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### *Preliminary Comments on Black Intellectuals and Reparation in the Black Power Era*

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Available online at [www.yale.edu/glc/justice/biondi.pdf](http://www.yale.edu/glc/justice/biondi.pdf)

In his important recent book *Atonement and Forgiveness: A New Model for Black Reparations* legal scholar Roy L. Brooks notes that the modern Black redress movement only became significant and visible recently, beginning in the late 1980s.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the recent outpouring of reparations scholarship—including even a study connecting Yale University’s origins with profits from the slave trade—and of course, this conference itself, serve to reinforce Professor Brooks’ point. I think, however, there were earlier developments both in American politics and in African American advocacy that help explain the relatively broad black receptivity to the idea of reparations today. This receptivity is shaped not only by longstanding conceptions of justice, but by a resistant reading of the civil rights movement. In this paper, I want to suggest that the late civil rights era was a critical turning point in how African American leadership imagined economic redress. This happened across the ideological spectrum—from Black Nationalists to integrationists. Black economists forged new ground in reparations

advocacy, and their contribution to this movement deserves recognition. But just as today, legal scholars—such as Boris Bittker at Yale, were also pioneering theorists of reparations. Indeed Mary Frances Berry’s first article on Callie House appeared in 1972.

The “Black Manifesto” by James Forman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee is often cited as the principal articulation of reparations during the Black Power era. This manifesto, announced at various venues in 1969 including a disrupted service at the Riverside Church in Manhattan, demanded 500 million dollars, not from the United States, but from churches and synagogues. Forman proposed a creative and wide ranging list of initiatives that could be financed through a reparations payment, including a Southern Land Bank and a Black University. Most histories of the black liberation movement mention the manifesto, but leave it at that. Interestingly, though, the proposals in the manifesto inspired research, theorizing and advocacy by many activists and intellectuals, and today I want to briefly discuss efforts to realize both the southern land bank and the Black University. Both efforts came out of the Black Nationalist thrust of the movement, although, ironically, core tenets of late 1960s black nationalism, especially the emphasis on self-reliance and autonomy, and the disinclination toward major confrontations with Washington, probably worked against the development of a bigger push for reparations.

The economist and international trade expert, Robert S. Browne delivered the keynote at the Detroit conference where James Forman unveiled the Black manifesto, and Browne credits the Manifesto’s impact with helping him secure funding for his Harlem-based, Black Economic Research Center. Browne’s life choices exemplify the idealism and sense of service that nationalist ideas stimulated in many Black intellectuals and other professionals: feeling slightly guilty, he said, he left his comfortable job at a white suburban college to launch an independent

non-profit in Harlem designed to promote black economic development. During its ten years of existence, the Black Economic Research Center put into practice core principles of the early Black studies movement: it conducted “relevant” or useful research and sought to put intellectuals at the service of the broader community. Browne also started the *Journal of Black Political Economy*, in order to provide a venue for Black economists to disseminate their ideas to an academic as well as non-academic readership. While over time the journal developed along more traditional academic lines, Browne’s original vision was for contributors to engage political and economic issues of the day. Black economists promoted the idea of reparations for slavery and Jim Crow as a way to address both the socio-economic crisis facing black communities and the aspirations of rising numbers of Black professionals. An issue in 1972 was devoted entirely to reparations with important articles by Professors Richard America and Robert Browne, among others.<sup>2</sup>

The BEREC took the initiative in fundraising for a southern land bank, and secured a grant from the Rockefeller Brothers to do an exploratory study. The crisis motivating the interest in a land bank was the sharp recent decline in Black-owned land in the South from 12 million acres in 1950 to less than 6 million in 1970. The BEREC’s study, *Only Six Million Acres: the Decline of Black Owned Land in the Rural South* published in 1973 offered an analysis of the problem and an array of remedies based on extensive interviews with black farmers. In its use of oral history, the report exemplified Browne’s desire to advance a “black perspective” in the work of the BEREC. Scholars and lawyers have since built upon the report’s identification of tax sales, partition sales, and foreclosures as the key explanations for the loss of black-owned land. But *Only Six Million Acres* also found that “a great deal of chicanery bordering on the illegal is regularly practiced by unscrupulous whites,” a claim that was reinforced in a remarkable study in

