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BACKGROUNDER

The Scholars Behind the Quest for Reparations

By Marc Parry

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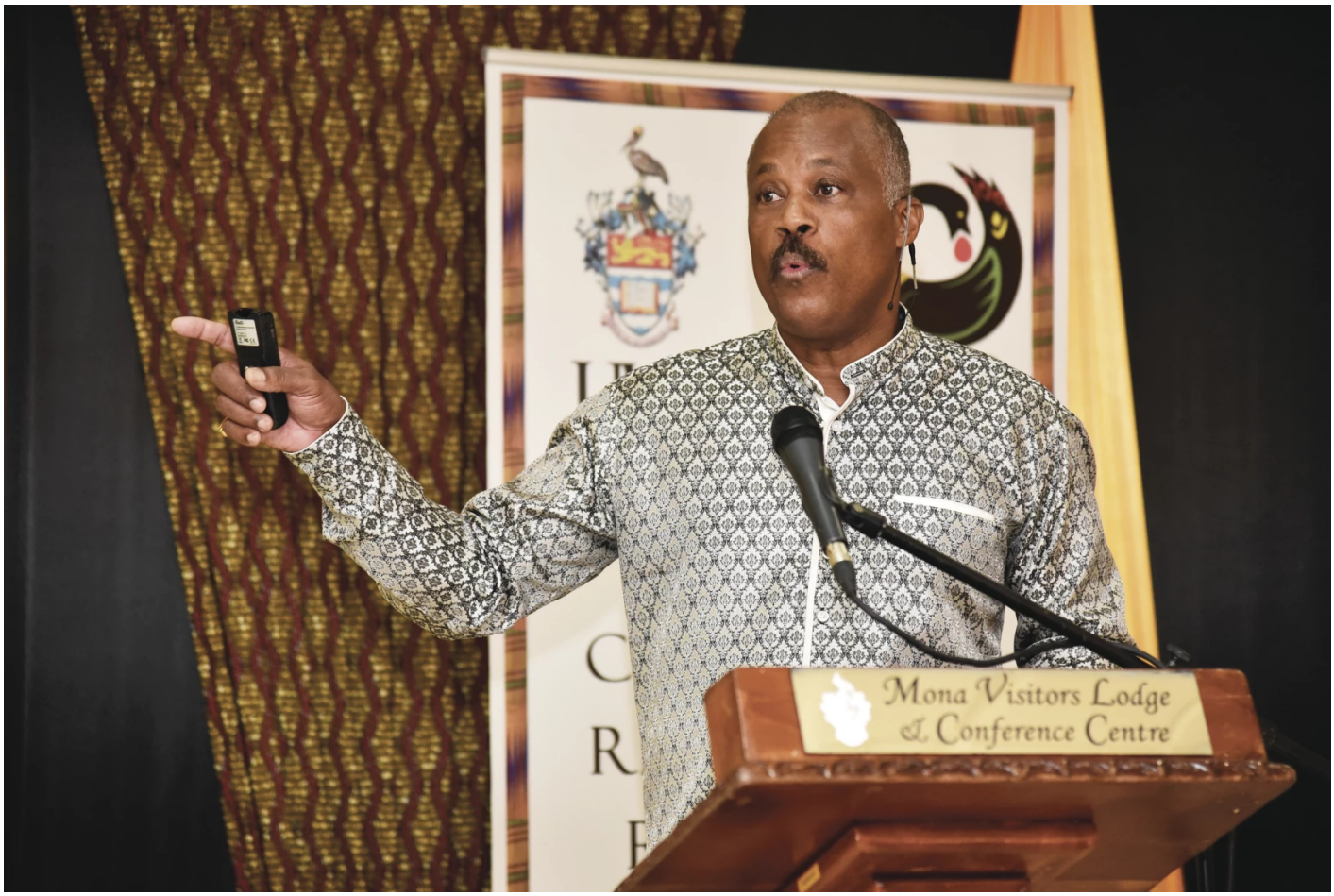


DONALD DE LA HAYE

Hilary Beckles, vice chancellor of the U. of the West Indies

Hilary Beckles wants his scholarship to sting. His audience: students and scholars who have assembled here at the University of the West Indies this morning to listen to the historian/administrator/diplomat lecture at a symposium on reparations for slavery. If his talk succeeds, they'll leave this gilded ballroom outraged — and inspired to join his university's fight.

