

Reparations would help close the staggering racial wealth gap

William Darity and Kirsten Mullen make the case for finally addressing a great wrong.

by [Walter Brueggemann](#) in the [November 18, 2020](#) issue

In Review



From Here to Equality

Reparations for Black Americans in the Twenty-First Century

By William A. Darity Jr. and A. Kirsten Mullen

University of North Carolina Press

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The recurring exhibits of police violence toward Black people and the responses of Black Lives Matter activists, regularly punctuated by the racist dog whistles of President Trump, assure that race will be a core subject of our public conversation for a very long time to come. Among an explosion of good literature on the subject, William Darity and A. Kirsten Mullen's new volume stakes out a compelling position on a critical matter: the crisis that remains from having left the emancipated slaves of the US South landless and without resources.

From Here to Equality begins with an extended historical review of a roster of missed opportunities to resolve the economic inequality this caused. Our republic, at every turn, has had the chance to deal constructively with the shame and brutality caused by slavery and its aftermath. And at every turn, Darity and Mullen argue, it has failed.

The Declaration of Independence and the Constitution refused to fulfill their own high-flying rhetoric when it came to race. Reconstruction promptly regressed to White supremacy. The generosity of the New Deal was willfully discriminatory and parsimonious toward Black Americans. The civil rights movement of the 1960s was walked back every time it began to come to terms with the injustice of the American system.

Some form of economic redress, in the form of recompense and reparations, has long been considered indispensable in response to the centuries of exploited labor that enriched White Americans. From the outset of emancipation, it was recognized that any economic resolution for the freed slaves required that they have land. Thus the frail (and ultimately unkept) promise of "40 acres and a mule" arose. Even during the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln and many others were planning for a financial settlement to accompany emancipation. But the powerful opposition to such thinking made it politically impossible—an impediment that continues today.

As a result, the authors can identify only three minor efforts at state or federal reparations for Black Americans. In 1994, the state of Florida funded reparation payments for the 1923 massacres in the Black town of Rosewood by angry mobs of White people—but only nine people received payment. In 1999, the US Department

of Agriculture agreed to make payments to redress discrimination against Black farmers in the allocation of farm loans and other federal assistance between 1981 and 1996. And in 2004, Virginia set up a fund for payments to those who had been deprived of a public school education in Prince Edward County between 1959 and 1964 because of segregation.

Our continuing failure to come to terms with the brutal consequences of slavery has resulted in a staggering racial wealth gap. Darity, an economist who teaches at Duke University, and Mullen, a folklorist and historian, offer a history of America's failures that is detailed and well researched.

They give extensive attention to the period of the Civil War. Although Black troops played a major role in the victory of the Union, there was intense opposition to equal treatment for Black soldiers. The Emancipation Proclamation evoked violent responses in the North, such as an 1863 riot in New York City initiated by White longshoremen:

The rabble, which reached an estimated total of 30,000 men, women, and youths, cut down telegraph wires to impede government agents' ability to communicate, destroyed firefighters' vehicles and killed their horses, pulled streetcars off their tracks, and made makeshift clubs from telegraph poles, train tracks, and fences. . . . For five hellish days, white supremacists harassed, assaulted, stabbed, mutilated, murdered, and dismembered black men and women.

The cause of this melee? Black men were being hired to work at the ports.

Reconstruction was also violently contended. Darity and Mullen describe the violent reaction to an 1866 constitutional convention in New Orleans seeking Black suffrage. "Encircled by hostile whites, the marchers—and other blacks in the vicinity as well as passengers on nearby cable cars—were attacked by gunfire, with the police also firing, inflicting mortal wounds on persons who had been taken into custody as prisoners."

Philip Sheridan, a Union Army general who was present at the event, said, "It was no riot; it was an absolute massacre by the police. . . . It was a murder which the mayor and police of this city perpetrated without the shadow of necessity. Furthermore, I believe it was premeditated."

During Ulysses S. Grant's presidency, some advances were made on behalf of Black people. After Grant, however, President Hayes completely capitulated to the insinuations of White supremacy. Soon emancipation evolved into virulent Jim Crow laws that reduced many Black people yet again to something like bondage. In response to the civil rights movement, Darity and Mullen note, America fought back through resegregation, White Citizens Councils, forced sterilization of Black women, and mass incarceration.

Every stage of advocacy for Black economic recovery in this country has been marked by violent resistance. As a result, the old image of 40 acres and a mule remains a fantasy. Black Americans are still largely denied the kind of ownership that may make for a just financial settlement of the brutality of slavery.

After providing an extensive assessment of this sorry history, Darity and Mullen move into advocacy. Appealing to Ta-Nehisi Coates's 2014 *Atlantic* article "The Case for Reparations," they offer two additional forms of argument in favor of reparations.

First, they state and answer 13 questions they're frequently asked about the viability of economic reparations. Some of these questions seek real information; others seem only intended to show that accomplishing reparations would be impossible. Darity and Mullen's answers provide a compelling response to those who resist or doubt the practicality of reparations.

The authors devote the final pages of the book to a program for reparations that is neither vague nor exclusionary. They clearly identify the criteria to determine who should receive reparation payments, and they do the math to show how these payments might be figured in actual dollars. Their calculations are impressively pragmatic and are based in part on two precedents: the US government's reparations for the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II and the German government's reparations for the victims of the Nazi death camps.

The urgent intent of this book is to initiate a new national conversation about reparations. Darity and Mullen advance the argument in two compelling ways. First, they show how the long history of resistance and violence since the Emancipation Proclamation has left restitution for slave families and their descendants unsettled. Second, they invite sober, specific, and realistic calculation about the ways to make such payment happen.

From Here to Equality is a wise guide for a conversation that can no longer be avoided.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Forty acres and a mule?"