

# REPARATIONS CONFERENCE KEYNOTE SPEECH: SHOULD AMERICA PAY?

*Speech by Professor Raymond Winbush\**

I'm going to let you know that I'm not an attorney, I'm a psychologist by trade. And some of you may say, well why did you get involved with reparations if you're a psychologist? About twenty years ago, I heard a woman give a speech by the name of Audrey Moore. She was more popularly called Queen Mother Moore. You know, sometimes you can listen to one sentence in a speech and say "that's it." She said that, "all of the struggles of African Americans in this country since 1690 has been to repair the damage of enslavement and white supremacy." Just that one sentence. That's why I thought about the civil rights movement -- Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, and others -- and I said "that's it." It was the issue of repairing.

So, Africans and Americans have talked about reparations since 1690 in some form or another. We always talk about the modern reparations movement. I always ask the question, well, when did it begin? It began in the 17th century. I discovered one of the earliest documents discussing whether America should pay. In 1782, a woman by the name of Belinda, who was a former slave in the state of Massachusetts, asked her former master right after the revolutionary war for reparations because she had worked for him. She asked for a pension of \$15 a month for the rest of her life, because, as she says in her petition, she made him rich. She worked for the Isaac Royal family, right outside of Boston. Believe it or not, the Massachusetts state legislature granted her a pension. This is the first indication of reparations won by an African in this country in 1782. There's nothing new about the issue of reparations.

About three weeks ago, I got a call from, the International Lawyers Guild. A group of Liberian workers with Firestone in California brought a lawsuit against their former employer, Firestone, for slave-like conditions in Liberia. They are currently living in California, and have fled the regime of Charles Taylor. Charles Taylor was arrested and will be tried for war crimes for preventing workers from suing Firestone, even though he knew of the slave-like conditions in gathering rubber throughout Liberia. This petition describes the conditions of the workers in Liberia, which is horrendous. The children get up every morning at 4:00 and they have to tap the latex rubber out of the trees at the rate of 1,500 trees every day. Their entire families and their whole lives are centered around gathering this rubber. I remember when I was little, my father used to say, you should never buy Firestone tires. I don't know if it was for that reason, but I never did. And now I never will because of what has happened with those workers. The issue of reparations is global. It involves African people and other groups throughout the entire world, not only in this country.

In the past seven months, there have been two women in my life that have been the center of my life. The first woman has the name of Katrina. The storm Katrina that hit the Gulf Coast last

summer is probably the single biggest social damage done to African Americans in this country since enslavement. The Institute for Urban Research has stated that all of the survivors of Katrina are now scattered in 50 states. The aftermath of Katrina should have removed all doubt from the minds of African Americans about how this nation looks at black folk. I'm still amazed that there are some 3,000 children missing from Katrina and no one knows where they are.

The second woman is Oprah Winfrey. I was in Barbados in late August of last year. My cell phone rang and on the other side of the phone the person asked, "May I speak to Dr. Winbush?" And I said, "This is he." The voice said, "This is Oprah Winfrey." I said, "Who is this?" I thought it was one of my students at Morgan playing a joke, but it really was her. And Oprah asked me if I had seen the movie *Crash*. I said that I had. She asked me would I be on the show and you don't say "no" to Oprah, so I agreed to do the show. I became kind of the Dr. Phil of the show when it was first broadcast in September. The criticism I have of *Crash* is that it talked about individual racism. But it does not talk about institutional racism. It's almost like after you leave the film, you're saying "everybody is racist." It really doesn't do justice to the idea of what racism is all about, but go see *Crash*. I know a lot of people have been using it as a springboard for discussion.

I believe three things about racism and White supremacy in the world. First of all, the issue of racism is a global issue. It is not confined to the nation of the United States. It's all over the world. When I taught at Fisk University before coming to Morgan, my assistant there was Naomi Tutu, the daughter of Archbishop Desmond Tutu. I've had many privileges of talking to what we call, La Arch, about the global nature of racism. The second thing about racism is that it is embedded in the very fabric of the United States. It's a part of this nation. In Derek Bell's book, a law professor who resigned at Harvard, and is at NYU now, *Faces at the Bottom of the Well*, Bell says that there will never be a time in this country where there is no racism. I don't think in twenty or thirty years we're going to say "remember when we had racism back in the early 21st century." Racism is a part of who we are as a nation. And a lot of times we're in a state of denial about it. I was very struck by the arguments right after Katrina, because we always have this discussion. Well, they weren't discriminated against or they weren't left on the rooftops because they were black, they were left on the rooftops because they were poor. So it's a class issue rather than a race issue. This country has always been in denial about that very issue. Then the third point that I believe about racism is that it is very difficult to talk honestly about race in the United States. If you lie about racism, you can become a Justice on the United States Supreme Court. You can become National Secu-

rity Advisor and be promoted to Secretary of State. But if you tell the truth about racism, you could be in trouble. Ask Martin Luther King, Fanny Lou Hamer, or Mother Rosa Parks.

