



BLACKLASH

The Africana Collective

REPORT NO. 6

Political Organization v. Reparations. For Whom? For What?



INTRODUCTION

Faced with a resurgence of Covid-19, unresolved and vexed electoral politics, Black men summarily rounded-up and targeted for some voting Trump-Pence, (neo-)liberals dancing to their muted victory in the streets, radicals-leftists squeezed ever so swiftly out of the “big tent” Democratic party, W. E. B. DuBois’s “black folk” feeling this might be *the* moment for reparations, we decided to the politics of organization and reparations—for whom? For what? Join us in this elongated post-election moment for perspectives and analysis.

Blacklash: The Africana Collective (BTAC) engages in interdisciplinary research to provide analysis and recommendations on a range of issues affecting the African(a) world—linked communities with peoples of African ancestry. Using our collective knowledge and skills, as well as our grounding as thinkers, educators, activists, organizers, and parents, our objective is to support and inform action toward safeguarded humane development throughout the African world. We are independent in our funding, research, and directives, allowing us to work decidedly in the best interests of said communities.

Each month, we consider one topical issue as a collective. In the process, we prepare individual statements, meet (virtually) to hammer out our findings, then prepare our report. That report is then shared with the African world via online outlets and through various networks a week prior to a (virtual) town hall meeting, where we invite members of the African world community to join us, debate, (dis)agree, and come away with perspectives that inform collective action. We strongly request that all attendees at the town hall read the report **beforehand**. This way, you are an active participant in shaping your own views and subsequent decisions. We encourage you to sign up, or register, for the town hall, so we may keep you abreast of upcoming events, key resources, and ways to translate the reports’ ideas into collective betterment scaled to wherever you are and with whom you have to work.

In this thought paper, report no. 6, we consider the topical issues surrounding debates about political organization and calls for reparations. Join us for the virtual town hall, titled “Political Organization v. Reparations. For Whom? For What?” on Wednesday, November 25, 2020, at 6 pm EST/10 pm GMT.



PERSPECTIVE: DR. IYELLI ICHILE

African people living in the western margins have always found a way to survive, and in some cases thrive, by being organized. We have done so without receiving the well-deserved, massive reparations that some of our people have demanded from this (and other) western governments for several generations. Again, to the question of whether we are owed reparations, the answer is undoubtedly yes. More than that, we are owed a measure of justice and vengeance that is almost unfathomable—namely because the debt is still growing.

I can remember the stir around Randall Robinson's treatise on the case for reparations entitled *The Debt: What America Owes to Blacks* (2001). What deserved more attention at that time, 2001, was the work he had been doing for decades as the Director of TransAfrica Forum, an organization that maintained the objective social and economic self-reliance for people of African descent in the U.S., the continent of Africa and across the African diaspora. Robinson's vision of reparations and justice foregrounded changes in U.S. foreign policy, domestic policy and in the mindset of Black people, themselves. His vision was not narrowly focused on what some are now calling "Foundational Black Americans," "autochthonous" or "ADOS" people in the U.S. Robinson was clear that the "debt" was global in scale and if it were to be fully repaid, that repayment must be global in scale. The Trans-Atlantic trade in enslaved Africans was a multi-continental system with dire, interconnected consequences everywhere it took place.

The narrow U.S.-centric approach to the reparations debate is still not the most troubling aspect of the matter to me. I am most troubled by the discourse surrounding reparations because if America somehow does decide to pay reparations to African people, this would more than likely deepen our investment in this unfinished and crumbling settler colonial project. In other words, this payout would not push us farther away from the death grip of American (and global) racial capitalism; in fact, most available evidence suggests that most of this money would likely be returned to the payer within a short period of time.

That said, Robinson's next book—which was conspicuously less popular—was *The Reckoning: What Blacks Owe to Each Other* (2002). I find myself much more interested in the answer to this second question than the question raised in his previous book. I do not reference Robinson's work uncritically, but I find his titles useful in my attempt to frame the issue. I believe the answer(s) to this second question has enormous potential to unify, and to direct our attention/energy inwards—perhaps even towards sovereignty. It is a reminder that we, in fact, still have a collective responsibility. We have the right to hold each other accountable to the group.

African cultures offer some useful frameworks with which to deepen this sense of responsibility, particularly at a time in which each new technology seems to provide us with a new means of shirking this responsibility, encouraging us to instead hand that responsibility over to outsiders who do not share our interests, and who are, in most instances, aggressively opposed to them. Here, I am specifically referring to a concept that some African women scholars have called *mothering*. This term, coined by Oyeronke Oyewumi, is not simply a literal, familial or biological conceptualizing of mothering; it is what Dianne M.



Diakite describes as a “metaphorical and socio-ontological” term, which informs peace-building, social change and sustainability among African people (Diakite 61). Motherhood is an ethic which prioritizes loyalty, love, unity and mutual support amongst “children of the same mother” (Oyewumi 12). The ‘mother’ in this instance, would be Mother Africa itself.

