Towards a Conceptual Framework,” Garrett Thomson develops a four-fold framework for understanding collective healing. He argues that healing must be a holistic and collective endeavor involving distinct processes, including coming to terms with historical woundedness, working through the resulting trauma and its harmful psychological effects, and reconciling towards more congenial and humanizing relationships. It further critiques the individualistic tendency in the dominant methodological approach to dealing with trauma and suggests that the societal features under structural dehumanization must also be confronted as part of our collective healing.

The next two articles explore the legacies of transatlantic slavery, evaluate their persistent harms, and discuss how existing approaches might contribute to collective healing. In “Legacies of Slavery and their Enduring Harms,” Scherto Gill outlines the legacies of slavery from an interdisciplinary perspective and makes a distinction between the legacies of slavery and their persisting damages on the relevant peoples, communities, and regions. This distinction can help situate the pains and sufferings of historical traumas within contemporary structural dehumanization that tends to perpetuate these harms. In “Collective Healing to Address Legacies of Transatlantic Slavery: Opportunities and Challenges,” Scherto Gill and Garrett Thomson draw on the insights from the previous two articles and use the four-fold framework for

understanding collective healing as a conceptual compass to critically review existing collective healing practices and discuss the relevant challenges along each of these dimensions.

The last two articles examine the conditionalities and possibilities of collective healing. In "The United States and Genocide: The Cases of Native and African Americans," Benjamin Bowser, Carl Word, and Kate Shaw make a case that transatlantic trade of enslaved Africans, slavery, and the elimination of Native peoples in the North America were primarily acts of genocide. They do so by detailing the intention, the level and scale of brutality, and the sheer number of people thus murdered. They then demonstrate that the same racist ideologies that once made mass killing of enslaved Africans and indigenous peoples possible have remain in place, sustaining contemporary racism in the US. Focusing the remainder of the discussion on the potentials of counselling as an approach to healing the traumas experienced presently by the relevant groups and communities, this essay opens a novel space for dialogue about the possibility of shifting the culture of US institutions towards more just and more caring.

Finally, in "A Dance of Shadows and Fires," Brandon Hamber and Ingrid Palmay draw on various contexts of historical mass atrocity, including transatlantic slavery, colonial oppression, apartheid, violence against women during wars, holocaust, and the Rwanda genocide, to critically interrogate the effectiveness of collective healing. They first problematize the complex political, psychological, and cultural processes involved in addressing the intergenerational trauma. Then, by taking a closer look at practices aimed at collective healing, such as truth commissions, reparation, public apology, political forgiveness, remembrance, and conventional and restorative justice, they question how these practices might result in collective healing, especially when evaluating the effectiveness of such practices from the perspectives of those who have continued to suffer pains and losses across the generations. The essay evokes that the survivors and their descendants of mass atrocity can only experience healing relevant to their lives in the present socio-economic and political situations. Through case analyses, the authors stress that the structural conditions are imperative in determining how societies can address past violence, and how peoples from both sides of mass atrocities can receive and accept healing. Furthermore, it raises a critical question: can historical wound, such as the brutality of transatlantic slavery, be healed? In many cases, according to the essay, the past "takes on a life of its own," shaped and reshaped by the present memories, manners of remembering, and by the ever-evolving process of shared meaning-making. It concludes that collective healing, conceived as "real transformation," can only happen when there is shift of our economic and political system towards more humanizing.

While multidisciplinary scholarship continues to raise critical voices about the harrowing sociocultural, economic, political, and ethical consequences of leaving the wounds of transatlantic slavery unhealed and the legacies unaddressed, close examination and focused study and research about collective healing remain wanting. New waves of interpersonal and intergroup racism, and internalized racism amongst people of darker skin tones are once again plaguing many societies, including those in the African continent, Europe, and the Americas. The *Black Lives Matter* movement and other grassroots movements are demanding more action towards collective healing.

As demonstrated, this Special Issue is underpinned by a deep concern with conceptual issues surrounding mass atrocities and their aftermath, but equally with methodological approaches and practices of collective healing. In understanding deeply the woundedness, pains, and sufferings following mass brutality, each of these articles adopts a particular conceptual, critical, ethical, and methodological lens and evokes a shift from purely trauma-informed inquiries to healing-focused investigations. Together, they call for a more integral approach to considering pathways to collective healing, including acknowledging mass historical dehumanization, their root causes and legacies, their impacts on peoples, and communities, such as cultural and intergenerational traumas, and other harmful effects, including racism, polarization, and exploitation.

A resounding conclusion from all articles in this collection, and from both conceptual analysis and desk-based "landscaping," is that without systemic transformation, without integrating historical, psychosocial, political, economic, cultural, and communal processes, and without

engaging peoples and communities of both sides of the violence, any efforts towards collective healing of the wounds and traumas from historical mass atrocity will remain superficial.

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