

Race and Reparations in Providence, Rhode Island: The Role of Public History in Racial Justice

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Abstract

Contemporary critiques of race reparations programs in the United States often highlight two primary concerns: the shortcomings of similar policy in the past, and a perception of reparations as a kneejerk response to nationwide protests against police violence. This article presents the city of Providence's 2020 reparations project as a potential response to these criticisms. By contextualizing the bill within the history of reparations in the United States and decades of historical activism on racial violence in the history of Southern New England, this article establishes Providence's reparations project not simply as a reaction to recent racial justice activism, but rather the culmination of decades of historical and transitional justice activism through public history and art projects around the region. As public policy deeply grounded in historical research and an understanding of past attempts at restorative justice, Mayor Jorge Elorza's reparations project presents a fresh, holistic approach to reparations, including an independent research commission, targeted recommendations for project implementation, and involvement from civil society organizations, government agencies, and law enforcement. This project has placed Providence on the growing list of American cities pursuing race reparations programs, and its implementation could serve as a barometer for measuring the effectiveness of public history projects and awareness programs in facilitating public support necessary for effective reparations.

Introduction

In a 1985 speech at the Bundestag in Berlin, Germany, then President of Germany, Richard von Weizsäcker, declared that “all of us, whether guilty or not, whether old or young, must accept the past. We are all affected by its consequences and liable for it” (Weizsäcker 1985). His words were in reference to German responsibility for the Holocaust, reaffirming the role of the past in each individual’s present circumstances. Von Weizsäcker’s speech, though given in reference to a specific atrocity, employs a contentious principle of remembrance present in any discussion of atrocities and violence: responsibility for the past. Responsibility for the past is the foundational concept of transitional justice, meaning the attempt by a government or a people to, whether through financial, political, or educational means, atone for atrocities that they committed in the past. In the case of Germany, a concrete agreement of responsibility was necessary for the state to conceptualize the idea of transitional justice to the Jewish people. With this speech, von Weizsäcker was reaffirming this agreement, thus supporting the intellectual framework upon which the German government built its reparations payments to the fledgling state of Israel.

The remembrance of past atrocities and payment of reparations are not unique to the latter half of the 20th century; in fact, reparations have been a piece of international relations for centuries, frequently concerning the belligerents of resolved multinational conflicts, as with the infamous German reparations following the First World War (Office of the Historian n.d.). But, their application to groups of people, most commonly those that share identification along ethnic, religious, or racial lines, has truly gained steam only in the last century. In the United States, reparations conversations have centered around several different groups, most recently formerly enslaved Americans of African Heritage. Public awareness, rapidly increasing due to a renewed

discourse regarding police brutality and systemic racism, has led to several cities in the United States pursuing investigations into past atrocities and, in some cases, designing projects of transitional justice, for example scholarship funds for African Heritage students which aim to increase access to higher education (Rhode Island Foundation n.d.).

In Providence, Rhode Island, Mayor Jorge Elorza (D) has passed an executive order mandating the establishment of a truth commission and the pursuit of reparatory projects aimed at addressing the State of Rhode Island's role in atrocities committed against African Heritage and Indigenous People through enslavement and genocide. Mayor Elorza's bill, similarly to von Weizsäcker's declaration regarding Germany, utilizes a framework of historical responsibility to argue that transitional justice is necessary to atone for past crimes. Furthermore, reparations and other forms of transitional justice in Providence are a part of a larger transitional justice framework of cooperating mechanisms to acknowledge, validate, and create justice for past atrocities. In Providence, this executive order's plans constitute a broader process of constructing public awareness, acceptance, and support of financial and political actions taken on behalf of repairing historical damage. Though recent public discourse around police brutality and systemic racism has certainly been a catalyst for reparations projects around the country, of which Mayor Elorza's proposal is one of many, the project's roots lie much deeper than recent political considerations.

This article will explore theoretical frameworks of transitional justice, including those which result in reparations, and dissect Mayor Jorge Elorza's executive order, situating it within the broader discourse as an answer to questions of perpetrators, victims, and of government-led transitional justice. Then, I will examine the mayor's truth commission's product, "A Matter of Truth," the official account of the history of racial oppression in Rhode Island, and lay out its

prescriptions for reparations in Providence. Finally, I will present contemporary criticisms of both the executive order and its espoused sentiments, both from reactionary circles and from sympathetic actors, and explore what is next for Providence's reparations plan and those elsewhere.