Motherhood is an organizing principle and a praxis which, from my own vantage point, has guided the most effective African liberation movements in our history. Mothering creates support for children, elders, families, as well as individuals without the support of families—within an organization. It creates space for culture, spirituality, acknowledgement of trauma and healing, strategic resource management, the personal as political, and intergenerational leadership models. Mothering, in this way, can and should be practiced by people of any gender or age within an organization. It requires each member to seek ways to ‘mother’ others within an organization (not to be confused with ‘babying’), and it creates the expectation that each member will be treated with the concern, integrity, and compassion of a mother within an organization. While mothering typically brings to mind softer, nurturing approach, the African and African diasporic mothering traditions studied in the works mentioned above (and my own), are also characterized by an emphasis on bravery, strategy, and (necessary) destruction/violence. Mothering is a crucial, if unrecognized aspect of warfare.

The dehumanizing effect of various processes of colonization and subjugation on us is a foregone conclusion, but what we do not typically acknowledge are the ways in which the struggle against these processes can dehumanize us, as well. Sometimes, the urgency about/pressure related to one’s performance of duties as a “warrior” or a “soldier” does not leave much room for one to also feel human. Even as motherhood organizes us around a common struggle, it also humanizes. Harriet Tubman, Nana Yaa Asantewa, Queen Mother Audley Moore, Assata Shakur, and countless others have given us blueprints for how we might implement motherhood within our organizations.*

There is much more to be said on the matter, but in general, my intervention is simply to advocate for the critical examination of the existence (or absence) of mothering within our organizations. Motherhood as ethic and praxis can expand the working capacity and deepen the personal investment of everyone within an organization. It can build courage because it first establishes trust and support. It can strengthen networks and coalition building processes. It can also help refine the mission and vision of an organization, especially with regard to inclusivity. For an organization, motherhood is the critical question raised by Lauryn Hill in her song “Doo Wop (That Thing)”: “How you gon’ win when when you ain’t right within?” and it is also a response to that question.

*See Appendix



PERSPECTIVE: DR. JARED BALL

In a conversation with me about political economy, Dr. [Nathan Connolly](#) said something to the effect that so much of the focus on entrepreneurialism among Black people actually speaks to a pervasive political pessimism. The idea that “we must first get our money right” before entering properly the political arena is, according to Connolly, really a concept born of a frustration with the political system as much as it is a base misunderstanding of how any economy works. My own history of struggle with the concept of reparations circles this very discussion, the one had with Connolly, and the one with which we are grappling here and has always for me returned to the following: 1) Reparations is too conservative, 2) as a movement it is a political contradiction, 3) it too often takes on the pessimistic characteristics summarized by Connolly.

First, reparations is too conservative. It is not a question of whether reparations are deserved. They are. But the question is itself somewhat of a fraudulent straw benchmark because better questions are of method, form, or purpose. In other words, to what end? Are reparations to be a rearrangement of the world or merely the reduction of revolutionary aspirations to African descendants enjoying greater degrees of colonial spoils? Much like its umbrella concept, Black capitalism, reparations have largely been a paradoxically easily dismissed but encouraged path for Black advancement. Rather than creating the righteous world of “equality of outcomes” reparations encourages greater acceptance of the mythological “equality of opportunity.”

“But,” as we often hear, “... other groups got it! The Jews and Japanese...” Sure, the Japanese lost coastal properties now worth billions and:

... in 1988—a decade after the campaign began and over 40 years after the internment camps closed—President Ronald Reagan signed the Civil Liberties Act, which offered a formal apology and paid [\\$20,000 to each survivor](#).

And those wanting to mimic Jews should familiarize themselves, among much else, with the work of Norman Finkelstein whose book [The Holocaust Industry](#) they may find shocking. In short, while a cottage industry emerged led by Jews to collect money and administer either guilt or forgiveness little went to the families of survivors or to survivors themselves. Equally important, the nations from which reparations were collected changed nothing as it regards their (neo)colonial extraction of wealth from so-called “developing nations” or former colonies, nor were their own internal labor and exploitative contradictions, including those of immigrant populations, ever corrected. And no legitimate nationalist or pan-Africanist political project could ever want to mimic the collision of political processes involved in the creation of an African equivalent to Israel (to the extent that state is considered partial payment for Nazism rather than a [Zionist](#) agreement among European powers to rid themselves of the radical and “international” Jew while installing a Western colonial outpost in the so-called “Middle East”).

