

BHM 2021 Presentations

Prof. Verene Shepherd's keynote (4 Oct)

Josie Fraser, Prof Verene Shepherd:

JOSIE FRASER: Welcome, everyone. It's so great to have so many of you joining us online, staff and students, for this exciting session, Black History Month Keynote Presentation from the amazing Professor Verene Shepherd. I'm Josie Fraser. For those of you that don't know me, I'm Deputy Vice Chancellor for the OU. And I'm absolutely delighted to be able to welcome and introduce our speaker.

I'm going to take a minute to thank Suki Hyder and Joan Simmons for organizing the Keynote, Kate Hawkins for all her work on Black History Month at the OU, and the OU Black and minority ethnic staff group for all their amazing work on equality, diversity and inclusion, which is such a critical priority for the OU, for Open University with our mission, to be open to people.

We're thrilled to have social historian Professor Verene Shepherd with us for this session. Verene is a graduate of the University of the West Indies and also the University of Cambridge. And she remains an honorary fellow of Jesus College there, as well as being the Director of the Centre for Reparation Research at the University of the West Indies in Jamaica.

Professor Shepherd is the published author of seven books and somehow still manages to be a radio host as well. I have no idea how she does it, I think we should be asking her for time management tips today. Professor Shepherd is a scholar activist, especially in the areas of women's rights, human rights, and reparatory justice.

She has held some really important roles in advocating for reparations for slavery. And as a UN expert, she has played a critical role in drafting the program for the United Nations to deliver the decade for people of African descent.

And in the adoption of the committee on the elimination of racial discrimination's general recommendation 36, preventing and combating racial profiling by law enforcement officials. Needless to say, with that background, Professor Shepherd has received many awards for her work in history, human rights, and gender, and she's achieved many firsts.

To be honest, writing an introduction short enough to do justice to her whilst also giving her time to actually give us a lecture was quite challenging, but I do want to give her the floor. So I'm delighted to hand over and introduce to you all Professor Verene Shepherd. Thank you so much for joining us.

VERENE SHEPHERDS: Thank you very much, Deputy Vice Chancellor Josie Fraser for that kind introduction. Greetings to the organizers, in particular Shereen Whitlow and Babette Oliver, greetings also to Professor Kwame Acheampong, to all the students, faculty, and other members of this virtual audience.

I really am honoured to have been invited to participate in Black History Month activities of the Open University. I have always found the idea of an open university a wonderful one, a sort of borderless institution that is committed to widening access, practicing inclusion and diversity itself, and seeking to leave no one behind. In fact, going beyond the rhetoric of leaving no one behind.

So, as you have heard, I have been invited to give this keynote lecture and I decided to title it leaving no one behind, gender reparation and diversity because these are the areas in which I'm working right now, and I wanted to just represent that area.

The rationale is that the establishment of the CARICOM reparations commission in 2013 and various national committees thereafter, right across the CARICOM region, led to complaints of a top-down approach in a movement which in the West, at least, was pioneered by indigenous peoples and enslaved and newly freed Africans and which in modern times has been continued by civil society or grassroots activists, grassroots people including Rastafari.

With keen roles also played by activists like Bernie Grant, known to this audience, I'm sure. Attendees at the Abuja conference in Nigeria cheered by former Nigerian president Chief Abiola, including Jamaican Pan-Africanist Dudley Thompson was there, and other individual politicians and academics.

The Abuja conference, of course, was the first Pan-African conference on reparations and it was held in April 1993 in Nigeria, leading to the issuing of the Abuja proclamation. It was sponsored by the group of eminent persons and the commission for reparations of the organization of African Unity as African people press their demand for justice from former colonizers, some of whom also perpetuate the legacies of colonialism. So, it is not something that is only lodged in the past.

The too often gender neutral, even gender blind approach or the justification narrative and the less than prominent roles of Indigenous peoples as a nation subjected to deceptive indentureship have also become contentious issues in the reparation movement, which is the single most important political struggle for African people wherever they find themselves. And is therefore a fitting subject for Black History Month.

