



Urban geographies in times of crises – thoughts from reparatory-justice perspectives

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My name is Bordeaux and Nantes and Liverpool
and New York
and San Francisco
not a corner of this world but carries my thumb-
print
and my heel-mark on the backs of skyscrapers and
my dirt
in the glitter of jewels! (Césaire, 2013 [1956]:29)

1 Introduction

Addressing our contemporary era as a time of crises has become ubiquitous in academic discussions across the Global North and even in (more) mainstream public discourse. There is a growing realization that our present predicament is best characterized as a confluence of manifold, interconnected ecological and justice crises, across various scales, spanning from global to local. This perspective is echoed in the call for sessions for the 2023 German Geography Congress (Deutscher Kongress für Geographie, DKG '23) referring to the current “critical times”.

In this forum contribution, I seek to reflect on conceptions of our current times of crises, engaging with reparatory-justice perspectives. These perspectives can add a strong sense of historical depth and a sense of entanglement between the global and the local. In alignment with Gurminder Bhambra’s (2022) call for reparatory social science, I advocate for reparatory approaches in urban geography. As part of such reparatory approaches, I gather scholarly discussions that are connected to political and activist demands for financial compensation, material restitutions, and institutional and symbolic reparations for past wrongs. Concerns about epistemological justice form part of such reparatory approaches,

since they see knowledge and knowledge production as contributions to projects of “justice in the world” (Bhambra 2021b:77). My engagement with these approaches has been inspired by Imani Tafari-Ama’s research on Flensburg’s colonial legacies and her *Rum, Sweat & Tears* exhibition in the Flensburg Maritime Museum. Tafari-Ama’s (2017:101) work on the CARICOM Ten Point Plan for Reparatory Justice continues to be a point of reference for my thoughts. This helps me to understand my research as working towards a global sense of place connected to my hometown of Flensburg.

In the coming sections, I engage with the following question. What are some of the epistemological transformations needed to develop reparatory urban geographies? In the first section, I introduce the growing literature around reparatory justice (Lewis, 2024). I argue that epistemological justice as an aspect of reparatory justice requires taking colonial and other violent histories seriously in our understanding of both times of crisis and contemporary cities. I then critically reflect on hegemonic understandings of our times of crises and the self-presentation of cities like Flensburg and Copenhagen in these times. I argue that connecting the more global, violent origin stories of European cities to the way we understand them in the present moment can be one thread of reparatory urban geographies. Finally, I will consider possible problems and pitfalls when engaging with reparatory-justice approaches and share thoughts on how they might be addressed.

2 Reparatory-justice approaches

Reparatory-justice approaches refer to multiple scales and temporalities around the concept of justice. The three-dimensional concept of justice based on Fraser’s (2006)

work is useful to make this explicit. She distinguishes between economic (distribution), cultural (recognition), and political (representation) dimensions of justice. Reparatory-justice approaches challenge the Eurocentric and restrictive national–territorial scale when it comes to demands for economic equity, cultural recognition, and political representation. Since this restriction has always been obviously counterfactual from the perspective of the Global South (Fraser, 2006:233), reparatory-justice approaches centre on voices and knowledges from formerly colonized peoples. Two points are relevant here. Firstly, whoever is a subject of justice and thus demands justice should not be treated as an object of benevolence (Fraser, 2006:241). Secondly, there are questions about the temporal and spatial framing of justice. This second point demands attention to the histories of European nations “that go beyond the national form” (Bhambra, 2022:16). Reparatory-justice approaches show the need for dealing with injustices and violence from a globalized past. Starting with the concept of reparations, the following section will highlight a broader understanding of reparatory justice.

As Lambert (2008:298–300) summarizes, the conceptual idea of reparations needs to establish that (1) a past wrong occurred; (2) this past wrong continues to affect the present; and (3) there is a relationship of identity between a past perpetrator and a present addressee for reparation claims, as well as between a past victim and a present claimant.

