A Conversation about Reparations in America with Professor Amilcar Shabazz

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Introduction

A champion of social justice and a distinguished scholar-activist, Amilcar Shabazz has dedicated his life and career to the discipline of Black Studies and community engagement. As a native of Beaumont, Texas, he completed his bachelor's degree in economics at the University of Texas-Austin (1982) before obtaining his master's degree in history from Lamar University (1990) and PhD in history from the University of Houston (1996). Shabazz has taught at multiple higher education institutions such as the University of Alabama, Oklahoma State University, and the University of Oklahoma. He currently serves as a full professor of history and Africana Studies in the W.E.B. Du Bois Department of Afro-American Studies at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst.

Over the course of his career, Shabazz has accumulated an extensive publication record. He is the author of *Advancing Democracy: African Americans and the Struggle for Access and Equity in Higher Education in Texas* (2004). He is co-editor of *The Forty Acres Documents: What Did the United States Really Promise the People Freed from Slavery?* (1994) and *Women and Others: Perspectives on Gender, Race, and Empire* (2007). His journal articles and short essays appear in the *Journal of African American History*, *The Houston Review*, *The Human Tradition in Texas*, *ArtLies: Texas Art Journal*, and the *Texas Gulf Historical and Biographical Record*. In addition to his written scholarship, Shabazz's leadership is evident in multiple academic and civic organizations. He is a past president of the National Council for Black Studies as well as a founding member of the New African People's Organization, the National Coalition of Blacks for Reparations in America, and the African Heritage Reparations Assembly of Amherst, Massachusetts. His advocacy surrounding reparations has been covered by major media outlets such as the *Boston Globe*, *Washington Post* and *NBC*

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News. In the following interview, Dr. Shabazz discusses the roots of his activism, his journey to professorship, the state of Black Studies in the academy, and the current push for reparations. This conversation took place at the New Africa House on the campus of the University of Massachusetts-Amherst.

Smith: First, thank you for setting aside time for this interview, Prof. Shabazz. I look forward to learning more about your scholarship and activism today. Before we go into that, can you speak about your upbringing as a youth? Are there any events or moments during your childhood that sparked your interest in activism and Black Studies?

Shabazz: Thank you. I'm glad to be a part of this interview, brother Caleb. My youth is located in a place called the Golden Triangle of Southeast Texas. The triangle included Beaumont, which was my hometown, Port Arthur, and Orange. That was an oil petrochemical, refining region. A lot of jobs started pouring in during the early 1900s. In fact, my family came from Louisiana because of the jobs that were opening up at the oil refineries. I was born in 1960 and grew up during the struggle to end racial domination. But where I was in Texas, there was not a lot of the mass movement. There were some things at a more elite middle-class level. However, my mother and father were part of breaking the color line at the state university there in Beaumont called Lamar State College of Technology in 1956. I had activism going on in my family but as far as mass movement or mass organizing, not so much.

There is another thing that I would like to add, Caleb. We see the FEPC or Fair Employment Practice Commission created during the World War II era. This was done to create equal access to jobs that were emerging due to wartime production. In Beaumont, not only was there the oil refining, but then there were also these large shipyards that played a role in the military effort. A lot of whites began coming in from all over east Texas. These were backwards white people though. They had the idea that Black people should be back in slavery. You know, that type of mentality. As they came in, they began to see generations of Black people that had started to gain some wealth from the early 1900s to 1943 or so by having jobs in the oil industry.

And Black people had their own little kind of Black Wall Street around Irving Street near downtown. So, these white people are seeing Blacks with businesses, dressing sharp and nice cars. So, shortly after the whites began to come in, there had been a scare of a white woman being raped. That turned out to be false. But then, another rumor began spreading about the rape of another white woman. White people in the shipyard just threw down their tools, left the

shipyard and started marching downtown to the courthouse to find the Black person. They wanted to see if the sheriff had arrested somebody for the rape or who they were investigating for the rape. They planned to take them out of the jailhouse and lynch them right there on the spot. This was around the summer of 1943. The police had already made moves to get the accused guy out of town because they knew what could happen. The white mob then started just going through the Black area of downtown Beaumont and burning it up. Law enforcement did not try to stop them. It was very similar to what happened to the Tulsa Black community. My family suffered direct damage. My grandmother and her brothers owned a butcher shop, a barber shop, and a dry-cleaning business downtown. All of this was burned down.

All of this type of stuff is what I grew up with. My grandfather, besides working at the mobile oil refinery, had a sideline business making burial vaults for the Black mortuaries. There were white people making the tombstones and the burial vaults. However, if you gave them the name and dates and everything you wanted on the tombstone and they made a misspelling, you couldn't go back to them and demand that they correct it. They would laugh at you and threaten your life if you came and told them to redo something because they did it wrong. So, Black people were much happier to work with my grandfather, who is Black and in the community. They knew that if there was a mistake, they could get the thing redone or whatever. My grandfather was enjoying so much great business that whites got wind of it and came and threatened him. That's when I learned the term, "white capping," from my grandmother. My grandmother said, "Yeah, they white-capped your grandfather." I looked the term up years later and I found out that was really a term that referred to when white supremacists, Klansmen, would come and threaten Black people to either leave the area or to stop doing something. My grandfather didn't stop doing the business. He just moved the business out of town where he would mix his vaults and then had people smuggle them into Black funeral homes. He still kept the business going for a while until he and his business partner kind of had problems and fell out. But again, this is all part of the background that I grew up with and knowing how our people were being oppressed.

