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## **Lost in Transition: Race, Reparations & Environmental Justice**

**Centre for Applied Legal Studies, Wits University**

**10-11 June 2025**

The global ecological crisis is a racial justice crisis, with racially marginalized groups facing the most severe impacts of climate change and environmental degradation. While these groups are among the most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, they also bear the least responsibility for the human activities fueling it. Their climate vulnerability is a product of the same unjust and racialized systems, rooted in histories of colonialism and slavery, that created and continue to drive the global ecological crisis. Debates around climate justice are therefore inseparable from racial injustice, including colonial injustices and their persistent impacts today.

This raises significant questions about the frames being deployed to understand the global ecological crisis and its colonial roots, and the utility of different frameworks to respond to its impacts. One framework for addressing historic injustice that is gaining renewed momentum is that of *reparations*. Some movements for climate justice are demanding reparations for the unjust and unequal harm caused by the global ecological crisis, with some making explicit connections to reparations for colonialism and slavery. Demands for reparations are also receiving growing international attention from states, including in the United Nations<sup>1</sup> and through regional efforts of the African Union<sup>2</sup> and CARICOM.<sup>3</sup> There are requests for advisory opinions from the International Court of Justice, the Inter-American Court of Justice and the African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights related to the climate emergency, and some submissions have made to these courts have raised potential connections between reparations for colonialism and slavery and the international legal obligations related to climate change.<sup>4</sup> Growing attention to reparations calls for greater engagement with what the project of reparations entails not only as a matter of law, but as a much broader and multidimensional project to remedy past and ongoing injustices.

Climate justice is also being mobilized with the frame of a 'just transition', which calls attention to the urgency of transitions from extractive economies to sustainable or even regenerative ones, on terms that address the injustices of the status quo.<sup>5</sup> At a minimum, as outlined by the United Nations, a just transition "aims to ensure that the transition to net-zero emissions and climate resilience is orderly, inclusive and just."<sup>6</sup> Many conventional approaches to environmental and climate governance risk reinforcing patterns of inequality. This occurs when they are designed without the involvement of communities on the frontlines of environmental

degradation and climate impacts, or those whose livelihoods are most impacted by a transitioning economy. As with reparations, important questions remain regarding what just transitions entail both in principle and in praxis.

The projects of reparation for racial injustice and the just transition intersect with and invoke the language and frameworks of ‘transitional justice’, which addresses questions about justice, reparation, non-repetition, and reconciliation in the wake of gross human rights violations. Just transitions seek to ensure that socio-technical transitions away from climatic damage do not entrench patterns of vulnerability and marginalisation. However, to date the two fields have not been in conversation. Countries of the Global South have been the site of the majority of ‘transitional justice’ processes, they are also the site of the worst effects of climate change. These countries also demonstrate the feedback loops between the two – how reparative claims can encompass historic environmental damage.

This convening will bring together scholars and practitioners who are interested in historic injustices of colonialism and slavery, and their contemporary and future impacts—particularly in the context of climate change and environmental degradation. Participants will draw from experiences with different, interconnected forms of racial and colonial subordination, including apartheid and the contested legacy of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and the unrepaired harms of slavery and Haiti’s ‘independence ransom’ to France. They will draw on different frames and frameworks to understand and respond to the global ecological crisis, examining sites of overlap and disjuncture between them, and identifying opportunities for coordination. Through this inquiry, we hope to collapse the bounded epistemologies and temporalities of formerly distinct projects, allowing participants to find common ground across struggle and across borders.

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<sup>1</sup> In 2024, the UN Secretary General called for reparations for the trans-Atlantic trade in enslaved Africans. Reparations for slavery and the slave trade is a central focus of the Second International Decade for Peoples of African Descent (2025-2034), and the UN Permanent Forum of People of African Descent has prioritized reparations. In 2025, the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination is preparing a General Recommendation on Reparations for the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade.

This builds on the 2019 report of the UN Special Rapporteur on Racism on reparations for racial discrimination rooted in slavery and colonialism, A/74/321: <https://promiseinstitute.law.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Reparations-for-Colonialism-and-Slavery-A74321.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> The African Union’s theme for 2025 is “Justice for Africans and people of African Descent through Reparations”.

<sup>3</sup> See CARICOM’s Ten Point Plan for Reparatory Justice: <https://caricom.org/caricom-ten-point-plan-for-reparatory-justice/>

<sup>4</sup> Request for Advisory Opinion on the Obligations of States in Respect of Climate Change, General Assembly Resolution 77/276 of 29 March 2023, <https://climatecasechart.com/non-us-case/request-for-an-advisory-opinion-on-the-obligations-of-states-with-respect-to-climate-change/>; Request for an advisory opinion on the Climate Emergency and Human Rights submitted to the Inter-American Court of Human Rights by the Republic of Colombia and the Republic of Chile, January 9, 2023, [https://www.corteidh.or.cr/docs/opiniones/soc\\_1\\_2023\\_en.pdf](https://www.corteidh.or.cr/docs/opiniones/soc_1_2023_en.pdf); and Requestion by the Pan African Lawyers Union (PALU) and Partners for an Advisory Opinion on the Obligations of States with Respect to the Climate Change crisis’, May 2, 2025, [https://www.lawyersofafrica.org/wp-content/uploads/20250502\\_PALU-Press-Release\\_Request-AO-on-Climate-Obligations-Before-the-African-Court-Final.pdf](https://www.lawyersofafrica.org/wp-content/uploads/20250502_PALU-Press-Release_Request-AO-on-Climate-Obligations-Before-the-African-Court-Final.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> “La Transición Justa: A Framework for Change”, Climate Justice Alliance, <https://climatejusticealliance.org/just-transition/>

<sup>6</sup> “Accelerating action for a just transition”, UN Global Compact, <https://unglobalcompact.org/take-action/think-labs/just-transition>