

Shared Legacies: Narratives of Race and Reconciliation by Descendants of Enslavers and the Enslaved

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Introduction¹

In August 2017, the white supremacist, nationalist, self-proclaimed ‘Alt Right’ travelled from all over the United States to a rally at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville. They marched with their faces uncovered, and while carrying burning torches, swastikas, Confederate flags, and weapons, Klansmen clashed with anti-racist counter-demonstrators; many people were injured and one person died. During their demonstration, Neo-Nazis chanted anti-gay slurs, “Black lives do not matter,” and Jews will not replace them. This was an extreme but by no means isolated incident.

Atlantic Monthly writer Ta-Nehisi Coates has called for a national "collective introspection" in his seminal article “The Case for Reparations.”² Many of us would like to have this difficult conversation because we recognize the connections between slavery in the past and racism in the present, but we feel we need guidance to initiate and facilitate the conversation. Others of us have been taught in school and through the media to think and experience our lives as individual disconnected events rather than understanding them as interrelated in terms of “causality, significance, and consequence.”³ Therefore, it can be difficult to engage people on

¹ Support for this chapter was provided by a PSC-CUNY Award, jointly funded by The Professional Staff Congress and The City University of New York.

² Ta-Nehisi Coates. "The Case for Reparations." *The Atlantic* 313, no. 5 (2014): 54.

³ Robin Erica Wagner-Pacifici. *What Is an Event?* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017.

issues that happened historically because they believe these issues have nothing to do with contemporary social issues or the future when in fact the past and how we remember the past in the present has everything to do with what is to come. Likewise, some do not believe that we, in the present, should be held accountable for what our ancestors did, or they think that discussing a family's connections to slavery would be somehow disloyal. Moreover, acknowledging slavery at a national level brings into question the very creeds of the nation and, by extension, our cultural identity. This is why many of us would prefer to avoid the difficult conversations required of reckoning with the past despite the reality that we cannot have reconciliation⁴ and real justice without truth-telling and accountability. As historian James Livingston notes in his article on universities with historic connections to slavery, "it's only when we acknowledge that we ourselves are the barbarians that we can stop running from the past and start learning from it."⁵

Coming To The Table (CTTT) is one organization that seeks to find "meaning and healing in the process of creating justice and promoting accountability"⁶ by remembering the past in the present for healing, acknowledgment, and action (repair) at local and national levels. This chapter describes how CTTT applies the principles and values of restorative practices for

⁴ The term 'reconciliation' implies that there was some kind of relationship in the past, and in the context of righting historical wrongs, how can there be reconciliation between people in the present who have never met? However, I agree with Weyeneth that the interdependent, complicated relationships between masters and their slaves shaped each other and our nation until today.

⁵ James Livingston. "Don't Repress the Past." *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (2015). Published electronically November 20, 2015. <http://chronicle.com/>.

⁶Mark S. Umbreit, Betty Vos, Robert B. Coates, Elizabeth, Lightfoot. "Restorative Justice in the Twenty-First Century: A Social Movement Full of Opportunities and Pitfalls." *Marquette Law Review* 89, no. 2 (Winter 2005 2005): 251-304.

“repairing the harm as much as possible, both concretely and symbolically”⁷ for a sustainable transformation to a more fair and equitable society. *Coming To The Table* is unique in its understanding of trauma and healing and how this understanding can break the cycles of violence. CTTT is based in the Center for Justice and Peacebuilding (CJP) at Eastern Mennonite University (EMU). CJP started out as the Conflict Transformation Program, created by scholar practitioner John Paul Lederach in the 1980s. Although the name has been changed, the effort for the transformation of conflict as well as the deeper, more contested, historical issues, is fundamental to restorative justice theory and practice. Restorative justice is focused on repairing harm by creating the conditions to express human needs, develop relationships, enable accountability, and foster growth. This theory and practice inform CTTT and its mission and vision by furthering the restorative justice field to include efforts at historical dialogue for reconciliation, societal transformation, and the generative possibilities of taking action.

What is Coming To The Table?

