

Scene on Radio
Season 6, Episode 5: A Way Forward
Transcript

John Biewen: Michael, I really don't think we could hear too much, in this series, from Mrs. Bertha Boykin Todd.

Michael A. Betts, II: I couldn't agree more, John. We've heard from Mrs. Todd in a couple of previous episodes. She's a 94-year-old community leader in Wilmington, a retired school administrator.

John Biewen: Mrs. Todd was not born in Wilmington. She's lived there for "only" seventy-plus years.

Michael A. Betts, II: That's right. She grew up in Sampson County, sixty miles from Wilmington, and got her Master's Degree at the historically Black North Carolina Central College, now Central University, in Durham. She moved to Wilmington in 1952. We were both so struck by what she told us about that experience.

John Biewen: She'd been hired, fresh out of her Master's program, as a media specialist at Williston, the city's Black high school.

Bertha Boykin Todd: When I arrived in Wilmington, it was a culture shock.

John Biewen: Why culture shock? This was the Jim Crow South, and there's a tendency, maybe, for those of us who never lived in it, to think that that segregated, white supremacist world was more-or-less the same everywhere, at least within a given state. But no.

Bertha Boykin Todd: I was accustomed – Durham was very progressive....

Michael A. Betts, II: As a student in Durham, the young Bertha had gone to integrated dances with white university students from Duke and UNC-Chapel Hill. This would have been unthinkable in Wilmington.

Bertha Boykin Todd: In Wilmington, I did not see Blacks and whites openly talking with each other. And I saw most Blacks not even looking whites straight in the face. I was not brought up that way. I was pretty outspoken, and the Blacks looked at me as if I may have come from Mars. And the whites looked at me as if, I guess, where did she come from? She's not like the people around here. Which I wasn't.

John Biewen: Later, in the 1960s, Mrs. Todd would lead efforts to desegregate the schools in New Hanover County.

Bertha Boykin Todd: I was angry with members of the black community during school desegregation.

Michael A. Betts, II: She felt they weren't pushing hard enough.

Bertha Boykin Todd: I said, well, these Black folk don' t care about their kids!

John Biewen: Mrs. Todd didn't understand, at the time, why Black folks in Wilmington seemed so resigned to their second-class status. But now she does.

John Biewen, in interview: To what extent did you think that had to do with the history?

Bertha Boykin Todd: One hundred percent, it had to do with it. You're talking about the 1898 atmosphere? Yes! As I reflect. I didn't really realize the profound residual effects of 1898 then.

Music

Michael A. Betts, II: So, sixty or seventy years after the massacre and coup, this place that had been a haven of opportunity for Black people in the 1890s now stood

out as a place where white folks were even more dominant than elsewhere in North Carolina, and Black people felt beat down.

John Biewen: Another generation later, in the 1990s, Bertha Todd led a small group of community leaders, Black and white, in forming a committee to commemorate the events of 1898 for the hundredth anniversary. She remembers the reaction when she reached out to the leaders of the city's mostly white civic organizations.

Bertha Todd: 'Let sleeping dogs lie! Don't, don't bring this up. Why do you want to bring this up now after almost a hundred years?' That was the first question from all White groups. But, I finally got over to them with a more comprehensive analogy that I developed. I believe in divine guidance. First I said, well don't you celebrate anniversaries? This is history! Finally I said, Sometimes wounds don't heal properly. And the physician has to lance the wound. It hurts. It's painful. But it will not heal properly until he has to lance it. The massacre, the violence in 1898 was a bad wound on New Hanover County. It was never addressed. We're simply trying to get the data, face the facts, and begin to heal and develop a process of reconciliation. And the spot may not be as dark.

Music

John Biewen: That is such a powerful metaphor. The need to lance a wound so it can heal properly. Mrs. Todd was making a case for something quite limited in that moment: a process of shared acknowledgment by the people of Wilmington. But her analogy raises the question: What would it really take to repair a wound like this?

Michael A. Betts, II: In our conversations with Black folks in Wilmington, none of them felt that a full acknowledgment of the massacre and coup, and its costs, has ever been achieved – considering how many people still don't know the story, or still have a distorted view of what happened in 1898.

John Biewen: At the same time, of the many Black North Carolinians we've talked to for this project – and Michael Betts, you're included – none would say that an acknowledgement, however complete it may be, is enough.

