ISSA Proceedings 2002 – Reparations Or Separation? The Rhetoric Of Racism In Black And White

No issue has received less attention in the rhetorical study of race in American public address than that of reparations for slavery. This essay integrates traditional rhetorical analyses with cultural critique to examine the discursive tactics and strategies of contemporary arguments against reparations. We will consider how anti-reparations rhetoric echoes the appeals of pro-slavery and segregationist rhetoric, and reveals the rhetorical privileging of normative whiteness in the symbolic construction of racism. Our analysis offers a reading of difference and identity that draws upon theories of rhetorical coherence to interrogate the underlying epistemological assumptions at work in the recovery of race in America and their implications for the our ability to find solutions to the problem of the twentieth century, the color line, as we enter the twenty-first.

If he gives to both North and South this terrible war as the woe due to those by whom the offense came, shall we discern therein any departure from those divine attributes which the believers in a living God always ascribe to Him. Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray that this mighty scourge of war might speedily pass away. Yet if God wills that continue until all the wealth piled by the bondsman's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn from the lash shall be paid by another drawn by the sword, as was three thousand years ago, so still it must be said 'the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether'.
Abraham Lincoln (Andrews and Zarefsky, p. 295)

And seeing that this is our status in the United States today, it devolves upon us to project a remedy for our condition, if such a remedy is obtainable, or demand of this nation, which owes us billions of dollars for work done and services rendered, five hundred million dollars to commence leaving it; or endorse the

petition of the colored lawyers convention, which was held in Chattanooga, Tennessee, asking Congress for a billion dollars for the same purpose. For I can prove, by mathematical calculation, that this nation owes us forty billion dollars for work performed.
Bishop Henry McNeal Turner
(Foner and Branham, pp. 480-81)

Seven score years ago, John S. Rock "advanced what was probably the first demand for distributions of land to slaves emancipated during the Civil war" (Foner and Branham, p. 368). Since that time, the call for reparations for slavery has gravitated between insinuation and agitation, but has never been silenced. While Rock's antebellum rhetoric is merely suggestive, John Smyth's claim during Reconstruction that "a debt of reparation is due from the white man to the black man can no longer be denied" (Foner and Branham, p. 823), expresses explicitly the discursive demand for justice that has continued to reveal itself in African American discourse. Perhaps it is Bishop Henry McNeal Turner's address of July 21, 1868, however, that most clearly illustrates the telos at the heart of this debate from its inception until today: the choice is between what Burke describes as identification and division, between reparations and separation. Indeed, even as the interest on America's debt to its citizens of African descent continues to grow, the disinterested hostility toward the issue on the part of America's citizens of European descent suggests that we are far from crossing over, as we enter into the twenty-first century, the problem of the twentieth: the omnipresent color line that continues to separate us from our better selves.

This essay represents our attempt to help suture that separation by bringing together the traditional analysis of rhetorical argument with cultural critique in order to examine parallel strategies and tactics in the anti-reparations position. Specifically, we undertake a historical-critical overview of African-American calls for reparations, comparing the more polemical responses to this call with two other rhetorical antecedents: pro-slavery arguments in the early Nineteenth century, *and* pro segregationist arguments in the twentieth century.We then draw upon notions of rhetorical coherence which have emerged in each of our previous writings independently, yet that similarly depend upon the idea that the relationship between discourse and practice is the ultimate arbitrar of what is true, what is just, and what has unfortunately never been realized in the American way.We offer these readings of the reparations debate in black and white to

illustrate areas of contention, places of coherence, and points of departure for an enlarged understanding of the problems and possibilities that rhetorical discourse and inquiry pose for rationally addressing what Montague so accurately called "man's greatest myth: the fallacy of race." We conclude that the question of reparations occupies a volatile, albeit less-than-examined position in the complex argumentative relationship between racial difference and democracy, one which reveals in all its sorry glory the terrible complicities and incoherencies of American racial (in) justice.

"Be True to What You Put on Paper" – McPhail's Coherence and the Rhetoric of Racism

Upon contributing to this project I came to the realization that the (unspoken) question at the heart of the reparations debate is whether or not slavery was a crime. That is the fundamental issue. If it was a crime, then the call for reparations is just. It is right. And it is right in the most fundamental, most self-evident way that it possibly could be right in the light of the moral and rational principles of truth professed to be foundational in the West. It is rationally just because of its consistency with the rule of justice, the application of similar standards to similar cases; it is spiritually just because of its adherence to the "golden rule," of doing unto others as you would have them do unto you. These are the discourses that mark the moral authority of Western culture in terms of its ultimate values, and beliefs and truths.Western philosophy and religion have understood justice, as both essential and as practiced, as reflecting a sense of moral coherence. So if slavery was a crime, then the call for reparations is just and right and fair and should be addressed by a culture which professes both moral conscience and moral authority. It is this simple.

But what if slavery was not a crime. What if the basic belief is that it was just an error of judgment, or reason, is true? What if it *was* pre-ordained by God? Or history? What if it was just the way things were *supposed* to be? What if we *should* just be happy and move on? Under these conditions there are no need for reparations. If it was an error of judgment then it was the result of ignorance, and should be forgiven. If it was an error of reason it should also be forgiven, for fallibility is sometimes the price we must pay for enlightenment. If God pre-ordained it then it is, by definition, beyond the need for debate and the question is moot. If it was just the way things were supposed to be then I guess we *should* be happy for what we have. It could have been worse. Yes, if slavery was not a crime

then all of the arguments made against reparations, especially those of David Horowitz, make perfect sense.