Equally contentious is the ongoing squabble surrounding whose voice it should be in the leadership of the reparation movement, the role of the diaspora, and the role of churches, educational, and financial institutions versus, of course, the state. These are troubling issues at a time when unity is a goal of the reparatory justice movement.

While recognizing these controversies divisive aspects, the lecture will zero in on the need for Black women's experiences to be more central to any movement for reparatory justice in this Black History Month. While I realize that the discourse is broader than gender and chattel enslavement, and I do touch another time periods, I have chosen to focus on women's experiences under chattel enslavement.

Why? The justification for the fight for apartheid justice rests heavily on the maangamizi or African holocaust, and we cannot stress that enough. The burden of enslavement fell disproportionately on women and girls, leading them to employ a variety of strategies, including armed resistance to destabilize the system of chattel enslavement and immediate pro-slavery oppression.

Black women's lives matter, Black women's stories matter, Black women's histories matter. So, let's remind ourselves today of why Black women's lives mattered historically and how we can learn from the past to strengthen our struggles today, whether in the Caribbean or in Africa or in the various diasporas.

The lecture will focus primarily on why slave women resisted, how they resisted, and why the reparations movement uses their struggles as a critical part of the justificatory narrative.

I hope that at the end of today's deliberations we will agree that the denial of reparation for the wrongs of the past is abhorrent to the spirit of justice, and so intensify our resolve to demand reparation from those who wronged African people. And I may add, continue to do so.

But who have to date have to date refused to take responsibility for that wrong or engage in a meaningful preparatory justice conversation with the victims of the original-- with the descendants of the original victims and those subjected to post-colonial harm.

Another very specific reason that I have chosen to focus on Black women is that too many tend to see the freedom struggles in the Caribbean, my geographical focus today, as a male only project, calling wars of liberation after male leaders.

Like Cuffee of the 1763 war in Berbice Guyana, Bussa of the 1816 war in Barbados, Captain Cudjoe of the Maroon Wars, Chief Tecu of the 1760 War, Sam Sharpe of the 1831 Emancipation War and Paul Bogle of the 1865 war in Jamaica, Quamina and King Court of Antigua Barbuda. And the list goes on as slides two and three will show you.

Yet women, many already trained in Africa as warriors, were sold into slavery. And so, they fought in these wars. And even if they were not always in the Vanguard of armed protest, opting for more day-to-day strategies, such strategies ultimately so undermined the efficiency of the economic aspects of the slave regimes that they played a key role in the abolition of slavery. Indeed, they deserve to be called abolitionists.

And so that's why I have them on this call point. We have been through Bussa, Cuffee, Quamina, Pompey, King Court, Sharpe. And we move on to Toussaint, Christophe, Dessalines, and we move on, of course, to the women in the slide four. I think that the same goes for the abolition narrative when related to the UK.

Even some carbon destiny textbooks still view as abolitionist men like those in slide five, people like Mansfield, Fox, Wilberforce, Clarkson and Newton. And women like Queen Victoria, of course, and Anne Knight, a Quaker from Essex, Mary Burke Kate Card, Georgina the Duchess of Devonshire, and Elizabeth Herring, just to mention a few of them. And you see three of them on the slide.

But thanks to historians like Lucille Mathurin-Mair who since the emergence of the definable field of women's history have used their scholarship in the service of knowledge production so that we know now what others never wanted us to know. We can confidently extend the term abolitionist to the women and men on the plantations who destabilize systems of colonial domination.

By choosing this topic then, I do not intend to downplay the role of our ancestral male warriors and men who are continuing in this struggle today, I just wish to endorse Professor Hilary Beckles' fundamental question in his path-breaking book, *Centring Woman*.

What is the political significance of an argument which says that physical combat in war should be privileged above broad-based ideological preparation? Why should nonviolence day to day strategies be marginalized and men's leadership of armed revolt centred as being more important?

I would add another question, who would dare underestimate the power of the support of the male rebels fighting against General Bradley, given by women of plant group plantation in what was then British Guyana, you know Guyana? Who even from prison waved their handkerchiefs, cheered and shouted, and I quote, "Nigger make bakura run today," end of quote.

What is important is that the struggles of these women demonstrate the historical role of mass political organization in the decolonization process, and we too must be animated by these historical processes.

