

Models for Reparations, Deep Solidarity, and Understanding the Legacies of Plantation
Capitalism

By

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Thesis

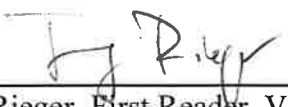
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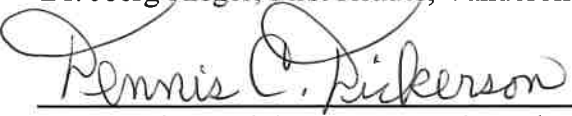
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Dr. Joerg Rieger, First Reader, Vanderbilt Divinity School



Date



Dr. Dennis C. Dickerson, Second Reader, Vanderbilt University



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Introduction: The Hands of the Maladjusted

On September 2, 1957, in Monteagle, Tennessee, Martin Luther King, Jr. gave the closing address for the Highlander Folk School’s twenty-fifth anniversary seminar, which was themed “The South Thinking Ahead.” In that speech, he argues for an alliance between the interests of the labor movement and the burgeoning civil rights movement at the time. He goes on to celebrate the achievements and possibilities of the Black freedom struggle in the South, stating that organized labor has proven to be one of the most powerful forces in addressing segregation and discrimination in the United States. He closes these remarks to the collection of leaders from trade unions, religious groups, and community organizations who were gathered at the Highlander’s anniversary conference by emphatically arguing that those who cannot conform themselves to the many injustices of the world are the ones best positioned to change it: “I call on you to be maladjusted,” King avers, “It may be that the salvation of the world lies in the hands of the maladjusted.”¹

The hands of the maladjusted. The hands of those who cannot accept the spiritual, psychological, and economic conditions of racial capitalism. In his 2022 book *Revolutionary Nonviolence: Organizing for Freedom*, Reverend James Lawson writes that, in organizing for freedom and justice, it is vital to “begin where you are.”² My approach to this research project

¹ Martin Luther King, Jr., *All Labor Has Dignity*, ed. Michael K. Honey, The King Legacy (Boston: Beacon Press, 2011), 18. Following his appearance as a keynote speaker at the Highlander Center, white supremacist propaganda produced by the White Citizens Council was distributed throughout the U.S. South, decrying the relationship between the labor movement and Black freedom struggle and capitalizing on the fears of the Red Scare. The propaganda widely accused King of being a Communist. Such historical events indicate the deep resentment and fear elicited in the owning class in the U.S. South when relationships of solidarity develop between the white and Black working classes. That fear demonstrates the radical potential that such relationships of solidarity can have for challenging the dominant power structures.

² James M. Lawson, *Revolutionary Nonviolence: Organizing for Freedom / James M. Lawson Jr., with Michael K. Honey and Kent Wong*. (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520387850>, 40.

revolves around this piece of advice: I seek to begin where I am, and see what happens. I am a white descendent of European settlers living in the United States; my white ancestors include unionized coal miners, history teachers, seamstresses, and preachers. In my life, I seek to cultivate maladjustment to the conditions of capitalism that rely on racism, patriarchy, colonization, and exploitation to replicate themselves. As such, reparations for the institution of human chattel slavery in the United States is an undertaking that involves, implicates, and challenges me to attend to the legacies of racial hierarchy and violence in the stories of the people, communities, churches, schools, and places that have shaped me. To understand the story of any physical place, I must also understand the storying of myself— and of the ancestors, church traditions, education systems, and social movements that have shaped the context in which I live. I attend to the work of economic justice in my life through a deep commitment to shared humanity and a sense of struggle for the realization and actualization of universal human dignity. As Lawson articulates, this commitment to humanity on a broad scale is vital for contemporary activists and organizers, and often missed by single-issue or identity-based activists and organizers. As human beings, we do not live single issue lives.

The aim of this research paper is to examine the theology and history of calls for reparations in the United States, such that studying them may inform and improve current day efforts for redress and repair undertaken in majority white congregations. In order to attend to this goal, I first overview the legacies of plantation capitalism in the United States and the attention such legacies require within the work of deep solidarity. Then I investigate two examples of ongoing reparations programs within church settings that undertake the work of repentance and repair in relation to historical arguments for reparations within the United States. One example of church-based reparations programs approaches it from a model of charity and

the other example approaches repair from a model of solidarity. I argue that the solidarity model remains closer to the aims of Black-led social movements that have been calling for reparations for slavery since the period of Reconstruction. Finally, I suggest that the transformation of racial and economic systems within churches in the United States requires a deep theological, cosmological, and epistemological shift oriented towards repair.

In the introduction to a special issue of the *American Quarterly* focused on leftist scholarship and the neoliberal university, Naomi Greyser and Margot Weiss write, “Left or radical critique means doing political work with and as, rather than for or about, the communities within which we are situated.”³ Accordingly, this writing is not directed outward at others without critical self-reflection on my personal relationship to the work of racial and economic justice as someone whose life has been shaped deeply by the legacies of economic and racial violence in the so-called United States. I see myself as self-interested (that is, neither selfless nor selfish) in this research, because I want to understand the mechanisms through which we can study, know, learn, live, do, and be better in collective; I see this writing as radically engaging my personhood within the adaptive processes of negotiating the conditions of the world in which I want to live with others.

My interest in the topic of redress, repair, and restitution for the economic, social, political, and theological legacies of the institution of slavery comes from an ongoing investment in the material work of solidarity within religious organizations, and in what it means to reckon with a legacy of race-based harm, disenfranchisement, and dispossession as a white descendent of European settlers in the United States. I research in order to cultivate my maladjustment to such legacies and to inform the development of maladjustment within majority white

³ Naomi Greyser and Margot Weiss, “Introduction: Left Intellectuals and the Neoliberal University,” *American Quarterly* 64, no. 4 (2012), 791.

communities and congregations. It is vital to study the efforts of Black radical organizers and intellectuals who have advocated for reparations, so that white communities may be informed as they undertake efforts at repair and redress for the legacy of slavery. These efforts demand my attention because of the urgency and diversity of faith-led reparations programs seeking to ethically repair some of the legacies of racial capitalism in their specific contexts, including forced displacement, racial hierarchy, and extreme wealth inequality. I am invested in discerning how different approaches to political education and reparative action within majority white churches might demonstrate the collective and cooperative work of repair for ongoing intergenerational racial harm.

However, not all white congregations engaged in this work are fully accomplishing the work of repair that they arguably set out to do, and some churches may even further entrench racial wealth disparities by relying on established models of charity and donations to nonprofits as their forms of reparations. I care deeply about these collective processes of learning and acting on a local level, and I believe that there is liberation and hope available to those who engage in such processes of organizing, acting, studying, and being in solidarity. In an interview discussing his book *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study*, scholar and poet Fred Moten says, “Study is what you do with other people. It is talking and walking around with other people, working, dancing, suffering, some irreducible convergence of all three, held under the name of speculative practice.”⁴ Study, learning, and knowledge production is generated and

⁴ “Studying Through the Undercommons: Stefano Harney & Fred Moten – Interviewed by Stephen Shukaitis,” *Class War University* (blog), November 12, 2012, <https://classwaru.org/2012/11/12/studying-through-the-undercommons-stefano-harney-fred-moten-interviewed-by-stephenshukaitis/>. Moten continues in this interview: “I believe in the world and want to be in it. I want to be in it all the way to the end of it because I believe in another world in the world, and I want to be in that.” That sensibility affects how I understand the work of reparations. It is the crafting and seeking of a more just and equitable world within the larger world that continues to operate within the system of plantation capitalism, achieved through continual resistance that often occurs underneath the

passed on through people. It is never separate from social communities or the processes of power within those communities. For that reason, careful attention must be paid to how racial and economic power is challenged or maintained through both academic research in university settings and reparative efforts in church settings.

