

Empire and Forgottenness: Abysmal Sylphs in the Reparations Debate for Black Folks in the United States

emilie m. townes*

order by the commander of the military division of mississippi

16 january 1865

special field orders, no. 15

I. The islands from Charleston, south, the abandoned rice fields along the rivers for thirty miles back from the sea, and the country bordering the St. Johns river, Florida, are reserved and set apart for the settlement of the negroes now made free by the acts of war and the proclamation of the President of the United States.

III. Whenever three respectable negroes, heads of families, shall desire to settle on land, and shall have selected for that purpose an island or a locality clearly defined, within the limits above designated, the Inspector of Settlements and Plantations will himself, or by such subordinate officer as he may appoint, give them a license to settle such island or district, and afford them such assistance as he can to enable them to establish a peaceable agricultural settlement. The three parties named will subdivide the land, under the supervision of the Inspector, among themselves and such others as may choose to settle near them, so that each family shall have a plot of not more than (40) forty acres of tillable ground, and when it borders on some water channel, with not more than 800 feet water front, in the possession of which

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land the military authorities will afford them protection, until such time as they can protect themselves, or until Congress shall regulate their title. The Quartermaster may, on the requisition of the Inspector of Settlements and Plantations, place at the disposal of the Inspector, one or more of the captured steamers, to ply between the settlements and one or more of the commercial points heretofore named in orders, to afford the settlers the opportunity to supply their necessary wants, and to sell the products of their land and labor.¹

i begin with part of the actual text of the special field orders because i find many things about it noteworthy

first, the notion of “and a mule” is no where to be found

not in sections 1 and 3 which i read

not in sections 2, 4, 5, or 6 which are more concerned about loyalty to the union and military service and defense

second, this was a decidedly un-universal field order

the boundaries are clear

islands from charleston, south, the abandoned rice fields along the rivers for thirty miles back from the sea, and the country bordering the st. johns river, florida

in other words, the sea islands on the coast of south carolina and georgia

these included edisto, hilton head, port royal, st. helena and many other smaller islands that had been under union control since 1861

i must admit being surprised by the limits of the field order

1. Special Field Orders, No. 15, Headquarters Military Division of the Mississippi, 16 January 1865, Orders and Circulars, ser. 44, Adjutant General's Office, Record Group 94, National Archives. Also published in by Ira Berlin, Thavolia Glymph, Julie Saville, eds. *The Wartime Genesis of Free Labor: The Lower South* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 338-340.

all my life i have heard and spoken versions of “where is my 40 acres and a mule?”

i thought

as i suspect many of us did or have

that this was 40 acres anywhere we could find it in the united states

i had no idea that beulah land was such a small area of possibilities given the vastness of this country geographically

and so, i sat with this—for weeks

not because i could not believe it

but because this new piece of knowledge caused me to re-think the context of a discussion of reparations for black folks in the united states

context

april 1861: the civil war begins with the confederate attack on fort sumter, south carolina

president lincoln issues the proclamation for troops to put down the rebellion

context

may 1862: general david hunter declares free all slaves in south carolina, georgia, and florida

president lincoln issues a proclamation nullifying general hunter’s emancipation edict and urges kentucky, missouri, maryland, and delaware to embrace gradual, *compensated* emancipation

context

january 1863: lincoln issues the emancipation proclamation that declares free all slaves in the confederate states

except tennessee, southern lousiana, and parts of virginia

context

april 1864: the senate approves a constitutional amendment to abolish slavery

june 1864: the house of representatives fails to approve the constitutional amendment

congress makes the pay of black soldiers equal to that of white soldiers (from \$10/month to \$13/month)

congress increases the pay of all privates to \$16/month with corresponding increases for higher ranks

november 1864: lincoln is re-elected

context

january 1865: sherman issues field order 15

the house of representatives approves the constitutional amendment to abolish slavery and sends it to the states for ratification

april 1865: the army of confederate general robert e. lee surrenders at appomattox court house, virginia

lincoln is assassinated and vice president andrew johnson succeeds to the presidency

december 1865: the 13th amendment to the united states constitution is ratified that abolishes slavery throughout the united states

“except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted”²

only parts of the whole context, to be sure

but what they signal for me is that this whole conversation about reparations for black folks in the united states

stands on some terribly troubling ground. . .