There is a vast body of literature which engages with these three points, with an emphasis being placed on the continued relevance of enslavement and forced labour, land dispossession, colonial drain, and the social–ecological violence of plantation and extractive economies. By directly or indirectly engaging with questions around reparations and colonial–global entanglements, such literature has a wide geographical range, e.g. focusing on North America (Coates, 2014; Tuck and Yang, 2012), the Caribbean (Beckles, 2013; Lowe, 2015; Ferdinand, 2021), Latin America (Galeano, 2017 [1980]), the Indian subcontinent (Tharoor, 2017), and Africa (Rodney, 1982). A study of reparations for slavery and the Atlantic slave trade shows the long and persevering history of reparation demands (Araujo, 2017). More than just underpinning and emphasizing the importance of long-standing political activities related to material reparations, scholarly work considers the complexities of the concept of reparations for past wrongs or harms. Katherine McKittrick argues that narrow conceptions of reparations can produce the idea of some kind of airtight time–space capsule in the past (that contained harmful and illegal racist violence) and a linear continuum of progress since then (McKittrick, 2013:9) – thus effectively erasing racist violence in the present. However, following the thinking of Inwood et al. (2021:1100), reparations “are not now, nor should ever be solely about the past”; they should be part of a “broad strategy to radically transform society” (Kelley, 2002:129) in ways that benefit everyone.

From an analytical perspective, demands for reparations can be seen as part of discussions around geographies of responsibilities. Geographies of reparatory justice extend conceptions of justice in a combination of spatio-temporal dimensions. Doreen Massey argues that discussions around reparations extend responsibilities in a temporal dimension and that the issues of the past are not closed because they are “part of what makes us what we are” (Massey, 2006:94). As Lambert has shown, demands for reparations usually single out deviations from normal and acceptable behaviour in the past. However, when considering present and spatially extended geographies of responsibilities, Doreen Massey suggests – with reference to Young (2003:40–42) – moving away from individualized liabilities for past wrongs which necessarily accompany terms such as perpetrators and victims (as in Lambert’s definition above). Instead, she advocates for concepts of collective political responsibility within the current political situation. She argues that it is imperative today to challenge contemporary and normalized but disastrous conditions that continue to produce harm and violence (Massey, 2006:94). This imperative can be supported through the connection of temporal and spatial aspects in reparatory-justice approaches. Reparatory-justice approaches denormalize contemporary catastrophic inequalities by putting them in a global historical context.

Central to the engagement with reparatory justice is an acknowledgement that the current economic and political world order and today’s urban structures are built upon colonial violence (Roy, 2018). Bhambra (2022) stresses that the catastrophic inequalities and injustices that shape our current situation are global, both in their current condition and their historical constitution. Thus, dealing with the coloniality of today’s global economic, political, and epistemic configurations is essential for a reparatory social science (Bhambra, 2021a:16f.). As Táíwò (2021:95) so aptly argues, “trans-Atlantic slavery and colonialism are the historical forces that built the modern world, that built world politics as we know it. The world historical context is *itself* an important part of the wrongdoing, which reparations ought to concern itself with”. Thus, reparatory justice is part of a “project of constructing the just world, in which the advantages and disadvantages of the transition to the just world are distributed in ways sensitive to past injustice” (Táíwò, 2021:108). In all their diversity, reparatory approaches always connect past, present, and future questions of justice. Thus, considering (new) ways of ensuring that stratifications and fissures do not reappear or reopen in the future (Obeng-Odoom, 2024:460) is just as integral to a reparatory-justice approach as the demand for “what is owed for what was taken, [...] before any common future of freedom can begin” (Scott, 2018:x).

I argue that urban geography should engage with interdisciplinary discussions on reparatory justice and ask how our conceptual thinking and respective normative claims must be reworked. Striving towards epistemological justice (Bhambra, 2021b) and dealing with epistemic violence (Brunner,

2023) are important parts of scholarly work toward reparatory justice. Academic theories and concepts powerfully shape the political understanding of (urban) problems and crises, and they can implicitly suggest solutions that are harmful to already impoverished or disenfranchised populations. Consequently, we should ask the following. How do our concepts fail to be sensitive to past injustices and violence, and how are they implicated by the lack of reflection on colonial relationships (Bhambra, 2021b:74)? Furthermore, how can we overcome ignorance around colonialism and develop an analytical language that is predicated on the work of survival (McKittrick, 2013:15)? In the following sections, I provide some thoughts about these questions from an urban-geography perspective.