Overall, this article finds that the Providence reparations bill is situated well within concepts of social healing and more broad approaches to transitional justice, using civil society and a broad array of projects to address both past atrocities and the issue of public support for acknowledging them. Mayor Jorge Elorza's reparations project is not simply a reaction to mounting political pressure over the past few years, but rather the culmination of decades of historical and transitional justice activism through public history and art projects around the state. Public history projects in Rhode Island, led in part by the Rhode Island Black Heritage Society, the 1696 Heritage Group, and other activist organizations, have sought to reconceptualize Rhode Island's role in past atrocities to African Heritage and Indigenous People in the region and define its subsequent responsibility to provide restitution for those wrongs. Public history, through visible historical markers, museums, and publicly accessible historical sites, also provided a space in public discourse through which the City of Providence is now able to approach issues of historical responsibility and call on various stakeholders to develop a plan for redress to African Heritage and Indigenous People in the area. As a culmination of the sentiments and goals expressed by these public history projects, Mayor Elorza's reparations project seeks to use this public awareness of local government's role in the history of racial oppression in Southern New England to begin to address questions of how to repair the damage that has been done.

Memory, Public History, and Reparations

The idea of reparations at its simplest is compensation for a loss experienced by a particular group, state, or people, frequently accompanied by either a formal or informal acceptance by the financier of the reparations of their role in perpetrating the perceived wrong. Reparations projects, particularly those concerning a racial, ethnic, or cultural group echo this idea of historical responsibility. Such projects are often framed by their proponents as providing compensation, be it through social reform, as with affirmative action in the United States, or direct financial payment, for past wrongs done to a particular group because of their identification as members of it. The role of reconciliation, in other words acceptance by the perpetrator and a process of forgiveness from the victim, is of some contention, as some proponents argue that looking towards the past is counterproductive to a better future. Howard McGary, a renowned philosopher of transitional justice, framed the philosophical bedrock of questions of race reparations, presenting reconciliation as an integral piece in the process of moving forward (2010, 547). McGary argues for the importance of reconciliation and the recognition of wrongs done in the past, underlining the crucial role that truth, acceptance, and forgiveness occupy in processes of restoring justice. A willingness to move forward and cooperate with established mechanisms, be they financial injection or social programs, rests on the fundamental idea that such actions are just. McGary posits that this willingness to move forward can only be achieved through truth-finding and reconciliation, as that will create a more receptive sociopolitical climate to redress for past wrongs.

In the United States, attempts at transitional justice have met mixed results and diverging reactions from the American public. By far the most popular avenue through which to attempt transitional justice, or at least acknowledgement, in the United States is the formal apology. Such

apologies typically consist of a formal declaration given in a state's legislative body, voted through both houses, and signed off by the governor to acknowledge both the state's role in past atrocities and their understanding that such actions were indeed detrimental to a specific group. Davis (2014) analyzes political apologies, their contents, and considers their effectiveness—or lack thereof. She raises the specific example of states—at the time of writing, Virginia, Alabama, Arkansas, Connecticut, Florida, Maryland, New Jersey, and North Carolina—and the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives issuing formal apologies for their role in the Transatlantic Slave Trade, arguing that these apologies, though framed as attempts to reconcile past wrongs, were complete failures to provide any sort of material justice. She posits that they ignored the material reality of Black Americans that continue to suffer from the legacy of slavery in the United States, arguing that true reparations will address this issue with concrete measures (Davis 2014, 281). From her argument and that of Dr. McGary, reparations complexifies into a long process, in which both reconciliation—including apologies—and concrete actions are requirements.

If then, the requirements for a legitimate reparations project in the United States are well-established, why have African Heritage and Indigenous People in the United States not been paid their due? Howard-Hassmann's (2004) comparative study of the Japanese American reparations program, redress for their internment during the Second World War, and calls for similar redress for enslaved African Heritage people outlines several problems with the idea of reparations. Her principal concern with Black American claims for reparations is regarding the framework, as she argues that the historical distance to the perpetrators of slavery, the sheer number of mostly unidentifiable victims, and the vast complexity of the causal chain act against their cause, complicating public support and leading to claims that some consider to be unfair (Howard-

Hassmann 2004, 835). These are very real problems for reparations advocates, leaving a steadily-deepening maze through which there are several different tacks to take. Yamamoto, Kim, and Holden (2007) examine the crossroads between theory, which has established the requirements for a true race reparations program, and practice to outline one such tack. They acknowledge the issues with achieving both reconciliation and what they call reconstruction, the concrete policies that will aid in levelling the playing field for impacted groups, and they follow this up by reframing reconciliation and eventual reparations as part of a broader process of social healing, not as an end goal (Yamamoto, Kim, and Holden 2007, 84). For them, reparations are but one piece of a larger process that will eventually lead to a national culture largely committed to transitional justice for negatively impacted groups. They argue that such a comprehensive approach to social healing will serve to reconcile aggressors and victims, generate a coalescence of cultural priority around reparations, and produce an effective and sustainable project of transitional justice.

