

UNTHINKING RACIAL REALISM: A FUTURE FOR REPARATIONS?¹

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Abstract

Considered costly, divisive, and backward-looking, reparations for slavery and Jim Crow appear to have no place in the politics of the “postracial epoch.” This essay proposes that the dismissal of reparations concedes too much. First, I contend that the conjunction of postracial discourse, on the one hand, and deepening racial inequalities, on the other, demands a counter-language, one that ties the analysis of the present to the historical conditions out of which it was produced. I explore reparations as a political language that (1) situates political claims within the historical framework of slavery, reconstruction, and segregation; (2) links past to present to future in its demand for concrete forms of redress; and (3) has played an important role in African American political life and in contemporary democracies in transition. Second, in contrast to much of the reparations scholarship, I focus on the demands of democracy rather than justice. Doing so both helps to evade some of the technical questions that have prevented full consideration of the political work of reparations and provides a vehicle for redefining both governmental and civic responsibility in the shadow of slavery and Jim Crow.

Keywords: Reparations, Postracial, Political Responsibility, Reconstruction, Egalitarianism

INTRODUCTION

W. E. B. Du Bois’s (1997) bitter summation of the thrust of social Darwinism sounds old-fashioned: “The silently growing assumption of this age is that the probation of races is past, and that the backward races of to-day are of proven inefficiency and not worth the saving” (p. 197). Americans today do not talk of “backward races,” or of “races” at all, with the same ease that Du Bois did in 1903. From the safe distance of the twenty-first century, his formulation clearly highlights how far we have come from the bad old days of racial distinctions and hierarchies. From another angle, however, the diagnosis seems not to be so safe or distant. What it reveals is a version of racial realism that finds its echo in contemporary common sense about race. According to this view, Americans need to stop focusing on the injuries of the past and face up to the reality that racial inequality, though deplorable, reflects Black Americans’ failure, individually and/or collectively, to take responsibility for their own fates. Further, it reflects a need to face up to the limitations of governmental efforts to realize a more egalitarian society and come to terms with the hard truth that further public action not only violates the rights of racially privileged citizens but undermines the agency of the disadvantaged.²

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In the face of realist common sense, prospects for a revitalized struggle for substantive racial equality are bleak. And approaching that struggle through demands for reparations appears to be a political dead end. After all, White support for material reparations is nearly nonexistent; and, despite the recent flurry of official expressions of regret for slavery and segregation, a substantial majority of White Americans oppose even an apology for slavery.³ Reparations litigation has come up empty in the courts, and the momentum that the reparations movement gained at the end of the twentieth century and beginning of the twenty-first appears to have been stifled by the election of Barack Obama to the White House. Race no longer matters, many citizens believe. Racial disparities simply reflect individual or cultural deficiencies. In this context, many of the most articulate opponents of reparations for slavery and segregation are racial egalitarians. They are scholars and public figures who are deeply distressed by the persistence of exclusion, domination, and division across racial lines and convinced that they are, to some degree, traceable to the legacies of slavery and Jim Crow. Yet they worry that proposals to redress the crimes of the past could do more harm than good, exacerbating the resentment of citizens who are affronted by the implication that they are culpable for injuries inflicted before they were born. Worse, these efforts might stimulate renewed animus against African Americans and distract the public from the gravity of contemporary social ills, including high unemployment in communities of color, dysfunctional schools, disparities in health and wealth, crumbling infrastructure, and mass incarceration. It seems impractical, maybe even irresponsible, to tackle today's racial disparities by conjuring the ghosts of bygone crimes. As Herman Melville's (2008) Captain Delano famously observes: "The past is passed; why moralize upon it?" (p. 106).

Among egalitarian critics of reparations, Glenn Loury provides a telling example. In recent years, he has offered a trenchant critique of the ways that race-blindness misreads both present circumstances and historical evidence, yet he is unequivocal in his rejection of any demand for compensation. Loury (2007) declares, "We Black Americans have little to gain and much to lose from making 'Reparations Now' the next civil rights rallying cry" (p. 87). His point is political: African Americans should not squander hard-won moral and political authority in pursuit of compensatory schemes that would surely be inadequate in the unlikely event that they were accepted by the broader public. Still, even as he offers a "resounding, 'No'" (p. 87) to reparations, he opens the door to another possibility. Loury allows that "[i]f one intends by [reparations] advocacy to urge on the American people a sober reflection on and reinterpretation of those aspects of our history which gave rise to the current extent of unequal social and economic standing between racially defined subgroups of American society," then "[his] answer is a tentative, hopeful, 'Yes'" (p. 87).