Smith: Okay. Thank you for the background information. Are there any significant Black political figures, scholars, or activists that have motivated you to join the social-justice fight?

Shabazz: Absolutely. Back there in Beaumont, I got engaged in early seventies. The city was widening the streets in our neighborhood. We had paved

blacktop roads with ditches and open drainage on the side. I grew up on Fourth Street. Because Fourth Street connected to a new interstate, the city planners saw that it could be a main artery from the highway into the center of town. They wanted to develop the street and close in the ditches. The problem was that there was a similar project on the white part of town, the west end. There the city planned to incorporate sidewalks, but the Black neighborhood did not have sidewalks in our street plan. The white neighborhood wasn't going to have very much pedestrian traffic, but we were going to have a lot. So, we protested – me, my uncle, and my cousin. I must have been in middle school. So, at 11 or 12 years old is when I sort of cut my teeth and started getting involved in mass action within my community. We began fighting and demanding for the sidewalk to come which we did not win. The town council was all white.

At age 17, I left to go to college at the University of Texas at Austin. You know, I hear a lot of people talk about predominantly white institutions and that they didn't have any role models. I had an abundance of Black faculty members that gave me a lot of attention. I took classes with them. They had the greatest impact on me as a scholar activist. At UT Austin, a man named John Warfield had the greatest impact on me. He was the head of African and African American Studies at the UT Austin. He was a scholar-activist. He organized the first Black themed radio station in Austin. I was one of his first program hosts. I had an eclectic world music beat kind of show on the radio called "It's a new African Day." One of my other faculty members that was very stimulating for me intellectually, was a man named William Doherty, Jr. He came to UT Austin from MIT. He and Prof. Sam Meyers came from MIT and their first tenure-track job was at UT in the Economics Department. I was the only Black undergrad major in that department. They showered me with attention. I also remember Rose Brewer, who is now up at the University of Minnesota. She was in the Sociology Department at UT Austin. I took gender and sexuality classes with her. So, I had a lot of Black professors as role models. Of them all, I'd say John Warfield was the one who had the most impact on me.

Smith: Definitely good insights. I would like to ask you about your name. Have you always gone by Amilcar Shabazz?

Shabazz: No, I was born Eric Frank. That name never resonated very much with me. The name Eric, as I understood from my mother, was the name of a character in a movie she saw when she was pregnant with me. She thought it sounded cute [laugh]. So, that's how Eric came about. Just right out of pop cul-

ture. Frank is the family name. That was my father's family name. But my father and mother split when I was about five. Due to the lack of my father's involvement in my life, I had no strong attachment to my former last name. I wasn't sure if it was a slave name or not, but, either way, it definitely wasn't a name that spoke to my African culture. At UT Austin, I became open to the idea of a free name, an African name. The name Shabazz came to me one night as I was cutting through a cemetery from the UT Austin campus to where I was living in East Austin, the Black part of town. I won't go too long into this, but I had an encounter with the spirit of Malcolm X, with El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz. And he welcomed me to be a son and to take his name. That's how the Shabazz [name] came into play for me.

Smith: That's powerful. What prompted you to gain a PhD and become a professor? What disciplines are you formally trained in?

Shabazz: My undergrad degree was in economics. One of my mentors wanted me to stay in economics and get the PhD in that field, but I was under the influence of the world African struggle. Particularly, the mantra coming out of South Africa was, "revolution now, degrees later." Because of my mother's influence, I went ahead and finished undergrad, but I was in no way interested in going on for yet another degree. For what? It was time to change the world. That was my mindset. So, I left Texas after finishing undergrad. I had met someone in New York City. He had come down to UT-Austin before. We had brought him down to speak about the revolutionary changes going on in Zimbabwe, formerly Rhodesia. His name was Ahmed Obafemi. This brother came because he had been over in Zimbabwe during the transition. He was out there with the guerrilla movements and with the leaders. He and two others had been over in Zimbabwe. So, we wanted to hear a report on how the transition was going and what was happening. So, he came and spoke. After speaking on all of that, he had some newspapers that he shared with me. It was called *The New African*. It was the newspaper of the provisional government of the Republic of New Africa.

And Ahmed was a leader in the provisional government of the Republic of New Africa. So, he said, "Let's keep in touch on this too. This is our struggle here. We are for the struggle in Zimbabwe too, but we also have a struggle here inside the belly of the beast." So, I said "Yeah, I definitely want to know more." So, we kept in correspondence. He introduced me to comrades that were in New Orleans, particularly his wife. So, I would catch the bus from Austin and go to New Orleans. There I studied and I took my oath of independence with the pro-

visional government of the Republic of New Africa. That's where I got involved. It was around 1980 or 1981. By 1982, I finished up the degree and headed to New York. Ahmed invited me to come up. It was only supposed to be about six months at the most that I would work, train, and study to be part of cadre development. Then, the plan was to go back to the South a little bit stronger, wiser, and better equipped to organize, but six months turned into six years.

A lot of times, the thought came up of me jumping into school at Columbia. I had friends there saying, "Come on to Columbia." Also, people brought up NYU, City College and Hunter College for grad school, but I knew me and I wasn't up there for school. My mind wasn't going to be divided like that. I would be trying to basically be this full-time professional revolutionary in the independence movement, and then trying to be a grad student. So, I said, "No, no, no. Revolution now, degrees later." That was my mindset. After this and going into the late eighties, we began to say, "You know, the main areas where we are organized have cadre and community-based organizations are all outside of the national territory. We stated the national territory [Republic of New Afrika] to be Louisiana, Alabama, Mississippi, Georgia, and South Carolina. That's where the Black folks were that we wanted to organize and to become independent. Yet, we were all in Detroit, in New York City, and California. When are we ever going to be in the territory we wanted to liberate?" So, I was ready to go. I'm like, "Well, I'll be one of the first to go South." So, myself and Chokwe [Lumumba] were the first to move South – Jackson, Mississippi. There, I was working with Chokwe out of his home in Jackson and keeping the newspaper going. That was my role.