Mr. Beckles has emerged as the chief spokesman of a global movement for racial justice. In 2013, heads of state from the 15-nation Caribbean Community, a regional group made up mostly of former British colonies, united to seek reparations for slavery and native genocide from Britain and other European powers. Their collective push — a mix of symbolic demands, like an apology, and financial ones, like debt forgiveness — placed the power of governments, not just the activism of individuals, behind the centuries-old struggle for reparations. To head the commission carrying

out that work, the politicians appointed Mr. Beckles, a Barbados-born, British-educated historian of slavery who leads the University of the West Indies.

Mr. Beckles's speech at the reparations symposium boils down to a basic argument: The British got rich by exploiting the Africans they imported to work as slaves on Caribbean sugar plantations. The descendants of those laborers are impoverished today because of structural inequalities inherited from slavery. And British politicians have consistently brushed aside calls to remedy this mess. Their anti-reparations policy began when the slaves were emancipated, in the 1830s, continued when the colonies emerged as independent nations, in the 1960s and '70s, and endures to this day.

"The persistence of the arrogance and the hatred: And I want you to feel that those postures are embedded in an underlying philosophy that says, 'Who are you? What are you? We do not apologize to lesser people,' " Mr. Beckles says.

By analogy, he says, think about when you want to cook some curry goat, and you ask a butcher to kill your animal. "You don't apologize to the goat," he says. "There is a perception, then, that we are the children of chattel. … We were property. We had no humanity. We were defined in the law for 400 years as real estate. So we are the descendants of property. You do not apologize to your property."

Mr. Beckles's response? Ratchet up the pressure. Today's symposium is part of a series of events held to mark a milestone in the movement: the establishment of an academic center, based at the University of the West Indies, devoted to reparations research. The center will supply arguments to politicians, narratives to the media, and a publishing platform to scholars. A think tank for the cause.

Whether or not that cause succeeds — and the obstacles are immense — this scene in Jamaica may be a harbinger of what's to come in the United States, where the reparations movement is also newly energized. Slavery scholarship has already

contributed to a national reckoning with America's original sin on campuses, in cities, and at corporations.

What Mr. Beckles is doing represents the next step. It's the marshaling of scholarship for a political aim: payback.

Slavery scholars, like the system they study, are a trans-Atlantic network. To see how new research is spurring the work of reparations advocates like Mr. Beckles, one of the best places to look is a campus 5,000 miles from here, University College London.

It was a researcher there, an investment banker turned historian named Nick Draper, who identified a slavery archive so significant that he and his colleagues have spent more than a decade picking it apart and sharing it with the world. Their goal is a form of narrative reparations: to repair British history by reinscribing the legacy of slavery into the consciousness of a country that prefers to remember its leading role in abolitionism.

When Americans think of slavery, they tend to picture cotton fields in antebellum Mississippi. But long before that time, European colonists had transformed Caribbean islands into capitalist machines producing slave-grown sugar for an international market. Between 1713 and 1822, the British West Indies carried on more British trade than all of North America, according to the historian David Brion Davis. The Caribbean, he writes, "became the true economic center of the New World."

Britain abolished its slave trade in 1807. But it wasn't until the 1830s that the 760,000 enslaved people in its colonies, most of them living in the Caribbean, were liberated. Emancipation happened through a deal negotiated among slave owners, abolitionists, and the British government. Under this 1833 settlement, the government agreed to pay 20 million pounds to about 45,000 slave owners around the world as compensation for the loss of their "property." The deal also compelled the previously

enslaved people to pay for their liberty with four to six years of additional free labor for their former masters. The ex-slaves themselves got nothing.