This view that reparations is terrible politics, and more historical consciousness should be encouraged, describes a recurrent theme among Americans committed to racial equality. It resonates, for example, with Obama's 2008 "A More Perfect Union" address that both insists on the lived power of historical injustice and yet disavows the pursuit of a more democratic polity through "divisive" speech. "We do need to remind ourselves that so many of the disparities that exist in the African-American community today can be directly traced to inequalities passed on from an earlier generation that suffered under the brutal legacy of slavery and Jim Crow," Obama told his audience in Philadelphia. It was a stunning admission for a political candidate, especially so for an African American vying for the presidency. Still, Obama's effort to promote historical reflection while suturing division reinforces the view that the pursuit of reparations is wrongheaded. Political scientists Desmond King and Rogers Smith (2011) concur. Even as they criticize Obama for abdicating his responsibility to encourage White

Americans to embrace some race-conscious policies, they suggest that reparations talk reinforces what Obama described as a “racial stalemate” (p. 7), rather than a path toward racial progress.

Costly, divisive, and backward-looking, reparations demands appear to have no place in the politics of the “postracial epoch.” Yet this essay proposes that the dismissal of reparations concedes too much to the racial realists. By contrast, I argue that egalitarians ought to take seriously the proposal that reparations for slavery and segregation is a democratic idea for three reasons. First, owning and exploring the concept counters an imbalance in contemporary political discourse. I agree with King and Smith (2011) that a politics of “evasion and euphemism” (p. 13) has been ineffective in responding to racial inequality. But if racial egalitarians run from the word “reparations,” the same cannot be said for conservatives. Whether named explicitly or merely implied, reparations is often a stalking horse for anti-civil rights activism. Glenn Beck’s warning, in 2009, that proposals for healthcare, access to college, and green jobs were part of the president’s plan to smuggle in reparations through the “back-door” indicates why it matters that the idea of reparations be openly discussed by advocates of a more egalitarian polity.

Second, reparations claims deserve attention precisely *because* they have been, both historically and in the present, dismissed as unthinkable. The purported novelty of the postracial epoch disguises the recurrent characterization of Black political demands as untimely and the ritual character of White expressions of impatience to move beyond race. White Americans are tired of talking about race, observes law professor Darren Hutchinson. They are committed to a view that any lingering inequalities along racial lines are the consequence of poor personal choices and that remedies for racial wrongs are “redundant, unnecessary, vexatious, futile, and unfair to Whites” (Hutchinson 2009, p. 926). As Hutchinson notes, contemporary complaints of racial exhaustion are not new. Rather, when it comes to racial justice, White Americans may suffer from “chronic fatigue syndrome” (p. 953). Today’s complaints thus echo those of White legislators who argued against the Freedman’s Bureau because enough—or too much—had already been done on behalf of the former slaves. They resonate with the Supreme Court’s reasoning in the *Civil Rights Cases* (1883) and *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896); and they extend twentieth-century critiques of civil rights legislation at the state and federal levels (Hutchinson 2009). Taking the idea of reparations seriously demands a confrontation with this history. Dismissing it out of hand, by contrast, helps to sustain White habits of devaluation of Black claims for equality.

Third, for political theorists, the recurrent dismissal of reparations ought to spur rather than stymie critical thinking. Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s (1995) analysis of European and American responses to the Haitian Revolution offers some conceptual help in this regard. The fact that enslaved people in Saint-Domingue succeeded in throwing off their masters and establishing themselves as a sovereign state was beyond the limits of intelligibility, Trouillot remarks, because European critics of slavery were not epistemologically prepared for the challenge the revolution posed. “When reality does not coincide with deeply held beliefs,” he explains, “human beings tend to phrase interpretations that force reality within the scope of these beliefs. They devise formulas to repress the unthinkable and to bring it back within the realm of accepted discourse” (p. 72). Reparations demands likewise violate the terms of what Trouillot calls “accepted discourse” insofar as they force a confrontation with questions about the centrality of slave labor to the constitution of American democracy, and about the successive forms of racial power and habitual practices that have devalued Black life and citizenship since the Civil War. It is precisely because investigating the limits, possibilities, and genealogies of political discourse is what political theorists *do* that

reparations' disrepute ought to be seized as an invitation to reflect. Otherwise, political theorists risk reproducing the broader public refusal to explore the idea of redress for slavery and segregation. They risk, in other words, incorporating a disregard for Black citizenship into their scholarship.

