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CREATIVE FUTURES BEGIN
WITH RECKONING WITH AN
UNJUST PAST

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Introduction
Moving forward to creative futures first requires a step back from the attitudes and practices based on white supremacy that have brought our world to the brink of dystopia.

The edifice of US wealth and power was built on the enslavement and exploitation of African-American people, the violent taking of the lands and children of Native Americans, and the extraction of resources and dumping of waste in the natural world’s waters and lands.

These created intergenerational trauma for some, especially Black and Indigenous people, while others, especially some white people, became enormously rich and powerful. This taking of labor, land, and resources are the foundation of today’s system of capitalism. The consequences are devastating for some and offer others nearly unlimited opportunities to consume, exert power, and set the rules that allow their power and wealth to grow still further. People of color, nonhuman species, and future generations foot the bill.

We cannot build creative futures on this unjust foundation. Doing so would mean reproducing the harms of racial exclusion, mass extinctions, climate change, and extreme inequality. Instead, we need to start by reckoning with these harms, taking responsibility for the brokenness, and acknowledging the ways some benefited from the theft of labor and land, and extraction and exploitation, enforced by terror, murder, and rape.

We have to tell some difficult truths, make right some devastating wrongs, and do some healing. Only then will we be able to build together the creative futures founded in justice, inclusion, sustainability, and community. The good news is that this is well within our grasp.

The role of white people
In this essay, I write as a white person who has lived most of my life in the United States. I use the term “we” for “white people” deliberately, because I grew up immersed in European worldviews, and I don’t believe I have the right to speak for any others. Although much academic writing places European worldviews, history, and culture as the default point of view, I want to be clear that this is just one lens through which to view the world.

Moreover, much of the damage that is causing today’s existential crises was caused by white people—especially those who built the power of corporate capitalism, extractivism
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(Extractivism, 2022), and colonialism—and by these means built generational wealth for their families and for other white people.

While not all white people benefited, many did and still do. The route to a middle-class or affluent life in the United States has always been far more available to white people, even working-class whites, than to almost all African-Americans and Native Americans. Today’s gap in asset ownership and health outcomes offers a snapshot of that reality. Median household assets for Black households is just 15% that of white households; $24,100 and $188,200, respectively, according to the pre-pandemic 2019 Survey of Consumer Finances (Bhutta et al., 2020). And white people have life expectancies three and a half years longer than Black people. “The death rate for Black people/African Americans is generally higher than whites for heart diseases, stroke, cancer, asthma, influenza and pneumonia, diabetes, HIV/AIDS, and homicide,” according to the US Department of Health and Human Services Office of Minority Health (2021).

White people have a special responsibility to step up; we have a critical role to play in making right the wrongs of exclusion and exploitation, whether or not we or our direct ancestors had a documented role in past atrocities.

People of color have been calling on us to join in this quest for justice for many years. Many white people have done so, although the efforts often fall short of those that could lead to true equality. Some offer lip service but little action.

Others, though, continue to resist equality with the passion and violence that have been part of the American landscape since its founding. That segment has been ascendant in American culture and politics with the reaction to the presidency of Barack Obama and the rise of Trump’s MAGA movement.

This periodic resurgence of white nationalist ideology make it even more urgent that we do the work of righting wrongs and take up the challenges of building a truly equitable society.

In line with the principles of restorative justice (Just Alternatives, n.d.), the priorities and approaches to healing of those harmed should be paramount. But much of the repair work must fall to white people.

On that foundation, we can come together across divides to explore creative futures that will work for all life. And the positive ripple effects will benefit all of us.1

The role of enslavement in the origins of capitalism

A full understanding of US history means coming to terms with the foundations of an economic, political, and cultural system that has enriched a few through the forced labor of kidnapped African-Americans, the stolen lands of Native nations, and the exploitation of the waters, soils, air, and species of Mother Earth.

