

Truth and Reconciliation: Archivists as Reparations Activists

Anna Robinson-Sweet

“And so we must imagine a new country. Reparations—by which I mean the full acceptance of our collective biography and its consequences—is the price we must pay to see ourselves squarely”

– Ta-Nahesi Coates, “The Case for Reparations”

This presentation examines the relationship between reparations campaigns and archives and argues that this relationship requires archivists to take on the role of reparations activists, particularly in the campaign for slavery reparations in the United States.

What are Reparations

Reparations are measures to satisfy victims in cases of systemic injustice and can include monetary compensation, prosecution of perpetrators, commemoration, or an official apology.

Reparation campaigns and individual claims are often based on evidence of state organized injustice, information that is usually uniquely found in government archives.

Activism in the Archive

There is an inherent connection between the archive and power. Archivists must take an activist position in order to avoid being used in the service of injustice. They can also have their biggest impact when contributing and supporting social justice causes.

Archives and Reparations Case Studies

- Norwegian war children
- Japanese-American internment victims
- Bracero guest workers

Archivists and Slavery Reparations

Ta-Nehesi Coates and others have made a compelling case for the need for slavery reparations and the Black Lives Matter movement has made clear that the injustice inherited from slavery lives on. Archives around the country (and world) hold the evidence documenting slavery and the state-sponsored violence and discrimination born of it. Yet, we have seen only isolated cases of archives being used to support some sort of reparation. And the archival literature is silent on how this material can and should be used in support of activism. As has been seen in the case studies, archivists have an essential role to play in the fight for slavery reparation.

Further Reading

Coates, Ta-Nehesi. “The Case for Reparations.” *The Atlantic*. Accessed October 19, 2016.

<http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/06/the-case-for-reparations/361631/>.

"The Georgetown Slavery Archive." *Georgetown University*. Accessed November 18, 2016.

<http://slaveryarchive.georgetown.edu/>.

Harris, Verne. "The Archive is Politics." In *Archives and Justice: A South African Perspective*, by Verne Harris, 239-252. Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2007.

Mbembe, Achille, “The Power of the Archive and its Limits.” In *Refiguring the Archive*, edited by Carolyn Hamilton, Verne Harris, Jane Taylor, Michele Pickover, Graeme Reid and