

CHAPTER ONE



Introduction

History is fiction subject to a fitful Muse.

—Derek Walcott, *Memory*

AFTER A LONG PERIOD IN THE BASEMENT of the African American Agenda, reparations have become a serious bone of contention among Blacks and others. Two events were especially important in making reparations salient. One was the lawsuit in 2002 by Deadria Farmer-Paellmann, a Black law school graduate, who found evidence that companies such as insurance giant Aetna, the railroad company CSX, and FleetBoston financial services had insured slaves for plantation owners or used slaves in their enterprises.¹ The second was the publication in 2000 of *The Debt* by Randall Robinson.² Robinson's message, that a debt remains unpaid to descendants of slaves—slaves who helped build the very Capitol of the United States, its surrounding city, and many other parts of the government's infrastructure—rekindled the debate over reparations. In this new climate emerged a group of highly visible lawyers and academics who attracted considerable press attention to their pursuit of a legal strategy to achieve reparations.³

The power of these events, coming so close to each other, stimulated a national discussion that generated new life in such organizations as the National Coalition of Blacks for Reparations, which was founded as an advocacy group in the mid-1980s. Moreover, it directed new attention to H.R. 40, legislation to develop a commission to study the issue of African reparations in America, which Congressman John Conyers has offered in every session of the House of Representatives for the past two decades.

In a pattern that resembles the grassroots movement against

Apartheid South Africa, several cities, especially those with large Black populations, such as Baltimore, Chicago, Washington, DC, and Detroit, have passed or considered resolutions affirming support for H.R. 40.⁴ In addition, the state legislature of California passed a resolution requiring insurance companies that do business with the state to reveal historical incidences of insuring owners against the loss of slaves.⁵ Vigorous discussion has been heard in the news media, on college campuses, and in conferences, especially the United Nations Conference against Racism, held in Durban, South Africa, in July and August 2001. Reparations are now a subject that registers in public opinion polls, and are a consensus topic among Blacks and their leaders, who at one time considered it unreasonable even to refer to.

This explosive and emotional issue is, therefore, a fit subject of inquiry, but it is necessary to state at the outset what this book does and does not attempt. It is not an actuarial calculation of the bill for slavery and its aftermath, tallied up in economic terms. Rather, it mines the underlying concepts of the moral claim to recompense and, in doing so, presents a view of the oppression that Black people have suffered in America, which determines the price of racial reconciliation. I compare the American case to the South African, an example of a process of racial reconciliation that involved reparations to victims of Apartheid. This example raises poignant questions for those who pursue reparations in the United States. That quest, we will see, is based on the memory of Black oppression and its relevance to the present.

Reparations are an explosive subject in part because they invoke two different histories, two different memories of past relations between Blacks and whites. The power of history is not only its description of events, but also its relation to the identity of those who shape it, and those who suffer from such shaping. As such, "history" comprises events that groups select as a resource to derive identity and meaning from the past, and to inform present understanding or action. The selectivity of such events politicizes history, for the powerful can determine an understanding of historical events consistent with a narrative they wish to advance.

Thus, memory is politicized, raising the question of what constitutes the "truth" of the past and how to reconcile the contentious perspectives of different versions. In this context, unpleasant aspects of the past, introduced as an alternative to a version of history emphasizing

positive social harmony, may be viewed by some as an imposition. One story provides an example:

It was as if the town were trying to erase the very existence of the black pioneers who settled this area [Priceville, Ontario, Canada] in the early 1800s. Hide the fact that some of the whites who came here later married some of the blacks. Hide the fact that many generations later, some white people still living in this town may not be white at all. Just a drop, they used to say.

Eventually, the only trace that black people had ever been in Priceville, working the land and building homes and schools, was the cemetery. Then in the 1930s, a white farmer named Billy Reid bought the land, plowed over the cemetery and planted potatoes.

That is what they say became of the history of black people in this part of Ontario. It was plowed over, buried and hushed up. But some of it survived, as when adults would whisper secrets, unaware that children were listening.