The certainly appear to make sense to the great majority of white people. They are, for many, self-evident truths. They are the *topoi*, in a sense, of whiteness, the places of argument sustained in the social and symbolic systems of privilege employed and enjoyed by people of European descent and heritage. It is clear that most white people are not in favor of reparations for slavery. If this were not clear, then the question of whether reparations are justified would be moot. There would be no need to speak of it. But we have been speaking of it for quite some time, and are speaking of it again today, and will continue to speak about it until it is resolved. My contribution to this conversation begins with the belief that for most white people the issue of reparations has already been resolved, while for most black people it has not.

I think this is what classical rhetoricians call *stasis*, the *point* of the argument. The very thing that *makes* an argument an argument. Its essence. Its reality. I think the reparations debate boils down to the question of whether or not slavery was a crime because this is the core issue in the arguments of both opponents and proponents, the essentially contested truth. The point at which they diverge. You cannot have the debate without it. This may be what the sophist Thrasymachus called "the theory of the opposite party," the thing that both sides agree upon by definition. It is the basic belief that presupposes argument itself. Either/or. Yes or no. Bivalence. One or the other. Complicity.

It is unquestioned belief. In foundational epistemologies it is the key criterion of truth: self-evidence. It is the starting point for Western philosophical and religious thought, the basis of the West's moral and spiritual authority. "We holds these truths to be self evident." Self-evidence has sustained itself through almost every system of intellectual thought since Plato: through rationalism, rational empiricism, mechanistic empiricism, and positivism. It resisted Hume, co-opted Kant, and remains untroubled by the assaults of postmodern and post Marxist theories. It is *the* resilient intellectual concept and psychological predisposition that justifies the West's claim to moral authority and intellectual superiority. Self-evident self-justification. It is axiomatic. Extra-argumentative.

In theory it is elegant and even eloquent. In practice – at least at it applies to the West's encounter with Africa – it is ugly. A great White Lie. Self-evidently untrue. The thorn in the side of reason, rationality, justice. This rupture between theory

and practice in the West's basic beliefs about its self and its African other has a long history. Hume, whose skepticism about knowledge apparently did not apply to his own, believed Africans to be inherently inferior. Hegel defined Africa as the antithesis of Europe. The Greeks were brought on board, and Aristotle and Plato were commissioned to justify the existence of slavery. The recruitment of God and Jesus sealed the deal. A great pantheon of intellectual and moral authorities denied as true the belief that slavery was a crime, one deserving of reparations above and beyond those already given.

The denial of slavery's criminality by people of European decent is enthymemic in the rhetoric of racism, that rhetoric of special pleading and double standards, fallacious in form and substance, but resilient and diffident. My own study of the rhetoric of racism informs my belief that the issue of the criminality of slavery is at the heart of this debate. I began this study with the belief that racism is created and sustained complicitously, a symbolic misunderstanding that could be remedied by dialogic and non-oppositional discourse, through a rhetoric of coherence. I no longer know if this belief can be justified as true.

I have, in fact, begun to believe that racism may be beyond the reach of rhetoric. That is it not, as my friends Robert Golden and Richard Rieke put it over thirty years ago, a problem of persuasion but of pathology. They wrote in *The Rhetoric of Black Americans*: "The study of the rhetoric of black Americans suggests the possibility that the rhetorical goal – communicating with white men about their beliefs and attitudes regarding black men – may be more a psychiatric than a persuasive problem" (1971, p. 6). Few scholars, black or white, have bothered to follow this line of inquiry, but I believe it offers an important starting point for the analysis of reparations and anti-reparations rhetoric.

The study of the rhetoric of African American reveals that demands for reparations have been sporadic, yet persistent. They appear in the rhetorics of John Rock, Issacc Meyers, Bishop Henry McNeal Turner, W. E. B. Du Bois, Marcus Garvey, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr., James Foreman, and most recently Randall Robinson. Robinson's *The Debt*, illustrates the degree to which the criminality of slavery is central to the debate, and echoes Golden and Rieke's suggestions about the psychiatric character of its denial. In pointing to the international precedents that provide the legal justifications for African American reparations, Robinson writes:

Only in the case of black people have the claims, the claimants, the crime, the law, the precedents, the awful contemporary social consequences all been

roundly ignored. The thinking must be that the case that cannot be substantially answered is best not acknowledged at all. Hence, the United States government and white society generally have opted to deal with this debt by forgetting that it is owed. The crime – 246 years of an enterprise murderous of both a people and their culture – is so unprecedentedly massive that it would require some form of collective insanity not to see it and its living victims (p 221).

Robinson believes that the nation's racial problems can be addressed "only if our society can be brought to face up to the massive crime of slavery and all that it has wrought" (p.7). For the West to erase the color line, there must be some acknowledgement of a crime, and he sees slavery and its aftermath as a "long running multidimensional human rights crime," a crime against black humanity (p. 229).

