

What We Owe: An Investigation of the Current Cultural Moment's Impact on  
Securing Radical Reparations

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## Introduction

America owes an immense debt to African Americans that has only grown since our first reliance on Black bodies for slave labor. Through waves of resistance and social movements led by African Americans, from abolition to Civil Rights to Black Lives Matter, the complexity of this debt has been exposed to willfully ignorant, white-dominated institutions. The call for reparations, as compensation for the various physical, social, and financial violences perpetrated by white citizens and their government, has manifested in varying ways throughout all of these movements. Through legal and political channels, Black scholars have pushed for racial reconciliation and equalizing of disparities between races through implementation of reparations. Through individual court cases and proposed legislation, African Americans have fought to secure reparations in a way that was palatable for the particular socio-political context in which they were operating. Regardless of the language used, reparations are a central aspect of organizing, as activists repeatedly fight to link the past to the present in all of our collective memories.

During periods of racial conscience raising, as witnessed in the 60s and 90s, demands for justice become more readily articulated. I argue that George Floyd's death acted as a catalyst for calling out the racial hierarchy in America, providing a window in which activists could once again push reparations as a solution to potentially more receptive publics and government authority. The public discourse that arose from this cultural moment normalized terminology such as systemic racism, institutional racism, performative activism, intersectionality, and intergenerational trauma. This rhetoric has appeared in the work of Black radical scholars for decades as they sought to

encapsulate the complexity with which racism operates in this country, while also attempting to convince contemporary citizens why they continue to reap privileged benefits from their ancestors.

Through analysis of the current cultural moment, as well as reparations programs that pioneered innovative redress, I will assess whether the visions of Black scholars have come to fruition due to this social shift. In the following sections I first provide foundational texts by Black scholars on the history, justifications for and against, and models of reparations to highlight how nuanced of a solution it truly is. Next, I utilize their frameworks to engage with two reparations programs that show the diversity of issues reparations can be applied to, as well as the multitude of obstacles that remain. I aim to investigate whether these instances of reparations from 2019 and 2020 confirm the dawn of a new era for reparations as the leading policy against racial injustice or rather show the pitfalls of this method. Additionally, my hope is that through a critical assessment of these programs I can provide guidance as to how to continue securing reparations in a sustainable, ethical way as we move forward from the sensationalized, attention-grabbing stages of this cultural moment. In my final section I draw out the most important differences between the two programs, in what ways they are evidence of larger scale social change, and how they can be expanded upon to more closely align with Black scholarly works.

## **Literature Review**

### **What Constitutes Reparations for African Americans?**

Reparations, in the context of the diasporic African American experience in the United States, has been defined in a multitude of ways, manifesting in varying models

which converge in their theoretical assumption that reparations should eventually be implemented. The history of reparations as a vibrant social movement, with its fluctuations in defining reparations to suit specific political opportunities and national narratives surrounding race, is beyond the scope of this paper but can be found in the extensive work of Aiyetoro and Davis (2009). For the context of this research, recurring definitions of reparations that can be commonly located in different schools of thought remains the most critical for assessing the issuance of reparations moving forward.

Roy Brooks, in his foundational text *"Atonement and Forgiveness: a New Model for Black Reparations,"* defined reparations as "a moral obligation to apologize and to make that apology believable by doing something tangible" (2004). Due to the open-ended nature of this interpretation, reparations stemming from this definition include the likes of symbolic reparation through commemoration or memorialization (Brown 2013), state-sanctioned apology and subsequent forgiveness offered by victims and their descendents (Brooks 2004), and social solutions to nurture Black communities' self-empowerment (Miller 2004). Rather than redress as material compensation, scholars such as Brooks center reparations around invaluable, intangible notions of restoring "Black pride and dignity," alongside journeys to "honor ancestral legacy" (2004). Reparations under this scholarly tradition are thus enabled to approach the nuanced, micro-level consequences of systemic discrimination, with reparations addressing issues from housing inequity (Jennings 2011) to disproportionate police killings of Black individuals (Page 2019). Westley (2005) continues:

reparations include compensations such as return of sovereignty or political authority, group entitlements, and money or property transfers, or some

combination of these, due to the wrongdoing of the grantor. It is obvious, then, that the form reparations will take depends on, among other things, the particular demands of the victimized group and the nature of the wrong committed.

Inherent in this definition of reparations is that reparations act as an evolving concept, which is both liberating in its concept and frustrating when seeking a consensus on when, where, and how it should be tangibly practiced.

Other scholars locate the definition of reparations within the legal context and particularly rely on how it has been interpreted or evoked in political channels or court cases. This model is often referred to as the tort model (Brooks 2004). Due to the constraints of this method, scholars of this tradition identify specific “breaches of contract” between African Americans and the United States’ government, grounding the inception of reparations in “the promise of ‘a plot of not more than (40) forty acres of tillable ground’ issued by General William T. Sherman” after the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863 (Ogletree Jr. 2002). When guided by this definition, reparations are conceived of as monetary payment from whites to Blacks for the repercussions of slavery and Jim Crow on the development of intergenerational wealth for African American communities and institutions (Ogletree 2001; Verdun 1993; Robinson 2000; Gilford 2000; Munford 1996). Under this justification, reparations are defined by the language of precedent and civil suits regarding unpaid labor costs, victimhood, and individual rights to property and self-determination (Verdun 1993). An extension of this monetary logic is applied to reparations on behalf of the continent of Africa for the redistribution of wealth that occurred due to their significant population loss, and reparations as “a means of restoring justice to individuals whose descendents had

suffered several deprivations” (Munford 1996). Reparations of this nature take on meanings defined by the United Nations and international courts and therefore understand reparations as pursuit of restitution for crimes against humanity (Obuah 2016). Reparations within the international context are conceived of as “post-war payments” between nations, which provoke discussions of reparations to the African continent as a whole for colonialism and imperialism (Obuah 2016; Burkett 2007). Due to the fluidity of its interpretation, I will now discuss the various ends that reparations seek.