Now, black Canadians—who make up about 1 percent of the country's 31 million people—are trying to put the broken tombstones back together, pick up the pieces of their ancestry and fill in the spaces that were left in the history books.⁶

A buried, now resurrected history has unpleasant aspects for whites who inherited the Priceville community from its original Black settlers. The injustice done to Blacks has survived in the memory of the community, demeaning the dignity of the descendants of both the inheritors of Priceville and those whom they oppressed, and so the descendants of those who were harmed have taken on the responsibility to achieve justice in their name.

As an step toward dismantling systems of oppression in which one cultural group dominates another, reparations are more than simply "payment" for past injury. They are a national question. If this is so, then a *broad view* of history must be presented and a broad demand must be made for restitution. Reparations address Black oppression, and in the context of a "grand narrative," this oppression is not merely damaging to Blacks but constructs the identity of America itself.

Here, my view of American reparations is affected by the case of South Africa, where the struggle to accomplish racial healing through a Truth and Reconciliation Commission addressed a grand narrative of oppression. This makes reparations a larger question than “race relations,” a concept that prompts attempts to rectify injustices according to a paradigm of racial dominance and subordination. This level of analysis comprehends what may be called “petty race oppression,” and is qualitatively different from the interrogation of the sources of power differences among cultural groups in their relation to the state. Since the paradigm is not concerned with the total environment, including the historical and current socioeconomic and cultural statuses that shape neighborhood conflicts, it invites petty methods of redress, such as calls for cross-cultural dialogues, symbolic apologies, and memorials and museums—forms of what Eric K. Yamamoto calls “cheap reconciliation.”⁷

In South Africa the consequences of Apartheid were acknowledged to be so serious that reconciliation through restitution became a legitimate goal of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. In particular, its consequences were legitimized for those whose relatives and ancestors were victims of Apartheid. Yet in the United States, the consequences of slavery for the descendants of the enslaved are held not to justify restitution to the current Black population. In this view, the progeny of slaves—great-grandsons and great-granddaughters, granddaughters and grandsons, even daughters and sons—are unaffected by what happened in the past. But what happened in the past is indeed profoundly material, in part because organic components of the institution of slavery—the most persistent of them being the inferiority of Black people—poisoned Black communities long after the legal regime of slavery ended.

Therefore, this book reconceptualizes the basis of reparations as an organic phenomenon of oppression, taking into consideration slavery, but making no sharp break between slavery and other forms of oppression. Nor do I take the position that slavery and other oppressive practices ended abruptly in the nineteenth—or some would say the twentieth—century, but understand that they recur as supports for the supremacy of the dominant class, especially when, in different periods of history, the underclass mounts serious challenges to that supremacy.

Given that oppressive acts have been directed at African American life for centuries, the demand for reparations has also had a long history.

Without describing that history here, I note that this demand parallels the history of oppression for at least four essential reasons: the politics of the memory as reflected in different notions of how America was born; the tension between majoritarian democracy and justice for all; the differential treatment of groups in America with respect to payment of reparations; and the attack by the dominant class on the liberal regime of rights that were meant to make the Black underclass equal. I will briefly discuss these factors in the sections that follow, as a preface to fuller treatment of these topics in the rest of the book.

The Politics of Memory

The dominant group in a society is often shocked to find that subordinate groups remember the harms done to them, which often resurface as the primary basis of their attitudes and behaviors toward the dominant group. The dominant group often appears naive, surprised that the historical victory over the suppressed group did not buy them peace. And that is because the settlement of or compensation for the harm done is inadequate, or nonexistent. Indeed, one frequently hears that, since the harm happened so long ago, the tactic of peace desired by the dominant group is forgetting and “moving on.” But forgetting is hard when the harm is lodged in the collective memory of a group. Such recollection may be termed “common memory”:

A common memory . . . is an aggregate notion. It aggregates the memories of all those people who remember a certain episode which each of them experienced individually. If the rate of those who remember the episode in a given society is above a certain threshold (say, most of them, an overwhelming majority of them, more than 70 percent, or whatever) then we call the memory of the episode a common memory—all of course relative to the society at hand.⁸

This powerful, shared memory means that simply “moving on” is impossible, and that any regime of reconciliation must have unresolved issues as a rationale for action. This is even more true when the imperative to remember is reinforced by ongoing experiences of harm, re-creating the political content of the memory in each age.⁹

Consider Memorial Day, a national opportunity to remember and preserve the supreme sacrifices made by soldiers and their families in wars. Blacks have not been the fuel for keeping these memories alive, but rather—just to name organizations that remember the Civil War—the Sons of Confederate Veterans, the United Daughters of the Confederacy, the Daughters of the Union Veterans, and the Sons of Union Veterans.¹⁰ Memorial Day began in May 1868 as Decoration Day, when the graves of both Union and Confederate soldiers were honored, in a move that began the reuniting of the North and the South.