Robinson's book is clearly meant to provoke guilt, though it accomplishes more. As such, if my theorizing of the rhetoric of racism is correct, the responses that reparations rhetoric will most likely elicit are denial and rhetorical reversal. Martin Reisigl and Ruth Wodak, in their recent exploration of discourse and discrimination, illustrate the strategic rhetorical uses of denial in response to guilt through a discussion of anti-Semitism. "Doubt, guilt feelings, and the need to justify or rationalise one's behavior encouraged the development of strategies for 'dealing with the past': playing down the actions and events themselves, denying knowledge of them, transforming the victims into the causes of present woes" (2001, p. 95). Numerous other scholars in rhetorical and cultural studies agree that denial is an enduring topic of white racism. As such, we should consider its significance in this debate.

And this brings us to David Horowitz's anti-reparations manifesto, "Ten reasons why reparations for slavery are a bad idea for black people – and racist too." Horowitz marks his polemic explicitly as a response to Robinson's Debt, which he describes as an "anti-white, anti-American manifesto." Horowitz goes on to argue that "the claim for reparations is factually tendentious, morally incoherent and racially incendiary." Logically, it has about as much substance as the suggestion that O.J. Simpson should have been acquitted because of past racism by the criminal courts. Its impact on race relations and on the self-isolation of the African American community is likely to be even worse" (p. 1). The discursive moves made here by Horowitz reveal rhetorical reversals that epitomize the rhetoric of white racism.

Consider first the assumptions at work in his appeal to *logos* behind the O.J. analogy. If the two cases are to be treated the same, then it must be premised that black people as a whole, have like O.J. been accused of a crime, and should be excused of that crime because of past bad acts against them. But what is the crime that black people are accused of other than, of course, being black. It is at best, a faulty analogy. Consider also the appeal to *pathos* in the claim that the call for reparations is racially incendiary, and will result in further isolation of black people from the American mainstream. Reparations here have become the cause of racism instead of a response to it. Faulty causality? Post hoc ergo? These are only two of the many fallacies at work here.

Neither of these examples adequately warrants Horowitz's claims. But what of his appeal to ethos, his claim that the call for reparations is morally incoherent? There is no example, fallacious or otherwise, to support this claim. Only an enthymemic silence that rests upon the implied conclusions of the other: that blacks are comparable to criminals, that guilt provocation is ineffective at best, a form of racism at worst, and that white people are innocent. No crime was committed. But if a crime was committed, the real criminal is the very party that claims to be victimized, and whites are themselves "victims" of reverse discrimination.

David Horowitz has taken the rhetoric of white racial recovery to a new extreme. He has outdone Hernstein, Murray, D'Souza, and host of others committed to the defense of white superiority. He has publicly claimed that black people are in essence responsible not only for the contemporary conditions in which we find ourselves, *but for slavery itself*. "It was not whites but black Africans who first enslaved their brothers and sisters. They were abetted by dark skinned Arabs (since Robinson and his allies force us into this unpleasant mode of racial discourse) who organized the slave trade" (p. 1). Will reparations be assessed against them too, Horowitz wonders. Didn't *they* benefit from slavery too, he asks.

And answers that they did. "America's black citizens are the richest and most privileged black people alive – a bounty that is a direct result of the heritage that is under attack." Black people should be good Americans and support "the American idea," and not ask for reparations. Because black people don't deserve reparations, not like the Jews or Japanese did. These are Horowitz's words. "The Jews and Japanese who received reparations were individuals who actually suffered the hurt." Black people evidently are not individuals. We do not suffer hurt. Horowitz is, of course, in good company in making these claims. They were

also made, Robinson reminds us, by Thomas Jefferson. We are "in reason much inferior."Our "*griefs are transient.*" Logos. Pathos. No ethos.

Because the ethos is enthymemic. It is embodied in the "heritage that men like Jefferson helped to shape," the heritage that has justified the subordination and exploitation of African Americans as something other than criminal for centuries. It is the character of whiteness: its true character. Demands for reparations call that character into question, and thus in Horowitz's estimation will further alienate African-Americans from their American roots and further isolate them from all of America's other communities (including whites), who are themselves blameless in the grievance of slavery, who cannot be held culpable for racial segregation and who, in fact, have made significant contributions to ending discrimination and redressing any lingering injustice" (p.2)
Black people should not blame other Americans for a situation of our own making. Others are "blameless." They "cannot be held culpable." Nor should we blame America itself, since the America that exists now is not the same America that sanctioned slavery and segregation all those years ago. What we need to do is accept what we have and be happy. "What African-Americans need is to embrace America as their home and to defend its good: the principles and institutions that have set them – and all of us – free." These are David Horowitz's words. They reflect his most basic beliefs. And they are racist.

They are in fact, the common topics of what Aaron David Gresson III (1995) describes as "white racial recovery," the "good reasons" beneath the claims, the uncontested warrants, the unspoken. David Horowitz simply gave them a voice. And he was really only saying what most white people basically believe. Most white people are not in favor of reparations for slavery. They apparently do not believe that slavery was a crime against African Americans or against humanity. They learn to believe this at an early age. Charles Gallagher found this attitude in many of his white students. "Many young whites refuse to feel in any way responsible for the roles whites have played in US race relations The common response 'I don't feel responsible for may father's sins' reflects this sentiment," he explains. "Or, as another student put it, 'The slavery thing happened so long ago, they can't keep prosecuting us – I don't even know if my ancestors were here then, so I'm kind of sick of keeping that held against me'" (p. 347). One has to wonder here if Horowitz is not simply praising Athenians in Athens, only telling white people what they want to hear about themselves. *That they are innocent of*

any crime. The call for reparations is an accusation of criminality that most whites are unwilling to hear or accept. David Horowitz exploits this unwillingness, and appeals to an ethos of whiteness based upon it own racialized "good" reasons.