Michael A. Betts, II: No. Getting the facts widely known is an important step, but only the first step. So, what more needs to happen? Not just in Wilmington, North Carolina, but across the United States, to address the profound damage done by centuries of white supremacist violence, disenfranchisement, and theft?

Theme music

John Biewen: From the Kenan Institute for Ethics at Duke University, this is Scene on Radio Season 6: *Echoes of a Coup*, Episode 5. I'm John Biewen.

Michael A. Betts, II: And I'm Michael Betts.

John Biewen: In this episode, we're gonna try for a kind of ... reckoning. Right, Michael?

Michael A. Betts, II: Oh no, not that word.

John Biewen: I know, I know. We heard it a lot in 2020, 2021, after the murder of George Floyd and the protest movement that followed. "America's racial reckoning" was finally here.

Michael A. Betts, II: Until it wasn't, and was followed by a powerful backlash.

John Biewen: So, we'll talk about that, too. Our reckoning will touch on that aborted "reckoning."

Michael A. Betts, II: Fair enough. And, with help from some brilliant and committed people we've been talking to, we'll think through a way forward – for Wilmington, for

North Carolina, and for this country. What *would* it take, and what would it even mean, to heal? To make things right, or at least less wrong?

Music

John Biewen: Let's start with that acknowledgement thing. The failure to tell the truth about 1898 has been a big theme for us. And in fact, contributing to the acknowledgment of this country's brutal history is central to what we're up to in this series and on this podcast generally. You just said it's only a starting point, Michael, but it is a required step, isn't it?

Michael A. Betts, II: Absolutely. And people in North Carolina have made real strides since the 1990s, when those white folks were telling Berth Todd to let sleeping dogs lie. She and her fellow members of that committee – which included an equal number of white Wilmingtonians – put on a 100th anniversary commemoration of the massacre and coup in 1998. That committee was supported in its work by some direct *descendants* of white people who'd been involved in 1898, including descendants of the Secret Nine, the committee of elites who led the white supremacist campaign.

John Biewen: A few years later, the state Wilmington Race Riot Commission funded the study by LeRae Umfleet, which resulted in a powerful and detailed report on what

happened in 1898. And a few years after that, in 2008, again with leadership by Bertha Todd and others in Wilmington, the city established the 1898 Memorial Park and Monument.

Sound: Ambience at park

Michael A. Betts, II: It's small, kind of a pocket park, at the edge of town, near where the first shootings took place in 1898, and close to the Cape Fear River. A busy boulevard runs past on one side. There's a lawn and a couple of sitting areas, shaded by trees. At the center of the park, two low, stone walls are inscribed with a summation of the events of 1898, written by Bertha Todd. Behind those walls, the monument's main feature: an array of slender, bronze structures, six of them, each standing sixteen feet tall.

John Biewen: They're stylized boat paddles. Cedric Harrison, who owns and operates the historical tour business, WilmingtonColor, starts his tours at the monument. To him, the paddles evoke a deep relationship between Black people in America and water.

Cedric Harrison: Now of course we can talk about the positive connection, as we look at religion and Christianity, baptism, renewing, rebirth, refresh. But this

is moreso the connection to the negative struggle that people of African descent had with the water, spiritually. The connection between people of African descent coming over the bodies of water during the time of enslavement. But then more locally, the connection between Wilmington Black natives being thrown into the Cape Fear River during 1898.

Sound: Ambience at Memorial Park

Michael A. Betts, II: The monument, designed by the Georgia-based artist, Ayokunle Odeleye, is beautiful and fitting. But it's in a spot that gets very little foot traffic, and most times when I visit, there's no one here. And then there's this: The Cape Fear River is just a couple hundred yards away. That made Odeleye's boat paddles that much more meaningful when the monument was placed here. But a decade later, a real estate development became a higher priority.

Cedric Harrison: And so, originally, in 1998 and in 2008 when it was first put here, you could see the beautiful blue Cape Fear River in the background. But now, it is now blocked by some high-rise apartments called Flats on Front.

Michael A. Betts, II, in interview: What do you believe that this says about the ongoing commitment of the city and New Hanover County to processing the community trauma?

Cedric Harrison: Uh, it's just a story that continues to tell itself – just being so tunnel-visioned and focused on economic development, capitalism, whatever, what have you, the bottom line, that they oversee the important of healing, of repairing....

Music

Christopher Everett: I love the stuff that's happening in the Black community right now, but there still are some challenges. It's still hard for a lot of stuff to happen in this city.

