

Repair: Students Design a Reparations Bill

BY URSULA WOLFE-ROCCA



Fibonacci Blue

Juneteenth reparations rally in St. Paul, Minnesota to demand reparations from the United States government in 2020.

AS I WRITE IN THE SUMMER OF 2020, there have been more than five weeks of nightly Black Lives Matter demonstrations in my city of Portland, Oregon, sparked by the brutal murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis. This exhilaratingly extended period of nationwide protest can be attributed to many factors: the steady drumbeat of new revelations of equally awful examples (Breonna Taylor, Elijah McClain) of state-sanctioned murder of Black people; widespread teargassing, pepper-spraying, use of “nonlethal” projectiles, and beating of protestors by police in dozens of cities; and the coronavirus pandemic, which has disproportionately infected and killed Black people in terrifying numbers, and has also created disruptions to daily life that, paradoxically, opened

up space for rallies, marches, organizing. More than anything, this moment feels like a reckoning with the United States’ past, with its long history of white supremacist violence, from slavery to George Floyd, and equally long history of Black resistance.

To reckon means to establish by counting or calculation. What would it mean to really reckon with the historical costs of white supremacy on Black life? What would it mean to count up all the violence, theft, harm, and injustice inflicted on Black people in the last 400+ years of white settlement of this land? It would mean establishing what *actually* happened, not what our historical fables and corporate textbooks peddle. More critically, it would be a first step in calculating what is owed.



Mrs. Callie House

Reparations for Black people in the United States is not a new idea. Before the Civil War was even over, [Special Field Order No. 15](#) was issued to confiscate land from Confederate land owners to be divided among newly freedpeople “to establish a peaceable agricultural settlement.” After President Andrew Johnson unilaterally reversed Order No. 15, leaving the formerly enslaved destitute, landless, and dependent, activist Callie House became the secretary of the [National Ex-Slave Mutual Relief, Bounty, and Pension Association](#). Calling on Congress to provide formerly enslaved people like her, and 4 million others, modest “pensions,” House traveled across the country, gathering petition signatures and building the association’s membership. By 1900, according to historian Mary Frances Berry, membership had grown to around 300,000. The organization fell apart after the government threw House in jail on trumped-up charges of mail fraud. In the 1950s, [Queen Mother Moore](#) founded the Universal Association of Ethiopian Women, where she started investigating the idea of reparations. Later, she published *Why Reparations? Reparations Is the Battle Cry for the Economic and Social Freedom of More than 25 Million Descendants of American*



Queen Mother Moore

Slaves, in which she laid out policies by which the government could relieve the manufactured poverty of “American citizens of African descent.” When the [Black Panthers issued their 10-point program](#) in 1966, number three, under “What We Believe,” read:

We believe that this racist government has robbed us and now we are demanding the overdue debt of 40 acres and two mules. Forty acres and two mules were promised 100 years ago as redistribution for slave labor and mass murder of Black people. We will accept the payment in currency that will be distributed to our many communities: the Germans are now aiding the Jews in Israel for genocide of the Jewish people. The Germans murdered 6,000,000 Jews. The American racist has taken part in the slaughter of more than 50,000,000 Black people; therefore, we feel that this is a modest demand that we make.

In spite of this rich genealogy, reparations are nowhere in the textbooks my school district has adopted to help me teach young people in the United States about their past. Looking up

the word “reparations” in the three recently published textbooks on my shelf is to find it absent altogether, or only in reference to the end of World War I or U.S. payments to Japanese Americans (incarcerated in concentration camps during World War II) in the 1980s. The message of the corporate textbook committees is clear: Reparations for Black people is so outlandish an idea as to not even merit mention.

But not so outlandish anymore. In 2015, Ta-Nehisi Coates published his gorgeous essay, [“The Case for Reparations”](#) in *The Atlantic*, which persuasively and painstakingly laid out how 20th-century structural racism stole Black people’s wealth just as surely as 19th-century slavery stole their bodies, labor, and knowledge. Also in 2015, [activists in Chicago won a long-fought battle to win reparations for victims of Jon Burge](#) and the Chicago Police Department’s campaign of torture. Financial restitution to victims was not all that was demanded by the activists, though. They also won “the Burge torture curriculum” — a requirement that the story of the torture and the activists who fought it be brought to middle and high school students throughout the city of Chicago. In 2019, for the first time in more than a decade, [Congress held hearings](#) on the decades-old bill, HR 40, a modest effort to simply establish a committee to develop reparative proposals. 2019 was also the first time in U.S. history that [presidential contenders](#) — in the Democratic primaries — were expected to have a “reparations position,” so common was it for them to be asked about it. Long overdue, reparations have entered the mainstream. It’s surely time then, for it to enter our classrooms and curriculum too.