We too must recall that Caribbean societies were created by the activism of enslaved ancestors who confronted their subjugations, said they would not collaborate with it, and lay the psychological foundations for the self-determinist posture of modern Caribbean societies whose nationalist luminaries later attacked the imperial assumptions and impositions.

Let's look at the roots of their opposition, these women. It was the very existence of enslavement that cause these women to engage in acts of resistance. Once located in the Americas, they were enslaved in large numbers and subjected to various forms of exploitation and control. Not least of those being categorized as property and unfree laborers, and forced to work without wages mainly in fields, factories, and planters' houses.

Enslavers appropriated their reproductive lives by claiming their children as property and use skin colour as justification for making women reproduce the stages of enslavement, unlike white women who could only reproduce free status, even if Black men fathered their children. And there were many of them, well maybe not many, but some number who were in that position, especially in Barbados.

Enslaved women were subjected to rape or sex exploitation. For now, the colonial statutes know codes which form the part of the superstructure of slavery designed to control those enslaved invested in slave women with any rights over their own bodies, but rather transferred and consolidated such rights within the legal person of the enslavers.

Orlando Patterson reflected the impact of rape, or the existence and frequency of rape, when he said in his *Sociology of Slavery*, and I quote. "The sexual exploitation of female slaves by white men was the most disgraceful aspect of Jamaican slave society. Rape and the seduction of infant slaves, the ravaging of the common law wives of the male slaves under the threat of punishment and outright sadism often involved in the most heinous forms of sexual torture was the order of the day." End of quote.

Similar evidence of rape and sexual abuse abound, for example, as captured in the Journals of Thomas Sowell from Lincolnshire. And you can see excerpts from his diaries or his journals on this slide. And the writings of Robert Wedderburn, a mixed race-- the mixed-race son of a planter, James Wedderburn who had plantations in Jamaica. You can see it on the slide.

And enslaved women turned abolitionists in the UK, or the enslaved woman turned abolitionist in the UK Mary Prince, and I think many of you have heard of Mary Prince and how she described her experiences in the Caribbean. She served in Bermuda and also in Turks and Caicos, also in Antigua, Barbuda, and then was taken to the UK by her owners. Became free and joined the abolition movement.

Laws also sort to defeminize women and race became a critical factor in the social stratification of the slave societies and heightened the struggle for rights and equality in the Caribbean. However, every form of control generates an opposing struggle for liberation. As African American Harriet Tubman-- Harriet Jacobs said, and I quote, "My master had power and law on his side, I had a determined will. There is might in each." How true.

Gendered patterns of resistance emerged to attempt to enforce white supremacy through racialized slavery. Modern scholarship affirms that Black women were a fundamental part of the campaign for freedom and rights in the colonial Caribbean, and that anti-slavery activism was not the preserve for males as was argued by the older scholarship.

Men in 18th and 19th century accounts testified to enslave women's rebelliousness and resistance to rape and to the plantation work regime. Bernard Senior, a British military officer active in this oppression of the 1831, '32 anti-slavery war in Jamaica led by known national hero Sam Sharpe, in describing instances of malingering insolence and the attempt to enforce moral economy on several plantations, admitted that women as well as men were alike defaulters.

Women participated in armed revolt in Marang and in the day-to-day acts of resistance that destabilized the regime on which slavery rested. It was former enslaved man turned abolitionist and author, the African American Frederick Douglass, who said something I like very much.

And I quote, "When the true history of the anti-slavery cause shall be written, women will occupy a large space in its pages for the cause of the slave has been peculiarly woman's cause," end of quote.

The storybook at a former plantation in St. James Jamaica, Kensington where the 1831, '32 emancipation was started, states boldly, as an enslaved woman eventually executed by the soldiers for her action after lighting the first flames is reported to have said, and I quote from

that storyboard, I've seen it myself. "I know I shall die for it but my children shall be free," end of quote.

Bernard Senior related other incidents in which African women in Jamaica provided strategic manoeuvring, supplied water to warriors, acted as guides to provision grounds, helped to guard captives, poison British soldiers through the guise of being on their side and providing them with food, and acted as lookouts and even as go between in the final stages of the war.

