



Recognizing The Legacy of American Slavery and Philanthropy's Role in the Movement for Reparations

Blog piece by Jenna Patel, FCCP Manager of Programs and Communications

As a former AmeriCorps VISTA member serving at a small, under-resourced community action organization located on the east side of Buffalo, NY, the legacy of American slavery is one I came to understand in much greater depth. It's something many of us philanthropic stakeholders read about in scholarly articles and academic reports, but something few of us ever experience being in proximity.

I was headed back home after a long day at my AmeriCorps service site to my apartment on Main Street, the segregating street of Buffalo, the sixth most segregated city in the country. I had ended my day meeting with a 20-year-old young Black boy whose single mother had passed away from gun violence two weeks prior, and who was responsible for navigating the complex Section 8 Housing Choice Voucher system to secure housing for himself as well as his 3-year-old and 7-year-old siblings. I will never forget him. I filled out every lottery application I came across on his behalf, provided daily updates to him of new housing opportunities or resources I came across, I even drove to him to help him fill out an application that had a tight deadline because he had no transportation to get to my service site. But these efforts felt futile in the confinements of a system designed to work against him. That day, I stopped at the closest grocery store, purchased a couple of snacks, and cried in my car in the parking lot. I immediately felt guilty for crying. I thought to myself that this wasn't my pain or my struggle, and that I have no right to cry. The truth is, I am human. And the truth is, to not feel emotion in a situation like this goes against my human nature. I think a big part of the sadness I felt was due to the fact that this is the exact pain and struggle so many people turn a blind eye to, and one many of us will never fully know. This is the pain and struggle so many Black Americans are burdened by. This is the pain and struggle of the legacy of American slavery, created and reinforced by White, Colonial America.

Many of our philanthropic stakeholders continue to strategize around moving money in ways that protect and defend our elections and constitutional rights, in ways that expand our electorate for marginalized communities across the country through a lens of intersectionality, and in ways that build sustainable power and infrastructure at the local, state, and national levels. It is imperative we first recognize that the totality and amalgamation of this work is critical, especially in the face of increasing attacks on the integrity of our elections, rights to organize and protest, and many other foundational aspects of American democracy.



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However, in order to truly actualize a multi-racial, just, and equitable democracy for all, we must grapple with the legacy of American slavery and recognize the philanthropic investments needed to repair persistent structural racism, beyond the days and months commemorating Black history.

American democracy is one that still involves an electoral college, rooted in racism, that continues to inevitably skew power. American democracy is one that employed various mechanisms of disenfranchisement throughout history, from the grandfather clause and poll taxes to current gerrymandering and mass incarceration.¹ It is safe to say that American “democracy” is deeply flawed, if a democracy at all. Beyond the permuting manufactured inequities Black people continue to face in their ability to exercise civic power, we must also recognize the enormous injustice and ongoing impact of a hundred years of Jim Crow laws, egregious lawful segregation enacted through methods such as redlining and racial zoning, the barring of Black people from social security benefits for nearly two decades, and several other mechanisms of structural racism that go unnamed.² It is this everlasting history, and our unwillingness to repair it in a meaningful way, that explains why America is dealing with an ever-widening Black-White wealth gap and an even more segregated country than the era of Jim Crow.³ In fact, it is this same unwillingness to repair our history that makes it that much harder to achieve a multi-racial, just, and equitable democracy for all.

Though we have much work to do as a collective to institute reparations through policy and governance, organizations like [The Bridgespan Group](#) and [Liberation Ventures](#) are making the undeniable case around the importance for philanthropy to truly embody and support the movement for reparations. In their two newly released co-authored reports, [“Philanthropy’s Role in Reparations and Building a Culture of Racial Repair”](#) and [“A Reparations Roadmap for Philanthropy”](#), The Bridgespan Group and Liberation Ventures outline several practical steps for philanthropy to invest in an equitable and just future through the championing of racial repair. As detailed in these reports, there is a looming “tension” to discuss the role of philanthropy in the movement for reparations. In acknowledging this “tension”, let us reflect on co-CEO of Threshold Philanthropy, Morgan Dawson’s profound statement embedded in the latter aforementioned report: “We talk about people having excess but don’t talk about excess because of Native genocide and 400 years of enslaved labor. [Philanthropists] do not have excess by chance. You have things to give away from your garden because you had free seeds, free water, and free labor and that allows you to stockpile money.”

¹ “The Electoral College’s Racist Origins.” Brennan Center for Justice, www.brennancenter.org/our-work/analysis-opinion/electoral-colleges-racist-origins.

² Florant, Aria, et al. “Philanthropy’s Role in Reparations and Building a Culture of Racial Repair.” Bridgespan, www.bridgespan.org/insights/philanthropys-role-in-reparations-and-racial-repair#ftn4.

³ Semuels, Alana. “The U.S. Is Increasingly Diverse, so Why Is Segregation Getting Worse?” *TIME*, 21 June 2021, time.com/6074243/segregation-america-increasing.



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I want us to remember the story I had told at the beginning of this blog piece. I want us to remember it because the story continues. One of the most chilling parts of this continued story is that the grocery store I had stopped at that day is one I visited regularly on my way home from my service site. That grocery store was Tops Friendly Market, the “Tops on Jefferson,” as many community members referred to it as. And this was the very Tops Friendly Market where, a few months after my service term ended, ten Black community members were killed by a white supremacist who premeditated his disturbing racist ideologies and terroristic plans in an 180 page manifesto. This was the 14208 ZIP code in Buffalo, home to the highest percentage of Black residents close enough to where this white supremacist lived in Conklin, New York.⁴ This was the community that was home to the 20-year-old young Black boy who I will never, ever forget.

It is important for me to recognize the privilege I hold. The privilege I had to cry that day. The privilege I had to choose which grocery store I frequented. The privilege I have to tell this story. The privilege I have as an Indian American woman who owes her life in America to the legendary civil rights leaders that fought for the passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, a law that eliminated national origin, race, and ancestry as a basis for immigration, and made discriminating against obtaining visas illegal.⁵

As philanthropic stakeholders and changemakers, it is our duty to be accountable in the privilege, position, and power we hold. It is our duty to commit to a culture of repair. And as we do so, we will find ourselves even closer to actualizing the multi-racial, just, and equitable democracy we so often speak of.

⁴ Connelly, Eileen Aj, and Larry Celona. “Buffalo Shooter Payton Gendron Posted White Supremacist Manifesto.” New York Post, 15 May 2022, nypost.com/2022/05/14/buffalo-shooter-payton-gendron-posted-white-supremacist-manifesto.

⁵ Barber, Rebekah. “How the Civil Rights Movement Opened the Door to Immigrants of Color.” Facing South, www.facingsouth.org/2017/02/how-civil-rights-movement-opened-door-immigrants-color.