

# *Slavery, Reparations, and the Mythic March of Freedom*

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"Freedom Isn't Free"

—War on Terror bumper sticker (seen  
on the frontlines: the Wal-Mart parking  
lot in Mountain View, California)

IN WHAT WAS widely viewed as an effort to appeal to African American voters, George W. Bush traveled in the summer of 2003 to Goree Island off the coast of Senegal, the site of one of the coastal markets that characterized the four centuries of the trade in African people. There, he delivered a speech that was billed by the White House as bringing together the themes of slavery, freedom, and democracy. Though he failed to deliver an apology for slavery, Bush's speech drew favorable mainstream media coverage for what the *New York Times* termed its "unflinching" account of the history of slavery, which labeled the forcible transportation of at least twelve million Africans a "crime" and a "sin." While those who had hoped that Bush would apologize for slavery should perhaps have known better, so should those who expected him to miss the significance of the moment. George Bush is no newcomer to the history of slavery. Indeed, as he made clear in the speech on Goree Island, the history of slavery figures powerfully (if peculiarly) in the history that Bush himself is hoping to make.

There was little that on first inspection differentiated his version of history from much of the recent scholarship on slavery in the United States. He spoke on Goree Island of slave resistance and slaveholder brutality; he emphasized the separation of slave families at the hands of traders and the corrupting effects of tyranny upon the master class itself. And then, much as he did in his inaugural address, when he described American history as "the story of a slave-holding society that became a servant of freedom," he closed

out his history of slavery with a redemptive story about freedom. Nothing on the face of this made it seem any different from the standard practice of historians who generally end the "first half" of the U.S. History survey in 1865, an act that subtly but insistently conveys the standard narrative of American history: slavery ended with the Civil War only to be succeeded—though at first fitfully, torturously, and incompletely—by "freedom." As the arrestingly self-opposed phrase "servant of freedom" hints, however, Bush has turned the scholarly history of slavery to purposes very different from those for which it was originally intended. Just how different became clear on Goree Island.

Standing on the spot where thousands were herded from stinking pens across a small wooden bridge to be packed into the holds of ships set to make a Middle Passage that many would not survive, the President of the United States—remarkably, brazenly, outrageously—described the slave trade as part of God's "Providence." Through their struggles against injustice, he explained, "the very people traded into slavery helped to set America free." Bush thus subordinated the history of slavery to the history of "freedom." Setting aside the tautological character of the Providence thus described (God sent African slaves to America so that they could help end African slavery in America) as an enduring mystery of the faith, it is worth asking on what authority he thought he could say this.

One answer can be found in what is commonly known as "the Suffering Servant," chapter 53 of the Book of Isaiah, a source hinted at in Bush's allusion to Jesus Christ as a "Suffering Savior" in the course of his speech. Isaiah 53 uses the imagery of servitude to convey the mystery of salvation in terrifying phrases like the following, which is taken from the fifth verse: "he was wounded for our transgressions; he was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed." While Bush might not seem to be doing African Americans any disservice by declaring that slavery was a wrong of Biblical proportion and by relating their ancestors' history to that of a figure sometimes seen as an antecedent of Christ, the allusion is disturbing. The servant

remains in Isaiah, and in Bush's speech, a servant to purposes larger than his own.

What is implied but never stated directly in the speech is an alarming recapitulation of the terms of the nineteenth-century Christian proslavery argument that slavery was less a system of racial domination or economic exploitation than a vehicle of salvation. "Enslaved Africans discovered a suffering savior and found he was more like themselves than their masters. Enslaved Africans heard the ringing promises of the Declaration of Independence and asked the self-evident question, 'Then why not me?'" The slave trade, Bush suggested on Goree Island, was God's way of revealing the true and underlying meaning of American freedom. And if the redemptive work of the history of slavery can be measured out in "lessons" about "the ideals of America," the relevance of those lessons reaches "wherever the sun passes"—a clumsy reminder that the sun never set on the British Empire, either. On Goree Island, Bush enlisted the history of millions of lives broken by imperialism justified in the name of Providence to the cause of, well, imperialism justified in the name of Providence.

This brazen appropriation of the scholarly history of slavery represents a substantial challenge, if not a crisis, for the social and cultural history of slavery. In the historical vision expressed by (though certainly not limited to) Bush's address, slavery has been turned into a cliché, a set of images that have been emptied of any authentic historical meaning through their sheer repetition in connection with their supposed extinction at the hands of freedom. In this way, the image of slavery has been put to work in the service of whatever meaning is given to that latter idea. In its dominant articulation, the history of slavery exists in a state of civil servitude to the idea of American freedom.

To explain Bush's ability to mobilize the imagery of the historical scholarship on slavery in the service of the "War on Terror," we need to revisit three of the central story lines in that scholarship: the history of the transformation of African slavery into African American slavery (and of Africans into African Americans); the defeat of

slavery by capitalism and freedom; and the question of the “agency” of enslaved people. Upon closer inspection, it turns out that each of these stories has been structured by unquestioned assumptions and unarticulated arguments—metanarratives—that have reshaped the stories of African and African American slaves according to the master narratives of American history. Throughout this essay, I aim to expose the metanarrative of “freedom,” the story that organizes so many of our histories of slavery, reassuring us that the succession of the latter by the former was somehow inevitable rather than contingent, complete rather than unfinished, a matter of the past rather than the present. The alternative to this narrative comes from the reparations movement, which suggests a cogent theory for the writing of a history of slavery outside the conventions of American-history-as-freedom.