Secondly, reparations as a movement is a political contradiction in that it wants to use a U.S. electoral process that would involve the support of millions of non-qualifiers to agree to a massive redistribution of wealth only to those Black people whose material/lived conditions demand repairs but are also the result of policies this



electorate has little problem supporting. In this arrangement the nominally radical call for reparations is little more than a rebranding of “Vote Blue No Matter Who,” a well-funded position to take by the way. Prior to this most recent U.S. presidential election a panel was convened supported by the National Coalition of Blacks for Reparations in America (NCOBRA) titled, “Reparations is on the Ballot.” This same message was supported in an [accompanying blog post](#) whose readers are encouraged to “express your commitment to obtaining reparations for African Americans by voting...” with claims that Democratic Party majorities have “led to historic numbers of cosponsors for H.R. 40. ...” But HR40 and SB 1083 are merely requests to *study* – not implement – reparations, and these “historic numbers of sponsors” come decades into a process that has only led here. But a movement whose demands are (apparently) consciously addressed to the political leadership of a country whose very existence and maintenance requires the persistent exploitation of African people, so much so that their descendants feel it necessary to seek repair even after centuries of nominal “freedom and equality,” is too powerful a contradiction to overcome.

Finally, too often reparations is preferred among Black populations over political organization, mass movements, or the processes required to assume political power which would have to be included in any true definition of liberation or sovereignty. Rather than the much harder work of building the kinds of movements required to achieve political power, the kind of power which would make movements for reparations moot, too many prefer the headline grabbing, applause lines of calls for “a check,” or some other form of economic justice from a still-unreformed and unrepentant state. Even more institutional reforms, such as, debt forgiveness, free healthcare, or education, and job training, even the “baby bonds” idea of Darrick Hamilton, all require the normal function of state-sponsored wealth creation for a mostly White, male, capitalist elite, only with more of those spoils redounding back to one segment of the most exploited. For this reason alone, many revolutionary organizations and activists have correctly placed their emphases on political organization and not gone for what is largely an encouraged distraction.

Our challenge is still to organize politically mass movements led by and including platform agenda items essential to achieving political power for African people in the U.S. and abroad. From there, all solutions must focus on equality of outcomes, not opportunity, and must redefine what it means to create and distribute “wealth.”

The returns for converting democratic politics into judicial selection have been very meager for the left. The point is not to gainsay some good things that judges did at the zenith of liberal power. But it is worth asking whether the courts were necessary to the outcomes—and whether it was worth depending on an antidemocratic power that the right has now turned against progressives.



PERSPECTIVE: DR. KWASI KONADU

The question of political organization versus calls for reparations assume these are at odds. I see them differently. If both are approaches to the consequences of colonial slavery for peoples of the African world, then they should be engaged in tandem, not as odd couples. Political organization or mobilization for said peoples seeks to redress collectivist and current socio-political violence in the Americas, Africa, and elsewhere, but so does reparations. While reparations might suggest near-term goals—monetary compensation, apology, etc.—political organizations of various stripes have lofty goals as well—socialist democracy, plain socialism, unification of Africa under scientific socialism, and too many to name. I’m suggesting we think about political organization through reparations, that is, the root mistrust and intra-cannibalism wrought by colonial slavery and which reparations seeks to address inhabits any sustainable political organizing or organizations which require workable levels of trust and disciplined starvation—to fight the pivot against or on each other. Mass movements don’t work, and neither do political organizations of any stripe. Their resumes, their fragmentation—the problem of *too* many organizations in intramural squabbles over finite resources and equally fragmented members—borne this out. Pointless are cadre classes, ideological seminars, dogma (read: political education), or quoting of this or that revolutionary (whose resumes, when you cut away the praise poetry, looks anti-revolutionary). Mass movements and political organizations can’t work unless we address the adhesive that holds organizations together, that make them workable, and that answer the crucial question of whether organizations are means to somewhere, to something, or permanent features regardless of the state of the African world.

Reparations is immediately and ultimately about coming to terms with the historic enslavement of African (diasporic) peoples, atomized as they were into statistics or painful memories, which lie and tell the truth simultaneously. Any reparatory argument for (monetary) redress has its virtues and vices, as do political organizations. In the Americas, intellectuals, politicians, activists, and even the enslaved and their U.S. descendants have been at the forefront of reparations discourse and action. Some will no doubt point out the case of an African woman named Belinda in late-eighteenth-century Massachusetts, who filed multiple court petitions for redress and was compensated at least once for her years of enslavement. But cases like hers were unexceptional at the time, and her petition was for personal rather than collective compensation.

