

CRIME, REFORM & ABOLITION

# Movements of hope: Abolition and reparations in these times

Fighting racial capitalism and white supremacy is key to closing the “hope gap” between wanting and achieving reparations and abolition



by Trevor Smith and David Ragland  
August 28th, 2023



Los Angeles, California Sept. 22, 2022 | Los Angeles long-time resident Walter Foster, age 80, holds up a

sign as the Reparations Task Force meets to hear public input on reparations at the California Science Center in Los Angeles on Sept. 22, 2022. (Carolyn Cole / Los Angeles Times via Getty Images)

In 2015, after the launch of the years-long reparations campaign, the city of Chicago passed an ordinance that established a [\\$5.5 million compensation fund](#) for those who [were subjected to torture](#) by the Chicago Police Department [between 1972 and 1991](#).

Led by the Chicago Torture Justice Memorials, Project NIA, and We Charge Genocide, this specific call for reparations included mandated education on police torture in public schools, a formal apology by the Chicago City Council, free college education for survivors and their families, a compensation fund, a public memorial to the survivors, and a counseling center.

Despite the success of this campaign and other examples where reparations were provided to specific communities, including the survivors and victims of the [Rosewood Massacre](#), [Japanese Americans](#) for their unlawful incarceration during World War II, and [Indigenous communities](#), few Black adults believe in the likelihood of reparations. While 77% of Black adults believe that reparations are owed, just [7% believe in the likelihood of reparations](#) being established and delivered in their lifetimes. We call this gap between support for reparations and belief that it will happen the hope gap.

We believe this hope gap exists for several reasons, ranging from a lack of trust in the government to intergenerational differences. The most significant cause of the hope gap is that conservatives have portrayed reparations for Black people in the U.S. as a [laughing matter](#), which only illustrates the depths of white supremacy and anti-Blackness. For all Americans, closing the hope gap is an urgent matter of justice and human dignity.

The campaign for reparations in Chicago was successful because it showed the interconnection between abolition and reparations frameworks and provided a valuable roadmap for future organizing, combining the profound respect for victims of torture with calls for abolition and reparations. To some extent, the city of Chicago had some recognition that the past harm constantly visited on incarcerated Black men was a profound violation of our sense of justice and the human dignity of the tortured, their families, and their communities.

More recently, cities like San Francisco; Evanston, Illinois; Savannah, Georgia; Philadelphia; Amherst, Massachusetts; Boston; and others have started to explore the topic of reparations. While organizing at the local level continues to grow, the call for reparations at the national level has held strong for more than 40 years as advocates and legislators continue to call for the passage of [HR](#)

**40**, a bill that would create a commission to study and recommend reparations proposals. This effort has been bolstered by newer congressional leaders, like Rep. Cori Bush, who introduced the “[Reparations Now Resolution](#)” [calling on Congress](#) to support reparations and other reparative justice measures. These policy measures also reinforce that the healing dimensions of reparations are as important as compensation.

Over the past year, 13 reparations organizers, strategists, and artists from across the country met, building on a deep well of past organizing, in a space dubbed the [Reparations Narrative Lab](#) to make sense of the current conversation on reparations nationwide. We’ve identified what stands in the way of advancing the reparations conversation and are developing a schematic that expands the frame of reparations beyond its financial aspect. At the core of our overarching narrative, we believe that reparations, much like abolition, are as much a collective world-building process aimed at creating and sustaining new systems rooted in care as they are a dismantling process aimed at tearing down all systems rooted in anti-Blackness. Now, the question is: How can we build the power necessary to achieve these goals?

## **The problem: The carceral system and racial capitalism**

The movements for abolition and reparations are poised to dismantle the system of U.S. racial capitalism. We specify U.S. racial capitalism because the capitalism incorporated within the nation is uniquely harmful and extractive—the land itself was stolen and used to enrich the pockets of early bureaucrats and private white citizens; the nation’s earliest wealth and critical institutions were built on the labor of enslaved Black people, and its carceral and penal systems have morphed and evolved over time but have disrupted Black families in a myriad of ways.

As historian [Walter Johnson argues](#), the “entire ‘pyramid’ of the Atlantic economy of the nineteenth century ... was founded upon the capacity of enslaved women’s bodies: upon their ability to reproduce capital.” Despite the abolition of chattel slavery and the advances made during Reconstruction, this capital was never returned to the Black communities it was and continues to be extracted from.

The prison-industrial complex—a complex set of public and private institutions that direct people into the prison and jail system—was born out of a convict leasing system from chattel slavery. The U.S. incarcerates [more than 400,000 people](#) in [pretrial detention](#), and those in pretrial are [disproportionately Black](#). As [Angela Y. Davis noted](#), “prisons do not disappear problems, they disappear human beings. And the practice of disappearing vast numbers of people from poor, immigrant, and racially marginalized communities has literally become big business.” Anti-

blackness sits at the core of these systems of subjugation—it is the heart that makes them beat.

Through capitalism, a market for privatized enslavement has emerged, incentivizing local and state governments to criminalize Black people further. We inflate police budgets to ensure that they are at maximum capacity to facilitate criminalization and allow for the creation of a private market that imprisons **8.5% of the incarcerated population**. The New York Police Department—the largest police force in the nation whose budget rivals the **military budgets** of Sweden, Greece, and Ukraine—costs New Yorkers a **whopping \$29 million per day**, according to the New York Civil Liberties Union.

The carceral system confines almost **2 million people**, almost **0.7% of our population**, with Black people, particularly Black men, **incarcerated at higher rates** than their share of the population. According to The Sentencing Project, the American prison population has **increased by 500%** just over the last 40 years. In the 2022 election cycle, more than 20 **members of Congress** received thousands of dollars in contributions from private prisons.