3 Multiple scales and temporalities of times of crises

Our contemporary era is often referred to as the Anthropocene, a time in which the earth system is under “human dominance” (Crutzen and Schwägerl, 2011). Humanity is presented as a universal, abstract collectivity in this understanding. This has been extensively criticized for its lack of sensitivity to past and present global inequalities and the structural processes that produce them. In her book *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*, Kathryn Yusoff argues that the concern with environmental harms is articulated in a Eurocentric way. It ignores how we live “in the wake of histories in which these harms have been knowingly exported to black and brown communities under the rubric of civilization, progress, modernization, and capitalism” (Yusoff, 2018:xiii). She argues that the current understanding of the Anthropocene is usually future-oriented, pointing towards an apocalypse, a dystopic future with effects on everyone on the planet, and thus ignores other temporalities and spatialities of the current times of crises. Considering this critique, I understand the current situation as historically constituted and ongoing, including a plurality of worlds, knowledges, and ways of life that have been ended and continue to be ended but which have also survived and thrived despite capitalist, racist, colonial, and patriarchal violence. This understanding acknowledges a longer historical arc of spatially uneven forms of forceful extraction, exploitation, and oppression that need consideration, repair, and reconstruction.

Academic work is and has been part of this longer historical arc of powerful ways of world making. This world making has included building or legitimizing racist imaginaries of “inhuman, dead, and dying” spaces (McKittrick, 2013:7) as well as linear conceptions of time and development as a historical queue (Massey, 2006:90). Therefore, academics need to consider their complicities with injustices and actively address and redress them as a way of doing reparatory work, in other words, as a way of working towards epistemological justice. One way of striving for epistemological jus-

tice is to engage with Black and Native scholarship sketching out different ways of relating to time and the environment (Curley and Smith, 2024). Yusoff’s (2018) book is one example of an attempt towards reparatory intellectual work, creating a plurality of origin stories or temporalities around the Anthropocene. She stresses that her work is one of redress, working through origin stories of the Anthropocene with decolonial and Black feminist theories. She challenges unilinear and singular conceptions of the Anthropocene with profound historical depth. Through her work, it becomes evident that attempts at theorizing justice in urban geographies cannot be done from a starting point of “innocent modernity” (Roy, 2018:33), as there should be a consideration of more extended temporal connections and a plurality of spatialities.

Dionne Brand emphasizes, “It never occurs to them that they live on the cumulative hurt of others. They want to start the clock of social justice only when they arrive. But one is born into history, one isn’t born into a void. And so Leslie stands at train stations in Germany cringing at the trains’ punctuality” (Brand, 2023 [2001]:82). Leslie is a Jewish scholar, and Dionne Brand is a Black Canadian poet, novelist, and scholar with whom she travelled in Landau and Mainz. Leslie’s family suffered in the Shoah in Germany; thus, “trains are portentous” (Brand, 2023 [2001]:81) for her. The “them/they” in the above quote is a person I identify with, as a *white* German urban geographer who wants to work towards social justice. Brand’s words prompt me to explore the temporal and spatial complexities of ideas around social justice and the limitations of the concepts that are currently at hand in urban geography. They make me ask the following. How can I realize and acknowledge how I was born into history? How can I deal with the fact that the concepts I work with are made from this history, filled with erasures of other knowledges and archives through patriarchal, colonial, and national-socialist violence within long histories of epistemic violence? I understand my engagement with reparatory-justice approaches to be some steps towards critical consciousness and towards finding ways of doing less harm in the conceptual work of urban geography.

As I have argued so far, this critical consciousness helps to reformulate and reconceptualize the current situation as a plurality of historical and current experiences of trauma, survival, resistance, and thriving despite oppression and catastrophic inequalities. Thus, it is necessary to develop the intellectual capacity to confront the plurality and complexity of the current situation, the academic (systemic and personal) complicities in harm (Andreotti, 2014:387f.), and the historical and contemporary entanglements within the production of global and local inequalities and violence (Massey, 2006). For urban geography in historically *white* European academic institutions, it is important to consider the ways in which many cities on this continent were historically entangled with systematic (colonial) violence and how imperial modes of living are deeply inscribed in contemporary urban structures – even while they are resisted and rejected through

political, activist, and critical academic work. In the following section, I suggest two threads of reparatory urban geography: the refusal to reproduce an asymmetric ignorance around the longer arc of extractive violence that built many European cities and the necessity to challenge hegemonic imaginaries of urban hierarchies.

