

Seizing the Moment to Galvanize the U.S. and Global Reparations Movement

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by

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Queen Mother Audley Moore was an indefatigable teacher, advocate and organizer for Reparations, the fundamental idea that Africans in America are due compensation to repair the physical, cultural, spiritual and mental damages inflicted by the holocaust of enslavement. She called herself a “brain surgeon” dedicated to operating on the minds of constipated “Negroes” to create a consciousness of the urgent need for Reparations. I was a patient of this great “surgeon.” Queen Mother Moore introduced me to the concept of Reparations and became my mentor on this issue. As the Institute of the Black World 21st Century (IBW) prepares to convene a potentially historic National/International Summit, April 9-12, in New York, I believe our “warrior woman” ancestor is looking down with pride and enthusiasm as reparations advocates from the U.S. and the Pan African world gather to galvanize and intensify the global Reparations Movement.

Reparations to repair the damages of enslavement have been a persistent demand within the multifaceted Black Freedom Struggle in the U.S. The movement ebbs and flows, being intense at certain moments in our history and subdued at others. Despite the fact that there is a “State of Emergency” in America’s “dark ghettos,” the pride associated with the election of the first African American President has not made this the most fertile period for the Reparations Movement. However, two events have potentially provided the impetus for a new moment of intense interest and advocacy for reparations in the months and years ahead.

First, as I have written recently, the courageous decision by the heads of state of nations in the Caribbean to demand reparations from the former European colonialists for Native Genocide and African enslavement and the formation of a CARICOM Reparations Commission has captured the imagination of reparations activists in the U.S. and the Pan African world. It is one thing for scholars and activists to advocate for reparations, it is quite another for the leaders of nations who are still in the neo-colonial clutches of the former colonial powers to make such a bold demand.

By doing so, they risk economic and political retaliation. No doubt the dismal conditions of the masses of their people and the pressure from civil society organizations influenced their decision, but there is no belittling the fact that the demand for reparations was/is a gutsy decision!

Second, the brilliant essay “The Case for Reparations” by Ta-nehisi Coates published in the *Atlantic Magazine*, has electrified a new generation of Black people who were largely unfamiliar with reparations or unconvinced of its validity and value as a goal. While a dedicated core of true believers have kept the issue of reparations alive, for the movement to grow it must be embraced by a new generation of potential advocates who, like Brother Coates, can be converted to the cause. Moreover, we need a moment when the movement can be broadened to form a critical mass, a formidable force to advance the demand for reparations. That moment may be at hand. Indeed, Queen Mother Moore would be excited to learn that a National African American Reparations Commission (NAARC) has been established in her memory! [visit the website www.ibw21.org for list of members]. Inspired by the CARICOM Reparations Commission and designed to function as a parallel body, NAARC’s primary mission is to develop a preliminary Reparations Program/Agenda as part of an education and advocacy process to expand the Reparations Movement in the U.S. Ultimately, NAARC will develop a final Reparations Program/Agenda as an outgrowth of input from a series of regional community-based hearings and town hall meetings across the country.

This moment presents a major opportunity for discussions on how the Reparations Movement in the U.S. should proceed. The Coates article tapped into what appears to be growing sentiment that reparations are due Africans in America not only for enslavement, but the damages done to our people during the era of de jure and de facto segregation as well as post segregation. Coates’ research on housing patterns in Chicago clearly demonstrates the intergenerational wealth deficit created by discriminatory housing policies and practices. Michele Alexander has also added her voice to reparations advocates who believe compensation is due for the massive damages to Black families and communities as a direct result of the “New Jim Crow,” mass incarceration. Damages from environmental racism are also a matter which some advocates contend should be on the table. These considerations expand the scope of the reparations demands.

There is also a need to discuss the collective versus individual payment of reparations. This often comes up as a question when arguing the case for reparations. While one could make an argument for both, I am hopeful that a consensus will emerge in favor of collective developmental assistance. The chronic wealth gap and state of emergency in America’s dark ghettos are a direct consequence of generations of exploitation and oppression which should be addressed in terms of compensation that will be used to end the underdevelopment of the National Black Community. Individuals in the Black community would benefit from increased opportunities resulting from developmental assistance for the group/collective.

Consistent with the concept of collective developmental assistance, it would also be useful to develop a consensus for a Reparations Trust Fund or similar structure to administer the various types of compensation that might be received from the federal government, state and local governments, corporations/businesses and institutions like universities, implicated in enslavement or other damaging policies and practices inflicted in other eras. Such a Trust Fund would be governed by a Board comprised of a cross-section of credible Black leaders and organizations that would receive various forms of compensation and allocate resources in accordance with a strategic development plan. As an aside, I have a particular interest in demanding that federal lands be transferred to a Trust fund with the same kind of sovereignty and rights eventually granted Native Americans for the criminal dispossession of their lands.

As the case for reparations for Africans in America is advanced, we need a much more coherent message about key issues and questions that are often raised by our people like the ones cited above. Hopefully, as NAARC engages in its deliberations, it can be helpful in formulating and advancing recommendations on these vital issues and questions. I continue to believe that HR-40, the Reparations Study Bill, introduced by Congressman John Conyers, Jr. every year since 1989, can be a valuable organizing tool to generate discussion and action on this vital issue.

The National/International Reparations Summit will not only be a moment to galvanize the U.S. Reparations Movement, it will serve to galvanize an emerging global Reparations Movement. A key goal of the Summit is to explore avenues for systematic information-sharing and mutual support as a means of strengthening the global Reparations Movement. As such, it will provide an opportunity for a dialogue/interface between NAARC and the CARICOM Reparations Commission (CRC) and advocates from the Caribbean, Central and South America, Canada and Europe (21 countries as of this writing). Without question, the CRC will be most closely examined as the model which has given a major boost to the U.S. and global Reparations Movements. At the end of the deliberations a mechanism will be put in place to sustain the momentum of this incredible moment in history. Let the word go out across the Pan African World, the global Reparations Movement is on the rise and Queen Mother Moore is pleased!