A dissection and evaluation of past reparations projects is crucial to conceptualizing current projects and, potentially, predicting their trajectory. In perhaps the most famous reparations deal of the 20th Century, the fledgling state of West Germany assumed the historical responsibility of its predecessor, the Nazi-controlled Third Reich, and began to pay financial restitution to the State of Israel to acknowledge and begin to repair the harm of the Holocaust on the Jewish people. A contemporaneous analysis of the reparations agreement between Germany and Israel, conducted by Barrister-at-Law, Frederick Honig (1954, 566) frames the goal of these reparations as Germany footing the bill for Jewish resettlement to Israel, something that both parties believed would begin to heal the Jewish people's place in the world. This particular agreement is one that a scholar like the aforementioned Angelique Davis would agree with, as it

assumed historical responsibility for past actions and enacts *material* restitution in the form of money given to the State of Israel for distribution. Similarly, reparations paid to Japanese Americans in recompense for their interment during the 1940s came as capital distributed to victims. Deepening the similarities to the German example, Japanese Americans were, themselves, victims of this crime, and they could point to living perpetrators and recent evidence to frame their requests (Howard-Hassmann 2004, 827-29). Both of these projects accomplished their goal of providing concrete reparations that served to both acknowledge past wrongs and attempt to materially correct them.

Where the German and Japanese American examples differ from the claims of Black Americans is in, just as Howard-Hassmann outlined, their ability to frame identifiable perpetrators across the board, put faces to the numerous victims, and provide reasonable requests for their desired payments. Considering the difficulty in agreeing on German terms with Israel and the decades-long fight for Japanese Americans to gain their desired restitution, reparations for slavery, Jim Crow, and ongoing racial oppression will be even more challenging in the American context. This is not to say that reparations for African Heritage and Indigenous People in the United States are impossible, just that the cause faces these unique difficulties of faceless perpetrators and victims of the past, and centuries-deep inequality. The Providence, Rhode Island executive order establishing a truth commission and reparations project is one attempt to tackle these obstacles, accounting for the unique difficulty of both the Black American calls for reparations and those of Indigenous People, both of which have suffered immensely for centuries at the State of Rhode Island. The next section will break down the executive order and its constituent parts as a holistic attempt at social healing, containing parts of reparations, other restorative social programs, and other processes of recognition.

The City of Providence Executive Order 2020-13

A 3-Phase Plan

Mayor Jorge Elorza's executive order, enacted on July 15, 2020, calls for a three-phase project of truth-telling, reconciliation, and reparations to be conducted over subsequent years. The first stage, titled Truth, is concerned with "identifying, compiling...synthesizing, and understanding the institution of slavery, the genocide of Indigenous People, and the continued discrimination within [Rhode Island and Providence] ..." In doing so, the executive order calls for the material documentation of this history by a committee, the members of which are not specified in the order, and the dissemination of the document through both government distribution and open access (Elorza 2020). In this stage, Mayor Elorza has outlined the importance of an established, agreed upon history to negotiating in the future.

Phase two, Reconciliation, is concerned with the development of the truth process into socially ingrained knowledge. The order calls for the engagement of the Providence community to "digest and reflect upon the experiences documented in phase 1..." The order continues: "...the Reconciliation process will find creative ways to engage organizations, institutions, and individuals to discuss the experiences in Phase 1," and "strive to help our community heal" (Elorza 2020). Acting upon the documentation of the Truth stage, the Mayor's Office will facilitate community engagement with both the physical report on Truth and with the ideas expressed by the commission's research. This is intended to be a communal effort, and in the body of the executive order, Mayor Elorza pledges his office's services as both a coordinator for this stage and as the developer of the aforementioned creative avenues of engagement.

The third, and final, stage of the Providence executive order, Reparations, is commonly believed to be the most important stage. The first two phases, Truth and Reconciliation, build up

to pave the way for Reparations, which the order defines as “a process whereby recommendations are made to reverse injuries caused by the experiences documented in Phase 1.” Such actions would, according to the document, “take the form most appropriate for the injuries, be they general or specific.” Furthermore, actions will involve the consideration of “appropriate recipients” and the elimination of state and local laws that continue to perpetuate the injustices delineated in Phase 1 (Elorza 2020). Though Reparations are the climax of the order’s plan, they are its least specific phase. Instead of suggesting specific forms of reparations, the mayor elects to commit the City of Providence to a process whereby the form of reparations can be considered, debated, and established by stakeholders and affected persons. Thus, the three-phase process is as much a plan for reparations as it is a commitment to a process by which citizens in the local area can take part in righting historical wrongs in a way deemed applicable to present circumstances.

