Repairing the National Memory by Acknowledging the Living Presence of ‘Our Childhood Locked in the Closet’

Troy Duster*

Yesterday, Randall Robinson quoted William Faulkner who wrote: “The past is never dead. It’s not even past.”¹ This brings to mind an interview with the great Swedish filmmaker, Ingmar Bergman. If you are a film buff, you know that Bergman brought dark and psychologically foreboding themes to the screen through brilliant and disturbing films. While many Swedes did not really like the intense subject matter of these films, they enjoyed considerable popularity outside of Sweden, especially among intellectuals. A Swedish interviewer, trying to situate and explain how and why Bergman emphasized the dark side of the human experience, brought forward a passage of Bergman’s autobiography,² in which Bergman described his own troubled childhood. Bergman’s father was apparently an emotionally cold person, a mean-spirited disciplinarian, and a man who had fervid religious certainty about rules, roles, and punishment.³ The passage from Bergman’s autobiography told a story about how his father once punished him—by locking him in a closet with no lights on, providing not even water, and requiring that he stay in that locked closet for two days without any human contact.⁴ The interviewer asked, “Mr. Bergman, did that experience, did that part of your past influence your filmmaking? Does that explain . . .” but Bergman sharply interrupted the interviewer and said, “No, no. It is not just a part of my distant past. Part of me is that eight-year-old child in the closet.”⁵

There is something in this story of what Randall Robinson meant in quoting Faulkner that bears some direct relevance to the current debates about the history of the United States. We are a nation whose first two centuries were

---

* Professor of Sociology, Institute for the History of the Production of Knowledge, N.Y.U.; Professor of Sociology, University of California, Berkeley; Ph.D., Northwestern, 1962; M.A., University of California, Los Angeles, 1959; B.A., Northwestern, 1957.

1. WILLIAM FAULKNER, REQUIEM FOR A NUN 92 *1951).
2. INGMAR BERGMAN, THE MAGIC LANTERN: AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY (Joan Tate trans., Viking 1988).
3. Id.
4. Id.
5. Recollection of interview (on file with author).
deeply mired in the institution of slavery. Slavery is our national childhood. Moreover, we are much more like Bergman’s account of himself in the experience than we wish to admit: this early imprint is embedded in our current trajectories, from ghettoes to suburbs, from incarceration rates to educational achievement gaps. It is who we are, not simply our buried past. The past is with us.

This panel is about the future of reparations strategies. The root of reparations is “repair.” The term repair is instructive because it is essentially always about the future. To repair something is to conceive of its future, even as the past is inextricably interwoven into the tapestry of a present that requires repair. And, if reparations are always about the future, the questions are: “What is the nature of the damage that requires repair?”; “Do we need only a band-aid, or an aspirin and sleep?”; and “Does the repair require major surgery, or is major reconstitutive reconstruction necessary?”

We should avoid getting trapped by talking about the different levels of repair, as if they are mutually exclusive. We must mind the different possible meanings of repair, and remember that some meanings may complement others. I propose two kinds of repair to get the project started. One is symbolic, and the other is substantive. First, I will address symbolic repair. Every American school child learns about Patrick Henry, “The Great Patriot” who uttered the famous words: “Give me liberty or give me death.” So, it is reasonable to assume that our nation’s heroes are those who embody the idea “Live free, or die?” Right? Wrong!

In reality, our nation’s monuments and plaques are overwhelmingly dedicated to those who championed slavery, not freedom. James Loewen, documents this in his book *Lies Across America: What Our Historic Sites Get Wrong.* The book details how, in a particular thirty-year period, Americans erected thousands of monuments and constructed plaques for sites all over the United States—systematically, routinely, and with funding from ideologically driven sources for the purpose of celebrating those who were in favor of the Confederacy.

As an empiricist, Lowen physically went around the country, counting plaques and statues. He was especially focused on three figures in American history: George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, and a third figure that I will name in a moment. He asked the question, “For what figure in America do we have the most statues?” It is not Lincoln in Illinois, nor Washington in Virginia. It is Nathan Bedford Forrest in Tennessee. He is the founder of the Ku Klux Klan. Think about it. The nation that has every school child celebrating the

---

7. *Id.* at 38-39.
8. *Id.* at 16.
9. *Id.*
heroic phrase “Give me liberty, or give me death” is the same nation with more statues erected to the memory of the founder of the Ku Klux Klan than to the president who signed the Emancipation Proclamation, or to the founding president of the Republic. How did this come to be?

Loewen points out that late nineteenth century Americans dealt with a tumultuous and unstable period in the South just after Reconstruction. The erection and placement of statues were part of systematic attempts to reconstruct a memory about that period—and thus assign the labels of hero and villain to key figures. White southerners led the effort to wipe out the history of those who heroically fought for freedom and against slavery. They instead made heroes out of those who defended slavery.