Women cooked food for the bands of rebels who stopped at various properties for revivling purposes and provided motivation for the soldiers through pre-combat ancestral rituals. Women as you would expect suffered for their activism, as a punishment list in the UK National Archives indicates.

For instance, Eliza Whittingham, Jane Whittingham, Catherine Brown and Christina James were sentenced to death. Susannah James got 200 lashes. Eliza James, Caroline Smith, and Ann Ramsey got 100 lashes, and Sarah Jackson and Priscilla were transported out of Island for life.

These punishments make for chilling reading, but they are tangible reminders that enslaved people never accepted enslavement uncomplainingly, and that women were right there among the protesters. If anyone is tempted to ask where on Earth did such women, the alleged subordinate sex get the nerve to confront systems of domination, Lucille Mairs' answer might explain.

She wrote this in her path-breaking thesis. "It came from their very subordination, the moral force of the powerless confronting the powerful, and from the ability to draw strength from that inheritance of ancestral spirits from that other side of the ocean," end of quote. So ancestral memory existed.

Activism and agency are particularly relevant then when speaking about ex-colonial societies where issues of freedom, human rights, restorative justice, citizenship, and self-determination had to be settled by rebel men and women before the issues of feminism and women's rights could form a part of the national anti-colonial discourse.

I turned now to the issue of reparation, the rationale for this context. It is for these enslaved women that African people and their supporters are engaged in the cause of repertory justice and engage in public education so that an informed citizenry can force former colonizers to live up to their obligations.

Now, if I could go to the next slide. As one of the slides outlines, the concept of reparation is a part of a theory of justice known as restorative justice. This concept of justice emphasizes repairing the harm caused or revealed by criminal action. Slavery and the transatlantic trafficking in enslaved Africans have been deemed crimes against humanity.

And here we can recall the Durban Declaration and Program of Action of 2001, we are after all commemorating the 20th anniversary of that historic conference and its outcome document. There was a high-level meeting at the United Nations on September 22 to mark this milestone.

Of course, as we now know, over 30 countries that ought to have been there boycotted and it reminded us of what happened in Durban. When the issue of reparations split the entire conference apart.

Despite opposition, denial, and refusal, for example, by no less a person than former UK Prime Minister David Cameron, as you can see here, reparation rests on economic, moral, legal, and political grounds. And the reparation demand is not only for native genocide and African enslavement but for a deceptive indentureship and post-colonial harm, the diversity we're talking about.

Indeed, the legacies of these atrocities ever contributed to the Caribbean underdevelopment. We need to admit that close to and over 180 years after emancipation, the people of the Caribbean are still struggling to achieve true political and economic independence and sustainable development and poverty and make the region less vulnerable to the ravages of natural and man-made disasters and the impact of climate change and centuries old environmental degradation.

Black women have suffered from these harms, in some cases disproportionately, increasingly so during the COVID-19 pandemic. And if we look at various ethnic and gender disaggregated data, we will see that to be true.

While a multiplicity of strategies has been pursued by the Caribbean in its efforts to overcome socioeconomic, environmental, and political challenges, especially after gaining independence from Western European powers as those powers left the region on and underdeveloped after having used our resources within Indigenous and in a forcefully imported labour force to ensure its own development.

Reparation as part of the colonial justice for such underdevelopment has been placed firmly on the table. What many have described as immorality, political irresponsibility, and social injustice of European colonizers who conceived of capitalising, managed and benefited from

the maangamizi for over 400 years from the philosophical underpinnings of the movement for repository justice in the Caribbean.

While there is no one strategy or formula for claiming reparation as a composition of the movement is diverse, with Rastafari for example demanding internal reparation from the states and repatriation, and diaspora groups pioneering their own strategies, since 2013 the governments of CARICOM have articulated as a negotiating strategy a 10-point action plan.

In my capacities as director of the Centre for Reparation Research and vice chair of the CARICOM reparation commission, I had to disseminate this plan while respecting all others that exist.

The CRC's plan recognizes the special role and status of European governments being the legal bodies that instituted the framework for developing and sustaining these crimes and served as a primary aid agencies through which slavery based enrichment took place, and as national custodians of criminally accumulated wealth.