Goals

Mayor Elorza’s reparations plan is, first and foremost, a commitment to acknowledging and reconciling with the City of Providence’s past, specifically instances in which the city and the State of Rhode Island (as a successor to the colony of the same name) acted in a way that harmed African Heritage and Indigenous People. While not a policy goal, the acknowledgement of this history is, as outlined by the order itself, the foundation upon which policy can become effective and sustainable. In a press statement announcing the passage of the executive order, Mayor Elorza stated that the goal of the three phase reparations project was both to educate and to “change the systems that continue to oppress our communities, while reaffirming our commitment to building a brighter, more inclusive future” (City of Providence 2020). Furthermore, the mayor states in the executive order itself that the goal is for this project to

produce “ambitiously scaled” reparations recommendations and “make Providence a model city for racial and social justice” (Elorza 2020). Though both the text of the order and the Mayor’s statements around its passage avoid defining concrete policy goals, they do state specifically that policy, perhaps including social and financial programs, is indeed the goal. Specific goals are limited to the philosophical and theoretical, addressing primarily the concern for beginning the process, whereas policy goals are simply referred to in the abstract sense. This is significant to the process of determining and issuing reparations, as the executive order has framed the entire project as an ongoing process, encouraging input from various stakeholders and civil society groups to define what the policy goals might be.

Philosophical Foundation

The executive order’s philosophical foundation is quite strong, as it draws from the conceptual framework of a holistic approach to transitional justice. Rather than simply include financial or social programs aimed at African Heritage and Indigenous People in Rhode Island, Mayor Elorza has attempted to construct a process of social healing, by which the cultural attitude of the state can shift to allow for a more sustainable justice process. Though financial reparations are certainly a significant goal of the project, the engagement of Providence residents, additions to school curricula, and other discussions of social acceptance are equally important to creating the social and political circumstances in which a reparations act will be both effective and well-received among the public. Hence, the three-phase plan will create and disseminate objective, historical documentation, plan reconciliation around this foundation of historical research, and then use the history to scaffold deliberations about the reparations process. Philosophically, the project also attempts to tackle the issue of putting a face to the perpetrators and victims of historical wrongs, a problem that Howard-Hassmann outlined with

reparations for Black Americans. By conceptualizing the City of Providence and the State of Rhode Island as the perpetrators of these historical crimes, Mayor Elorza is providing a target to serve as the foundation for claimants of reparations, creating a prospective solution to this very real problem.

Lastly, this reparations project conceives of not just a moral debt to African Heritage and Indigenous People in Rhode Island, but acknowledges a financial debt as well. Though this seems obvious with the idea of social programs and financial assistance to those determined to be victims, there are many who would argue that perpetrators, in this case the state (and to a larger extent the Federal Government), have no *financial* obligation to the victims. Rather, as with the theory behind formally issued apologies, the best course of action is only to assume responsibility for something in words or legislation (Davis 2014, 281). Elorza skirts this idea, employing the idea of a debt rooted in present day material conditions to frame his reparations project. Because the impacts of slavery and the genocide of Indigenous People in Rhode Island manifest in the present day as disparate financial affluence, unequal opportunity, and a lack of generational wealth, Mayor Elorza and his colleagues in this project argue that material, financial relief in some form is required to begin to repair this damage. It is a natural conclusion, and one way that Elorza, despite being deliberately open-ended in some corners, has created a very well-defined idea of the sort of reparations project he believes will be effective in Providence. He has drafted multi-stage project that can create a larger process of cultural healing rooted in historical fact and a solution grounded in the material conditions attributed to the genesis of reparations claims in the United States.

Analysis

Background: What Made This Executive Order Possible?

Mayor Elorza's executive order, though certainly pioneering in some regards, did not arise from a vacuum. Throughout the last few decades in Providence and the surrounding areas, several projects concerning local history have brought to light the role that the city and state had in the Transatlantic Slave Trade, creating public awareness of their local area's role in the past. Projects such as the Greene Farm excavation, the Slave Medallion Project, Historical Markers Project, and the contributions by the DeWolf family have made up part of this initiative to increase public awareness.

One such project, located only a short drive from the Rhode Island State House, concerns the archaeological excavation of a 17th Century farm called Greene Farm. The results of excavating the former Warwick, Rhode Island, plantation, a process containing the uncovering and assemblage of various artifacts and architectural remnants, reveal that from the earliest decades of English settlement in Southern New England, the presence of settlers permanently disrupted the Indigenous Peoples' existence (Frank and Ryzewski 2013, 37). Similarly, Slave Medallion projects in Rhode Island have displayed of the State of Rhode Island and its associate actors' role in the oppression of African Heritage people. On top of presenting historical artifacts of slaves in the Middle Passage, the Slave Medallion project participates in historical marker development, creating signs with the "hope to make that history easily accessible" and increase public awareness through easy access and visibility ("Documenting Places and People" 2021). Both of these projects encourage the public to interact with historical artifacts, some of which are physical pieces obtained through archaeological excavation and others are simply markers explaining a historic event that occurred at a particular location. They have been key players in

the development of public history in Rhode Island, and their ability to disseminate this history has been crucial to the mounting political pressure for transitional justice for affected communities.