Reparations are offered as rectification for the contemporary social, political, and financial gaps that exist between Black Americans and other groups due to the systemic, state-sanctioned oppression of African Americans throughout this nation’s history. While reparations have an explicit emphasis on past wrong-doings as justification, the scholarly literature points to contemporary reverberations as further evidence and a starting point for considering solutions. The goals of reparation movements are nuanced and varied, ranging from desire to secure political autonomy to want of financial compensation. As Brooks (2004) articulates, the reparations movement seeks redress for stolen capital, which includes “financial capital (labor and property), human capital (education and skills), social capital (social esteem and empowerment), and basic capital (life, liberty, and human dignity).” James Forman and his “Black Manifesto,” is probably one of the most critical documents in the reparation movement, which exemplifies the diversity of demands and hopes expressed by Black citizens. The manifesto demanded \$500 million dollars to be used towards:

a land bank for those who had to leave their land because of racist pressure and those who wanted to establish cooperative farms; publishing and printing industries; cooperative investment in the Black community, jobs and an alternative to the White-dominated and controlled printing field, scientific and futuristic alternatives to racist propaganda and capital for establishment of cooperative Black businesses in the U.S and Africa (Flemming-Hunter 2020).

It is clear within this one example, that while money may be a commonly cited medium for reparations, it would be utilized for achieving many different ends in different sectors of society and politics.

Integral to the motivation behind securing reparations is the ideal of rehabilitating the African American population in America, both through material gain and restoration of spirit. Each understanding of reparations from issuance of apology to legal restitution has a primary aim of rehabilitating the Black community. As Obuah (2016) states:

more important than any monies to be received, more fundamental than any lands to be recovered, is the opportunity the Reparations campaign offers us for the rehabilitation of Black people, by Black people, for Black people, opportunities for the rehabilitation of our minds, our material condition, our collective reputation, our cultures, our memories, our self-respect, our religions, our political traditions and our family institutions; but, first and foremost, for the rehabilitation of our minds.

Healing the Black community thus means preserving Black-centered wellness by creating loving institutions designed for, and by, Black individuals. Other goals for restoring the strength and pride of the international Black community involve unifying

diasporic peoples, gaining greater representation in international institutions such as the IMF or World Bank, and promoting more Black voices in media (Osabu-Kle 2000).

The healing nature of reparations also reaches beyond repairing the African American community, but also seeks to reform the racist, white supremacist system so as to prevent future wrongdoings. Burkett (2007) postures that reparations, conducted in a non repetition framework centered around structural change, can promote a “progressive opposition to American economic, cultural, and gender hierarchies that are perpetuated by the American brand of capitalism.” In past movements, apologies and monetary compensation has been offered by institutions, but it has not resulted in challenging the belief systems that produced such wrongs, and therefore contemporary conceptions of reparations hinge on having a transformative nature. Reparations are seen as a medium by which to restore interracial trust and allow “Blacks an opportunity to share their experience in America in hopes of transforming white perceptions of racism and their own self-perception” (Harvard Law Review 2002). An extension of this project, in some scholars' views, is the righteous punishment of white Americans and their ancestors by rendering authentically the history of the United States through truth commissions (Browne 2003; Brophy 2006). Symbolic reparation through commemoration pursues recovery by solving “the political contestation of memory in deeply divided societies,” which works to shift blame on white perpetrators rather than Black victims (Brown 2013). This correction of history and exposure of white complicity has manifested in the legal aims of disclosure laws, resurrecting failed lawsuits and litigations filed by descendents of slaves, and pushing for congressional restructuring of liberalist political plans (Burkett 2007). Additionally, punishment of other actors at



varying individual, state, and international levels who were involved such, as religious institutions or Western countries and oil-rich Arab states, who maintained their own slave trades is a key goal for the reparations movements.

When conceptualizing reparations as monetary compensation, wealth redistribution is treated as central to solving the various disparities between Black and white communities in the areas of health, education, and socioeconomic standing. Many of these issues are inextricably linked and cannot be discussed separately, as an impact on one often produces significant change in another. Wealth redistribution involves community reinvestment, financial assistance programs, grants for institution building, extensive reentry services for Black incarcerated populations, job training, and health education programs (Brooke 2021). Scholars seek to address health inequality as a result of structural racism that has deprived Black Americans of equal access to quality neighborhoods, schools, intergenerational wealth, and healthy environments (Williams and Collins 2004; Bassett and Sandro 2020; Outterson 2005). In doing so, reparations would work to solve high mortality rates and disease gaps, mediate obstacles such as urban infrastructure which restrict access to services, and change demographics of those in positions of power within medical spaces (Williams and Collins 2004). It is within this emphasis on greater medical justice for African Americans that the treatment of Black bodies as merely property during slavery is refuted and rectified, focusing instead on preservation of the valued body.