This is the ethos persistently called into question by the rhetorical efforts of African Americans, and never more so than in the demand for reparations. Those demands, and the responses they have elicited, invite us to revisit Golden and Rieke's questions about the usefulness of rhetoric in race matters. "When forced to search deep into his own central belief system," Golden and Rieke write, "the white man discovers he perceives himself as a white man and holds beliefs of a primitive nature, that whites are not only different but better than blacks" (p. 7). Perhaps this continues to be the reason why black people, in the minds of most white people, do not deserve reparations. Because we are different and inferior.
In the debate over reparations, then, it seems improbable that black rhetors will ever convince a majority of white people that reparations are warranted. Regardless of the eloquence of our arguments, the quality of our justifications, the coherence of our rhetoric. White people, collectively, will never be induced to believe that the historical enslavement and exploitation of black people was a crime. Regardless of the fallacies exposed, the rationalizations revealed, the narratives deconstructed, black demands for reparations for slavery will never be persuasive to most whites. "How long," asks Randall Robinson, "must a few lonely blacks whistle wisdom through the lightless centuries?" (p. 243).

Of Judgments True and Righteous Altogether: Farrell's Coherence and the Ethics of Rhetoric

Upon contributing to this project, I came to the realization that the central norms I have elsewhere posited for rhetorical culture (competence, performance, coherence, and distance) were all norms of proportion. A rhetorical sense of proportion must take account of the many ways rhetorical practice departs from the preoccupation with singular conduct we find in the ethical treatises. Rhetoric is, first of all, a collaborative practice. It is a situated, eventful practice. It is audience-dependent and reciprocal. How do we formulate a sense of proportion that might be sensitive to these special traits. Much of what we have in mind for these aspects of the concept is captured by the adjective, "practical." Ethos in rhetoric, as we are exploring it here, is an emergent that results from the interaction among the rhetorical event/appearance, the place(s) occupied by the audience/agent, and the mediation performed by rhetorical exchange.

The ethos of rhetoric, a sense of practical proportion, is not one thing. It is many things. For every time we encounter someone who hits the mark precisely (Roosevelt's "First Inaugural," "I Have a Dream"), there are many other times when we miss it completely. Political campaigns are littered with the body parts of candidates who said or did something so spectacularly wrong that instead of making history they became history. And if this will not do, think of the Catholic Church in America. Or think of Enron. The list goes on. A second, and not terribly surprising conclusion is that the ethos of rhetoric is only as strong as is the actual performance of rhetoric in practice. Were we to be wedded to a practice, the performance of which only led to untrustworthy or suspicious results, the practice itself would surely be called into question. So it is with rhetoric.

This is entirely consistent with Aristotle's famous definition that ethos is character as manifested through speech. To this formulation, we would like to add the idea that ethos may also refer to the characteristic atmosphere or *aura* of an encounter setting, be it workplace, religious institution, concert hall, Department. Finally, we wish to suggest that ethos in rhetorical practice emerges from the way such practice fits into a larger picture. This is the sense of ethos we shall explore here. There have been numerous attempts to explore this sense of "fit." Some have called it "prudence," others "propriety." There have been few, if any, attempts to explore the larger picture that emerges when a successful fit has occurred. We call this "coherence." To make what some have characterized as a "practical turn," we need, in a sense, to take inventory of the ways rhetoric might "fit in" to a larger picture, and then to ask whether there are any commonalities among these ways.

Some rhetoric achieves coherence by helping to complete a larger picture. Some rhetoric places its horizon within yet an even greater horizon. Some rhetoric, in a pragmatic vein, sets out to trace the implications of its place, and some rhetoric finds it necessary to subvert conventional practice in light of allegedly higher principles. What we have concluded is that – regardless of chosen option – all rhetoric achieves coherence by cultivating a sense of what we will call "practical proportion." It is in his most famous lectures on character, the *Nicomachean Ethics* and the *Eudaimonian* ethics, that Aristotle gives us an introduction to the idea of proportion. To condense a discussion both complex and known to all, virtues are cultivated as habits of proper or proportionate action. Thus, the ethos of rhetoric is only as strong as is the actual performance of rhetoric in practice. Were we to be wedded to a practice, the performance of which only led to

untrustworthy or suspicious results, the practice itself would surely be called into question. So it is with rhetoric. Finally, and this is critical to our analysis, it is sometimes the case that the real event or referent of rhetorical clash and argumentative mediation is not the one advocates actually think they are discussing. While controversy is typically explicit in focus, its referent often is not. Instead, it may be some aspect of history looming in the recesses of the lifeworld, still defying the capacity of rational speech to declare its meanings explicitly. This is one of many things we believe to have been occurring in the ongoing reparations controversy.