John Biewen: That's the documentary filmmaker Christopher Everett. He grew up in Laurinburg, North Carolina, but now lives in the Wilmington area. His feature film, "Wilmington on Fire," came out in 2015. It was another milestone in the campaign to make the story of 1898 more widely known.

Michael A. Betts, II: Everett is now at work on a second film, about young Black Wilmingtonians who are working today to bring about change.

Christopher Everett: I've always been the mindset of, if it's not there, we got to create it. And that's why I did the first Wilmington on Fire. No one did a documentary on it, and I said, you know what, let me try to do it, and be a part of the solution.

Michael A. Betts, II: Chris's film has been widely screened and won a couple of awards. In 2019, during a Congressional hearing about reparations for the descendants of enslaved Black people, Julianne Malveaux, the economist, commentator, and former Bennett College president, gave the film a shout-out.

Julianne Malveaux, Congressional testimony, 2019: There's a film called Wilmington on Fire. I want everybody to watch this film, Wilmington on Fire. It really does talk about what happened in Wilmington in 1898, when they just basically burned Black folks out....

John Biewen: For a long time, documentary makers, teachers and others who tried to educate the public about the history of white supremacy in the U.S., toiled away on the margins. They might get some attention from time to time, but it was hard to see the needle move. Then came 2020 and the murder of George Floyd.

Chris Everett: You saw a shift throughout the whole country. You started seeing people, for a brief period of time, go all out to support black business. I even

seen it in my own stuff, man. I was getting hit up left and right to speak about racism. (Chuckles) I saw streaming numbers go up. Even a Black-owned streaming service, KweliTV, that I'm a part of, subscriptions went up tremendously. I know, I would go to Black farmers markets. You could easily walk in and get what you need and out. But during this time, lines were around the block just to get into these Black farmers markets. So, it was a widespread support of Black initiatives and everything – then it went away. And the same thing happened in Wilmington. You started to see a lot of things happen, but it kind of died down over a period of time.

Michael A. Betts, II: That “racial reckoning.” I struggle with that term. What started out *looking* like a reckoning really just petered out. Yes, millions of people, of every shade, did go into the streets, in the U.S. and all over the globe. It was widely considered the largest protest movement ever, in the U.S. if not in the world. Corporations and other organizations made big pledges about how they were ready to turn a new page on race in these United States.

John Biewen: The bestseller lists were dominated by books on whiteness and white supremacy.

Michael A. Betts, II: John, you must have seen a similar surge in interest towards some of your work.

John Biewen: To put it mildly. Seeing White, our season on the history of white supremacy, was three years old at that point. Folks downloaded those episodes more than two million times in the six months after George Floyd was killed – far more than listened when the series came out in 2017. For a few months, it seemed like Americans of every shade, including a lot of white folks in the mainstream, had sat up to take notice, moved by the brutal, slow motion, videotaped murder of George Floyd, and wanted only to learn more.

Michael A. Betts, II: But then came the backlash – or, should we say, whitelash.

Nestor Mato, Fox 35 News, Orlando, Dec. 2021: Governor Ron DeSantis announced new legislation he’s calling the “Stop Woke Act,” or Wrongs Against Our Kids and Employees Act. The bill creates a law to back up the state Board of Education’s ban on teaching Critical Race Theory in Florida schools. ...

Michael A. Betts, II: After the protests subsided, right-wing politicians and commentators launched a well-organized campaign to undermine the surge of interest in talking about white supremacy and its history in the United States.

John Biewen: Ron DeSantis’s campaign against “wokeness” is emblematic of the pushback. On the right, “critical race theory” became shorthand for any claim that anti-Black-and-brown racism was a prominent feature of American institutions and laws.

There's also been a wave of book bannings in various towns and states – including Wilmington, by the way – and attacks on teachers who said too much, in the classroom, about racism in the U.S., past or present.

Michael A. Betts, II: Florida's Stop Woke Act explicitly banned lessons that might make certain students feel “discomfort, guilt, anguish, or any other form of psychological distress” on account of their race. Which brings to mind what we heard from historian William Sturkey in the last episode. Remember, he was talking about historians in the early 20th century who shut down any teaching about white supremacist terror after the Civil War, including the Wilmington massacre and coup.

William Sturkey: That's basically how the history was treated. If it makes white people upset, then you just don't tell it.

Music

John Biewen: The Stop Woke Act in Florida was put on hold in the face of legal challenges from the ACLU and others. A district judge who blocked the law from taking effect called it “positively dystopian.”