4 Cities and their genealogies – understanding European cities through their colonial entanglements

One thread of reparatory urban geography is research on how European urban structures are built through profits from slavery, plantation economies, extractive industries, (settler) colonialism, and genocides. To do this, I work specifically from my hometown of Flensburg, which was a profit-making part of colonial plantation economies in the Danish and British empires through sugar and rum extraction, importation, and processing. Much of Flensburg's old urban and economic infrastructures were built with wealth extracted from the work of enslaved Africans and indentured Asian workers, who were forced to toil on land that was previously the home of Indigenous peoples in the Caribbean (Carstensen-Egwuom, 2023). Thus, acknowledging its global entanglements, Flensburg needs a genealogy that departs from that of an innocent, blossoming modern port city. As Ananya Roy emphasizes, postcolonial perspectives on urban studies demand “a genealogy that is attentive to urban worlds constituted through historical difference, specifically the violences of slavery, colonialism, and imperialism” (Roy, 2018:35). This genealogy serves as a method for reinterpreting and renarrating our ideas around European cities in ways that do not create ignorance, and – in a reformulation of Gregory's (2004:4) phrase – which are part of an epistemological disruption in the stories that European cities like to tell about themselves. The summary of (a part of) Flensburg's colonial entanglements expands the geography of Aimé Césaire's words in the opening quote of this text: the glitter of the jewels of not only French, British, and North American but also northern European cities carries the thumb-print and the heel-mark of colonized peoples. This critique is productively taken up by Ha and Picker (2022) as they reflect upon the sociological and geographical concept of the “European city”. They show that – in academia as well as in political discourse – the European City is mostly connected to freedom, enlightenment, and modernity (without coloniality). Such a conceptualization refuses to reflect upon the role of European cities in shaping racism and white supremacy.

However, adding some “darker context” (Yusoff, 2018:18) to the origin stories of European cities is just one of the threads of reparatory work in urban geography. I argue that connecting the more global, violent origin stories of European cities to the way we understand European cities in the current moment of crises can be another thread of repara-

tory work. There are two aspects of these origin stories that point towards a broader need to rework approaches to urban crises: firstly, the genealogy that was presented here, with its threads of global extraction and violence, indicates an ongoing pattern. The present “normal way of life” (McKittrick, 2013:6–7) is a deeply violent but normalized situation within European urban centres. It is based on historical and new forms of externalization, extraction, and imperial modes of living (Brand and Wissen, 2022). I argue that reparatory urban geographies should take up the task of denormalizing the idea of European cities as success stories. Secondly, Flensburg's genealogy connects with the landscapes of the Caribbean, which were shaped into plantations, resulting in deforestation, soil depletion, and the destruction of biodiverse ecosystems through monocultures. This connection shows that reckoning with the afterlives of slavery and colonialism in today's cities must include thinking about the interconnections between colonial-racial and environmental issues (Davis et al., 2019). However, the “colonial and environmental double fracture”, as Ferdinand (2021:3) elaborately conceptualizes the disconnect between ecological and antiracist movements, is deeply entrenched in modern academic thought. Reparatory approaches should aim to recognize and repair the fractures that were created by systems of thought that have established a binary between nature and culture (Ferdinand, 2021:4). They need to engage with the realization that we cannot separate the repair of the planet from the task to dismantle colonial structures that have shaped our relationship with nature (Bruno et al., 2024:13). While the task of resisting binary thinking between nature and culture is not specific to European cities, I contend that it is nevertheless a continuing task that can be conceptualized as a part of reparatory approaches towards urban geography.