You would think that the facts of the African slave trade would be so brutally obvious that they would not require much rethinking or exposing: four hundred years, twelve million people, billions of dollars. The trade, we are told in the conventional account, was the bloody bottom edge of a triangle that linked European merchant capital, African slaves, and American planters into “the Atlantic economy.” And the image that comes to mind upon hearing the words “the African slave trade” is an image of the Middle Passage: unspeakable groaning misery, slaves “tight-packed” into the holds of slave ships and fed like animals, the dead thrown overboard as the ships passed on. But what is perhaps even more horrifying is that to many Africans the Middle Passage was not identifiable as the middle of anything: to many of the slaves who crossed the Atlantic in the slavers’ ships, the historian Stephanie Smallwood has recently suggested, the Middle Passage seemed instead a potentially endless journey into a void in time, a place bereft of the narrative markers beginning, middle, and end that might have made it intelligible. A place where time could be reckoned only in the gradual physical deterioration of their own bodies.

Thinking for a moment from their perspective, we can illuminate the historically and ideologically embedded character of the definition of "the African Slave Trade," which frames standard historical accounts. It was only from the perspective of Europe that the slave trade had a beginning on the African coast, a middle in the Atlantic, and an end in the slave markets of the Americas. For Africans, the slave trade often began hundreds of miles from the coast with a series of trades only tenuously linked to coastal mercantile capitalism. Many of the Africans ultimately drawn into the force field of European slave traders never made it to the coast—they died on the roads along the way, victims of a "first passage" who numbered in the millions. Nor was it only Europeans who preyed upon African slaves. As well as the approximately twelve million traded to the Americas, another ten or eleven million Africans were traded northward and eastward, across the Sahara and the Indian Ocean, during the period of the slave trade. In the trade to the Americas men outnumbered women two to one; in the trans-Saharan and Indian Ocean trades, the ratio was reversed; consequently, there was no population growth on the entire continent of Africa during the eighteenth century.

I say all of this not simply to convey the sheer magnitude of the violence that underwrote the fabulous growth of American and European capitalism, but to illuminate the way that the bare definition of the historical problem of "the African slave trade" has concealed within it a prevailing perspective on that historical experience—one that presents the experience in its relevance to Europe while eliding its other dimensions.

If the spatial character of the history of the slave trade has been invisibly structured by the history of European mercantile capitalism, the temporal framing of the story of American slave revolts shows signs of a similar representational leakage. Almost all of those who write about the military activity of these Africans once they reached the Americas—the actions generally and often misleadingly termed "slave revolts"—have relied upon one of the two grand narratives of African American history: the story of how black slavery was superseded by freedom or the story of how Africans became African

Americans. The first narrative has emphasized the commonality of the oppression visited upon enslaved people over the differences between them. Thus the Maroon wars, which sought to install African notions of community and governance in the New World (often including slavery), and Nat Turner's revolt in Virginia, which sought to bring about the reign of Christ on earth, have often been treated, fundamentally, as part of the centuries-long effort of enslaved people to gain their freedom. The second narrative has framed the history of these events as part of a broader story of acculturation—the transformation of Africans into African Americans—and used the cultural content of New World slave revolts to measure the progress of this ongoing transformation at a series of stops along the way. There is no doubt that both of these explanatory paradigms are instructive: there were certain material and ideological features common to New World slavery, and African populations in the New World did become African American, a change that was reflected in their revolts.

And yet neither of these stories fully exhausts the historical content of the events they seek to explain. The set of explanations that emphasizes the similarities between slave rebels in their sequential struggle toward freedom has glossed over very real differences in the ideologies that defined the purpose of collective revolt and vastly different accounts of what was at stake in the Americas. In seeking to convey those differences, the culturalist accounts, by contrast, have had very little to say about the internal politics of slavery—about why, for instance, women and nonconspirators, who were presumably as African or African American as the conspirators, were not visible on the leading edge of what historians have taken to be their history. On the one hand we have been given the story of a labor force in arms and on the other a narrative of cultural assimilation.

Scarcely concealed in the contrasting outlines of these explanations is a single story of progress organized around successive modes of production and the achievement of citizenship: the story of racial liberalism, of black freedom and racial acculturation, of how black slaves became American citizens. Historians, that is, have reworked

the history of rebels who were willing to risk their lives to escape from American history into a part of that history.

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Close to the literature on Africa in the Americas on my library's bookshelf, charting a parallel course and apparently subject to the same laws of conceptual gravity, is the literature on capitalism and slavery. If it is hard to think about slavery as capitalism, that is because it is supposed to be: slavery is, in some sense, unthinkable in the historical terms that frame Western political economy. In both Smithian and Marxian economics, slavery serves as an untheorized and almost invisible historical backdrop to the history of capitalism. The foundational exclusion of the fact of slavery from these theories of political economy has had consequences that bedevil us down to the present moment.

James Oakes has recently argued that Adam Smith and the bourgeois political economists who followed him spent a great deal of time and energy trying to reconcile the accepted notion that slavery would inevitably give way to free labor (because of the superior capacity of self-interest as a tool of labor discipline) with the stubborn fact that slaveholders were making a great deal of money. Smith resolved this problem, according to Oakes, by passing it off to other regions of intellectual inquiry. Perhaps it was the "pride" of man that made "him love to domineer," combined with the excessive fertility of the tropics, which accounted for the persistence of slavery in the face of its supposed inefficiency and predicted decline. Perhaps, that is, the persistence of slavery was a question to be answered by psychology or geography rather than political economy.