Critically, the memories of veterans of both sections of the country were passed on to their descendants. One such descendant was Garland Pool, who recalled that his father could not shake memories of the war, for example, when, during a battle, slaves were liberated and one slave was given a gun, which he used to beat his slave master to death.¹¹ These memories live on to such an extent that students at a middle school in Peoria, Illinois, having received visits and email from descendants of Civil War veterans in 2004, said that their exploits did not seem to have happened 140 years ago.¹² For some people, these memories color behavior today.

Some Blacks and whites remember the Civil War strongly enough to participate in reenactments of its battles. In May 2004, I arrived at a hotel in Fredericksburg, Virginia, only to be asked at the desk whether I had come to participate in the battle of Spotsylvania, which on its 140th anniversary was being re-created on the nearby Belvedere Plantation.¹³ The event was not restricted to men who took the role of soldiers. The full-page spread in the local newspaper assessed the role of women, who also donned period clothing, attempting in every way to conduct their roles as authentically as possible. Indeed, there are thousands of such Civil War reenactments all over the country.

The vigorous desire to preserve memories of the Civil War is demonstrated in other ways as well. A political movement has emerged to prevent developers from destroying historic battlefields. For example, a coalition was formed in 2002 to save the Chancellorsville battlefield, threatened by developers who wanted to build expensive homes on the site; the coalition won its battle before the Fredericksburg Area Metropolitan Planning Organization.¹⁴ Indeed, many of the Civil War battlefields have similarly come under the pressure of development. The fifty-thousand-member Civil War Preservation Trust is dedicated to preserving them, believing that “these battlefields are the last tangible

reminders of the valor of those who donned the blue and gray. They must be preserved for future generations of Americans.”¹⁵

Thus the memory of the Civil War and of the reasons it was fought is still strong in the American psyche. Preservation of this memory entails recollection of the atrocious harm done to African slaves and their descendants, an aspect of the past that cannot be detached and removed from the history of which it is a part. It is thus a prime impediment to any “reconciliation” that consists entirely of forgetting.

Part of the equation of American memory, however, is that slavery and its aftermath are sensitive subjects. The sensitivities in the racial memory of the white psyche may be seen in the tortuous considerations that always arise when one looks at the posture of the founding fathers on slavery, and in the massive rejection of the legacy of miscegenation exposed by the story of Thomas Jefferson’s slave mistress. Sensitivities notwithstanding, African slavery and the subordination and virtual extinction of Native Americans were bloody affairs, with many victims, much slaughter, and the debasement of the humanity of such peoples. This stigma has survived into the modern era. Reconciling such a history requires an admission of this inhumanity and these atrocities. They constitute a significant part of the moral legacy of the victorious group, and therefore must inform its intention to make recompense, or establish, as it is often called, “justice.”

Contentious Perspectives on the Making of America

Mt. Rushmore symbolizes the idea that America was created by great white men—George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, and Theodore Roosevelt—and that the purity of their contribution should be preserved, enshrined in stone as the basis of their right to rule. The monument was forged in the early twentieth century, an intensely nationalist era of American history. In fact, the primary builder of the monument, Gutzon Borglum, named the monument “The Shrine of American Democracy,” calling it “the mark of American civilization.”¹⁶ His quest was not just to create the scene of four American presidents carved into Mt. Rushmore, but to define the meaning of this colossal memorial to the greatness of American civilization.