Michael A. Betts, II: There's still so much work to do before we can say that Americans have reckoned with the reality of our white supremacist history, including crimes like the Wilmington massacre and coup. The resistance to that journey of

understanding and acceptance, and the commitment to the nation's customary denial, are still so strong.

John Biewen: While we're working on that front, the next question becomes: what would it mean to repair the damage, to make amends?

Kim Cook: When I was a kid, I shoplifted strawberry lip gloss from Kmart. And my mom caught me. She was mad. She was really mad.

Michael A. Betts, II: Kim Cook is a sociologist, criminologist, and restorative justice practitioner at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington.

Kim Cook: And it was an hour drive to Kmart. So she drove me back to Kmart, and that's a long way to go to return strawberry lip gloss. And she made me take it back into the store. She made me take it to the store manager. She made me tell the store manager what I had done. And she made me pay for it. I had to return it, and I had to pay for it. I had to pay for it three times – with embarrassment, with not getting the strawberry lip gloss, and then with the money that it would have cost had I bought it. My mom taught me to take responsibility when I do something wrong. And the 1898 massacre and coup d'etat was one of the wrongest things I've ever heard about, I've ever read about, I've ever seen unfold. I didn't see the violence unfold in 1898, but I've

seen the impact of it unfolding in this town since I arrived in 2005. It is a crime against humanity with many different types of crimes connected to it, like a cluster of crimes.

John Biewen: For Cook, who is white, that cluster of crimes includes, of course, the violence and loss of life, but also the loss of property, the stolen wealth, and the theft of political power from the Black community in 1898 and, really, ever since. And it's sort of a given when we're talking about these sorts of historical crimes, but, Michael, it still hit us – it was another one of those moments during our interviews when we looked at each other – when Kim said that next thing.

Michael A. Betts, II: Yes. When she pointed out that the actions of those white supremacists in Wilmington were never reversed.

Kim Cook: As far as I know, no historian has documented, no effort has been made, to repair the harms of the 1898 Massacre and Coup. It *has* to be repaired – for this city to be made whole, for this community to be made right, for the people that caused the harm and their descendants who have inherited the benefit of that plunder, and for the descendants of the people who were harmed to feel the benefit of people caring about what their families have been through over the last several generations. That needs to happen. That's paying for it three or four times.

Michael A. Betts, II: 1898 is not a million years ago, and many details of the massacre and coup are known. So, Cook says, let's get specific.

Kim Cook: I mean, let's talk about the cost of the property that Alex Manly lost. Let's talk about the cost of the printing press. Let's talk about the cost of Joshua Halsey's life and the impact on his children and his wife Sally. Let's talk about William Mouzon, whose descendant is one of my friends here in town and whose descendant is also a resident on death row in North Carolina.

John Biewen: William Mouzon was one of the Black men shot down in the first blast of gunfire, at 4th and Harnett Streets, on November 10th, 1898. Think of the successful Black businessmen and professionals who were banished at gunpoint and forced to leave their biggest assets behind, and the working-class Black families who fled the gunfire and had to start over somewhere else.

Kim Cook: Let's talk about what they've lost. Let's talk about the rug being pulled out from under them. Let's talk about repairing all of that harm. Let's have that conversation and let's make it right. Let's fix it because it isn't fixed yet.

Inez Campbell-Eason: I was going through some of the journals and stumbled across an ad for the Metropolitan Trust Company. And I saw the name Isham Quick, and I, you know, and I was going to turn the page, and I was like, *errrr*,

like, record scratch, let me back up, like, hey! That's my great-great granddad's name, and he, I was reading the names of the board members of the bank and was like, wait a minute, something is amiss here.

Michael A. Betts II: Inez Campbell-Eason, a school psychologist in Wilmington, can point to several branches of her ancestry who've been in the area for generations. She says, years ago, a researcher with the Cape Fear Museum of History and Science encouraged Inez to look into her family history because the Campbell side of her family owned substantial property in the 19th century. But then Inez learned about that great-great grandfather on the *other* side of the family, Isham Quick, who'd run a wood and coal hauling business and had real-estate investments.

Inez Campbell-Eason: He chartered the first Black-owned bank, helped to charter the first Black-owned bank here in the city of Wilmington back in 1893. It was called the Metropolitan Trust Company. And I learned this year, not only was he on the board of directors of that bank, and that bank was bonded for close to a million dollars. It was like \$900,000, which is a lot now, so just think about in 1893. Not only was he on that bank, he was on the board of directors of two other banks.