If Smith displaced the question of slavery, Marx simply evaded it. The magnificent critique of the commodity form with which Marx began *Capital*, for instance, unfolds from a consideration of a bolt of linen. Out of the dual character of that linen as an object and a commodity—having a use value and an exchange value—Marx develops the notion of "the fetishism of commodities," the habit of mind by which things are made to seem as if they exist in relation to one

another (compared according to their prices) rather than to their uses and the circumstances of their production, all of which reflected the larger matrix of social relations. But wait: a bolt of linen? At a moment when English mill hands expended the few calories they gained from Caribbean sugar on the work of processing American cotton? Describing an economy that shipped sterling debt to the New World to pay for slave-grown products and then received it back again in exchange for the finished textiles produced in British factories? After a bloody Civil War in which the Confederate foreign policy had been premised on the idea (almost true) that the disruption of the cotton trade would cause such suffering in England that the British would be forced to support secession? A bolt of *linen*?

Marx's substitution of (British) flax for (American) cotton as the emblematic raw material of English capitalism enabled him to tell a story of the commodity form artificially hedged in by British national boundaries. This unacknowledged specificity surfaces again in Marx's chapter on "primitive accumulation," which describes the expropriation of the commons through enclosure—the forcible imposition of private property on the landscape through the planting of hedges and the violent enforcement of exclusive rights. Enclosure prevented the landless from providing for themselves in any way other than working for wages they would then use to pay for things they once had made (here specified as "yarn, linen, and woollens").

With his emphasis on laws from the reign of the Tudor monarchs, domestic products, and the "home" market, Marx tells an unabashedly provincial tale. It is the Anglocentric and teleological story of feudalism succeeded by capitalism in England. And yet this is the section of *Capital* historians of slavery have used to situate their histories within the larger history of capitalism. For among the very few remarks that Marx made about slavery, he did include in the historical account of capitalism at the back of the book the following amazing sentence: "The veiled slavery of the waged workers in Europe needed, for its pedestal, slavery pure and simple in the new world."

Historians have generally read this sentence as if it makes a



claim about historical development—about time. “Veiled slavery” refers to the commodification of labor power, the sectioning of the human body’s capacities into time-scaled units of labor that can be freely sold on the open market. Marx opposed this process to “slavery pure and simple”—the commodification of the laborer, the sale of human beings at a price that made them comparable to all manner of things. In the standard reading, this is the passage where Marx refers to the inevitable succession of commodified laborers by commodified labor power. In answer to the question as it is commonly put—what does Marx say about capitalism and slavery?—there can only be one answer: slavery in Marx is not, properly speaking, capitalist. As many in the Marxist tradition have argued, in American slavery there was no separation of labor from the land; it was labor rather than labor power that was being commodified; capital and labor were not counterpoised by contract but cohabited in the same exploited body; the domination of labor was not abstract but concrete. According to the orthodox historiography of slavery in the United States, North American slavery was, like feudalism, precapitalist, archaic, a conservative residuum; its supersession by capitalism (here defined as an industrial mode of production characterized by wage labor) was inevitable. Theorizing beyond that fact is apparently unnecessary. So, that is what they say Marx says about slavery. But what does slavery say about Marx?

Imagine the history of that bolt of cotton Marx left out of *Capital*. It had been purchased before it even existed by a British buyer who extended credit in sterling to an American factor. It had been put in the ground, tended, picked, bagged, baled, and shipped by an American slave. It had graded out well and brought a premium price because it was free of trash (leaves, stems, sticks, rocks, etc.) and stains (which resulted from cotton being left in the field too long after it bloomed); its condition, that is, reflected the palpable presence of standards of the exchange in Liverpool in the labor regime that governed Louisiana. It had been shipped in the name of a planter who was liable for any difference between the price he had received in advance and the price it eventually brought—a planter,

that is, who was legally present at the exchange on which his cotton was sold. It had been summed out in the accounts between planters and factors in dollars that the factors had bought with the sterling they had received from English buyers and sold to Northern merchant bankers who would pass it on to those seeking to buy English manufactures. And it had been finished in an English mill, made into a coat, and ended up on the back of an English millhand who paid for it with his wages.

With the material facts of the Atlantic economy in mind, a heterodox reading of *Capital* emerges, particularly of Marx's image of capitalism as veiled slavery. According to Marx, the wage-labor contracts by which free workers sold control over the capacities of their bodies concealed deeper histories of coercion with a fiction of consent. The veil is an image for that concealment. It suggests the mystification by which the commodification of laborers and the commodification of labor power came to be understood as two separate and, indeed, opposite things—past and present, slavery and freedom, black and white, household and market, here and there—rather than as simultaneous, intertwined, and symbiotic elements of a larger structure of exploitation. The veil is shorthand for a complex cultural project: the identification of an array of social relations characterized by wage labor and the industrial mode of production as the accepted form of freedom. Following that bale of cotton, we can see the outline of a history of slavery organized not around the story of how slavery was replaced by freedom, but how slavery produced freedom.

Having worked so hard to understand how the world system of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries came to be divided into a set of Southern and Caribbean social relations called “slavery” and a set of Northern and European social relations called “freedom,” students of history may be surprised to find “contract freedom” or at least its emblematic historical figure—the self-determining liberal individual—popping up everywhere in the literature on slavery. But there he is (for his insistent masculinity is part of the problem with this particular historical subject), and nowhere more consistently

than in the emphasis on the recovery of slaves' agency that has framed so much recent work done on the social history of slavery.