King's conceptualization of the "hands of the maladjusted" echoes for me what Duffy, a union organizer in Leslie Feinberg's novel *Stone Butch Blues*, says when he recruits Jess, the protagonist of the novel, to organize with him: "I'm not saying we'll live to see some sort of paradise. But just fighting for change makes you stronger. Not hoping for anything will kill you for sure."⁵ This sensibility, too, affects my approach to theology and to the work of anti-racism and anti-capitalism in my life. The process of fighting for change betters me in and of itself. Balancing the pragmatic with the hopeful, Lawson writes in the same vein as Duffy's statement, "there are never any guarantees, but it is important to act as if it were possible to radically transform the world."⁶ The nonviolent movement for social justice, as embodied by Lawson and those who practice his principles, is not just a series of protests, but an overall shift in consciousness, especially in those struggles against what Lawson terms "plantation capitalism,"⁷ or the structure of capitalism that originates from the economic, political, and social conditions

surface of oppressive theologies and epistemologies. Furthermore, Harney and Moten's theorizing of the "undercommons" cannot be detailed in this paper, but remains of interest to any person seeking to do radical work within an institution that commits itself to the maintenance of the status quo.

⁵ Leslie Feinberg, *Stone Butch Blues* (Ithaca, N.Y: Firebrand Books, 1993), 328.

⁶ Lawson, *Revolutionary Nonviolence*, 23.

⁷ Lawson, *Revolutionary Nonviolence*, 61. Plantation capitalism is an elaboration of Cedric Robinson's conceptualization of racial capitalism. See Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (London: Zed, 1983). The systematization of race as a form of oppression is theorized as co-constitutive with the development of capitalism and invention of private property. Racial capitalism creates systems of value attached to racial identity in order to facilitate political and economic domination and exploitation.

of the plantation system. In the following section, I examine the legacies of plantation capitalism and the potential for deep solidarity within social movements for reparations.

Plantation Capitalism and Deep Solidarity

In a recent *New York Times* article for “The 1619 Project,” sociologist Matthew Desmond compellingly argued that the brutality of American capitalism in the current day can be traced to the systems of economic, psychological, and social control that emerged on the plantation.⁸ Any reckoning with American capitalism in its modern forms must also reckon with the legacies of human enslavement and the plantation system in the U.S. South. In his book *Development Arrested: The Blues and Plantation Power in the Mississippi Delta*, Black studies scholar Clyde Woods argues that “Plantation production is one of the most monumental burdens ever placed upon any community. It disfigures every nation, region, and ethnicity it touches.”⁹ While I am not directly descended from plantation owners, my white ancestors certainly benefited from the racial hierarchies in place in Alabama. They were disfigured by plantation production when they sacrificed their ability to recognize a shared interest in organizing with Black workers against plantation bosses.

Desmond criticizes the collective political imagination of white workers that emerged through the plantation system, arguing that witnessing the horrors of slavery impressed upon white workers the idea that their conditions could always be worse, eroding their sense of

⁸ Matthew Desmond, “American Capitalism Is Brutal. You Can Trace That to the Plantation.,” *The New York Times*, August 14, 2019, sec. Magazine, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/08/14/magazine/slavery-capitalism.html>. Along with Desmond’s writing, the other articles and intellectual work produced through The 1619 Project is of great merit to anyone interested in the legacies of slavery and specific harms for which repentance and atonement is required in American history.

⁹ Clyde Adrian Woods, *Development Arrested: The Blues and Plantation Power in the Mississippi Delta*, The Haymarket Series (London; Verso, 1998), 321.

freedom. Desmond writes, “[White workers’ notion of freedom] understood what it was against but not what it was for; [it was] a malnourished and mean kind of freedom that kept you out of chains but did not provide bread or shelter. It was a freedom far too easily pleased.”¹⁰ Karl Marx produces the same insight more than a century and a half earlier than Desmond, when he writes in chapter ten of *Capital*, “Labour cannot emancipate itself in the white skin where in the black it is branded.”¹¹ Any hope of cultivating widespread maladjustment to the economic conditions of capitalism rests on the cultivation of solidarity between working people at large. To do that, it is necessary for white working people to engage with the legacies of racial harm and violence in our histories. It is necessary for white working people in the United States to feel and understand how deeply entangled our pasts, presents, and futures are with the economic and racial conditions of the plantation system. Until then, a malnourished and mean sense of freedom within the white working class will continue to proliferate. The work of racial redress and repair is deeply connected to a liberatory vision of the future.

In describing the origins of the industrial capitalist, Marx makes explicit connections between the violence of slavery on plantations, the process of primitive accumulation, and the exploitation of labor within factories. Primitive accumulation refers to the expropriation and concentration of wealth and resources, often through violent or coercive means, such as colonization, conquest, enslavement, and enclosure of common lands.¹² Marx argues that primitive accumulation is a necessary precondition for capitalism to develop, as it created a class

¹⁰ Desmond, “American Capitalism Is Brutal. You Can Trace That to the Plantation.”

¹¹ Karl Marx, *Capital, Volume I* (London, United Kingdom: Electric Book Company, 2000), <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/vand/detail.action?docID=3008518>, 432.

¹² Marx, *Capital, Volume I*, 870-5.

of dispossessed and landless workers who were forced to sell their labor power to survive. With the rise of the plantation system and industrialization, production becomes increasingly centralized and organized. For Marx, “primitive accumulation plays approximately the same role in political economy as original sin does in theology.”¹³ He saw primitive accumulation as a violent and exploitative process that laid the foundation for capitalist exploitation and class struggle and was an integral part of the historical development of capitalism. This transformation is made possible by the exploitation of labor, the separation from land, and the expropriation of resources held in common. Owners use a process of primitive accumulation to generate profits through the exploitation of labor, most viciously through the exploitation of enslaved labor.