John Biewen: As a member of the Committee of Colored Citizens, Isham Quick was the target of white supremacist threats in 1898, according to the official state report.

He survived and remained in the city after the massacre and coup. But in the new Jim Crow Wilmington, his children and grandchildren never recovered the financial status that he had achieved.

Sonya Bennetonne-Patrick: Today, we still have not healed. The African American community was affected economically, socially, politically, and psychologically. And a lot of the things that were imposed in 1898 are here today.

Michael A. Betts II: This is Sonya Bennetone-Patrick, speaking in 2022 on the Laura Flanders TV and radio show. Bennetone-Patrick is chair of the New Hanover County Chapter of the National Black Leadership Caucus. She also chairs the Democratic Party in North Carolina's Seventh District, which includes Wilmington.

John Biewen: Remember how the white supremacist campaign of 1898 took aim at the specter of "negro rule" in North Carolina? As we said, that was a wild overstatement of Black people's political power. Even in Wilmington, a majority Black city and the strongest bastion of Fusionist, multiracial politics, Black men held only a small fraction of local elected and appointed offices. But a number of Black men did hold positions of responsibility, and Black voters were pivotal in choosing the city's leadership.

Michael A. Betts II: Bennetone-Patrick says Black political influence has never recovered.

Sonya Bennetonne-Patrick: For example, they didn't have a public official that was African American 'til 70 years later. Today, we still have never had a Black mayor, and you can count the number of public officials over that period of time, 'til today, on two hands. We have a new Hanover County Board of Education that has no African Americans on it as well. We don't have any representatives currently in the state House....

Michael A. Betts II: Kim Cook, influenced by conversations with Sonya Bennetone-Patrick, and determined to help change the dynamic in Wilmington, helped to start a local chapter of Coming to the Table.

John Biewen: It's a national organization that was founded by the descendants of Thomas Jefferson, and the descendants of two women with whom he produced children: His wife Martha, and Sally Hemings, the biracial, enslaved young woman the Jeffersons owned.

Kim Cook: They all had children, and the descendants for many generations denied knowing that they were kin to each other. Ultimately, through DNA testing, they discovered that they were in fact biological relatives of each other.

And they wanted to do something because of the national prominence of their story and because of their legacy in this country. They wanted to do something about repairing racial harms, around the connections that people have to the history of slavery, and to move forward in kinship and in unity around truth telling, making historical connections, taking action to repair the harms, and working toward a strategy of healing and hopefulness.

John Biewen: The Wilmington chapter of Coming to the Table has a similar goal. Kim Cook co-facilitates the group with Frankie Roberts, a Black community activist and lifelong Wilmingtonian. It brings together people, Black and white and biracial, whose ancestors had a role in the massacre and coup – as perpetrators or victims.

Michael A. Betts, II: Kieran Haile grew up in Southern California. He'd never been to North Carolina until his first visit in 2021. But he'd heard family stories about his ancestor, and 1898, and he's now a member of the Wilmington Coming to the Table chapter.

Kieran Haile: Alex Manly was my great-great grandfather. I'm a direct descendant in that way.

Michael A. Betts II: Alex, or Alexander, Manly, the Black newspaper publisher who had to flee Wilmington for his life before the white mob burned his printing press.

John Biewen: Kieran Haile is a DJ, music producer, and racial justice activist. Our theme music for this podcast series is a Kieran Haile composition.

Michael A. Betts II: For Kieran, the exploration of his family's history in North Carolina has powerful relevance in his everyday life – in fact, in his body. Like his great-great grandfather, Kieran is light-skinned.

Kieran Haile: I've chosen to acknowledge myself and view myself not as white, but certainly, others in my position, my siblings, could live their entire lives as white if they really wanted to, looking as I do.

John Biewen: Haile is convinced that his health also holds painful clues about his family history, and the legacy of racist brutality and exploitation.

Kieran Haile: I have been diabetic since, I must have been 19 when I was first diagnosed, but I've had some health problems, but my health started getting compoundingly worse right as I turned 30. My hip broke. Turned out that I had brittle bone disease, but that came about after a year or two of medical research and testing. I've had a hip replacement surgery, I've been sort of scrambling to deal with it ever since. And as I've tried to figure it out, as far as I can tell, the only leads that I have point to my Manly background, points to the Manlys. And

so I started at that point trying to just do family research, check my family tree.