One of ironies of abolition in Europe and the Americas is that governments volunteered to compensate slaveholders while stubbornly refusing to do likewise for the formerly enslaved. Almost a year before issuing the Emancipation Proclamation, Abraham Lincoln signed the DC Emancipation Act of 1862, which provided slaveholders loyal to the Union compensation of \$300 for each emancipated African and \$100 for each of the emancipated who opted to emigrate outside the United States. When the Dutch abolished slavery in 1863, their government compensated slaveholders at a rate of 300 Dutch *guilders* (= \$161) for each enslaved person. By the 1860s, Britain, France, the Netherlands, and Scandinavia (Denmark, Norway, and Sweden) used large



allocations of taxpayer monies to compensate plantation owners and slavers. The British government, through its Slave Compensation Commission, paid out over £20 million in 1833 to approximately 3,000 slaving families, and recent reports indicate that British taxpayers, including persons from Africa and the Americas, are still paying this debt! But Portugal did not compensate its slaveholders because it didn't possess the tax base to do so; instead, when slavery was outlawed in 1869 across the Portuguese empire, it was replaced by compulsory forms of labor conscription and vagrancy laws, similar to those in colonial Africa and the United States, where such labor conscription essentially became life sentences. This practice continued into the early twentieth century. Brazil terminated slavery in 1888, and its slaveholders, like those in the U.S. South, received no compensation for "property" forfeited with the passing of abolition laws.

In the wake of the U.S. civil war, the ex-slave pension movement was born. Its story is instructive for any discussion of reparations and political organization and mobilization. Pension bills for the formerly enslaved were introduced, but these were designed as a tax-relief for the white U.S. South, wherein the legally emancipated would spend their pensions in an economically devastated region. From the 1870s, however, African and their progeny at the grassroots had their own ideas and they pushed for reparations through various politicized pension organizations. Among them, the National Ex-Slave Mutual Relief, Bounty and Pension Association (MRB&PA) stands out. Based in Nashville, the MRB&PA was led Isaiah Dickerson, an educator and minister, and Callie House, a widow, mother of five, and formerly enslaved. The MRB&PA sought to petition Congress to compensate the formerly enslaved and provide for mutual aid and burial expenses. Sophisticated in their organization and lobbying tactics, the organization proposed a pension payment scale based on the age of beneficiaries, that is, people seventy and older would receive an initial payment of \$500 and \$15 per month until death, based on the Civil War pension scale for soldiers and similar to Belinda's reckoning.

As the movement and its membership grew, Dickerson and House came under intense U.S. government surveillance. Specifically, the Bureau of Pensions, the Post Office Department, and the Department of Justice worked aggressively to undermine the movement. The commissioner of the Bureau of Pensions accused organizers of arousing false hopes for "reparation for historical wrongs... and distrust of the dominant race and of the Government." Hindered by legal suits and false investigations by federal agencies, the movement was still able to get a pension bill to Congress. The bill received little attention and was filed under "indefinite postponement." Dickerson died in 1909, and House became leader of the movement. In 1915, House helped with the *Johnson v. MacAdoo* case, in which plaintiff Cornelius Jones filed a class-action lawsuit against the U.S. Department of Treasury to recover \$68 million for the emancipated. The DC Court of Appeals claimed government immunity and the Supreme Court upheld the decision, while persistent charges of mail fraud sent House to jail. Marcus Garvey arrived in Harlem in 1916 and the fate of his movement, too, would be sealed by the Post Office and other federal agencies. House died in 1928, and the momentum for the movement perished with her.

In 1963, Queen Mother Moore organized the Reparations Committee of Descendants of US Slaves. She gathered over one million signatures and presented them to President Kennedy. A year later, Malcolm X visited African countries, met with heads of state, and even attended the second Organization of African Unity meeting. On this trip, he tried to convince African leaders to support a case, inclusive of reparations, against the United States at the UN's International Court of Justice in The Hague, on behalf of peoples of African ancestry in the United



States. In fear of the United States, no leader supported Malcolm's initiative. By 1969, a member of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee and Black Panther Party, James Forman, made yet another call for reparations. For Forman, compensation for reparations amounted to half a billion dollars—later raised to \$3 billion—which would be used toward establishing a "Southern land bank," "publishing and printing industries," "audio-visual networks," "research skill centers," an effort to "organize welfare workers," and creating a "National Black Labor Strike and Defense Fund." Forman's *Black Manifesto* was read to a stunned congregation at Riverside Church in New York, but Black Nationalist organizations such as the Republic of New Afrika, which made similar calls for reparations, opposed the manifesto because it targeted churches and synagogues rather than the federal government. The manifesto's demands never materialized, though churches did fund a few proposed projects.

Over the next four decades, the discourse and efforts concerning reparations varied in tactics, approach, and outcome. In 1973, Yale law professor Boris Bittker argued for reparations based on a post-slavery caste system and payments to individuals; this remedy for injustice operated on a "restitution principle," whereby a court could order the defendant to give up their gains to the claimant, but this presupposed the federal government would agree to allow itself to be sued. For Bittker, the focus for reparations should be confined to a period between the late-nineteenth to the twentieth centuries. In the 1990s, the well-known *Cato v. United States* case sought damages for slavery, Jim Crow laws, and an apology. The district court ruled, "As the United States has not waived its sovereign immunity with respect to any of Cato's theories of relief that might fall within the Federal Tort Claims Act or any other source that we can identify, and under well-established principles Cato lacks standing to pursue claims in court arising out of the government's failure to do right as she sees it, we conclude that the district court did not abuse its discretion in dismissing both complaints with prejudice." The district court suggested Cato might seek remedy through the legislative process, but when Congressman John Conyers introduced a 1993 bill to study the effects of slavery, rather than ask for reparations, the bill failed in committee.