So, the 10-point plan contain these 10 demands. Full formal apology, not as a statement of regret or an acknowledgment that something happened, and the indigenous people's development program, repatriation for those who desire it, the establishment of cultural institutions.

And by the way, repatriation is not just about going back to Africa or being taken back to Africa, but also the repatriation of cultural items of cultural heritage that were looted. Number four, the establishment of cultural institutions then, number five, addressing the public health crisis. Six, education or illiteracy eradication, seven, the development of African knowledge program.

Eight, psychological rehabilitation, nine, technology transfer which is located within the right of development framework. And 10, debt cancellation and the return of the 20-million-page enslavers in return for the agreement to the Emancipation Act, on the basis that the Caribbean governments that emerged from slavery and colonialism have inherited the massive crisis of community poverty and institutional unpreparedness for development.

The post-independence demand for development with input from former colonial powers still continues, especially as nationalist leaders anxious to capitalize on the prostrate condition of European nations after World War two in [INAUDIBLE] words never received compensation although they engage Britain on the issue.

On the contrary, the new nations founded with much hope faced daunting economic challenges. So, there was no Marshall plan or Colombo plan which we know was made possible for other nations. The justification for these demands is then highlighted in the next slide. The payment of reparation to enslavers and the lack of compensation to the enslaved, though, we find the most egregious. And so that's one of the main justifications.

Now, the next few slides provide an idea of the compensation pay-out across the CARICOM region. And you will see that the top six recipients' countries, meaning planters in those countries are, enslavers in those countries were Jamaica, Guyana, Barbados, Trinidad and Grenada.

Now, pay attention to the slide from Jamaica because what I want to show, well, on the next slide, the one from Barbados I want to show that women in this case in Barbados were also enslavers and they also received compensation.

And many of the enslaver women actually owned enslaved women, meaning that the majority of their labour force consisted of women. And even if they had just one or two, most likely those were women, especially for urban enslavers who ran establishments in the city.

Now, the next slide gives an idea of the parishes of location of the planters in Jamaica who got the pay-outs. Pay attention to the pay-outs of those from St. James, St. Mary, St. Thomas in the Vale, St. Thomas in the East, parishes from which much was extracted and little invested.

In fact, this month we are marking the Morandi war, the anniversary of the Morandi war of 1865. And people always talk about Morandi and the parish of St. Thomas being the poorest parish and yet look at the extraction of wealth from St. Thomas at emancipation.

The reparation movement has not been without its small successes, even though as UN high commissioner notes in her recent report, no state has comprehensively accounted for the past or for the current impact of systemic racism. Instead, there remains a pervasive failure to acknowledge the existence and impact of systemic racism and its linkages with enslavement and colonialism.

Still, while the former colonial powers have failed to go beyond statements of regret, some individuals, some families, some educational institutions, churches and financial institutions, and you have heard about many of these like Lloyd's of London, Greene King, and so on especially in the aftermath of the murder of George Floyd in the USA and the globalization of the Black Lives Matter campaign, have taken responsibility for their actions and committed to preparatory justice program.

Because the road to true racial justice and equality for people of African descent lies in reparation for the maangamizi. Former colonizers must repair the dark legacies of racial discrimination against people of African descent and Africans before we can all move forward in peace and reconciliation and build a better future.

So today I say, as I've said in many other fora, that it is time that the British state apologizes for the atrocities their military personnel acting under the orders of various colonial governors meted out to Black women in the region. Atrocities demonstrated by these slides.

There's a slide called women at war that you should be looking at now, and you can see the names, they were real, real people and the punishments meted out to them. And there are slides here that also demonstrate the cruel orders of Governor Eyre in 1865. And we also have a slide from Barbados showing the death of Nanny Grigg who was the co-leader of the 1816 war in Barbados, but we hardly hear anything about her.

And then we show you, I show you and you should be seeing now these women who were killed or otherwise punished in this final emancipation war in Jamaica, 1831, '32 and the Emancipation Act was passed in 1833.

Of course, the ancestors had to go through this camp called apprenticeship. But I end by saying, may those of us who are the ants of their descendants never betray their memory.

Thank you very much.