But my family tree stops at Alex Manly.

Michael A. Betts II: Alexander Manly was almost certainly descended from enslaved people, as a mixed-race man born in 19th century North Carolina. Haile says his research on brittle bone disease pointed to something disturbing.

Kieran Haile: One of the consistent things that's a cause for all of it is inbreeding in your background. Everyone is aware, generally, when you think of slavery, everyone knows that the master would from time to time have his way with some of his female slaves and eventually add to his slave population, with illegitimate kids or legitimate, depending on how you view it. What people don't think about is that when that's the status quo for decades and decades, eventually they're raping their own daughters. And in a big enough slave population, cousins and half siblings would be married to each other. And that's just a reality of plantation life that people have chosen not to investigate or think much about.

Music

Michael A. Betts II: So, John, imagine: conversations between folks like Kieran Haile, Alexander Manly's great-great grandson, and white people descended from men who participated in the massacre and coup.

John Biewen: Right? Conversations based on, to borrow Kim Cook's words, kinship and unity around truth-telling, working toward healing and hopefulness, and taking action to repair the harms.

Michael A. Betts II: The Coming to the Table chapter is working to develop a proposal for reparations, for the damage that white supremacy has done to Black Wilmingtonians in 1898 and otherwise.

BREAK

John Biewen: Michael, when we talk on this show about the importance of, uh, "people" in the U.S. acknowledging the nation's white supremacist history, or embracing the need to repair the damage from that history, we're talking in particular about white folks, the majority population that still very much holds the power in this country. Sometimes we make that explicit, sometimes it's implied.

Michael A. Betts II: Right. I think everybody understands that. But that leads me to something that doesn't get said enough. Do you know who's *already* doing a lot to try to repair the damage from white supremacy, and always has been putting in that labor?

John Biewen: Let me guess. People *in* those marginalized, oppressed communities.

Michael A. Betts II: At least, let's say, to the extent folks can, given their limited capacity, especially financially. Black and Brown and Indigenous folks tend to be out here doing a lot.

John Biewen: In this case, since our series is about an African American community that was devastated by a massacre, coup, and disenfranchisement, let's focus on the Black community.

Michael A. Betts II: Yes. I spoke with some people in Wilmington about this.

Candice Robinson: I asked one of my respondents, well, why? Why do you spend all of this time volunteering? And she was like, 'cause I'm Black. And I

remember that interview, 'cause she looked at me like, how dare you ask me this question. Like, this is the most ridiculous question I've ever heard before.

Michael A. Betts II: Candice Robinson is my colleague at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington. She's a sociologist and she studies how Black people, especially in the middle and upper classes, show up in the world.

Candice Robinson: But what I find is that they're doing a lot of volunteering because they recognize the inequalities that are already baked within the system and they're not interested in only fighting for the institutional change, they also recognize there needs to be a little bit of mutual aid. There needs to be a little bit of support, because the government's not going to do enough. When I was doing my dissertation, I asked people how many hours a week did you volunteer this week? And they would say, you know, I have my nine to five and then I have my five to nine, so it's like a part time job. I'm only working like 20 extra hours on volunteer work – even though 20 hours is a lot of time too. But some of these people I would see out, I would get emails from, I would get texts from, I would be at events, and they were grossly underestimating how many hours a week that they were doing things. I know when someone calls me and they're like, Hey, can you shoot off this email real fast? I would never consider that five minutes as part of my volunteer work, but it's incredibly important. Or if I help my mom or help my aunt or I help my cousin, I'm not going to consider those

things as part of volunteer work. And I think for African Americans, we historically and contemporarily are a communal group, which means we don't consider these things as volunteering. We just consider it part of what you're supposed to be doing.

Michael A. Betts II: Robinson also studies *organizations* that have long worked to address the unmet needs of Black people, and to advocate for change and repair, in local communities and in Washington, DC.

Candice Robinson: When we look at organizations like the National Urban League and NAACP, they really are standing in the gap to ensure that poverty and inequality actually isn't worse than it already is. The Urban League's mission is to help eradicate inequalities around education, jobs, housing, health care, and ultimately they add civil rights after the civil rights movement. So you have the NAACP, you have the National Urban League, and as you move into the mid 20th century to the 1960s, you have things like the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, CORE, you have organizations that are dedicated to the experiences of Black women, National Council of Negro Women, National Council of colored women's club. You have inter-gendered organizations. You have interracial organizations. Because at the end of the day, back to what one of my respondents said, they were Black and they saw the need and how

important it was to create things to stand in the gap because the government really wasn't doing much.