Founded in 2006 by descendants of slaveholders and enslaved people, and with the continued guidance and support of the Center for Justice and Peacebuilding, *Coming To The Table* envisions the United States as “a just and truthful society that acknowledges and seeks to heal from the racial wounds of the past—from slavery and the many forms of racism it spawned.”⁸ Examining our history of settler colonialism and slavery through a restorative lens

⁷ Howard Zehr. *The Little Book of Restorative Justice*. The Little Books of Justice and Peacebuilding. Revised and updated ed. New York: Good Books, an imprint of Skyhorse Publishing, Inc., 2015.

⁸ <http://comingtothetable.org/about-us/vision-mission-values/>

allows for a framing of “collective introspection”⁹ to uncover and reflect upon the complex and painful truths of a racial past in order to determine what is possible in the present to address and repair the wrongdoing, and thereby shape a new legacy.

The framework for Coming To The Table is founded on four interrelated areas of practice:

1. **Facing History** - researching, acknowledging, and sharing personal, family and community histories of race with openness and honesty;
2. **Making Connections** - connecting to others within and across racial lines in order to develop and deepen relationships;
3. **Healing Wounds** - exploring how we can heal together through dialogue, reunion, ritual, ceremony, the arts, apology and other methods;
4. **Taking Action** - actively seeking to heal the wounds of racial inequality and injustice and to support racial reconciliation between individuals, within families, and in communities.¹⁰

These four areas were developed out of racial justice theory and practice through a restorative justice lens combined with the methodology of Strategies for Trauma Awareness and Resilience (STAR), another CJP initiative.¹¹ STAR was designed to develop awareness of the impacts of trauma, interrupt cycles of violence, and increase resilience at all levels of society.

⁹Ta-Nehisi Coates. "The Case for Reparations." *The Atlantic* 313, no. 5 (2014): 54.

¹⁰ <http://comingtothetable.org/about-us/coming-table-approach/>

¹¹ David Yoder. "Desire to Address, Heal, Traumatic Legacy of U.S. Slavery Sparks Growth in Coming to the Table Group." Eastern Mennonite University. <https://emu.edu/now/news/2014/06/desire-to-address-heal-traumatic-legacy-of-u-s-slavery-sparks-growth-in-coming-to-the-table-group/>.

Created to address the trauma of the events of September 11, 2001, STAR “equip[s] community leaders to understand the dynamics of trauma and healing, and their linkage to issues of conflict, justice and peace.”¹² To engage in the difficult conversations of slavery and racism, CTTT uses the peacemaking circle process¹³ to face history, make connections, heal wounds, and take action.

The circle process is an indigenous model integrated with contemporary practices of consensus-building, dialogue, and conflict transformation. The talking piece (any item that has special meaning to the facilitator and/or the group) and the circle format both serve to equalize power relationships, allowing everyone to be heard through storytelling. The one who holds the talking piece has their turn to speak while others listen and support the speaker.¹⁴ “How we are treated, how we participate, who is involved, how we are heard: these factors give us a sense of whether or not we have experienced justice.”¹⁵ CTTT was founded on the belief that all voices matter. When we feel respected and heard, we tend to be more open to hearing other viewpoints and considering the larger picture. What begins in dialogue has the potential to move to collective action for positive social change.

I first learned about Coming To The Table while attending trainings at the Center for Justice and Peacebuilding (CJP) at Eastern Mennonite University (EMU). I participated in my first STAR training in 2004 which happened to coincide with meetings between the descendants

¹² <http://www.emu.edu/cjp/star/training/>

¹³ http://www.livingjusticepress.org/index.asp?Type=B_BASIC&SEC=%7B51F9C610-C097-446A-8C60-05E8B4599FE7%7D

¹⁴ <http://www.tolerance.org/blog/talking-circles-restorative-justice-and-beyond>

¹⁵ Kay Pranis, Barry Stuart, and Mark Wedge. *Peacemaking Circles : From Crime to Community*. (St. Paul: Living Justice Press, 2003).

of Sally Hemmings and Thomas Jefferson. These historic events did not go unnoticed at CJP, given its vision and mission, not to mention its location in Virginia, also the home of Jefferson's Monticello where many of those meetings initially took place. When I returned to EMU two years later to take a course at the Summer Peacebuilding Institute, I learned of the founding of Coming To The Table. CTTT was to be based there since it was started by EMU's grounds-supervisor, Will Harrison, whose ancestors were slaveholders, along with Susan Hutchison who is a Jefferson descendant. Coming To The Table is the first national organization bringing together descendants with a shared history and heritage of slavery and racism to *engage with the past in the present for a different future*.