“It was beyond most people’s intellectual and moral compass to think about compensating the enslaved people,” Mr. Draper says.

Scholars debate how best to translate the payouts into modern terms. One way to think about it: The 20 million pounds amounted to about 6 percent of Britain’s gross national income in 1831, Mr. Draper says. The same percentage of Britain’s contemporary economy would equate to 76 billion pounds, or about $100 billion.

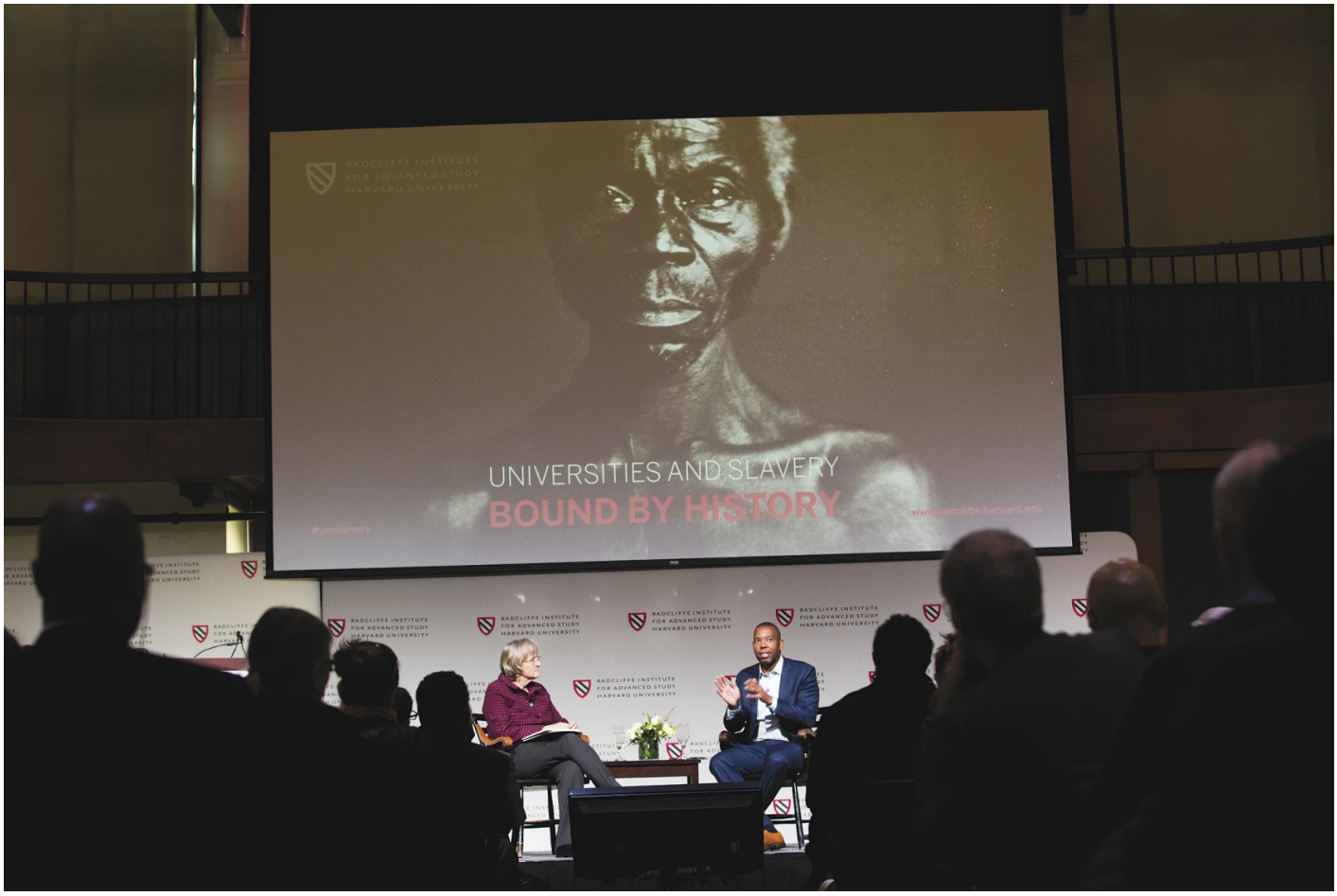
Here’s why this resonates so forcefully for reparations activists. To obtain their shares of the 20 million pounds, slave owners filed claim forms. The records of that compensation process, Mr. Draper discovered, were sitting in Britain’s National Archives. Thanks to a database built by Mr. Draper and his colleagues, the documents are now easily searchable online: who got paid, how much, where.