Roosevelt’s place in this pantheon has been often questioned, but he was a favorite of Borglum, who was enamored with his policies and raised funds for his campaigns. Indeed, Roosevelt himself characterized

his policies as the product of a period of “new nationalism.” Borglum’s contribution to the dominant ideology of the era not only exalts the contribution of whites to the making of American civilization, but tries to exclude Blacks from the myth of America’s new creation. Borglum’s view of America was that of a white nation in conflict with other racial and ethnic groups, some of whom came before the Europeans, such as the Hispanics and Native Americans, and others, such as Africans and Asians, who were used as laborers to build the country’s material infrastructure. Mt. Rushmore is set in the Black Hills of South Dakota in the home of the Sioux Indians, who regarded it as a desecration of the land of their ancestors. The monument to democracy was carved not only in a place where, but at a time when, Indians were being hunted down, slaughtered, and set on reservations. Thus, Mt. Rushmore stands as one of the greatest ironies of America.

In some ways, it is consistent that the builder of the monument was not only a white nationalist, but a racist who excoriated Jews at every opportunity, and of course, felt that Blacks were patently inferior. The irony deepens in that Borglum also worked on a monument to Robert E. Lee and other Confederate generals at Stone Mountain in Georgia, just outside of the city of Atlanta. While he believed that the justice of the Southern cause was made moot by the Civil War, he also thought that “the character, the high principle of these great men, should not be ignored.”¹⁷ What’s more, he was a partisan and close associate of the Ku Klux Klan, which was reborn at a ceremony at Stone Mountain in 1915. As John Taliaferro points out, Borglum “attended Klan rallies, served on Klan committees, and endeavored to play peacemaker in several Klan leadership disputes.”¹⁸ But regardless of Stone Mountain’s association with the terrorism of lynching and other violence against Blacks, Borglum agreed to place a Klan altar at the base of his monument there.

In the 1920s, Borglum said about Black people, “[W]hile Anglo-Saxons have themselves sinned grievously against the principle of pure nationalism by illicit slave and alien servant traffic, it has been the character of the cargo that has eaten into the very moral fiber of our race character rather than the moral depravity of Anglo-Saxon traders.”¹⁹

Proof that Mt. Rushmore remains a symbol of American nationalism may be found in the survey at the site that asks visitors to name the greatest president. While one of the obvious choices, George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Abraham Lincoln, has come in at the top of

the list each year, Ronald Reagan, a modern nationalist, has often placed second. In part, this was the result of a dedicated campaign by the Reagan Legacy Committee, which succeeded in having Washington National Airport named for Reagan, over the objection of Blacks who regarded him as a racist.²⁰ But a primary point of the committee's agitation was to have Reagan's face added as the fifth president on the surface of Mt. Rushmore!

Neither the original faces on the mountain, nor the attempt to place Ronald Reagan there, reflects the contributions of other groups to America. Rather, Mt. Rushmore is a monument to a myth of creation that rejected their contribution. The effort to add Reagan symbolizes recent attempts to undo what progress had been achieved to bring racial and ethnic groups to full equality within American society.

Black Oppression as a National Question

Randall Robinson artfully brings to the surface the point that concern with Black oppression requires acknowledging the use of Black resources in the construction of the American state. The immorality of slavery has been compounded by the modern failure to acknowledge that the grandeur of this country was based, in substantial part, upon the monumental resources made possible by African labor. The failure to acknowledge the contribution of Africans is an act of social theft, removing from the story its real heroic virtue. Moreover, it is a theft that has been repeated in each age, corrupting what passes for American history and the education upon which it is founded. It fosters cynicism and alienation among Blacks and precludes their full-faith acceptance of the institutionalized version of the American dream.

Traditionally, the contribution of Blacks to the building of America has been understood on the basis of the pallid notion of "contributionism," that is to say, a nod toward Black inventors, soldiers, cultural artists, and such. The case made in Robinson's book is that the real impact of Blacks on the American genesis includes a comprehensive contribution to the entire political economy, including the accumulation of monumental profits by private companies and massive resources by the government. So reparations are significant not merely to Blacks, but to the reconstitution of a fair perspective that respects the roles all played in the making of America, as a primary content of their own citizenship.

Democracy and Memory Justice

When Blacks advance a project of recompense for subordination, the response by the majority contributes to the definition of a democratic society. If restorative justice is unavailable to the citizenry, one can have no confidence that the society intends to pursue a democratic state for all. Therefore, we must confront the question of whether the goal is real democracy, defined by the sharing of power, or the maintenance of a notion of democracy that accommodates white dominance and Black subordination. The answer will provide us with the criteria according to which the society remembers its past, organizes its present, and designs its future. We allude here, then, to a potential tension between democracy and justice.