I had followed Coming To The Table from its inception but only joined in 2014 when an open invitation was made to all who recognize the injustice of slavery and racism in the past and present, and who want to work for racial healing and social change. Being part of CTTT has inspired me to do genealogical research into my own conflicted German Jewish history and heritage. Wendy Zierler begins her article, "My Holocaust Is Not Your Holocaust: 'Facing' Black and Jewish Experience in The Pawnbroker, Higher Ground, and The Nature of Blood," with the question, "what is to be gained by drawing comparisons between the African Diaspora experience of slavery and the Jewish experience of the Holocaust?"¹⁶ In fact, there is considerable evidence and literature comparing, contrasting, and linking the Black and Jewish ethnic and social experience, so this journey I am undertaking is not unprecedented. For example, slave spirituals, "expressed a yearning for a better life [and] claimed identification with

¹⁶ Wendy Zierler. "My Holocaust Is Not Your Holocaust: 'Facing' Black and Jewish Experience in the Pawnbroker, Higher Ground, and the Nature of Blood." *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 18, no. 1 (2004): 46-67.

the children of Israel.”¹⁷ Likewise, depending on when and where Jews have lived in the United States, they have been assigned to the white race and at other times an “off-white race” which shares the “experience of marginality” with Blacks and other minority power groups.¹⁸

I do not think it is useful to compare trauma. However, efforts by second and third generation Germans who have worked to acknowledge and make amends for an inherited legacy of wrongdoing are models worth looking at as we in the United States find our ways to address the legacies of slavery and racism in the present. I am a woman, Jewish, and white. As a Jewish woman, I have experienced sexism and anti-Semitism along with the privilege that comes from being European American in the United States. These are complex, interconnected issues requiring both an internal journey about my personal heritage and an external journey regarding the heritage of my country. What can I learn from my German peers to make amends for my white privilege that often goes unacknowledged and from which I frequently benefit? What can we, as a nation, learn from third-generation Germans who offer us fifty years of "collective introspection,"¹⁹ repair, and action?

¹⁷ <http://www.umc.org/resources/part-of-history-african-american-spirituals-still-heal>

¹⁸ Karen Brodtkin. *How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says About Race in America*. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1998).

¹⁹ See for example, Dan Bar-On. *Legacy of Silence: Encounters with Children of the Third Reich*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1989); Dan Bar-On and Fatma Kassem. "Storytelling as a Way to Work through Intractable Conflicts: The German-Jewish Experience and Its Relevance to the Palestinian-Israeli Context." *Journal of Social Issues* 60.2 (2004); Yaacov Bar-Siman-Tov. *From Conflict Resolution to Reconciliation*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); Björn Krondorfer. *Remembrance and Reconciliation: Encounters between Young Jews and Germans*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995); Toshio Ohsako. "German Pupils and Jewish Seniors: Intergenerational Dialogue as a Framework for Healing History." *Linking Lifetimes: A Global View of Intergenerational Exchange*. Ed. Matthew S. Kaplan, Nancy Z. Henkin, Atsuko T. Kusano. (Lanham: University Press of America, 2002).

Writing Projects at Coming To The Table

A “collective introspection” can take any number of forms. Coming To The Table has working groups focused on reparations, trips to sites significant to slavery and the civil rights movement, a writer’s group, monthly dialogues, meditation, inspiring the next generation of activists, and a group for linked descendants (African Americans and European Americans with shared ancestry). In addition, CTTT members are prolific authors and poets, documentary filmmakers, artists, presenters, and activist public historians, offering genealogy research support, and advocating for the recovery of slave cemeteries. When there are few or no traces left, these creative projects take on the added challenge and responsibility of “historical representation.”²⁰ At the same time, preservation and documentation can be healing and empowering when histories that have been all but lost or forgotten are recovered through (re)constructed and memorialized word, image, and ritual.

For instance, the Linked Descendants working group maintains the Bittersweet: Linked Through Slavery blog.²¹ As CTTT member Felicia Furman notes, the organization “places a high value on these links because personal connections can create a compelling and intense desire for healing and reconciliation.”²² Members and others are invited to share their stories of doing genealogical research, approaching linked relatives, and having the opportunity to respond to the posts of others who generate important online dialogues about racism and justice. These 500-to-1000-word pieces describe the power of genealogy, blood, place and story²³ as well as the

²⁰ Saidiya Hartman. "The Time of Slavery." *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 101.4 (2002): 757-77.