I think what reparations does is afford us an opportunity to talk honestly about race in the country. I heard it on the previous panel where someone said that this country has so many myths floating around about racism. We have myths from “Lincoln freed the slaves” to “Sally Hemmings and Thomas Jefferson were in love with each other.” I remember right before I moved to Baltimore, I was packing and saw this CBS mini-series about Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemmings, which they advertised as the greatest love story ever told. Thomas Jefferson did not love Sally Hemmings. He raped Sally Hemmings, systematically, beginning when she was only 15 years old. If he had been alive today, he would be on trial for statutory rape. So we have these myths, these American myths that govern how we look at everything, including the issues of reparations. If you listen to Limbaugh, he will say things like, well I’m not going to pay people any money for reparations, they just want a handout from the government. But, the reality is that it’s not a handout from the government.

I’m going to read something from *Warrior Method*, something that took place in 1918 in this country. How many of you know how many lynchings took place in the United States, roughly from 1865 up until 1994? Tuskegee University kept track of them - an estimated 24,000. I’m always fascinated by the pictures of the lynchings of White people looking at the black people as their bodies were being burned. I want to read this one story, “The lynching of Mary Turner,” reported in *The Crisis Magazine* in 1918. In the article, W.E. Dubois “confirms the inability of black men and black women to protect one other from violence. After her husband had been lynched in Valdosta, Georgia, Turner made the mistake of making public her intention of seeing her husband’s murderers put to death.” Now let me set this up, Mary Turner’s husband had been lynched in Valdosta, Georgia on a Tuesday in October of 1918. The myth is that most black men were lynched because they had whistled at a White woman. In fact most black men were lynched in the South for their land. The boys, in fact, coined a phrase “White happy.” Mary Turner’s husband had been lynched for this reason on a Tuesday. She asked her employer, a White woman, if she could have the next day off from work. Her employer said no, that she had to come to work, clean the house, wash the dishes, take care of the children. I can imagine, as Mary Turner walked to her employer’s house that she was angry, she was hurt, she was grieving, and she made the mistake of telling the White woman that she was going to see that her husband’s murderers were put to death, not knowing that the husband of her boss, was one of the men who lynched her husband. “When word of her defiant promise reached those who had participated in her husband’s murder, they kidnapped her from her house. Although she was eight months pregnant, she was hanged upside down from a tree and bathed with gasoline. After burning her clothes from her body, her stomach was cut open and the infant fell to the ground. It gave out a whimper before a man crushed the baby’s head with

his shoe. When found, Ms. Turner’s body was riddled with hundreds of bullets. The autopsy report said 538. Her murder was casually reported by the press as the result of her ‘unwise remarks concerning her husband’s death.’”

That was the lynching of Mary Turner. Mary Turner wanted justice, she wanted reparations. Reparations have nothing to do with a handout, no more so than if somebody breaks the window out of your car and you go to court and the person who broke the window says you just simply want a handout. No, you just want justice, and Mary Turner wanted the same thing.

I want to read a letter that was written in 1865. It’s in *Should America Pay?* and was written by a man by the name of Jordan Anderson. He had been enslaved on the Anderson plantation. In 1865 his former master Colonel P.H. Anderson wrote Jordan who was living in Dayton, Ohio. It said, “Jordan, would you come back to Big Spring, Tennessee and work on the plantation again?” Jordan was living with his wife and his children, and this is the actual letter that he wrote back to Colonel Anderson. “To my old master Colonel P.H. Anderson, Big Spring, Tennessee. Sir, I got your letter and was glad to find that you had not forgotten Jordan and that you wanted me to come back and live with you again, promising to do better for me than anybody else can. I have often felt uneasy about you.” The black folk called that a signifier. He didn’t say I hate you, you make me sick, you must be crazy to think I’m coming back to Tennessee. He said I have often felt uneasy about you. “I thought the Yankees would have hung you long before this for harboring Rebs they found at your house. I want to know particularly what the good chance is you propose to give me. I am doing tolerably well here. I get \$25 a month with vittles and clothing. I have a comfortable home for Mandy. The folks here call her Mrs. Anderson.” Now he’s signifying again because he knew that his former slave master would not call his wife Mrs. Anderson. “And the children Millie, Jane, and Gruden go to school and are learning well. We are kindly treated here in Dayton. As to my freedom, which you can say I can have, there is nothing to be gained on that score, as I got my free papers in 1864 from the Provost Marshal General of the Department of Nashville,” and in doing the research, I found out that was on the campus of Fisk University where I used to teach, which you know was founded in 1866 as a haven for the formerly enslaved Africans in this country. “Mandy says she would be afraid to go back without some proof that you were disposed to treat us justly and kindly.” Black folk are always talking about justice, always talking about justice. “And we have concluded to test your sincerity by asking you to send us our wages for the time we served you. This will make us forget and forgive old scores, and rely on your justice and friendship in the future. I served you faithfully for 32 years and Mandy, 20 years. And \$25.00 a month for me and \$2.00 a week for Mandy, our earnings would amount to \$11,680.” That’s reparations. Notice the stages of reparations that John Van Dyke, a legal scholar, talks about it. First, apology, tell us that you’re going to pay us, and then accountability. A lot of times I’m disturbed in the reparations struggle when people say, “Well this ain’t about money.” It is about money, and it’s about