Other projects are not as concerned with physical objects or events specific to one area, but rather commit themselves to uncovering narratives, themes, and establishing new conceptions of historical narratives surrounding racial oppression. The 1696 Heritage Group, a historical consulting firm geared towards increasing both the public awareness of minority ethnic groups' suffering in the United States and the political pressure generated by it, has conducted projects across Rhode Island for this purpose. They have assembled artifacts and given narrative lectures to situate the contributions of Black and Indigenous People and their suffering within the broader story of American history (1696 Heritage Group n.d.). Consequently, this organization and its leadership were chosen by Mayor Elorza to spearhead the truth commission, which is a testament to their fabulous ability to convey history and deepen personal understanding of narratives. Working in a similar, though slightly more localized, vein, the Tracing Center, based out of the Boston Metropolitan Area, aims to publicize the role of local officials and governments played in the slave trade, paying particular attention to the Northeast and its less-well-understood role. They published an Emmy-nominated PBS film about the DeWolf family, wealthy Rhode Islanders that were the leading slave traders in American history. With this project, the Tracing Center wanted to bring attention not just to the Northeast's involvement in the slave trade, but to their *pioneering* place in the slave trade's inception in the United States (Tracing Center 2010). They, just as the 1696 Heritage Group, deal with narratives and reimagining history to include this sense of responsibility both for positives and negatives. All

four of these efforts—along with countless others—have created a rapidly expanding space for this sort of historical discourse in Rhode Island, particularly at the local level.

Previous reparations projects have blossomed from the seeds of these public history initiatives and the increasing space for discourse around historical responsibility in the state. The Rhode Island Indian Claims Settlement Act, passed in 1978, well-before Mayor Elorza's project, granted the Narragansett people land, natural resources, and other concessions that they claimed on the grounds that it was stolen from them by the State of Rhode Island. Their federal claim was extinguished in exchange for 900 acres of privately held land and the extension of an option to purchase more through the governor at a fixed rate (Rhode Island Indian Claims Settlement Acts 1978). These concessions, on top of a settlement fund from which the Narragansett still receive money (Narragansett Indian Tribe. 2021), constitute this shift in public history to a space more open to concrete policy providing restitution. On a smaller scale, Brown University established a similar process to Mayor Elorza's reparations project, by which the school hoped to address demands for transitional justice to students and private citizens whose lives—and, notably, those of their ancestors—were negatively impacted by the Brown family. The project established an academically independent commission to discuss the historical grounding of the college in the slave trade and potential avenues for restitution. The committee resolved to establish truth as a foundation for the debate and place members on equal academic footing, deliberate on the calls for reparations, and settled on reparations to empower students of color and give money back to the surrounding area as a corrective measure (Clarke and Fine 2010, 88-96).

Though not directly caused by the shift in public history and public awareness, both actions were nonetheless able to come into being within the space created in public discourse and conception as a result of such actions. Furthermore, public history projects have played the

crucial role of identifying the perpetrators of past wrongs, which is something that, as Howard-Hassman (2004) pointed out, previous calls for reparations have struggled with. Around the nation, eleven mayors have committed to similar reparations projects as of June 18, 2020. Because national discourse around reparations has failed to make notable progress in the US government, these mayors have utilized their cities' willingness and understanding of historical responsibility to craft bills and processes that will lead to material results. These mayors want to take concrete action and create results for African Heritage and Indigenous People in their localities, and they have acknowledged that their prospective ideas occupy this same intellectual space as public history projects. As a part of a process, their reparations projects rest on the foundations of public awareness of past wrongs, revealing the idea that reparations are rooted in the public history of a specific area is not limited solely to Rhode Island. Understanding of local history, and specifically its tragedies, will raise questions of responsibility, and these reparations bills are simply several mayors' answers to those questions. What this means, though, is that the questions must be raised before they can be answered.

A Matter of Truth: The Providence, Rhode Island Truth Commission Report

In the Spring of 2021, the established truth commission published their report on the history of racial oppression in Rhode Island, as mandated by Mayor Elorza's executive order. The two principal groups placed in charge of the commission were the Rhode Island Black Heritage Society and the 1696 Heritage Group, both groups focused on the same narrative development from which current reparations discourse emerged. Keith W. Stokes, a scholar in community development and history and the vice-president of the 1696 Heritage Group, and Theresa Guzmán Stokes, a historian and the president of the 1696 Heritage Group, researched and wrote the 194-page historical report on Rhode Island (2021). Their experience both in the

history of exploitation in the United States and their focus on community development and advancement were central to the framing of the report.