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Despite seventy-five years of Black Marxist, Black Nationalist, and Black Feminist scholarship that challenges settled and oversimplified notions of African American subjectivity, "agency" remains the master trope historians use to understand arguments about slavery. It has become impossible to read W. E. B. Du Bois's *Black Reconstruction* or C. L. R. James's *The Black Jacobins*, John Blassingame's *The Slave Community* or Lawrence Levine's *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, Deborah Gray White's *Ar'n't I a Woman?*<sup>9</sup> or Nell Irvin Painter's *Sojourner Truth* apart from a discussion about "agency" that overwrites their complex accounts of human subjectivity and political organization and presses them into the background of a misconceived question about whether or not African American slaves were agents of their own destiny. The notion of agency has come to replace a set of serious questions about slavery with a set of bromides about freedom (reflexively defined as self-willed action, as "freedom from").

The common way to frame an argument about agency is to emphasize, as does one recent and influential account of American slavery, the fact that enslaved people successfully "strove to preserve their humanity." In the current political climate, the reiteration of a commitment to the preservation of black humanity is an understandable gesture. But framing that commitment as the defining contribution of our studies rather than as the simple predicate for any historical investigation reproduces, through the very act of repudiating, a set of arguments that historians have long since agreed should be laid to rest.

To say that, however, is to ask what historians mean (and what they miss) when they treat agency and humanity as if they defined one another. The word *agency* itself has a long and polysemous history, but as employed in social history it has generally been used in its primary sense as self-directed action, the type of action that the

*Oxford English Dictionary*, quoting Coleridge, terms “personal free agency” or, in the words of another recent historian of slavery, “independent will and volition.” That definition is saturated with the categories of nineteenth-century liberalism. *Agency* smuggles a notion of the universality of a liberal sense of selfhood (with its emphasis on independence and choice) into the middle of a conversation about slavery. Yet the supposedly natural condition of independent selfhood was originally defined *against* slavery, and depended materially upon it.

By applying the language of self-determination and choice to the historical condition of civil objectification and choicelessness, historians have ended up in a mess. They have embraced a rational-choice model of human beings, and shoved aside any consideration of humanness lived outside the conventions of liberal agency—any consideration, that is, of the condition of enslaved humanity. And out of this misleading entanglement of the categories of humanity and liberal agency has emerged a strange situation: the bare fact (as opposed to the self-conscious assertion) of enslaved humanity has come to be seen as resistance to slavery. As one historian puts it: “Whenever and wherever masters, whether implicitly or explicitly, recognized the independent will and volition of their slaves, they acknowledged the humanity of their bondpeople. Extracting this admission was, in fact, a form of slave resistance, because slaves thereby opposed the dehumanization inherent in their status.” As hard as it is to see when humanity is defined as agency and agency is defined as resistant, there were many ways for enslaved people to be human that involved neither resisting slavery (collaboration being only the most obvious) or acting as liberal agents. Think of the Providential Christianity of Nat Turner, the Africanity of the Maroons, or the complex subjectivity of natal alienation and filial longing expressed in the bare seven-word title of the spiritual “Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child.”

Posing questions about the condition of enslaved humanity, rather than searching for evidence of humanity as revealed by acts of self-determination, opens new ways of thinking about slavery.

To imagine the condition of enslaved humanity is to think, at once, about the bare life existence of slaves, the ways they suffered in and resisted slavery, and the ways they flourished in slavery—not in the sense of loving their slavery, but in the sense of loving themselves and one another. For enslaved people the most basic features of their lives—feeling hungry, cold, tired, needing to go to the bathroom—revealed the extent to which even the basic sensations of their physical bodies were shaped by their enslavement. So, too, with sadness and humor and love and fear. And yet those things were never reducible to simple features of slavery. The condition of enslaved humanity, it could be said, was at once thoroughly determined and insistently transcendent.

By reducing historically and culturally situated actions to manifestations of a larger, abstract human capacity—agency—historians have lost sight of important questions about how enslaved people conceived their own actions and how those actions provided the predicate for new ways of thinking about slavery and resistance. The reduction of all sorts of actions to the abstract category of “slaves’ agency” presumes the identity of the subject of history—that is, “an individual slave” rather than, say, “a Christian” or “a mother” or “the Coramantee” or “the blacks.” It begs important questions about politics and organization, about the difference between breaking a tool and being Nat Turner, and about the cultural forms and political process that could get somebody from one to the other. It alienates enslaved people from the historical circumstances of their own resistance, and replaces the history of slavery with the ideology of contract freedom.

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The oft-repeated injunction to “give the slaves back their agency” is an attempt to establish an ethics of the relationship between the present and the past, one that frames history writing as a mode of redress. The claims of the past upon the present are registered in terms of stolen agency and addressed through the writing of history that returns the stolen possession to its rightful owners. This practice

raises the question of what is really at stake in the repeated assertion that slaves should be the beneficiaries of contemporary scholarship: why don't historians invoke their colleagues or their students or their tenure files or their pocketbooks as the beneficiaries of the work they undertake?

I have nothing against the advertisement of good will, the recognition that scholarship is political, or the linkage of historical work to the project of redress. But I think that in order to understand the work of the bidding to "give slaves back their agency," we need to imagine its history. In the era of Civil Rights, the slave agent served as a sort of scholarly parallax for the elaboration of notions of black subjectivity and racial justice defined by citizenship—rights-bearing, self-determining individualism. The confluence of social history's emphasis on history from the bottom up and the emergent focus on enslaved people as agents of their own history created unprecedented access and influence for people of color within the academy, and produced a body of scholarship that was both exemplary in its scholarly rigor and influential in its vindication of the idea of black civil rights.