The records show, for example, that an ancestor of David Cameron, Britain’s former prime minister, received some of the money. So did the families of the authors Graham Greene and George Orwell.

Mr. Draper isn’t trying to make targets of contemporary descendants. He uses the records as a tool for investigating larger questions about how much of a role slave money played in the formation of modern Britain. He calculates that 15 to 20 percent of the richest Britains who died in the 19th century owed their wealth to slavery. He and his colleagues have compiled hundreds of case studies of what happened to that money — the paintings it bought, the buildings it built, the businesses it supported.

Mr. Draper, director of the Centre for the Study of the Legacies of British Slave-ownership, wants to make it difficult for people to write British history without taking that slave entanglement into account.

Mr. Beckles has a different agenda. He calls the 1830s abolition settlement, with its failure to compensate the former slaves, "the greatest crime of all committed by the British state against the African people." And he wants the money back.



STEPHANIE MITCHELL, HARVARD U.

The author Ta-Nehisi Coates with Drew Faust, president of Harvard U.

Earlier this year, Mr. Beckles sat down to discuss that reparations campaign in a conference room at Harvard University's Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study. He was in town to participate in a symposium on universities and slavery. As it happened, the speaker scheduled to keynote that event was the closest U.S. analogue to a Beckles-like figure: Ta-Nehisi Coates.

Mr. Coates, 42, emerged as one of America's most famous writers on race after "The Case for Reparations," his 16,000-word plea for "an airing of family secrets, a settling with old ghosts," was published in *The Atlantic* three years ago. His essay reframed

U.S. history as a centuries-long process of extracting wealth from black people to benefit others, a systemic plunder that persisted long after slavery ended. It took the reparations conversation into the mainstream of American life.

Mr. Beckles, 62, appraises the Coates phenomenon with a mixture of admiration and gentle condescension. The two have shared a stage; Mr. Beckles says he gave Mr. Coates a copy of his own book about reparations, *Britain's Black Debt* (University of the West Indies Press, 2013). "I really felt that he was a young man who ought to be encouraged," Mr. Beckles says. "I thought it would be very useful for him to understand how to do the historical research, and how to provide detailed scholarly analysis of this subject."

Mr. Beckles's own reparations campaign originated with a phone call. The United Nations was preparing to convene its first global conference on race and racism. The 2001 summit, in South Africa, would be an opportunity to reckon with slavery and colonialism on the world stage. Mia Mottley, education minister of Barbados at the time, was calling to ask if he would lead their country's delegation.

Mr. Beckles headed to South Africa shaped by his personal experience with slavery's legacy. Born in 1955, he was raised in a plantation village where residents labored for sugar planters "who owned everything of worth around us," he has written. Today, Barbados promotes its golden-sand beaches as "paradise on earth." Historically, though, this easternmost Caribbean country was the first New World society in which Africans became a majority of the population as the entire economy revolved around large-scale enslavement.

He descends from slaves who worked on a plantation owned by ancestors of Benedict Cumberbatch, the British actor who played a Louisiana planter in the movie *12 Years a Slave*, according to a report in *The Guardian*. When Mr. Beckles was growing up, his great-grandmother spoke openly about their slave ancestry. "She would say that if her

enslaved grandparents were to return, they would fit right in," Mr. Beckles writes. "Little had changed in over 150 years."

