

From the Editors

St. Louis and its suburbs represent a Midwestern landscape with which I am familiar, for I was born and went to high school in (and for a long time referenced as “home”) Louisville, Kentucky, a markedly similar city just down the road. The family we went on summer vacations with while growing up lived in St. Louis for a time and, on our family visits for Easter and Labor Day, I vividly recall touring, along with its famous zoo, warehouses of beautiful old architecture, already pillaged, broken down, and sold as salvage when I was barely a teenager. St. Louis is one of our SOPHE cities, where we reliably gather, in part, to puzzle and rail over racial injustices and inequities; it is a place where we recently heard from our local colleagues about St. Louis’ still-apartheid-like racial divide and celebrated brave local folk who challenge it, working out how best to serve all children, all families, all communities in spite of the still-intense racial chasm. But now St. Louis reaches a new, “improved” notoriety as center city to the suburb of Ferguson, where police gunned down yet another Black, unarmed, young man, Michael Brown. And we are left to wonder (and hope) if, once and for all, such glaring, race-based injustice has finally hit a national nerve.

Recently, NPR’s Sam Sanders (2014) asked what it means to be a Black man in today’s America, to which one man responds, “I’ve been a victim of racial profiling in Brooklyn, actually. So I was actually going to the bodega to get an Arizona iced tea...and I was approached by five white officers.” Sanders asks, “Five?,” and the man replies, “Five. Me, I’m 5’8”, 138 pounds. Then they proceed to handcuff me and take me down to the precinct. I asked why. They didn’t tell me why. To actually experience that, I lost hope ’cause it’s like, you know, these people are here to protect us. But they’re killing us.” This in a country that, in 2008, elected an African-American man President, and by his very inauguration allegedly transitioned to a post-racial nation, a term Derrick Bell likely coined 1989, but which did not gain the traction or weight of corresponding belief until the 2008 primary election season.

But, “post-racial” was never meant as a term meaning “beyond racism,” though it has become shorthand for such a colorblind modern mentality, rather it refers to the “flipping” of America, or the approaching—some say past—moment when the U.S. becomes a majority-minority nation. Everywhere the backlash against the seeming

mathematical end of white supremacy explodes from shadows and seeps from crevices, those “angry, white men,” as Michael Kimmel (2013) calls them, making a last stand to uphold their racist birthright, tied to their very notion of masculinity, and, in so doing, erupting not only in hate, anger, and violence against people of color, but in a tremendous resurgence of violence against women: this aspect a vestige of Freire’s (2000) horizontal violence as white, male oppressors come to envision a fictional end of days and reckoning of their own oppression. One such surreal ploy is the Ku Klux Klan throwing in residents’ driveways bags of candy weighting down recruitment flyers in the Hamptons last week (Baker, 2014).

Alice Goffman (2014) recently published a wholly damning, six-year, ethnographic exposé on the lives of Black men on the run from the law in one Philadelphia neighborhood. Her data leaves one aghast at the depth, drive, and dysfunction of the surveillance state in Black inner-cities, its pernicious and pervasive policing tactics, and how these yield a broken society in which men with something so small as unpaid court fines or a failure to appear in court cannot attend their children’s births or families’ funerals. For the police now hang out in hospitals, and routinely video funerals in order to pick up and detain those on the run. These travesties against one’s basic humanity, this robbery of the rituals that make community and family, along with out-of-all-proportion police tactics used to muscle women into telling the whereabouts of their men—sons, fathers, partners, husbands, brothers, nephews, cousins—end in carried-out threats such as repeated, wanton, callous destruction of property, and constructing reasons DCFS should seize and remove children from an uncooperative woman’s home.

Such ritualistic, destructive treatment of inner-city Black folk amounts to nothing short of the manufacture and imposition of abject terror. This terrorism is made possible directly because we *are* a post-racial, savagely color-aware society, and society drives this terror whose dominant group, whites, *still* believe African-Americans less-than-human, uncivilized, savage, and a threat to white majority status. This terrorism arises from the consequences of 250 years of slavery, of the United States’ total dependence on a slave-based economy to rise to the level of superpower and remain there (Coates, 2014), just as today we remain a slave-based economy. And it is past time we step up to call these policies and practices what they are: terrorism. Our public servants perpetrate terror against our own citizens, our fellow man, and on hallowed, patriotic, domestic soil. Congress exponentially ratcheted upward this terror when, post-9/11, it gave local police forces millions

to arm themselves against the perceived threat of domestic terrorism. The militarization of local police forces and their shiny, expansive cache of warfare weaponry, including armored vehicles—essentially tanks—, perhaps first became apparent during Boston’s unprecedented, city-wide lockdown following the marathon bombing when, though it surely looked as if the National Guard or U.S. Army occupied Boston, it was in fact simply local police. For police departments took these government-offered resources, even in the sleepest, most crime-free towns and cities, even when there was no reason to believe they would ever be needed. But newly flush with military equipment, at some point, one must begin to believe policing’s relation to warfare and enter a corresponding state of militarization and a tendency toward martial law. Furthermore, largely white police forces most often invoke—and rationalize entitlement to—a militarized, martial law when faced with race-based “unrest.” This relation recalls the U.S.’ most staggering domestic, race-based terrorist event in 1921 (Askew, 2001) when the U.S., for the only time in history, bombed, from aircraft, its own citizens in Tulsa, Oklahoma’s “Black Wall Street” to quell perceived “rioting,” which was actually Black folks organizing to protect a wrongly accused young man of attempted rape from the determined white mob setting about to lynch him. The Tulsa, OK race riot (and such a term gravely demeans the unimaginable scope of tragedy, destruction, and loss) still stands as the most violent racial incident in U.S. history.