2001 by the Associated Press called “Torn from the Land” which exposed the widespread use of violence, intimidation and exploitation by whites eager to seize black-owned land. The investigation identified 107 land takings in 13 states involving 24,000 acres of land. Over half of these were violent land takings, and many others involved what the BERC had termed “legal theft.”<sup>3</sup>

Part of my goal in this paper is to suggest a genealogy—a connection between the burst of interest in reparations in the late civil rights era and the more contemporary reparations-oriented litigation and activism. The BERC’s efforts resulted in the creation of the Emergency Land Fund in 1972. The Fund’s goal was to help black farmers keep their land—through help in estate planning and other legal assistance, paying taxes and other financial assistance as well as research and advocacy. The ELF also advocated a variety of legislative changes; for example, they urged passage of laws compelling the administration of estates so as to avoid the proliferation of heir property and ensuing partition sales. The ELF merged with the Federation of Southern Cooperatives in 1985, and the new group sponsored political mobilizations of black farmers in Washington in the 1990s, and many of their members are part of the class action lawsuit begun in 1998 but still continuing against the United States Department of Agriculture charging systematic racial discrimination in a host of programs, especially lending. (This has resulted in a consent decree in which the government is supposed to make cash payments and cease discriminatory practices. But unfortunately, this apparent victory has been painful and disappointing for many, as the government has tried in various ways to subvert it.)<sup>4</sup>

Despite this connection between Robert Browne’s early efforts and the more recent class action suit by black farmers, I want to suggest some reasons why the push for a southern land bank did not, at that time, develop into a broader reparations movement. As soon as Robert

Browne and the BERC began exploring the idea of a land bank, contradictions emerged between a nationalist imaginary which sees land as the foundation of a nation, and the sober realities of agribusiness and urbanization. The demand that the US cede several southern states to the ‘captive black nation’ has long shaped nationalist reparations advocacy, and helps contextualize the interest by northern black radicals, such as Forman and Browne, in a southern land bank. Browne had in fact authored a widely reprinted essay called “The Case for Black Separatism,” which explained the desire for a Black nation. Furthermore, Malcolm X, a revered figure for this generation, had placed enormous emphasis on land as the basis for black nationalism and black self-determination. One reason that *Only Six Million Acres* is such an interesting document is that it gives us a sense of the encounter between this nationalist stress on landownership and real peoples’ everyday and urgent needs. The report begins with Robert Browne’s laments about the mass migration to the North, the ills of the city, and the decline of the small farmer. Moreover, passage of the Voting Rights act made the idea of a southern black nation a tantalizing and plausible possibility. The 79,000 black owner-operators need to stay on the land, Browne argued because “in the black belt counties many of these land-owning farmers constitute the major ingredient for building a black power base.”<sup>5</sup> Research in the rural south, however, quickly dispelled any dreams of a yeoman nation, as investigators for the land fund witnessed the difficulties small holders faced in making their land profitable enough to maintain. Black farmers suffered greatly from the transition to capital intensive agriculture. Browne quickly concluded “that it has been relatively easy to identify the problems of the rural land owner but it has proved to be extremely difficult to mount an effective campaign to assist him.” The BERC and the ELF threw themselves into helping disproportionately elderly, poor, and uneducated landowners hold on to their land, develop new agricultural strategies and techniques and write wills. While the

BERC did call for a federal attack on rural black poverty and public policies to support black farmers, the emphasis of the Emergency Land Fund and the BERC was on self-reliance and black-controlled solutions. At one stage, a national black fund-raising effort was proposed in which every northern or urban African American would be urged to purchase one acre of land as a symbol of unity with southern rural blacks. Indeed, there were several efforts in cooperative or collective farms as solutions to the crisis of the small farmer. In the eyes of some this even took precedence over individual ownership. As Lew Myers wrote in his report to the BERC about the situation in Mississippi, “the question facing black landowners and farmers is whether there is still a future in individual ownership or has the age of mechanized farming and competitive production forced the need for collective endeavors.” Well, his idea of collective endeavors provides a good place to switch our focus to a Black University.<sup>6</sup>

The quest for a Black University, also part of the Black Manifesto’s call for reparations, attracted considerable support and interest among many black students and intellectuals in the late 1960s. Although some activists did call for federal financial backing of a Black University as part of a reparations remedy, most supporters of the idea did not explicitly invoke reparations, and focused on converting an already existing Negro college into a Black University. Again, the political spirit was self-determination and doing for one’s own, notwithstanding the fact that Howard, one of the hoped for sites of a Black university, was already federally financed. So, for these reasons, most discussions of a Black University did not directly refer to reparations, and instead focused on the need to transform the racial consciousness and life choices of black people and institutions.