At the start of the new millennium, Randall Robinson argued, "The question of reparations is critical to finding a solution to our race problems." For Robinson, reparations are a medium for intra-race problem solving, which he sees as "not merely technical in nature." A collective demand for restitution, he continues, is part of healing and "forgiving of ourselves" as "history's orphans." Wary of reparations as financial restitution, Robinson concluded, "Only in the case of black people have the claims, the claimants, the crime, the law, the precedents, the awful contemporary social consequences all been roundly ignored." Also, in the early 2000s, Robinson, Harvard law professor Charles Olgetree, and Adjoa Aiyetoro, lawyer for the National Coalition of Blacks for Reparations in America, joined forces as co-chairs of the Reparations Coordinating Committee. The committee's work, beginning with the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921 and the reparations cases brought on its survivors' behalf, continues with no concrete results except a plague and memorial. More recently, Ta-Nehisi Coates, like Bittker, has focused his case for reparations on "actual living African Americans" rather than enslaved Africans and their progeny. Like Congressman Conyers, he advocates studying slavery and its legacy to determine whether reparations are feasible—"some sort of official document tallying up the specific costs for some three centuries of injury" so as to "argue for a plan for payment."



If movies and television series are any indication, racialized chattel enslavement is increasingly popular as visual consumption—the films *12 Years a Slave* grossed over \$187 million and *Django Unchained* \$163 million worldwide. As such movies and mini-series (e.g., *Freedom Run*, *Underground*, and a remake of Alex Haley’s *Roots*) continue to profit the heirs of pillage and plunder, might there be an opportunity to transform reparations from feasibility to reality, from an overly researched topic to a revolution in consciousness and decisive action? Recent court cases for African American reparations rest on moral and legal arguments for “unjust enrichment,” but these cases and their proponents have yet to make clear their ultimate goals. Is an apology, a payoff (whether in a lump sum or installments), or race relations the only or most effective ways to frame reparations? What forms would, or should reparations take? What would recipients do if they received reparations? Who would be eligible for reparations? Which slavery or slaveries and which African diaspora could qualify? What kind or set of evidences would be drawn together to buttress the case for whatever kind of reparation is sought? And is it sensible to pursue and expect redress in the highest courts of the nations that would be on trial? Does the 1988 Civil Liberties Act, used by Ronald Reagan compensate over 100,000 people of Japanese descent held in World War II internment camps, provide any lessons for present reparations seekers? These are neither idle nor academic questions, and they are not restricted to the United States.

In parts of Africa, the call for reparations has gained traction. In the Caribbean, the president of Antigua has called for reparations from the United States, while Jamaica has recently revived its reparations commission to seek compensation or a formal apology from Britain “to heal old wounds.” This same commission is charged with developing a “financial estimate for reparations,” which is viewed as “critical to coming to terms with the lasting legacy of slavery.” Ironically, the kind of arithmetic used to transform captive Africans into kinless commodities a few centuries ago is being evoked to once more reassign monetary value to those departed souls so that some undefined group(s) can get their just enrichment in the present. It is difficult to fathom how any apology can “heal old wounds” or how the presence or absence of financial reparations could bring one “to terms with the legacy of slavery.”

In a fascinating study by Nathan Nunn and Leonard Wantchekon, the two economists argue that contemporary individuals whose ancestors were brought into Atlantic and Indian Ocean slaving show low levels of trust in their neighbors, relatives, cultural groups, and local government on account of the “slave trade,” suggesting global slaving premised on African bodies and skills disrupted not only households but also cultural norms, core beliefs, and values. The resultant “culture of mistrust” and “400 years of insecurity” lay at the feet of any attempt to organize and have sustainable efforts—in and outside of organizations—for the outstanding remedy which the African world awaits.



PERSPECTIVE: DR. MJIBA FREHIWOT

Organization Decides Everything!!! This is the rallying call for many organizations around the world, particularly in the African World. But what does it mean, and for whom is it relevant? Can one liberate themselves without organization? In my opinion, this is an unequivocal no!! In recent times, the fight for reparations has been led at least in the U.S. by NCOBRA, an organization.

I am a member of the All-African People's Revolutionary Party and have been for the last twenty-three years. This relationship has not only guided my very identity construction but my life trajectory. My ideological understanding and clarity have been shaped not only by reading Kwame Nkrumah, Sekou Toure, W.E.B. Du Bois and Assata Shakur in work-study but by my participation in organizing to change the political milieu.