James Booth suggests that we should endeavor to live in a world ruled by justice as the basis of democracy, and memory, he writes, occupies the heart of justice.²¹ Booth suggests that to achieve the kind of society we desire, the future must be freed from the pollution of the past, and that the only possible cleansing derives from a feeling among victims that justice has been done. So the modern state must establish an apparatus to free itself from the unfulfilled responsibilities of the past, fomenting justice in order that dignity may emerge. It is the dignity of the victims that restores the past, not as a concealed burden but as an acknowledged source of the present and the future.

The political problem here is whose version of reality will govern. Our sense of reality is generally seamless in sewing together the past, present, and future into a whole experience. Within it, the events that comprise different eras interact with one another in inescapable confrontation. Memory is social, not merely individual, and incorporates social interactions. If an attempt to forget obscures a history (a set of memories) that is important to a subordinate group, this is another form of oppression, and contrary to Booth's concept of "memory justice." Erasing the unpleasant past to evade the truth, making selective aspects of past realities disappear, is impossible so long as representatives of the victims exist in the present and future.

Commenting on competing senses of memory, Ueno Chizuko poses the notion of a "multivalent reality":

When slavery was practiced in the American South, there was no law against it. But subsequently, after a change in the con-

sciousness brought recognition of what a crime against humanity slavery was, American history was re-written. Slavery and the genocide of indigenous peoples became indelible smirches on American history. What Anglo-Saxon Americans had understood as a “noble conquest,” native Americans remembered as a massacre. Only with the challenge of minorities’ opposing realities has American history come to be written from a more diverse perspective.²²

Blacks have asserted their own reality in an effort to endow it with a moral force that will attract restitution. About that stage of the contesting of realities, Chizuko says:

When the victims are bold enough to break their silence, we have no choice but to embark from their own overwhelming “reality.” By “reality,” I do not mean here the same things as “facts.” When this great a disparity exists between the experience of the perpetrators and the victims, how can one call the incident a single “fact”? Rather, two “realities” exist.²³

If a society’s memories offer up two realities, or more than two, are all realities equally true? Michael Kreyling raises the question of whether there is such a thing as “false memory” and how it gets recorded.²⁴ The “multivalent reality” of American slavery has been established primarily by those who reside atop the power structure: the dominant group has made a dedicated practice of forgetting about it, and very often about modern racism as well. Kreyling implies that one reality may be more authentic than another, and that the latter exists as “false memory.” He sheds light on the process of false memorization in the contemporary United States: “We live in a society which fashions itself post-traditional and we imagine that we remake our society everyday, that we are members of a highly mobile deracinated community.”²⁵ In such an environment, he asks, why do certain events, such as the Holocaust, merit the “justice of remembrance”? On that question ultimately turns an important ethic of our society, our collective responsibility to remember.

When realities are multiple, when they are not woven together in a seamless garment, what happens? Larry J. Griffin asks what white Southerners should remember about the struggle in Birmingham dur-

ing the civil rights movement, or about the exclusion of Blacks from Ole Miss (the University of Mississippi). Since Blacks “now insist that the overarching majoritarian story is not the only memory,” memories held by the dominant class must be scrutinized. In fact, since post-traditional society must be more inclusive, “it is precisely because of the contestation over the dominant narrative, or the story, that there is room for this kind of insurgent use of memory by any numbers of people who felt themselves to be slighted or ignored or forgotten in the grand narrative.”²⁶ Such an insurgency has been created over slavery and its consequences, memories of which will not die because they are material to the identity those who still live as victims, a legacy of slavery’s original victims. Dignifying past victims is the key to dignifying those who from them inherit a present and future. As Booth has observed about the Nazi regime, here “the intertwining of . . . political identity, responsibility, and remembrance is plain to see.”²⁷