The times, however, have changed, and with them so must our form of address to the past. One need look no further than the fact that one in nine African American men between the ages of twenty and thirty-four is currently in jail, and thus not even subject to the narrow protection of the Thirteenth Amendment, to recognize the obduracy of racial injustice despite the achievements of the Civil Rights era. If we are to acknowledge the claims of the past upon the present and to frame our scholarship as an act of redress, it is important that we do so in ways that engage the exigencies of the present—the globalization of racialized and feminized structures of exploitation, the unprecedented rates of black incarceration in the United States, the resurgence of slavery (pure and simple slavery) as a mode of production, the identification of the unfolding history of freedom with a permanent state of war, and the emergence of new forms of global political solidarity and collective action. And we need to use terms other than those produced by an earlier struggle.



The argument for black reparations provides one such set of terms, one template for relating past to present, which might productively be applied to the history of slavery. Rather than accepting the idea that we are living at a moment characterized by the final chapter in the unfolding story of freedom, the theorists and grassroots activists of the reparations movement insist upon the presence of slavery, in both its historical guise and in more contemporary forms of exploitation and disadvantage, in the condition of blackness. Arguments for reparations contest the subordination of slavery to the story of freedom by demonstrating that slavery remains a living presence in the lives of African Americans. The reparations movement represents a counterhistory of the United States. The narrative markers framing American history as a progression toward the supposedly just society of today are replaced with images of temporal lags (the notion that the succession of slavery by freedom has been incomplete) or even of temporal stasis (the idea that American history is a single episode in a continuing, centuries-long Black Holocaust).

Yet the efficacy of reparations talk involves more than the creation of an alternative historical perspective. Compared to what it seeks to replace as the basis for national policy in regard to racial justice, reparations talk is exemplary in its historical rigor. The legal basis for the Affirmative Action programs provided by the Supreme Court's 1978 decision in *Regents v. Bakke*, as many scholars have noted, explicitly ruled out the possibility that "affirmative action" programs could be used to redress or rectify "a history of prior discrimination at the hands of the State and private individuals." They were, instead, to promote interracial understanding by providing opportunities for interracial contact, or, as the majority opinion put it, "the educational benefits that flow from an ethnically diverse student body." The ahistorical character of these remedies has enabled their legal dismemberment over the past several years. Absent any accounting of the historical roots of racial inequality (which the

*Bakke* decision referred to as being at once “transitory,” “amorphous,” and “ageless”), federal courts have based their decisions in equal-opportunity cases on what is in essence a timeless liberalism. They have supposed white and black subjects to be a priori equal (“agents” all!) and counted any explicit effort to address the effects of historically produced racial inequality as a violation of this timeless verity—even to the point of focusing their energy on the problem of “discrimination” against whites. Cast in this light, even the most meta-physical connections between the history of slavery and the injuries of the twenty-first century seem salutary reminders of the historical character of injustice.

The history of claims for slavery reparations provides a compelling alternative model for how we might begin to formulate a historical ethics. As a way of suggesting the possibilities (and some of the limitations) in reparations thinking, I will survey four examples of the effort to link claims for racial justice to the question of historical redress: the presentation of *The Black Manifesto* to the National Black Economic Development Conference in 1969; the publication of Randall Robinson’s *The Debt: What America Owes to Blacks* in 1999; the completion of Brown University’s report on “Slavery and Justice” in 2006; and the more broad-based and diffuse efforts of contemporary activists in local and state politics. Several questions about the way that these claims formulate the relationship between the past and the present will guide this analysis: What has been the nature of the past injury posited by various articulations of the idea of reparations? What has been the nature of the proposed redress? And who in the present has been called into account for what in the past?

James Forman’s 1969 *Black Manifesto* used a claim for reparations to call into question the notion of Civil Rights as the hallmark of black freedom, to call into question, in fact, the idea that it was possible for blacks to be free in the United States at all. Rather than seeking redress from a government that, in any case, it sought to overthrow, *The Black Manifesto*, drafted and delivered to the National Black Economic Development Conference in 1969, was addressed



to "The White Christian Churches and the Jewish Synagogues in the United States of America and all Other Racist Institutions." The specific reparations demanded in *The Black Manifesto* remapped the geography of black political and economic exclusion by proposing that the \$500,000,000 demanded be used to finance the institutional and infrastructural elaboration of a "Black Socialist State." Foremost among the proposals of the *Manifesto* was the use of \$200,000,000 to fund the creation of a "Southern land bank" to protect tenant farmers evicted from their homes in retaliation for political activism and to support the efforts of those wishing to establish cooperative farms. There were proposals for the establishment of publishing houses, television stations, and "a Black University in the South." There was money for research "on the problems of black people," for training in movie-making, television and radio manufacturing and repair, and other technical skills. And, finally, there was money to be allocated for the organization of welfare recipients, the creation of a National Black Labor Strike and Defense Fund, the support of African Liberation Movements, the creation of a Black Anti-Defamation League, and the mobilization of "black brothers and sisters who have acquired training and expertise in the fields of engineering, electronics, research, community organization, physics, biology, chemistry, mathematics, medicine, military science and warfare." The demands of *The Black Manifesto* framed the injury inflicted upon African Americans in the terms of arrested national development: they outlined a set of institutional and infrastructural improvements necessary to the achievement of black techno-modernity, and made the point that stolen black labor had "helped to build the most industrial country in the world."