The funneling of funds towards equality in education promises institutions that are no longer loyal to white racial dominance, improved opportunity for sustained and higher education of African Americans, as well as production of uniquely black

knowledge. Aims of educational reparations include reducing the dropout rate of Black students, equalizing testing scores between Black and white students, and changing the probability of Black children being born into poverty (Fleming-Hunter 2020; Waterhouse 2020). Scholars often propose models of reparation implementation that centers around Black children, as they are the “first to experience the horror of white supremacy” and changes within their status can denote large-scale change for subsequent generations (Flemming-Hunter 2020). Fleming-Hunter (2020) discusses how reparations to solve educational disparities between white and Black children would aid in addressing the criminalization of Black children, their internalization of inferiority, and their exposure to the “whitening process” which has been commonplace since the Antebellum period. Reparations of this nature could take on affirmative action programs, greater investment in predominantly Black schools, specialized programs for incentivizing more Black teachers, and culturally specific histories and curricula (Waterhouse 2020).

One of the other most cited goals of reparations is addressing and ending housing discrimination. Racial segregation, which has been both de facto and de jure in this nation’s history, remains one of the key factors influencing disparities in the realms I have just discussed – both education and healthcare. For those proponents of reparations wishing to elevate the socioeconomic status of African Americans, home equity becomes an essential source of wealth (Kaplan and Valls 2007). A focus on discriminatory lending, redlining, and environmental racism not only provides for a more recent injustice than slavery to justify asking for reparations, but also promises to be reversible through public policy change (Kaplan and Valls 2007). The effects of housing discrimination are quantifiable and thus the goals in this realm of reparations are more

tangible including, but not limited to: greater house ownership by African Americans, more equitable distribution of taxes, and an end to the ongoing “discrimination tax” through race-blind policies (Kaplan and Valls 2007).

### **Justifications For and Against Reparations**

Proponents for reparations utilize multiple avenues to argue for the ways in which Black Americans have been wronged by the United States and white supremacy. These lenses include a look at psychological and emotional traumas, physical acts of violence, and most significantly, the financial stunting of Black communities throughout various waves in American history. Even further, legal and philosophical justification is offered when examining the American government’s culpability in orchestrating Black suffering.

Scholars such as Jennings (2011) refer to processes of subhumanity, conflation of African bodies with currency, and racist industries which have worked to associate Blackness with evil, filth, and danger as instances of the “psychological devastation” experienced by African Americans. Azibo (2011) claims that the tactics used by the United States in order to suppress African Americans amount to a “psychological warfare” in itself. The very treatment of slaves as 3/5ths of a person speaks to the devaluation of African Americans as political stakeholders and human beings, enshrined in foundational American text and the American conscience (Jennings 2011; Mcgary 2010; Obuah 2016). Many authors touch on the nuance of this pain as it is compounded with each generation that lives within America’s racist system and as it particularly affects the formation of healthy “self-concept” among Black individuals (Burkett 2007; Flemming-Hunter 2020; Murphey and Hampton 1994). As Davis (2021) continues, the laws of slavery also “largely refused to acknowledge family ties and did much to disrupt

much of enslaved people's efforts to preserve their African cultures, access mainstream American culture, or create their own, uniquely African-American culture.” Ultimately, the sociological damages experienced by African American communities is hardly quantifiable, but well documented and accommodated within various reparations frameworks.

Reparations on behalf of the physical violence enacted on Black bodies is fortified by precedents within the American and international tradition, where ethnic groups such as Jews in World War II and the Japanese were offered material compensation for their losses. Scholars focus on rape and torture during slavery, lynchings, consistent police killings, and hate crimes committed on the individual level as markers of such violence (Jennings 2011). In contemporary scholarship, violence against Black bodies has focused on food deserts, disproportionate imprisonment, and higher mortality due to inadequate healthcare among others (Roberts 1997).

The economic basis for reparations is perhaps the most cited argument in the literature. In sum, this angle is grounded in the “unpaid wage bill carried over from slavery” but also in “the need for a calculation of the magnitude of the underpayment of the freedmen and their descendents during the period since Emancipation” (Browne 1993). Scholars base their claims on varying points of history, but almost universally converge in viewing slavery as the principal debt which must be repaid. This debt of slave labor is not only measured for the ways in which it deprived generational Black wealth, but also the integral role it played in securing the United States as a “preeminent industrial power” with an economy that provoked its social and cultural development as well (Browne 1993). Slave labor is largely responsible for building this country’s

infrastructure, its agricultural sector, and catalyzing our industrial revolution. Additionally, for those scholars examining Black exploitation from an intersectional framework, they justify reparations on the basis of not only conventional productive labor but also sexual and reproductive labor (Davis 2021; Roberts 1997). Jim Crow, characterized as “American apartheid” in the literature, focuses on the white destruction of Black wealth through inferior education systems, residential segregation, and employment discrimination (Darity and Frank 2003). Economically powerful whites were able to sustain control by way of excluding African Americans from political life, engaging in property theft through collusion with local government, and constructing social welfare programs to aid only poor whites in their efforts towards economic mobility (Waterhouse 2020; Darity and Frank 2003). Likewise, proponents also argue that there is an economic basis for reparations awarded to Africa as a whole. The same economic stunting experienced by domestic African American communities is witnessed at a larger scale for Africa, which experienced reverse development, loss of knowledge and skilled workers, and insufficient compensation for the resources that were plundered from their continent (Osabu-Kle 2000).

