

Stephen Friedman Gallery

The Washington Post
Wrestling with the complexities of music, art and reparations
Ellis Cose
30 April 2021

The Washington Post

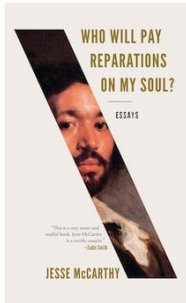
Wrestling with the complexities of music, art and reparations



Image: Kehinde Wiley's portrait of Barack Obama, on display at the National Portrait Gallery in 2018. Essayist Jesse McCarthy examines Wiley's work, including its "appropriation of Old Master swag." (Photo by Carolyn Van Houten/The Washington Post)

Decades ago, U.S. congressman John Conyers Jr. launched a lonely crusade, pressing Congress to consider the case for reparations for black Americans. His efforts were largely dismissed and viewed as a lost battle. Conyers, a Michigan Democrat, died in 2019, but his signature issue lives on. As America wrestles with the racial inequities newly highlighted by the coronavirus pandemic and confronts the racial injustices that poison relations between law enforcement officers and communities of color, we yet again have arrived at a moment when talk of racial reckoning and redress is unavoidable.

And it is not just talk. In March, Evanston, Ill., made history when its city council agreed to pay reparations to Black residents to ameliorate the impact of slavery and discrimination. Eligible households can receive \$25,000 toward home repairs or down payments.



A new bill in Congress — the Commission to Study and Develop Reparation Proposals for African Americans Act — has the backing of President Biden. The legislation, introduced by Rep. Sheila Jackson Lee (D-Tex.), was approved in April by the House Judiciary Committee. It endeavors to "address the fundamental injustice, cruelty, brutality, and inhumanity of slavery in the United States and the 13 American colonies between 1619 and 1865 and to establish a commission to study and consider a national apology and proposal for reparations for the institution of slavery."

Much of the current discussion derives from Ta-Nehisi Coates's well-received Atlantic article, "The Case for Reparations," published in 2014. Now we have yet another literary offering: "Who Will Pay Reparations on My Soul?," a new book by Jesse McCarthy, a Harvard professor of English and African and African American studies.

McCarthy's book is a fascinating addition to the literature that shows an involved, first-rate mind at work. But if you are looking for a policy wonk's introduction to the crafting of reparations, or a treatise on whether Blacks ought to be paid cash money — and if so, when, how and by whom — you will not find an answer in McCarthy's book. Nor will you find a proposal for dealing with such issues as, "How do you set things right for the education your grandmother never received, for your innocent great grandfather lynched by a mob, or for the land that your great, great grandparents were not allowed to own — and therefore were unable to pass on to you?" Or, "How do you transform an America, still organized around the concept of ethnic ghettos, in an age when even the unenlightened agree that racism and redlining should be relics of the past?"

McCarthy is interested in addressing deeper and broader questions, one of which he poses in his introductory essay: "What do people owe each other when debts accrued can never be repaid?" His answer, in essence, is that we owe each other a real democracy that embodies what America has always claimed (dishonestly) to represent; or, as he puts it, "freedom from domination ... [and] equality before the law."

Stephen Friedman Gallery

The Washington Post
Wrestling with the complexities of music, art and reparations
Ellis Cose
30 April 2021

McCarthy's special talent lies not in policy prescriptions. Indeed, he seems less interested in the details of public policy than in the challenge of wrestling with complex ideas. In doing so, his arrestingly original mind draws connections and conclusions that are not necessarily apparent.

He surmises that Black artist Kehinde Wiley's presentation of human subjects has been influenced by the culture of vogueing, and he wonders how Wiley's reimagination of the work of Jacques-Louis David ("Bonaparte Crossing the Alps") alters the message. He points out the difference in the two paintings: "David's mounted Emperor points ahead, his index finger showing the way through the Saint Bernard Pass to his victory over the Austrians at Marengo," McCarthy writes. "Wiley's anonymous subject is a black man who wears Timberlands (corporate logo to boot), baggy camo getup, and a bandana tied Tupac-style in the place of Napoleon's iconic bicorne." McCarthy concludes: "The black appropriation of Old Master swag necessarily changes the meaning of a symbol or a gesture, even if the difference may at first seem small."

McCarthy introduces Spanish painter Juan De Pareja en route to engaging the question of what it means to have a person, previously enslaved, practice art at an elite level. How do we judge the quality and purpose of his work? And what should we make of Virginia Woolf's casual use of the n-word in her description of an approach to labor? (Hint: It has to do with "the figure of the racialized outcast.")

McCarthy is the first essayist I recall reading who contrasts the gifts of blues singer Billie Holiday with those of the lyric poet Sappho: "Compare the 'Midnight Poem,' for instance, to Billie Holiday singing from Ellington's composition 'In My Solitude.' ... How far back does the tradition of the blues woman go?" And he suggests, with an attribution to philosopher Walter Benjamin, that "the only way to save the future is by rescuing the past from the overlords of the present."

We pause for a long tribute to poet and scholar Fred Moten and a rumination on artist Jean-Michel Basquiat. We also consider music, particularly the meaning and function of trap — and in particular its intersection with Blackness. And we read several open letters to the singer D'Angelo.

"Dear D, "Let's talk for a minute about the Spanish Joint. About nights in Richmond and nights in Havana, and what they both know about New Orleans. About Africa. How America's greatest music comes out of her greatest slave ports. How there's this thing in your music that Fred Moten would call its 'surplus lyricism,' a saturation of sweetness so thick it threatens to curdle the notes."

In the end, McCarthy makes an urgent appeal to the ideas of Black agency and Black self-deliverance: "What of our magnificent insistence that we will pull this country into righteousness and justice by our own hands, by our own words and deeds and witness, by any means necessary?" And he also makes an argument about reparations, about, as he puts it, "thinking of reparations for racial injustice as a moral rather than a material debt," although McCarthy makes clear that a material debt is indeed due.

There are ideas enough in this book of essays for 10 books; but there are no pat answers. Instead, there are endless interesting questions raised by a gifted, restless mind.