“A Matter of Truth” did exactly what its commission outlined: Stokes and Stokes were able to clearly delineate, outline, frame, and retell the history of racial oppression and the resulting inequities in Rhode Island and Providence, all while maintaining the role of the city and state governments as perpetrators of these crimes. Their work adds depth to the existing discourse that public history projects expanded over the last few decades, as it tackles the history of exploitation in Rhode Island from a more economic lens. One area of considerable emphasis for the report is in the economic value stolen from Black Americans in terms of their labor. In fact, the first chapter of the historical narrative, titled “Founding Enterprises: Indigenous People Land and African Labor (Pre-1600-1800),” centers around the value that Rhode Island settlers gained at the expense of African Heritage and Indigenous bodies. For Stokes and Stokes, slavery and other forms of servitude exploited the labor of African Heritage and Indigenous people at great benefit to the state government and local nobility (Stokes and Stokes 2021, 7–13). For them, and thus for the purposes of the mayor’s truth commission, this constitutes a form of economic theft, creating a clear link to the question of reparations and transitional justice through money.

Deepening this conceptualization of slavery, expansion, and other past wrongs as a theft of Black and Indigenous labor and land, “A Matter of Truth” weaves a thread of transgressions linking those crimes with economic circumstances today. The fact that Black children in Providence are at an educational, monetary, and otherwise social disadvantage compared to their White peers is, according to the report, directly caused by past transgressions. The report explores this idea in extensive detail, inextricably linking the way in which racism, notably

through disparate educational funding, businesses, and housing inequity, impacts people's lives in Rhode Island today to the original theft of labor defined very early on in the report. For Stokes and Stokes, African Heritage and Indigenous People continue to suffer today from the consequences of the unequal power dynamic established by Rhode Island and Providence throughout its history, leading to the persistence of slavery, the passage of laws like redlining, and continued police brutality (Stokes and Stokes 2021, 110-20). This thread, woven between the original transgressions of British colonialism in Rhode Island and the systemic racism in Rhode Island frames the impact of the past on present circumstances with astounding clarity. In doing so, "A Matter of Truth" assigns the role of the perpetrator to the City of Providence and the State of Rhode Island, thus giving them the historical responsibility for the atrocities outlined by the report.

In assigning blame to the state and city, Stokes and Stokes have attempted to solve the issue of faceless victims and perpetrators, creating a subject upon which to place the responsibility for righting the historical wrongs. By explaining how current citizens of Providence, Rhode Island (really the entire country), suffer from the enduring legacy of slavery in the form of state institutions, "A Matter of Truth" uses the sense of obligation that citizens, as participants of a democratic government, expect of their leaders to create a sense of historical responsibility. Because citizens expect their governments to do right by them, the knowledge that the City of Providence and State of Rhode Island have led the way in the establishment of systemic racism that continues to affect people creates a broader recognition that these actors, the city and state, have a responsibility to answer for their transgressions. Thus, by building off the existing conceptions historical wrongdoings constructed by public history and framing historical

fact as inextricably linked to present suffering, this report can construct a framework in which reparations and social healing are not only feasible, but seemingly just.

“A Matter of Truth” does not leave the question there, as Stokes and Stokes address policy questions following the conclusion of their historical retelling of oppression in Rhode Island. They address the various ways in which the City of Providence could address problems such as inequality in education, business inequity, issues with housing access, access to jobs, and so many more. The report’s list of potential actions contains specific plans such as:

- i. the support of a proposed bill to include African American History in K-12 Schooling (Rhode Island General Assembly 2021a), introducing students to this history at a younger age;
- ii. a plan to meet President Biden’s goal and organize with Indigenous leaders to organize new recognitions of sovereignty and governance;
- iii. criminal justice reform in Providence through partnering with the NAACP, ACLU, Mayor’s African American Advisory Group, Providence Police Department, Providence Human Relations Commission, and other stakeholders to engage with think-tank organizations to “reduce criminalization at the front end;”
- iv. steps to make Providence more welcoming to immigrants seeking to resettle and enter the work force, including the creation of a Mayor’s Office of Immigrant Affairs;
- v. increase educational funding for urban public schools, including issues of housing;
- vi. expand access to state-provided healthcare, particularly in the face of COVID-19, which has disproportionately impacted these groups;
- vii. and, most abstractly, closing the wealth gap, which, they argue, will come with the policies outlined elsewhere (Stokes and Stokes 2021, 122–30).