Toward the close of the Twentieth century, a series of episodes emerged, where attempts were made to reconcile, or make amends with aggrieved groups. Apologies and partial reparations were made to the offspring of interned Japanese-Americans during World War II, to Jews whose property, wealth, and art had been confiscated by Nazis and hoarded in Swiss banks and many others. Even the Catholic church got into the act, apologizing (eloquently) for its blindness and long-standing anti-Semitism. There were also apologies for the Inquisition, and to Galileo, for being prematurely correct on the relationship between earth and sun. Along with the apologies, specifically targeted groups financial reparations, as symbolic acknowledgment of their inestimable loss. And then the rhetorical envelope was pushed. A group of renowned and somewhat controversial, led by a coalition including Louis Farrakhan, Jesse Jackson, and Cornel West began an insurgent movement demanding reparations, because of slavery, for living African-Americans.

The movement for civil war reparations to the descendants of slaves had gathered considerable momentum in the United States; for instance, the Chicago City Council's aldermen voted 49 to 1 in favor of reparations. And until February, 2001, there were few of the sort of specifics that could divide constituencies of support. But on the last day of Black History month, David Horowitz decided to print on one of the most prominent sites of the internet what he called, ala, Letterman, "The Ten Reasons why Reparations are a bad Idea, and Racist too." Most of the manifesto proclamations in evidence with these more public sentiments are not at all new. They are preceded by clear antecedents in pre-and post-civil war racist arguments.

This is evident from Horowitz's first argument, introduced by the ambiguous caption, "*There is no Single Group that Benefited Exclusively from Slavery.*" And it reads, "If slave labor has created wealth for Americans, then obviously it has

created wealth for black Americans as well, including the descendents of slaves. The GNP of black America makes the African-American community the tenth most prosperous 'nation' in the world. American blacks on average enjoy per capita incomes in the range of twenty to fifty times that of blacks living in any of the African nations from which they were kidnapped. The ambiguity serves to mask the argument's incoherence. It could refer either to any single group benefiting from slavery, to the exclusion of other groups; or, it could refer to groups which benefited exclusively from slavery, while benefiting from nothing else. Of course, neither of these refuted positions have ever been advocated by proponents of reparations.

We believe this to be the strategy of straw man argument. But this is not the real source of the difficulty. The deeper difficulty is that David Horowitz is here doing something he will do throughout his diatribe; he is recycling blatantly racist arguments from the antebellum South, as well as the late Fifties segregationist South. The argument essentially shows African Americans content with their inferior social position, slowly but surely getting their piece of the American dream. Here is historian, Paul Johnson: "Southerners argued that to take a black from Africa and set him up in comfort on a plantation was the equivalent, allowing for racial differences, of allowing a penniless European peasant free entry and allowing him, in a few years, to buy his own farm." James Kilpatrick, in his openly racist diatribe, *The Southern Case for School Segregation*, hangs the argument out for all to see: "The Negroes of America are better off materially, culturally, and politically than any Negroid people in the world, and their lot improves at an incredible speed." How did this happen, one might ask. Surely not through the "Negroid race"'s *native* abilities: "The question that never seems to be convincingly answered is why the Negro race, in Toynbee's phrase, is the only race that has failed to make a creative combination to civilization."
Of course, a race that has contributing essentially nothing to civilization while improving its lot exponentially, can only have benefited disproportionately from its centuries of tutelage. From the perspective of Kilpatrick, however, we have come far enough to already witness "the potentially degrading influence of Negro characteristics." Now, Kilpatrick is honest enough to admit that his "is a 'racist' thesis." David Horowitz does not. Instead, he is content to build sophistry upon sophistry. In one entry, we are told that "racism" essentially ended with the end of the Civil War. And where oh where is the gratitude of the Negro race for America having "given" the race its freedom? And as part of the rhetorical

smokescreen surrounding his reasons, David Horowitz presents himself as the victim of university and journalistic political correctness.

For Horowitz, the failure to be invited to speak on a college campus amounts to censorship, just as the editorial decisions of newspapers as to whether to accept these "arguments" as suitable for appearance in news journals. For anyone forced to confront these logistical decisions directly, there is an alternative explanation for Horowitz's "persecution." One co-author of this essay has on his campus a fairly well known professor who has claimed, repeatedly and publicly, that the Holocaust never occurred. On still other campuses, there are proponents of creationism, abject homophobia, and still further extremities in cause. While inquiring minds may disagree, a generic recalcitrance regarding open debate with such advocates has emerged. Why? Because open debate leaves a residue of legitimacy on positions long discredited. This may seem like conspiracy to the already paranoid victim. But it is surely not censorship.
If Horowitz had been shooting for the purity of analytic distribution, he surely failed. But if his goal had been, say, to muddy the deliberative waters, considerably greater credit must be ceded. But for all the sound and fury David Horowitz's polemic managed to stir, his was not to be the last word. In mid-March of this past year, a decision was made which would dramatically shift both the venue and the genres of the reparations controversy. Instead of continuing to engender deliberative, across-the-board reparations proposals, reparations advocates have initiated a series of class-action law suits against firms, universities, news agencies who prolonged and benefited from conspicuous features of slavery.