My point is not to argue that reparations, in any form, will single-handedly transform political conditions or eliminate racial hierarchies in the United States. Nor is it simple perversity that animates my conviction that the very terminology thought to shut down constructive conversations across racial lines might be used to stimulate collective thinking about racial equality. I recognize the force of Ellis Cose's (2004) remark that "even without the explosive element of race, reparations is a difficult subject And once race enters the room, what was already a difficult conversation becomes virtually impossible" (p. 167). Despite the difficulty Cose identifies, I posit that a revival of reparations talk might reinvigorate democratic thinking in two specific ways. First, I contend that the conjunction of postracial discourse, on the one hand, and deepening racial inequalities, on the other, demands a counter-language that ties the analysis of the present to the historical conditions out of which it was produced. Reparations can provide such a language. Imperfect though it may be, reparations talk may provide the best available rebuttal to racial realists. It is distinct from reconciliation, regret, and apology (although it may work together with any or all of them) insofar as it goes beyond the expression of an attitude to material exemplification. Because reparations claims have long played an important role in African American political and social movements, taking them seriously will democratize democratic theory by widening the bounds of what counts as "accepted discourse" and whose utterances can be heard. Second, in contrast to much of the reparations scholarship, I focus on the demands of democracy rather than justice. Doing so, I argue, both helps to evade some of the technical questions that have prevented full consideration of the political work of reparations and indicates how a commitment to reparations could serve the unfinished task of democratic reconstruction. Countering the historical and ongoing devaluation of Black citizenship, reparations provide a vehicle for redefining both governmental and civic responsibility in the shadow of slavery and Jim Crow.

CONVERSATION STOPPING, CONVERSATION CHANGING

Why embrace a language of reparations now? Loury's concern that speaking of reparations is dangerous ought to give advocates pause. But it may be precisely the dangerous character of the language of reparations—its offense—that makes it so necessary today. Indeed, part of what is singular about reparations talk is that it is heard both as a threat or affront and as a promise of repair. The latter, with its close connection to maintenance, mending, fixing, restoring, and making amends, is akin to the kinds of ongoing political work that Sheldon Wolin (1989) calls tending. Politically, it matters a great deal that reparations claims have been not only unthinkable, but also largely unspeakable, in mainstream public discourse. The banishment of reparations as unworthy of serious discussion does real work. In the face of what Thomas Shapiro (2004) describes as a "U-turn in racial progress" (p. 10), race-neutral and ahistorical public languages can naturalize and even exacerbate racial inequality. Although the idea of Black reparations is often popularly interpreted to mean a one-time pay-out, many reparations activists and scholars have refused such narrow terms. Instead, they have approached reparations as a political language that joins a vision of a reconstituted, multiracial polity to an insistence on confronting racial slavery and its legacies (Biondi 2003; Henry 2007; Johnson 2007; Kelley 2002). Following their lead, this section

focuses on the distinctive promise of reparations as a political language that: (1) situates political claims within the historical framework of slavery, reconstruction, and segregation; (2) links past to present to future in its demand for concrete forms of redress; and (3) has played an important role in both African American political history and in contemporary democracies in transition.

Reparations language, unlike other forms of political discourse, trains citizens' sights on the heritage of the living past. Inculcating such a perspective is especially urgent in an era in which both political and popular commitments to color blindness disconnect present circumstances from past policies and relations of power. In the post-civil rights period, notes Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2006), Americans both disown the overt racism of previous generations and rely on a collection of color-blind "story lines" (p. 76), collective myths that explain away contemporary racial inequalities and disavow responsibility. Among these story lines, claims such as "the past is the past" or "I didn't own any slaves" discredit not only reparations efforts but *any* governmental efforts to address racial disparities. Perhaps even more ominously, one psychological study finds that a growing number of White Americans now believe that Whites are the primary victims of racial prejudice and that any forward motion against anti-Black racism entails an equal step backward in the status of Whites (Norton and Sommers, 2011). To scrutinize these views within a framework that traces links between past crimes and present inequality is not simply to appeal to history. Rather, a reparative frame unsettles progressive slavery-to-freedom narratives and dislodges the hold of color-blind histories that either collapse all historical specificity into an ideal in which race has no legitimate significance or admit the horrors of history only to reinforce a conviction about democratic accomplishment. Reparations talk also reveals how preemptory announcements that "the past is past" discredit *some* historical claims as wholly backward-looking, while advancing others as essential to Americans' collective future. Often, these historical stories emphasize White sacrifice (in the Civil War, for example) and public largesse (the welfare state) while occluding the conditions in which African Americans have actually lived since abolition. "Reparations talk," by contrast, "is exemplary in its historical rigor" (Johnson 2007, p. 55).