Each of these propositions, as well as other, less concrete ideas address the fundamental inequities created by historical oppression in Rhode Island. These plans are well-prescribed by the truth commission, and the report prescribes various ways in which the city government can comply with them. They are, however, certainly limited by the scope of the executive order, as it can only apply directly to the city, instead opting to *recommend* action by other actors. Though questions will certainly remain as to how effective they truly are, the propositions are both reasonable within the historical framework ascribed by the report's authors and feasible in terms of the city's ability to carry them out. They do provide concrete ways in which Providence can directly solve problems, such as housing, that the city itself caused directly. Thus, by acknowledging its own responsibility in creating the circumstances from which these problems arose, the City of Providence can begin to attempt to rectify them in concentrated efforts directed for a targeted effect.

Without the foundation of local history projects, increased public awareness of the historical impact of Rhode Island on Indigenous and African Heritage People, the success of previous reparations projects in the area, and increasing public interest in transitional justice activism, this executive order would not be possible. Though it was directly caused by the increased public awareness and political pressure generated by public history projects in Rhode Island, the Providence reparations plan is certainly a culmination of the sentiments and theoretical goals which they ascribe. Put differently, public history projects to increase awareness of past wrongs have created a public discourse for transitional justice, and the reparations project has deliberately entered that space and made use of actors already present within it. Thus, Mayor Jorge Elorza's executive order calling for reparations to be paid to African Heritage and Indigenous People in Rhode Island is, in some ways, the spirited culmination of decades of

transitional justice activism through public history that, despite not actively working towards reparations all the time, made them a possibility.

Criticism and Opposition to the Executive Order

Though in many circles, this process of distributing reparations is a morally just way by which the City of Providence can, at least in part, repay its debt to oppressed peoples, there has been vehement opposition to the very idea of reparations and historical responsibility from some circles. The idea that White Americans and local governments, today, are responsible for wrongs committed against Black and Indigenous People has received considerable pushback in recent years. Critics of critical race theory (CRT), simply the idea that there is systemic racism in the United States with a traceable line from slavery through the present, have come out in droves to criticize plans for reparations or, even, the introduction of this idea into public schooling. These critiques of CRT address two of the primary concerns, both of which are relevant to Mayor Elorza's Bill. The first primary concern for those who would oppose the bill is with the idea of historical responsibility in the first place. Put differently, a critic of CRT rejects the idea that White Americans alive today have a *direct* responsibility for slavery or Jim Crow; thus, they would not support the idea of financial redistribution to their Black or Indigenous contemporaries. The second concern revolves around this same idea, but specifically concerns children and the role of the topic in public education. Opponents of CRT do not wish for this conception of historical responsibility to be introduced in schooling, for fear of making their children feel guilty for crimes that, they argue, the children are either not prepared to understand or are not responsible for at all (Simon 2021). Though the majority of these critiques are rooted in a fundamental misunderstanding of what CRT actually is, they are nonetheless a roadblock for legislation such as Mayor Elorza's reparations order, as they challenge both the

conceptualization of historical responsibility that the plan rests on and the potential forms which the reparations would take, one of which is the aforementioned change to schooling.

In fact, direct opposition to some of Mayor Elorza's plan has already trickled into the Rhode Island General Assembly. In March of 2021, Representatives Patricia Morgan (R), George Nardone (R), and Sherry Roberts (R) introduced a bill in the General Assembly concerning the role of "divisive concepts" in the state's public education curriculum. Specifically, the proposed bill would "prohibit the teaching of divisive concepts...and prohibit making any individual feel discomfort, guilty, anguish or any distress on account of their race or sex" (Rhode Island General Assembly 2021b) Citing the very same concerns from the national debate, their pushback against educating children about systemic racism revolves around concerns of guilt. Divisive concepts, in their argument, are those they feel would make White children feel guilty about the systemic issues experienced by their Black, Indigenous, or otherwise marginalized peers (Borg 2021). These representatives, along with similar critics of CRT, address the issue of White responsibility for crimes of the past as a form of guilt-tripping, reiterating the claims that despite traceable links between present inequity and past racial discrimination, contemporary White Americans have no reason to feel guilty or responsible for the past. Notably, this bill was raised to the floor around the same time as "A Matter of Truth's" publication, and although there is no direct causal link, the coincidental timing reveals the heated, partisan nature of this debate around historical responsibility.

