"The Debt: What America Owes to Blacks."
By Randall Robinson

Reviewed by Asatar Bair
Department of Economics, Riverside Community College
asatar@econs.umass.edu
August, 2001

I'm raw lightning; my power extends in the planet and out through the opposite ends
Black men traveled through the universe and back
While cavemen still thought that the earth was flat
But whatever sacred plan that we carry throughout the ancient lands
before the separating of the sands and of course all the power I create in my hands
-Jedi Mind Tricks "Retaliation"

It is no exaggeration to say that no single book has done more to revive the claim
for reparations to African-Americans for the exploitation and oppression of slavery and
the lasting legacy of racism than Randall Robinson's The Debt. This book has changed
public consciousness dramatically, creating a rich opportunity for debate over racism and
how we might end it.

Reparations as an idea seems to have the power to invoke a powerful reflex of
denial: of racism, of the importance of the past, of the effects of slavery; denial of
suffering, of the destruction of African culture and society, and of the contributions of
African peoples to scholarship, art, trade, and human development.

It is precisely this denial that Robinson targets in The Debt. With a powerful style
that is at once passionate, intimate, and analytical, Robinson shows us the consequences
of slavery and racism, focusing largely on the ways in which we remember the past, and
what that teaches us about who we are. He argues that the invisibility of people of color
in America's national monuments mirrors our view of history, which has been interpreted
to justify the lie of white supremacy and African inferiority, the idea that Africans, as Eric
Wolf put it, are a people without history, existing in a kind of homogenous primitive state
without development or change. Robinson argues that this Eurocentric interpretation of
history never would have been possible before the destruction of African societies caused
by the theft and killing of millions upon millions of Africans, and the colonialism and
oppression that followed. Robinson writes:

Our whole society must first be brought to a consensus that it wants to close the
socioeconomic gap between the races. It must accept that the gap derives from the social
depredations of slavery. Once and for all, America must face its past, open itself to a fair
telling of all its peoples' histories, and accept full responsibility for the hardships it has
occasioned for so many. It must come to grips with the increasingly indisputable reality
that this is not a white nation. Therefore it must dramatically reconfigure its symbolized
picture of itself, to itself. Its national parks, museums, monuments, statues, artworks must
be recast in a way to include all Americans - Native Americans, Hispanic Americans, Asian Americans, African Americans as well as European Americans. (173-174)

It is both surprising and commonsensical that Robinson places so much emphasis on changing our racist understanding of history. On the one hand, it goes against the messages we're constantly bombarded with that tell us to look towards the future, look at the progress that's been made, the blindly optimistic idea that progress towards racial justice is somehow inexorable. On the other hand, African-American activists and scholars have long placed emphasis on reclaiming history, from Marcus Garvey and W.E.B. DuBois to Malcolm X.

Thus the sly exaggeration in the lyrics quoted above by the underground rappers Jedi Mind Tricks. The lyrical content may not be exactly true - that African peoples were building spaceships for interstellar travel while presumably European 'cavemen' were still living in caves - but it fits with the hip hop attitude and tradition of 'droppin' science', and the power of knowing your heritage in the face of oppression. Fans of the genre know that power is a theme of many raps - which seems appropriate in a people from whom so much has been taken.

Perhaps the lyrics even hint at a wider recognition of the whitewashing of history. Young people may not know the truth about Africa, but they at least know that something important was not taught in school. A more mainstream rap group, Dead Prez, in fact offers this exact sentiment in their blazing indictment of the educational curriculum entitled "They Schools" on the album Let's Get Free.

Just as the debates over affirmative action have faded - and it seems to me that the right certainly won in the popular arena, and perhaps in the legal arena as well, if the spate of court cases suing Universities over affirmative action policies are any indication - suddenly people are talking about something much larger, for as Robinson asks, why seek pennies when a fortune is due?

Robinson does not talk about affirmative action at all, with the exception of one brief passage, which basically says he's not going to talk about it. Instead he shifts the terrain of the debate so dramatically, that conservatives must be left wondering which side is up.