From the legal and philosophical tradition, there is much rationale offered for reparations, looking both at communal rights and individual rights. Dagan (2004), Klimchuk (2004), and Darby (2010), among others, advocate for reparations based on private law claims grounded in “corrective justice,” or the moral obligation to make the victim whole by restoring the status quo before the wrongful harm. Advocates opt for “*black agent neutral*” explanation of persistent racial disparities, which roughly holds that the primary explanation, or the root cause, of these racial disparities does not have to

do with the actions of black people in general or even a small subset of black people (e.g., the so-called ghetto poor)” (Darby 2010). The rights-based argument calls upon “the legitimate state” to “protect rights and address rights violations,” justifying government issuance of reparations (McGary 2010). Arguments from the groups rights paradigm are particularly centered around broken contracts between African Americans and the United States government, filling the gaps that exist due to the limits of liberal individualism (Cook 1999). Perhaps the most salient promise referenced in the literature is the failure of the federal government to provide land promised to enslaved blacks under General William T. Sherman’s Special Field Order No. 15 (Levitt 1997; Murphy and Hampton 1994; Thomas 2015). The communal rights justification for reparations focuses on solidarity bridges between historically oppressed groups (Cook 1999), the impact of institutions on the public (Howard 2020), and the identity politics that can be utilized when defending “groups” such as Black businesses (Howard 2020).

Opponents of reparations come from varying ethnic identities, with significant differences in terms of relation to the subject matter and active stake in potential benefits from the issuance of reparations to Black Americans. Opposition to reparations ranges from disagreement with the concept of reparations to dislike of models that have been proposed for securing or realizing reparations. From within self-identified Black scholarship, scholars such as Westley are skeptical of current narratives surrounding reparations, arguing that “compensation to the enslaved entails not mere abolition but a fundamental social revaluation of objects of commerce as subjects, a social transformation in which those same subjects are viewed as persons entitled to restitution and recognition of human rights,” which is fundamentally unattainable within

an American legal system that has implicit “devaluation of people of African descent” (2005). Therefore, inherent in the reparations process and conversation is a treatment of Black bodies as property once again, as entities which need to be made “whole again” through compensation determined by white-serving institutions (Westley 2005; Kane 2003). Even further, the individual rights paradigm of reparations imposes heavy burdens on Black victims who must “prove” their suffering, thus further retraumatizing victims (Harvard Law Review 2002). Certain African American intellectuals argue that reparations may lead to assuming Black experience as monolithic, while promoting ideas of rootlessness based on African identity that many contemporary Black people do not actively relate to (McWhorter 2001).

White scholars often focus on the legitimacy of grievances by present day African Americans, finding insufficient causal connection between “wrongdoings of the past and the contemporary situation” and minimizing how white Americans have benefited from anti-Black societal structures (Epstein 2021). Kane (2003), Epstein (2021), and Horowitz (2001), emphasize need for direct, living victims to be present for true reparations to be issued (thus nullifying justifications on the basis of slavery) and take fundamental issue with the degree to which proponents claim African Americans suffer[ed] from discrimination. Reparations, under this belief, act as an affront to the racial progress that they argue has been made in this country in terms of racial equality (Horowitz 2001). Even further, white scholars advance the notion that reparations only contributes to creating a new era of Black victimization, while potentially creating an even larger chasm between whites and Blacks (McGary 2010).

The breadth of scholarship on reparations is significant and is continuously shifting to adapt to the current state of racial affairs in this country. Gaps exist in the literature in terms of the justifications for securing reparations, as many intersectional identities are not addressed. Compensation for more nuanced pain experienced by individuals who occupy various identity combinations including disability, sexual identity, and gender alongside their racial identity, are few and far between in scholarship. Additionally, there is not much inclusion of personal narrative or anecdote to center Black voices in the explanation of these injustices. Put simply, reparations seek compensation for the atrocities experienced by African Americans, including past injustices and present consequences, so as to produce greater well-being for contemporary Black citizens and communities. The primary issues that reparations seek to address are employment, education, and housing, with a greater end to create a more just society through the redistribution of wealth.

## **Methodologies**

In order to assess whether the current cultural moment has produced reparations programs more aligned with the critical visions of Black theorists, I will investigate two programs implemented at the height of the most recent wave of political protests against racial injustice. By analyzing both a municipality-centered, government-implemented program and a private organization's reparations program, I hope to illuminate potential difference in funding, public responses/support, and scope of mission. Additionally, through the inclusion of both programs I aim to highlight the diversity of the injustices that reparations aim to address - both in seeking redress for "contemporary" instances



of oppression during Jim Crow and more widely “accepted” instances of America’s dark past that is conceptualized as originating, and even ending, during slavery.

The city of Evanston, located in Illinois, implemented their Restorative Housing Program in 2019 with the purpose of providing grants to African Americans of their respective community to purchase a home, home improvement, or mortgage assistance. Their program, structured around ancestral records, identifies redlining in Evanston, disproportionate cannabis arrests, compliance tickets, and opportunity gaps for those 18 or older living in Evanston during 1919-1960 as justification for redress. Evanston is the first city to issue reparations in the United States. Conversely the Georgetown Reparations program (GU272), has a legalist framework, focused on payback for the institution-saving selling of 272 enslaved people by the Jesuits of the Maryland Province. A heavy emphasis of their project is a restoration of community and familial ties that were fractured due to a lack of genealogical archives, and by supporting the aspirations of descendants through financial and educational backing. In comparing the ethos of each program I can make preliminary suggestions as to how we should move forward implementing reparations in the future, as we follow in pursuit of the precedent they have set.