*The Black Manifesto* represents what the historian and theorist Cedric Robinson might term a black radical reworking of the Marxian notion of primitive accumulation. Slavery, I have suggested, is treated in the orthodox Marxist tradition as a discrete stage of capitalist development, part of the process of property-making primitive accumulation that preceded and underwrote the development of industrial capitalism. In *The Black Manifesto*, slavery appears as

simply one part of a continuing subordination of black labor to the service of developing white power. This temporal dilation of the history of primitive accumulation was evident in the way that Forman characterized black people as historical subjects. The word *we* in *The Black Manifesto* variously refers to the “slaves,” “colonized people in the United States,” “African people,” “black men,” “black brothers and sisters,” and “black people” being called into action by the address. The demand for reparations for “our role in developing the industrial base of the Western world through our slave labor” is immediately followed by the assertion that “we are no longer slaves.” These temporal slippages disrupt the mode-of-production and national-boundary organization of Western historiography with an assertion of identity among people seemingly distant in time and space from one another. Ultimately, the *Manifesto* asserts a historical vision of radical simultaneity. The struggle that this *we* must join in 1969 began “on the shores of Africa, for we have always resisted attempts to make us slaves and now must resist the attempts to make us capitalists.” *The Black Manifesto* reworks the history of the exploitation of Africans in the Americas — by whatever means, under whatever mode of production, mystified by whatever category of analysis — as a single extended historical event.

The question of historical responsibility in *The Black Manifesto* is equally complex. Those to blame for the situation of black people in the United States—those on the other side of the centuries-long war of accumulation—are variously referred to as “rich white exploiters and racists,” “capitalists,” “imperialists,” “colonizers,” “the United States,” “General Motors, Ford, Chrysler, the DuPonts, the Rockefellers, the Mellons,” “the white-dominated leadership of the United Auto Workers,” “white America,” “Christians,” and “Jews.” Indeed, it is to the last two of these groups, in their institutional manifestation as churches and synagogues, that *The Black Manifesto* is addressed, and from which it claims reparations.

While the condensation of “white America” and “the rich white exploiters and racists who run this world” into “Christians and Jews” reflects cultural nationalism’s search for a foundationalist white

identity, it also represents the displacement of the role of the state—the United States—as the arbiter of black freedom. It sets aside the story by which the history of black freedom in the United States runs parallel to the history of American political institutions. In explaining why these demands for money have been placed before the churches and synagogues of the United States, Forman wrote that “we have the same rights . . . as the Christians had in going into Africa and raping our Motherland and bringing us away from our continent of peace and into this hostile and alien environment where we have been living in perpetual warfare since 1619.” The historical vision of *The Black Manifesto* is one of redress that focuses on patterns of economic, cultural, and sexual imperialism, patterns that antedate the history of the United States and cannot be addressed through its political institutions and state-based notions of justice and freedom. Beginning with the Christian institutions that provided the ideological justification for the slave trade, the centuries-long extraction of white wealth and pleasure from black people will be replaced by a moment of the extraction of wealth from white institutions by “Black revolutionaries,” culminating in the concrete-and-steel fabrication of a state in which “the total means of production are taken from the rich people and placed into the hands of the state for the welfare of all the people.”

In contrast to *The Black Manifesto*, which configured the links between past and present in terms of nationalist and socialist developmentalism, Randall Robinson’s 1999 book *The Debt* frames the call for reparations as an opportunity for psychic and spiritual healing. For Robinson, slavery was a radical cultural and psychological break from the African past that has never healed or even been fully recognized. His writing is punctuated by plaintive questions: “Where am I? Who am I? Why am I here?” In his own anguished loneliness, Robinson finds the key to understanding what he sees as a crisis of African American anomie. “Languages, customs, traditions, rituals, faiths, mores, taboos—all vitals of the immortal larger self—gone, extinguished,” he writes, “a seemingly eternal identity, a people’s whole memory, crushed under the remorseless commerce

of slavery. African Americans must spiritually survive from the meager basket of a few mean yesterdays. No chance of significant group progress there. None." The psychic character of the wound, for Robinson, shapes the character of the redress proposed. Indeed, for Robinson, the concrete terms of reparations proposals are less important than the fact that they are being proposed at all. He terms the bare posing of the question as "a good measure of our psychological readiness as a community to pull ourselves abreast here at home and around the world," and seems less concerned with forming demands (and still less with their practical possibility) than with exhorting black people to declare their own worth by claiming the right to form such demands, whatever they might eventually be. "The issue here is not whether or not we can, or will, win reparations," he writes, "the issue rather is whether we will fight for reparations, because we have decided for ourselves that they are our due."

There is much to be wary of in Robinson's accounting. It assumes, even more resolutely than *The Black Manifesto*, that the universal subject of black history is male. Robinson stages his account of the erasure of the African past as a conversation between a black male mentor and a young black man, and he presents "the status of today's Black male" as his only extended example of the concrete effects of history's unpaid debt. Not only that: Robinson's cultural nationalism seems hemmed in by a specifically U.S.-based black subjectivity rather than the international solidarities articulated in *The Black Manifesto*. Both the "Blacks" and the "America" of the book's subtitle are contained by the territorial boundaries of the United States—a strange framing, indeed, from a man who has done so much to advance a politically trenchant version of Pan-Africanism. Indeed, *The Debt* ultimately imagines the black subject as a neglected petitioner to the white state: Robinson's conversation between mentor and male, for example, occurs on the Washington Mall, where he pointedly notes the lack of a museum devoted to African American life in the American national theme park. Indeed, insofar as there is any concrete discussion of the terms of payment of the debt referred to in the book's title, it is the U.S. government that

is being held to account. This reinscribes the authority of the state as the ultimate arbiter and appropriate adjustor of the contending claims of its citizens. Finally, and perhaps most troubling, is the therapeutic tone of the activism Robinson proposes: a politics of self-improvement rather than of social transformation.