An organization is simply a group of people who come together for a shared purpose or objective. An organization can be a family, political organization, NGO, political party and can be both positive and negative in its simplest form.

Organizations in one form or another have been part of the history of resistance against slavery, colonialism, and neo-colonialism, particularly concerning African descent people. Organizations such as the Black Panther Party, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, Convention People's Party, Azanian Peoples Organization (AZAPO), United Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), West African Student Union, and many more organizations have fought for freedom, liberation, against police violence, for reparations and much more.

Many of these organizations, such as the Black Panther Party, have set the stage for generations of activists and Pan-Africanists to challenge the system of oppression. Unfortunately, some African people have used organizations to advance their personal or professional careers. Even more unfortunate, in recent history, organizations have been breeding ground for predatory behavior. Those individuals who engage in this counterproductive behavior are products of a capitalist system that promotes rampant individualism. This fact does not in any way absolve them of the responsibility for their actions. Finally, some individuals profess that they do not want to be in organizations because of internal contradictions.

In some cases, there are serious problems that must be resolved. In other cases, Africans are not in organizations because they do not want to be held accountable to anyone or anything. There are plenty of individuals who claim to be Pan-Africanist but use the work of Pan-African organizations to promote their fame and fortune.

Organizations like humans are flawed and have structures that are influenced by the society in which they are in and the ideology dictated by the ruling class. Organizations will develop and grow and become influential for a period and will die a natural death. What is important is that organizations are needed to organize the people against their oppressors. Organizations have served for hundreds of years as a force to fight for the people against better-organized governments and groups. Organizations like the Black Panther Party provided free lunch, free education, free health care, and self-defence to the community. Organizations like *Out of the South*



African Students' Organization (SASO), which later became the Black Consciousness Movement, led the South African Anti-Apartheid Movement while the ANC and PAC were banned (Hadfield, 2019).

The call for reparations should not be a call for no-organization but should be called for by organizations with a history of struggle. As we know, reparations should not be based on a plan to individually enrich African people in the United States to become capitalists. Instead, it should be built on a plan to free Africa and African people from imperialism's bondage. I am not opposed to reparations that impact the individual lives of African descendants in America. In a Brookings report, Ray and Perry suggest that reparations equate to personal payments, housing support, college tuition at 4- or 2-year colleges, small business loans. They also offer that one must prove that they are a descent or an enslaved African from the USA.

This plan is not necessarily a bad plan in that it will support a few African/Black/African American people, but will it drastically transform the power dynamics? These demands are fundamental human rights—although they have been denied to Black/African people. Why are we not calling for a robust program that transfers the seat of power to Black/African people?

If we wanted reparations, we should be demanding the following: 1. Support our Indigenous Sisters and Brothers to be reinstated as the rightful owners of this land called America; 2. Immediate liquidation of all companies contributed to and was enriched by slavery and a direct reinvestment into the Black/African community; 3. Compensation to African countries for the rape, murder, and pillage of their people. 4. Loan forgiveness for all international finance loans to countries that are majority African and 5. Refunding African countries and African majority countries for their raw resources now and in the past. Buying them at market value and not below market value to make a considerable profit is the start of this refund. The plan would fundamentally shift the global power dynamics with Global North countries being cash strapped and poor, and Global South countries would be resource-rich and economically stable.

The question is not reparations or organization. The problem is how we use organizations to push for reparations that benefit African people. African people deserve reparations, but the question is how we ensure that the reparations are not just a reform tactic to appease the grumbling masses. But real revolutionary change to transform the present and future of the African nation.



PERSPECTIVE: DR. TODD STEVEN BURROUGHS

All I know about organizations is what I learned in the almost-late 20th century from “legacy” Black media, particularly Black newspapers. At 17, within the midst of the height of the analog, mass society-mass media era, I learned in the 1985 news columns of *The New Jersey Afro-American* and *The New York Amsterdam News* (strange, new organizations to me then but, in reality, papers that had been around for an average of 50 years by then), that Black Americans had political organizations that fought for Black people both in America and in a place I had recently become obsessed with—the Republic of South Africa (formerly the USA, the Union of South Africa). In those papers’ Op-Ed pages, I learned about organizations through their respective, representative columns—“To Be Equal” was the National Urban League’s John E. Jacob, “Civil Rights Journal” was Benjamin F. Chavis, Jr. of the United Church of Christ’s Commission of Racial Justice, “Child Watch” was Marian Wright Edelman’s Children’s Defense Fund. And they all met—united!—on the same Op-Ed pages!