In addition to a close reading of both programs, I will be supplementing my analysis with media discourse on the Black Lives Matter movement and what news reports, leading nonprofits, and politicians posture as fruitful channels of activism during this time. In particular, through the support of scholarly research, I will delve into the development of the public’s understanding in regards to what racism is, how it manifests and is perpetuated, and what solutions are viable to address its many varieties.

Additionally, I am guided by a need to explore whether the national conscience-raising that occurred when “systemic racism” became a more called-upon term rather than interpersonal racism, can be directly linked to the growing view of reparations as a more valid practice.

## **Analysis**

The “racial reckoning” of 2020 is perhaps given its own significant namer due to the tendency to center white individuals as indicators of America’s racial progress. It is a racial reckoning because it refers explicitly to the increased participation of white Americans in both conversations and tangible actions, under the instruction of organized BIPOC movements, against racial injustice. The abundant transparency of inequity, made more salient due to the conditions that arose from the pandemic, forced a confrontation with lacking institutions rather than racist individuals. As TIME notes, the notion of “systemic racism” was once “confined to academic activist circles on the left of the spectrum” but has now emerged as “a phrase du jour, with Google searches for the term rising a hundredfold in a matter of months” (2020). It is within this shift of language, intention, and framing that the public was primed to approach reparations again after years of stalemate within government bodies trying to implement redress. As the scholar Henry notes, “reparations is a divisive issue precisely because it is impossible to avoid directly talk about race and race privilege” (2007). I would argue that until this moment, where culpability of white Americans was widely discussed, normalized, and essentialized, the feasibility of reparations was less likely. As Henry continues, “unlike affirmative action, welfare, and other social programs, reparations discourse avoids counterarguments of merit or behavior. Reparations demands tend to be redistributive

rather than individual and incremental” (2007). The term systemic racism, not only speaks to a more accurate and encompassing depiction of racism, but its very nature promotes macro level analysis akin to that which is used in reparations frameworks.

In addition to a shift in language, there was also a shift in expectation by the public – led by activists labeled more radical than that of Civil Rights organizers. More specifically, organizations, government offices, and businesses that sought to participate in this racial reckoning were highly scrutinized under these demands. Essential characteristics of this social movement were: a centering of voices from those most affected by whatever issue they are addressing, redistribution of wealth, and active listening by white individuals rather than being placed in positions of authority. This vision falls under a Black Freedom framework, more focused on securing joy, liberation, and restitution for Black individuals through means other than Civil Rights. This understanding of achieving equity, as I will explain further, is clearly evident in the reparations programs I will highlight and significant when comparing past manifestations of reparations. These principles were then translated into corporate spaces and asked to function within white supremacist institutions as “diversity and inclusion” ethics, racial sensitivity trainings, re-evaluation of staff and board’s ethnic composition, etc. This development and or evolution is important to take into consideration as I assess how the vast visions of Black scholars might be altered when implemented by a private organization such as Georgetown.

While the public’s response to reparations is not always historically an indicator of whether it will be brought to the political docket, white supremacist organizing of power still deems white Americans as constituents critical to the material and social

success of politicians. Essential again to politics, is political performance or adaptation to trends in popular culture, which translates into legitimacy and authority. I could not discuss this subject, and this cultural moment, without calling out the ways in which legislative change and public outrage by white individuals has often hinged on publicized black death. The video of George Floyd that circulated in 2020, a traumatizing documentation of blatant police brutality, was the sensational, shocking “proof” white Americans needed to respond to the call to action that Black organizers have sounded for centuries. In a 2021 poll of Americans by UMassAmherst, they found that 72% of white Americans opposed monetary reparations despite “a growing awareness of contemporary racial inequality – suggesting strongly that a racial awakening alone may not substantially alter policy views” (Brookings Institution 2021). White Americans remain most supportive of symbolic actions and these percentages have not varied significantly from 2014, a year characterized by “riots” in Ferguson after the fatal shooting of Michael Brown (Brookings Institution 2021).

We are at a catalyst moment for reparations, which necessitates an investigation as to what conditions created this environment. However, deeming a rise in reparations as a reflection of fruitful, sustainable racial progress is, in my opinion, naive. A key aspect of reparations discourse is that some portion of its intent lies in changing the minds of white communities, so as to prevent future suffering of Black communities. The following programs I analyze instead affirm that the productive nature of reparations rests on those run by and for Black citizens. And that simultaneously, they still are asked to exist with limitations placed upon them by the white public and institutions that were designed to preserve their control over resources, the economy, and politics.

## **City of Evanston's Reparations Restorative Housing Program**

The City of Evanston implemented their Restorative Housing Program, as the first of many proposed reparations programs, after the 2019 passage of Resolution 58-R-19 - "Commitment to End Structural Racism and Achieve Racial Equity." For the rest of the broad overview of this program, I will rely primarily on reports published by the City of Evanston, transcripts from city halls, and goals established by their Equity and Empowerment commission, all of which are available on the City of Evanston's website (website citation). The program was designed to "revitalize, preserve and stabilize Black/African-American owner-occupied homes in Evanston, increase homeownership and build the wealth of Black/African-American residents, build intergenerational equity amongst Black/African-American residents, and improve the retention rate of Black/African-American homeowners in the City of Evanston" (website citation). The resolution is funded by the City's Municipal Cannabis Retailers' Occupation Tax, a 3% tax on gross sales, which allows registered ancestors to receive grants of up to \$25,000 for home ownership, mortgage assistance, or home improvement purposes. Ancestors are those "defined as an African American or black individual, at least 18 years old at the time, who was an Evanston resident between 1919 and 1969" (Evanston Website).