The premise of this lesson is that Congress has finally taken on the task of reparations legislation. But what Congress offers is extraordinarily weak sauce. Students play the role of activist-experts working in one of the following domains of racial justice: Education, voting, housing, labor, health care, or criminal punishment. They talk back to Congress’ flimsy legislation and design a more robust alternative. In crafting amendments and additions to the bill, students must decide what form the reparations should take, how much is due, and argue which needs are the most

immediate, pressing, and fundamental. As racial justice activists, students are all on the “same side” in this role play, but they come to the discussion with different expertise and priorities. As they struggle to design reparative policies that will address the needs of all the groups present (and thereby garner support in the mock congressional hearing), their discussions reveal the deep interconnectedness of different forms of oppression and how critical it is to untangle the symptoms of a disease from their underlying causes.

Instructions for Reparations Role Play

Pre-Teaching: This should not be taught as an introductory lesson. It was written as a culminating activity for a U.S. history class in which students spend 10 weeks investigating the Black Freedom Movement. It was also tested in a political economy class in which students spent weeks unpacking the U.S. racial wealth gap with lessons on redlining, environmental racism, school segregation, etc. Whatever the context, I recommend that teachers spend some time [introducing reparations in general](#) before diving into this lesson, which focuses exclusively on Black Americans.

1. Tell students the premise of the role play. “You have been invited to congressional hearings to give feedback on and offer amendments to *A Bill to Apologize for and Repair the Harm Done to African Americans by Slavery and Racial Segregation*. Each of you has been invited to this hearing based on your particular area of expertise. You represent all regions of the country.”
2. Divide students into six groups. Hand out role sheets to each group. [Note: Though all the information in the roles is factual, and though there are many real-life activists working in these areas of advocacy, the organizations themselves are made up. This was a simple curricular decision to help streamline the lesson while ensuring a broad cross section of issues and geography.] Give students time to read and mark up their role sheet.



Next, have them answer two questions:

- a. What are the harmful policies and history of racism your organization seeks to address? Be detailed and specific.
- b. What policies would you support to repair past wrongdoing and create a better future? (You will not find answers to this question in your role sheet. You will have to imagine them!)

(For students to be successful in completing part b. it is vital that they be introduced to some other models of reparations before this lesson, otherwise, they will struggle to design reparative policies. "[How to Make Amends](#)," another lesson from the Zinn Education Project, explicitly addresses this issue).

3. Give students time to discuss and share their answers in their groups. Tell them that they will be working together to move their ideas forward in the role play, so they need to come to some agreements about what they believe and why. It is critical that groups have some concrete policies in hand before moving on. If students struggle, remind them of some of the examples raised in prior

discussions: cash payments, land settlements, non-cash compensation (health care, housing, education), national apologies, etc.

4. Hand out the draft bill. Say to students, "OK, this is the bill that Congress has drafted. But it is just that: a draft. These people are supposed to represent you, the people, so your feedback is needed. As you read, feel free to mark it up. What do you like? What questions do you have? What needs to be removed or changed? What needs to be added?" (When I did this lesson, I read the bill aloud in a somewhat grandstanding and dramatic tone — and asked students to just listen for the first go-round. Then I asked them to re-read it silently and mark it up.) Finally, give students plenty of time to chat about and critique the bill in their groups. (For my 90-minute block class, step 4 was where we ended for the first day.) Now tell students, "Before you get started working on the bill, you and your group need to decide whether you will support this bill with amendments or oppose the bill altogether. If you support the bill with amendments, it means you think it is on the right track but needs some significant

changes. If you oppose the bill, it means you think it does not have any redeeming value, and you want to completely start over.” Some students who hated the bill were reluctant to start from scratch because they thought it might be more work. I assured them that no matter which avenue they chose, the workload would be roughly the same. Whether students support or oppose the bill, they will all complete the assignment explained in the next step.

5. Give students the following tasks:
 - a. In conversation with your group, come up with at least two additions or edits to the “whereas” section. This is the section that lays out the historical background for the apology. What needs to be added to this section to make it more complete? Is there anything you would change or remove? Write the additions/amendments you want to make, as you will be sharing these with the class.
 - b. In conversation with your group, come up with at least two additions or edits to the “actions” section. This is the section of the bill that promises concrete measures to address the consequences of past and current policies. What needs to be added to this section to make it more complete? Is there anything you would change or remove? Write the additions/amendments you want to make, as you will be sharing these with the class.

For both a. and b. above, students should have plenty to say. Their roles, after all, include information that is nowhere in the bill. But it was helpful, as I walked around the room, to remind students that they were the only experts on their domain. So I said, “You’re the only ones here who can speak to education (or health care or housing, etc.), so make sure you

say your piece!”

6. Give students an opportunity to meet with other groups in the room. I had half the group stay at the table, and the other half rotate around the room — but you can do this in a number of different ways. Tell students that it is unlikely all of the proposals introduced today will be adopted, so they need to be strategic about which to support and persuasive in trying to get other groups on board with their own. They want to build alliances before heading into the committee hearing to increase their chances of success. Students should take notes as they meet other groups.

This discussion also helped students refine their thinking. For example, I heard the housing activists begin to make an argument of priorities: “But if we can get people good housing, that is the foundation for everything else.” The voting group found their policies challenged: “What good is the vote if I am dead?” asked the health care group. “If we make sure Black people have good wages,” said a member of the labor group, “they won’t have trouble paying for the ID needed to vote.” In talking with each other, students grasp how interconnected all the domains are.