The language of reparations is also distinct in its association of the acknowledgment of wrong with a material response. Indeed, speaking of reparations raises unsettling questions about the purpose of the official expressions of regret for slavery and segregation, and calls for racial reconciliation that have proliferated at the local, state, and federal levels over the past five years. Often, these statements have explicitly or implicitly excluded consideration of material redress, whether individual or collective. They have been in effect, if not by design, instances of what Trouillot (2000) calls "abortive rituals" (p. 171), efforts that circumvent political efforts to address deep structural inequalities. By contrast, Margaret Urban Walker (2007) notes that reparations connect "acknowledgment" to "exemplification"; reparations efforts are transactional insofar as their meaningfulness depends on both the statement of responsibility and the action(s) it engenders. Although the idea of reparations is not reducible to economic compensation, and it may entail an apology or appeal for reconciliation, the value of those utterances is measured by the degree to which they actually enhance citizens' well-being. The value of reparations, in other words, resides in their connection to concrete projects of repair. Such projects could encompass a range of initiatives, including major financial commitments to predominantly African American communities and institutions, political and legal reforms, scholarships and educational programs, public history projects, and truth commissions.⁴ To see reparations in these terms is to refuse the choice between backward- and forward-looking orientations and to reconceive possible futures by shifting attention from Black disadvantage as

a timeless social fact to the ways in which, historically, Black Americans have been “taken advantage of” (Lipsitz 2011, p. 2).

Reparations talk also raises questions about why White citizens are incredulous about Black entitlement to the basic benefits of citizenship and suggests that race-blind narratives of capitalist development and individual merit deserve closer scrutiny. To that end, Adrienne Davis (2007) remarks, “Putting racism into economic language is important. A significant effect of racism is its dissociation of Blacks from markets and economics. Part of the reason so many Americans are skeptical of awarding reparations is the absence of a compelling discourse of Black economic personality and desert of wealth” (p. 378). Dave Chappelle’s 2003 spoof of societal fantasies about what Black Americans would do with a reparations check (think diamonds, fried chicken, and Cadillac Escalades) illustrates the force of Davis’s concern (*Chappelle’s Show* 2003). To be sure, it is possible that a language of reparations could do more harm than good, if it were reducible to a single transaction. Melissa Nobles’ (2008) conclusion that “apologies potentially ‘open the books,’ whereas reparations close them,” registers such a danger (p. 139). Yet neither the language of reparations nor the historical claims of Black reparations activists require such closure.

Reparations talk not only rebuts the historical fallacies that undergird racial realism and offers an alternative to purely symbolic forms of memorial politics, but it also draws from the rich reservoirs of Black political thought and practice from the era of antislavery activism to the present. Speaking of reparations enlarges and deepens political theory by calling attention to often forgotten ideas of celebrated thinkers and leaders, in addition to the ideas that have emerged from less respectable, more nationalist forms of political organizing. On the one hand, taking reparations seriously might lead present-day thinkers to a new examination of Whitney Young’s 1963 proposal for a “Marshall Plan for the Negro”; Young’s proposal included federal investment in jobs, housing, and education for Black Americans to compensate them for years of preferential treatment toward Whites (Sugrue 2008; Young 1964).⁵ Thinking seriously about reparations could also attune contemporary admirers of Martin Luther King, Jr. (1986) to his references to the unfinished work of emancipation and his reminder that Americans have defaulted on the “promissory note” (p. 217) issued by the founders. On the other hand, and equally crucially, studying Black reparations movements requires engagement with the ideas of activists and intellectuals who have favored revolution over uplift; it reopens the conversation about ideas too casually dismissed as radical, nationalist, and militant (Aiyetoro and Davis, 2010; Berry 2005; Biondi 2003; Kelley 2002). In this sense, my proposal echoes Mari Matsuda’s (1987) call for scholarship that proceeds by “looking to the bottom,” learning from the legal and political concepts of grassroots traditions and dishonored communities. Mary Frances Berry’s (2005) remark that “the poorest African Americans have been the most consistent supporters of reparations for slavery” (p. 230) since the late nineteenth century indicates why addressing reparations demands could upend conventional understandings of who produces theory and who is its object. That many of the leaders of the reparations movement, including Callie House in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and Audley (Queen Mother) Moore during the second half of the twentieth century, have been women further magnifies the importance of listening more attentively. It indicates how much democratic theorists have to learn from the dissident citizens whose critiques have gone unheeded.⁶

In a context in which not only reparations talk but (critical) Black political discourse more generally has been discredited by White Americans as “outside the boundaries of acceptable speech” (Dawson 2011, p. 26), taking reparations seriously may itself be a democratic act. It provides a weapon to counter what Walker (2006)

discerns as the “normative contempt” (p. 226) embodied in White unwillingness to probe or be disturbed by the evidence of racial disparities. Developing political claims through a language of reparations need not preclude other possibilities. It does not, for example, undermine Ira Katznelson’s (2005) plea to reinvigorate the “idiom of affirmation” (p. 145) or to reconstitute affirmative action so that it is as robust as it was across the generations when its beneficiaries were almost exclusively White. Nonetheless, unlike affirmative action, which is associated with elite policy discourse, reparations language is distinctively challenging to the status quo in that *it could not be thought or said* in most polite policy circles. By returning to the ideas and words of politically marginal actors, it enlarges the world of democratic ideas that are “thinkable, sayable, legible” (Butler 1997, p. 41).