Two years later, I would be told about a New York radio station that would serve as a major educating force—1190 WLIB-AM. That was a great organization to me because it introduced me to [radio hosts like no one I had heard before](#) and New York moderate and radical Black organizations over the air—the New York Chapter of the NAACP, the United African Movement, [the Patrice Lumumba Coalition](#), The December 12th Movement, CEMOTAP (the Committee to Eliminate Media Offensive to African People), N’COBRA (a group that demanded something I had never heard of called “reparations”) and a mysterious group called Ausar Auset. (This news-talk radio station was a little different than the “soul” radio station I had grown up with because my mother had kept it locked at 1430 WNJR-AM, our local Black radio. In-between those 1970s songs, I was hearing on WJNR Black news, local and [national](#), without identifying it as such or understanding or being told about its significance.)

All of this had impact as the Reagan era forced me to compare USAs. By the time I was 19, I had dumped my comicbooks and began to buy books about both Mandelas. I had begun to pay more attention to those big, brown, hardcover *Ebony* books my mother had for almost my entire life, the magazine’s *Pictorial History of Black America*, a book series led by [Lerone Bennett, Jr.](#) I had become a regular reader of a wild, Black radical-ish weekly newspaper called *The City Sun* and a devoted viewer of New York’s five local and national Black public-affairs programs—WNBC’s nationally syndicated *Essence: The Television Program*, PBS’ *Tony Brown’s Journal*, WNBC-TV’s *Positively Black*, WNYW-TV’s *The McCreary Report* and WABC-TV’s *Like It Is*. I had found my organization, my own private HBCU, my continuum, my family crest and my intellectual home—Black mass media. My *New Jersey Afro-American* press pass was my membership ID card and my organizational ID in the continuum of the 20th century. Ten years from my first published newspaper story—a massive 1985 anti-apartheid rally in Newark, on the front page of *The New Jersey Afro*—I would become a contributor to those same *Washington Afro* Op-Ed pages, side-by-side with those organizational leaders I had read.

I say the above because I think it’s time to retire the tired canard that we as African people in America are not organized. Yes, we don’t have armies, armament factories or our own political parties; we cannot reward our friends or punish our enemies. All of that is true. But we have hundreds of organizations, from churches to civic



clubs. We have demonstrated a determination that has resulted, on radical days and not-so-radical days, in tension, conflict and resolution, often in our eventual favor.

Bennett, from his underrated classic *The Shaping of Black America*, writes something I often cite as he talks about the period between 1787 and 1837, our unity formation. During these years, he explained in a paragraph I have used many times, with the majority of African-Americans still enslaved, Black Americans struggled to build their own institutions to escape the virulent racism they lived with each day. The North's free Blacks and escaped slaves had developed several institutions. Churches, schools and clubs were the most common. The need to know each other and to gather meant more than social advancement; it meant survival. Blacks were not allowed to mix with whites in any of those institutions, so they had to build their own. Separated from Africa and by America, they began to think of themselves "as a common people with common aspirations and a common enemy."¹

Because of white supremacy, an open and discussed issue among all Americans in 2020, there are clear consistencies. What I failed to understand then but have more a grasp on now is the [protracted, almost-silent nature](#) of our struggle for justice. The lack of noise may mean tepidness or too much acceptance of fate as dictated to by America, but it could also mean iron-clad resolve against the settler state. A sense of elongated continuity, if not complete permanence. Thirty-five years after that anti-apartheid rally in Newark, *The Afro-American* no longer exists in New Jersey, but it still publishes in Baltimore and Washington. *The New York Amsterdam News* is still in Harlem. Both Black newspapers still publish news stories and Op-Eds about what we are collectively doing and how we are doing it. [WLIB](#) and sister station WBLS still exist. The legacy groups that remain—the National NAACP being the most prominent example—are still holding the same points of cultural and intellectual reference as they have been all the 52 years I've been alive. We join an established continuity that suits us only when it's time, only when we feel the need, or we choose a new/old strand to coalesce under. (For example, Black Twitter's almost-complete replacement of Black news-talk radio for those under 40, and self-broadcasting on YouTube and now Zoom replacing most legacy Black public-affairs television programming.) I see our organization (verb) and our organizations (nouns) simultaneously through linearly and non-linearly prisms. Our spaces seem eternal, and always welcome, in that way.

As far as the topic I learned about from Black media—reparations—is concerned, between the first and second drafts of this essay I watched [Marc Lamont Hill's book event for his recent Haymarket release, *We Still Here*](#). He was joined by activist-scholar Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor and activist Phillip Agnew. I had to look up Agnew, but I had seen Taylor on *Democracy Now!* and definitely I knew who Marc Lamont Hill was: [he had written a book with my biographical subject, Mumia Abu-Jamal](#), and almost had his neck chopped off by America for [standing up strongly a couple years back at the United Nations for the Palestinian people](#).

