



BLACKLASH

The Africana Collective

REPORT NO. 8

Reparations: Then & Now, Here & There



INTRODUCTION

In some quarters, there are pronouncements of a “global movement for reparations.” Recent reporting catalog Japanese internment camps during World War II and U.S. government payment for 120,000 people, Colombia’s allotment of \$23 billion to victims of five decades of murder and rape by rebel paramilitary groups, and South Africa’s payment of \$85 million or \$3,900 per victims of apartheid crimes, among others. While those in the United States were paid with an apology, Colombia’s and South Africa’s is still ongoing. We can add the governments of Côte d’Ivoire, Peru, and Philippines (under Ferdinand Marcos’s dictatorship) to the list of those waiting for their checks. Still unsettled is the reparations case of Africans killed and imprisoned in colonial Kenya in the U.K. high courts, while Germany has given Israel \$7 billion and another \$89 billion in reparations to individual Jewish survivors. France’s reparations, or returned-reparations to Haiti, remains in the realm of debate. The Blacklash collective will consider these and more as we, too, debate reparations, then and now, here and there.

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. 8, we consider the topical issues surrounding debates about reparations. Join us for the virtual town hall on Wednesday, February 17, 2021, at 6 pm EST/10 pm GMT.



PERSPECTIVE: DR. IYELLI ICHILE

For this discussion which, unlike our sixth report, will be focused solely on reparations—and not the question of organizing—I am going to indulge in a bit of self-critique, and perhaps also highlight the utility of a concept I’ve been unpacking for a while.

In my sixth BTAC report, I suggested that if Black people were given reparations, two things would likely (unfortunately) occur: 1) Black people would spend the money in ways that enrich the white world that has just paid them; and 2) that receiving reparations would only serve to deepen their overall investment in America and the rest of the West. In my usual search for the roles played by Black women in the reparations movement (and in all others), I learned more about the work of two women: Callie House and Queen Mother Moore. Looking further into the approach each woman took to the struggle for reparations caused me to reconsider my earlier assertions, and think more seriously about the *how* of reparations, than I had ever done.

Mary Frances Berry’s vital monograph *My Face Is Black Is True* (2006) tells the story of Callie House, a Tennessee-born washerwoman who became one of the earliest and most influential voices of the reparations movement, at the turn of the 20th century. Callie House’s organization, the National Ex-Slave Mutual Relief, Bounty and Pension Association, worked aggressively to get federal pensions for formerly enslaved people, many of whom were still living, at the close of the 19th century. She and her colleagues saw the struggles with disease, poverty and dislocation. They hoped that a federally granted pension could be used to support the “mutual aid, medical insurance, and burial assistance” work, which the Association had already begun. The aging freed people and their direct descendants knew they were owed a great debt for their labor. Before being targeted, persecuted and eventually incarcerated by the combined efforts of the U.S. Pension Bureau and the U.S. Postal Office, and despite being disparaged and discredited by the Black elite, Callie House and the Association had reached about 600,000 members.

What this woman’s work recalls is the fact that reparations was never NOT a part of the Black working class agenda. It levels a serious indictment at the Black middle and upper classes for their lack of initial support for this movement—an indictment which might still be applicable today. It draws our attention to the existence of clear-cut roll-out plans for reparations, dating back over 100 years. It could be argued that had the federal government paid pensions to those formerly enslaved families in the early 1900s, when many were still around, the critical “who should get paid” question would have been more easily answered, and perhaps less reparations would be owed now. As many have already stated, the debt continues to grow. Furthermore, we need to shine a necessary light on the organizational strength, political awareness and social cohesiveness of Black people in the South.

The work of Queen Mother Audley Moore and Dara Abubakari, both from Louisiana, do this as well. These two women were heavily influenced by the Garvey movement, and by communism. Through the Universal Association of Ethiopian Women, they worked for everything from welfare rights to culturally-focused education. They fought to protect Black women from rape and Black men from lynching.