The myriad of justifications cited for this program highlight the versatility of reparations that Black scholars have argued for and dreamed of. Evanston outlines the ways in which segregated practices not only prevented the accumulation of wealth for Black residents but also purposefully constrained their access to spaces that promote joy and community. They cite transportation, beaches, public parks, retail and restaurant

patronage, theaters, employment, and healthcare services as areas in which African Americans were coded as undesirable and threatening under Jim Crow (Evanston Policies Citation). Additionally, the city of Evanston sought to acknowledge the contemporary evolution of systems that enact violence upon Black bodies by including disproportionate cannabis arrests in Evanston and subsequent incarceration as continued justification for reparations.

It is within their framing of the racial segregation that occurred in Evanston that the authors of this program meet the demands of Black scholars. Their discussion of history is inherently corrective and, by relying on a collection of primary sources from multiple public sectors, shows the large-scale, coordinated efforts to uphold racial segregation. They include newspaper articles which speak to the processes of white flight, informal mechanisms of intimidating Black residents, and the purposeful undervaluing of property in predominantly African American neighborhoods. By providing a timeline that spans from 1860 to 2000, the authors share in the conviction of reparations advocates that racism is an ongoing structure and that the policies of “the past” have artificially constructed our contemporary reality. By examining both de jure and de facto segregation, they clearly identify the culpability of not only the federal and state government, but also the white residents of Evanston. Most importantly, the curators of these reports, which are shared with the public, hold in tension both the ways in which African American residents were subjugated and also honors the ways in which they resisted through legislative and grassroots organizing.

A key aspect of Evanston’s program is its fulfillment of what is woven throughout multiple Black scholar’s works – whether they are discussing the implementation of

reparations or defining what they are – which is that sovereignty must be granted to Black individuals so that they may possess an active, primary role in this process. All members of the various committees that collaborate in implementing reparations are African American residents of Evanston. As Simone (2021) offers, “a local approach allows for powerful, close-to-home storytelling, understanding of connections between past and present... in addition, municipalities can solicit input more easily from community members.” By having local officials implement reparations, there ensures a certain level of accountability because these governing bodies are held responsible by their constituents.

However, this reparations program does not fully meet Brooks’ Tort Model of reparations. Brooks (2004) claims that restitution is only met when “providing a reparation or reparations commensurate with the atrocity.” The Evanston Program follows this logic, in creating a corollary between past housing discrimination and the choice to focus on housing in the contemporary. However, the main emphasis of his work, and that of his followers, is that racial reconciliation should be the primary purpose of slave redress (Brooks 2004). He continues, “[w]hen a government perpetrates an atrocity and apologizes for it, it does four things: confesses the deed; admits the deed was an injustice; represents; and asks for forgiveness. All four conditions are essential for taking personal responsibility” (Brooks 2004). While Evanston rightfully empowered African American citizens to provide the historical and emotional labor of recounting atrocities, their reports then reflect the side of the victim apart from conversation with the perpetrator. Nowhere in the listed documents available to the public on the Evanston website is there a formal *apology* by the government or its white descendants. Their

language becomes inherently passive when they use phrasing such as “acknowledges the harm caused to Black/African-American Evanston residents due to discriminatory housing policies and practices and inaction on the City’s part” (Official Program Guidelines 2019). Despite mentioning contemporary cannabis arrests as continued racist policies, much of their language about discriminatory policies is in the past tense, such as their primary justification for housing reparations which seek to address “historical wealth and opportunity gaps that African American/Black residents of Evanston *experienced*” (City of Evanston 2019).

There is much to be said about the source of reparations funding as well, due to it being a regressive tax on Cannabis sales. While this method provides for ample monetary resources, it neglects channels established by reparations scholars to place culpability on the specific groups that have historically benefitted. A critique leveled by Simone (2021), who is one of the most prominent proponents of municipality-issued reparations, is that “there are inevitably some members of the beneficiary group who are themselves taxpayers and will therefore contribute to their own reparations.” Taxes on specific sales, while easy to execute and meant for public initiatives, are not progressive in the sense that they do not proportionately tax those of higher wealth (which is often synonymous with those who most benefit from intergenerational wealth). In terms of reception by the white public, utilizing a highly stigmatized and misunderstood industry such as cannabis to implement highly contentious reparations, feels counterproductive to ensuring longevity and future funding. This aspect lacks holding specifically white individuals and systems accountable to pay the compensation



themselves – especially when utilizing the logic that they should pay from the uneven wealth they maintain due to ancestral opportunities.