7. After students have met all the other groups, give them a chance to debrief in their home groups. Once again, they need to come to an agreement about which policies they will support or oppose. Since all the groups agree on the need for reparations, it can be tricky to get students to narrow down their list. I had students say, “We want it all!” I told them, “Look, this is Congress. It is really hard to get legislation passed. If you try for everything, you’ll risk getting nothing. You need to put everything you’ve got into the three to four proposals you think will bring the greatest transformation.” This warning led students, again, to think about priorities and the order

of operations: What has to happen first? What has to be in place for broader goals to be achieved? (In my 90-minute block class, step 7 is where we ended for day two.)

8. Set up the room for a full group meeting. I asked each group to make a single proposal at a time. I had students share their proposals on a GoogleDoc and read it aloud. That way I could project it on the screen while they read and students could more easily reference it in the follow-up discussion. Then came questions and supporting and opposing arguments from other groups. I allowed the presenting group to respond to any feedback they received. You can either vote on each one as you go or, and this is my preference, wait until each group has offered at least one proposal, then ask students to rank them with the understanding that in all likelihood only the top three will make it into the final bill. The point of this lesson is not to spend a lot of time and energy creating a cohesive, well-written bill; rather, the goal is to have students reflect and discuss, through the bill-writing *process*, how to design policies that address complex and deeply rooted problems.

9. After the full group discussion (which will not cover all the proposals, but should surface most of the major themes), give students a chance to step out of their character and reflect on the role play. Some possible debrief questions:

- a. Did you learn any new history in this activity that you hadn't known before? What was it? What was your reaction?
- b. Which of the proposals discussed today might you support in real life? Why?
- c. Which of the proposals discussed today might you oppose in real life? Why?
- d. How likely do you think it is that the United States will ever pass a bill like the one you debated today? Explain your thinking.

10. There are a number of places you might go next. One idea is to have students do a close reading of [H.R. 40](#) and write about whether they would support the bill and why. Another rich vein of investigation for students would be to make reparations local: What did or does racism and racial injustice look like where you live? What institutions are culpable? What policies might address the harm? As models for this kind of local action, students might investigate the [Chicago torture curriculum](#), [Georgetown University's efforts](#), or the [4th graders in California](#) who lobbied their legislature for new state standards. ❖

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A Bill to Apologize for and Repair the Harm Done to African Americans by Slavery and Racial Segregation

Whereas millions of Africans and their descendants were enslaved in the United States and the 13 American colonies from 1619 through 1865;

Whereas after emancipation from 246 years of slavery, African Americans soon saw the fleeting political, social, and economic gains they made during Reconstruction undone by racism, lynchings, disenfranchisement, Black Codes, and racial segregation laws (“Jim Crow”) that imposed a rigid system of officially sanctioned racial segregation in virtually all areas of life;

Whereas African Americans continue to suffer from the consequences of slavery and Jim Crow laws — long after both systems were formally abolished — through enormous damage and loss, both tangible and intangible, including the loss of human dignity and liberty;

Whereas it is important for the people of the United States, who legally recognized slavery through the Constitution and the laws of the United States, to make a formal apology for slavery and for its successor, Jim Crow, so they can move forward and seek reconciliation, justice, and harmony for all people of the United States: Now, therefore, be it

Resolved by the Senate (the House of Representatives concurring), the Congress:

(A) apologizes to African Americans on behalf of the people of the United States, for the wrongs committed against them and their ancestors who suffered under slavery and Jim Crow laws; and

(B) expresses its commitment to repairing past harms with the following actions:

1. The creation of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission. This commission will study and recommend appropriate ways to educate the public about the history and legacy of racism in the United States;
2. The creation of a national monument promoting racial harmony on the National Mall in Washington, D.C.;
3. Implement new classes in K–12 public education that emphasize values like equality, pluralism, and diversity;
4. Encourage universities, banks, and private businesses that built their wealth using the labor of enslaved people to acknowledge that debt and find ways to repay it.

Educators for Justice

Moberly, Missouri

You are a member of Educators for Justice, an organization devoted to transforming the educational experiences and opportunities of Black children. You believe that transformation is impossible without reckoning with the history of educational racism in the United States. You would like to see the government both acknowledge and take bold action to address this pattern of harm.

The history of educational wrongdoing by the United States toward Black people can be traced back to slavery, when colonial and state laws outlawed teaching an enslaved person to read or write. In 1847, here in Missouri, the territorial legislature passed an act stating that even free Blacks were not allowed an education: “No person shall keep or teach any school for the instruction of negroes or mulattos, in reading or writing, in this State.” Enslavers harshly punished those who secretly learned and taught each other. Your ancestors were whipped, sold away, even killed, for daring to read and write. Nevertheless, you never stopped using the written word to fight for freedom.

Black people opened hundreds of schools for Black children in the first decades after the Civil War. Yet the U.S. government did nothing to support and protect these schools. Even though the courts said schools could be divided by race, they were supposed to be equal. In actuality, white state legislatures awarded less money to Black schools, paid Black teachers less, and kept Black schools open for fewer days out of the year.