Eventually, I started commuting from Jackson to my hometown, Beaumont, Texas. Then, I decided to consider school again. I applied for a master's program in my hometown at Lamar University, the school that my mother and father desegregated in 1956. I decided to do my master's thesis on the desegregation of Lamar University. I wrote the story that my family was a part of, but there was nothing previously in the record about this. I wrote the study and finished that in 1990. From there, I was encouraged to do the PhD. I chose the University of Houston. There, I thought, "Why not do a study of desegregation in the complete state?" Then came the dissertation, "The Opening of the Southern Mind: The Desegregation of Higher Education in Texas, 1865 to 1965." After I finished it, I got my first tenure-track job at the University of Alabama, which, of course, was kind of historic to the whole desegregation process. There I started to work on changing the dissertation into a monograph. That's the story behind *Advancing Democracy*.

Smith: How long have you been here at UMass Amherst and what positions have you held here?

Shabazz: Since 2007. But, like I said, my first tenure-track job was at the University of Alabama. I got tenured and became an Associate Professor of American Studies. I had been given some dispensation to build up African American Studies as a minor. However, my tenure was actually in American Studies. I left there and went to Oklahoma State University. There, I was the head of American Studies. My tenure was in the History Department though. I was charged with developing all of the different ethnic programs within the United States. Programs such as Indigenous Studies, African American Studies, Latinx Studies, and Asian American Studies. Although I was only in Oklahoma for two years, I did some things with Black Studies that still continue today. For example, I helped establish the Center for Africana Studies. Then, I came here to UMass in 2007 to be the seventh chair of the department.

Smith: Okay, great. Can you talk about the W.E.B. Du Bois Department of Afro-American Studies and its growth since you have arrived?

Shabazz: Well, we have not and may never get back to the level that the Department grew to. This Department in the New Africa House was approved by the Board of Trustees in April of 1970. It was approved as a full degree-granting, tenure-conferring, and stand-alone department with its own tenure lines. We are one of the first in the nation to do this. Everywhere else, administration was playing games about departmental status. They were playing games about how many lines they could have or whether professors would teach half in Black Studies and half in another discipline. But here, it was straight out the box – we're going to try to do this the way we would do it if we were doing Irish Studies, Italian Studies, or Classics.

This department grew to 20 faculty members in its early years. It was predicated on a humanities and fine arts model. We had some historians, some literature people, but it also had people in music and dance. We had faculty in visual arts and fine arts. In 1972, we became the first Black Studies department with a full-time Jazz Studies professor. Our faculty members were a hundred percent obligated to this department. There were no splits. Our department was impacting people like Fred Tillis, the Black Chancellor. That's another thing about UMass in the seventies that you got to realize. We were one of the first predominantly white institutions to have a Black chancellor. We definitely had the first Black chancellor of New England.[1]

Tillis supporting our Black Studies Department was a very promising moment. I learned from the department's early pioneers like my colleague John Bracey and others. They were the strength of Black Studies here, but the prestige did not all come from traditional academics, historians, and social scientists. It was the artist we had and the curriculums in music and dance. That's where the buzz came from. By the time I got here in 2007, the Department was in a moment of transition. A lot of those founding people from the seventies were looking at retirement. They just wanted their vision to be sustained.

Smith: I would like to go back a bit. You mentioned John Bracey. Can you speak about him, his impact and his passing?

Shabazz: He [John Bracey] touched a lot of lives. He was a big factor in all of our lives, of the people in the Department. I had known of his work during my undergrad days. He was co-editor of a book called, *Black Nationalism in America* (MacMillan Publishing Company, 1970). I checked it out of the Austin Public Library and never brought it back in. But at any rate, this book came out in 1970. I found this book around 1979 or 1980. This is where I started learning about the history of our people and self-determination. And particularly in this latter part of the book, a lot of these documents such as "revolutionary activism," "General Baker," and "My Fight for Freedom" are in here because of Bracey. He is in many of the organizations mentioned in the book. He was a member of the Revolutionary Action Movement. Bracey hid Max Stanford out in Chicago during the seventies, when the FBI had him on the Most Wanted List, trying to capture him. Stanford was staying with John [Bracey] in a safe house. So, you know, I started to learn from Bracey's work. This is where I learned about the concepts of Black Power. So, he had a great impact on me.

When I got in here to UMass, I started to tell him about how I read and admired his work. He signed a copy of the book [*Black Nationalism in America*] and said, "Brother Amilcar, welcome aboard." Bracey passing the baton to me was just really profound. I still haven't been at a point emotionally to write on the significance of John's passing. John and I had many arguments. People would hear us all down the hall arguing. However, there was also care and mutual respect for each other's opinion, but when we clashed, we clashed. But John meant everything to me regardless of the bitter fights we had with each other. He meant a lot to me as a friend, as a comrade, and colleague. It's almost ineffable to describe the impact of his passing. Our alumni base definitely felt his going. Thank you for that question. It's definitely something we are still rebounding from.

Smith: I appreciate that information. From your perspective, what is the state of Black Studies in the academy? Where do you see progress and milestones? What is the future of Black Studies?