I don't remember whether it was Hill or Agnew who said it, but one pointed out that the impossible suddenly becomes possible when the security and survival of the state is at stake. So, said the speaker, the United States

¹ Lerone Bennett Jr., *The Shaping of Black America*, rev. ed. (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), 116.



government has been against reparations for Blacks, claiming it is a complex discussion whenever we have brought it up, but it giving at least a third of all Americans \$1,200 (and local governments stopping evictions) was executed immediately, completely free of complexity. One of the issues of the “Defund the Police” movement is de-incarceration—emptying the jails of nonviolent felons. Impossible, said the speaker, until COVID made it risky for prison officials to have so many prisoners.

So what makes the two topics mind-meld? That all we must do is move in a serious direction and we can advance. With a HBCU grad/AKA in the Oval Office, there is a new buffer that will result in new-ish, Obama-echoed complacency. But there are so many things that we have seen this year, good and bad, that we can’t unsee. And because we have historically mastered both revolutionary study and organic act (although not by the same groups of people, the *We Still Here* speakers pointed out), we don’t have to spend so much time educating and socializing ourselves through media forums, mass-media-legacy or de-massified. We all see what is now visible, on the horizon, if we chose to look up and to the left.



TOWN HALL AND RESOURCES

Town Hall

November 25, 2020 at 6 pm: <https://www.crowdcast.io/e/political-organization-v/1>

Resources

Books and Articles

Badat, Saleem. *Black Man, You Are on Your Own* (Steve Biko Foundation, 2009)

Beckles, Hilary. *Britain's Black Debt: Reparations for Slavery and Native Genocide* (University of West Indies Press, 2013)

Bennett, Jr., Lerone. *The Shaping of Black America* (Penguin Books, 1993)

Berry, Mary Frances. *My Face Is Black Is True: Callie House and the Struggle for Ex-Slave Reparations* (Vintage Books, 2009)

Biko, Steve. *I Write What I Like* (Ravan Press, 1996)

Blackmon, Douglas A. *Slavery by Another Name: The Re-Enslavement of Black Americans from the Civil War to World War Two* (Doubleday, 2008)

Coates, Ta-Nehisi, "The Case for Considering Reparations," *The Atlantic*, 27 January 2016.

Diakite, Dianne M. "'Matricentric' Foundations of Africana Women's Religious Practices of Peacebuilding, Sustainability and Social Change," *Bulletin of Ecumenical Theology* 25 (2013): 61-79.

Hadfield, Leslie Anne. *Liberation and Development: Black Consciousness Community Programs in South Africa* (Michigan State University Press, 2016)

Howard-Hassmann, Rhoda E. and Anthony P. Lombardo, *Reparations to Africa* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008)

Miller, Eric J., "Reconceiving Reparations: Multiple Strategies in the Reparations Debate," *Boston College Third World Law Journal* 24 (2004): 45-79.

Miller, Jon and Rahul Kumar, eds., *Reparations: Interdisciplinary Inquiries* (Oxford University Press, 2007)

Muhammad, Khalil Gibran. *The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime, and the Making of Modern Urban America* (Harvard University Press, 2010)



Nunn, Nathan and Leonard Wantchekon, "The Slave Trade and the Origins of Mistrust in Africa," *American Economic Review* 101, no. 7 (2011): 3249–52.

Oyewumi, Oyeronke, *African Women and Feminism: Reflecting on the Politics of Sisterhood* (Africa World Press, 2003)

Potorti, M. "Feeding the Revolution": the Black Panther Party, Hunger, and Community Survival," *Journal of African American Studies* 21, no. 10 (2017): 85-110.

Robinson, Randall. *The Debt: What America Owes to Blacks* (Plume, 2001)

----. *The Reckoning: What Blacks Owe to Each Other* (Penguin, 2002)

Ogletree, Charles J., "Repairing the Past: New Efforts in the Reparations Debate in America," *Harvard Civil Rights-Civil Liberties Law Review* 38 (2003): 279–320.

Worger, William H. "Convict Labour, Industrialists and the State in the US South and South Africa, 1870-1930." *Journal of Southern African Studies* 30, no. 1 (2004): 63–86.

Web

<https://www.brookings.edu/policy2020/bigideas/why-we-need-reparations-for-black-americans/>

<https://www.ncobraonline.org/>

<https://www.sahistory.org.za/article/azanian-peoples-organization-azapo>



APPENDIX

An organization might begin by asking itself the following:

1. Is mothering happening within our organization?
2. If not, why not? What might we be losing without it?
3. If yes, then who is doing the “mothering” within this group?
4. What personal conditions/circumstances might be limiting the capacity of each of our members to do the work that they’ve committed to doing in this organization?
5. How do we address those needs/limitations? How might we offer support to these members in these ways?
6. How does this organization facilitate learning, and how is information/knowledge imparted within the group?
7. How do we ensure smooth, transparent and fair transitions in leadership?
8. How do we resolve interpersonal conflict within the organization?
9. How does this organization facilitate constructive criticism (internally) and by what process does that translate into meaningful change?
10. Where is the joy within this organization, and how to we foster more of it?