

The Instansigence of white “supremacy” = Inertia for Reparations and Climate Justice

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Thank you and good afternoon.

Long before COVID 19, the stolen lands known today as the United States of America were inflicted by a more nefarious outbreak that still infects the nation to this day a primordial pandemic of white “supremacy,” driven by the pathology of whiteness that has been manifested as colonization, the genocide of people Indigenous to these lands, and chattel slavery of people Indigenous to the African continent. As Raoul Peck reminds us in his documentary, *Exterminate All the Brutes*, at the end of the day it wasn't the dehumanization, the psychological warfare that came with colonization, nor the execrable conditions on slave ships that delivered stolen people to concentration camps in the form of Southern plantations that should trouble us the most as much as the willingness and resolve to carry out these acts in the first place should.

This attitude of manifest destiny remains today in this nation and now it's manifesting itself as a quintessential threat, climate change, that threatens the very ability of this planet to sustain life. And we know that the same people primarily impacted by this nation's legacy of unchecked and quiescently mitigated white “supremacy,” are the same people disproportionately impacted by a climate crisis they had little hand in engendering - a crisis exacerbated by the extraction and emissions of fossil fuels that render Indigenous, Black, Brown, poor Asian and poor white communities into energy sacrifice zones, a process known today as “environmental racism.”

As I will soon demonstrate, white “supremacy” and climate change operate in a sinister symbiosis - and this reality forms grounds to allocate reparations to descendants of African slaves, and retribution for broken treaties with Indigenous peoples and the brutal land theft they continue to experience in the form of colonization by fossil fuel infrastructure including perilous pipelines like the Dakota Access Pipeline in present-day South Dakota and the Line 3 pipeline in present-day Minnesota. When it comes to white “supremacy,” colonization, and Anti-Black racism in this country, Mark Twain's famous quote, “history does not repeat itself, but it often rhymes.” is vindicated on a quotidian basis.

My name is Anthony Karefa Rogers-Wright, I currently serve as the Director of Environmental Justice with New York Lawyers for the Public Interest (“NYLPI”) - a 40 + year organization dedicated to the protection of civil and freedom rights in an effort to achieve lived equity for marginalized and historically oppressed communities. NYLPI combines organizing, policy analysis/development, and our brand of community lawyering to foster transformational and lasting change. I am also the proud son of two immigrants from the West African nation of Sierra Leone - an African nation re-settled by former slaves - removed and then restored, which to me

is not only the apotheosis of DuBois's theory of double consciousness but also the essence of reparations - to restore and repair, in part, by distributing fair compensation for what is owed.

From the outset, I believe it's imperative to arrive at a consensus of what we're talking about when we use a term as charged as reparations. According to the National Coalition of Blacks for Reparations in America ("N'COBRA"), "Reparations is a process of repairing, healing and restoring a people injured because of their group identity and in violation of their fundamental human rights by governments, corporations, institutions, and families. Those groups that have been injured have the right to obtain from the government, corporation, institution, or family responsible for the injuries that they need to repair and heal themselves."

Despite the fact that N'COBRA has been in existence since 1987, and despite the fact that former Congressman, John Conyers of Michigan introduced HR 40, a bill that simply STUDIES reparations, every year since 1989 until his death 2019, too often the polity of this nation has perambulated the issue with ambiguous innuendos and references. Even white "progressives" are circumspect when it comes to uttering the phrase, "reparations"- it's literally the Voldemort of political discourse for far too many white lawmakers and white people as a whole it's a form of intransigence that asserts the horrors of slavery as something of the distant past.

For instance, earlier this year when HR 40 advanced out of the US House of Representatives Judiciary Committee, the ranking GOP member, Jim Jordan, a white man, quipped, "Spend \$20 million for a commission that's already decided to take money from people who were never involved in the evil of slavery and give it to people who were never subject to the evil of slavery. That's what Democrats on the Judiciary Committee are doing." It's this variety of willful intransigence that I imagine informed the great scholar, bell hooks, who once stated, "Close to white folks, I am forced to witness firsthand their willful ignorance about the impact of race and racism. The harsh absolutism of their denial. Their refusal to acknowledge accountability for racist conditions past and present."

And even white lawmakers like Senator Bernie Sanders, a national progressive leader and first Jewish man to win a presidential primary in this nation's history has demonstrated his own unwillingness to embrace the idea of reparations or the understanding that first and foremost it's about an unpaid debt - electing to refer to programs like Congressman's Clyburn's 10-20-30 proposal as an equal and more acceptable alternative to reparations. As such, I believe it necessary to make this lucid distinction.

Reparations are the debts that must be paid for forced labor associated with chattel slavery, targeted investments in Black and Indigenous communities, on the other hand, are the price that comes with unchecked and unmitigated white "supremacy" that continues to cost these communities so much.

