The Center for Social Solutions (CSS) at the University of Michigan is poised to launch an innovative project that focuses specifically on and addresses racial inequality and its many manifestations. Founded in 2018, CSS was created to foster research and collaborations that diagnose and solve critical social problems. Our four founding issues—diversity and democracy, slavery and its aftermath, water equity and security, and the future of work—concern different forms of inequality that we believe must be addressed for the sake of advancing a more democratic society.

*Description of Proposed Work*

CSS seeks a $5,000,000 grant for use over three years to create and leverage a national network of college and university-based humanities scholars working in partnerships with community-based organizations to develop research-informed, community-engaged reparation plans for each location. The network will consist of 8-10 geographically-dispersed and organizationally-different colleges and universities, employ the spectrum from senior humanists to graduate students, and involve community fellows as well as local organizations in a collaborative public history reckoning designed to offer tangible suggestions for community-based racial reparations solutions. Faculty and graduate students who participate stand to showcase the importance of humanities scholarship for tackling gnarly social problems, gain an opportunity to connect theory and practice, and demonstrate the value of humanities scholarship for crafting workable solutions. Community partners stand to gain a better appreciation of the colleges and universities in their communities, demonstrate that they too are intellectual workers, and produce a plan that speaks to the local history and suggests real options or solutions. Once completed each site proposes to present findings and recommendations to local policymakers, and provide detailed recommendations for implementation, akin to what occurred in Evanston, Illinois (2019)-- and more recently in Asheville, North Carolina (2020).

*Rationale*

This proposal, “Crafting Democratic Futures: Situating Colleges and Universities in Community-based Reparations Solutions,” emerges from the Center’s focus on slavery and its aftermath and is informed by three generations of humansitic scholarship, and what that scholarship suggests for all seeking just futures. We have come to learn that African peoples who survived the trans-Atlantic journey or Middle Passage, entered the Americas with transferable knowledge and not just their labor. That the record shows slavery exacted a toll--physically, emotionally, and psychologically. Exiting slavery, mindful of the need for resources, the formerly enslaved organized and demanded recognition of their plight and sought a kind of restitution or reparations. Rather than securing such reparations, in the main, most experienced further hardships, which the segregation-era reinforced. Callie House, for example, worked tirelessly through the Ex-Slave Mutual Relief, Bounty and Pension Association in a pursuit of reparations, but rather than offering aid, the federal government charged her with fraud and other crimes. And as W. Caleb McDaniel notes in his Pulitzer-winning history, *Sweet Taste of Liberty*, only Henrietta Wood succeeded in bringing claims for false imprisonment during slavery and earning formal reparations.

The question of reparations for the descendants of enslaved African peoples in the Americas, and especially the United States, had—until recently—been part of a smaller effort seeking a broader audience, lingering on the other side of what is possible until the late 20th century. In 1987 the federal government offered reparations to Japanese Americans interned during World War II and their descendants; it admitted that it wrongly declared them foreign agents and held them against their will in encampments. With this important gesture, the issue of reparations achieved new status in American life. The following year then-Congressman John Conyers (Democrat, Michigan) introduced a bill authorizing a commission to study the merits of reparations for African Americans. The legislation, known as H.R. 40, has been before Congress ever since.

Conyers’ effort built on more than a century of agitation, litigation, and education. In the late 1800s, formerly enslaved African Americans called on the government to recognize the generations of coerced, unremunerated laborers with material forms of assistance. While the effort became entangled with the idea of forty acres and a mule, the cause of reparations involved more than financial compensation for years of enslavement and equal years of postemancipation racialized trauma.

Today, in the wake of the public execution of George Floyd and the publicized murder of Breonna

Taylor, among others, there has been a renewed call for reparations. It has come in the form of pushes to defund the police, corporate largess for past transgressions, removal of statues and monuments, name erasures, and symbolic acts of inclusion. Somewhat missed in this groundswell of activity has been community-centered efforts to formulate scalable, sustainable local frameworks for reparations.

Some, such as Duke University Professor William Darity have argued that community-based solutions ignore the federal government’s role in devising a national plan with earmarked federal dollars. Certainly federal involvement is warranted and long overdue. We believe, however, there is not an either-or road to reckoning and that a humanities approach, centered on the contours of local histories, is vital to a fuller telling and the solutions to follow. As history has shown, oftentimes national action followed strategic work by local actors. That is undeniably one of the lessons to be extracted from the history of the civil rights movement. From Montgomery to Greensboro, Albany to Birmingham, Atlanta to Selma, men and women organized at the local level to achieve change at the national level.

Previous instances of community-based reparations solutions may, when combined with strategic and innovative collaboration, serve as models for communities across the nation. One such example follows from the efforts of citizens and community leaders in Evanston, Illinois. Through careful historical research, Evanston came to understand that social policy meant black and brown communities paid an exceptional price for the war on drugs with higher than anticipated incarceration rates. As a result, it decided to use tax funds from the legalization of marijuana to underwrite investment in and financial resources for its black residents. Here, a detailed analysis led to a specific solution. This model is replicable, scalable, and sustainable. Universities and colleges, with humanitists in the lead, can steer similar efforts nationally.