. . . actually shifting sand

and that neglecting to factor this into our present day discussions on reparations

may doom us to endless debate

which is another word for failure:

we simply go on talking without resolving anything

this causes me to seek a somewhat different

though i believe tangential and necessary course

to set our conversation in a part of the broader context

and explore two themes i find ranging around as abysmal sylphs

inhabiting the air around us but largely unseen:

empire and forgottenness

it is clear to me that although many of our conversations about reparations do not include financial solutions as the sole answers

2. United States Constitution, Amendment Thirteen (1865). The complete text of the amendment is:

Section 1. Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction.

Section 2. Congress shall have power to enforce this article by appropriate legislation.

this does not remove us

as people drawing our breath in the largest imperial power in
the world

from what holds this country in its place on the global
scale

versions of "can't we all just get along and move on"

only speak to the ways in which we are suspect historians in
this country

we only teach and are taught, in most cases, what is pleasing
to the myth of the city on the hill

no attention given, generally, to who and what may be at the
foot of that hill or clinging to its side or at what cost do we
keep our houses on top of the mountain

if we do not factor these things into reparations talk

any notions of fairness or justice or reconciliation or any of their
kin will stumble and fall before the massive juggernaut of turbo
capitalism twined with a studied, oblivious amnesia

as a christian social ethicist who is also a womanist ethicist

i am particularly drawn to this conversation by a fact little reported
in reparations talk

many of us know that general sherman and secretary of war major-
general stanton met with 20 black leaders just 3 days before issuing
the field order

but what is often lost is that these 20 black leaders were black male
ministers and church officers

their ages ranged from 26 to 72

some were free-born, some had been set free by their masters
and mistresses, some had bought their own freedom, some
had been freed by the union army

but even here the mutterings of empire begin to be heard

for the minutes of meeting contain some interesting details for
those who were pastors

the size of the congregation

the race of the trustees

the value of the property

and whether or not the congregation owned the
property

for those who had bought their freedom

the amount they paid for themselves was included

this is a rich proving ground for this ethicist

for after the first question to the men that asked if they understood
lincoln's 1863 proclamation to the rebellious states

the next question asks if they understood what slavery and free-
dom meant in the proclamation

their representative was clear

"Slavery is, receiving by *irresistible power* the work of another
man, and not by his *consent*. The freedom, as I understand it,
promised by the proclamation, is taking us from under the
yoke of bondage, and placing us where we could reap the
fruit of our own labor, take care of ourselves and assist the
Government in maintaining our freedom."³

3. Published in *The Wartime Genesis of Free Labor: the Lower South*, 331-338; Ira Berlin, Barbara J. Fields, Steven Miller, eds., *Free at Last: A Documentary History of Slavery, Freedom, and the Civil War* (New York: New Press, 1993), 310-318, and Ira Berlin, Joseph Patrick Reidy, Leslie S. Rowland, eds., *Freedom's Soldiers: The Black Military Experience in the Civil War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 149-153.

the next question asks if they think they can take care of themselves and how they believe they can best assist the government in maintaining their freedom

again, their representative was clear

"The way we can best take care of ourselves is to have land, and turn it and till it by our own labor—that is, by the labor of the women and children and old men; and we can soon maintain ourselves and have something to spare. And to assist the Government, the young men should enlist in the service of the Government, and serve in such manner as they may be wanted. (The Rebels told us that they piled them up and made batteries of them, and sold them to Cuba; but we don't believe that.) We want to be placed on land until we are able to buy it and make it our own."⁴

the fourth question asked them to "state in what manner you would rather live—whether scattered among the whites or in colonies by yourselves."⁵

answer: "I would prefer to live by ourselves, for there is a prejudice against us in the South that will take years to get over; but I do not know that I can answer for my brethren."⁶

in a notation, it states that "Mr. Lynch says he thinks they should not be separated, but live together. All the other persons present, being questioned one by one, answer that they agree with Brother Frazier."⁷

brother frazier was their chosen representative

fifth question: "Do you think that there is intelligence enough among the slaves of the South to maintain themselves under the Government of the United States and the equal protection of its