One million African Americans fought on behalf of the United States in World War II. Yet while the G.I. Bill supposedly offered all veterans a free college education upon their return, Black veterans were often shut out of one of the most generous social programs in U.S. history. By allowing states



A meeting of the board of directors of the Georgia Teachers & Education Association in 1956.

Georgia Teachers & Education Association Collection

to administer the law, the federal government empowered Southern states to deny Black veterans the college education to which they were entitled, widening already gaping gaps in education and wealth.

When the Supreme Court finally outlawed segregated public schools in the famous case *Brown v. Board of Education*, thousands of Black teachers and principals lost their jobs. Here in Moberly, when the government integrated the schools, they closed the one Black school and fired all of the Black teachers. Black students were sent to white schools with not a single Black teacher. Today, only 7 percent of the U.S. teaching force is Black, while Black students make up more than 16 percent of public school children.

The lack of Black teachers has measurable negative consequences for Black children. White teachers are more likely to discipline Black children and less likely to recommend high-achieving Black children for “gifted” programs. The benefits of Black children having at least one Black teacher

are enormous. One study in North Carolina found that if an African American boy had even one Black teacher between 3rd and 5th grade, their chances of dropping out of school decreased by 39 percent. And what do students learn in school? A recent study found that generally only one to two lessons are devoted to Black history in most U.S. history classrooms.

In part because of the history of housing segregation, U.S. education is still separate and unequal for Black children. A recent study found that predominantly white school districts receive \$23 billion more per year than districts that serve mostly students of color.

There are huge racial gaps in educational attainment in the United States. 72 percent of white

students who complete high school enroll in college the same year compared with only 44 percent for Black students. The racial wealth gap means getting an expensive college education is out of reach for many Black families — according to [*The Washington Post*](#), the average white family holds more than 10 times the wealth as the average Black family.

Knowledge is power. Black people in the United States have for too long been denied full access to knowledge through a formal education. It is time to tell the truth about our history of educational racism and enact equalizing policies that are long overdue.

Our Vote Is Our Voice

Durham, North Carolina



Stephen Melkisehian via Flickr

Voting rights protest in Raleigh, North Carolina.

You are a member of Our Vote Is Our Voice (OVIOV), an organization devoted to helping Black North Carolinians — and all African Americans — achieve full political rights in the United States, rights that have long been denied.

You believe the people of the United States, aided by whitewashed textbooks and school curricula, have never fully grappled with the implications of a founding document — the U.S. Constitution — that protected, preserved, and legalized slavery. Racial inequality was baked into the U.S. government from the beginning.

Yet, in your state, like in many places during the era known as Reconstruction, Black people made great inroads toward full citizenship in the years following the Civil War and emancipation. At the 1868 North Carolina Constitutional Convention, your ancestors helped enact universal suffrage for males, eliminated high property qualifications for serving in state offices, and established a system of tax-supported public schools. African Americans

in North Carolina — and across the South — finally had the opportunity to vote, hold office, and get an education.

But the U.S. government abandoned the goal of racial equality when it pulled its support for Reconstruction by withdrawing the troops protecting the new and fragile interracial governments in the South. White supremacist politicians, aided by terrorists like the Ku Klux Klan, created racist work-arounds to all the new amendments to the Constitution. The 13th Amendment said slavery was illegal except as punishment for a crime, so Black people were arrested for ridiculous infractions and sentenced to work — slavery by a different name. The 15th Amendment extended the vote to all Black men, but poll taxes, literacy tests, and grandfather clauses made it impossible for almost all African Americans to register to vote. The elders in your organization still remember those times.

During the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s

and 1960s, Black activists succeeded in passing new legislation — the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965 — that finally, after hundreds of years of disenfranchisement, secured your right to vote. But here you are, in the 21st century and that right is once again under threat, in your state and across the country.