²¹ <https://linkedthroughslavery.com/our-stories/>.

²² <https://linkedthroughslavery.com/2015/06/28/just-like-family/>.

²³ <https://linkedthroughslavery.com/2015/12/01/linked-through-stories-and-history/>.

frustrations of trying to find documentation, and thus they piece together a narrative based on educated assumptions about the personalities and behaviors of ancestors, along with the rationalization of slavery—what Grant Hayter-Menzies describes in *End of the List* how “a combination of imagination and logic suggests a scenario.”²⁴

As challenging as it can be for descendants of enslavers to find information about their ancestors, it can be that much harder or impossible for descendants of enslaved people. To aid her healing process, Sharon Morgan developed a database called Our Black Ancestry to help African Americans find their history in honor of her ancestors—enslaved, enslavers, and lynching victims.²⁵ Morgan’s database has a special section for descendants of enslavers where they can contribute information about the people their family enslaved, people who are often discovered in family papers such as deeds and wills. Morgan also co-authored *Repairing the Breach of Slavery* with co-author Prinny Anderson²⁶ for the Bittersweet blog, which describes the CTTT monthly conference call as a venue for “what linked descendants say about making connections across the divide.” The blog post describes participant satisfactions as well as their frustrations with trying to contact and create relationships with their linked family members. Then, the blog post reader is asked, “What would YOU like to say to or ask of people with whom you are linked by slavery?” (sic.).

²⁴ <https://linkedthroughslavery.com/2015/09/09/end-of-the-list/>.

²⁵ Sharon Morgan. Our Black Ancestry. <https://ourblackancestry.com/about.php>.

²⁶ <https://linkedthroughslavery.com/2016/02/10/repairing-the-breach-of-slavery/>.

This invitation to the reader to add their story to the blog is also an invitation to those who have not yet begun their own family history (re)search to take on the task to further repair the divisions and estrangements that are also an inheritance of settler colonialism and slavery. The monthly conference call is another example of how Coming To The Table works to maintain connections between biannual conferences. One conference call in September 2014 was focused on developing a Coming To The Table writers' group. Several on the call voiced a similar need to write their stories in community because they were new to the writing process. Others felt prepared to take on the challenge but expressed a concern that they did not think they had enough in their respective story for a whole book or did not have the time for such an endeavor. This conversation sparked the idea of a collection of non-fiction essays by descendants of enslavers and the enslaved to be published in one volume. There are many commendable books on slavery in the United States,²⁷ but none of these texts takes a multiple-perspective approach. This opportunity is something that Coming To The Table members could do and should do in keeping with the organization's efforts to challenge and transform the legacy of slavery and racism.

Most Coming To The Table efforts are co-led by an African American and a European American, so I partnered with journalist Dionne Ford, a descendant of both enslavers and enslaved to co-edit the anthology. Dionne is also researching and writing her own memoir called

²⁷ See for example, Edward Ball. *Slaves in the Family*. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998); Karen Branan. *The Family Tree: A Lynching in Georgia, a Legacy of Secrets, and My Search for the Truth*, (New York: Atria, 2016); Thomas Norman DeWolf. *Inheriting the Trade: A Northern Family Confronts Its Legacy as the Largest Slave-Trading Dynasty in U. S. History*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 2008); Annette Gordon-Reed. *Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings; An American Controversy*. (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1997); Saidiya Hartman. *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007); James Oliver Horton and Horton, Lois E. *Slavery and the Making of America*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); Wienczek, Henry. *The Hairstons: An American Family in Black and White*. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999).