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid.

laws, and maintain good and peaceable relations among yourselves and with your neighbors?"⁸

answer: "I think there is sufficient intelligence among us to do so."⁹

no one of their number disagreed with this assessment

137 years later black folks are still answering these kinds of questions about who we are, what we think, and are we able

and it would be a flawed strategy to think about reparations without acknowledging that some of its roots are lodged in this field order

which was issued not out of a sense of humanitarianism, strong support for the newly freed, or a universal notion of place and property

sherman was trying to relieve his army of the thousands of freed men and women who had been following it since his invasion of georgia

as he marched, slaves had abandoned the plantations to follow the army

and feeding and clothing these folks had become a strain

what gets lost, often, is Sherman's later claim that his order was a temporary solution and not one designed to grant permanent possession of the land to black folks

i rehearse this history in cursory form to highlight the fact that 40 acres and a mule has always been on tenuous ground if not outright contested ground

sherman didn't really mean it

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid.

congress never fully supported it and president johnson began dismantling it just 1 year later

as i read this part of the history, this has never been a *moral* argument

however, it has been, most decidedly, an economic one

we should always be wary of “gifts” passed our way that have serious economic ramifications that are not discussed, acknowledged, or recognized at the time of the gift-giving

they have a way of being withdrawn, dismantled, and disavowed

and those who were the supposed beneficiaries of the “gift” are pathologized and subjected to all manner of moral condemnation and devaluation

let me clarify any confusion i might be sparking just about now

i do not consider reparations a gift or to be about gift-giving

but i want to be incandescently clear¹⁰

that a major part of the context of the reparations debate regarding black folks

is that it is taking place in a time in which imperialism is being dwarfed by empire

unlike imperialism, empire

with multinationals functioning as its chattering, chuckling cheerleaders

has no territorial center of power and it does not rely on fixed geographic, cultural, religious, or social boundaries or barriers

10. Many thanks to ethicist Patricia-Ann Johnson for this marvelous turn of phrase.

as it incorporates the entire global realm in its ever-expanding frontiers¹¹

nation-states, even the US, have less and less power to regulate economic and cultural exchanges around the flow of money, technology, people, and goods under empire

but the construction of empire is still in process

and there remains much to be said about what *is* going on *within* the united states that shapes the reparations debate in this country

from the beginning of this country as a republic

the myth of universal uninhibited freedom has always had its evil twin—studied sadistic subordination and annihilation

our history is one that cast native americans outside of the constitution

and included blacks in the constitution—but not as 5/5ths of being human

this has, to my mind, always been a great problematic in our self-understanding as a nation

we have not been the land of unfettered liberty, equal access, and open markets

but we have, domestically and globally, been a nation of imperialistic domestic and global outrages that carry kinder and gentler names such as

personal responsibility and work opportunity act of 1996

usa patriot act 2001

11. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), xii.

economic growth and tax relief reconciliation act of 2001

free trade area of the americas

under empire

our reliance on foreign savings has pushed the value of the dollar up

this makes goods produced in the united states less competitive in world markets

and it contributes to unemployment and low sales in those parts of our economy that are vulnerable to international competition

things have changed

we no longer produce the cheapest, best, and most profitable goods

we no longer have a strong economy

in fact we are in a recession sparked by over investment

an ill-conceived tax cut

that has spawned a \$165 billion deficit for fiscal year 2002

and the strong likelihood that we will have \$100 billion deficits each year for the rest of this decade¹²

we do not have low rates of unemployment

and the federal solutions thus far continue to be tax breaks for the wealthy

this sadistic smiley face economic policy is being powered by going off to invade someone