In the book, “The Half Has Never Been Told,” author Edward E. Baptist (2013) shows that the development of cotton and textiles was at the root of the Industrial Revolution, the primary commodities traded during the time of mass enslavement. Productivity, he shows, was increased through the use of punishment and torture of enslaved people as a mechanism to meet production quotas in the cotton fields. Productivity was further realized by separating out the most physically able workers for export to large-scale plantations developing in the south and west, shattering families. Owners of enslaved people were able to leverage their human “assets” through bonds secured by the human collateral and guaranteed by state governments, which financed much of this expansion and the development of capitalism, along with the building of family fortunes among white owners of human beings, land, and enterprises that supported the trade in enslaved people and in the products they produced.
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The discussion in government at the time focused on the tremendous “wealth” that enslaved peoples’ bodies represented to those who claimed ownership, and the pressing question—not of how those enslaved people should be compensated for their kidnapping, unpaid labor, and suffering—but how slave owners should be compensated for the loss of these “assets” should slavery end.

In the north, too, families built fortunes via slavery and the slave trade—directly participating, investing, supplying, or providing finance and transportation (Baptist, 2013).

This system of brutal enslavement was only possible because of the participation of all facets of white society. Law enforcement and legal system enforced the slave owners’ tyranny over Black bodies. White-led churches sanctioned the institution of slavery, and preached patience and forbearance to those suffering. Banks loaned money that was collateralized with black bodies. Political leaders adopted such policies as the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, which required law enforcement in “free” states to kidnap and re-enslave those who had fled north for freedom, and prohibited aid to enslaved people (Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, 2022).

The scope of the violence and exploitation is vast. Most of the stories are lost of the people brutalized, the families torn apart, and the centuries of back-breaking labor. The Civil War was followed almost immediately by the reign of white terror when the federal government—after a very brief period of reconstruction—broke the promises of “40 Acres and a Mule” intended to help formerly enslaved people restart their lives with a fraction of the wealth they had helped to create. The farms and businesses Black families did nevertheless build were starved of credit by private banks and public financing. Federal funding for agriculture excluded Black farmers (US Commission on Civil Rights, 1982). The GI Bill supported education for white veterans, not Black people (Onkst, 1998). Redlining kept homes from being the pathway to the middle class for Black people as they were for white people (Anderson, 2020).

White supremacist terror and exploitation have continued unabated since that time, changing form and locations, waxing and waning in severity. Today, lynching is rare, but Black people dying in police custody is not. Chain gangs are gone, but prison labor continues, carried out chiefly by African-Americans who, at every stage in the criminal justice system, are treated more harshly than their white counterparts. Today, neighborhoods and schools are as segregated as they were in the pre-civil rights era.

The brutal exploitation of enslaved African people and their descendants, and their exclusion from the nation’s wealth, is only one component of the explosive growth of American wealth.

The taking of lands from Native people was foundational, providing space for the expansion of white settler holdings, transportation routes controlled by settlers, and access to resources on Indigenous lands.

Indigenous peoples—making right the stolen lands and crushed hopes

When European explorers first made contact with the Native peoples of the Americas, there were an estimated 50 million people living from the Arctic North to Tierra del Fuego, from the saltwater estuaries of the Northwest to the lush rivers of the Amazon. The tribes were affiliated to a variety of federations and alliances, speaking a wide range of languages, with a standard of living that was arguably superior to that of most of Europe. They were healthier, lived longer, and many of them ranged over large areas of the Americas.

Following contact, populations of Native people—hollowed out by disease, displacement, killings, and enslavement—were a fraction of their earlier size. North America’s original
people were pushed off their land and massacred as white settlers moved westward and consolidated control.2

Likewise, the peoples of the area that is now Texas and the US Southwest, many of whom are Indigenous peoples, lost their lands during the Mexican–American War. Many of today’s immigrants from the south of the border are from displaced Indigenous communities.

In an effort to assimilate Native people, the US government prohibited religious expression and took children away from their families to boarding schools, where they were taught that their way of life was wrong and punished for speaking their language or praying as they had been taught. Many were physically and sexually abused (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2021).3

The shattering impact of the loss of land, culture, family and community, and the grief and trauma of separation and abuse echo across generations, and to this day, most Americans have little idea about what happened.

Increasingly, though, awareness is growing that all of us here in the Americas are living on lands that were once inhabited, and cared for, by Native peoples. And the wealth accumulated in this most affluent country was created on these lands—often through destructive extractivism, along with the land theft and massacres.

In spite of hundreds of years of colonialism, Native peoples survived and are making a comeback on their own terms. As they do, they are insisting on recovering their rights, their culture and ways of life, and restoring their region’s ecological systems, which all humans, and all life, rely on.