Not only does the language of reparations draw from deep reservoirs of African American struggle, it also situates questions of democracy in the United States within a larger context of global efforts to come to terms with the living legacies of a violent or repressive history. Drawing on a language of reparations has the virtue of moving conversations about race and democracy beyond the United States in ways that not only challenge the boundedness of American politics, but also offer opportunities to learn from political experiments elsewhere, such as South Africa, Morocco, Chile, Peru, Sierra Leone, Timor-Leste, Argentina, and Ghana.⁷ This list is incomplete, but it represents a sample of the countries in which reparations programs of some kind have been proposed, if not implemented, as part of the transition from mass violence and/or repression to a more democratic polity. That innovation often emerges from redress efforts in postcolonial and postapartheid settings heightens the democratic stakes of attending to those efforts.⁸ Moreover, the currency of reparations language as a worthy topic of debate, if not a realized policy, around the world intimates that the anti-reparations intransigence in the United States is outdated. Examination of recent re-foundings that have involved some promise or at least a discussion of reparations may offer conceptual assistance at a moment when the United States seems firmly in the grip of forms of postracialism that either ignore or justify the degree to which gains of the civil rights era have stalled or regressed. Perhaps it might *provincialize* America, to borrow a line from Dipesh Chakrabarty (2007), and provincialize democratic theory by recalling the degree to which apparently universal ideals are born out of a particular, and often violent and antidemocratic, history.

AFTER JUSTICE

For the language of reparations to do the work I suggest, the concept of reparations needs to be approached as a political, and, more specifically, democratic idea. I contend that understanding reparations in this way offers an opportunity to approach the unasked questions of what it would mean to reform the United States as a democratic polity in the aftermath of slavery and segregation, and to make an overdue, explicit commitment to African American citizens. In this regard, my argument departs from most recent academic treatments of Black reparations, which have concentrated on questions of justice. Such an approach is not surprising, but it has been debilitating. Because debates about reparations typically revolve around questions of what is owed to victims and by whom, and they have flourished in law schools and philosophy departments, a preoccupation with justice is to be expected. My approach, like Pablo de Greiff’s (2007), conceives of reparations as “a political and not a juridical [or moral] project” (pp. 156–157). The aim is twofold—to explore reparations as a vehicle for redressing the historic denial and denigration of Black citizenship, on the one hand, and for rethinking the norms and attendant responsibilities of all citizens

and the democratic state, on the other. In this sense, reparations are fundamental to democratic reconstruction.

What difference might such a reorientation make? First, shifting the focus of concern from justice to democracy would help to avoid the morass of technical questions—of standing, sovereign immunity, statutes of limitations, and so on—that have tied up legal inquiries in reparations. It would, furthermore, provide an alternative to interminable debates about how to identify appropriate perpetrators and victims or to distinguish between backward- and forward-looking remedies that have animated much of the philosophical literature. Let me offer just one example. In philosophical treatments of reparations, arguments frequently hinge on a distinction between corrective and distributive justice; and reparations advocates have been accused of confusing or conflating the two. Tommie Shelby (2011), for instance, maintains that “the concept of reparations is fundamentally about rectifying past wrongs. In particular, it is about repairing the damage done by past injustice, restoring the victims to their condition prior to the injustice or, if this isn’t possible, compensating the victims for their losses. Whether such restitution or compensation would help bring about material equality or democratic inclusion is irrelevant” (p. 395). Yet insisting on this neat division between “past injustice,” with its idea of a status quo ante to which the victims might be restored, and current forms of economic inequality obscures the legacies of slavery and segregation, while hobbling efforts to develop creative responses to them. Instead, I echo Trouillot’s (2000) caution against a notion of historical responsibility that treats past crimes as discrete events—an original sin—and that ties reparations to a “linear relation between time and responsibility which assumes that the effects of past wrongs are necessarily more concrete when the actual victims are still on the ground” (p. 183).

Conceiving reparations as a *democratic* idea highlights the ways in which historical forms of racial oppression, exploitation, and violence have impeded the flourishing of Black citizens, and therefore damaged the polity as a whole. According to Ruth Rubio-Marín (2008), reparations are “acts of recognition of people as equal citizens and right-holders which, paraphrasing Andrew Schaap, will facilitate the recognition of the other as ‘sharing a space for politics within which citizens divided by memories of past wrongs could debate and contest the terms of their political association’” (p. 211). Not only do they redress specific injuries, she continues, but they serve as “discursive instruments” (p. 212) that enable the articulation of political claims by women and men who have been publicly silenced or discounted.