As Ta-Nehisi Coates (2014) argues so brilliantly, were we not a nation whose dominant group believes—and actively constructs and reconstructs—African-Americans as less-than, we could not continue to legislate terror as a slave-class status that effectively bars African Americans from seemingly boundless, meritocratic U.S. economic opportunity and prosperity. This systematic discrimination happens at every turn: through restrictions on “progressive,” long-lasting, New Deal programs like Social Security and unemployment insurance (which “initially excluded farmworkers and domestics—jobs heavily occupied by” (p. 64) Blacks); through “rating” neighborhoods for loan risk based upon the race of its inhabitants (denying legitimate mortgages to Black folk, forcing them to seek predatory lending, and shutting Blacks out of citizens’ single best wealth-building opportunity—home ownership); and Title III of the GI Bill (which, rather than ceding loan authority to the federal level, Congress legislated decision-making control to white officials at local VAs, shutting Black veterans out of home loans) (Coates, 2014). Today, one most readily sees that discrimination, that terror, in the enormous, machine-like, neoliberal profitability of the prison industrial complex and all that feeds it, schools inclusive. And this is to say nothing of how radically negatively a felony conviction eternally alters a person’s—and in particular a Black man’s—political, social, economic, and familial future.

One of the knowledge bombs Coates (2014) drops in his profound, provocative *Atlantic* essay “The Case for Reparations,” is when he posits the economic and political success of U.S. democracy is founded upon its dependence on the benefits of slave labor and its practices of “[B]lack plunder” (p. 62). In short, the U.S. could never have amassed the wealth or the power or the resources to break from the crown were it not for slavery’s legality, which “created the economic foundation for its experiment in democracy” (p. 62); policy protected indentured servants, not slaves: an astonishing insight. Jumping forward in time, with the U.S. still firmly entrenched in a post-slavery, slave-based economy, historian Katznelson argues, “The Jim Crow South [and, I would argue the new Jim Crow America, as Michelle Alexander theorizes (2012)], was the one collaborator America’s democracy could not do without” (quoted in Coates, 2014), designed as it was to make governmental social programs masquerading as “the new American safety net ‘a sieve with holes just big enough for the majority of Negroes to fall through’” (Coates and NAACP quoted in Coates, 2014, p. 64). A sobering new reality, today’s Jim Crow (Alexander, 2012), with its astonishing percentage of African-American males imprisoned, paroled, or on the run, completely undermines the collectivist notion we mythically attribute to democracy, disempowering these men of democracy’s very foundational ideals: the franchise, home, liberty, and—most crushingly—the pursuit of happiness.

With so much already lost, the terror society perpetrates on Black America reads as even more systemic, systematic, purposeful, evil in its angriness, its surety, its entitlement. The senseless deaths of African-American young men—America’s fathers, husbands, brothers, and sons—are not because of the actions, foolishness, or even hatred of a few bad cops. We need immediately to silence that pernicious myth once and for all, calling it out whenever its deeply deluded, dismissive conclusion is raised. What we need to be asking ourselves as a culture is, “What can be done?” and, importantly, “How morally can we permit terrorism enacted upon our fellow mankind, upon fellow citizens?” For, although an important step in acting on such revelatory knowledge is calling to task false attributions, false conclusions, and false consciousness—as important certainly as calling terror by its name and naming those individuals who perpetrate terror—, work of a whole different scale is needed at the systemic level before we can begin to cop to the witheringly discriminatory, disruptive history of African-Americans in the United States. A first step detailed in Coates’ (2014) “The Case for Reparations” is the passing of HR 40.

Congressman John Conyers, Jr., Detroit, has raised House Resolution 40 every year for his past 25 years in office, yet his resolution,

in which he proposes a study on payment of reparations to African-Americans, has never made it to the floor, neither under Democratic- nor Republican-controlled House (Coates, 2014), largely because “The popular mocking of reparations as a harebrained scheme authored by wild-eyed lefties and intellectually unserious [B]lack nationalists is fear masquerading as laughter” (pp. 69–70). Mind you, Conyers’ resolution only proposes *studying* reparations and authorizes not a dime for paying reparations (although the term “reparations” does not necessarily indicate monetary recompense); he merely proposes studying reparations the same way we routinely authorize funds and resources to study our water, air, and environment. But, even to study, even exploring and educating ourselves as a nation in such knowledge as what happened, what contributed, who benefited, and how Black Americans came to, “for centuries, ... [live] in America’s crosshairs” as a result of slavery-based systems of oppression (p. 62) remains far too threatening. For “The idea of reparations is frightening not simply because we might lack the ability to pay. The idea of reparations threatens something much deeper—America’s heritage, history, and standing in the world” (p. 69). But, this is the risk we must take and exactly what makes the work of a task like HR 40 vitally important. Studying reparations and understanding the context created for its need may be the only way we can ever become great as a nation, the only way we can morally, honorably claim to be civilized beings, and is certainly the only way we can ever gain our full humanity as a people, and that means to struggle to understand, to educate ourselves, to feel the shame and pain, and to do all of these with genuine, thoughtful intent. To begin such a project is our only hope of moving as a nation toward a humane racial reality and an end to this reign of terror. Otherwise, we risk the unfathomable: an endless telling and retelling of the story of Michael Brown and his lost brothers without ever hearing the real story.

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