All over the world, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, nations and cultures are struggling to heal from, memorialize, adjudicate, or at least understand and explain traumatic pasts. Throughout modern history human exploitation—slavery, caste systems, and other forms of official discrimination, war, and genocidal violence—have left untold scars on individuals and whole societies. What obligation does the present owe the past? Who or what decides the nature of repair for past wrongs? When historical knowledge, the obligation to remember, and the obligation to seek retrospective justice meet, what are their roots in philosophy, ethics, religion, law, politics, and history? And, how is or has this process of seeking historical justice been different from one culture or nation to another?

This international conference, sponsored jointly by the Gilder Lehrman Center for the Study of Slavery, Resistance, and Abolition at Yale University and the Brown University Steering Committee on Slavery and Justice, puts history, memory, and justice in conversation among a group of scholars representing many disciplines and several countries. The aim of the conference is to foster a discussion that will inform our own scholarly communities as well as the larger public, and that will lead to further research, teaching, and human rights activity about the world’s need to face so many traumatic pasts in a more humane way.