Shabazz: Well, the National Council for Black Studies (NCBS), which I am former president of, formed in 1975 to give guidance and direction to the discipline of Black Studies. People don't realize it, but some of our people [UMass-Amherst] were foundational to that. John Bracey himself, but also Chet Davis, the fourth person to be chair of this Department. The second major NCBS conference was held here on the campus of UMass Amherst. John Bracey was chair then.

So, we have been intimately and integrally involved in the shaping of the Black Studies discipline. Where is it right now? Well, the theme of the NCBS meeting that we just came back from in San Jose is "Our Afrofuture in the Crosshairs." Now, we see Black Studies as in an existential crisis. The rise of white nationalism and the whole MAGA and Trump stuff have made it no secret that they are wanting to eliminate us and our scholarship. If you look at the books being banned, it's mostly Black Studies scholars. If you look the so-called assault on Critical Race Theory, white nationalists haven't foregrounded it as an attack on Black Studies as much anymore. That's because we beat all the attacks in the past. These things come in waves. In the 1980s, under Reagan administration, Black Studies was demonized. In the eighties, white nationalist claimed that Black Studies was about indoctrination and not education. They portrayed Black Studies as a pro-fascist type field. We beat all of that mess back from the eighties, but this existential crisis that we are in now is another wave of it. We will fight and beat this wave of suppression as well.

Smith: How will the recent nationwide assault on DEI affect Black Studies?

Shabazz: Well, it's part of the whole attack on Critical Race Theory, banning books, and trying to delete African American Studies from high schools and AP courses. It's all integrated with the assault on DEI. The right wing is attempting to turn our universities into conservative citadels of conservative dogma. The conservatives are the underdogs because liberals and leftists run the college campuses. White supremacists just want to eliminate us. They want to get in charge so they can then shut down DEI offices, shut down Black Studies, and

shut down Gender and Sexuality Studies. The attack is on any of the studies that feature the left, not just Black Studies.

Smith: Considering the activism of the Third World Liberation Front and the birth of Black Studies on the West Coast in 1968, do you see another opportunity for a coalition to rise again and combat the conservative threat against minority studies?

Shabazz: One of the books that I'm currently working on comprises 50 years of experience of observing and participating in mass movements for change. From what I've learned about social movement theory and practice, it is going to be a challenge. The book project that I'm working on centers on the theory of solidarity. What is solidarity? I think that there is the potential for solidarity among different identity groups and among communities interested in environmental and gender justice. The question is: Can these communities of interest really come together? But, yes, I think that you are right. The sixties served as a catalyst to galvanize and inspire folks in a variety of communities. The movement inspired folks of different identities. The Third World Liberation Front was a model and pattern for the collective fight. However, forging solidarity was not magical.

You know, one of the things we look at with Africana Women's Studies is the way in which Black women had to fight within the Women's Movement to protect the interest of Black people. To pull that movement to be in solidarity, you're fighting for reproductive rights, breaking the glass ceiling for women in terms of pay equity and all of those kinds of issues within the broader women's movement. We also need to look at the struggle of Black people and see how we have a community of interest that should be in solidarity. It took work then, and it's going to take work today for all of us to come together. So, if you look at the campus as kind of a microcosm or a lab in a way for analyzing some of this right now, we don't have the kind of solidarity that we should. In the case of my own campus, we have a long-standing solidarity with Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, but it's in a little bit of a receding mode. We have to strengthen that. We ought to be doing things together, working together, and understanding our common ground and problems. Likewise, with folks in other parts of academia, the same way in the broader movement as well.

I think the technology and the technical relations of production in some ways give us the opportunity through social networks, social media, and through the proliferation of this digital age. There are ways in which we ought to be able to find and to create those spaces of commonality and solidarity. I don't know

that we've quite caught up with the technology and harnessing the technology to really doing that. It can happen on some spontaneous levels in the case of the modern Black movements from Trayvon Martin, to Mike Brown, the Ferguson uprising, George Floyd and Breonna Taylor. Those cases have now begun to bring us into moments of great solidarity. Intersectionality as a concept is rising in this time as well. We are going to keep working at solidarity, building it and making it stronger.

Smith: I know you have numerous published works. How is your activist tradition present in your research and publications?

Shabazz: Almost a hundred percent really. There is very little that I do just for the sake of studying. I own the fact that the things that I write about are things that I care about. I try to make sure that the care that I have for the subjects compel me to be honest and critical. I avoid propaganda and cherry-picking. For me, the care that I have about my people and our liberation does not allow me to be deceptive. I have to look at data and research objectively. I was once told that "the purpose of criticism and self-criticism, is to sharpen practice." If I want us to win, I'm committed to our people being victorious in our struggle for freedom, but I want them to be sharp. I want them to be strong. I want them to be critical. I want them to see the world as it is and what the problems are and how to fix the problem.

I don't want my people to be under some kind of indoctrinated mind control. I need them to see flaws anywhere they see it, and be able to call out the flaws in the thinking. I want people to be able to see the deficiencies, problems, and contradictions within the Black world that we study. I think it's absolutely essential that we be critical in our studies and objective. I don't think you have to be detached to be objective.

Smith: Okay. Let's move to discussing your classroom instruction. What courses do you traditionally teach at UMass Amherst?

Shabazz: Well, I teach the history of the Civil Rights Movement. It's a large class that satisfies the general education requirement that our undergrads have for diversity. It is usually open to 200 to 300 students and I have three teaching assistants who work with me. That's one of my classes this coming fall. Another course that I teach is the Education of Black People. This course is compli-

mented by another course called Urban Education which deals with things from about 1965 to the present.