Mother Earth

“There are no unsacred places; there are only sacred places and desecrated places.”

How to Be a Poet by Wendell Berry, 2001, p. 270

In past centuries, flocks of birds filled the skies in numbers so large that scientists could calculate the scale of a migration by counting the numbers passing in front of a full moon.

Today, many people enjoy the sightings of wild birds, but entire species of birds are dying; 23 species, including the ivory-billed woodpecker, were declared extinct as I completed work on this essay (Associated Press, 2021). Other living beings, too, are endangered and dying out—some tiny but playing crucial roles in the ecological web that supports all life.

The world may finally be coming to terms with the ecological crisis, and it is possible that this reckoning will occur in time to stop the societal collapse. The signs of the climate crisis—one aspect of this larger crisis—have become impossible to ignore, from the wildfires burning through the parched west of North America, floods and record-breaking storms along the eastern seaboard and the Gulf states, warming oceans becoming more acidic and less able to support the organisms that produce more than half of the oxygen we rely on (Morsink, 2017).

We are coming to see that the stripping of resources from the body of Mother Earth, and the dumping of pollutants into the oceans, rivers, and the atmosphere can’t continue.

A lack of understanding of the fragile and interconnected biological and geological functioning of the living planet is part of the problem. But in many cases, we do know, but choose to act as though we don’t.

Many white people and their descendants have grown tremendously wealthy and received status, power, and rewards by extracting from the Earth and dumping wastes into her atmosphere and waterways.
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In economic terms, this is “externalizing” the costs. The vast majority of the world’s population survive through farming, fishing, and low-wage employment and have a fraction of the impact on the planet as those living in the Global North. Still, the environmental costs are borne by all, while the profits are concentrated among those who are already wealthy.

Money accumulated by individuals and powerful corporations is used, in part, to fund climate-denying scientists, buy political influence, fund “think tanks” to spread pseudoscience and economics, and self-serving policy prescriptions, all in the service of blocking actions that could protect the living planet, but would erode some people’s profits (Goldenberg, 2015; Rojas, 2019). The world’s wealthiest have been delaying action on the climate crisis, perhaps beyond points of no return.

Where we stand today

The exploitation of enslaved people, the taking of Indigenous people’s land, and the extraction and dumping in the natural world make extreme capitalism possible, and with it, the excessive enrichment of a small group of mainly white men who were able to remake the planet in their interest. Their control of media and education made their narrative the accepted one, justifying their power. Their political connections maintain the laws and regulations that benefit them, including the structures of finance and corporations, which further build their wealth while all of us, and future generations, pick up the tab.

This system, which combines economic clout, political power, and a culture of individualism and consumerism, is continuing to cause profound damage. These are multi-generational forms of harm that began before we were born, and the repercussions will continue after we are gone. But we should be clear—the pain is not equally shared.

A creative future requires coming to terms with this dynamic, and building a new foundation of inclusion and equity. And we are nearly out of time.

Failure to repair this damage reproduces the harm, causes fresh rounds of trauma, and deepens divides. Allowing the mythology of white supremacy to continue unchecked reinforces the right-wing backlash, which is built on attempts to justify the white privilege. This backlash is preventing progress on many fronts. Scratch below the surface of the resurgent Right, and it’s clear that racial animus is a, or the, driving issue blocking action on universal health care, investment in public education, poverty alleviation, and greater economic fairness.

On the other hand, if we take on the challenge of addressing historic harms, we can mend divides, offer healing to the traumatized, build greater equity across classes and races, and provide a foundation for a new world that we can build together.

Making it right

In From Here to Equality: Reparations for Black Americans in 21st-Century, William Darity Jr. and A. Kirsten Mullen (2020) propose a process to address the harms done to African-Americans summarized as ARC—Acknowledgment, Redress, Closure:

Acknowledgment involves recognition and admission of the wrong by the perpetrators or beneficiaries of the injustice. ... Beyond an apology, acknowledgment requires those who benefited from the exercise of the atrocities to recognize the advantages they gained and commit themselves to the cause of redress. ... Closure involves mutual conciliation between African Americans and the beneficiaries of slavery, legal segregation, and ongoing discrimination toward blacks. Whites and
blacks would come to terms over the past, confront the present, and unite to create a new and transformed United States of America.