Mr. Beckles went to the U.N. summit to hold the former colonial powers accountable for that past. What he saw at the meeting disgusted him. The United States objected to any talk of reparations, almost scuttling the conference. European diplomats, too, dodged responsibility. Yes, they maintained, colonial slavery should have been a crime. But it was legal at the time.

Mr. Beckles responded with an international campaign of lectures, and, eventually, a book, *Britain's Black Debt*, which lays out the Caribbean case for reparations. It springs from the argument that the mass enslavement of Africans was criminal when it happened, and Britons knew it. They simply justified it in the interest of nation-building.

The book synthesizes generations of scholarship to sketch the nature of that crime: The role of the British state in nurturing, regulating, and profiting from the slave trade. The links between colonial sugar revenue and Britain's ascent as the first industrialized nation. The ideological cover provided by the Church of England.

And, crucially, the 20-million-pound payout when it all came crashing down. That compensation for slave owners "should have been paid to the enslaved," says Mr. Beckles, who credits Mr. Draper's research with shaping much of his own book. "We have a right to that. We are going to demand it."

His reasoning: Britain pulled out of the Caribbean without a plan to clean up the rubble left behind from centuries of slavery and colonialism. When Jamaica, for example, became independent, in 1962, 80 percent of its citizens were illiterate, Mr. Beckles says. Caribbean countries had to incur significant debts to modernize.

Forgiveness of those debts is key to a 10-point reparations platform that Caribbean leaders backed in 2014. The fact that politicians in the region now frame their economic agendas partly within the narrative of reparations owes much to the influence of Mr. Beckles.

"He has the ears of the grassroots people in the region," says Verene A. Shepherd, a Jamaican historian and radio host who directs the Centre for Reparation Research at Mr. Beckles's university. "People listen to him. They believe in him."

People in the United States, too, are listening. When Mr. Beckles gave his "curry goat" speech at the recent reparations symposium in Jamaica, the audience included a contingent of visiting American-based historians, legal scholars, and political scientists. Their presence speaks to how the Caribbean momentum has galvanized the U.S. reparations movement — a cause that is also rooted in scholarship, and, increasingly, is taking aim at universities.

The U.S. discussion has a long lineage. How long it is hits home if you visit the National Museum of African American History and Culture, in Washington, where you can read the elaborately scripted case file of an ex-slave, Belinda Royall, who successfully petitioned the Massachusetts legislature for reparations — in 1783.

Most such appeals have not been victorious. "Blacks have never received any group compensation for the crime of slavery imposed upon them by the people and government of the United States," according to Robert Westley, a legal scholar at Tulane University. The 1990s saw a flurry of failed efforts to change that. After the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, which shifted public attention to national security, reparations talk faded.

It tends to resurface amid racial unrest. American race relations are "pretty bad right now," Mr. Westley says in an interview at the Jamaica event, "and I think this is the

reason why there's a perception, at least, that the issue has come back to the forefront."

More than a perception, if you listen to Ron Daniels, a political scientist at the City University of New York's York College. Mr. Daniels, 75, is a civil-rights activist who has spent decades agitating for reparations. In a session after Mr. Westley's, he rises to offer a rundown of how the American scene has evolved. His bottom line: Discussion of reparations in the United States "has never been hotter in my lifetime."

The Caribbean push "sent a positive shock wave throughout the world, including the United States," he says. It led Mr. Daniels and other U.S. activists, several of them scholars based at universities, to establish the National African American Reparations Commission in 2015, with its own 10-point program. Black Lives Matter and related groups have also grafted a reparations agenda onto their broader racial-justice platforms.

And, as Mr. Daniels notes, history departments at U.S. universities are brimming with new scholarship focused on the role that slavery played in the development of American capitalism. Works in this genre have parallels to the new British research that helped Mr. Beckles make his reparations case. For example, Cornell University's Edward E. Baptist, author of *The Half Has Never Been Told* (Basic Books, 2014), argues that the expansion of slavery in the 19th century transformed the United States from a "postcolonial disaster" to a "geopolitical and economic superpower."