Take, for example, the recent antics of the rather clownish conservative commentator David Horowitz. Horowitz, a former editor of the famous radical journal Ramparts and former secretary of the Black Panthers, is currently editor of the online magazine FrontPageMag.com, which is largely dedicated to arguing Horowitz's laughable claim that the left and "political correctness" control not only the media, but academia and politics as well, making any attempt at "straight talk" about race impossible. Horowitz made a splash in the media recently with an ad he attempted to place in 48 college newspapers across the country, entitled "Ten Reasons Why Reparations for Blacks is a Bad Idea for Blacks - and Racist Too". The ad is available for viewing at the website listed above. Even a cursory glance reveals it to be rife with errors, omissions, even outright lies. Interestingly, although Horowitz claims to know what is best for blacks, few have actually given him their support. Even the noted republican lawyer John Doggett (who is black) has systematically attacked each of Horowitz's points. (See thedebt.net)
Unfortunately, 34 college newspapers rejected the ad, which seemed to prove Horowitz's point about political correctness stifling honest debate. It became clear, though, that Horowitz himself had no intention of following his own noble principles of freedom of debate and expression when several papers published the ad, along with editorials that attacked it. Horowitz responded by refusing to pay for the ads. Apparently what Horowitz means by free speech is that he should get to control the entire content of the media. Isn't open and honest debate wonderful? Of course, the fact that Horowitz used *The Debt* as his latest target reflects the strength and influence of Robinson's argument.

The most revealing section of Horowitz's ad is the end:

> For all America's faults, African-Americans have an enormous stake in their country and its heritage. It is this heritage that is really under attack by the reparations movement. The reparations claim is one more assault on America, conducted by racial separatists and the political left. It is an attack not only on white Americans, but on all Americans -- especially African-Americans. America's African-American citizens are the richest and most privileged black people alive -- a bounty that is a direct result of the heritage that is under assault. The American idea needs the support of its African-American citizens. But African-Americans also need the support of the American idea. For it is this idea that led to the principles and institutions that have set African-Americans - and all of us -- free.

Horowitz is absolutely correct to say that it is the country's heritage that is under attack - it is our heritage of slavery, exploitation, lynching and Jim Crow, it is the omissions and lies that fill our history books that are at issue.

However, it is worth asking if it is really an attack on American ideals of freedom and equality to point out that these ideals have not been enjoyed by all Americans, nor is it likely that these ideals will be realized in the future without a serious societal commitment? We must know the truth about our history before we can truly celebrate that which is worth cherishing, without denying all the things that are appalling about both our history and the present day.

One criticism of the book is that Robinson is rather brief in describing some purposes for which the reparations fund might be used, such as education and research into institutions that benefited from slavery. Granted, the major thrust of the book is towards simply making the case for reparations, not to delve into the technical details of a spending plan, but based on an observation of the responses of some of my (usually white) students, they often have a difficult time understanding how reparations would be paid and to whom, and sometimes this turns into a kind of nihilistic, post-modern malaise - as in, we can't figure out perfectly who should receive the benefits of reparations, so we shouldn't try.

Perhaps this is merely a convenient way of negating a powerful attempt to address the effects of racism, which entails giving up the social, cultural, and material privileges of being white, or it may be a signal that developing the argument for reparations may be aided by further consideration of what the money might be spent on.

A criticism that emerges from the Marxian tradition is the lack of focus given to issues of class, despite Robinson's interest in the experience of Cuba. Robinson speaks of
reducing black poverty, but shows no concern over the issue of exploitation, and how it might relate to race. He could take a page from Manning Marable's classic *How Capitalism Underdeveloped Black America*, especially his analysis of black entrepreneurs. Marable concludes that capitalism in its current manifestation is inherently racist, and hence working to make more blacks into capitalists, while it may benefit those blacks individually, will not be enough to end racism.

In the face of the book's importance, its powerful argument, and evocative style, such criticisms become secondary. I urge anyone who is interested in the problem of race in this country to read this book.