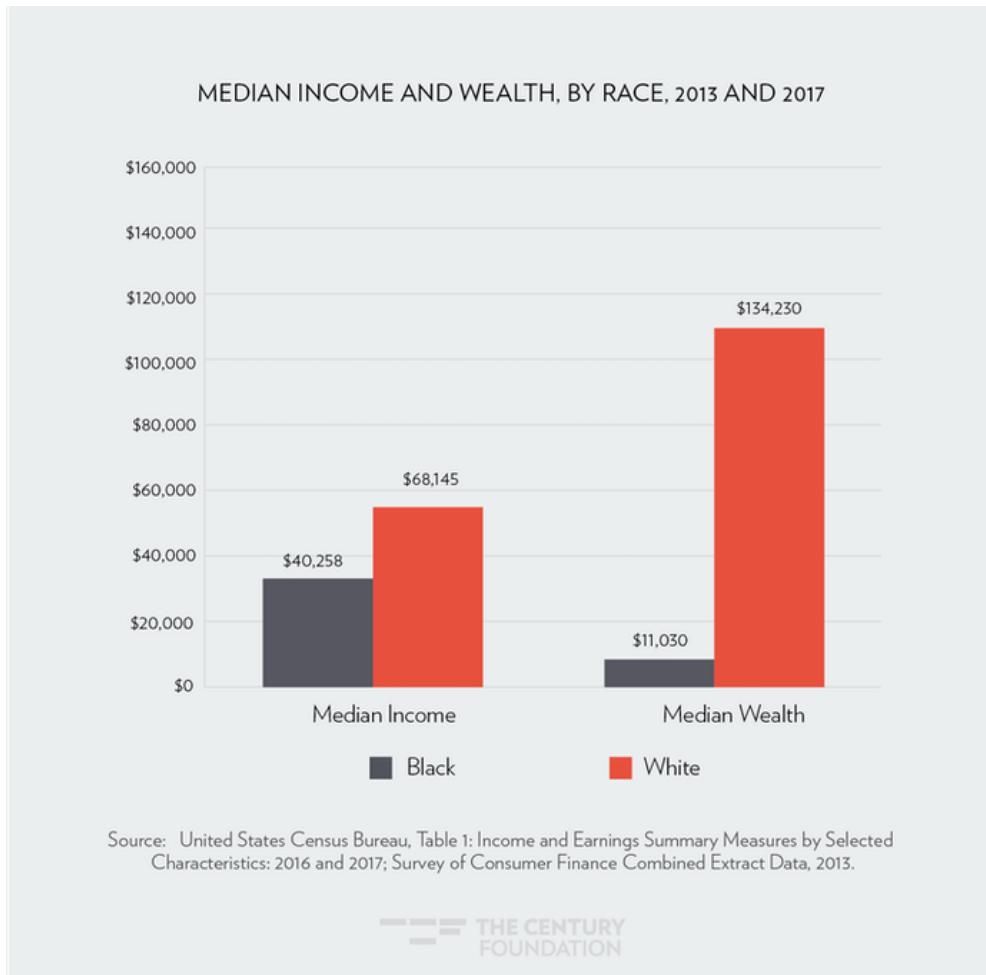
First, the state legislature redrew the borders of congressional districts (a process called gerrymandering) to dilute the power of the Black vote. By making sure Black neighborhoods are split into multiple districts, white legislators ensure African Americans are never more than a small minority of voters. Next, the legislature passed a so-called “Voter ID” law, which not only required voters to have government-issued ID, but also shortened early voting, and denied teenagers the right to pre-register if they would be 18 by election day. All of these new rules disproportionately hurt Black voters in the state. One of your grandmothers — a seamstress in a rural town her whole life — did not have government ID. To get it, she needed to find a ride to the nearest city over an hour away *and* pay \$75. By the time she got the money and the ride lined up, it was too late to register.

Luckily, you and other organizations sued the state, and the courts have struck down some of the new voting rules. Recently, one decision on gerrymandering said that the racism behind the law was unmistakable: the court said the state government had targeted “African Americans with almost surgical precision.”

But the long history of disenfranchisement of Black voters has had an enormous impact on your political power. You, your parents, your children are not anywhere near adequately represented in our so-called democracy. Out of 100 U.S. senators, only two are African American; only 10 have served in the entire history of the United States. In 2020, there is not a single African American governor of a state. And, as we all know, there has been only one Black president. Now the coronavirus pandemic is making voting in person dangerous, especially for Black people, who are disproportionately susceptible to the virus and die from it at almost twice the rate as white people. Yet the president calls proposals to enable vote-by-mail for all citizens “fraud” and “corrupt.” It is time we enacted policies that address the many ways Black people are denied political power — past and present.

40 Acres Housing Council

Chicago



You are a member of the 40 Acres Housing Council, an organization devoted to helping African Americans access fair housing and build wealth. Even though your organization is Chicago-based, the families of many of the people you serve are the descendants of enslaved people from the South who traveled North during the Great Migration.

Following the Civil War and emancipation, freedpeople and their allies worked for land reform. Your organization's name — 40 Acres — refers to the Special Field Order No. 15, a military

proclamation that reserved formerly Confederate-held land for freedpeople. The order stated, “that each family shall have a plot of not more than 40 acres of tillable ground,” and “the sole and exclusive management of affairs will be left to the freed people themselves.” The prospect of owning land, and living self-sufficiently and independently, was central to your ancestors’ ideas of freedom. Unfortunately, the government went back on its promise and let former Confederates take back the land that *your* ancestors had worked for centuries as enslaved people.

At the same time the government seized land from you, they handed it out for free to whites in other parts of the country. Between 1862 and 1934, the Homestead Acts stole 246 million acres land from Indigenous nations in the West, and handed it out to individual citizens and immigrants, almost all of whom were white. To receive 160 acres of government land, these people only had to file an application, “improve” the land for five years, and finally, file for the deed of ownership. While a few African Americans were able to take advantage of the original Homestead Act, most were shunted into another program called the Southern Homestead Act. This program was intended for newly freedpeople, but a large percentage of the land offered was unfarmable, either heavily wooded or swampland. In the end, the government gave white people land that would come to be worth billions of dollars, while your ancestors got next to nothing.