Because the process of primitive accumulation involves the separation of people from their means of subsistence, such as land, tools, and other productive resources, and the concentration of those resources in the hands of a few capitalist owners, 19th-century advocates for reparations often insisted on access to land on which to subsist as a part of a reparative process. Black-led calls for reparations today often insist on restitution with regard to land and property, as well. Marx argues that primitive accumulation was driven by the relentless pursuit of profit and the inherent contradictions of capitalism, which required constant expansion, exploitation, and accumulation of capital. He critiques the social and environmental consequences of primitive accumulation, highlighting its role in disrupting traditional social relations, destroying indigenous cultures, and causing ecological degradation. At the end of the 31st chapter of Volume 1 of *Capital*, which describes violent processes of alienation and labor exploitation, Marx writes, “If money, according to Augier, ‘comes into the world with a

¹³ Marx, *Capital, Volume I*, 873.

congenital blood-stain on one cheek,' capital comes dripping from head to foot, from every pore, with blood and dirt."¹⁴

The development of the industrial capitalist is intimately connected with the institution of plantation slavery. In *Development Arrested*, Woods describes the “plantation bloc” of power in the Mississippi Delta, which refers to a constellation of interlocking institutions, policies, and practices that have historically and continue to subordinate Black people in the United States.¹⁵ The concept draws on the legacy of the plantation system in the southern United States, which relied on the exploitation of enslaved Black labor to generate wealth for white plantation owners. The plantation bloc is maintained through a variety of mechanisms, including the use of state violence, the creation of racialized economic hierarchies, and the extraction of resources from Black communities. Woods sees the struggle against the plantation bloc as central to the project of Black liberation and argues that it requires a multifaceted approach that addresses both the economic and political dimensions of Black oppression.

Plantation capitalism is not simply an economic system, but rather a cosmology. It is “a way of organizing the relations between humans and the rest of nature.”¹⁶ Dealing with the legacies of plantation capitalism requires a shift in both epistemology and ontology: it requires

¹⁴ Marx, *Capital, Volume I*, 1088.

¹⁵ Woods, *Development Arrested*. Woods uses this term throughout the book to describe the bloc of white institutional and economic power that leads in the restoration of white supremacist attitudes, alliances, institutions, social policies, and economic programs in the Mississippi Delta, empowered by national and international alliances that work to preserve the plantation bloc’s vestiges of institutional control despite resistance and change in the region. For Woods, this is a force ever present in the workings of U.S. politics and economic development, in which social order, control, and supervision are maintained by mechanisms of white supremacist paternalism, through which daily racial terror and violence are insultingly romanticized.

¹⁶ Raj Patel and Jason W. Moore, *A History of the World in Seven Cheap Things: A Guide to Capitalism, Nature, and the Future of the Planet* (University of California Press: Oakland, California, 2017), 3.

attempts to think beyond the logics of racial capitalism in our efforts to imagine alternatives. The shift in consciousness required to examine the legacies of racial violence in the United States prompts both an investigation into the histories of freedom struggles against systems of injustice and a critical imagination, based on those histories, for the future. Lawson calls for different tactics and strategies within the contemporary movements for economic, social, and political justice for working people, arguing that there needs to be a convergence between labor institutions like the AFL-CIO and community organizing principles rooted in religious and spiritual principles. He writes that “we need to shake up the way we look at labor and labor unions; we need to shake up the way churches and religions look at themselves and recognize that we have a common past of advocating, protecting, and defending our social environment.”¹⁷ Those who are interested in organizing for economic and racial justice need also to shake up the ways we engage with solidarity, history, and reparations. I see myself invested in the conversation around reparations for the institution of chattel slavery, and I seek to understand how current day initiatives for repair among majority white congregations and communities might be improved by examining the history of social movements for reparations in the United States.

I intend this writing to be partial in two important ways: first, this research is partial rather than complete, comprehensive, or universal. Such universals never existed in the first place. What I have written throughout this project about the theology of reparations does not claim a final or universal say on the subject. I cite the work of Black radical historians, theologians, academics, and organizers throughout this research, attempting to engage their research and writing while refusing to position myself as an infallible authority on the subject of

¹⁷ Lawson, *Revolutionary Nonviolence*, 63-4.

racial and economic repair. I am deeply invested in this research, work, and writing on reparative efforts; that does not mean I will never falter. Second, this research is partial rather than impartial, expressing my specific interpretations, interests, and experiences throughout the work. My partiality in this sense needs to be explicitly named: I am a white queer Southern socialist, born and raised within the borders of land that is now known as Alabama. The legacy of human chattel slavery and the ongoing systemic racial and economic subjugation of Black people has permeated every context in which I have been formed as a human being, from labor to educational to social to familial contexts. The work of racial and economic repair for the legacies of European colonization, racial capitalism, and institution of slavery feels quite literally close to home for me, and I seek to engage in such work humbly, as someone who hopes and dreams about a world in which it is possible to heal some of the damage that racial capitalism continues to inflict on human souls.

I hope that this text remains partial in both ways, never offering up complete or final analyses and clearly stating the stakes, leanings, and discretions that I find important in the progression of my argument. My engagement with this topic seeks to explore how it is possible to cultivate communities with others committed to valuing life, justice, and survival both within and apart from the machinery of a world system that oils its gears on mass exploitation, death, destruction, and neglect. I see this research project as one way in which I engage in what theologian Joerg Rieger calls “deep solidarity,” or the form of solidarity that goes beyond surface-level relationships and addresses systemic issues of oppression and inequality.¹⁸

According to Rieger, deep solidarity requires an acknowledgment of the interconnectedness of

¹⁸ Joerg Rieger, *Theology in the Capitalocene: Ecology, Identity, Class, and Solidarity*, *Dispatches: Turning Points in Theology and Global Crises* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2022), 146.

all people, the shared interests of the working majority in the struggle against capitalism, and the recognition that the struggles of marginalized communities are linked to larger economic, political, and social systems.¹⁹ This means that deep solidarity requires addressing the root causes of inequality and transforming the conditions that maintain oppression, rather than providing temporary aid or charity.

The work of repair, imagined beyond a transfer of money that does not address the power inequalities inherent within the system of racial capitalism, may open up possibilities for deep solidarity. I remain committed to an expansive definition of repair, engaging with what Raj Patel and Jason Moore called “reparative ecology” at the end of their book *A History of the World in Seven Cheap Things: A Guide to Capitalism, Nature, and the Future of the Planet*.²⁰ Like Patel and Moore, who “do not think of reparation exclusively in monetary terms,”²¹ I find it vital to examine and undermine the complex economic, psychological, theological, and political structures of racial capitalism which have allowed for the institution of slavery and its ongoing legacies of harm in the United States. Deep solidarity, like reparative ecology, involves a commitment to working in solidarity with those who are marginalized, rather than just on the behalf of those who are marginalized. Understanding that the vast majority of living beings on this planet share both common experiences and common interests, begins with shared experiences of exploitation at the hands of the global neoliberal order. Theology therefore needs

¹⁹ Rieger, *Theology and the Capitalocene*, 144-8.

²⁰ Raj Patel and Jason W. Moore, *A History of the World in Seven Cheap Things: A Guide to Capitalism, Nature, and the Future of the Planet* (University of California Press: Oakland, California, 2017), 206. Reparative ecology is a particularly important concept for the intellectual work of this paper, as it calls for a significant shift in theology, cosmology, epistemology, and ontology in order to confront the system of plantation capitalism that has marred and marked relationships between human beings.