12. Paul Krugman, "Just Trust Us," n.p. Online: nytimes.com, 30 August 2002.

so that we do not notice rising unemployment and
plunging stocks

because we have the flag being whipped in our faces

and our grief and anger being molded into unrighteous
vengeance and sprained patriotism

no, it is no longer the late 1990s

where the united states was among the best and brightest economic
performers in a world economy plagued by high unemployment in
europe

and financial disaster in asia

simply put, the administrations in washington can try as hard as they
can to keep us at the center of imperialism

but the best we can attain with the rise of empire is a privileged
position in it

empire invites everyone and no one to the global capitalism feeding
trough because it no longer recognizes nation-states

only commerce in its purist form

because we have reached the age of ultimate commodification

this is part of the reality in which reparations talk sits

in a competitive global economy where our country tries to shift
the rules to its favor

but ultimately it cannot control all of the game as it once did

even old style liberal racial reform becomes nearly if not completely
impossible in this kind of global economy

liberals are no longer able to get around white supremacy by run-
ning budget deficits to finance education, housing, and health care
for blacks

who were excluded from these things by free markets catering
to the phobias of many middle and upper class whites¹³

to date, the only alternative considered has been redistributive
taxation

but i'm here to tell you

that high taxes linked with black folks are unpopular these
days

and then enters reparations talk

into this loaded economic arena

and with a deep history of forgottenness

as a nation, we have made it political, social, economic, and religious
policy to dwell in the land of false consciousness¹⁴

we consistently and persistently refuse to come to terms with the
"reality of the obvious"¹⁵

we live off the bitter fruits of a fantastic hegemonic imagination

which caricatures and pillages peoples—all peoples—lives

our thoughts, our culture, our analyses, our is-ness

instead, we have logo-ized versions of ourselves

native americans are reduced to spiritual

blacks are reduced to hip hop

asians are reduced to intellect

13. Marcellus Andrews, *The Political Economy of Hope and Fear: Capitalism and the Black Condition in America* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 139-140.

14. Charles H. Long, *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion* (Aurora: The Davies Group, Publishers, 1995; Fortress Press, 1986), 149.

15. *Ibid.*

latinos/as are reduced to salsa

and whites . . .

well whites have no culture, no is-ness

they are simply—white

this kind of forgottenness lets white supremacy off the hook

it feeds into empire and u.s. attempts and successes at imperialism

it fails to address whiteness as a racial construction

that functions as privilege and power on national and global stages

and attempts to talk about reparations for black folks

domestically or globally

falter because we have failed to recognize that whiteness is a concept and a reality

that reveals and explains the racial interests of whites and links them collectively to a position of racial dominance

reparations talk, to my mind, is not ultimately about black folks

its about white power and privilege sashaying around with forgottenness

that translates directly into forms of social organization that shape daily life

residential, social, and educational segregation have moved from *de jure* (by law) to *de facto* (existing) segregation

housing patterns, home loan lending policies, educational systems, affordability and accessibility to health care, policing

policies, availability and accessibility to public transportation
and decisions about how it will be plotted out on city grids

all point to the myriad ways in which we continue to be
a compilation of segregated societies in the united states

in this country, when it comes to black folks

i believe reparations are about the ability or inability of whites and
their kin

to recognize they have attained their power and privilege on the
backs of

the poor

the darker skinned

the feminine

and it just might be the time to have an honest conversation about this

deal with the denial and guilt it is sure to spark

and then talk about just what reparations might mean in empire

sadly, if not strategically, stanton and sherman's fifth question have
never fully left the lips of many in this country

"Do you think that there is intelligence enough among the slaves of
the South to maintain themselves under the Government of the
United States and the equal protection of its laws, and maintain
good and peaceable relations among yourselves and with your
neighbors?"¹⁶

and i have just enough of

aunt jemima
topsy

16. Ibid.

jezebel
sapphire

not to mention

miss nora
and momma mary

in me

that my answer has not changed and will not change

not in the context of empire

not in the context of imperialism

not in the context of the fantastic hegemonic imagination

not in the context of forgottenness

for there is sufficient intelligence among us to do so

but the problem is not us

i worry more about the intelligence, intentions, and will of my
neighbors

thank you

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