The report on "Slavery and Justice" was produced in 2006 by a committee appointed by the President of Brown University to study the role of slavery in the institution's history and "reflect on the meaning of this history in the present, on the complex historical, political, legal, and moral questions posed by any present-day confrontation with past injustice." The report came at a moment when the effort to advance the question of reparations at the federal level (the effort imagined by Randall Robinson) had reached an impasse. In Congress, H.R. 40, the Commission to Study Reparation Proposals for African Americans Act, has not yet moved out of committee. And in the courts (most recently, the Seventh Circuit Court in December of last year), state and federal judges have repeatedly ruled that plaintiffs in suits demanding reparations from corporations historically implicated in slavery had no standing to sue because there was no legally viable notion of responsibility that related the conduct of any given eighteenth- or nineteenth-century corporations to the condition of specific "living persons."

Federally based legal remedies having been foreclosed, recent reparations claims have unfolded along the same pathway as other sorts of social justice claims (or, more emblematically of the age, consumer protection claims) during the Bush Administration: at the levels of state and local government, and through the practice of corporate self-governance. The Brown Report represents an intellectually searching and historically scrupulous example of the latter (another is JPMorgan Chase's creation of a scholarship fund for African American college students): the effort of a powerful institution to hold itself to account for a legacy of injustice.

Perhaps at a moment in history when the mainstream discussion of racism is framed around a series of celebrity blowouts (John Rocker, Mel Gibson, Michael Richards) whose resolution takes the

form of confession and counseling, it was inevitable that efforts at institutional responsibility would be drawn into the metaphorical register of the talking cure. In the Brown Report, this takes the shape of an emphasis on “truth telling” over and against “denial and evasion” as a moral imperative, and an emphasis on the provision of a space for open dialogue about “traumatic histories” as the defining mode of redress, here understood as healing. Much of the Report adopts a he-said-she-said liberalism toward the actual prospect of material reparations, repeatedly noting that it is something over which “people of good will” can disagree, seeking instead to foster dialogue in and of itself—a task, it notes, to which universities are uniquely suited (though one they should be pursuing even in the absence of a claim to be providing “reparations”).

The Brown Report translates the question of the wrong represented by slavery from the economic reckoning of *The Black Manifesto* into a psychological register reminiscent of *The Debt*. “If one of the defining features of a crime against humanity is the legacy of bitterness, sensitivity, and defensiveness that it bequeaths to future generations, then American slavery surely qualifies,” wrote the committee. The Report here foreshortens its accounting of the effects of that crime into a dematerialized sense of psychic conflict, that is, into something susceptible of solution through dialogue rather than more material forms of redress.

But perhaps the greatest slippage in the Report is not in its assessment of the character of the wound, but of the wounded, for by the end of the Report, the question of reparations has been removed from the context of race. In contrast to *The Black Manifesto* or even *The Debt*, the committee at Brown framed the reparations question around an orthodox notion of history, treating the wrong in question—slavery—as an aspect of a distant past, and the claim for reparations as “retrospective justice,” comparable to national and international reconciliation efforts in such places as South Africa, Australia, and Japan. Such a treatment has the virtue of treating the question of reparations on a world-historical scale. Nations, however, have different interests than races, and reconciliation is a different

project from redress. The unruly claims to a black counterhistory voiced in *The Black Manifesto* are here translated into a call for dialogue across the color line and folded back into the American national story; claims of ineluctable racial and historical difference are treated as a question of race relations. In the Brown Report, the wounded subjects of the nation's catastrophic history are white as well as black, "defensive" as well as "embittered."

The list of remedies, albeit worthy and creative, proposed at the end of the Brown Report—creating a memorial and center for the study of "slavery and justice," "maintaining high ethical standards in regard to investments and gifts," outreach to public school students in Rhode Island—lacks a concrete commitment to any race-based remedy. Beneath the heading "Expand opportunities at Brown for those disadvantaged by the legacies of slavery and the slave trade" appears a carefully worded paragraph (apparently inserted by a band of insurgent lawyers) explaining that the university's stated commitment to "need-blind" admissions prevents it from offering racially specific scholarships. In the place of such a commitment, the Report reiterates the university's concern for "economically disadvantaged" populations, and provides some pointed but unspecific language about the recruitment and retention of minority students and faculty. Such are the politics of reparations in the age of color-blind liberalism.

As difficult as it is to reconcile the syntax of reparations with the lexicon of liberalism, among the recommendations made by the Brown Report is one that stands out for the materiality of its commitment to relating the wrongs of the past to those of the present: the call to reevaluate the institution's investment policies in light of the ethics of the corporations involved. While a recognition of other aspects of the university's policies in regard to wage rates, unionization, subcontracting, real estate speculation, land use, and environmental impact might have provided a fuller account of Brown's implication in the economics of racial disadvantage, the emphasis on investment reaches outward, connecting school to society and past to present in a potentially powerful manner. In so doing, it reflects the

work done over the last fifteen years or so by grassroots reparations activists who have attempted to use the circuitry of capitalism to map the connections between the past and present, between the accumulation of capital and the impoverishment of race.

