

‘Reparations’: An Interpretation of T. S. Eliot’s ‘Burnt Norton’ Quartet

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Abstract

The Quartets of T.S. Eliot have puzzled literary theorists who assume that it is difficult to decipher what Eliot called the 'absolute meaning' of the poems. Many marveled at the religious allusions to the Catholicism of the poet and Eastern traditions of spirituality. But written during the great depression and after the first European Tribal World War over which European tribe would get the lion's share of the colonies in Africa, the first Quartet, 'Burnt Norton', is being interpreted here as an apology to people of African descent for the crimes of enslavement and colonization that European Christians visited upon them and probably also for the racism in the earlier poems of Eliot. The other three quartets were appropriately written by Eliot during the second European Tribal War again over the greed for colonies in Africa but none of the critics has put Africa at the center of the interpretation of the poems. I suggest in my line by line interpretation that Eliot was probably confessing the sins of Europe against people of African descent and calling for reparations long before the Caribbean countries went to court in search of reparative justice, a term that was developed in a 2002 documentary, 'Reparative Justice' (available on YouTube) and a 2004 book chapter, 'Reparative Justice: A Pan African Criminology Primer' in Anita Kalunta-Crumpton and Biko Agozino, eds., *Pan African Issues in Crime and Justice*, Aldershot, Ashgate, republished by Routledge, 2017.

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Uche bu akpa: The mind is a bag
Onye obuna nya nke ya: Everyone carries one

Aku fecha n'elu fee n'ala: The termite flies high and flies low
Emecha o dalu awo: In the end it falls for the toad

(Igbo proverbs with English translations)

I

Past crimes and present crimes
 May be repaired in future judgments,
 And future crimes are rooted in past crimes.
 If all crimes are always open to reparations
 No crime is ever irreparable.
 Crimes against humanity are not abstractions
 To be regarded as only hypotheses
 For those who speculate and say they think
 About on the one hand and on the other hand
 Reparations are a must, the demand is always heard.
 Footprints on the sands of history
 Pass through the paths of peace abandoned
 Past the doors of love you scorned
 Plunging into the vineyard. Your stupor stinks
 Like this, in your breath.

Don't gain the world

And lose your soul in the quest for gold dust
 We know you do not lack wisdom

Other voices

Wail in the caves. Will you not harken?
 Screw you, said the Kiskadee kid, Bless you too
 Said his mother, perched on another branch,
 Spying our indigenous world, you rushed with greed
 Without deception you crushed? Into our first world.
 Here you are, disgusting, deliberately nauseating.
 Gallivanting with protection, over the murdered leaves,
 Shot down by the firearms of fall, fouling the clean air,
 Screw you the bird keeps calling, and the mama blesses
 With the music of decolonization that you refuse to hear,



And you refuse to see the blood that marks the X you seek
While you look for roses to smell in the midst of corpses.
Here you are as our guests, accepting the peace pipes.
We shall not be moved, along the path of tears and blood
Away from the emptied plains, into the shoe box reservations,
To stare into the dried-up pool of blood, sweat and tears.
The dried pond gave way to the bloodied concrete jungle
And the pond was filled with the blood of the natives
And the loot increased, in leaps, in bounds,
The jewels glittered from dark heartless greed,
And the filth surrounded us, reflecting our tears in the pond.
Clouds of wars passed overhead, but their eyes were dry.
Go to hell, said the bird, for the dead leaves are children,
Playing hide and seek, roaring with the cries of gales.
Screw you too, said the bird to humanity
Who cannot bear the simulacrum of reality.
Slavery past and slavery future
The love that could have been and the peace
Demand the denied reparations, unlike a present

II

Pearls in the mud before swine
Flags drape the hanging tree.
The strangling noose soak the blood
Sings of the strange fruits bearing scars
Black reconstruction is reversed after the war
Those known as dancing minstrels
Set up the bank of blood
And were singled out as superstars
But still strung up on the summer trees
You rise above the swaying tree
And light the bonfire for the barbecue
And cheer from the bloodied ground
Below, the bloodhounds baying for blood
Prey on us as though our feet are chained
But reconcile with our stars in high places.

At the center of the world. Both flesh and blood;
 Both coming and going; at the center, where the party is at;
 Both arrest and incarceration. But do not call it static,
 For the past and the future are meeting. Both coming and
 going,
 Both rising and falling. Except for the center, the margin point
 The celebration will go on, all we got left is the dance.
 All we can say is that we remain here: and you know where.
 We can say that it is forever, for you know we are timeless.