Official attempts by governments to be accountable to the memory of oppressed groups by devising programs of racial restitution are meant to foster reconciliation, as the means through which their societies may settle social dilemmas that have plagued them. And, doubtless, they have in the past believed that they were employing democratic values in the process of considering restitutive acts. Nevertheless, the attempt to use democratic means to devise systems leading to racial peace has fallen short because, as Booth points out, memory justice is a democratic value in both means and ends that should be at the heart of the enterprise. The issue has been one of naïveté, of whether those who have proposed solutions understood the complexity of the problem and had the courage to confront the difficult issues involved. The result of the failure to comprehend memory justice has been not only a notion that one can buy racial peace on the cheap, but that one can close the deal while ignoring difficult problems. (All of this leaves aside another issue, whether attempts to resolve problems facing Blacks have been genuine or a strategy of delay, a political feint to the oppressed groups, meant to reduce pressure from them while the dominant group pursued its own priorities.)

At all ends, racial reconciliation does not come about simply through the initiatives of the dominant group, but as an urgent imperative of the oppressed, driven by their socioeconomic conditions. Such are the politics of “memory justice.”

The Justice Problem and American Reparations

Reparations Given

On the basis of their common memory of oppression, African Americans seek justice in the form of reparations. They have been encouraged toward this politics by U.S. government attempts to make restitution for harms done to subordinated groups. Yet many Blacks are perplexed by the disparity in results. It is difficult to understand the motivation of an American leadership that, while denying consideration of reparations for slavery and subsequent racial oppression, has offered compensation to Native Americans, Hawaiians, and Asians and facilitated reparations for Jews. Reparations by the U.S. government were awarded as recently as 1994, when the Colville Indians received a package worth \$53 million for the loss of breeding grounds for salmon and other tribal lands when the Grand Coulee Dam was built in the 1930s.²⁸

The Jewish Holocaust of World War II has resulted in reparations to Jewish victims by European states, bankers, and firms. For example, in June 2001, 10,000 Jewish recipients in 25 countries who were survivors of Nazi-era slave labor received from German firms checks of about \$4,400 each, wired to their bank accounts. This amounted to \$23 million for 5,400 survivors living in the United States.²⁹ In August 2004, a second round of checks totaling \$401 million was sent to 130,681 survivors, averaging \$2,556 each. And while the total of some \$7,500 might appear small to the affluent, one recipient offered, "If you're poor, it's meaningful."³⁰

Reparations were also paid to Japanese families whose land and houses were taken and who were incarcerated during World War II, and payments were made to Chinese "comfort women" who were forced to provide sexual services to the Japanese, also during World War II.³¹ These well-known examples of payments for crimes of the past have reawakened the sentiments of African Americans, who suffered far longer from the even more insidious and heinous crimes of slavery and from postslavery racism, and continue to suffer today.

These groups I have mentioned suffered at the hands of the state, and a political coalition at a moment in history believed it was worth an attempt to rectify an acknowledged historical wrong. Why, then, does this country believe that it can stop short of that goal with respect to the

oppression of African Americans, without fanning the flames of Black memory even higher, thereby elevating the price?

In many cases, the motivation for attempting to resolve these problems by the U.S. government was as simple as righting a wrong done to people who could be identified as victims. The Jewish and Japanese American examples were not intended to elevate their material status, since these groups were already above the norm in measures such as family income. Thus, they constitute a category where the major consideration was to rectify the moral and legal wrongs in which their racial integrity was violated.

To make a further distinction, Jewish reparations were not intended to reconcile Jewish citizens to America, since the crime against them was committed largely by Germans and other Europeans. It was an American problem only in the sense that Jewish Americans expected that their government should assist in the resolution of the international problem, an expectation to which it responded positively.

The case of reparations to Japanese American reparations is different in that their incarceration during World War II occurred in this country and was perpetrated by the American government. Thus, there was a direct issue of restitution, though again, it was not intended either by the Japanese community or by the U.S. government to elevate that community as a whole to economic equality. Rather the sum of twenty-five thousand dollars per family as payment for relocation and internment may be regarded as a symbolic replacement for lost property. Both of these cases, the Jewish and Japanese American, fall into the category of "moral amelioration," since the reparation was intended to correct past damage to the group.