A language of reparations can call attention to and begin to repair the historical—and ongoing—devaluation of Black citizenship. Ida B. Wells (1999) noted at the turn of the twentieth century that the end of slavery did not simply give birth to freedom, as popular histories would have it. Drawing a direct connection between emancipation and abandonment accompanied by the chilling (wishful) thought that Black citizens were “doomed to extinction,” Wells reminds us that it was not simply reparations, but also Black membership in the life of the polity that could not be conceived of in the aftermath of the Civil War.

The Civil War of 1861–65 ended slavery. It left us free, but it also left us homeless, penniless, ignorant, nameless and friendless. Life is derived from the earth and the American Government is thought to be more humane than the Russian. Russia’s liberated serf was given three acres of land and agricultural implements with which to begin his career of liberty and independence. But to us no foot of land nor implement was given. We were turned loose to starvation, destitution, and death. So desperate was our condition that some of our statesman declared it useless to try to save us by legislation as we were doomed to extinction (Wells 1999, p. 17).

Her assessment, offered in 1893 as a counterweight to Americans' self-representation in the Columbian Exposition in Chicago, also undercut the Supreme Court's judgment in the late nineteenth century that Congress had done too much to remedy the injuries of slavery and its aftermath (Hutchinson 2009). Although Wells does not use the word "reparations," she presses her readers to consider the harm done by refusing to contemplate what was owed and what was required at slavery's end. As Robert Westley (2005) notes over a century later: "Actual reparations . . . cannot reinforce the cultural logic of Black devaluation and White privilege the way that denial of reparations does" (p. 106).

In the contemporary context, dismissals of reparations, even by egalitarians, can reinforce this logic and compound the injury. Discerning a connection between the rise of reparations activism in the late twentieth century and the emergence of a discourse of "victims' rights," John Torpey (2007) bemoans the substitution of identity politics for an ideal of equal citizenship and the end of a prior (golden) age of universalist activism. To declare that the idea of equal citizenship "was once aspiration enough for the dispossessed and disenfranchised" (p. 222) is to give weight to a view that Black reparations claims are inherently narrow, particularistic, and illegitimate. In Torpey's view, reparations demands fragment the polity, substituting "political claims on the basis of people's membership in groups defined by sociological characteristics rather than . . . their common membership in a politically defined community" (p. 216). By reexamining the struggle for equal citizenship through the lens of African American history, in contrast, Wells prompts her readers to consider not only the obstacles to realizing equal citizenship, but also the democratic costs of proclaiming one's commitment to equality by defaming the aspirations of women and men to whom it has been repeatedly, and viciously, denied.

Is it hyperbolic to call on Wells's narrative of abandonment in the context of twenty-first-century struggles? Simply to say that nothing has changed is irresponsible. Yet the postracial insistence that everything has changed is equally worthy of scrutiny and critique. One of the dangers of color blind or postracial conceptions of U.S. democracy is their reinforcement of a history that occludes the actual conditions in which African American citizens have lived since abolition. As both Margaret Somers (2007) and Michael Dawson (2011) have argued, the betrayal of New Orleans' most vulnerable residents in 2005 provides a snapshot of citizenship in the postracial epoch. "The story of the Katrina crisis is a social parable of citizenship in America today," writes Somers (2007, p. 63). Echoing Wells' account of the post-Civil War landscape, Somers reconstructs the decades-old story of abandonment in which "those left behind in New Orleans to face the storm alone were *already* a rightless, stateless, and expendable population" (p. 11, emphasis in original). Despite the prevalence of narratives of racial overcoming and the attribution of inequalities to personal or communal failure, Somers contends that in the contemporary United States, "two different systems of inequality and exclusion—one based on immutable, particularistic and arbitrary race-based attributes, the other based on market-driven class inequalities—have been grafted together to create a previously unmatched level of almost total exclusion from civil society, an exclusion that is much greater than the sum of its parts as it amounts to nothing less than nonrecognition" (pp. 105–106). Not even the televised, real-time evidence of the fatal consequences of this "nonrecognition" could shake a widespread conviction that race no longer matters. On the contrary, Dawson (2011) argues, Black efforts to shape public understanding of Katrina and bring racial questions to the fore were the subject of "ridicule" (pp. 2–3). They were unthinkable.

These histories intimate a kinship between the degradation or expendability of Black citizens, on the one hand, and the failure to consider reparations, on the other.