John Biewen: Michael, I want to just step in here for a second, because some people might bristle at Dr. Robinson's words there: "the government wasn't doing much," and might say the government does a lot – spends billions of taxpayer dollars on antipoverty programs and so on, right?

Michael A. Betts, II: No doubt, people would say that.

John Biewen: But I think what Candice would say – and what a series like this one shows, the way it looks to me, is that the argument, "the government does *plenty* to help poor people and communities, who are disproportionately Black and Brown..." – that argument just doesn't do justice to the scale of the historical tally, of exploitation and theft from those communities.

Michael A. Betts, II: *Exactly.*

John Biewen: (Laughing.) I knew you were gonna say that.

Michael A. Betts, II: Of course, it's true, the government spends billions on food stamps and child support and housing assistance and on and on – and by the way, the majority of that support goes to white folks, simply because white people make up the

majority of people in this country, including low-income people. But, especially and disproportionately for folks who are *not* white, the hole that millions of people have to dig out of is just so deep.

John Biewen: Because of the widespread and systematic crushing and disempowerment of those communities, Wilmington being just one of countless examples. Black and Indigenous people have been the most oppressed and dispossessed groups, going back to the founding of the country and colonial America.

Michael A. Betts, II: Yes. So those band-aid government programs are good, as far as they go. They're essential, in fact. But they just aren't adequate to lift people out of those deep holes.

John Biewen: Did you know the phrase, lift yourself up by your bootstraps, was originally meant sarcastically, because of course it's physically impossible to do that? I mean, the physics just ain't there.

Michael A. Betts, II: And yet, I do think Black and Brown and Indigenous folks don't get enough credit for how we've survived and often thrived in this country in spite of it all. Of course, there's a long-running debate *within* the Black community about which side of the coin to emphasize: the unjust treatment this society has dealt out to us, and

what society should do to make up for that, or our own responsibility to work together and improve things in our communities.

John Biewen: That argument famously goes back at least to the 19th century: Booker T. Washington on one side, emphasizing “racial uplift” by Black folks themselves, and thinkers like Frederick Douglass or W.E.B. Du Bois calling for racial justice.

Michael A. Betts, II: Yes. And the debate is alive today.

Paul Jervay: I think we have to look at ourselves as far as what liberation looks like. We've come a long ways as a people. We are in a different circumstance.

Michael A. Betts, II: That's Paul Jervay. There's some poetry in the fact that he's a lifelong newspaper publisher. After the white mob burned down Alexander Manly's successful Black daily newspaper, the Daily Record, in 1898, it took almost thirty years before the Jervay family founded a new Black paper, the Wilmington Journal. The Jervays have owned and operated other newspapers in North and South Carolina, and Paul recently retired as publisher of *Raleigh's* Black paper, the *Carolinian*.

John Biewen: When he says Black people have come a long way, he's talking about, for one thing, the wealth that Black folks, collectively, have amassed.

Paul Jervay: That wealth could become a wealth dynamic if we could put it together, nationally, statewide. and locally. It's very hard to deal with liberation when you have situations of child hunger, when you have situations of poverty in the community. I think – and this is I, this is not the Black press – I think we need to step back and look at the village that we have lost. I think our strength is going towards liberation is unification. If we get it together on our side of the street before we go to the other side of the street, we can get what we want as far as liberation is concerned.

Music

Michael A. Betts, II: John, Paul Jervay is making a point about the importance of Black people acknowledging our Blackness and our distinct position in society, as a way of bringing us together to work for our freedom. Unlike him, I was once, in my college days, in the Booker T. Washington camp, but more of a budding Black conservative. I wanted a “colorblind” society, and thought Black folks needed to get ourselves together and lift ourselves up. And yes, I still believe we should do all the things – mutual aid, bring back the village, pool our resources to take care of one another. Hell, yes. *And* organize politically. But my opinion shifted as I learned more history, and gained a deeper understanding of how we got this grotesque racial wealth gap, for example.

John Biewen: Yes. You're talking about the fact that white American households have roughly ten times the assets of the average Black household. (For Latino families, the gap is roughly five to one.) Put another way, according to Duke economist Sandy Darity, there's a gap of 300-thousand dollars in wealth for every man, woman and child, or 850-thousand per household, depending on whether the family is Black or white.