Finding Josephine that is about Dionne’s journey to discover and recover her biracial heritage.²⁸ As co-editors, we created the title, *Slavery’s Descendants: Shared Legacies of Race and Reconciliation*.²⁹ While Dionne and I had thought about the positive contribution the anthology will have for those who read the book, as it turns out, writing the respective narratives has had a cathartic effect for several contributors. Literature, be it prose, poetry, fiction, or nonfiction, has a powerful role to play in the reconciliation process for authors as well as readers. Narratives can be transformative for authors when we are able to make meaning of our experiences and find shared meaning with others. Making connections based on communal experiences can be particularly healing for groups such as African Americans who “have experienced political repression, historic violence, or marginalization, [whose] voices and experiences have usually been excluded from mainstream understanding of that particular period of history.”³⁰ Coming To The Table members, however, are not only crossing racial divides. Many are also seeking out ways to find the humanity in their own ancestors. For some of the European Americans, this is a particularly challenging part of their journey. Whereas descendants of enslavers often feel guilt, African Americans may feel shame and even a kind of inherited trauma termed “Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome”³¹ as a consequence of being descended from enslaved people.³² CTTT members are not just attempting to walk in another’s shoes; we are attempting “to walk back in

²⁸ Dionne Ford. *Finding Josephine*. (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 2020).

²⁹ Dionne Ford, and Jill Strauss, eds. *Slavery's Descendants: Shared Legacies of Race and Reconciliation*. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2019).

³⁰ David Anderson Hooker, and Amy Potter Czajkowski. *Transforming Historical Harms*. (Harrisonburg: Eastern Mennonite University, 2012).

³¹ Joy DeGruy Leary. *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome: America's Legacy of Enduring Injury and Healing*. (Portland: Uptone Press, 2005).

³² Alma Carten. "How the Legacy of Slavery Affects the Mental Health of Black Americans Today." <http://theconversation.com/how-the-legacy-of-slavery-affects-the-mental-health-of-black-americans-today-44642>.

someone's footsteps,"³³ and this requires empathy and imagination as well as a sense of obligation for what happened in the past.

The telling observation that she was "walking back in someone's footsteps" was made by Crystal Rosson, a participant in one of CTTT's Slave Dwelling Project overnight events led by CTTT member Joe McGill.³⁴ This event was held at Thomas Jefferson's Poplar Forest plantation. McGill has arranged Slave Dwelling Project overnights across the country to raise awareness and discussion, as well as encourage protection of extant slave dwellings. Empathy and understanding are created through first-hand experiences of sleeping in the same spaces and in the same ways as the enslaved did, namely on the floor. "It's being a part of and going through the same thing that they went through and feeling what they felt, and through that, understanding just a glimpse into that world."³⁵ Hamber maintains that genuine healing is communicated through the context and process, and also through the relationships engendered around the rituals and actions of righting the wrongs of the past and the present.³⁶ However, as discussed at the beginning of this chapter, there are many reasons for an unwillingness or inability to engage in these processes. Cohen points out that while there can be a "mismatch between people's need to tell their stories and express their suffering, and 'the other's' capacity to listen."³⁷ Reading someone else's experience can seem less threatening, leaving the reader more open to taking in

³³ Emma Schkloven. "Visitors Spend the Night at Poplar Forest as Part of Slave Dwelling Project." *The News & Advance*, (2017).

³⁴ <http://slavedwellingproject.org/>

³⁵ Emma Schkloven. "Visitors Spend the Night at Poplar Forest as Part of Slave Dwelling Project." *The News & Advance*, (2017).

³⁶ Brandon Hamber. "Public Memorials and Reconciliation Processes in Northern Ireland," (paper presented at the Trauma and Transitional Justice in Divided Societies Conference. Warrington, Virginia 2004).

³⁷ Cynthia Cohen. "Engaging with the Arts to Promote Coexistence." In *Imagine Coexistence: Restoring Humanity after Violent Ethnic Conflict*, edited by Antonia Chayes, Martha Minow. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003).

the narrative even when it is counter to their understanding of the world or identity. This initial willingness to accept the experience of the other as valid is a first step toward reconciliation and even forgiveness.

What forgiveness and literary activity share, then, is an act of submission and active risk-taking in so far as one person opens up to the possibilities brought into existence through contact with another person. For just as in writing, where the author must relinquish the desire to predetermine the reader's comprehension in any definitive way, so also in giving and offering forgiveness, participants must make themselves vulnerable to the interpreting activity of the other.³⁸

As it turns out, I went through this interpreting activity myself as co-editor of *Slavery's Descendants*. I am writing a chapter entitled, "What a Legacy of Slavery and Racism" Has to do with Me," which explores our present-day dilemma and debate on the purposes and consequences of revisiting the past through the lens of my own story. Like all the contributing authors, I am doing genealogical research and collecting information from relatives. In addition, writing this chapter coincides with an opportunity to do onsite research in Michelfeld, Germany, the hometown of my grandfather and my ancestors going back to at least the 1700s. My guides are the townspeople who are researching and memorializing my great-grandparents who were the last Jews in the village and the last to leave in 1937 or 1938. I also plan to go to the surviving home of my great-grandparents which my father remembers visiting as a young child. I will write about the experience of having pieces of my lost ancestry returned to me by those who