## **Georgetown Reparations**

Georgetown, in 2016, founded the GU272 Descendents Association to facilitate the issuance of reparations to the descendents of the 272 enslaved people sold by the Maryland Province Jesuits in 1838 that resulted in the construction of the university. The GU272 Descendents Association's board is entirely filled with direct descendents who articulate contemporary desires on behalf of their ancestors. 2019 was the first year that the university pledged to commit funds annually to support descendent communities, establishing a designated \$400,000 reconciliation fund. As a historically exclusionary educational institution, their program focuses reparations funds on supporting the educational aspirations of descendents and community-based projects. Due to the nature of the original sellers – the religious Society of Jesus – the language of apology manifests as repenting for past “sinning” and they remain a larger partner in this endeavor than university representatives.

Potentially the most unique quality of GU272 is its emphasis on reconnecting families and renewing ties lost. Like Evanston's program, they place a heavy emphasis on “descendents,” which is both a simple, linear logic and also massively open to interpretation. Their objectives include uniting current and future descendents of the GU272, as well as to “foster a spirit of family, kinship, unity, and mutual support among all descendents of enslaved people” (GU272 Descendents Association 2016). The GU272 Memory Project has exerted tremendous effort to trace the more than 8,425 direct descendents and provide genealogical traces that are often unavailable to

African-Americans due to the nature of namelessness in slavery (New England Historic Genealogical Society). They also actively engage in recording oral histories and maintaining a searchable online database that empowers descendants to retrace their family origins. Through annual conferences and association events, descendants are given a protective space to repair their ancestral legacy, thus enabling greater sense of self and dignity - a central goal of reparations work outlined by Brooks (2004). The sense of community that has been fostered by this organization is no small feat, rather it speaks to the fervent desire of descendants to live according to how their ancestors radically envisioned them existing in the future.

Racial reconciliation is at the forefront of GU272. As stated in the declaration of the GU272+ descendants:

We are determined to turn the insistent survival of our ancestors into an unwavering commitment within the entire Georgetown Family; a commitment to promote and facilitate a safe and effective pathway to a Common Good for our family, our country, and our humanity...Our goal is to unshackle the hearts and minds of those who were never physically in bondage, but who nevertheless live and work under the vestiges of our nation's legacy of slavery. Though we may be from different fibers, our destiny is in fact woven together into a single garment (GU272 Descendants Association 2016).

Georgetown established a Descendants Truth and Reconciliation Foundation to facilitate dialogue between descendants of the enslaved and descendants of the enslavers. The concept of "truth commissions" are ever present throughout Black scholars' work on reparations, as they often identify this as the most socially accepted

version of reparations and foundational to any form of monetary compensation that may follow. The manifestation of their truth commission includes forging the Georgetown Slavery Archive which includes collections, exhibits, and outreach activities which detail Georgetown's complicity in slavery while also honoring the unique lives of each slave sold. As an institution their unraveling of the ways in which slavery is interconnected with their "prestigious" legacy is a critical process necessary for every American institution.

The Georgetown program has been heavily scrutinized for numerous reasons including contention surrounding who pays, delay in implementation, and lack of transparency. Among protests in 2019, Georgetown students pushed for a new student fee to supply necessary funds for reparations programs, however the university agreed to instead fundraise (Svrluga 2021). As GU272 argued, "by taking over the effort and turning it into a philanthropic effort rather than treating it as a debt to be repaid" Georgetown negated the definition of reparations as posited by Black scholars (Svrluga 2021). Fundraising is mentioned numerous times as well by the GU272 Descendants Association, where donations are suggested in order to "support their work" (GU272 Descendants Association 2016). This framing harms the intended outcome of reparations because it makes their worth, or deserving of wealth, contingent on outsiders who are empowered to assume a savior-esque position. White saviorism, where white individuals or institutions gain social, political, or cultural clout for aiding minorities, constructs two harmful realities for participants in this exchange. Firstly, this logic reinforces for white individuals that they possess more money because of some superiority or benevolence that only they maintain when participating in capitalism.

Secondly, it makes white individuals/institutions feel as though they know how best this money should be spent, because they are the ones who already possess it. We must realize that those possessing expendable income most likely have gained that through white supremacist channels of inheriting wealth or capitalistic ventures that are intimately intertwined with racial oppression. It also requires continued commodification of Black personhood, as the organization has to repeatedly prove their “worth” and market themselves through capitalistic avenues. Through this method of obtaining compensation, descendents of slaves are problematically asked to contribute labor again.

The vagueness of some of the visions articulated by the varying GU272 partner foundations are a manifestation of the open-ended nature of reparations definitions. They are unable to standardize what the “educational and financial aspirations” of descendents entails, and so it is determined via a case-by-case basis – which enables sovereignty of recipients but hinders wide-scale implementation. Georgetown brings up an issue prevalent through many reparations discourses – that reparations must go to those who are “deserving,” or rather those who will put the money towards “good use.” When in actuality, providing funds solely for educational or financial aspirations, while wholeheartedly necessary for building Black wealth, is again attaching a morality to the exchange. Recipients must in turn provide something to the organization, usually a success story or proof of using funds in ways prescribed by white capitalists so as to boast progress for future donors. Inconsistency of funding, due to heightened dependence on goodwill from donors each year, fails to provide the stability mechanisms necessary for building intergenerational wealth. Recipients of reparations

need time and resources afforded to them, and consistent trust in their capability, just like white citizens have been provided since the inception of this nation. Overall, African American descendents are *owed* money and we must assess how systems of power continue to exert force over how, when, where, and why they spend that money. Who benefits from African Americans buying more homes in a highly white-saturated market of developers, realtors, homeowners, etc.? Who benefits when more African Americans are empowered to go into higher education where they will produce free knowledge at research-based institutions or must assume student loans for the inevitable costs that arise?