The spiritual freedom from your materialist desire,
 Releases us from your prison sentences, releases us from inner suffering
 And frees us from your external commandments, still surrounded
 By the curse of your nonsense, your white light that moves not
 Uprising with movement of the people, confrontation
 Without mass slaughter, bringing forth a new world of love
 And the old world explained, overstood
 Given the fulfilment of its empty seductive joy,
 The partial reparation of its bloody horror.
 Breaking the enchainment of the future to the past
 Embroidered in the weakened body politic
 Protests the damnation of humanity In hellfire
 Which somebodies delight in.

Cruelty past and cruelty future

Make for rising consciousness.
 It is not consciousness that determines being in time
 It is the toad in the garden that determines consciousness
 Sitting in limbo in the arbor when the rain beats down
 A moment in a place of worship with burning incense
 Can be remembered as part of the past and the present
 Only through struggles do present injustices get defeated.

III

This is a time of rebellion
 Before and after the uprising
 These little lights of ours are not daylight
 But we gonna let them shine with delight
 To turn black bodies into proud beauty



With round Afros as permanent halos
Not darkness to imprison the souls
Emptying brains with school deprivation
Wiping love from the hearts of prisoners
We offer neither abundance nor vacant clubs. Only a dance
Over the graves of old Jim Crow and the new
Discrimination for discrimination by discrimination
Full of fancy words signifying nothing
Only apathetic bullshit without compassion
People are pieces of paper, blowing in the wind
Cold wind of yesterday blows today and tomorrow too,
Like the smoke from cancerous lungs
Crimes before and crimes after.
The belching of dying souls
Into the polluted air, belching from factories
Spread from the chimneys of New England
Merseyside, Shanghai, Tokyo, Seoul, Berlin, and Moscow,
Marseilles, Barcelona, Toronto, Porto, and Amsterdam. Not here
Never here in the ghetto, where the birds never post a tweet.

Rise higher, rise only ye mighty people
The work to be done cannot be done alone
Both in this world and in the world to come
Light your igbo, peel away the darkness
Of deprivation, destitution and exploitation,
Desertification of the world without trees
Expropriation of the world of wealth,
Hauntology of the world without specters
That is on the one hand, and on the other
The outcome is the same, without movement
When you are absent from the movement, while we on a move
On the television, on its metallic worldview
About crimes past and crimes future.

IV

Crimes from hell have covered the earth,
A dark cloud covers the sun, heralding a storm
Will the flower ladies turn to march with us, will tears
Stream down, old rivers, flooding like Katrina
Flood and drown?
Scream
Fingers clench into newborn fists
Raised by us? After the butterfly's swing
Has answered sting for sting, the bee is silent, the count is still
At the knockout point in the spinning world.

V

Words have rhythm, music dances
Only to the beat of crime; the living string
Never dies. Words, written in speech, attain
Eternity. Only the style, the genre,
Makes words become flesh in music
The soothing balm from a Chinese jar
Perpetually rousing like Makeba and Simone.
Moves like Kuti's saxophone, or the Wailers' chant
In addition to the harmony of the back-up sistren,
When the end is only the beginning for the DJ
With the end of one the beginning of a whole another
Before the beginning and before the ending.
The looping of Colored Peoples Time, African Time.
Words are encoded, decoded, cracked and broken
Under the stress, under the burden of oppression,
Down with imperialism, decolonize every space,
We will not stay still. Screaming fractals
Scolding, mocking, and chanting down Babylon,
Will always accuse you. The words in our hearts
Are always attacked by the voices of law and order,
The menacing shadow keeping an eye on the funeral
The loud lament of Black Lives Matter movement.



The killings fall into a pattern of a movement
Like the Ten Points Program of the Panthers.
The desire for freedom is part of the movement
But desire is not enough without the ire of fire;
Love is not all that we need for the movement,
It is the beginning and end of the movement,
Even before the invention of crime and desire
Except that it takes different shapes in history
Experienced with different shortcomings
Loving those deemed un-being and being.
In the sudden shaft of sunlight
In the cave with atoms of dust shimmering
There echoes the best laughter
Of children who laugh last in the leaves
Make some noise now, right here, always –
Talking is a ridiculous waste of time
Stretching the breeze from the past to the present.