By the early 1960s, they came to see reparations as how people of African descent could acquire a piece of sovereign land, separate from “Euro-America” and from there, struggle for pan-African liberation. Moore submitted a petition to the U.N. in 1957, asking that people of African descent wanting to repatriate to Africa should be given the means to do so, and those who chose to stay in the U.S. should be given land and 200 billion dollars. Land-as-reparations is something which had been on the table since before the Civil War, and 100 years later, these women continued to envision land as the core reparatory item. They mentored and supported other organizations whose goals aligned with this vision, including the Republic of New Africa and the Revolutionary Action Movement.

It must also be noted that while some of their goals reflected a desire to establish a sovereign African territory in North America, they maintained direct connections with anti-colonial movements in Africa, and posited the embracing of African identity and consciousness as key to liberation for all of us, everywhere. Audley Moore underwent a formal enstooling as a Queen Mother in Ghana, although as she said, she was a ‘queen mother’ even before that. Dara Abubakari (formerly Virginia Collins) was also given the title Queen Mother.

The attention all these women paid to the plight of working women, families, sustainability, resource management and collectivism in their approach to reparations is a solid example of *motherhood* in practice. They were clear that reparations would not be spent on individual excess, but on communal advancement through land acquisition and mutual aid—even to the point of full separation from white America and the rest of the West. My goal is to explore the ongoing relevance (applicability) of their work further, and to think about the ways in which today’s reparations movement might benefit from a similar process.



PERSPECTIVE: DR. JARED BALL

My visceral and ultimately negative initial reaction to discussions of reparations is not a response to a question of “deserve,” it is that the call itself is such a painful compromise. Such claims are an appeal to a victorious enemy, they are not the spoils of war, rather, they are for what the spoiled are made to appeal. And in the U.S. those appeals are even more embarrassing as they are merely requests for future study, requests that for many represent the extent of their political fantasies, and activist effort. Worse still, the energy put into arguing for reparations supports the persistence of the very exploitative processes which have resulted in the very need for reparative justice in the first place.

First, reparations become a limiting framework in which justice is conceived of as coming almost exclusively from existing legal and power structures. Secondly, having wedded themselves intellectually to those limitations, ample room is made for neoliberal (neocolonial) usurpations and conservative impositions. Building admittedly from my initial biases I refer to two interviews I have conducted recently on the subject. As much as African (Black) people in the U.S. base their own advocacy on the experiences of others the discussions with Drs. Dr. [Ana Lucia Araujo](#) and [Norman Finkelstein](#), whose focus is the African, Indigenous and Jewish diasporas respectfully, seem more than relevant.

Though her work, and to a lesser extent our discussion, is far more expansive I am interested here in a segment of our exchange focused on the shortcomings of reparations (all?) efforts which are wedded exclusively to legal structures. Araujo was quick to point out, for example, that Indigenous people have had in place for years laws which protect their rights to lands previously stolen during colonization. However, under the current right-wing administration of Bolsonaro these laws are meaningless and go unenforced. Similarly, as she points out, existing laws do not protect the increasing numbers of Black Brazilians killed every year. Existing legislation is insufficient beyond their symbolic or potentially mollifying effect on those seeking justice. And who more than the U.S., those Malcolm X had said years ago have perfected the “science of image-making,” to make ignoble use of symbol?

For his part, when I asked Dr. Finkelstein for his assessment of comparisons made by some between Black calls for reparations and those historically of Jews, he could not have been clearer: “don’t bother with it.” After watching his own family, which was only those in his immediate 5-person household given that both his parents were the only in their respective families to have survived the Nazis, receive next to nothing while an elite class of Jews siphoned off all the money, Finkelstein concluded by warning that relative to Black America “... only the Al Sharptons will get paid.”

In either case, that of Araujo and Finkelstein, the approach comports with the revolutionary political struggles of individuals like Dr. King, Malcolm X, or the Black Panther Party. Safiya Bukhari, Claudia Jones before her, and Assata Shakur still, all represent wings of the Black liberation struggle which eschewed such reparations frameworks as being insufficient to the project of freedom. These women, men, and organizations represent still the extra-legal potential threat lying dormant or managed in its appearance by waves of neoliberal propaganda and punditry. Radical stylings in calls for reparations are just that, symbolic but largely empty claims



which give many conservative actors their chance for revolutionary theatrical acclaim. But in the end it remains performance.

