**Remarks at United Nations Expert Meeting on Reparations**

**Reconsidering Reparations: Theory and Practice**

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Special Rapporteur Achiume, Colleagues:

I hope that my remarks will contribute positively to ongoing efforts to secure reparations and justice for our peoples and for all peoples.

**Theory: The Constructive View of Reparations**

As a philosopher, much of my work involves engaging with, categorizing and evaluating arguments at a highly abstract level. Applying this background to a wide variety of arguments and rationales for a reparatory response to the history trans-Atlantic slavery and attendant colonialism, I group the arguments into two broad families of strategy: harm repair and relationship repair.

*Harm repair* arguments view reparations as a project in service of the justice of restitution or retribution. These accounts, I argue, start in the right place – attention to the living conditions and material realities that Black people are forced to confront as a result of the history of racial and colonial domination.

However, these arguments tend to rely on welfarist conceptions of harm, which in turn implicitly characterizes problems in these present-day conditions as welfare reductions relative to some unstated – I argue unstatable – contrast class. This renders them vulnerable to what philosophers call the “existential worry” or the “non-identity objection”, which points out that the harmed classes of people would not exist but for the history of racial domination that constitutes them as the races they are, which presents trouble for identifying a counterfactual contrast class against which to construe their present-day living conditions as harm. This objection

*Relationship repair* arguments often view reparations as a project in the service of reconciliatory justice. Reparations are to be understood as aiming either at repairing the relationship between the parties broken by historical wrongdoing and subsequent non-reparation (which can cause represent an additional wrongdoing). Alternatively, on this picture reparations can be about rightfully navigating whatever relationship remains between the parties by performing whatever obligations arise out of that relationship’s history.

While these arguments avoid the non-identity objection that plagues harm repair arguments for reparations, many of them accomplish this at considerable cost. I argue that some sub-categories of relationship repair arguments decenter the welfare of descendants of the enslaved and colonized, especially those that construe the relationship damage in symbolic or communicative terms, thereby implying that the relationship between Blacks globally and their white and First World counterparts could be repaired without substantive changes either to the material conditions of their lives or to the systems that produce these material conditions. This charge is particularly apt for those that focus on the relationships between the moral inheritors of the wronged and the moral inheritors of wrongdoers, which often feature in academic discussions of the problem.

Within this family of views is the view that I argue for, which I term the *constructive view* and offer as a critical reconstruction of many of the more materially focused visions of reparations offered by activists, political actors, and even post-revolutionary states in pursuit of Black liberation and universal global justice. The constructive view is a kind of relationship repair argument that takes a more holistic approach to relationship construction and reconstruction, which includes tasking reparations with facilitating healthy relationships within communities of marginalized people, relationships of such communities to their own collective ends, and the overall relationship composed by all of these to the material world in which individuals and groups pursue their ends.

According to the constructive view, reparations’ practical aim is the building of a just social order. The familiar, backward-looking considerations bear on how we allocate the benefits and burdens of transitioning to this new order, shifting the burdens and costs of this transition towards the inheritors of the relevant historical moral liabilities. Then, on this view, reparations is a description of the distributive justice of the construction of a just social order.

**Practice: Climate Justice as the Constructive Project**

As a political philosopher, I try to engage with the relevant political actors as well as the social and natural sciences to see what aspects of the concrete world that our abstractions must answer to while being formed, but also for insight into what concrete form our theories of justice ought to take given real-world conditions, historical context, and state of political play at local and geopolitical scales of analysis. One increasingly salient aspect of the real world that reparations discourse has yet to fully engage with is this: it is getting much, much warmer.

The constructive view is about the costs of transition to a more just social order. We will not so much as be able to maintain what was won in past struggles on the present courses. All other past or near-future political and material gains, the chapter reasons, will be erased or reversed in a world that warms even 1.5C above preindustrial levels – a global average temperature rise which scientists project that many swaths of Africa will greatly exceed. We will lose these gains due to the toxic combination of Black peoples’ hypervulnerability to climate impacts, lower levels of adaptation and mitigation-ready infrastructure, and the low probability of sufficient after-the-fact economic and humanitarian aid (due in no small part to attitudes and political realities cemented by centuries of global racial domination). That is, if we survive as a political community at all: it is no exaggeration to call the stakes of climate crisis as existential for entire populations of Black peoples and those who live near and among us, including the entirety of the Caribbean and broad swaths of the African continent.

Since Global North countries are disproportionately responsible for the emissions that caused climate change as well as the underdevelopment that made Africans and other colonized peoples susceptible to climate change, this destruction would in and of itself count as colonial violence. But this massively understates the problem, since there is a dangerous possibility of climate colonialism: that the securitizing responses of world powers to climate crises will deepen or expand neocolonial political relations between themselves and the Global South.

Any practical reparations project must, at a minimum, involve an effective climate justice component. More likely, given the amount of political will that will be required for a justice and effective global response to climate change, this aspect of world politics must become the central focal point of a concrete reparations project.