

Literature and Culture Workshop I: Summary and Discussion

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The first workshop of the Literature and Culture session commenced with Professor Okuda Akiyo's presentation of her paper titled "Social Justice and Economic Reparation: African-American Struggles for Equal Opportunity around the Turn of the Century." In the presentation, she elaborated on the theme of "Americanism and Social Justice," exploring controversial reparation issues related to African Americans.

Professor Okuda described the recent reparation movements of the late twentieth century to date as being, in the words of Roy L. Brooks, the "Age of Apology." Efforts to redress the sufferings of the oppressed can be observed in apologies made to African Americans by the United States Congress in 2008 for the wrongs of slavery and in the compensation to Japanese Americans in 1988 for the incarceration during World War II. Nonetheless, why did ex-slaves and their descendents not seek reparations right after the emancipation from slavery? Professor Okuda hypothesized that one of the plausible reasons was that they were placed in a very precarious situation—it was much more important for those relegated to the status of second-class citizens to attain citizenship, rather than to receive monetary reparations. Prominent African-American leaders of the time, such as W. E. B. Dubois and Booker T. Washington, highlighted the achievements of African Americans to prove themselves to be self-sufficient citizens of America who would not need any financial aid. Although their achievements as well as struggles have largely been disregarded by racist politics and society, their laborious efforts paved the way for the reparation movements today. Professor Okuda's careful and insightful examination of historical accounts offered a new outlook on social justice and contemporary reparation movements.

A commentator, Professor Qian Mansu, delineated further achievements of African Americans during the Civil Rights movements in the 1950s and 1960s. She also responded to the question raised by Professor Okuda on the possible implementation of reparation measures for African Americans. Furthermore, she pointed out the social progress and success achieved by some African Americans after the enactment of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. While reflecting on the heroic history of the Civil Rights movement, Professor Qian demonstrated the complexity of pursuing reparations by examining the mixed comments made by

her Chinese colleagues and those available on the Internet. Admitting the complexity of reparations, she proposed a possible way to deal with the issue from three perspectives: morality, politics, and law. She argued that the opponents of reparations should take effective measures in these respective fields. More importantly, she emphasized that belonging to the human race should be the ideal common ground on which social justice should be discussed.

In response to the prior speakers' arguments and comments respectively, Professor Werner Sollors speculated on the reluctance of African Americans to ask for reparation immediately after the emancipation. He highlighted the military usage of reparation, which was seen in the victor's demands for monetary compensation for warfare from the defeated. In the late twentieth century, the term "reparations" began being used to convey apology/remorse for the rectification of historical wrongs, as seen from the reparations given to the survivors of Japanese American internment camps and the descendents of slaves. Another example of recent reparation would be the measures taken by Brown University, whose funding family was discovered to have benefited from the slave trade. Professor Sollors then emphasized the importance of "uplifting" for ex-slaves and their descendants, stating that literacy, rather than the accumulation of wealth, was the key to becoming an integral part of society. He also explicated that African-American intellectuals deliberately avoided slavery issues because they felt that racism, having escalated with the end of slavery, might have intensified further if they had asked for monetary compensation. Today, the view of slavery has changed. In the post-Civil Rights era, some African Americans were integrated and became successful in various fields including education, the military and the economy. However, there exists the other group of African Americans who are still underprivileged. Professor Sollors suggested that the creation of a financial scheme toward reparation would help advance social justice and redress the socially disadvantaged.

Owing to the commitment of the panelists and participants, the question and answer session was constructive. The topics raised during this session included the following: the possibility of achieving economic justice in a capitalist society; the global influence of U.S. reparation movements; the coalition beyond ethnic differences; the publication of Black magazines for raising awareness on reparations around the turn of the century; the purpose of the nineteenth century American Colonization Society to return black Americans to Africa with the creation of Liberia; the tendency of African-American male leaders fighting against racial injustice to be gender biased; the importance of a positive self-image in the search for equality; and the negative influence of reparations. To summarize Professor Okuda's responses as well as the comments made by other participants, the aim of contemporary reparation movements would be to set a goal to promote social justice. It will be unrealistic to seek economic equality in a capitalist society, and neither will it be feasible to claim larger financial compensations without identifying the victims. Moreover, immigrants of other

ethnic groups in a post-slavery generation might oppose financial reparations if paid by the government, since the latter might not be directly associated with the oppression. Nevertheless, reparation movements serve as a powerful tool to bind divided groups and advance coalitions among different ethnic groups. Some examples of cultural reparations such as museums preserving the memory of past wrongs will be effective in ensuring that these wrongs are not repeated. The session clearly encouraged a heated debate on social justice and enabled us to understand the importance of reparations in terms of social justice.