(p. 9)

The following approach builds on Darity’s and Mullen’s proposal, but expands it to include harms to the Indigenous peoples who live throughout the area now the United States, and damage to the natural world.

This proposal also suggests that resisting current harms must be part of the process. Black and Indigenous people are still being brutalized by the criminal justice system, still suffer from economic inequality, and have lower life expectancy and health outcomes. Mother Earth continues to be torn up and dumped on, with consequences for all life, including human life.

We also add a final step, “Transformation,” aimed at remaking the institutions now founded in white supremacist culture.

The full process, then, includes stopping current harms, telling the truth of what has occurred, acknowledging (and apologizing) for harm done, reparations or restoration, and transformation.

Truth-telling

Establishing a shared understanding of what has occurred may be contentious, but it is an essential foundation to healing. Truth and Reconciliation Commissions are one way to accomplish this.

“Officially establishing the truth of the past can be critical to a society’s coming to terms with a period of widespread abuse,” concludes a study of Truth Commissions around the world (Hayner, 1994, p. 655).

A truth commission has the potential to “reduce the number of lies that can be circulated unchallenged in public discourse,” Canadian historian and politician Michael Ignatieff (1996, p. 112) observed (as cited in Odartey-Wellington and Alhassan, 2016, p. 38).

After the South African Truth and Reconciliation process, for example, it became difficult to defend the system of legalized white supremacy known as apartheid. Likewise, Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation process for reckoning with boarding schools helped to create a shared understanding of a history that included the forced removal of First Nations children from families and communities into schools rife with abuse and neglect (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2021).

For many Americans, our identity is wrapped up in belief in American exceptionalism. Any blemishes on the historic record of this country challenges white supremacy and entitlement, and is felt as an existential threat.

So sources of objective truth-telling—including scientists, journalists, public health officials, and educators—are often maligned and even threatened with violence by the white nationalist Right.

Classrooms are a focal point for this war over telling the truth. A majority (55%) of educators surveyed by Education Week Research Center in 2021 said classroom conversation about racism, sexism, and other controversial issues should not be limited by legislation (Najarro, 2021). But 32% said such teaching should be restricted, according to the survey, reported in Education Week. And 23% of the educators surveyed said they do not believe systemic racism exists. These results were reported at a time when 21 states had introduced bills limiting the teaching of so-called critical race theory or other curriculum on racism and sexism. Five states had signed such bills into law as of June 2021, according to Education Week (Najarro, 2021).
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The battles at times seem absurd, as when a Texas publisher had to back off of its cringe-worthy referral to enslaved people as simply “workers” (Schlanger, 2015).

For white people who have not acquired wealth and power, acknowledging the realities about the role of white supremacy in American society may seem to threaten their last chance at the affluence and status that they believe they are entitled to as a birthright.

We live in a system with a steep gradient between the top and the bottom—where failure to “make it” can result in a lifetime of debt, insecurity, and humiliation. So, the fears are very real.

These factors and others complicate the willingness of white people to fully take in the facts of our history, or to hear the experiences of Black and Indigenous people.

Hearing the truth is nonetheless an essential step if we are to build a life-sustaining future.

Acknowledgment and apologies

While the truth-telling step is primarily about listening to survivors of harm, and to research, the acknowledgment phase is the time for those who did the harming, or benefited from it, to speak. This may include apologies.

Apologies can be difficult and humbling. Some religious groups, though, have stepped up to do the repentance and grieving that go with acknowledgment.

Catholic and Protestant Church leaders sent the following acknowledgment to Pacific Northwest Tribal leaders in 1987:

This is a formal apology on behalf of our churches for their long-standing participation in the destruction of traditional Native American spiritual practices. … We have frequently been unconscious and insensitive and not come to your aid when you have been victimized by unjust federal policies and practices. In many other circumstances we reflected the rampant racism and prejudice of the dominant culture with which we too willingly identified. … We, as leaders of our churches in the Pacific Northwest, extend our apology. We ask for your forgiveness and blessing.  

Church Council of Greater Seattle, 1987

Acknowledgment can take the form of words, works of art, monuments, or memorials. A powerful example is The National Memorial for Peace and Justice, which contains more than 800 steel monuments, one for each county in the United States where a racial terror lynching took place (The National Memorial for Peace and Justice, n.d.).