They also suggest why thinking *through* reparations is potentially critical to the flourishing of democratic life in the United States. In the postracial context, to speak of reparations is not to be enmeshed in the burdens of the past so much as it is to affirm the possibility of a future in which broken promises of citizenship might be redeemed. Reparations talk offers a mechanism through which “to take into account the structures of privilege unleashed by a history of power and domination and to evaluate the current losses induced by the reproduction of these structures” (Trouillot 2000, p. 183). Reparations, in other words, query what law professor Ariela Gross (2008) calls “the time of slavery” (p. 283) and impels citizens to reconsider their political priorities in light of the history of systemic disregard for some citizens and impunity for others.⁹

Building on Iris Marion Young’s (2011) conception of political responsibility, I suggest how thinking through reparations might provide an alternative to two regular features of public discourse that have stymied efforts to address the legacies of slavery and segregation: collective guilt and personal responsibility. The idea of collective guilt, which is conjured so vividly in the outraged insistence that “*I didn’t own slaves,*” individualizes and isolates responsibility, reducing it to liability for discrete actions that happened sometime in the past. Young’s argument, on the other hand, moves away from sterile conceptions of responsibility as a matter of inheritance or identity and sidesteps contested divisions of the political world into victims and villains.¹⁰ Young’s (2011) formulation—“being responsible, but not guilty” (pp. 91–92)—replaces languages of blame and absolution that feed either resentment or the evasion of acknowledgment or both with a call to action. It replaces the fully backward-looking orientation of guilt with “plural temporalities” (p. 108).¹¹ “Being responsible, but not guilty is a designation that belongs to persons whose active or passive support for governments, institutions, and practices enables culprits to commit crimes and wrongs” (pp. 91–92). Such a conception connects citizens to the actions of the state and incites them to ask what they can *do* to repair the damage of racist policies and institutions. Because all citizens are expected to take responsibility for unjust and unequal conditions, reparations are recast as a shared endeavor rather than a form of punishment.

Reparations, understood in this way, also unsettle a discourse of personal responsibility that has been deployed to blame African Americans for today’s racial inequalities. The hold of this discourse on the public imagination was vividly displayed on the night of Obama’s election to the presidency, when a national news commentator declared that anyone claiming to have been affected by racial injustice would henceforth have “no more excuses,” as though the one logically followed from the other.¹² Approaching reparations as a form of shared responsibility illuminates why the ground on which such claims are built is racially suspect, historically problematic, and as Nancy Rosenblum aptly discerns, a sign of “*political despair*” (quoted in Young 2011, p. 40).

Crucially, an emphasis on citizens’ responsibilities supplements arguments for reparations that focus wholly on the state, but it does not supplant them. Rather, conceiving reparations as reconstruction indicates that citizen and state action are intertwined and must be mutually responsive. To develop a more robust account of political responsibility is not to shift the burden of racial progress entirely to the shoulders of the citizenry. As Charles Henry (2007) observes, it was precisely this kind of shift that effectively undermined any positive political action by President Clinton’s advisory committee on race. One could raise similar concerns about recent public apologies that have called for racial reconciliation without delineating any concrete measures that the state might take to undo the ongoing effects of racial power inequities. Accordingly, my argument resembles Robert Fullinwider’s (2000) account of reparations as a matter of both corporate (state) and civic (citizens’) responsibility. Fullinwider frames his

argument as a matter of moral liability for the crimes of the past, but I want to suggest that a political conception of responsibility closer to Young's allows reparations advocates to link a backward-looking assessment of harm to a forward-looking conception of democratic reconstruction.

At this point, it should be clear that my formulation of reparations "after justice" is misleading. It would be more accurate to say that I ask what a political account of reparations can do that prevailing philosophical and legal discussions have missed. Of course, if this supplement enables us to rethink the democratic value of reparations, it also has its own dangers. It is possible that the embrace of reparations could reinforce "histories that either implicitly or explicitly celebrate the advent of the modern state and the idea of citizenship" (Chakrabarty 2007, p. 44) and that disguise the repression and violence that have defined this American statehood from its inception. Perhaps the most obvious worry is the inherently exclusionary character of citizenship and its historical dependence on the drawing of borders between members and their others. As a political project, reparations for slavery and Jim Crow need not, and cannot, be tied to a fixed status quo that depends on dividing members from outsiders. On the contrary, reparations claims ought to be oriented toward questions of how social and political arrangements might be otherwise constructed. Their power resides in the possibility of constituting the "people" without resuscitating the familiar set of assumptions captured in James Baldwin's (1984) observation that "the Black man, to become truly human and acceptable, must first become like us" (p. 45). Extending Baldwin's logic not only to African Americans but to immigrants, Muslims, criminals or others figured as fundamentally *not like us*, a democratic reparations project would highlight the urgency of conceiving forms of U.S. citizenship that are not predicated on the denigration of outsiders. Here again, Young's conception of shared responsibility is illuminating. For it is oriented toward the development of new forms of solidarity. Young (2011) views solidarity as "a relationship among separate and dissimilar actors who decide to stand together, for one another" (p. 120). Pablo de Greiff (2007) similarly understands reparations to be tied to the expression of solidarity, a manifestation of "the interest of the traditionally most advantaged in the interests of the least favored" (p. 165). In other words, a commitment to reparations could signal an acknowledgment of Americans' repeated failures to stand together and a repudiation of the boundary-drawing that has proved essential to the maintenance of racial hierarchy.