After reading Loewen’s book, I became highly sensitized about the issue of where statues and plaques appear in this country, and what they symbolize. I am from Chicago. For many years, I walked north to cross the Chicago River on North Michigan Avenue, never noticing a decades-old plaque. Having read Loewen’s book, I stopped to read the plaque for the first time a few years ago. It names three people, and then says: “These are the first three white men to cross this river.” I thought about that—the first three white men who crossed this river. Why would anyone care about the first three white men who crossed this river, except to feel good about “white studies?” Some of you will know that I refer to conservative critics of African-American Studies who say that this was not really about history, but about “making Blacks feel good.” So tell me, why do we want to know that three white men crossed a river? Who does that make feel good? Why should they have a plaque, while those who died fighting to end slavery have no plaques and no place in the national memory?

My first modest suggestion for symbolic repair is that, in deciding who we erect statues to and plaques for, we reexamine our priorities. I suggest that we have a national proclamation project that entails a reclamation of where statues are and why we put the plaques where we do. We need to consciously decide what and who we celebrate. We should be celebrating “give me liberty, or give me death,” not the confederates who defended slavery, nor Nathan Bedford Forrest. I do not, however, want to tear down the statues and plaques of slavery’s defenders and apologists. Rather, building monuments, placing statues, and putting up plaques honoring champions of freedom next to the plaques of those who defended slavery would become part of the symbolic reparations that would generate a new national dialogue. Young children would ask: “Who are those two people, and what did they stand for?” The only honest answer would be, “One fought for freedom. The other fought to preserve slavery.” That would force us, as a nation, to engage in actual dialogue about freedom and slavery and a past that is still with us.

10. Id. at 38-39.
11. Id.
Second, I would like to have an American equivalent of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission. This might be called the Patrick Henry-Nat Turner Commission. We heard this morning that Congress is quite aware of the politics of slavery reparations. So, my suggestion is to make this a full-scale national activity around monuments in every community, not just here in Berkeley—all around, plaques and statues—with proposals to city councils everywhere that there be monuments to those who championed liberty at the expense of death. Their plaques should appear alongside those who fought the abolitionists. Where are the abolitionists in American history? They are gone from our conscious national memory. They are regarded as the dead past, yet they should be an integral part of our living history.

They were the ones in favor of Patrick Henry’s universally famous statement about liberty. Who could oppose that? What city council member would vote to keep only the statues of the founder of the Ku Klux Klan—and say we want no part of Patrick Henry or Nat Turner? Symbolically, this is where the conversation would begin. This would begin to constitute what Randall Robinson referred to as “the reclamation project inside our heads.”

While we also need to begin the conversation about substantive reparations, we first need a project to till the soil of the national consciousness. This national awakening will make substantive suggestions more resonant. We cannot get there without people finally waking up and saying, “Oh, I see. As a nation, we pay more tribute with our statues and plaques to those who fought for slavery, and to the head of the Ku Klux Klan than to those who fought against slavery.” That’s the beginning of a conversation of “repairs” that we need to have all over this nation.

Substantive reparations need not go back as far as slavery. We can go back to 1935. That was the year that the Federal Housing Authority’s race-based loans became an important feature of American housing. Namely, the Fair Housing Act of 1935, which gave birth to slums, specified that those low-interest home loans would only go to those who did not disrupt the racial integrity of a neighborhood. So, for the next twenty-five years, white Americans got loans, while Blacks did not. This fact is the largest contributor to the current equity gap between Whites and Blacks. Today, white median net worth is more than ten times that of black Americans. That is just one of the

---

12. For more information on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, see the official website at www.doj.gov/za/trc/.
14. Id.
many children locked into that dark closet that is still part of us.

The single most important determinant of American wealth is housing stock. Median worth is based upon housing stock. The answer to the question, “How could that happen?” provides the substantive basis for the discussion of reparations. We must repair this by developing a new federal program that gives people low-cost housing and subsidized housing right now, based upon this urgent and recaptured past. So, for the second half of this reclamation project—the substantive part of reparations—we do not need to send checks for thousands of dollars to the third or fourth or fifth generation of those who were slaves. Rather, we need to prepare our citizenry to think about how “our childhood in the dark locked closet” is the decaying infrastructure of our schools and our housing.

16. See, e.g., ZHU XIAO DI, JOINT CENTER FOR HOUSING STUDIES, HARVARD UNIVERSITY, HOUSING WEALTH AND HOUSEHOLD NET WEALTH IN THE UNITED STATES: A NEW PROFILE BASED ON THE RECENTLY RELEASED 2001 SCF DATA 5 (2003) (stating that housing value comprised 27.3% of household's total assets).