An especially brilliant feature of this museum is that, in each case, a replica of the monument was created and offered to the community where the atrocity occurred. Each community is invited to acknowledge what took place in their community by erecting historical markers, holding essay contests for local high school students, and other “community-led efforts to engage with and discuss past and present issues of racial justice,” according to the Memorial’s website (The National Memorial for Peace and Justice, n.d.). The Memorial staff will work with these communities to erect a replica of the marker now in the museum.

To be meaningful, acknowledgments and apologies should be done in public, and in the presence of those harmed.

This process may or may not result in “forgiveness.” During the Truth and Reconciliation process in South Africa, for example, there were emotional stories involving families of murdered South Africans or victims of torture forgiving the perpetrators who had confessed their crimes. Forgiveness can offer healing to all involved, but it is a mistake to expect it.
Restitution, reparation, restoration, redress, repair

It’s quite amazing how powerful “I’m sorry, please forgive me” can turn out to be, when it is genuine. But the genuineness will be tested, in fact, by whether you are prepared to make up as far as you can. Are you ready to provide material resources that will seek to redress the balance, and in the United States, it’s schools, and housing, and work, job discrimination.

—Archbishop Desmond Tutu in interview with the author, Davis & van Gelder, 2015

“The only compensation for land is land.”

Winona LaDuke, 2020

The necessity of repair or reparations is not a new concept to African-American and Indigenous leaders. Rep. John Conyers (D-MI) began introducing HB 40, which calls for a commission to study reparations, in 1989; the bill finally cleared a House committee for the first time in 2021.

Author Ta-Nehisi Coates rekindled the discussion with his much-read and discussed article, “The Case for Reparations” published in the Atlantic in 2014 (Coates, 2014).

In Indian Country, also, there are efforts to repair past harms. The Lakota Sioux Nation has been working to reclaim the Black Hills, sacred land to the Tribe and retained by the Tribe in the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868. Once gold was discovered, though, the US government took the land, and unilaterally removed the Black Hills from the Sioux Reservation in 1877. The Supreme Court sided with the Lakota Sioux in 1980, and ordered the Tribe paid for the land, with interest. But the Tribe refused the money—they want the land back (Black Hills land claim, 2022).


That process rightfully starts by honoring the treaties the United States made with Indigenous nations, by restoring all sacred sites, starting with the Black Hills and including most federally held parks and land and all stolen sacred items and body parts, and by payment of sufficient reparations for the reconstruction and expansion of Native nations. In the process, the continent will be radically reconfigured, physically and psychologically. For the future to be realized, it will require extensive educational programs and the full support and active participation of the descendants of settlers, enslaved Africans, and colonized Mexicans, as well as immigrant populations.

Reparations take many forms, and only those most affected can say what form is acceptable. In the book, From Here to Equality, Darity and Mullen (2020) argue that closing the wealth gap between African-Americans and white people would be a reasonable form of reparations.

“Those who have been hurt must be the ones who have the right to propose what it is that will begin to assuage the anguish, or you’ll just be repeating the same cycle of the perpetrator, who is a top dog, prescribing,” Archbishop Desmond Tutu said in a 2015 interview with the author (Davis & van Gelder, 2015).

Local action

Action at the scale needed will eventually have to be a national project, but there are many ways local communities and institutions can begin the process now. And local action can set the example and build the momentum for national reparations.
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A good example is the recent action by Georgetown University, where 272 enslaved people were sold into bondage in Louisiana plantations in 1838 to pay off the debts of the university’s Jesuit owners (Andrew, 2021). Today, the Jesuits have pledged $100 million as reparations, with the funds to be controlled by the descendants of those enslaved people. The Descendants Truth & Reconciliation Foundation will invest the money in descendants’ education, in anti-racism advocacy, and to support elderly descendants (Andrew, 2021).

This story has many of the elements described above: Truth-telling—a group of Georgetown alumni did painstaking research to identify 200 of the individuals who had been sold by the Jesuits, and then to find around 8000 of their descendants (Andrew, 2021). Acknowledgment and apologies—the Jesuits, when confronted by descendants, apologized. And reparations, as defined by the survivors.