³⁸ Julie McGonegal. *Imagining Justice: The Politics of Postcolonial Forgiveness and Reconciliation*. (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2008).

descend from the ones that tried to take it away. In the process, I will create my own narrative of a past of forced displacement and migration that in turn creates a sense of place and a new belonging for me. Hopefully I will also build new relationships with those who are doing the hard work of researching and documenting our shared past.

Coming To The Table members are enthusiastic about the idea of an anthology. From the original thirty proposals we now have a collection of more than two dozen essays that collectively give a more nuanced perspective on our national inheritance of slavery and racism. *Slavery's Descendants* includes essays by contributors like Sarah Kohrs who writes about restoring a cemetery in her community where many enslaved were buried. Karen Branan and Stephanie Harp reconstruct their families' participation in separate lynchings, and recount their work to memorialize the victims. Phoebe and Betty Kilby tour the country, discussing their families' connection through slavery.³⁹

The narratives included in *Slavery's Descendants* expand the time frame associated with our country's history of slavery. The wide range starts with Grant Hayter Menzies' narrative which connects his family's roots to the first 1555 slave route from Africa to England which thereafter became an established practice carried over to the 'new world.' At the other end of the time continuum is Elisa Pearmain's narrative that probes the accepted relationships established by the institution of slavery which remained in her family in the body of a cook all the way through the 1960's and the Apollo Mission to the moon. The essays return to the Americas with Fabrice Guerrier who emigrated to the United States from Haiti as a teenager when he "first

³⁹ Dionne Ford, and Jill Strauss, eds. *Slavery's Descendants: Shared Legacies of Race and Reconciliation*. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2019).

discovered that he was Black.” To comprehend what it means to be a Black man in the United States, Fabrice looked to W.E.B. Dubois, and then found healing at the Center for Justice and Peacebuilding through Coming To The Table activities. These essays also enlarge our understanding of where slavery existed, which includes Rhode Island (DeWolf) and Oregon (Noakes). Some of the narratives reframe who we assume to have been touched by slavery. For example, Rodney Williams recounts unearthing that his ancestor was the son of a slave and a Quaker, a religious group thought of as pacifist and egalitarian. These and the rest of the essays by descendants of enslavers and the enslaved are uncomfortable and sometimes harrowing, filled with recurring themes of displacement (literally and figuratively), identity, trauma, shame and guilt, memory and silences across generations, along with generosity, gratitude, and love. Throughout the book, the various contributions challenge readers’ understanding of history while uncovering personal and collective truths.

Conclusion

In his January 2017 Farewell Address, President Barak Obama said, “Race remains a potent and often divisive force in our society.”⁴⁰ Coming To The Table, with its mission and vision, is expanding the restorative justice field by including efforts of historical dialogue for expression of harms, both past and present, and to determine obligations for inherited and present-day wrongs. Moving beyond guilt, shame, and blame, and on to imagining possibilities can have the added benefit of giving citizens an opportunity to not only break open the many

⁴⁰ <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/10/us/politics/obama-farewell-address-speech.html>

facets of our national story, but also to determine together what Bell calls a “collective meaning” of our shared history and legacy. In the absence of a national truth-telling process, CTTT is taking the first steps by adapting restorative justice models at the grassroots, offering examples for how we can use restorative practices in more situations and contexts in society. Coming To The Table also emphasizes the creative, generative possibilities of taking action for societal transformation. For there to be true, national self-examination or “collective introspection” (if such a thing were possible), we will need organizations like CTTT that are creating the conditions for accountability and for what author Jill Scott calls “poetic forgiveness” that “arises as the product of human creative communication... this forgiveness constructs us. It speaks to us as we speak in creative ways.”⁴¹ At CTTT, we believe that by learning our history, we can forge a new sense of identity and use that knowledge to educate others and create solidarity.

⁴¹ Jill Scott. *A Poetics of Forgiveness: Cultural Responses to Loss and Wrongdoing*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

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