The idea for a Black University was first articulated by political scientist Charles Hamilton in a 1967 speech “The place of the Black College in the Human Rights Struggle.” He

called on HBCUs to reject the white middle class character imposed on them by white funders and to redefine their mission to provide greater aid and assistance to black communities. Later published in the *Negro Digest*, Hamilton's article spawned a yearly tradition of devoting an entire issue of the *Negro Digest* (later the *Black World*) to the Black University. According to Hamilton, the mission of the Black University was to develop a distinctive black ethos; to prepare students to go to, or return to, the ghetto to help solve its problems; and to offer a transformed curriculum, one that was relevant to contemporary needs but which also required a course in ancient African civilizations. "I am talking modernization," Hamilton asserted, in a point that many would echo as student activism on black college campuses later swept across the south. "I propose a black college that would *deliberately* strive to inculcate a sense of racial *pride* and *anger* and *concern* in its students." The ideas in his essay illustrate the emerging view that the black intelligentsia was a relatively untapped and potentially radical leadership resource for the Black liberation movement. We need," Hamilton declared, "militant leadership which the church is not providing, unions are not providing and liberal groups are not providing." "I propose a black college," he wrote, "that would be a felt, dominant force in the community in which it exists. A college which would use its accumulated intellectual knowledge and economic resources to bring about desired changes in race relations in the community." It would dispense with "irrelevant PhDs," he wrote, "recruit freedom fighters and graduate freedom fighters," and grant honorary degrees to the likes of Paul Robeson and Amzie Moore. (let's just add Ella Baker...)<sup>7</sup>

But, Hamilton predicted, such a move might provoke a loss of funds. People will ask, "Who will support this?" Again, reflecting the nationalist emphasis on self-determination and independence, Hamilton argued that a Black University should close-down rather than accept

unacceptable conditions on financial support. “Only a man *who is his own man* can be a legitimate man,” he insisted, invoking the gendered rhetoric and imagery typical of the black power movement. On the question of financing, however, several advocates of a Black University did raise the idea of reparations. The Howard literary scholar Stephen Henderson wrote “If we were honest with ourselves, and if national spokesmen for cultural pluralism were serious, then (black college) presidents would have no fear of losing financial and moral support. Indeed, the federal government and private industry ...should have no qualms at all about paying some interest on that great invisible national debt, that vast backlog of salary which they owe us for almost 400 years of economic exploitation.”<sup>8</sup>

Ed Beckham of Wesleyan, and later the Ford Foundation, wrote that “What is so exciting about the Black University is that it affirms the diverse activities of Black people in their struggle toward a coherent ideology and a unified community. It sets clear goals, but makes few restrictions on strategies. It raises the critical questions of Black identity and Black survival, but avoids pre-empting the role which Black people must play in providing answers.” For him, “the Black University exists implicitly wherever and whenever Black people join together for a Black educational purpose.” But he did offer criteria for a Black University. “As process, and as people,” he wrote, “the Black University has only two critical characteristics: freedom from extraneous influence, and committed responsiveness to the educational needs of Black people.” Interestingly, this commitment to autonomy did not prevent Beckham from demanding support from the federal government. “The money ought to come from the federal government,” he wrote, “not in the form of an annual dole, but as a permanent endowment for several comprehensive institutes of Afro-American studies, located regionally and designed as major centers of Black learning.”<sup>9</sup>