Then, we have a doctoral program here. I contribute certain seminars each semester. One is a seminar in Black Studies called History, Theory and Practice, which I frequently offer. Another course that comes to mind is called Race and Caste. We organized a major conference some years ago around the course theme. My teaching connects to my research and writing. A final big area of instruction for me and the department is the concept of Global Black Studies. We must situate Black Studies in a global nature. We learn better by looking at the presence of Black people around the world and exploring the connections and experiences between them. We aim to examine the Black experience in Japan, China, Europe, the Pacific and all of the Americas. I do a class here called Introduction to Global Black Studies.

Smith: Is the reparations movement a part of your curriculum?

Shabazz: Yes, I have a class on reparations. It is a split undergraduate and graduate level course. We look at the ways in which the idea of reparations for African people has emerged historically. We historicize the struggle and look at contemporary practices around reparation. Students examine current debates and development in communities from Columbia, Haiti, and the United States. I cover all of that in the class.

Smith: Can you give a brief history of the movement for reparations in the United States? How long have African Americans been pushing for reparations?

Shabazz: Well, you know, Ta-Nehisi Coates' wonderful and compelling essay, ["The Case for Reparations"], brings out one of the early cases dealing with a woman named Belinda who was enslaved by the Royall family in Massachusetts. Her enslaver took her out of Africa, had her in the Caribbean, and then brought her to Massachusetts. That family was among the loyalists when the American Revolution breaks out. They were loyal to the king and not breaking up with the king. Of course, that side loses. So, as things kind of go south, the family leaves the enslaved property here in Massachusetts. So, what happens to the property? Well, after 1780s, the view is not to keep the people enslaved or to sell them somewhere else. So, Belinda Royall becomes free. Likewise, the property was divvied up. Harvard University got the biggest share. Harvard Law School benefits from the Royall estate. But I come to the point to say this, Coates points

out she had these petitions where she was asking for help. She's now old. She can't work anymore and you're telling her it isn't now? Where is the back pay from Mr. Royall? She has nothing. She is in her seventies and got a child with special needs. From her petition, there is a little bit of assistance given to her by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

Truth be told, there are a number of legal efforts being waged, both to be liberated from slavery, but also demanding some kind of redemption, some kind of compensation, some kind of reparations. You know, the Mum Bett case of Elizabeth Freeman and other cases. There're so many cases just in Massachusetts in the late 1700s. These cases pressed question of their rights. Questions around the right to be free and if so, what about the years of enslavement? What is owed? What is due? What is due? Some of this has roots back to the Revolution or the War for Independence. We definitely can trace it with the very rise of the United States of America itself. There has been a cry for, in not only ending slavery, but reparations. So, it goes from there.

Smith: Can you define what reparations mean for Black people in the 21st century?

Shabazz: I think it means this is the pathway to rebuilding ourselves individually and collectively. Reparations are needed if we wish to rebuild ourselves from the place of harm and the place of the wrongful taking of labor power of our ancestors. Slavery was the death of us as beings in society, as social beings. We were commodity. We were property. We weren't part of the social world; we were socially dead. So how do we have a rebirth? How do we become socially alive in this country? Reparations are the theory and the practice of that move from being a person or community that was deemed socially dead and had no place in society to now having a place in the world and in society. Reparations are the way to building that space of freedom and social presence.

Smith: How long have you been involved in the movement for reparations? Can you offer any insights to the National African American Reparations Commission?

Shabazz: I attended the first Black political meeting of the National Black Political Assembly in New Orleans in August of 1980. I attended as a student delegate from Texas. There were two keynote speakers at the Assembly. The Saturday keynote speaker was Louis Farrakhan. He talked about rebuilding the

nation. The Friday keynote speaker was Queen Mother Moore, originally born and from New Iberia, Louisiana. My grandfather was born there. Queen Mother Moore told the story of seeing lynchings in New Iberia. She spoke about leaving to go to New Orleans and then getting involved with the Garvey movement. From there, she went to Harlem. She called for two things. She called for an independent Black political party which would establish a Black agenda for our vote. Secondly, she called for liberation through reparations.

Remember this was August of 1980, right. All of this is what's going on in my head. At the time, I am also reading Bracey's collection of essays, *Black Nationalism*. By 1981, I moved on to do work in New York City. There, I was a founding member of the New African Peoples Organization. In that organization, I went on to work with brothers from the Republic of New Africa to help found the National Coalition of Blacks for Reparations in America or COBRA in 1988. But I'll be honest with you, Caleb. At that time and for many of us, the demand for reparations was legitimate under self-determination, but we saw it as an organizing vehicle to get into the community, to organize and unite our people. That was our strategy. We wanted to use the reparations push as a way to get in the door in the Black community. There, we aimed to meet with people and talk about self-determination, to talk about what we are owed, and to talk about how our labor and land had been stolen from us. We have a right to back-pay. Okay, we'll work out with the Native Americans, whatever we got to work out, but we owe land here, not just land over there.

Again, reparations were more of an organizing mechanism to get at that broader question of land and independence. We absolutely believed in it, but we didn't believe that we would ever get a critical mass of white people to support. When it does begin to happen in 2020 and a little bit before then, we start seeing this, that the reparations talk is no longer this fringe kind of idea out of the Black pro-independence community but now a plausible idea for social change. That moment has come. Now, where do we go? The legislation in Congress is of course, stalled, because Congress can't even pass a budget for itself, let alone a budget for reparations. So, it's dysfunctional. How are we going to get Congress to appropriate the budget necessary for reparations? So that's not happening immediately. We still believe we can get a commission established to study the harm, the damage, and what is owed from slavery. So, let's at least get the commission established by federal executive order and funding. Then, we understand it's still a political question of when we'll be at a place where we could possibly expect the Congress to approve the money necessary for the reparations. But we got to take it one step at a time.