In the Northern cities, like Chicago, you faced different obstacles, with a similar outcome — government helped whites become homeowners while almost entirely shutting out African Americans. From the 1930s through the 1960s, government agencies like the Federal Housing Administration and Veterans Administration offered millions of Americans low-cost loans to buy their first homes by making small monthly payments; in time the property doubled, tripled, or quadrupled in value. Homeownership became the single most important way that families built wealth. But the government almost entirely denied these loans to Black families. Cities like Chicago were redlined, meaning areas in which Black people lived were

ineligible for loans. The government and banks said these areas were too risky financially, but when the government labeled your neighborhoods a risk — and refused to support loans there — they *made* these neighborhoods risky.

Supposedly, the U.S. government outlawed these housing policies in 1968 with the passage of the Fair Housing Act. But discrimination persists today. A recent study of 61 U.S. cities found that banks and other lenders continue to deny African Americans home loans, and make them borrow at far higher rates than their white counterparts, even considering applicants’ income, loan amount, and neighborhood.

Homes are the single biggest asset in most families, and they get passed down from parents to children, creating what is known as generational wealth. The impact of the government and banks denying African Americans access to land and housing for centuries cannot be overstated. According to [*The New York Times*](#), for every \$100 in white family wealth, Black families hold just \$5.04. You want the people in the United States and the U.S. government to acknowledge that much of the wealth held by whites today can be traced to government giveaways of the past — the Homestead Act, FHA loans, giveaways that were not available for African Americans. The federal government *created* much of today’s racial wealth gap. It is up to the federal government to do something to close it.

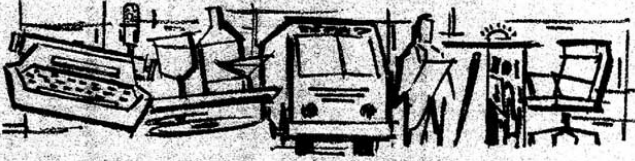
Union of Black Workers for Justice

Seattle

JOBS FOR NEGROES NOW!

SUPPORT **DEEDS** NOW!!

DRIVE FOR EQUAL EMPLOYMENT DOWNTOWN SEATTLE



Seattle business and government leaders say jobs are the solution to racial problems---yet...

- LESS THAN 2% OF RETAIL TRADE JOBS HELD BY NEGROES
- LESS THAN 3% OF AVAILABLE OFFICE JOBS HELD BY NEGROES
- NEGROES HOLD ONLY 1% OF THE JOBS IN BANKING, INSURANCE, REAL ESTATE, ETC.
- NEGROES SPEND \$12 MILLION DOWNTOWN ANNUALLY
- NEGROES ACCOUNT FOR 5% OF ALL SALES GENERALLY

**Seattle Needs Deeds . . .
Not Words**

*From the Special Collections Division of the
University of Washington Libraries*

You are a member of the Union of Black Workers for Justice, an organization committed to fairness for African Americans in employment and compensation. You believe this country owes Black people an enormous debt from centuries of unfree and unequal labor policies.

You and most members of your organization are descendants of enslaved people who worked without compensation for centuries. You recently read a study calculating the total value of all your ancestors' labor as somewhere between \$5.9 trillion and \$14.2 trillion. That is money that went

into the pockets of whites who controlled the economy at the time: Southern plantation owners, Northern factory owners, and Western farmers, bankers, and railroad magnates, enriching them and their heirs.

After emancipation, your families tried hard to build lives free from white exploitation. But laws passed by white-controlled legislatures made that almost impossible. Under the so-called Black Codes, you could be arrested for “vagrancy,” sentenced to forced labor, and sent back to the plantation. The great-uncle of one of your members was unable to pay the court costs during his trial for vagrancy in Alabama. The white judge sentenced him to a year of hard labor. The county prison “sold” him to U.S. Steel Corporation. From there, he was moved to Pratt Mines where he was whipped if he did not work fast enough or disobeyed an order. Decades after slavery had been abolished, Black people still worked for nothing, in dehumanizing conditions.

When the Great Depression hit in the early 1930s, the federal government passed lots of new labor laws to help struggling workers: capping maximum hours, ending child labor, setting a minimum wage, creating universal old-age pensions — the Social Security system. But the government excluded your family members in the South from these new benefits. The laws specifically made exceptions for agricultural work (where the majority of Black men labored) and domestic work (where the majority of Black women labored). When it came to Black workers, the government did *not* create a minimum wage, limit the work day, restrict child labor, or create savings accounts for old age. Without any minimum wage laws protecting your labor, the average sharecropper earned only about 10 cents a day. By being shut out of Social Security (until the law was changed in the 1950s), it is estimated African American workers lost \$143.2 billion.

Many of your parents moved to Seattle during WWII to seek work in the booming war industries.

Boeing was the biggest employer at the time, but refused to hire any Black workers. Your family and others organized to pressure Boeing to integrate, and that pressure, along with a wartime worker shortage, led the company to open up jobs to African Americans. But the union, the International Association of Machinists, still refused to admit Blacks. Your parents told you stories of workplace discrimination, segregated toilets and lunchrooms. One friend of your mother’s was Ruby Black. The company took \$3.50 from her pay for a work permit while they charged white women \$1.50. When Ms. Black complained about the higher dues for Black women, the company fired her.

