

Atonement for Racial Capitalism the Pathway to a Socially Just San Francisco

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When I look back at my formative years growing up in San Francisco, California in the nineties I have a mix of emotions. I remember feeling celebrated by my diverse collective of early education instructors for being precocious and charismatic. I also remember the traumatic experience at 11 years old of being egged and called a racial slur by a man driving by. This took place while walking with my best friend to her house in the Marina District. The Marina District of San Francisco even in the present day is a predominantly White and a more affluent area of San Francisco. Marina Middle School was somehow different — it was a virtual melting pot of racially diverse children from all over the city. Students from the Mission, Chinatown, North beach and the Fillmore Districts all attended school with me, and we all formed a real connection that somehow transcended the realities we faced outside of school — realities based on our economic and ethnic backgrounds. The more common, historical and present-day experience of Black people making their way through San Francisco is liken to the experience that I endured of being egged by that man. The history of Black communities in San Francisco is rife with systematic limitation of access to economic opportunities and spaces for belonging. If we are to address the historic harms that limit Black San Franciscans thriving, we have to confront the issue of reparations. Economic reparations are the most viable solution to the harm caused by displacement of Black communities of San Francisco. It is the

true marker of San Francisco being a socially just city.

According to *The Unfinished Agenda: The Economic Status of African Americans in San Francisco* a study by Polaris Research and Development (PRD), Black people have been part of the social, political and economic fabric of San Francisco as early as the Gold Rush. The population of Black people in San Francisco was relatively small in the early 1900's but from 1940-1950 the city saw a population increase of 798 percent (PRD 3). The population of Black people in San Francisco reached an all-time high by 1970 — Black people represented 13.4 percent of the population (PRD 3). When we look at the factors that enticed Black people primarily from the South to San Francisco it was twofold. In the early 1900s it was the lack of discrimination in housing and integration across the city particularly with Japanese communities (PRD 4). When World War II began a more visible Black community in San Francisco formed because of recruitment to work in the war industry. The San Francisco Bay Area during this time was a center for shipbuilding and there was the development of numerous military facilities such as the Oakland Army Base, the Naval Supply Center, the Alameda Naval Air Station, Treasure Island, Travis Air Force Base, and Hunters Point Shipyard (PRD 4). Black migrants from the South were enticed to San Francisco to build the economy that we see today. There are stories that Kaiser advertised for workers nationwide and even sent trains through the southwest and south to recruit

workers for its shipyards. Recruiters called farmers and sharecroppers from the fields to pack up and to move to California with the promise of “good jobs, more cash they’d ever seen, and decent places to live” (PRD 4). By the 1950s the Hunters Point and specifically the Fillmore became what people refer to as the “Harlem of the West” with a “rich street life, strong community institutions and churches, restaurants serving Black regional foods, and a range of nightclubs and cabarets that became well known for jazz and blues and other forms of African American music” (PRD 5). The Black community from the mid 1940s through the mid 1960s were considered prosperous times for the Black community but that changed with the end of the war and the closure of the shipyards. The rate of unemployment in the Black community grew by 30 percent and housing discrimination grew with the return of non-Black soldiers and sailors. This all set the stage for Black communities “which had been vibrant with hope and economic vitality 15 to 20 years before” to transition to blighted communities setting the stage for urban renewal (PRD 6).

Urban renewal in San Francisco was a form of systemic racism that remains in place today with new methods and the end goal remains the same. “The practice of defining low-income, Black neighborhoods as uninhabitable have always been founded on the structure of meaning constituted by the production of classed racial hierarchy and white supremacy” (Addie and Fraser 1376). As we enter the late 60's in San Francisco, Black people

that were enticed from the South to San Francisco to work in war-time industry manufacturing jobs were now being left behind with the transition to the new economy where government and service jobs prevailed. These jobs required different, higher-level skills and competition for these jobs was fierce (PRD 9). This economic transformation in San Francisco led to the decrease of San Francisco Black population competitiveness and size (PRD 9). Compounding disenfranchisement from the workforce, urban removal which has been described as “Negro removal” displaced thousands of Black residents particularly in the Western Addition. When we observe what took place in the Western Addition of San Francisco it recalls the reality that “structural white supremacy continues to reign, despite a more inclusive definition of citizenship, and state policies continue to be implicated” (Brown and Barganier 109).