Our repair can only come from the assumption of political power and the ability to define society, its socio-economic structures, and outcomes. Those often most notable in making popular calls for reparations are themselves making claims for increased participation among Black people in the rapacious accumulative processes of the United States. Their claims for “a check” or some other form of reparative justice often sound bold but are themselves, as Araujo alludes, encouraged by state power as an “illusion” which is never to be achieved. The distraction from extra-legal framing of movement-building is complete.

So-called advances in Black liberation struggles, and to Araujo’s point, others around the world, can measure their success by their willingness to move beyond [imposed legal structures](#) which themselves only exist to ease the process of colonial conquest. The attendant propaganda encouraging uninspired returns to neoliberalism is indeed powerful but even it struggles to contain the anger a Covid crisis has inspired. And this is where we must challenge the limited/limiting logic of reparations narratives and move toward what it would take to make such discussions moot; political power.

Arguments over reparations histories, justifications, qualifications, or sums are inferior to debates over formations, campaigns, tactics, or roles to be taken in organizations, and movements targeting political power. We deserve more than reparations. We deserve an entire civilizational break from the processes which produces the need for reparations in the first place.



PERSPECTIVE: DR. KWASI KONADU

rep·a·ra·tion / repə' rāSH(ə)n / noun:

1. *the making of amends for a wrong one has done, by paying money to or otherwise helping those who have been wronged.*
2. *the compensation for war damage paid by a defeated state.*

ARCHAIC. *the action of repairing something.*

In BTAC Report 6, I made the case not *for* nor *against* reparations, but for a grasp of reparations—as historicized concept and practice, as individual compensation, and as an organizing strategy. Here, I want to reaffirm my position, which remains unchanged, and suggest there's no way to have sensible discussion about reparations unless we put all its meanings on the table and then decide which ones support broader-than-the-individual strategies in the African world.

In a time when every human effort constitutes a “movement,” with self-appointed leaders and spokespersons, with or without organizational structures, reparations because of its iterations lacks cohesion and thus cannot be a movement. There is no shared aim or strategy. For the pay-check expectants, what happens then the day after getting the (unlikely) compensation? What individual desires should be tempered to feed collectivist needs, and how will those needs receive remedy? This monetary approach to reparations, if we can call it an approach, justifies itself as a solution, but the layered predicaments of “black” life in white societies is no mathematical equation solved with a number-crunching solution. For those who want an apology, and are satisfied with that alone, then the ends justify the means, for this, too, is a dead-end approach. For the justice-seekers, what does the justice they seek look like and justice (whatever this means) for whom and from whom? They cannot bring a collectivist suit, representing their angst and aims, against the U.S. government—or any government—and expect to win in *their* courts. For the law-making sponsors of reparations, there have been decades of bills introduced in Congress to *study* reparations, not to *grant* it, and this approach continues elected officials asking for or creating reparations task forces and commissions to study “the effects of slavery and create recommendations for reparations.” And, finally, for the this-will-save-democracy and bring-racial-reckoning-to-a-close proponents, nothing in nor through reparations will accomplish either, except reconfigure U.S. empire as it marches on with less-than-disgruntle “descendants of slaves” (pun intended!).



PERSPECTIVE: DR. MJIBA FREHIWOT*

*Dr. Frehiwot will return with her contributions in the next report.

PERSPECTIVE: DR. TODD STEVEN BURROUGHS

My favorite reparations story is the one not normally associated with reparations—the shadow of Big Walter in Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun*. That play is about the Negro past, the Black present and the African future. Hansberry hit the exact note in 1959, seeing what was, is and coming. Big Walter’s \$10,000 life insurance policy was lost by the son, and the father, only an unseen ghost floating over the play, can do nothing until he is summoned; the money is lost—as invisible as Big Walter—but the symbolic nature of it/he remains; it/he hangs in the air until it/he is utilized as a path to resistance to white hegemony. Walter Lee’s manhood, finally, comes from naming his Ancestor out loud and openly acknowledging the blood and sweat attached to that money: “We have decided to move into our house because my father—my father—*he earned it for us brick by brick*. We don’t want to make no trouble for nobody or fight no causes, and we will try to be good neighbors. And that’s all we got to say about that. We don’t want your money” (Act III).