CONCLUSION

Reparations advocates have been told that they are going about things in the wrong way and at the wrong time. The concept of reparations is, in any political climate, controversial. In the face of declarations that Americans are now "postracial," approaching present racial inequalities through a language of reparations promises to alienate potential allies and arouse opponents. Speaking of reparations gives offense. Nevertheless, insisting on ideas that have been deemed unspeakable may help to expose the arguments used to justify the social and political arrangements of the postracial epoch as profoundly unrealistic. Such arguments ignore the present reality in which racial disparities are growing; and they fail to contemplate the links between those disparities and legacies of state-sanctioned White supremacy and individual attitudes and actions.

Can reparations bring about the end of racial inequality? Obviously not. In this regard, I share Walker's (2007) sentiment that, "as I continue to think about reparations, I have come to accept how little, in a sense, reparations ever do or could do. This does

not make them less important.” Reparations are important, because they stand as a rebuttal to racial realism and provide a vehicle for imagining what it would take, concretely, to move beyond race. Reparations force a confrontation with the living past, crystallize the democratic costs of gross inequalities, and supplement an account of governmental responsibility with one of the shared responsibility of citizens. In short, reparations calls on *all* citizens to remember the systematic character of the violence, exploitation, and degradation that have defined our horizon of possibility and take inspiration from the slaves and citizens who have challenged their fellows to redefine the visible horizon.

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NOTES

1. I have presented pieces of this argument at multiple workshops and conferences, and I have benefited from excellent comments and suggestions in every case. I am especially grateful for the advice of Robert Gooding-Williams, Charles Mills, the participants in the “race in the post-racial epoch” workshop, and the anonymous reader for the *Du Bois Review*.
2. For an acute critique of this concept, see Klinkner (1998). This use of “racial realism” is not to be confused with Derrick Bell’s (1995) admonition to shift away from the pursuit of abstract rights, which reinforces Black subordination, and adopt “a hard-eyed view of racism as it is and our subordinate role in it” (p. 308). My essay is informed by Bell’s work, although I defer judgment on his claim that racial inequality is a permanent fact of life in the United States.
3. Comparing Michael Dawson’s recent report that a 2008 poll found 23% of White Americans supported a federal apology for slavery (in contrast to 74% of Black respondents) with data from 2000 in which 30% of White Americans endorsed such an apology (Dawson 2011; Dawson and Popoff, 2004) suggests that White opposition may be growing.
4. These initiatives might include what William Julius Wilson (2012) calls “opportunity enhancing affirmative action programs” (p. 5), which are more likely to engender broad public support than older models of racial preferences.
5. I am grateful to Andrew Valls for pressing me to think about Young’s proposal.
6. I borrow the term “dissident citizens” from Sparks (1997).
7. These examples are drawn from Priscilla Hayner’s (2011) selective list of countries that have considered reparations following truth commissions.
8. On global reparations efforts, see de Greiff (2006).
9. The acquittal of George Zimmerman for the murder of Trayvon Martin offers a dramatic example of this idea. For an excellent collection of essays on the killing, published before Zimmerman’s trial, see Roberts (2012).
10. If her argument undercuts the idea of passively inherited responsibility, it also effectively undermines the argument that Black Americans are owed reparations as a matter of inheritance because their ancestors were due reparations that were never paid. For an account of the inheritance argument, see Boxill (2010). For a recent defense of Black reparations that retains a distinction between victims and wrongdoers, see McGary (2010).
11. In her foreword to *Responsibility for Justice*, Martha Nussbaum (2011) raises a series of challenges to Young’s distinction between guilt and responsibility. Although I cannot address each of Nussbaum’s points with the specific care it deserves, I believe Young’s book offers two rejoinders that cover several of the criticisms. First, Nussbaum is right to question the distinction between guilt or blame as wholly backward-looking and responsibility as forward-looking. Young’s argument does depend on such a distinction in places, especially in the chapter entitled “Guilt Versus Responsibility.” However, her later assertion that responsibility always relates to “plural temporalities” (p. 108) and her account of ongoing structural injustice unsettle the distinction and suggest that responsibility is not purely prospective. Second, Young’s emphasis on *political* responsibility, rather than legal or moral responsibility, shifts the argument away from some of the considerations of personal blameworthiness that concern Nussbaum.
12. Although the comment is most famously attributed to CNN commentator William Bennett, Jack Turner notes that it was a “common refrain” (Turner 2012, pp. 1–3).

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