One would have difficulty overestimating the significance of this shift. It takes the question of accountability from the legislature to the Courts (where, we are tempted to say, it belongs). It also changes the operative argumentative genre from deliberative to forensic discourse. Perhaps most important, reparations litigation allows the hidden referent of this controversy to emerge, without the sort of vitriol and evasion sponsored by the David Horowitz's of our political culture. Here is Charles J. Ogletree, Jr.: "A full and deep conversation on slavery and its legacy has never taken place in America; reparations litigation will show what slavery meant, how it was profitable and how it has continued to affect the opportunities of millions of black Americans." With all due respect to the complexities of America's bicameral legislature, this would not be the first time

an aggrieved people has had to rely upon the courts to conduct business others would sooner ignore. For thirteen consecutive years, the Congress has refused to even appoint a study group to explore the issues of reparations. In this as in previous revelatory episodes of civil rights history, neglect may prove to be the mother of invention.

There is, of course, a special irony in the fact that the litigation project seems a direct outgrowth of the weakest of Horowitz's premises (on groups who benefited disproportionately from slavery). Perhaps David Horowitz and the Committee on Reparations may find some way of sharing credit for this. A final irony rests with the likely defendants themselves. We have already heard from several them. Recently, the *Chicago Tribune* intoned: "Long before all of the sad facts have been accumulated, it will have become clear that the benefits of slavery were not restricted to a few parties in either North or South.What Lincoln himself saw as a national stain implicated a complex web of economic, political and cultural forces. No one was immune, then or now. And to the extent that the ill effects of slavery still plague our nation, we are all liable." Noble words. But perhaps in the *Tribune's* haste to shed the yoke of litigation, it lost sight of the similarity between its current stance and the original reparations position. We are, indeed, all liable.

Rhetoric, Reparations, or Resignation: The Hope(lessness) that Race Creates

No phrase more clearly epitomizes the consciousness underlying the demand for reparations for slavery advanced by African Americans than "forty acres and a mule." It reveals an understanding of the fact that people of African descent could never truly gain equality without access this nation's most valued and protected privilege: the ownership of land. Yet the phrase itself reveals the rhetorical incoherence that has always circumscribed race relations in America. Some historians contend that the promise of land and the means of sustaining it were never even offered to African Americans, while others suggest that it amounted to little more than insincere inducements by those who wished to garner the support of ex slaves for their own ends. Claude Oubre (1978) suggests that the belief held by African Americans that they would receive reparations in the form of land and livestock can be traced to the rhetorical efforts of both abolitionists and legislators. "It appears that the concept of land distribution may have originated within the abolitionist camp. Less than one month after the war began, abolitionist William Goodell demanded that Congress confiscate land belonging to rebels and redistribute it among freed slaves" (p. 181). Oubre argues that a

number of pronouncements by Union army officials and legislators, along with the confiscation acts enacted during the war, gave many African Americans both free and slave the impression that they would be compensated by the government for over two hundred years of unpaid labor.

Those pronouncements were, however, motivated less by benevolence than by opportunism. Indeed, few whites were sincerely committed to creating the conditions that would lead to racial equality for blacks, much less providing them land. Oubre concurs in his discussion of the failed legislative attempts to provide land for newly freed blacks in Louisiana. “Although the majority of congressmen never really intended to give the freedmen land, the action of high ranking military and political officials convinced freedmen that there was substance to all the land rumors they had heard,” he explains. “This belief, unfortunately, by creating a false hope, deprived many freedmen of the incentive to acquire land through their own efforts” (p. 184). For Oubre, the failed legislative attempts to provide African Americans with land represents the “tragedy of Reconstruction… since without the economic security provided by land ownership the freedmen were soon deprived of the political and civil rights which they had won” (p. 197). He nonetheless concludes that the few individual African Americans who were able to acquire land achieved “a personal triumph against overwhelming odds” (p. 198). Their limited success, however, stood in stark contrast to the hopelessness that masses of African Americans experienced in the aftermath of Reconstruction, a hopelessness created and sustained by the rhetoric of white racism.

That rhetoric ranged from the opportunism of those who appealed to the belief held by many blacks that the nation would make reparations for the crippling legacy of slavery, to a reliance upon the traditional mechanisms of fear and violence that has been used to maintain social control. As Cal M. Logue (1977) observes: “The new rhetorical status of blacks challenged the power of whites. Spokesmen for the white community perceived Reconstruction as ‘that new revolution which aims at the overthrow of the Constitution of the country, and the subversion of these heretofore free and independent Commonwealths'” (p. 241). Logue argues that whites “communicated two persuasive appeals as a means of convincing blacks to accept the submissive role circumscribed by the rhetorical contract: a verbal bribe and a rhetorical threat” (p. 244). These strategies replaced the sanctions which restricted blacks during slavery, and exploited a rhetorical situation which whites perceived as threatening to their political rights. Whites were urged by political leaders and public figures to “prepare for the

struggle." "Journalists, speakers, letter writers, and 'poets' contributed to the verbal campaign to control the political behavior of blacks" (p. 242). At the end of the nineteenth century, white Americans were persuaded to believe that demands political and social equality and opportunity for black Americans would ultimately lead to their victimization at the hands of "black Republicans," and their northern abolitionist allies.