The historian Vincent Harding's contribution to the 1969 *Negro Digest* issue on the Black University became a lightning rod. In an article entitled, "New Creation or a Familiar Death: An Open Letter to Black Students in the North" Harding argued that the desegregation of northern white colleges was leading to (or would lead to) the destruction of black colleges. The article sparked an array of critical responses—indeed an issue of the *Massachusetts Review* was devoted to them, featuring essays by William Julius Wilson and Mike Thelwell. While sparking controversy and dissent among black students and scholars, Harding's emphasis on the south as the proper site of black institution building, including educational institutions did have admirers, and reflected the nationalist interest in building the black nation in the south. Interestingly, in light of his intense regionalism, Harding was also an internationalist who promoted a global approach to black studies. He wrote that "a Black University would celebrate the non-western world;" it would break from the cold war influenced area studies and offer instead "a black-oriented internationalism" that emphasized comparative black history and culture in the diaspora. Harding's ideas about globalizing black studies and forging closer relationships with other intellectuals in the African diaspora were incorporated in the Institute of the Black World, an educational advocacy center he helped to establish in Atlanta in 1969. It helped end the McCarthy-era's severing of ties between African American and West Indian intellectuals, and influenced the trend toward Pan-Africanism and later Diaspora theory that would mark the development of African American Studies.<sup>10</sup>

I have focused in this paper on the work of activists who identified as black Nationalists. Even though reparations for slavery and segregation in the United States is widely associated with black nationalist advocacy, and justly so, it is clear in retrospect that the changing posture of the liberal-left civil rights leadership, from A. Philip Randolph's Freedom budget, to the Urban

League's Marshall Plan for Black America, to the SCLC's Poor People's Campaign also played an important role in the rise of a broad reparations consciousness among African Americans. Their willingness to make bold and substantial financial demands on Washington, their insistence that present day inequalities are linked to past abuses and deprivations, as well as their urban orientation contributed to the character of today's reparations movement. Moreover, subsequent political developments have further pushed African American leaders across the political spectrum toward support for reparations, whether it is framed as a form of corrective or distributive justice. The nationalist focus on rural landownership has declined, but it has been replaced by a broader attention to access to capital and credit, with as much focus on homeownership as farm ownership rates. Finally, while there was no single institution that became the black university, the quest for it, as well as the broader movement to transform black colleges, was part of a larger African American reassessment of the school integration movement. This era marked an important turning point when the black middle class moved to defend the continued existence of state-supported historically black colleges, viewing prevailing integration plans as a threat to black jobs, community development, and indeed, to the education of black college students. In sum, while the late 1980s—with reparations to Japanese Americans, the drafting of HR 40 and the formation of N'COBRA—did mark a new phase in the growth of the African American reparations movement, it built on a deep indigenous history.

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<sup>1</sup> Roy L. Brooks, *Atonement and Forgiveness: A New Model for Black Reparations* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

<sup>2</sup> Robert S. Browne, "The Origin, Birth and Adolescence of *The Review of Black Political Economy* and the Black Economic Research Center," *The Review of Black Political Economy* 21:3 (Winter 1993), 9-24.

<sup>3</sup> See Robert S. Browne, ed. *Only Six Million Acres: The Decline of Black Owned Land in the Rural South* (A report sponsored by Clark College of Atlanta, Georgia and funded by the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, New York: Black Economic Research Center, 1973); "Do Black Economists Have a Special Role?" *Business Week* (July 17, 1971), 98-102; Federation of Southern Cooperatives Land Assistance Fund, "What is African American Land Ownership?" (2004) <http://www.federationsoutherncoop.com/aalandown04.htm>

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<sup>4</sup>Federation of Southern Cooperatives Land Assistance Fund, “What is African American Land Ownership?” (2004) <http://www.federationsoutherncoop.com/aalandown04.htm>

<sup>5</sup> Browne, 25.

<sup>6</sup> Browne, Appendix D-9

<sup>7</sup> Charles V. Hamilton, “The Place of the Black College in the Human Rights Struggle,” *Negro Digest* (September 1967.)

<sup>8</sup> Stephen E. Henderson, “The Black University: Toward Its Realization,” *Negro Digest* (March 1968.)

<sup>9</sup> Edgar Beckham, “Problems with ‘Place,’ Personnel, and Practicality” *Negro Digest* (March 1969.)

<sup>10</sup> Vincent Harding, “New Creation or a Familiar Death: An Open Letter to Black Students in the North” *Negro Digest* (March 1969.)