²¹ Patel and Moore, *A History of the World in Seven Cheap Things*, 207.

to be based on solidarity rather than morality, because a moral demand on well-meaning people does not have the legs to transform the capitalist system that solidarity based on common interest and collective experiences of exploitation does. Engaging with the common-interest in deep solidarity—rather than with single-issue movements—is absolutely necessary in order to encounter the system of global racial capitalism and emerge with any viable alternatives.

In the next section, I describe two present-day examples of reparative efforts undertaken by churches in relationship to two Black-led historical social movements for reparations in the United States. I examine these key historical moments in broad brushstrokes, not to tell the entire story of each period, but rather to produce a keener sense of the development of discourse around issues of repair for intergenerational legacies of slavery in the United States. I first compare an example of the charity model of reparations with the demands for reparations organized during the Black Freedom Struggle of the 1960s, arguing that charity does not meet the demands of Black organizers, intellectuals, and radicals crafted during that time. I then compare an example of the solidarity model of reparations with the movement for reparations during the period of Reconstruction after the Civil War, when demands made by formerly enslaved persons for pensions, repayment for stolen wages, and land access came to national prominence. I argue that the solidarity model comes closer to engaging with the demands for repair made by both the Reconstruction era movements and the Black Freedom struggle movements. Finally, I turn to examine what insight these two present-day examples and their relationship to historical movements may give to churches seeking to work around issues of reparations, redress, and restitution for their roles in racial harms in the United States. I conceptualize repair as an expansive, transformative process, rather than a simple monetary exchange that does little to

challenge dominant the racial and economic power dynamics between Black and white Americans.

There is no way to engage with the fullness of each separate historical moment in this size of a research project, but I choose to engage briefly with them in order to trace out a general genealogy of the conversations around reparations happening since the late 19th century in the United States. Each moment has deep connections to Black religious and economic organizing; understanding the history of such conversations better may help white communities and congregations organize their efforts to take responsibility for racial and economic harm. I hope this task is helpful for those who want a better sense of the discourse around redress for slavery as it relates to theology. Engaging with the longer and lesser-known history of conversations around reparations may inform the work that majority white congregations and communities can do in the current day as they undergo processes for reckoning with history. In order to consider some of the local and regional organizing efforts which may be most helpful for congregations to understand, I focus on social movement history rather than political history, such as the various bills introduced in the U.S. Congress that address the issue of reparations.

The Charity Model of Reparations

There are many examples of reparations programs within nonprofits, cities, and churches that rely on a model of charitable giving, with decision-making power about how, who, when, and why reparations are granted is retained within a white supremacist institution. For the purposes of this paper, I am choosing to detail one program that reveals a larger pattern I have observed in the larger landscape of the reparations programs in churches in the United States. In 2019, Evanston, Illinois, became one of the first U.S. cities to pass legislation establishing a reparations program that engages with the word explicitly. The city created a housing program

for those impacted by racially discriminatory housing practices. The first recipients received up to \$25,000 in vouchers toward home ownership and improvement in 2022. Because it is often seen as the first municipal-based reparations program in the United States, Evanston's "Restorative Housing Program" is widely cited as a model for other local and municipal reparations programs. In order to qualify for the money, recipients must have resided in Evanston at some point between 1919 and 1969, be at least 70 years of age, and have identified as Black on an official document. These candidates are referred to as "ancestors" by the housing program. The term "descendants" refers to the children and grandchildren of Black people who resided in Evanston during that time period. Instead of being given in cash, the funds will be applied straight to a mortgage balance, down payment on a house, property taxes, or a contractor for home improvements. The home that these payments go towards must be located in Evanston. The majority of the program is financed by a tax on Evanston's newly approved marijuana sales.²²

While it is certainly a step towards repentance and repair for racist housing policies, the Evanston program is not without problems. It has received criticism from local and national activists for its funding sources, for its limited scope— only sixteen people have received the first round of money— and for its use of housing vouchers, rather than direct payments to Black people. Those sixteen recipients were chosen at random, using a lottery system. Critics are especially wary of the lack of direct input that Black residents of Evanston have had in the process of developing this program, with many saying that the housing program does not go far

²² Jesse Washington, "History Is Made as Reparations Start to Flow in Evanston, Illinois," *Andscape* (blog), October 14, 2021, <https://andscape.com/features/history-is-made-as-reparations-start-to-flow-in-evanston-illinois/>.

enough to qualify as reparations for racist practices within the city's history.²³ They argue that the program further entrenches racial disparities in homeownership and wealth by approaching the problem through a piecemeal, gradual effort at repair and retribution.

Amidst all of this public debate and criticism about the material and financial structure of one of the nation's first reparations programs, the majority white First United Methodist Church of Evanston, IL, donated \$50,000 towards the development of the Restorative Housing Program. In February 2022, on the final Sunday of Black History Month and the last Sunday before the start of the Christian Lenten season, the check was presented to one of the architects of the city's housing program. Lent is a season of repentance, apology, and forgiveness in an effort to make amends for wrongdoing and harm. Invoking the Old and New Testaments' teachings about recognition, atonement, penitence, restitution, grace, knowledge, humility, service, and righteousness, congregants explained their support of the housing program by arguing that reparations exist to right a wrong that has been done.²⁴ It is necessary to understand and address the specific histories of harm in a local context in order to start the process of repair. In Evanston's case, anti-Black zoning laws and housing policies deprived Black families and Black businesses of wealth and opportunity. A housing voucher lottery does not provide adequate redress for such policies, nor does it preclude such anti-Black laws or policies from continuing to exist in Evanston.

²³ Heidi Randhava, "Critics of Restorative Housing Reparations Program Voice Concern and Anger Ahead of Vote by City Council," Evanston RoundTable, March 7, 2021, <http://evanstonroundtable.com/2021/03/07/critics-of-restorative-housing-reparations-program-voice-concern-and-anger-ahead-of-vote-by-city-council/>.

²⁴ Yiming Fu, "Evanston Faith Leaders Commit to Local Reparations," *The Daily Northwestern* (blog), June 14, 2022, <https://dailynorthwestern.com/2022/06/13/city/there-is-more-love-somewhere-evanston-faith-leaders-unite-to-support-local-reparations-fund/>.

Reparations for the Black community in Evanston and the United States are a complicated and drawn-out process that call for involvement from every member of the community. The donation represents a positive step toward repair and repentance towards members of the First United Methodist congregation in Evanston, but like critics of the housing program, I am reluctant to say this donation goes far enough in addressing racial harms. A donation to an existing program reifies the dynamics of the established charity models of outreach and mission work within Methodist churches, preventing and precluding structural change in the work of the church. It is not an exercise in deep solidarity, but rather a simple transfer of a portion of accumulated collective white wealth to a housing program that randomly meters out payments to some Black residents of Evanston.