scholarships, and it's about justice. "Add to this the interest for the time our wages have been kept back and deduct what you paid for our clothes and three doctors visits to me and pulling a tooth for Mandy, and the balance will show what we are in justice, entitled to." He's used the word justice three times before the letter is even over. "Please send the money by Adams Express. In care of V. Winters Esquire, Dayton Ohio. If you fail to pay us for our faithful labors in the past, we can have little faith in your promises in the future." Now see, this is one of the reasons why I think there's always been this tension between black folk in this country, because we know that this country has been a fickle lover to us at so many levels. "We trust the good maker has opened your eyes to the wrongs which you and your fathers have done to me and my fathers in making us toil for you for generations without recompense. Surely there will be a day of reckoning for those who defraud the labor of his hired," quoted from the Bible. "In answering this letter, please state if there will be any safety for my Millie and Jane who are now grown up and both good looking girls." The first sexual encounter of most White males on the plantation was with black women. "You know how it was for poor Matilda and Catherine. I would rather stay here and starve and die, if it come to that, than have my girls brought to shame by the violence and wickedness of their young masters. You will also please state reparations if there has been any schools opened for the colored children in your neighbor-

hood." Now you know good and well that there were no schools for black children in Big Springs, Tennessee in 1865, but he asked, "The great desire of my life now is to give my children an education and have them form virtuous habits. Say howdy to George Carter and thank him for taking the pistol from you when you were shooting at me. From your old servant, Jordan Anderson."

What was interesting about that letter, when I was doing research on *Should America Pay?* I actually contacted the descendants of Colonel Anderson, I couldn't find Jordan's descendants, but I did find some of them were still living in Big Springs, Tennessee. What's amazing is that the current living relatives of Colonel Anderson are still angry at Jordan for not coming back or to say that he should have been faithful and come back to the plantation to help out because he knew that the plantation was in such disrepair because of the Civil War.

But the point I'm making is this that all of these wounds in South Hampton County, in Big Springs, Tennessee, and unfortunately New Orleans are still open. We have not done the repair in this country that is necessary to heal about racism. As I grow older, I am very cynical about the fact of whether this country will ever resolve its issues of racism, because in this country, people do not want to speak the truth about it. They're in a state of denial about it, I think in order for reparations to begin we must all engage in the necessary dialogue.



**"Until lions have historians,  
hunters will be heroes."**

**-Kenyan Proverb**

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In 1995, Dr. Winbush left Vanderbilt to be named a Benjamin Hooks Professor of Social Justice at Fisk University and Director of Fisk University's Race Relations Institute. In 1996, as part of his work as a consultant and web site curator of the Encyclopaedia Africana Project, Dr. Winbush traveled to Ghana

for a research fellowship where he studied the last two years of Du Bois' life in Accra, Ghana, and West Africa. Upon his return to Fisk University in 1997, Dr. Winbush received a \$2.6 million grant from the Kellogg Foundation to establish a "National Dialogue on Race" and promote regional conversations on about race relations. Dr. Winbush organized and engaged in provocative dialogues focused on race relations with social and political figureheads such as Dr. John Hope Franklin, Chuck D, Max Roach, U.S. Rep. John Conyers, Erykah Badu, and Goodie Mob. In 2001, Dr. Winbush authored and published *The Warrior Method: A Program for Rearing Healthy Black Boys*, and in 2003, Dr. Winbush edited and published *Should America Pay? – The Raging Debate on Reparations*.

Dr. Winbush currently serves as the Director of the Institute for Urban Research at Morgan State University where his research interests include infusing African-American studies into school curricula, African-American adolescent development, Black male and female relationships, and the influence of hip-hop on contemporary American culture. He is also working on a special project called the Institute for Reparations Information Strategies and Education with the mission of educating the American public on the issues of reparations. Dr. Winbush sits on the executive board of the National Council for Black Studies (NCBS) and is the former president of the Southern Region of the Association of Black Cultures Center. Radio and television guest appearances include the CBS Morning Show and Black Entertainment Television (BET).