One example of denormalizing the way European cities present themselves in the current moment of crises deals with ideas around sustainable urban development. European cities were and are centres of accumulation and of the production of the global context that needs repair (Táíwò, 2021). Thus, challenging notions around urban hierarchies that put European cities at the top of measurements of development – and especially at the top of measurements of sustainable development – is part of a reparatory urban geography. To show this in more detail, I now move to Copenhagen, a European metropole and port city that is historically deeply connected to Flensburg. Copenhagen was home to the headquarters of the Danish slave trade and other colonial endeavours with the royal chartered Danish West India and Guinea Company from 1674. It was the place where the ships left for the Danish forts on the western coast of Africa. Captured and enslaved Africans were held in these forts before they were forced into the Middle Passage and chattel slavery to labour on the killing fields of the Caribbean sugar plantations (Gøbel, 2018). Their unpaid work on the plantations provided the sugarcane products that Flensburg merchants profited from by shipping, refining, and trading with it. Today, Copenhagen

is a city that serves as a role model for urban sustainability. It actively brands itself as the “capital of sustainable development” (City of Copenhagen, Department of Finance, 2024). In hegemonic measures of so-called sustainable development, such as the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Denmark as a country usually performs particularly well (Sachs et al., 2023:4). This produces a mythical story of inherent goodness and moral superiority, both of Denmark as a country and Copenhagen as a city. I contend that reparatory approaches in urban geography need to challenge such myths and shake the foundations of Eurocentric worldviews underpinning them.

Processes of branding Copenhagen as a role model of green/sustainable development need to be conceptualized as epistemically violent and unjust. Cities that have reached high levels of development based on histories of enslavement and appropriation, within structures of continued global extraction and externalization, are indefensible as global role models. Any conceptualization of successful sustainability as a single logic in the sense of ecological modernization, which relies on structures that constrain development “or even drive de-development elsewhere” (Hickel, 2020:4), is contradictory as a universal concept. Likewise, any city that claims to have achieved high levels of sustainable development but at the same time produces material and emission flows which are detrimental to other parts of the world cannot be analytically defended as a role model for sustainability. The normalized mode of thinking about (some) European cities as sustainability champions has to be denormalized. Krähmer (2021) has shown an analytical example of such a denormalization from a degrowth perspective. Building on such work, the dynamics of European cities should be conceptually and empirically much more deeply connected to the natures and peoples that were and are implicated by their (over)development. This conceptual shift shows that the globalized past of European cities extends into the present and that concepts of justice cannot be contained within a national-territorial frame.

The branding around “successful sustainability” that I have just criticized also points towards another critique, namely that the grand narratives of solutions and sustainability still carry the tenets of Western colonial knowledge in them. As previously mentioned, Yusoff (2018) criticizes how Crutzen and Schwägerl (2011) developed the discourse around the Anthropocene – coming from Western colonial knowledge and extraction practices. She shows how this discourse reinforces and resettles extraction practices and how it “indicates a desire to overcome coloniality without a corresponding relinquishing of the power it continues to generate in terms of who gets to formulate, implement, and speak to/of the future” (Yusoff, 2018:27). This kind of claim towards agency and responsibility for implementing ideas of the future is immanent in the example of Copenhagen branding itself (and being branded) as a role model. From a reparatory-justice perspective, it could be argued, with ref-

erence to the role of European cities in the historic production of the current situation, that the ones that wreaked the most harm should be the ones responsible for repairing the harm. However, this is a way of elevating the position of a Western knowledge perspective that is particularly skewed. It does not make sense that a Western way of thinking about and acting upon the world should be the solution to a problem that was created through this thinking. This points towards some challenges for reparatory approaches in terms of the positions of agency and petitioning for reparations that are created through them.

5 Challenges for reparatory-justice approaches – and some ways forward

In light of the current crises, scholars have argued for grand systemic shifts that are transformative and postcapitalist and that carry the promise of a sustainable future for all (Sutherland, 2023). Such a transformation, in itself, can be seen as an attempt towards reparatory justice, as Obeng-Odoom (2024:460) has argued – in other words, an attempt at ensuring that fissures are repaired and will not open up again. However, as Ramírez (2023) writes, as long as grand concepts of transformation and system change remain unreflective towards the positionality and specific location from which they are written, they tend to develop a false universalism and ignore the many worlds that were destroyed and also built amid the “death-making order of slavery, genocide, and its afterlives” (Ramírez, 2023:134). There is a warning here – a warning of universalizing a grand narrative of solutions to our crises, of some universal grammar of urban theory or practice (Ren, 2022:6). This warning provides a note of caution against centring on a *white* European perspective that claims to be the agent of reparatory justice.