"To me, this whole debate is, on one level or another, about reparations," Mr. Baptist, whose work has generated vocal pushback from some economists, says in an email to *The Chronicle*. "It is about who profited from slavery, and where white wealth comes from, and what that implies for the future of our society. The history matters to present-day discussions of inequality."

Mr. Coates's *Atlantic* essay introduced a new generation to that history. One contribution of his argument is that it did not hinge on slavery. It focused on housing discrimination: how, from the 1930s to the 1960s, "black people across the country were largely cut out of the legitimate home-mortgage market through means both legal and extralegal." Similarly, another prominent public intellectual, the legal scholar Michelle Alexander, now demands reparations for the effects of the war on drugs.

William A. Darity Jr., an economist at Duke University, is co-writing a book that will move the discussion beyond *why* reparations and into the realm of *how*. His research has examined issues like the potential structure of a reparations program (for example, lump-sum payments to individual African-Americans) and who might be eligible for it (people who could demonstrate that they had at least one ancestor who was enslaved in the United States).

Mr. Darity's work mirrors developments in Congress. Rep. John Conyers, a Michigan Democrat, has long promoted legislation that would establish a commission to study slavery, its legacy, and reparations. This year he introduced a revised version of that bill, which would both study reparations and propose plans to implement them.

American college leaders will very likely be forced to confront this growing activism and scholarship. The 10-point plan put forward by Mr. Daniels's reparations commission pledges "to relentlessly pursue local and state governments and private institutions directly engaged with or complicit in these crimes."

Lately, many universities have established commissions to investigate their historical connections to slavery. These have produced stacks of official reports. These have generally not yielded much beyond symbolic steps to make amends, like memorials, says the Howard University historian Ana Lucia Araujo, author of a new book, *Reparations for Slavery and the Slave Trade: A Transnational and Comparative History* (Bloomsbury).

Activists want more. The issue will be a focus of their agenda at a forthcoming forum on reparations in New Orleans (keynote speaker: Hilary Beckles).

"Every single one of these universities needs to make reparations," Mr. Coates has said. "I don't know how you conduct research that shows that your very existence is rooted in a great crime … and you walk away."

But is all of this just talk?

The Caribbean demands have generated few results to date. European governments have responded tepidly. In 2015, David Cameron traveled to Jamaica, the first British prime minister to make an official visit in 14 years. Addressing slavery in a speech to Jamaica's Parliament, he told Jamaicans to "move on."

Some Jamaicans, too, raise doubts about the reparations agenda. *The Jamaica Observer*, a newspaper in Kingston, the capital, greeted the opening of the research center at the University of the West Indies with a biting editorial that asked "whether all this is not just a grand waste of time and money that can scarcely be afforded by cash-strapped Caribbean countries." A more practical approach, the newspaper suggested, would be to focus on strengthening existing international programs that the former slave-owning countries of Europe already use to channel aid to the Caribbean.

Even one scholar sympathetic to the Caribbean cause points to some holes in the reparations study at its heart. *Britain's Black Debt* neglects important questions raised by skeptics, says a review of the book by Alfred L. Brophy, a law professor at the University of Alabama. These include "why the current generation should pay for the crimes of the past" and "how much current poverty in the Caribbean is related to the legacy of slavery and subsequent racial injustice."

The new reparations-research center at the University of the West Indies will no doubt try to plug some of those gaps.

But, as a historian, Mr. Beckles also holds a long view. It took all of the 19th century to get rid of slavery, he notes. It took all of the 20th century to gain civil and human rights for the slaves' descendants. And maybe it will take all of the 21st century to prevail in the final stage of that fight, winning reparations.

"The thing about historical struggles is that it always appears daunting," he says. "And then, suddenly, everything changes."

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