One of the major concerns brought by Black-led social movements calling for reparations in the 1960s and 70s was a change in the balance of economic power. Queen Mother Audley Moore, one of the revivers of the conversation around reparations in the 1960s, insisted on material reparation as well as formal atonement for the harms of slavery.²⁵ In April 1969, following nearly a decade of sustained organizing for racial and economic justice by people of faith that is now known as the Civil Rights Movement, James Forman developed the "Black Manifesto" in conjunction with the National Black Economic Development Conference in Detroit, Michigan. The manifesto presented a list of demands that included a request for \$500 million in reparations from "Christian white churches and Jewish synagogues" to be paid to

²⁵ Audley M. Moore, *Why Reparations? "Reparations Is the Battle Cry for the Economic and Social Freedom of More Than 25 Million Descendants of American Slaves,"* Pamphlet, (The Reparations Committee for The Descendants of American Slaves, 1963), <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/5a3265a0-2088-013a-67c4-0242ac110003>.

Black Americans.²⁶ On May 4, 1969, a month after developing the manifesto, Forman interrupted a Sunday service at the Riverside Church in New York City by making his way to the front of the largely white congregation and reading its text aloud.²⁷ The white church organist continued to play as the majority of the clergy and crowd left, drowning out what Forman had to say. Other calls for reparations around that time period addressing white people of faith include Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s 1964 "Bill of Rights for the Disadvantaged" that "pointed out the intergenerational nature of sin registered by the prophets of the Hebrew Bible."²⁸ The growing 20th-century movement for reparations coalesced in 1987 under an umbrella organization called the National Coalition of Blacks for Reparations in America (N'COBRA), which remains active in discussions around reparations programs to this day.

The Black Manifesto represents what historian Juan Floyd Thomas calls "the first full-fledged prophetic appeal for financial restitution for African American enslavement from religious institutions in the nation's history."²⁹ Half a billion dollars for reparations is a small number to request from white churches and synagogues, calculated at only \$15 per Black person living in the United States in 1969. Robin D.G. Kelley comments that the drafters of the manifesto "considered their request seed money to build a new revolutionary movement and to

²⁶ James Forman, "Black Manifesto · The Special Program · The Church Awakens: African Americans and the Struggle for Justice," accessed March 10, 2023, <https://episcopalarchives.org/church-awakens/exhibits/show/specialgc/black-manifesto>.

²⁷ Forman, "Black Manifesto · The Special Program · The Church Awakens: African Americans and the Struggle for Justice".

²⁸ Rieger, *Theology in the Capitalocene: Ecology, Identity, Class, and Solidarity* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2022), 207.

²⁹ Juan Floyd-Thomas, "The God That Never Failed," in *Faith, Class, and Labor*, ed. Jin Young Choi and Joerg Rieger (United States: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2020), 47.

strengthen black political and economic institutions.”³⁰ In his memoir, Forman writes that reparations were not the end goal of the writers who developed the manifesto at the National Black Economic Development conference, but rather that reparations were “an intermediate step” in the long range goal of Black economic and social freedom.³¹ In the same vein as the Black radicals who conceived this text, it is vital to understand current day reparations programs as one step in a larger ecology of reparative efforts for the legacy of human chattel slavery in the United States. Financial payments are not the end point of work to be done around intergenerational harm. The Evanston church’s donation to an existing fund for reparations could be bettered with a fuller engagement in other steps towards repair, such as investigating the church’s specific history as it may relate to the use of enslaved labor, displacement of Black residents and businesses, or complicity with anti-Black zoning laws or housing policies in Evanston.

In the months that followed Forman’s interruption of the Riverside Church service, the responses to the Black Manifesto were diverse and far ranging. Many Black clergy publicly endorsed the manifesto, while prominent Black organizations such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the National Baptist Convention “quickly formulated a contradictory position”³² to the demands of the Manifesto, which declared that white Christians “owed reparations for centuries of complicity in the exploitation of Black

³⁰ Robin D. G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002), 121.

³¹ James Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*, Illustrated ed., Black Thought and Culture (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997), <http://www.aspresolver.com/aspresolver.asp?BLTC:S16340>, 607.

³² Floyd-Thomas, “The God That Never Failed,” 53.

people.”³³ On the other hand, white Protestant leaders largely failed to address any of the demands at all. Instead, writes scholar of race and religion Jennifer Harvey, “they dictated their own terms for the funds” that were allocated towards aid to address the needs of Black Americans.³⁴ These responses are based on a model of charity rather than solidarity, and they continue to withhold resources, power, and decision-making abilities from those who have been harmed by legacies of racial and economic injustice. Such actions remain lackluster and underdeveloped responses to the system of plantation capitalism in the United States. I interpret donations from majority white churches, such as the example given by Evanston’s First United Methodist Church, as a step towards repentance and repair that does not fully engage with the demands from Black radical organizers and theologians for white churches to cede economic power.

In his memoir, Forman continues elaborating on the transformative nature of the demands presented in the Black Manifesto, invoking repair beyond a sense of financial cost. Christian churches, he argues, are responsible for centuries of exploitation and oppression inflicted on Black people in the United States. Demands for repair in the document, therefore, “would not merely involve money but would be a call for revolutionary action, a Manifesto that spoke of the human misery of black people under capitalism and imperialism, and pointed the way to ending

³³ Jennifer Harvey, “Which Way to Justice? Reconciliation, Reparations, and the Problem of Whiteness in US Protestantism,” *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 31, no. 1 (2011): 57–77, <https://doi.org/10.5840/jsce201131130>, 62-3. Harvey’s scholarship on White Christian anti-racist practices, including especially her work on reparations, remains a prophetic guide in the articulation of how church-based reparations programs can be undertaken better in the United States.

³⁴ Harvey, “Which Way to Justice?,” 63.

those conditions.”³⁵ Reparations, as conceived by the drafters of the Black Manifesto, go further than charitable donations or transfers of wealth from white congregations. Martin Luther King, Jr., makes a similar request for compensation as the bare minimum form that reparations may take in his 1964 book *Why We Can't Wait*, writing, “While no amount of gold could provide adequate compensation for the exploitation of the Negro American down through the centuries, a price could be placed on unpaid wages.”³⁶ Repaying unpaid wages to the descendants of slaves is only one action to take in a larger ecology of the movement for repair for the legacies of plantation capitalism in the United States. Further actions may include investigating specific histories of racial and economic dispossession within local contexts, working to prevent the economic disenfranchisement of Black communities within local city policies, and supporting the self-determination and autonomy of Black churches and community organizations.

Emphasizing justice is one condition of the theology of reparations as discerned from the political organizing of the Black freedom struggle. However, argues Harvey, “justice is at best underemphasized” in the Protestant embrace of a reconciliation paradigm and a vision of the beloved community.³⁷ In the context of reparations, justice is an important theological principle because it demands that those who have been wronged be given redress for the harm they have suffered. The theology of reparations is built on the idea that those who have been harmed by injustice have a right to restitution, regardless of whether it has or has not been received in any form before. The singling out of white churches and synagogues in the Black Manifesto’s

³⁵ James Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*, Illustrated ed., Black Thought and Culture (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997), <http://www.aspresolver.com/aspresolver.asp?BLTC;S16340>, 607.

³⁶ Martin Luther King, *Why We Can't Wait*, [1st ed.] (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), 129.