Criticism of reparations plans, including Mayor Elorza's, from around the country has not come squarely from reactionary circles. Though most criticisms have come from the right wing, specifically from those who oppose the idea of reparations entirely. Some proponents of reparations, however, have criticized the approach to the idea that some cities have taken to the

issue. Allan D. Cooper argues that the conceptualization of reparations as the repayment of a debt owed by the government to, in this case, Black Americans is ineffective. Cooper argues that instead of framing the issues of Jim Crow and slavery in terms of their economic value, reparations are more likely to occur if advocates frame the oppression of Black (and, by extension, Indigenous) Americans as a genocide, utilizing international law instead of domestic considerations (Cooper 2012, 121-23). This criticism is not of the idea of reparations, but rather the ineffectiveness of previous frameworks, and Mayor Elorza's framework falls under the category of conceptualizing slavery, Jim Crow, and the treatment of Indigenous People in economic terms. Though this is not solely the Providence project's viewpoint, the economic side of the coin is indeed their principal strategy. Mayor Elorza's plan establishes history in economic terms to scaffold economic policy, and Cooper's argument would claim that this is a weak approach considering the fate of similar proposals in the past. Like Howard-Hassmann's article, which explains the ways in which reparations frameworks have failed in the past, Cooper raises some potential concerns that could still very arise in the future. Elorza's project has yet to enter its reparations phase, and until policy decisions are made and put into practice, these criticisms from other advocates could well turn out to be true.

Conclusion: What's Next?

Despite the tremendous progress that the Mayor's Office and the truth commission have made, the meat of the reparations project—the actual reparations—are still not implemented. As Providence enters the Reconciliation phase of his project, advocacy group, stakeholders, government officials, and private citizens are left to reflect on the information conveyed in the Truth phase. "A Matter of Truth" is a powerful and deeply unsettling document, revealing the true depth of oppression that has taken place in the region, and it articulates a vision of Rhode

Island and Providence not as the shining beacons of religious freedom and opportunity, but as instruments of exploitation. The enslavement of African Heritage People, the displacement of Indigenous Nations, and the continued exploitation and oppression of both groups are the driving forces of prosperity and wealth experienced in the state's history. Though it has taken centuries, the transfer of this wealth through targeted investment in social programs, funding for schooling and other public services, and the broader support for minority advocacy groups will begin sometime soon for Providence, as the various solutions outlined in "A Matter of Truth" are considered in public arenas. The question remains not if forms of reparations will take place, but when they will occur and what form they will take. For that, however, the mayor's executive order, comments, and public statements have provided no timeline or predictions. That being said, there has been an air of expeditiousness about the project that reflects Mayor Elorza's commitment to the cause.

Questions of effectiveness, however, persist, as the form of reparations and their impacts will remain unknown until well into the future. According to the mayor's statements and the executive order itself, the hope is certainly that the steps taken by the City of Providence and, hopefully, the State of Rhode Island, will begin to decrease the racial wealth gap through the eventual steps taken with the project. Certainly, the best-case scenario for this executive order is for the passage of effective legislation in accordance with the truth commission's recommendations and the immediate improvement of circumstances for marginalized groups, specifically African Heritage and Indigenous People. Mayor Elorza's plan has developed a strong historical grounding, a prestigious array of partner organizations, and the backing of a fairly progressive voting body in the City of Providence, so the pieces are all in place for the steps taken by the project to be effective. The principal roadblock, as outlined by Howard-

Hassmann (2004, 835) and Cooper (2012, 121-23), is whether the framework of the project elicits a sufficient process of social healing to allow for the passage of significant legislation that will heal a wealth imbalance. Though scholars like Cooper would argue that “A Matter of Truth” does not create the most effective framework, their predictions are merely just that: predictions. Only time will tell whether this executive order will have the desired effect in improving the lives of African Heritage and Indigenous People in Rhode Island.

This executive order is but a piece of the broader national movement to address issues of historical injustice in the United States, and the fate of recent reparations projects will be a barometer of the national opinion on racial justice. In a period where resistance to addressing topics of racism, broadly (and frequently incorrectly) termed Critical Race Theory, has grown tremendously, more and more, especially young people, are receptive to discussions about systemic racism, historical injustice, and the persistence of modern inequalities rooted in the past. This seemingly dichotomous picture of awareness around issues of systemic racism is reaching a tipping of policy at the moment, as seen by the competing bills in Rhode Island’s state legislature surrounding the curriculum in public education. The next few years will be key at the local and national levels to the future of discussions about historical responsibility, as more and more policy is put forward to both the voting body and legislatures. Perhaps the probability of heavy backlash from detractors or the immense logistical challenges will prove to be too great of obstacles for effective implementation. The litmus test of Mayor Elorza’s reparations plan will be whether it can sustain the process of sending policy to the floors of legislatures around the state, and the same goes for the other mayors around the country passing similar legislation. Will these projects establish sufficient frameworks of social healing and proceed to pass legislation aimed at transitional justice to those affected groups, or will they simply become another line in

a long list of failed attempts to provide justice to African Heritage and Indigenous People in the United States? Only time will reveal the answer, but strengthening conceptual frameworks centered around existing public history projects have provided potentially the strongest foundation yet for reparations legislation.

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