In many ways, the Society of Jesus provides a clear example as to how historically problematic institutions, that are still vital to the lifeblood of contemporary life for African Americans especially, can start to slowly institute widescale change. Perhaps the nature of the church, that theologically centers around forgiveness, grace, and lovingness, is especially apt to rally current congregations to atone for the actions of their ancestors. Churches provide built-in channels for community organizing and communication around shared morals, which may ease any uncomfot surrounding the topic of race. Churches also have massive purchasing power and pull for political candidates, meaning any boycotting, reparations work, or pressure that they place could cause a chain-reaction of taking accountability. Georgetown University is one site of Jesuit reliance on slavery and this program, as a microcosm experiment, could then be widely translated to other sites.

## Conclusion

In investigating both the Evanston Program and the Georgetown GU272 Initiative, there are clear benefits and costs to each model. Each program is a reflection of the organizing entity, hence the scholarly approach to reconciliation through curated archives and think-tanks by Georgetown, and approaching the domain of housing from the municipality level. Both are the result of intense, sustained pressure by subjugated communities emboldened by the political opportunities of the time and supported, finally, by white counterparts in these endeavors. Municipality-centered reparations, like Evanston's, are able to gain a certain amount of momentum due to the very personal, localized demands that exist at their core. The nature of polarized politics and limited terms, however, threatens the continuity/security of these programs. This may hinder the expansion and imaginative qualities of this program. Conversely, a private program such as Georgetown must contend with a variety of demands from stakeholders including, but not limited to, transient student bodies, external investors, prominent alumni, etc.

Georgetown and Evanston offer two phases of reparations instigated by the most recent racial awakening, that are equally important. Georgetown's form of reparations, with their heavy emphasis on truth commissions and repairing Black dignity through an anthropological lense, is crucial for the forgiveness process. In order for reparations to be a transformative practice capable of providing interracial healing, they must be treated as a scholarly discipline by white scholars. White scholars must match the legacy of Black scholars and protestors and movement leaders who have intimately known the power of reparations as a tool for justice but lacked the institutional support

to achieve it. The municipality backing of Evanston provides a foundation necessary for other key functions regarding reparations work. The government stands as the only entity that exercise “legitimate use of force,” which necessitates their participation in these initiatives. In order to solidify the conscience change from interpersonal racism to a greater understanding of systemic racism, government institutions must be involved in the repair.

Despite apparent progress from the current cultural moment in terms of theoretical approach to reparations, there is clear evidence that financing remains an obstacle – and one that I argue is essential for issuing reparations in a way that is authentic. The consistent thread throughout Black scholarly work is that reparations is relationship-producing and affirming, that monetary transfer is a part of clearly designating oppressor from oppressed. Evanston, through sales tax, and Georgetown, through fundraising, manage to outsource this relationship thus muddying what should be apparent culpability. This ultimately degrades the process of forgiveness. Through my research, it seems that universities, which are some of the sites most critical to instigating wide-scale social transformation, are in most ways more welcoming of symbolic reparations. Symbolic reparations provide institutions with great publicity, the promise of changing minds rather than material conditions, and reflects their fashionable commitment to diversity and inclusion initiatives. The dedication of buildings to past slaves and erection of educational memorials is part of reparations work, but is insufficient for descendants who have repeatedly been told to wait for justice.

It is apparent that there is still a reliance on manufactured scarcity, meaning that institutions still claim that there is not enough money to attempt these endeavors or that

it will take longer than demanded to gather financial supporters. However, American institutions have historically had no issue quickly gathering welfare assistance for white citizens, big banks, and corporations. Underpinning this refusal to apply that same intensity to the issue of reparations is an embodiment of the racism that Black scholars want to address with redress. This language masks the reality that American institutions, despite acknowledging the harm they have caused and continue to uphold, still do not value – and perhaps are threatened – by the prospect of social mobility for African Americans. This current cultural moment has produced clear evidence that reparations are an effective solution for addressing large-scale systems of racism that bleed into one another (i.e housing and education), while affirming what is an age-old tale at this point – white citizens refusing to materially accept responsibility. Rather than reparations being rightfully positioned as a repayment of debt, it is psychologically understood as an unearned gain for African Americans at the expense of white Americans who are asked to make a “sacrifice.”

America is a nation comfortable with debt, plain and simple, as each day our national debt exponentially rises in the trillions. Repayment of debt, on the other hand, is something we expect of student loaners and those under the neoliberalism narrative that are saddled with debt because of “bad choices,” but not of our institutions. If reparations continue to be contingent on the “goodwill” of white citizens, then it must be marketed in terms they have historically responded to. Addressing intergenerational wealth gaps and promoting the betterment of communities through greater educational, housing, and health resources is not only deserved, but will benefit the totality of American society. White citizens, because of how our nation has been structured to



serve their desires and needs, remain critical of all which appears to be “taking” from them. Despite my protests against centering white folx or making reparations digestible for them, it is an obstacle that must be reconciled with, as is evident in the programs I explored. One of the most cited arguments against reparations is that it overwhelmingly focuses on past wrongs, that cannot be “fixed” retroactively. Therefore, a focus on a mutually beneficial future created by reparations, one where racial division is lessened and communities are restored is how we must conceive of reparations moving forward. White citizens and institutions need to feel as though they are gaining by “giving” what they owe.

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