Working largely at the state and local level, these activists have begun empirically reconstructing the historical involvement of existing corporations in the slave trade. They have passed laws requiring insurance companies doing business within the State of California to reveal whether they ever issued life insurance policies on slaves, and sued Aetna, claiming reparations for the same. They have set about quantifying the costs of lost wages, excessive interest and mortgage charges, government sponsorship of the development of racially exclusive suburbs and schools, and other continuing affirmative action programs for white people. They have mapped the vulnerability of black bodies to degraded social services, police violence, incarceration, execution, and other forms of politically produced suffering. They have used the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century history of Barclay's bank as a way to contest the destruction of twenty-first century Brooklyn, and articulated a right of return for the black citizens of New Orleans—a claim to ground based upon the proxy citizenship of history and home standing against the fiscal, ecological, and martial notions of historical development so malignly arrayed against them. The activists have, it could be said, provided a historical and material accounting of “the social construction of race” that maps and quantifies the material correlates of inequality in the United States.

And, at the end of that accounting, they have proposed a set of solutions that, in their focus on social transformation and institution building, go well beyond the stipendiary character of the historical precedents for reparations. They have proposed financial restitution from institutions like insurance companies and realtors who can be shown to have directly profited from their interest in black disadvantage. They have proposed remedies such as universal access to health care and higher education for African Americans that directly address the past-determined conditions of black humanity in



the United States. They have revised and in some cases transformed school curricula relating to Africa and African Americas. Broadly speaking, they have articulated the historical conditions of black disadvantage through a detailed analysis of the interleaved histories of capitalism and racism, and proposed an agenda for its redress through the transformation of black civil society. And they have done so at a moment when the reparations discussion has become a genuinely international one: one that has transformed understandings of black politics and subjectivity in Brazil, the Caribbean, Nigeria, Ghana, and elsewhere. Particularly in light of the United Nations' statement in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights that slavery and the slave trade were "crimes against humanity," it is possible to see reparations as a template for a genuinely international, anticapitalist, and antiracist politics, one that would dynamically interconnect the past with the present and the history of the United States with that of the rest of the world.

Still, it is important to emphasize the continuing limitations—or perhaps determinations—of the reparations discussion. Throughout its history, the idea of reparations has been framed according to what Cedric Robinson might call a logic of dialectical negation. Reparations talk—the 1960s techno-modernity of *The Black Manifesto*, the 1990s multicultural Americanism of Robinson's museum on the Mall, the corporate confessionalism of the Brown Report, or the dollar-value calculation of the tort that shapes much of the broader contemporary discussion—has recapitulated the dominant terms of American politics at any given moment, even as it has criticized the history that produced those terms. Indeed, even as they contest teleological accounts of the progress of freedom, even the most pointed of the present-day efforts have embedded within them an eschatology that assumes that final payment of this debt is possible, and that on this day of reckoning the history that began with the slave trade might be brought to an end. And, finally, these claims necessarily assign a racial character to what are (or ought to be) universal values, such as equal access to health care and public education, and equal protection from arbitrary violence.

And yet throughout their history, calls for reparations have produced complex notions of politics, subjectivity, and history that exceed the historically conditioned limitations of the terms of redress they have proposed. The intellectuals and activists in the reparations movement have not only replaced the temporally isolated liberal individual "I" with a racially and historically structured notion of "we" as the subject of history. They have also sought to contest the organization of African American history around milestones derived from the historiography of modern Europe and the United States. Rather than accepting a history organized around successive modes of production or expanded notions of citizenship (here understood as voting rights), they have asked why, if so much history is supposed to have happened and so much to have changed, blacks are always on the bottom. Through their practice they have attempted to rework the relation of the past and present into one more representative of the daily experience of blackness in the United States and elsewhere.

In so doing they have illuminated and called into question ideas of historical development that are widely accepted in the United States. By using slavery as a paradigm for understanding black history in the Americas all the way up to the present day, they cast doubt on the story of American history as a story of progress toward freedom, and contest the colonization of the history of American slavery by the supposedly subsequent story of American freedom. By treating American history, not simply American slavery, as at root defined by the economic exploitation of Africans and African Americans by whites, they reveal the extent to which liberal notions of responsibility (like those that frame the Seventh Circuit Court's recent decisions) rely upon segmenting history according to a logic of individual life. They note that this individualism has little actual relation to such underlying historical processes as capitalist exploitation and the intergenerational accumulation of wealth. They contest the legal liberalism that fragments American history into tiny sets of temporally specific personal relations, making it impossible to establish present responsibility for past action. They challenge the recombinant

nationalism that rewrites all of American history as a prelude to freedom. Finally, they question the narrative of American history that sees an inevitable progression from slavery to wage labor and that equates voting rights with freedom, in part by insisting on a deeper set of historical continuities—continuities that directly relate the wrongs of the present to those of the past, that treat episodes conventionally designated as the past and the present as emerging from the same historical process, namely, a centuries-long “Black Holocaust.” Viewing the work in the world of the self-designated “servant of freedom” and considering the fact that there are estimated to be twenty-seven million slaves in the world today, it might do us good to try for a while to imagine our history framed not by the story of freedom but by that of slavery.

In light of the actuality of contemporary slavery, Bush’s remarkable phrase “servant of freedom” provokes some serious questions. Whose service is it that produces freedom, we might ask? And where? And for whom? Where Bush’s use of the phrase “a nation of slaveholders that became the servant of freedom” works out a pat narrative of American history, a literal reading of the phrase “servant of freedom” argues otherwise, indeed insists upon the simultaneous presence of servitude in its definition of “freedom.” Read that way, Bush’s phrase marks not the expulsion of slavery from the American social body and the dawn of the age of freedom, but the insinuation of slavery and servitude into the heart of the notion of freedom. It calls on us to think of freedom not as a condition that can be achieved once and for all at the happily-ever-after ending of the American story, but as an ongoing social relation in which the freedom of some is actively and violently produced through the service of others.

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