Smith: What about the National African American Reparations Commission? Have you been involved with them? How do they situate themselves in the Reparations Movement?

Shabazz: Previously, I mentioned New Orleans and the National Black Political Assembly. One of the key organizers of that meeting in New Orleans is a man named Dr. Ron Daniels. He is the principal theorist and figure behind the establishment of NARC (National African American Reparations Commission). NARC grows out of his political organization that he calls IBW 21st Century or Institute of the Black World, 21st century. But again, as this thing is starting to pick up some interest, he will go right ahead to establish NARC and invite different commissioners to come on board. They've gotten big grant money that helped to facilitate their growth. They actually moved around the world. It's not all just U.S. centered. So, Dr. Ron Daniels has a long, extensive history around the Reparations Movement. He and NARC took the lead organizing role at the Black assembly that I attended in 1980 as a student. That's the trajectory that gets us to NARC. They are very knowledgeable of the legal theory and the global human rights dynamics that all stand behind reparations. Dr. Daniels has been a very significant leader around what reparations ought to look like.

Smith: Good. Can you speak first about the push for reparations locally? When did the Amherst Heritage Reparations Assembly evolve? What is your involvement in the organization?

Shabazz: It was born during the Covid pandemic, but began to develop actually even right before the pandemic. A white man approached me about wanting to talk about reparations and how to make things better and what white people can do to help. So, we started having discussions. This man later introduced me to someone he was building with and talking about these ideas with also. After we started meeting to discuss ideas, I got them to do a podcast piece with me. I can send you the link. Because of the pandemic, we did a lot of interacting through Zoom until about Juneteenth of 2020.

Shortly after we came out of social distancing, Juneteenth was made a state holiday. I received a declaration from the Senate, a declaration from the general court that acknowledged my contribution to helping establish Juneteenth as a state holiday. So, after meeting the groups of white people that wanted to help, they told me that they wanted to do an apology and get the town government to make an official apology for their involvement in slavery as this place became a

municipality. When this place [Amherst, Massachusetts] become a municipality around 1759 or 1760, slavery was going on. People were enslaved here. So, asking for an apology is fine, but what else have you gotten for me? Because, that alone didn't really float in my boat. And they said, "Well, no, we want to, to study the harm and talking about repairing things and reparations." Then we did a petition drive and got a lot of signatures. Mind you, the town population is majority white, but we got the town council unanimously approve this resolution that was a call to fight against structural racism, to end structural racism, and to engage in reparations.

That then became the leg that we could stand on and say that we need to establish some kind of local commission. I gave it the name the African Heritage Reparations Assembly. We started meeting and we met for over two years under the charge given to us by the town council and through the town manager to produce a municipal plan for reparations. We studied Evanston [Illinois] a lot. They were the one and only other municipality that had gone that whole arc from acknowledgement, apology, to talking about restitution and to developing a plan for some type of restitution and closure – to do the whole arc. We studied Evanston and we started traveling up there. They were having summits of local groups working on reparations. We are regarded as the second municipality to complete a plan for reparations. So, our plan was put before the council in November of last year. Now we are working for the implementation phase to begin. We wanted to implement some of the things our plan recommended.

Smith: You mentioned Evanston, Illinois. Can you give other examples or testimonies surrounding the push for reparations in other cities and states that are playing a major role in the movement?

Shabazz: So, we just came back in December from the third annual summit of local reparations groups. We were there from the first summit in Evanston. Here we are back again for the third one. Our co-chair of the African Heritage Reparations Assembly, Michelle Miller, was given an award for her work over that period from the first summit to the third one. We are regarded as the second municipality to establish a commission to study and to produce a plan for reparations second only to Evanston. Now at this third summit, there are over 70 active municipalities that had people at the summit. Over 100 municipalities across the nation are in some phase of the process. They are either at the phase of putting together an acknowledgement, apology, or acknowledgement resolution in their town for slavery and the impact of slavery and racism on Black people.

Commissions are being set up to analyze the harm, find out the intergenerational effects of those harms, and what is the due owed today. I want to add this also. We are advocating for the town to embrace reparations at the federal level.

So, when people say that this path is a detour or that this means we are not fighting for the big change at the federal level, we say absolutely not. Part of this local effort to look at harm is a part of organizing people to acknowledge and to support work at the federal level. This local level work is for federal legislation where there are funds available to make meaningful welfare transfer, wealth transfer, and to meaningfully address the wealth gap. The five areas of reparations include the health gap, the wealth gap, the education, criminal justice disparities, and finally the dignity gap. The last gap, dignity, refers to our peoplehood. Slavery and the transatlantic slave trade robs us of a sense of peoplehood. These five areas formed the Amherst plan. We draw these areas right out of national discourse and international human rights discourse around reparations. So, our recommendations all come out of that.

Smith: That was definitely more than enough. Last year, Boston created a task force to study reparations. Do you know of any developments or progress taking place there?