The case of Native Americans is also rooted in moral considerations, but it differs in that it involved ceding land and according them a semblance of sovereign rights, as a people whom the European settlers had defeated in battle and largely exterminated. Nevertheless, the reconciliation sought on the grounds of "fairness" has not been achieved because the treaties in many cases were honored neither by the American government nor the states. This is in part because fairness has always been assessed by those whites who control the political establishment and who represent the vested power of the victors, whose interests have always been protected. Hence there is an ongoing demand for reparations from the Indian community.

Reparations Denied

The preceding examples have brought into the full view the complexity of motives for restitution, political power, and race relations. In light of the compensation made to other groups, one is struck by how far outside the realm of legitimacy reparations to Black people are judged to be by the American government and white public. In fact, that judgment itself may be considered a manifestation of racism: Africans are boldly rejected despite a just claim and despite efforts to deliver reparations to other groups. So, while other writers have researched such issues as the nature of African slavery and what is owed to African Americans and by whom, this book discusses the price that must be paid.

The denial of reparations by the state is a singular illustration of how racism works in America. The definition of racism contains the concept of unequal treatment by authority systems with an impact that is visited negatively upon racial groups of color. When governments provide reparations to one group of people and deny them to another, it means, first, that the group denied is poorer economically. Second, this is not only “unequal” treatment, but also the most pernicious form of inequality in its duplicitous treatment of groups that claim reparations.

Many suspect that the rationale for the denial of reparations to African Americans is based on race and is, therefore, a manifestation of the dynamics of racism. C. Eric Lincoln has suggested that attitudes toward “race” are often governed by “the fantasies of social preemption,” which become “institutionalized as values [that] inevitably set the stage for the fear and alienation that fracture the society and torture us all with a pervasive sense of contradiction.”³² Many familiar incidents—so many that they need no listing—are created by the fantasies of the powerful and their ability to affect social preemption, rather than the facts experienced by less powerful racial groups. This confirms the existence of differing perspectives on racial problems that are shaped by the race and class position of the viewer. This distance between viewpoints leads to different judgements about the quality of fairness or justice belonging to an event or practice. For example, if whites now feel that they are discriminated against by civil rights laws originally meant to protect Blacks, their class position enables them to act on that proposition. While Blacks may also feel aggrieved, their relative lack of power prevents them from establishing their perspective as the basis on which to

achieve justice. Differing perspectives and the actions that flow from them are the source of much of racial politics in America.

South Africa and Retrenchment of the American Regime of Rights

Comparative public policy is described as “the study of how, why, and to what effect different governments pursue particular courses of action or inaction.” Certain issues of political significance are presented to the political system for authoritative resolution in the form of policy, and governments enact certain policies but not others. The choice of policies is in one sense the outcome of a “political class struggle.”³³ African-descendant peoples, who as a political class have not fared well in this struggle, face the problem of how to obtain necessary “public goods” through governmental policy that would allow them to become viable social and economic actors, apart from the private resources to which their group has access. This brings into sharp relief the separate and collective activities, attitudes, and policies of governments and their perspective toward African-descendant peoples. Here, the common heritage of western European and American countries is vital to understand, in that it has yielded concepts of restitution based on a common history of involvement in the exploitation of African peoples.

The state as a host of the African-descendant community is the primary reference where race is concerned, understanding that “the state” is a composite that comprises the government in a dynamic interplay with the private economic and social sectors. Almond and Powell have addressed the “rule making function of government” in a comparative context as that produced by government bureaucracies and party structures.³⁴ This discrete function of government, however, must be challenged within the racial context, to conceptualize the entire state as an organism that gives support to “policy” through the political culture, since the state and its various agencies are often but the superstructure for the manifestation of the racial interests of the majority. Here it will not only be necessary to take the state seriously as a unit of analysis, but also to treat it as transparent in order to unearth the racial-ethnic interests of the majority, and thus, the real face of majority and minority competition.

In my previous work, *Pan Africanism in the African Diaspora*,³⁵ I found it useful to design a comparative race framework of analysis that consisted of two major variables involving, first, a comparison of governmental institutions that addressed race relations in different countries and, second, a reconstruction of the relationships among Blacks who interacted socially and politically, in order to assess the nature of Pan-Africanism in those relations. I will present in this work a brief sketch of the history of Black Americans and Black South Africans who maintained some level of interaction and especially of Americans who were resident in South Africa at the turn of the twentieth century. Because of the prominence of race in the United States and South Africa, and because the two countries share aspects of their racial histories, I believe that the project of restitution in South Africa yields principles that would be useful to racial reconciliation if a similar project were to arise in the United States.