Today employers still discriminate against African Americans. Just last week, you heard a story on the radio about a new study showing that Black people have a much harder time getting hired than whites. Researchers sent out résumés with similar levels of education, experience, and qualifications, but some résumés had a stereotypically Black name and the others had a stereotypically white name. The researchers found that on average, “white applicants receive 36 percent more callbacks than equally qualified African Americans.”

This history of racism has created an economy in which the median income of Black workers is only 65 percent of the median income of white workers. Amid the coronavirus pandemic, Black workers are overrepresented in the category of “essential” workers — those who cannot stay home and who are, therefore, most likely to become infected. Yet for all the risks your members take to drive buses, stock grocery stores, and take care of people’s children, employers do not pay them “essential” wages. You are sick of powerful white institutions stealing from, exploiting, and devaluing Black people. The work of Black people has built the United States. It is time to pay for what was stolen and build a truly fair society.

Fighting for Healthy Communities

Flint, Michigan

You are a member of Fighting for Healthy Communities, an organization devoted to improving long-term health outcomes for African Americans. Most people have heard of the current Flint water crisis — when the government poisoned your majority-Black community with lead by changing your water source from Lake Huron to the less expensive Flint River. But that episode only scratches the surface of the health threats your community has faced over the years; and now there is a new deadly threat: coronavirus.

Slavery is not often thought of as a health crisis, but it was. The daily repetitive, hard manual labor, from sunup to sundown, did significant harm to the bodies of enslaved people on its own, but that harm was exacerbated by systematic violence: whipping and rape. The traumas of slavery were both physical and psychological. Many enslaved people never recovered from the loss of family members, sold away by their so-called owners, not to be heard from again.

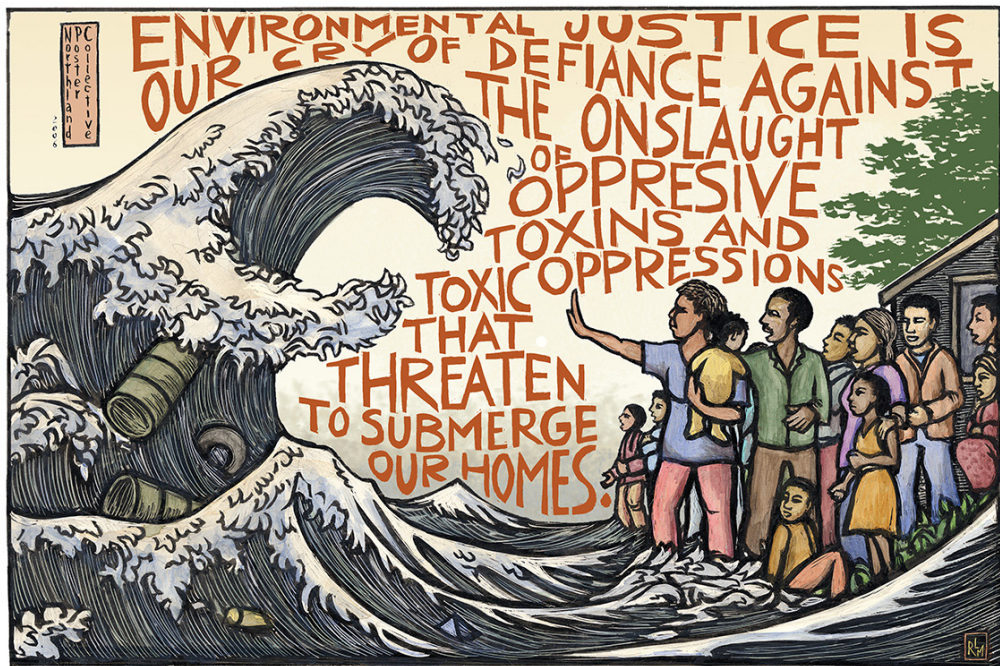
Your organization recently hosted a panel discussion of scientists and researchers working on something called intergenerational trauma. They are studying how the negative health effects of severe trauma (from war, genocide, slavery) are passed from generation to generation through biology. If a fetus was exposed to high levels of stress hormones in the womb of their enslaved mother, the child's genetic expression might be altered so that even if the child is born free, she may carry the traumatic effects of her mother's ordeal for the rest of her life. You were amazed to find out from scientists that enslaved people's descendants may still be walking around with the

genetic consequences of slavery's brutality.

Across the United States, Black people suffer disproportionately from some of the most devastating health problems, from cancer and diabetes to maternal mortality and preterm births. African Americans are 44 percent more likely to die of stroke, 20 percent more likely to have asthma, 40 percent more likely to die of breast cancer, and 25 percent more likely to die of heart disease than white Americans. The coronavirus pandemic has brought similarly horrifying disparities. Black people are three times as likely to become infected with the virus, and twice as likely to die from it, compared to white people. You know that these deadly statistics have multiple causes.