³⁷ Harvey, “Which Way to Justice?” 62.

demands for restitution is a call out of the hypocrisy of white religious institutions that claim to be engaged in the work of justice and salvation for human beings and yet continually falter in their engagement with the legacies of slavery and systems of plantation capitalism. The Black Manifesto, writes historian Elaine Allen Lechtreck, can therefore be “understood as an expression of rebellion rooted in the despair of a people who had given up hope of integrating into the mainstream socioeconomic systems and structures in the United States.”³⁸

Reparations necessitate contending with specific harms over the course of history and taking concrete actions in response to those specific harms. Reparations models for addressing intergenerational harm, when they rest not on reflexive notions of charity but on an understanding of deep solidarity, center relationality, and materiality. In this sense, they are deeply anti-capitalist. “A reparations paradigm,” writes Harvey, “brings whiteness plainly into view because reparations necessitate an actual contending with history.”³⁹ This restitution is not merely a matter of compensation for material losses, but also an acknowledgement of the harm that has been done and a recognition of the dignity and worth of those who have suffered under the conditions of slavery and their descendants who continue to suffer under the conditions of plantation capitalism. “Reparations recognize that brokenness comes from specific harms done,”⁴⁰ continues Harvey, and it is necessary to engage with history as a theological act. Charitable donations are not full reparations. Reparations are a form of justice that is one necessary step in a larger re-imagining of human social, political, economic, and theological

³⁸ Elaine Allen Lechtreck, “‘WE ARE DEMANDING \$500 MILLION FOR REPARATIONS’: THE BLACK MANIFESTO, MAINLINE RELIGIOUS DENOMINATIONS, AND BLACK ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT,” *The Journal of African American History* 97, no. 1–2 (2012): 39–71, <https://doi.org/10.5323/jafriamerhist.97.1-2.0039>, 40.

³⁹ Harvey, “Which Way to Justice?,” 64.

⁴⁰ Harvey, “Which Way to Justice?,” 64.

relationships. In order to go deeper towards a process of repentance and atonement for the legacies of slavery— including anti-Black housing policies and forced displacement— churches need to grapple with their own specific histories and roles in racial harm, and then do the deeply theological work of imagining and crafting a system that does not allow the perpetuation of those histories and harms.

The Solidarity Model of Reparations

Material steps towards repentance and repair, including but not limited to the redistribution of accumulated wealth by majority white congregations, are part of a solidarity model of reparations. Solidarity models that retain their fidelity to the work of Black organizers, intellectuals, and preachers in the United States should also include the redistribution of land and property to Black churches and communities. As an example of the solidarity model of reparations, I look at the organizing for racial redress by Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Bethel was founded around 1808 and is often considered Pittsburgh's oldest Black church, but in the 1950s its historic property was a victim to the policies of urban renewal that decimated many communities of color in the United States.⁴¹ In 1906 the congregation moved into a building in the Lower Hill District, where it continued its role as a community hub, organizing center, and provider of childhood literacy education. The historic property of Bethel Church was demolished in the 1950s, after the Urban Redevelopment

⁴¹ Urban renewal in the 1950s refers to a period of urban planning and development policies in the United States that aimed to revitalize urban areas by creating new housing and commercial spaces. The benefits and adverse effects of urban renewal efforts during this time were distributed unequally by systemic racism and discriminatory practices, which disproportionately negatively affected communities of color and benefitted white property owners.

Authority of Pittsburgh declared that much of the Lower Hill District was “blighted.”⁴² This urban renewal policy demolished 1,300 buildings, displaced over 8,000 people, and destroyed multiple places of worship, although it did not affect a majority white Catholic church in the area.⁴³ While the congregation fought against it, the Urban Redevelopment Authority ultimately seized the property through eminent domain and paid for only a fraction of the value of the land. Since 2020, members of the Bethel congregation have been seeking reparations for this injustice, challenging the city, the redevelopers of Lower Hill, and the local white faith communities to acknowledge their role in and profit from racist systems of urban and economic development. They are seeking land, development rights, and funding to restore Bethel to its position as a spiritual, social, and educational home for the Black community of the Lower Hill District.

Access to land is a cornerstone demand of the earliest movements for reparations in the United States. For the early proponents of reparations and compensation to formerly enslaved people, many of whom were ex-slaves themselves, “land was their major priority.”⁴⁴ At an 1865 meeting between freed Black religious leaders and General Sherman in Savannah, Georgia, the leaders argued strongly for access to land as a form of restitution for slavery. Garrison Frazier, the spokesperson chosen to answer for the twenty Black ministers and freed people gathered,

⁴² “Black Church, NHL’s Penguins Reach Historic Land-Use Accord,” AP NEWS, April 14, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/pittsburgh-penguins-historic-black-church-bethel-reparations-08dfa73ed59ee66d31cfec3a3c5381be>.

⁴³ Chris Hedlin, Rich Lord, and Naomi Harris, “Oldest Black Church in Pittsburgh Calls out Racism, Seeks Reparations,” PublicSource, April 14, 2021, <http://www.publicsource.org/bethel-ame-black-church-history-racism-reparations-lower-hill-penguins/>. Advocates for reparations within the Bethel context have pointed out this hypocrisy as evidence of the systemic racism at play in the redevelopment of Lower Hill District.

⁴⁴ Mary Frances Berry, *My Face Is Black Is True: Callie House and the Struggle for Ex-Slave Reparations* (New York, United States: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2009), <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/vand/detail.action?docID=5337150>, 11.

argues that “The way we can best take care of ourselves is to have land, and turn it and till it by our own labor—that is, by the labor of the women and children and old men; and we can soon maintain ourselves and have something to spare.”⁴⁵ This argument shares the same sensibilities as Marx’s concern with the violence of the enclosure of the commons and the alienation of workers from the means of production. Securing access to land and therefore to the means of production is a major concern for both the religious leaders of the formerly enslaved in Savannah and the early proponents of social movements for reparations. This demand for restitution parallels the insights of Marx’s theory of primitive accumulation. It is vital to understand the role that land sovereignty plays in these early demands for reparations, in order to consider how land may play a key role in modern calls for reparations.

In 1865, as part of his "40 acres and a mule" policy, Union General William T. Sherman signed Field Order 15, a directive that set aside 400,000 acres of captured Confederate land to be distributed to formerly enslaved people in the former Confederate states. A few years later, however, President Andrew Johnson revoked the directive. That reversal left many Black people with few options but to become sharecroppers on the same land where they were formerly enslaved, reordering rather than disrupting the impacts of the institutions of white supremacy and racial capitalism in the United States. The promises of General Sherman did little to disturb the fundamental distortion of labor relations and the power inequalities embedded in the system of plantation capitalism. This racialized distortion of labor relations is inherent in the system of enslavement, and it affects every aspect of theology, society, identity, and politics. It is a

⁴⁵ “Meeting between Black Religious Leaders and Union Military Authorities, January 12, 1865,” Freedmen and Southern Society Project, accessed February 20, 2023, <http://www.freedmen.umd.edu/savmtg.htm>.

totalizing cosmology, a “world-ecology” of plantation capitalism.⁴⁶ In efforts towards repair, it is key to recognize the distortions of justice, social relationships, and images of God that enslavement and plantation capitalism has caused within dominant Christian institutions. In *God of the Oppressed*, theologian James Cone argues that “there can be no forgiveness of sins without repentance, and no repentance without the gift of faith to struggle with and for the freedom of the oppressed.”⁴⁷ The work of repentance and repair which reckons with the world-ecology of plantation capitalism, especially as it is undertaken within church communities, should center an understanding of the message of the gospel of Christ as the liberator of the oppressed from political, economic, and social struggle. The organizing for reparations done by Bethel’s leaders, congregants, and community allies recognizes this necessary shift in theology better than the work of churches that rely on charitable donations.