At the end of the twentieth century, a similar phenomenon occurred in response to government efforts to address the long legacy of racial discrimination through affirmative action. This new rhetoric of racial recovery drew upon many of the same figures and tropes of whiteness that emerged during Reconstruction, but also reflected more subtle and insidious forms of racial reasoning. Gresson offers important insights into the parallels between the rhetoric of Reconstruction and contemporary anti-reparations rhetoric. He argues "that white political and economic recovery efforts in America have resulted largely in judicial, occupational, and symbolic losses for Blacks and others previously targeted for so-called mainstreaming" (p. 12). He also suggests that contemporary white racial recovery rhetoric plays upon the fears and insecurities of European Americans, casting them as "victims" and revealing an historical amnesia that reverses the realities of racial oppression and discrimination. "Many whites ," he explains, believe the story that Blacks and others are *privileged*. Because they see and hear images of Black success… they 'feel' that all Blacks have the power and opportunity to be model successes. Because they see many of their own family and friends suffering, they believe white men have had to pay for Black success. This is the new white racial story. In this new white racial narrative, moreover, the white male is the victim (p. 211-2). While the story may seem new, its rhetorical motives and racial reasoning are as old as the exigencies that have historically shaped the ways in which white Americans see themselves in relation to people of African descent.

What is new, however, is the "spirit of opportunism" which Gresson suggests shapes racial recovery rhetoric on both sides of the color line. That opportunism is revealed in the rhetoric of black conservatives, whose denial of white culpability in the contemporary problems that best black Americans has been instrumental to the success of white recovery efforts. Gresson persuasively documents the ideological and material complicity of black conservatives in the resurgence of racism in America, and his suggestion that these African Americans "collude with the white man's agenda" (p. 182) is confirmed by their anti-

reparations rhetoric. William Macklin (2000), in discussing the call for reparations advanced in Randall Robinson's book *The Debt*, notes that "while many blacks have joined the call for reparations, some have balked" (p. A12). He cites, for support, George Mason University economist Walter Williams, who refutes the claims of reparations advocates regarding the destructive effects of slavery with the preferred rhetorical strategies of black and white neoconservatives: the argument from anecdote. Maclin notes that Williams claims " that slavery actually benefited blacks by forcibly moving an estimated 20 million Africans to the New World. "I would say that my wealth is much higher being born in America than if I had been born in Africa," said Williams. "And I would say the same thing about any African American." Williams certainly isn't alone in his view. For many Americans, the idea of reparations is an affront, evidence of the stiff-necked refusal of blacks to move beyond the past. Others see it as a sham that would shower the undeserving with tax-funded cash (p. A12).
The fallacy at work in William's synecdochal substitution of the part for the whole is also revealed, albeit more subtly, in Macklin's racial reasoning as well. The "many Americans" and the "others" of which he speaks are clearly white, but their race has been erased to give the impression that the resistance to reparations is as widespread among African Americans as it is among European Americans.

Neil Steinberg's discussion of the issue of reparations suggests otherwise. Steinberg, a white writer for the *Chicago Sun Times*, offers a compelling account of the reparations debate in black and white, its central issues, and its reliance on the rhetorics of racial recovery and reasoning. "My column last week on the issue of reparations for slavery seemed to have touched a nerve with a lot of people, white and black," he writes. "Most gratifying of the many responses I got, and thought were worth sharing, were letters and emails from African Americans who were astounded to find a white person expressing an opinion that made sense to them" (p. 16). Steinberg, who argues in favor of reparations, also comments on the responses of his white readers, who largely rejected the call for reparations. "White readers, on the other hand, tended to take what I call the 'that's not my table' approach. Their relatives were in Ireland or Sicily, or somewhere else, and the whole thing is not their problem" (p. 16). Most whites, Steinberg notes, invoke a rhetoric of denial, and many echoed the arguments made by Horowitz in his rejection of the call for reparations. Steinberg also indicates that many of the responses of white readers revealed an underlying racism, sometimes subtle,

sometimes, not. “Many who wrote in opposition of reparations had an amusing tendency to unconsciously illustrate the pervasive racism that blacks are still up against. Perhaps sensing the loathsomeness of their opinions, they tended to write anonymously” (p. 16). Steinberg ends his column on what he implies is a more positive note, with these words from a reader whose race is not identified: “Your column put this issue in very clear words. The United States should set this matter right… I don’t have the answers, but we should at least start” (p. 16).

Whether or not this country is willing or able “to set this matter right” remains to be seen. Our reading of this controversy in black and white leads us in two directions, toward both the possibility of reparations and the probability of resignation. The point at which we do agree, however, is that the opponents of reparations are ultimately opportunists, those who play to our least ethical, rational, and compassionate impulses to advance their own agendas. This is certainly our view of David Horowitz and those like him who would distort historical and rhetorical realities in the service of self-interest. Gresson’s observations concerning the invidiousness of this opportunism is instructive: “It is similar, for example, to that spirit of opportunism that inspired the imaginative white male in Boston in 1990 to kill his pregnant wife in a Black neighborhood, accuse a Black male, and induce the mayor, police force, and city to fall in frenzy upon the Black community” (p. 170). Like Charles Stuart, David Horowitz is more than willing to exploit the primitive, basic belief held by most whites, that they are inherently different and thus inherently better than blacks. We wonder if any rhetorical effort can overcome this condition, which Golden and Rieke correctly observed, may be more a problem of pathology than persuasion.