Now summoned, the Ancestor strengthens the son, who finally takes his place as (co-)head of the Afrikan family. The family turns down the white, middle-class suburban bribe that would keep it in ghetto because the payment is representative of the extensive Western resources based on stolen land, people and minerals, and how the West used all of it to establish different types of apartheid around the world. The *motion* produced by the appearance and promise of the \$10,000—the earned reward of the Ancestor for accepting his Negro role and putting up with the humiliation of Jim Crow until death as the price of that transforming ticket—stops the family’s Jim-Crowed stagnation: the whole play is their eventual push forward as a tested unit, on one accord, into the Black American future, regardless of the personal consequences. The no-longer-accessible money nonetheless spurs the Negro family into Blackness, [and the pressing-for-freedom daughter Beneatha and the stifled Walter Lee forecast the Pan-African future that still awaits](#). With Hansberry as my theoretical framework, I think about what reparations would/could do today, since I look at the current example of [how COVID reparations for everyone](#) late last year at least kept many afloat, if not propelled anyone forward.



PERSPECTIVE: DR. QUITO SWAN

The global implications of reparations for the African world was critically discussed at Durban, South Africa's 2001 United Nations World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance (WCAR). WCAD's African and African Descendants Caucus, comprised of NGOs from across the Africa, Europe, and the Americas, called for the recognition that: the Slave Trade, Slavery and Colonialism were crimes against humanity; that reparations for Africans and African Descendants were essential to ending inequalities derived from the Slave Trade, Slavery and Colonialism. The Caucus also called for the adoption of public policies that specifically corrected institutionalized racism with emphasis on education, health care and environmental racism; addressed African and African Descendant Women; and recognized the intersection of race, gender, and sexual orientation.

Representing the Pan-African Movement at the Caucus, Bermuda's Pauulu Kamarakafego argued that reparations should be given to communities of African descent in the form of programs, projects and measures for sustainable self-reliance and not simply hard currency. Examples of such programs included the eradication of debt for "developing" countries, a comprehensive satellite driven communications network to be implemented in Africa, infrastructure of roads and mass transit systems, health, education, housing systems, an efficient renewable energy system based on solar, wind, biomass, mini-hydro, and thermowave energies, systems of water and sanitation, and a development bank to regionally serve Africa. Mechanisms needed to be implemented to deal with natural disasters such as hurricanes, earthquakes, floods and droughts, and the creation and/or development of universities, and technology banks. The lengths of these programs were to be for the amount of time that African descended persons were enslaved and colonized. Compensation for these African communities needed to come from all European countries who participated in the Atlantic Slave Trade, all members states and institutions that participated in the Berlin conference of 1884-1885, all religious institutions that "aided and abetted the enslavement and colonization" of the African world, all financial institutions that funded slavery and the trade, the Australian government and settlement companies who engaged in blackbirding and the genocide on the indigenous persons of Oceania, and all present states, institutions, and individuals who benefited from the enslavement, (neo) colonialism of Africans and African descended persons.



TOWN HALL AND RESOURCES

Town Hall

February 17, 2021 at 6 pm: <https://www.crowdcast.io/e/reparations-then-now->

Resources

Books and Articles

Berry, Mary Frances. *My Face Is Black Is True: Callie House and the Struggle for Ex-Slave Reparations*. Vintage: New York, 2006.

Farmer, Ashley. "Mothers of Pan-Africanism: Audley Moore and Dara Abubakari," *Women, Gender, and Families of Color* 4, no. 2 (2016): 274–295.

Hansberry, Lorraine. *A Raisin in the Sun: A Drama in Three Acts*. New York: Random House, 1959.

Web

"Audley (Queen Mother) Moore Interview (1985)" | <https://youtu.be/AQHixAltclg>

"Marc Lamont Hill on Abolitionist Vision" | <https://youtu.be/tN5Q6PQjSyQ?t=326>