Shabazz: It's in progress. Boston's mayor has given strong support. When you're talking about big municipalities like that, you actually need some staff time. You need people who can really dig deep into the research and get access to different departments to get the data. All of that takes time and money. You have to dig deeply and to see where Black land rights have been denied, where redlining has occurred, where health disparities are running rampant. There are a lot of efforts, public and private, going on to try and systematically analyze these things. For example, look at Prof. Kendi at Boston University. At Boston University, Kendi got a lot of funds to build a digital dashboard that can compile all of the data around different racial disparities – the real hardcore unimpeachable kind of data. I am talking data around land loss, maternal health and criminal justice stats. I pray that the database can be a resource for all of our local areas to tap into. These things take time, but they're very committed to it in Boston.

So, progress is happening. You have to assess these harms, document them and show it in a detailed study to municipal governments. Then, you build on them by asking – "How do we repair the wrongs done? What kind of resources are needed? How should those resources be paid out? Another initiative around

reparations deals with colleges. They, too, have played a role in suppressing Blacks from participating in higher education. Like I said earlier, my folks were among the first to get into Lamar University. They had to fight to get in, but generations before them had been barred, even while that institution was getting state taxpayer dollars. So, we are owed. So, we have to continue to pull data together and make an assessment of the magnitude of the harm done and what it would take to ameliorate them.

Smith: Have you received any pushback or white backlash surrounding your advocacy of reparations?

Shabazz: It's kind of interesting because I see other colleagues at other places getting all kind of hate mail. I don't know if mine is just automatically going to the spam or what. I just don't even see it. I look at few criticisms here and there, but not a lot. I don't pay too much attention to the negative, but people have attacked me in other ways. People have tried to steer resources away from me that I could have been selected for. The pushback isn't so much individual as it is collective. When you put forward the work and you don't start the next step of action, I consider that to be pushback. We haven't gotten action at the state level quite yet. Senator Miranda has a bill, but I need that bill out now. I needed that to happen like yesterday. Even though we dropped off a report in November of last year on the Amherst plan, I'm not seeing the necessary steps taken yet toward fulfilling the plan we laid out.

Smith: Okay. Are there any myths or misunderstandings about the current push of reparations that you would like to address?

Shabazz: One thing that comes up is the phrase that "reparations take from people who never did anything wrong to help people who were never the victims of any wrong." However, I think we've chipped away at a lot of people to better understand that this is an incorrect way of thinking, but I think there's still a lot of people who don't quite understand. For example, I'll tell you one group that has gotten it just by contrast. Our Jewish congregation of Amherst organizes with different groups that make up the life of the community. One of the groups that formed wanted to then look at reparations with us and study some of the things we thought were important to study. Out of it, they have developed a curriculum that they have used here in Amherst with different people interested in learning about Black reparations. And they have even had this

curriculum shared. And other groups are now having study groups around that same curriculum just in the community and not exclusively Jewish communities – other groups in general, utilizing that curriculum.

Some of my pieces are in that curriculum. Ta-Nehisi Coates' essay is in it. The curriculum offers five weeks of reading and discussion. The one that I participated in was Zoom-based. The reading groups are about 40 people, not too large so that people can have an opportunity to discuss the materials. Lively discussions take place. The misnomer is that today's white people are not the beneficiaries of any wrongful taking and are not culpable of any wrongful taking. So, why should they be taxed or be asked to take taxpayer dollars to support reparations? And that's where we challenge. Have you really not benefited? Have you been required to do something anti-racist to outweigh the racism of the system? That's where we are trying to continue to make that point. Yeah, you never owned a slave. We get that. I, personally, have never been the property of another human. That's all true enough, but what we argue is that a wrong that happened to an ancestor of ours and that benefited an ancestor of yours is not a wrong in terms of human rights law that has a statute of limitations. We are still owed. Until what is owed is paid, we are still due [to receive it]. That's just the truth of it.

Smith: How can reparations aid racial reconciliation in America?

Shabazz: That was a part of our local study as well – the idea of truth and reconciliation initiatives needed in our town. We found in our research that there were restrictions in deeds dating back to the 1950s. Many of the deeds stated that a person could never sell the house or rent to Black people. This idea of keeping Amherst predominantly white and making it a place for the very wealthy is something that the town really has to grapple with and confront. This town has to figure out what it is prepared to do to make it equitable to all. For me, the local push for reparations is a microcosm of the macrocosm. First, we have to acknowledge the harm and wrong that was done and take steps to listen to Black people and listen to our pain about what has been done. That begins the reconciliation process. So, how do we reconcile? We can reconcile when there's no more stop and frisk, when there's no more driving while Black, when there's no more unarmed Black deaths at the hands of police. We can reconcile when there is no more nine minutes of the police [kneeling] on somebody's neck. When we begin to eliminate these evils and bring closure, that's when we can have full reconciliation. But America likes to hurry up and act like it's all over. You know, we saw it with the election of Barack Obama. We've seen it at

other times. For example, Dr. King's assassination. We need to get off of this act of letting everything cool down and play like no wrong is being done. We need America to deal with the truth and hear our truth as a people. The reconciliation will come from how America responds to our truth.

I shared my truth when opening this interview. I had to grow up knowing my grandparents and parents went through a race riot in their lifetime. And there's nothing in Beaumont that has ever been done to make that right. Much less even a decent acknowledgement of the wrong. Same thing with Tulsa, where I lived for two years. Same thing there. They have two living people who carry that memory of the 1921 massacre. They are still alive and over a hundred years old, but we're about to lose them. Then, what will we say? Forget about it and say, "Nobody was ever harmed, nobody from it is alive, so, we can't do anything about it?" America has to stop this, Caleb. We really got to stop this, but there is hope. Now people are talking about reparations in conversation with the presidential election campaigns. Biden has had to talk about it. I am glad it is at least in conversation. And you got some municipalities doing some things. State governments like California created a commission. Now they are trying at the phase of figuring out how can we actually do some compensation in these spaces. Let's do more. We got to keep pushing.