As rhetoricians invested in the possibilities of ethical rhetoric we continue to hope that a more coherent understanding of discourse and difference might help us to erase the problem of the color line as we enter a new millennium. Perhaps the shift from the deliberative to the forensic realm offers some hope, but this too remains to be seen. With the ideological shift toward the right on the Supreme Court, a shift facilitated in large part by the appointment of a black conservative, one wonders whether the legal system will be any more responsive to the needs of African Americans. Gresson suggests that the rhetoric of white racial recovery had already found its way into the judicial process well before the appointment of Clarence Thomas. “At the conclusion of a recent reversal of an earlier landmark case, Justice Thurgood Marshall accused several of his peers of ‘selective

amnesia' and of insulating 'an especially invidious form of racial discrimination from scrutiny of the Sixth amendment.' Marshall, a Black justice and member of the body voting on the earlier landmark case, declared the spirit of the previous decision violated" (p. 176). What Marshall saw as "selective amnesia," another distinguished black jurist, Paul L. Brady, labels "a certain blindness."

A federal judge and "grandson of a slave," Brady (1990) contends that "the white majority has willfully blinded itself to the humanity and worth of Americans of African descent in order to preserve the best potion for itself" (p. ix). He comments on the incoherence of America's treatment of African Americans, and the continuing role of race in shaping American cultural and rhetorical norms:

> There has been no official act of the American government to memorialize slavery, nor has proper recognition been given to those who helped end it. Rather, our society honors those who supported the system of man's inhumanity to man. Included are the many leaders who renounced their citizenship and betrayed their oaths of office. They are compassionately remembered by memorials and statues, because race determines recognition in our nation, and not deed (p. 320).

Brady's critique of white America's moral blindness concludes with a clear statement of the ethical, rational, and emotional grounds of the call for reparations. His is an argument not only from anecdote, but from history as well, and it reveals what we both believe is best understood as a call for rhetorical coherence: "As black Americans we share our humanity and aspirations with all this nation's peoples, but history and experience contradict that truth, and we continue to suffer from that contradiction. The principles found in the Declaration of Independence and in the Constitution have been neither completely accepted nor appropriately resolved," he concludes. "Instead, further contradictions and inconsistencies have been introduced throughout our history, rendering our government practically incapable of perceiving the tragic result" (p. 327). While it seems unlikely that the courts will be able to achieve what the government could not, there always exists the possibility that justice might become something more than the interests of the stronger might or the protection of privilege. As the century of the problem of color ends, and the century of the challenge of conscience begins, perhaps European and African Americans will move beyond separation and toward reparations. We do not have the answers, but believe that it would indeed be a good start.

REFERENCES

Aristotle, (1941) Nicomachean Ethics, W.D.Ross (trans.), in *The basic works of Aristotle*, Richard McKeon (Ed.), New York: Random House.
Aristole, (1991). *On rhetoric: a theory of civic discourse*, G.A. Kennedy (trans.) New York: Oxford University Press.
Chicago Tribune (Editorial), *Section 1*, p. 16, 4/1/02.
Foner, P. and R. Branham, eds. (1998). *Lift every voice: African American Oratory, 1787-1900*. Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press.
Golden, J., and Rieke, R. D. (1971). *The rhetoric of black Americans*. Columbus: Charles E. Merrill Publishing Co.
Gallagher, C. (1998). White reconstruction in the university. In J. Ferrante, and P Brown, Jr., *The social construction of race and ethnicity in the United States* (pp. 337-354). New York: Longman
Gresson, A. (1995). *The recovery of race in America*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
Horowitz, D.(2002) *Uncivil wars: The controversy over reparations for slavery*. San Francisco: Encounter Books.
Johnson, P.(1997) *A history of the American people.* New York: Harper Perennial.
Kilpatrick, J.J. (1962) *The Southern case for school desegregation*. Richmond: the Crowell-Collier Press.
Lincoln, A. "Second Inaugural Address," (1965), in J .Andrews, and D. Zarefsky, (eds.), *American voices: Significant speeches in American history, 1640-1945*. New York: Longman Press, 1989, 294-296.
Logue, C. M. (1977). Rhetorical appeals of whites to blacks during reconstruction. *Communication Monographs*, 44, 241-251.
Macklin, W. (2000). Reparations for slavery sought by some blacks. *The Salt Lake Tribune*, 13 Feb, A12.
McPhail, M. (2002), *The rhetoric of racism revisited: Reparations or separation*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield, Publishers, Inc.
Morrison, S.E. (1972). *The Oxford history of the American people*. New York: Oxford University Press.
Ogletree, Jr., C.J. (2002). *Litigating the legacy of slavery*. New York Times, 31March, 2002.
Oubre, C. (1978). *40 acres and a mule: The freedmen's bureau and Black land ownership*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press.
Reisigl, M. and R. Wodak. (2000). *Discourse and discrimination: Rhetorics of racism and antiSemitism*. New York: Routledge.
Robinson, R. (2000). *The debt: What America owes to Blacks*. New York:

Penguin Books.
Zinn, H. (1999) *A people's history of the United States, 1492-present*. New York: Perennial Classics.