So my question to this body, to all legislative bodies is this - what's the point of reparations without the extrication of white "supremacy?" This nation has demonstrated that Black liberation and edification is too often anathema to white people's sanity - so much so that even when

freed slaves proved they could be self-sufficient, could prosper independently, could thrive, white "supremacy" could not handle it. This is how we got the antipathy that metamorphosized reconstruction to redemption and Jim Crow, this is why white "supremacy" manifested the Red Summer of 1919, the destruction of Black Wall Street in Tulsa, and an Anti-Black legal system that's attempted to, and, too often, successfully lynched and condemned Black people from the Scottsboro Boys in 1931, to the Central Park/Exonerated Five in 1989, to Briana Taylor, and George Floyd in 2020.

The intransigence of white "supremacy" and Anti-Black racism in this country is essentially an interest rate that continues to accrue and it must be added to any and all forms of reparations. Freed slaves and their descendants are still captives of racist policies that show up in every single system that operates in this nation, as I will point out when I commence my PowerPoint presentation.

We have to understand that reparations are a currency of truth - they cannot be embraced without verisimilitude, without accepting a pointed observation by James Baldwin who once wrote, "The truth is that this country does not know what to do with its Black population now that the Blacks are no longer a source of wealth, are no longer to be bought and sold and bred, like cattle; and they especially do not know what to do with young Black men, who pose as devastating a threat to the economy as they do to the morals of young white cheerleaders."

And reparations will never be accepted without accepting the veracious conclusion of the National Association of County and City Health Officials who in 2020 stated, "The legacy of violence against Black Americans extends deep into the history of this country and has cost countless lives. This violence is a public health issue deeply rooted in our nation's legacy of systemic racial, economic, and social oppression and injustice."

Therefore, we cannot really begin the discussion about reparations, nor the cogent conversations necessary to avert the worst-case scenarios of the climate crisis without getting to the bottom of and eviscerating the myriad lies that form the foundation of this country. According to Professor Eddie Glaude Jr, "the lie is more properly several sets of lies with a single purpose." He continues, "If what I have called the value gap is the idea that in America white lives have always mattered more than the lives of others, then the lie is a broad and powerful architecture of false assumptions that support the everyday order of American life." Glaude then concludes, "Taken as a whole, then, the lie is the mechanism that allows, and has always allowed, America to avoid facing the truth about its unjust treatment of Black people and how it deforms the soul of the country."

The events of January 6th where the world witnessed the pubescent volatility of toxic white male masculinity in the form of white supremacist terrorism seem to render Glaude Jr's words incontrovertible. Because the Big Lie that led to January 6th is derived from one of the biggest lies ever told, the one that speaks of a nation of stolen lands built largely by the free labor of stolen African people was "founded" on ideals of mutual freedom, mutual justice, and mutual liberty when it was actually forged in a cauldron of white "supremacy," colonization, and

genocide. The truth that's requisite for reparations and Afro-Indigenous liberation cannot be realized while the lies of white "supremacy" continue to run roughshod. Because it's never been more clear to me that the so-called light on the top of the hill illuminates a nation of stolen lands built largely by stolen people. And now that light is flickering and on the brink of being extinguished by the strong winds of a climate crisis that's catalyzed by the typhoons of white "supremacy."

So we have to make a decision right now, either we accept the idea that white people are genetically predisposed to success associated with social and economic elasticity - that is, we accept the theory of white "supremacy" as an inexorable societal law, or we admit and act on the reality that Anglo conformity and the global white hegemony has been engineered, it's synthetic and filled with additives and preservatives in the form of policy development and implementation specifically designed to benefit white folk at the expense of and cost to Indigenous, Black, Brown and poor Asian folk, and exercise the necessary remedies, including reparations, to set the record straight and operate from a currency of truth.

I was asked to speak briefly about housing in the context of reparations and the climate crisis. So let me say that it's interesting to discuss housing at reparations. Housing, of course, is property and so was I at one point in this nation's history. And we know that housing is still a modern-day manifestation of Jim Crow and Anti-Blackness that contributes to the racial wealth gap as much as anything. We must also consider the issue of Indigenous people as there is an axiomatic connection to their land and our housing as well as the fact that Black and Indigenous liberation are inexorably tied together.

California's Prop 13 is a stark example of a program put in place to engineer a white hegemony - it was designed to maintain and increase white wealth even though it costs the state upwards of \$11.5 billion a year - not to mention social costs including the rising number of houseless people and the prevention of working-class people to afford homes that don't force them to live in areas of the state that probably should not be developed as wildfires and mudslides in your state continue to demonstrate. If the state of California is really looking for a funding source to address climate solutions and racial injustice, repealing Prop 13 should be an axiomatic and forgone conclusion.

Thank you, and now I would like to move to my brief presentation on the climate crisis as a function of white "supremacy" and the new social compact necessary for both reparations and efficacious climate solutions.