One cause is environmental racism, which you have seen firsthand when the government piped in poisoned water for your family, friends, and neighbors to drink. In part due to discriminatory housing policies of the past, many Black people live near environmentally hazardous facilities (toxic waste dumps, industrial areas, power plants) and bear a disproportionate exposure to toxins that have negative health effects. Another cause is racism itself, the daily experiences of being treated unequally, which has been shown in many studies to contribute to high blood pressure, anxiety, and depression.

Once ill, African Americans also receive worse treatment and health care. Some of your members simply can't afford health insurance and so rely on the care of overburdened, under-resourced free clinics. Other members report doctors and nurses rushing them through their appointments, failing



Ricardo Levins Morales

to listen to their reports of pain or discomfort, and chiding them to “eat healthy and exercise,” as if the health problems they experience are their fault. One woman you represent was pregnant, having really bad headaches, swollen feet and hands, and terrible back pain. She went to the doctor twice, but both times she was sent home to rest. Finally, in excruciating pain, seven and a half months pregnant, she went to the hospital again. This time they took her blood pressure and found it was at dangerous levels; they delivered the baby, but it had died. She had pre-eclampsia, a pretty common pregnancy-related condition that if monitored

and addressed can be treated. This may sound like bad luck. But Black infants in the United States are more than twice as likely to die as white infants — 11.3 per 1,000 Black babies, compared with 4.9 per 1,000 white babies.

You believe Black bodies have borne the burden of too much violence and too many toxins for too long. It is time for this country to reckon with the damage caused by a history of racism and enact policies that will heal and protect Black Americans.

Justice Is Not a Crime

New York City

You are a member of Justice Is Not a Crime, an organization committed to dismantling the current criminal “justice” system and seeking compensation for families who have been harmed by its racist policies. You regularly remind people that just because something is legal doesn’t mean it is just or fair.

The best example is slavery, which was protected by the U.S. Constitution and was legal in the United States until 1865. Though textbooks and the media wrongly mispresent slavery as a Southern system, powerful people in the North also supported and benefited from slavery. Not only

Southerners under which Black people across the South could be arrested (on some minor infraction almost never enforced against white people) and rented out by the county or state to work for a private business — a plantation, mine, or factory. This period is where the idea of “Black criminality” originates. Wealthy white people wrote these laws specifically to intimidate and scoop up as many Black people as possible. Blackness itself made one eligible for arrest.

While convict leasing was mostly a Southern institution, your families have their own stories of a racist punishment system that affected *all* sec-



Fibonacci Blue

did enslaved people help build New York, but its merchants, bankers, shippers, and traders participated in and profited from the slave trade and the agricultural commodities produced by enslaved people across the South. It is not a stretch to say that many of New York’s wealthiest families built their fortunes — at least indirectly — from the brutal exploitation of enslaved people.

The unjust, yet perfectly legal racist policies continued after slavery in the form of Black Codes and vagrancy statutes — laws passed by white

tions of the country: lynching. Between 1880 and 1940, white mobs lynched thousands of African Americans. If they were not participating in the violence themselves, white police officials, judges, and juries almost never charged or convicted those who did.

As a New Yorker, you have firsthand experience watching people’s lives and livelihoods stolen by modern mass incarceration. So-called “tough on crime” policies in the 1980s and ’90s packed the prisons with a disproportionate number of Black

and Brown people. And just like with the systems of slavery and convict leasing, some people got rich. Private prisons operated by for-profit corporations went from five in 1998 to 100 in 2008, with profits increasing more than 500 percent in the last 20 years. The more people arrested, the more money that flowed into the pockets of the prison corporations.

There is simply no denying that the system targets Black people unfairly. Your organization was excited when New York City decided it would no longer arrest people for low-level marijuana possession, yet that excitement quickly dissolved when you saw the most recent arrest statistics. Of the 4,081 arrests for criminal possession of marijuana over a three-month period, from January through March 2018, 93 percent were New Yorkers of color, in spite of the fact that dozens of studies have shown that whites use drugs at rates equal to or slightly higher than communities of color.

Today, people know the name of George Floyd, who was brutally murdered when a white Minneapolis police officer put his knee on Floyd's neck for eight minutes and 46 seconds. But before there was George Floyd there was Eric Garner, a New

Yorker like you. Garner was the 43-year-old African American man who police arrested for selling loose cigarettes on the street. Police officer Daniel Pantaleo put Garner into a chokehold, pressed him face down on the sidewalk, the officer's knee in his back. Garner begged, "I can't breathe. I can't breathe. I can't breathe," but the officer did not let up. Garner passed out and was pronounced dead at the hospital not long after. Even though New York Police Department policy prohibits the use of chokeholds, Pantaleo was not indicted. You cannot call a system like that fair.

You want a true justice system — one defined by fairness, not racism. But you wonder whether a country whose original law of the land endorsed slavery can ever erase the legacy of that evil. Can the country truly face its past and build a different future? Can it make it up to the people who were unfairly exploited, killed, and jailed by the U.S. criminal justice system?