Discourse about reparations reached a peak during the period of Reconstruction, when multiple organizations, prominent Black intellectuals, and even some white politicians were organizing around the issue of redress for slavery. By the late 19th century, Callie House, and Reverend Isaiah Dickerson, two formerly enslaved people, worked together to establish one of the most prominent organizations working towards reparations of its era, The National Ex-Slave Mutual Relief, Bounty, and Pension Association. House and Dickerson traveled extensively throughout former Confederate and border states to develop support for the new organization that sought to provide relief and services on a local level while advocating for reparations on a national level. The organization was chartered in Nashville, Tennessee, in collaboration with the

⁴⁶ For elaborations on the use of “world ecology” here, see Patel and Moore, *A History of the World in Seven Cheap Things*.

⁴⁷ James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, Rev. ed. (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 1997), 221.

Primitive Baptists, the “church of working-class blacks.”⁴⁸ However, the first association convention took place at Gay Street Christian Church, the Disciples of Christ Church led by the prominent African American minister Preston Taylor.⁴⁹ One of Taylor’s lasting impacts on Nashville was to buy land and establish Greenwood Cemetery, the second oldest cemetery for the Black Nashville community and the final resting place of Callie House. Such actions of the early organizers and allies for reparations, pensions, and mutual aid mirror the emphasis on land autonomy voiced by the Black ministers of Savannah in their conversation with General Sherman. Similarly, Bethel’s ongoing call for land and property restitution deepens an understanding of what reparations can and should look like in the United States. Reparations require not merely an allocation or donation of money, but a deep rethinking of land, autonomy, self-determination, and history.

In 1915, following years of organizing, the National Ex-Slave Mutual Relief, Bounty, and Pension Association of the United States of America sued the US treasury for more than \$68 million dollars, arguing that that sum was produced in the cotton industry through the unpaid, coerced, and forced labor of enslaved Black people. The claim was denied based on “governmental immunity” for the institution of slavery.⁵⁰ Still, the organizing done by the National Ex-Slave Mutual Relief, Bounty, and Pension Association represents the first successful mass movement for reparations in U.S. history, galvanizing thousands of supporters and impacting the conversation about reparations for slavery to this day. House and Dickerson saw

⁴⁸ Berry, *My Face Is Black It’s True*, 69.

⁴⁹ Berry, *My Face Is Black It’s True*, 70.

⁵⁰ “House, Callie,” in *Tennessee Encyclopedia*, accessed December 11, 2022, <https://tennesseencyclopedia.net/entries/callie-house/>.

reparations as a matter of justice and emphasized the religious and theological dimensions of the struggle for pensions and mutual assistance. Such forms of financial restitution and collaboration were a way of acknowledging the inherent worth and dignity of all human beings, and of affirming the central role of faith in the quest for justice. The work for reparations for Bethel continues in the tradition of this movement for reparations, addressing specific harms within the history of Pittsburgh and requesting support and solidarity from local religious communities, especially those that could have come to Bethel's aid in the 1950s and did not at the time.

The work of National Ex-Slave Mutual Relief, Bounty, and Pension Association demonstrates a method for living out the message of the gospel as it relates to the oppressed and their struggles for liberation. House in particular believed that the pursuit of reparations was not only a matter of justice, but of faith, and that it was an essential part of the work of building a more just and equitable society.⁵¹ Black theologian and historian Dwight Hopkins argues that faith played a major role in the organizing of formerly enslaved Black women for reparations, writing, "We can learn to address [the unfinished business of legacies of slavery in the United States] by remembering the faith of enslaved black women who understood that faith must include justice."⁵² What emerges from such faith is a theology of justice that understands collective accountability for slavery and the necessity of action that repents for the histories of enslavement in the United States. Bethel's work for financial restitution and land access invokes justice as an argument for reparative action in the present day. It is a movement that is directed

⁵¹ Berry, *My Face Is Black It's True*. Theological conceptions of divine justice for the oppressed are evident throughout Berry's biography of House and her scholarship on the work of the National Ex-Slave Mutual Relief, Bounty and Pension Association.

⁵² Dwight N. Hopkins, "Enslaved Black Women: A Theology of Justice and Reparations," in *Beyond Slavery*, Black Religion/Womanist Thought/Social Justice (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, n.d.), 287–303, https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230113893_17, 291.

by the members of the church who were affected by urban renewal policies, whose demands include land, financial restitution from the city and from franchises that benefited from the seizure of the property, and solidarity from other communities of faith. Because of this, Bethel stands as an example of what reparations looks like in a solidarity model. Present-day attempts at reparations undertaken by churches wishing to engage in actions based in solidarity must consider the centrality of conversations around divine justice, financial restitution, and land access within the early movements for reparations. They must consider challenging the distributions of economic resources and ceding decision-making power to those who are most directly impacted by the legacies of specific racist harms in the United States.

Imagining Anew: Reparative Futures

In the concluding section, I discuss the guidance that the two examples discussed above can provide for churches attempting to address questions of reparations, redress, and restitution for their participation in the system of slavery in the United States. Instead of a straightforward exchange of money that does little to disrupt the existing racial and economic power dynamics between Black and white Americans, I envision repair as an extended, transformational, and relational process that affects all involved. Similarly, I argue that racism is too often seen as an issue that primarily or exclusively pertains to Black people. White Christian frameworks that have historically been used to evaluate and describe race are therefore challenged as I argue for an ethical analysis of racism that relies on relationality, materiality, and the primacy of whiteness within systems of racial capitalism.

I trace parts of the history of reparations movements within churches in the interest of following the courses and developments of theological claims about reparation for the institution of chattel slavery. It is deeply instructive— for me personally, for congregations engaged in the

work of repair, for local organizers of demands for repair— to better understand some of the contours of legacy and the weight of history in relation to claims for economic and racial redress in the United States. Over the last ten years, calls for reparations have grown louder and louder in the public sphere in the United States. In 2014, journalist Ta-Nehisi Coates published “The Case for Reparations,” a long-form article exploring the histories of reparations movements in the United States, plantation capitalism’s continued exploitation of Black land and labor, and again elevating the call for reparations for racism in the national conversation.⁵³ Cities, nonprofits, individual churches, and sometimes entire denominations are taking ethical and material stances on the issue of repair, redress, and reparations for the economic sins of white supremacy and racial capitalism. Since the widespread protests in the summer of 2020 in response to the police murders of Ahmaud Arbery, George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and other victims, this reckoning with the legacies of racial and economic injustice has grown especially prominent in some Christian institutions. Because of the prominence and possibilities of such calls for repair, I see the work of this research as vital to bettering church-based reparative efforts. It matters how reparations are approached. Charity models may reify existing economic disparities without challenging the economic, political, theological, and social dynamics that have created and maintained plantation capitalism in the first place.