As a topic in recent public discourse, restitutions of stolen African objects from museums and collections have been a focal point in dealing with colonial entanglements. However, some scepticism around the celebrated grand gesture of return is advisable, as Kader Attia argues in an interview with Nina Möntmann (Attia and Möntmann, 2021). He argues that countries of the Global North, such as France, are taking over the role of the restitution agent – making themselves the centre of the story. A similar critique is expressed by Noxolo et al. (2012:420) in the field of geographies of responsibility: the focus of moral agency rests with the (contemporary) active giver, and a strong power asymmetry is upheld. Thus, the language of reparations tends to position *white* people in the role of generous benefactors and Black people in the position of petitioners, imploring others to acknowledge that they are human, too. Antiracist violence is continuously repeated and recreated when Black people have to reiterate, calculate, and prove the harm done to them (Hartman, 2007:169; Lewis, 2024:6–7). This situation shows that it is necessary to reflect on the various complex power relationships and claims to

identity that go along with demanding or granting reparations for past wrongs. Thus, a reflexive view towards reparations “may signal a move towards more ambivalent versions and visions that acknowledge the vulnerabilities and disconnections involved in geographies of responsibility” (Noxolo et al., 2012:418).

Furthermore, claiming that the work of return is actually a work of repairing the wounds of the past is a callous allegation. What was done in the context of extraction cannot be repaired (Attia and Möntmann, 2021); reparatory thinking has to deal with the haunting of the irreparable and with ongoing colonial violence (Bruno et al., 2024:126). In short, “Some things cannot be repaired. But that’s no excuse for inaction. That’s no excuse to wash our hands and go about our business. Because the days when we just go about our business without engaging the work of repair, those are the days we build the structures of white supremacy, colonial capitalism, patriarchy, and other violences into the future” (Bruno et al., 2024:15).

Inaction and intellectual pessimism are not an option. I argue for the need to think hard and deep through the possibilities and pitfalls of reparatory urban geographies and to share the work of dismantling and decentering Eurocentrism from its centres (Hilbrandt and Ren, 2022:601). This should be done in a contextual, specific, and grounded manner (Bruno et al., 2024:14) – e.g. by engaging with and critiquing the conceptual frameworks around European cities and our times of crises. I suggest three threads for what reparatory approaches can mean in practicing urban geography.

1. Realizing and working with the insight that some of the existing frameworks and concepts, e.g. around citizenship and belonging (Bhambra, 2022; Ha and Çetin, 2015) or nature and culture (Ferdinand, 2021), are inadequate for reparatory academic work. This requires us to sit with our complicities in (ongoing) epistemic violence and necessitates lifelong (un)learning.
2. Building our imaginaries around a pluriverse of alternatives to the historically shaped and plural contemporary situation, I suggest, requires engaging with the works of scholars and activists who have built analyses and suggestions from beyond the European centres and who bring theories and approaches into conversation with research on European cities (Kothari et al., 2019). This includes researchers and anticolonial activists who have analysed colonial processes during existing colonialism and suggested alternative economic, social, and political structures during the early days of formal decolonization. These can inspire us today, thinking about the need for structural transformations (Lewis, 2024; Veit, 2024).
3. Working beyond the reiteration of violence requires developing work on Black life beyond injury, suffering, or resistance. It means not letting the political possibilities

of reparations narrow the imaginations of what the descendants of colonized, oppressed, exploited, coerced, and enslaved people deserve (Lewis, 2024:7–8). This is a fundamentally reparatory conceptual move: it enables us to work from the everyday, joy, and survival and to affirm life and relations, growing coalitions and solidarities.

I end with words from Aimé Césaire again and encourage urban geographers to engage with Black lives beyond a focus on suffering or resistance; to engage with stories, poems, songs, and artworks; and to listen closely.

At the end of the small hours these countries whose past is uninscribed on any stone, these roads without memory, these winds without a log.

Does that matter?

We shall speak. We shall sing. We shall shout.

Full voice, great voice, you shall be our good and our guide. (Césaire 2013 [1956]:31)

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