San Francisco’s racist land use policies in the form of urban renewal systematically limited the upward mobility of Black communities throughout the City. San Francisco has been considered widely as a “progressive” city that has policies that reflect the diversity of our residents to thrive. When we analyze the history of what happened to the Black community from being lured with the promise of more income than they had ever seen during the war to being left out of the mainstream economy and having their culture, business and domiciles stripped away — the imperative for economic reparations emerges. There are differences of opinion about the forces that created the conditions for Black San Franciscans. Capitalism is not color blind. When you examine the roots of the destabilization of the Black community, racial capitalism is at the core of the issue. “Analyzing racial capitalism requires that

we shift our lens to consider how both ideology and history inform and are shaped by material processes — just because a situation is not popularly recognized as a racial one does not mean that it is not” (Pulido 13). I have heard numerous stories whether through the news or anecdotally of people who have lived in a particular urban city for generations who hold rich and deep experiences in their neighborhood being disregarded and attacked when newcomers move into the area. Many will describe times past where they felt very connected to all their neighbors and could play music on the sidewalks, host block parties, sit on their stoops and felt responsible for each other’s families. This change of newcomers coming in and conflicts happening is too often trivialized as an expected and even accepted result of changing economics most characterized as “gentrification.” The physical stress and psychic terror that comes along with no longer being valued in your own community is too much to bear. For example, longtime residents having the police called on them for activities they have done in the neighborhood for generations. Being excluded from opportunities for relaxation and recreation because of privatization. People who just moved to the neighborhood don’t believe longtime residents deserve to belong there anymore. When newcomers see these residents, they may scuttle by with suspicion not even trying to look them in the eyes. This brings into question where can Black people particularly poor Black people of color feel valued in our changing cities? Where is a safe space to call their own in the face of ever-changing economics?

Economic reparations are not new — for this to happen in San Francisco we need political will. As discussed in “Jewish and Japanese American Reparations: Political Lessons for the Africana

Community.” reparations were made to the Japanese and Jewish community for the structural harms they experienced. Why has this not happened for Black Americans? “Men are used to seeing Negroes in inferior positions; when therefore, by any chance a Negro gets in a better position, most men immediately conclude he is not fitted for it, even before he has a chance to show his fitness” (Dubois 122). The rallying cry that “Black Lives Matter” can be seen and heard all around us. The realization that America since its inception has perpetrated atrocities and systematically excluded Black people from realizing their full potential in this country. There are some people who believe that things have gotten better for the Black community. That the government has done a good job implementing policies that uplift Black people and heal past harms. One has to ask is this true? Where can we see evidence of real investment in the Black community? The juxtaposition that I felt throughout my early years reflects to me the contradictions that exist for Black people in urban centers all over the United States. Being Black and especially if you are poor and Black there are fleeting moments of feeling seen and celebrated but it is too often coupled with a pervasive lack of opportunity, the devaluing of our bodies, our families, our right to participate in our democracy, a lack of justice, a safety net and at any point our lives being taken through some form of state violence and systemic racism.

Economic reparations are the most viable solution to the harm caused by displacement of Black communities of San Francisco. It is the true marker of San Francisco being a socially just city. To be able to compete in the ever-changing landscape of San Francisco’s economics the Black community needs access to an equitable solution and real opportunity to compete and to

participate. As stated in *SF Capital of the 21st Century*.” *Hollow City: The Siege of San Francisco and the Crisis of American Urbanism*, “gentrification is just the fin above water. Below is the rest of the shark: a new American economy in which most of us will be poorer, a few will be far richer, and everything will be faster, more homogenous and more controlled or controllable” (Solnit and Schwartzberg 13-14). We need our leaders to recognize the harms of the past and to create mechanisms to address those harms to communities that have been marginalized and displaced and create a reparations fund for Black San Franciscans. We know that the Bay Area has the grown to be one of the wealthiest areas of our nation. That wealth despite the systemic harm that has been done to the Black community economically over the past 100 years has not trickled down to the Black community of San Francisco. “While people of color and immigrants earn more on average in the Bay Area than other cities and earn more at every level of education and in every industry, there is an unrelenting inequality based on gender and race” (Walker 88). The time is now to move forward this righteous economic agenda for the Black community and for San Francisco to be truly a socially just city. We have taken steps forward by establishing a Reparations Task Force that is looking at how San Francisco can pay the debt it owes the Black community. I believe that the only way forward is an economic imperative and to look at all avenues for the Black community to equally participate in a San Francisco that has become increasingly unaffordable for most residents.

“SF needs to establish a reparations fund, marches and protests cannot by themselves alter the living conditions of blacks in San Francisco that are the

result of decades of systemic racism. What is required to repair this historic injustice is the kind of urgent, significant action that John Lewis fought for during his career. It can and should mark the start of making long-overdue reparations to the black community, by both the private and public sectors in San Francisco.”

- Rev. Dr. Amos C. Bro

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