“We didn’t know what to do in response to our sin of slaveholding, and the descendants said, ‘We can show you a way forward,’” Rev. Tim Kesicki, president of the Jesuit Conference of Canada and the US, told CNN. “With courage, we followed” (Andrew, 2021).

In the case of restoring the natural world, restoration should be guided by Indigenous people, who hold traditional ecological knowledge, by natural scientists, and by representatives of future generations.5

Transformation

When we stop the harms, lift up the truth, acknowledge and apologize, and seek to repair the damage, we have created the preconditions for fruitful collaboration across races and cultures. And, in the process of undertaking these steps, we have already started the work of building a creative future.

Failure to engage in this process with sincerity and integrity risks re-traumatizing those already traumatized and reproducing the wrongs that got us to this point. Without these steps, the old oppressions are simply reformulated into new ones.

The work of restitution and repair, done with the guidance of those most harmed, helps rebalance broken power relationships. People of color, who make up the world’s majority, are fully included and powerful. That means the new world being created draws on the brilliance of every culture and is created based on equity, not a continuation of exploitation and trauma.

And this work is the precondition for unifying around a truly equitable and empowered people’s movements with the clout required to make real change that can benefit all those who have been marginalized. We no longer allow race to be the wedge issue that keeps us from trusting and collaborating across race lines.

This is also a rejection of the use of power by one group to extract labor, land, resources, or other value from those less powerful. This creates a starting point for envisioning ways of life that no longer rely on anyone’s marginalization or exploitation, or the exploitation of Mother Earth.

Conclusion

Reckoning with the past is important for its own sake. Our ancestors and founders of the United States committed grave injustices, and these acts diminished the lives of generations of people, who suffered, in many cases terribly, through no fault of their own. Many of these harms continue today. These actions created enormous wealth and power for a relatively small group of mainly white people. Although many white people also got left behind, there were always many more routes to the middle class and beyond open to white people than were
ever available to most people of color. So acknowledging and seeking to make right what was wrong is about justice for its own sake.

But there are more reasons to do this work.

As we delve deeply into the wrongs committed in the past, we learn important lessons about the cultural beliefs, institutions, and power dynamics that led to these atrocities. Understanding those dynamics can lead to a commitment to societal changes that will undo the hegemony of white supremacy culture and prevent these sorts of atrocities in the future.

Understanding our nation’s specific forms of intergenerational wealth and privilege will counter the sense of entitlement to wealth and power that is a part of white supremacy culture, and justifies today’s massive wealth and income inequalities. These insights can also counter US exceptionalism, which has justified disastrous foreign interventions.

At the same time, full realization of the extraordinary courage and grit that it took our brothers and sisters of color to resist and survive in spite of the brutality they were subjected to can increase respect and esteem for them, their ancestors, and the many contributions these communities have made to our society.

With greater understanding comes humility, which opens us to learning and transformation.

We have much to gain through this process: healing, better relationships across race and culture lines, a sense that all belong. We can let go of the white hubris that has been so harmful and join with people of all races and nationalities in taking on today’s major crises.

And in a time of crippling isolation, fragmentation, and loneliness, we can build a more resilient community life.

This process is not a quick fix. But beloved community and transformation is possible, and it begins with this reckoning.

Notes

1 This chapter focuses on the history and possibilities for a creative future in the context of the United States. Many, but not all, of the principles apply widely—particularly those related to acknowledging and repairing the damage of colonialism and white supremacy.

2 Although much of the time of westward expansion took place at the time that formerly enslaved people were seeking land to settle on and begin a new life as free citizens, the land was not offered to them.


4 See, for example, a quote by Randal Balmer, author of Bad Faith: Race and the Rise of the Religious Right (2021b), in a recent column in The Guardian, “the beauty of the religious right’s embrace of abortion as a political issue is that it allowed leaders to camouflage the real origins of their movement: the defense of racial segregation in evangelical institutions,” in a 2021 column in The Guardian titled “There’s a straight line from US racial segregation to the anti-abortion movement.” https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/sep/08-abortion-us-religious-right-racial-segregation (2021a). Accessed September 17, 2021.

5 A recent study shows young people are overwhelmed by climate anxiety (see Thompson, 2021). Young people will also be the ones confronted with the worst impacts (see Hachadourian, 2015).
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References