Today's movement for reparations must commit to transforming what we would describe as the world built by slavery and colonization. Without holistic and spiritual conceptions of reparations that heal and educate, American society will cut the check today without ever uprooting white supremacy and anti-Blackness.

Therefore, abolition and reparations must always be seen as interconnected. Tearing down oppressive systems without repairing the damage they have caused has left us with the world we see before us. While we've abandoned the structure of chattel slavery, we haven't ever sought to radically repair its damages; its vestiges are still apparent today.

## **The solution: Reparations and abolition as worldmaking projects**

In 2020, **Mumia Abu-Jamal** wrote, “abolition was not a skip in the park. It is a deep, committed movement of social transformation that seeks to bring down institutions that needlessly inflict pain upon the People.”

In a similar vein, the work of reparations is no easy task. It is work born out of a deep commitment to the betterment of society and the notion that those who have been harmed in a systemic way must be repaired in ways that go beyond reform. Modern-day abolitionists, according to longtime organizer Mariame Kaba, **should ask themselves**, “Are we growing or shrinking the prison-industrial complex? Are we really building new social relations with each other? Are we exploring

the binaries between ‘person who caused harm’ and ‘person who was harmed’? Do we truly believe that people can change?”

As reparatationists, we believe that people can change and that systems must transform or be abolished if we value human dignity. If systems do not value human dignity, they are anti-human and thus reinforce the logic of their abolition. This requires abolishing the impulse to exert direct or indirect violence to extract from people. If we combine the current approaches and struggle for abolition with the work of the current reparations movement, we can build the deep connection needed to shift our culture toward one that requires accountability at all levels.

We sit at a hopeful moment in U.S. history, where the conversation of reparations for Black people is reaching heights it never has before. In Asheville, North Carolina, organizers have created a [Reparations Stakeholder Authority](#) to provide the space for Black residents to engage in a reparations process the city might go through. In Chicago, organizers are pushing the state to commit to a [reparations process for the victims of the war on drugs](#). Just as California wrapped up its [statewide reparations task force](#), New York state [passed a similar bill](#).

Through it all, we’ve been convening with others throughout the reparations movement in the Reparations Narrative Lab to build narrative power, or the ability to tell stories that can shift cultural mindsets and, ultimately, culture.

We believe that reparatationists, abolitionists, and all those calling for transformative change are the modern torchbearers of truth and justice. This country is in dire need of more people, particularly Black and other people of color, to bring their skills and leadership into these movements. At the individual level, we must realize that capitalism sells us all a false dream. Once that is understood, our charge at the collective level is to embody the principles of abolition and reparations and repair society from the brokenness inflicted by hierarchical systems of exploitation and oppression. This is an invitation to learn and join these movements, and we’ve compiled resources below to support that.

**What to read/listen to (A special thanks to the Black Narrative Table for their work in curating a list from which the below list heavily drew):**

- Angela Y. Davis, “[Masked Racism: Reflections on the Prison Industrial Complex](#)”
- [An Indigenous Abolitionist Study Guide](#)
- The Black Scholar, “[Black Liberation and the Abolition of the Prison Industrial Complex](#)”

## [An Interview with Rachel Herzing](#)

- [California Reparations Task Force: A Collection of Expert Testimonies](#)
- Cedric J. Robinson, “[Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition](#)”
- Critical Resistance, “[What is the Prison Industrial Complex? What Is Abolition?](#)”
- [Dreisen Heath’s Written Testimony on HR 40](#)
- [Dr. Tiffany Crutcher’s testimony on the Tulsa Race Massacre](#)
- Liberation Ventures, “[A Dream In Our Name](#)”
- “[Histories of Racial Capitalism](#),” edited by Destin Jenkins and Justin Leroy
- Mariame Kaba and John Duda, “[Toward the Horizon of Abolition](#)”
- Media 2070’s [Media Reparations Toolkit](#)
- Movement for Black Lives’ [Reparations Toolkit](#)
- Movement for Black Lives’ [Reparations Platform](#)
- *New York Times*’ [interactive on the Tulsa Race Massacre](#)
- Olúfẹ̀mí O. Táíwò, “[A Framework to Help Us Understand the World](#)”
- [Reparations Daily \(ish\)](#)
- Robin D. G. Kelley, “[What Is Racial Capitalism and Why Does It Matter?](#)”
- Ruth Wilson Gilmore and James Kilgore, “[The Case for Abolition](#)”

## **How to join or support the abolition and reparations movements:**

- Join the [Grassroots Reparations Campaign](#) to participate in our courses and work with faith-based and spiritual communities to build a culture of reparations.
- Join [Get Free](#), a youth-led movement to “repair past harms, remove ongoing barriers to equality, and realize a future where freedom is for all.”
- Join the [Movement for Black Lives](#), in “calling on Congressional leadership to ensure that future action prioritize[s] our communities over corporation and pushes back against the use of militarization in our communities.”
- Educate [yourself on HR 40](#), a piece of legislation that has been introduced for more than 30 years, that would create a national commission to study and propose reparations recommendations.
- Dive into the narrative schematic co-created with movement organizers through the [Reparations Narrative Lab](#).
- Read about the different frameworks regarding reparations—from the [United Nations](#),

**Liberation Ventures**, and the **Roosevelt Institute**.

**The March Continues** is a Prism project highlighting the legacy of the March on Washington and the inextricable relationship between labor and racial justice in the U.S. Prism looks at everything from prison labor, to Black women and their labor organizing in the South, to chattel slavery and its pervasive legacy and replacements. The March Continues because it must, and we're here to report on it.

---

© 2023 Prism.

Proudly powered by Newspaper by Automattic