Guided by the scholarship on community engagement and social movements, the proposed project aims to combine several dimensions, while highlighting how humanities work can simultaneously enhance higher education and the communities in which they are located. Specifically, a national network of eight to ten colleges and universities, guided on each campus by historians, historical sociologists and others will work with community fellows, selected based on recognized work on matters of race and justice, to co-author local histories and engage key community stakeholders in government, the religious sector, and business in local reparations solutions. Such an approach allows scholars, young and old, to demonstrate the relationship between theory and practice and to underscore the ways humanities research can and should shape policy discussions. After all, just futures require some purposeful attention to social policy at all levels. In addition, we aim to highlight the ways colleges and universities are resources for change at the local level. Through professionally facilitated conversations, we expect to take the findings from the scholars into community settings in all locales--from churches, synagogues and mosques, to reservations and community centers. Those exchanges will result in carefully crowdsourced plans for addressing racial reparation. Once completed, the overall project would produce replicable processes and solutions that other cities and their higher educational institutions can duplicate and modify. To aid the national conversation and to advance the broader mission of community-based reparations, we plan a final book as well as a documentary that chronicles the processes and elucidates the recommendations.

*Project Description*

The project we propose requires the careful and critical eye and analytical skills of humanists and those in the humanistic social sciences. Moreover, we seek to harness the intellectual, personal, political and economic capital found in colleges and universities, as well as in community partners, to address the need for reparations and support community-led efforts to develop reparation plans. As anchor institutions colleges have the ability to attract a diverse set of actors to drive solutions to complex problems, the intellectual acumen to link the past to the present in formulating solutions, and the influence and staying power to drive permanent, enduring change. They have their own histories in communities as well, which we understand may at times enable or impair the project outlined.

The undergirding theory of change argues that history can be mobilized by scholars to inform the present and help communities craft effective solutions that erase structured inequities. Specifically, this project aims to build on university-community partnerships to ultimately offer reparations solutions that emanate from the careful exploration of local histories informed by planned engagements with community members in 8-10 locations dispersed across the country. Historians, historical sociologists, African Americanists, literary historians and other humanities scholars at selected colleges or universities will mine local archives and work with community members and municipal officials to identify programs and opportunities that would contribute to just futures for African American and in places Native American communities. Ideally, such initiatives would relate to workforce development, entrepreneurship, homeownership, education and infrastructure. As in Evanston, the goal of the culminating report is to necessitate action by elected community leaders. An important piece to this effort includes facilitator-led dialogue sessions that positions community members to co-author the local histories and generate potential solutions. This project and the processes are a pivotal shift in recognizing and addressing the wealth and opportunity gaps African American and Native communities experience due to historical racism and discrimination, and therefore our efforts will be recorded through a documentary to be disseminated nationwide.

Without question, the history of reparations in the United States begins with the displacement of Native Peoples, the creation of the institution of slavery, its application to African Americans and implications for Native Americans. Humanists and social scientists continue to document the long-term effects not just of slavery, and its abolition, but of segregation as well on the material, social, and psychological wellbeing of African and Native Americans. Those histories, anchored in the specifics of place, must be written to secure policy solutions and just futures.

*Proposed Activities and Schedule - Project Period: January 1, 2021 – December 31, 2023*

*Year 1: January 1, 2021 – December 31, 2021*

* *PI hires a managing director to oversee day-to-day operations for the three years of the grant.*
* *Select 8-10, geographically and institutionally diverse colleges and universities from across the country. (The group would include the University of Michigan, Rutgers University-Newark, 3-4 members of the Council of Independent Colleges, Carnegie Mellon University, Emory University, and at least one HBCU).*
* *Identify four regional directors that would work with 2-3 colleges in their region, drawn from the list of co-PIs.*
* *Impanel a group of historians and scholars of social movements to help guide research framework.*
* *Hold initial convening of all participating university-community partners.*
* *Underwrite faculty research leads able to document a community rationale for reparations.*
* *Allocate funds for one to two graduate students for three years to the project at each location.*
* *Hire an external facilitator/trainer expert in leading intense community discussions on sensitive subjects related to race and equity.*
* *Allocate funds for at least one community activist to design community-based strategy per location called community fellows.*
* *Engage and contract journalist(s) and media partner to document and assess the project from the outset, resulting in both individual productions and a concluding documentary.*

*Year 2: January 1, 2022 – December 31, 2022*

* *Annual convening of all participating university-community partners, with reporting on progress-to-date.*
* *Continue to underwrite faculty research leads able to document a community rationale for reparations.*
* *Continue allocation of funds for one to two graduate students for three years to the project at each location.*
* *Continue support of community fellows.*
* *Continue work with journalists and our media partner on documentary.*

*Year 3: January 1, 2023 – December 31, 2023*

* *Hold final annual convening of all participating university-community partners with reports on progress and achievements.*
* *Conclude support for faculty research leads able to document a community rationale for reparations.*
* *Conclude allocation of funds for one to two graduate students for three years to the project at each location.*
* *Conclude support of community fellows; secure reports.*
* *Work with journalists and media partners on a final documentary.*
* *Travel to and present at the US Conference of Mayors in Ohio.*
* *Contract a PR firm to craft a national message.*

*Outcomes*

The tangible deliverables would include: the development of a general template for community engagement; a summary product that integrates findings from all sites; documentation of best practices across sites; presentation of findings and recommendations to elected officials in each locale, with detailed steps for implementation; host concluding convening and shape a national message around the local reparation projects; and, develop briefing documents to share with appropriate congressional committees.

In the immediate moments after police murders and public protests, corporations and individuals pledged funds to certain groups and specific institutions. While noteworthy and even laudable, such efforts fail to conceptualize a systemic response. This is why we seek to craft democratic futures through a well-coordinated plan, where a select number of communities, after grassroots work, develop reparations plans born of their histories. Such an approach is scalable, would lead to resolutions in several locations across the country, encourage calls for replication, and may spur national involvement. This we believe redounds to the benefit of all.