Smith: Who is eligible for reparations?

Shabazz: In California, it was straight up those who had, and can prove, ancestry in the United States to someone who has been enslaved. That's the position they took in California. In Evanston, initially it was defined from the very specific targeted reparations program that was approved. This was a housing voucher based upon direct fact that you had lived in Evanston at a time in which redlining was practiced. The pay was $25,000 to individuals that qualified. There are people who have got that benefit thus far. Eligibility in Amherst has this model of concentric circles. At the core, at the heart, at the center, is really to look at the Black community with ancestry through to the period of enslavement that lived here and were born here. We do have people who trace their ancestry to the time in which slavery was practiced in the United States. We got people here whose ancestors fought in the Civil War from this area. They are owed reparations from that.

Widening out from there are those whose ancestors, not necessarily in Amherst or Massachusetts, but somewhere in the United States, that had ancestors who were enslaved. That's where I come in for eligibility. I'm in that next ring

of concentric circles. And, at the widest level, anyone of African descent living in Amherst is eligible to be a part of on some level of the reparative justice program. You might be thinking, why do we widen it out to that level? Because they are African and all Africans were hurt and harmed by the institution of slavery, the slave trade and all of the white supremacist oppression that manifest from that down through time. I'm talking from Jim Crow, down through redlining, down through all the rest, and any other period where those of African heritage were victims of white supremacy. For example, if somebody that migrates over here from Haiti in the seventies and they move to Amherst, I am not going to tell those people that they are not eligible for reparations. Of course, they're eligible. Their ancestors were enslaved in Haiti. Their ancestors were brought over from Africa, just like mine. In Haiti, they rose up and liberated. After liberation, they had to pay reparations back to the French for freeing themselves.

They are definitely owed reparations. They are owed by the world and by France. So, they should participate, but they may not participate depending on the particular harm or initiative we're trying to address. Because first of all, reparations at the local level are not about everybody getting an equal check, like at the federal level with the Japanese. This is because we don't have the money for that. We asked the town [Amherst] to set aside two million dollars. They made a promise to do that, but two million for the 1,400 Blacks that are year-round residents here is really not very significant. What is that going to do – 1,400 with 2 million [to share]? Maybe, you can go out and get a bucket of Popeye's. I mean, come on. So, we're talking about other kinds of benefits as well. There are ways that we can mitigate the impact of structural racism, such as the DEI office that we asked them to create and has been created. Now there's a struggle to make the DEI office be more effective. We want them to do more than this limited stuff such as assessing and trainings. All that is good, but we need more within the town. We see more robust work for DEI to do. Particularly, they need to work to administer the reparations that we are looking at.

In our local reparations plan, we call for the people to be assembled once or twice a year. We are urging every person of African heritage coming to the town meeting. Anybody that is a resident will have two minutes to put before the town some type of initiative. We see these meetings as a way to bring Black people together, to talk about the problems we are seeing and then make recommendations from that body. That then goes up to the council to be paid out of the reparations fund if it can be taken care of. That's the way we see it. And within the eligibility piece are these concentric circles. At the widest level, everybody is included. I don't care if it's a brother from Cape Verde that just moved to the states 10 years ago or a Black brother that just moved to Amherst five years

ago. They have as much standing in the meeting as me because they are African like me. But it's to all Africans, not only to one subset. However, we do see a core group being those with enslaved ancestors here in Amherst and Massachusetts, those who have ancestors anywhere in the United States and to those whose ancestors were hurt by slavery and the slave trade from anywhere in the world. It moves out like that.

Smith: We've mentioned the report from the Amherst Heritage Reparations Assembly several times. Is there anything else you want to add or speak about? What was the impact of the report within the area?

Shabazz: Well, it has served as a good template here and beyond. We helped to inspire Northampton. They have a reparations commission now with many people on it. One of them is an alum of this Department [W.E.B. Du Bois Department of Afro-American Studies], Ousmane Power Green. They are in the phase of doing research and getting their priorities and strategies together. They've looked a lot at our report for their work and informing their work. So, there is progress being made. Another thing I haven't emphasized so far is the concept of land and territory. Land is the basis of all freedom, justice, and equality. Land is the basis of independence. So, I do believe that the endowing of Black people with land and property is absolutely essential for freedom. You know, at the turn of the 1900s, Black people per capita had more owned more land than we own now. Land is so essential. I want to see some of the town's land and Amherst College land go to the rebuilding of Black spaces.

Smith: What about any advice or suggestions for the next generation of social justice warriors and those pushing for reparations?

Shabazz: I say to the young people coming up – love yourselves and love your culture. Love the shoulders of the people you stand on. And, those that built the bridge that got you over to the side that you're on. We need new world-making. I want the young people to dream big. Go back and fetch in the Sankofa principle. Go back and fetch what you can from the past that can be meaningful to building a more loving and caring communities. I say to them – invent new ideas and new forms of enrichment for the culture.

Note

1. Randolph "Bill" Bromery was the "Black" chancellor of the University of Massachusetts, Amherst (UMass). He was appointed chancellor in 1971. Fred Tillis joined the faculty of the Music Department at UMass in 1970. He was later named the director of the Fine Arts Center and was appointed, among other positions, Associate Chancellor of Equal Opportunity and Diversity. Like Chancellor Bromery, Dr. Tillis was a strong supporter of UMass Afro-American Studies during his time at the University.