South Africa is perhaps the best-known example in the global system of a state based on racism. When it sought to resolve its racial conflict as part of a general complex of issues—but perhaps the most vexing of them all—it devised a system of racial forgiveness in connection with restitution to the victims of Apartheid. My inference is that the racial situation of South Africa, though not identical to that of United States, contains lessons for the resolution of the America racial problem.

The first proposition is that the issue in the United States has been posed as one of the continuing impact of something known as “racism” but that a more sophisticated understanding of this term, bringing to bear the meaning of South African Apartheid, exhibits the entire history of Black people in the United States and the dialectic between their oppression and the result of that historic process. Michael Brown has ventured into an analysis of the differences between “racism” and the apartheid system.

Apartheid . . . is far more than can be hinted at by “racism” at least as that term is traditionally used. It is something on the order of a state system that attempts to coordinate economy, polity, and community in order to maintain the systematic racialist division of the national population on which that state system depends. *Apartheid* is, in other words, a statist project

that attempts to subordinate the whole of its natural population and all aspects of “society” of that population to its self-reproduction as a state.³⁶

Brown defines apartheid according to its role in the capitalist order, and especially in South Africa’s links to other capitalist states in the process of trade. South Africa used race oppression not only as an internal ideology, but as a system to generate profits derived from its ability to export low-cost goods to international markets. The intensity of capitalist demands required the administration of the state on the basis of strict separation of the races and the oppressive control of the Black population. This structure prohibits the development of “society” in the normal sense, since it violates the very principle of society “in order to provide sufficient conditions for pursuing the project of a self-reproducing state, specified on its own denial of that principle.”³⁷

However, the function of “racism” in the United States is, in one respect, obscured by a comparison with South Africa, because those who perpetrate it are in the majority in the United States, while in South Africa they were in the minority. Given these demographic differences, the treatment of Blacks can take on a more benign appearance in the United States, where the goals of containment and control of the Black population are still evident, but where the consequences are not as drastic because Blacks and their demands upon society are not immediately threatening to the majority. Under this circumstance, the majority can even allow a modicum of social progress, given that it can still maintain dominance and avoid violent conflict. However, when the interests of Blacks are perceived to be threatening, the system responds by closing down further benefits to the Black community, as has been the case in the 1990s and beyond.

Conclusion

Having introduced the comparative context of this work in this chapter, including a preliminary comparison of relationship between Blacks in South Africa and the United States, I proceed with three chapters on South Africa. The United States and South Africa “changed histories” after a period of very similar circumstances because in the twentieth century there arose two different notions of the desired society, as will

be seen in chapter 2. A “grand narrative of oppression” forms the crucible for the struggle for justice by Blacks in South Africa, leading to their assumption of power. Chapter 2 assesses their attempt to govern by forming the Truth and Reconciliation Commission as a mechanism of racial redemption. Chapter 3 examines the conceptual issues involved in constructing that mechanism, elaborating a template of theoretical concepts that will be useful in understanding how those who constructed the TRC believed it could be successful. Chapter 4 evaluates the success of the TRC process.

The extensive preparation by the South African government, intellectuals, religious leaders, and others for the Truth and Reconciliation process, and the participation by victims of Apartheid and perpetrators of its crimes, have left an indelible record of concepts, processes, and issues that must be broached by any country attempting to bind up the racial wounds of the past. This record helps us see why the past must be confronted, what victimization consists of, which contexts allow racial reconciliation, and how the dynamics of reconciliation, justice, reparations, and just war play out. It gives us a template of critical parameters by which one may measure the prospect of racial reconciliation elsewhere, and discern its true price.

The application of the South African template to the American racial situation makes it possible to tease out the factors that are necessary to achieving racial reconciliation in the United States. The chapters on South Africa are therefore followed by four chapters on the United States, three of which parallel those on South Africa. The additional chapter is chapter 8, “The Reparations Movement: A Liberatory Narrative,” which considers the two principal parties in American’s contentious historical racial relationship.