In most of the examples of reparations programs that exist in the United States, the congregation, organization, or municipality first spends time conducting research and partaking in collective political education in order to identify specific historical legacies and ongoing instances of racial injustice, displacement, urban renewal, housing segregation, or other instances

⁵³ Ta-Nehisi Coates, “The Case for Reparations,” *The Atlantic*, May 22, 2014, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/06/the-case-for-reparations/361631/>.

of harm in which they as a group or congregation are implicated. Many historically and majority white churches throughout the United States are engaging in collective political education and action on the issue of redress for chattel slavery and racism.⁵⁴ Congregations vary in both their identifications of historical racial injustices and in their approaches towards repentance and repair. Definitions of reparations vary widely— some churches establish housing programs, some do direct payments to descendants of enslaved Africans, some make donations to nonprofits that serve the Black community, others establish pension funds for Black parishioners. These differences offer a vital point of departure for how to approach education, conversation, and action around issues of economic and racial justice. While no amount of money can undo the twin legacies of enslavement and colonization with which we live in the United States, wealth redistribution through church-based reparations programs focuses on first formally acknowledging collective responsibility for the history of wrongdoing that many white and Christian institutions have enabled in the United States.

A theology of reparations based in deep solidarity needs to attend deeply to matters of the interdependence of life on earth. This task can only be done by using the tools of class analysis that does not self-reflexively or carelessly limit itself to whiteness and maleness. Rieger writes, “a theology in the Capitalocene needs to develop the theological concerns for interconnectedness and interdependence in relation to the topic of solidarity as it grows out of collective experiences

⁵⁴ For examples of these localized efforts, see 1) Kelly Powers and Sammy Gibbons, “Are US Churches Setting the Tone for Reparations? How a Movement Is Growing,” *USA Today Network*, June 15, 2022, <https://www.northjersey.com/in-depth/news/2022/06/15/black-reparations-slavery-princeton-theological-seminary/7195593001/>, 2) “One Church’s Path Towards Reparations: Donating Its Property Tax Equivalent to Black- and Indigenous-Lead Organizations,” *Healing Minnesota Stories*, March 15, 2021, <https://healingmnstories.wordpress.com/2021/03/14/one-churchs-path-towards-reparations-donating-its-property-tax-equivalent-to-black-and-indigenous-lead-organizations/> and many others.

of exploitation and extraction and an analysis of class.”⁵⁵ While religion and theology have both been a core part of the problem of slavery, economic oppression, and ecological destruction, they have also been a key part of struggles against those same forms of oppression and exploitation. In the last chapter of their book *A History of the World in Seven Cheap Things*, Raj Patel and Jason Moore argue for the importance of developing an intellectual and cosmological shift beyond the epistemologies and ecologies of capitalism. They argue that capitalism needs to be understood “as a world-ecology of power, capital, and nature helps us see how deeply each half of these is embedded in the other, how mightily the powerful have worked to police the sharp boundaries between them, and how forcefully those boundaries have been contested.”⁵⁶ Plantation capitalism is not merely an economic system; it shapes visions of the divine, understandings of the human, and all the relationships between the human and other than human world. Patel and Moore continue in that same chapter to define “reparation ecology” as a radical vision of the future which may be able to provide for such a shift in theology, cosmology, and economy.

Reparation ecology is a reimagination of the world-ecology of plantation capitalism that is grounded in addressing the material realities of its histories, which requires recognition, reparation, redistribution, reimagination, and recreation all in turn.⁵⁷ While considering demands for reparations, it is important to recognize that they also include requests beyond money, namely the removal of important aspects of life (such as housing, healthcare, and education) from the totalizing conditions of the market. Reparation ecology involves reevaluating what

⁵⁵ Rieger, *Theology in the Capitalocene*, 207.

⁵⁶ Patel and Moore, *A History of the World in Seven Cheap Things*, 202.

⁵⁷ Patel and Moore, *A History of the World in Seven Cheap Things*, 208-10.

justice, humanity, and nature all imply. Theology can be and has been developed such that theological conceptions of justice, liberation and deep solidarity create both resistance against and alternatives to the matrices of domination that are embedded in plantation capitalism. Reparative theologies should engage with histories of resistance and theories of change that think beyond the logics of plantation capitalism.

Therefore, reparations are not an issue of charity, but an issue of justice. In early 2023, Peter Jarrett-Schell released the book *Reparations: A Plan for Churches*, which argues for the importance of reparations beyond moral imperatives. He writes that this debt should be paid, not out of obligation, but rather “for its potential to help break the Episcopal Church from the gilded shackles of white supremacy that have defined our history. Until reparations are paid, they will define our future as well.”⁵⁸ The shift implied by a reparation ecology requires examining the legacies of European knowledge production within theological understandings of humanity and the divine. Dealing with questions of race, capitalism, and colonialism in an essay titled “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom,” Sylvia Wynter offers a challenge to her readers: she calls to find ways to ethically unsettle systems of knowledge that rationalize European coloniality and plantation capitalism while making white supremacy commonsense.⁵⁹ These include theological systems, educational systems, and social systems. Reparations are one

⁵⁸ Peter Jarrett-Schell, *Reparations: A Plan for Churches*, Church Publishing Incorporated, 2023, 67.

⁵⁹ Sylvia Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument,” *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (2003). Wynter continues, “all human groups have been enabled to make the fact that it is they/we who are the authors and agents of our own orders opaque to themselves/ourselves,” 305. I find this particularly useful in theorizing human agency within the work of theology and epistemology. What is often seen as commonsense, unavoidable, unalterable ways of relating to and understanding the world (in science, economics, theology) are in fact mutable conditions that have been shaped by human beings every step of the way.

step in a larger disruption of the dominant ways of being and knowing in the world, confined by the logics of plantation capitalism. Part of the work of reparations, as understood through Patel and Moore's conceptualization of reparative ecology, is to unsettle the commonsense interactions of capitalism: continued experiences of exploitation and extraction based on race and access to capital. Our present normative modes of collectively living in and knowing the world keep this system as is, and present the system of plantation capitalism as normal, natural, and unalterable. Research, writing, and teaching are tools to be used in the task of unsettling recursive colonial systems of knowledge and creating breaches— spaces for new ways of living in and with the world to form. Racial and economic oppression is not a natural phenomenon but rather, like the global capitalist system, is manufactured and maintained by the work of human hands. It can be undone by the work of human hands. That is what a theology of reparations calls on us to do: to engage in the process of repair, develop connections of deep solidarity, and think beyond the logics of plantation capitalism.

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