Michael A. Betts, II: There are a whole bunch of concrete reasons for this. We don't have time to rattle them off here but folks, if you haven't listened to the Scene on Radio episode, "White Affirmative Action," go do that, from Season Two. Those reasons, no surprise, go back to 250 years of racialized slavery, and they reach up to now.

Larry Reni Thomas, in "Wilmington on Fire": I think if a person can prove that they are the descendant of the victims, and that there was some property lost, that they should be compensated.

Michael A. Betts, II: Larry Reni Thomas was a journalist, filmmaker and scholar, and another Wilmingtonian who spent years trying to shine light on the 1898 massacre and coup. He passed away in the summer of 2023. Here, Thomas is speaking in Christopher Everett's 2015 film, *Wilmington on Fire*.

Larry Reni Thomas, in “Wilmington on Fire”: My organization is called the International Organization for Compensation and Reparation for the Victims of the Wilmington Race Massacre of 1898. I've been seeking these people and I found two of them, two descendants, a Manly and Thomas C. Miller's descendants, and they want to be compensated. There's no telling what they could have been, especially the Manlys with his newspaper. There's no telling what he could have done with that newspaper.

John Biewen: Thomas C. Miller was the wealthiest Black man in Wilmington in the 1890s. He ran a real estate and pawnbroking business, and lent money to Black and white people. He was one of the men that the Secret Nine decided to run out of town at gunpoint, for being successful while Black.

Michael A. Betts, II: It's hard to calculate what Miller and his family lost when they had to flee and start over someplace else. But Larry Thomas thought that somebody should be doing that math for the benefit of Thomas Miller's descendants.

Larry Reni Thomas, in “Wilmington on Fire”: So I do favor compensation because I think it's the right thing to do. Just, simply that. I mean, it's just as simple as that. / We're talking about going to court. We're talking about lawyers handling this. I'm not a lawyer, you'd have to ask a lawyer how to do that.

Kim Cook: There's a difference between what I would consider to be the legal truth and the moral truth, right?

John Biewen: Kim Cook again, the UNCW sociologist and restorative justice practitioner.

Kim Cook: So the legal truth might have been, and might be, that the city took over derelict properties after 1898 that had been, quote, abandoned or for nonpayment of taxes when the actual people who own those properties were run out of town and no longer were safe in this town. So it might have been legal for the city to take over those properties. But the moral truth is missing from that legal truth, right? The moral truth is, why were those properties abandoned? Why were those properties not having payment of taxes? Why were those people no longer in their homes or on their property that they owned? And why did the city decide that it was okay to not pay those people back for the property that was taken away from them that they were run out of town. So, the moral truth is, we owe it to people.

William "Sandy" Darity: I think about thirty years ago I was a reparations skeptic myself. I was absolutely convinced that it's something that would never happen and so there wasn't much point investing time or effort in trying to promote the idea.

John Biewen: The Duke University economist William “Sandy” Darity is arguably the nation’s leading proponent of a major, national reparations project for the descendants of enslaved Black people in the U.S. He and his partner Kirsten Mullen co-wrote *From Here to Equality*, a book published in 2020 that lays out their proposed program.

Michael A. Betts, II: Here, Darity is doing a Zoom interview in 2020 with Pastor Phil Davis on the PBS program, *Courageous Conversations*. Darity says, years ago, a fellow scholar sent him a collection of essays on the prospect of reparations and wanted Darity to write the introduction.

William Darity: The more that I read, the more I was absolutely convinced that if we were serious about addressing racial and economic inequality in the United States, that it will require something of the magnitude of a reparations project for the Black American descendants of U.S. slavery.

John Biewen: Darity points to two examples of national governments paying substantial reparations to groups that those governments themselves had harmed: Germany’s reparations for victims of the Holocaust and their descendants, and the U.S. government’s payments to Japanese Americans who were wrongly incarcerated during World War II. That one was signed in 1988 by President Ronald Reagan.

Michael A. Betts, II: For Darity and Mullen, reparations for Black Americans should have three components: First, acknowledgment, which would come with an apology.

William Darity: The second component of a program of reparations is redress, which is the act of restitution, which traditionally has meant direct payments to eligible recipients or the victimized community for the harms that have been inflicted upon them.

Michael A. Betts, II: Finally, the third component: closure.

William Darity: Which is a settling of accounts, the recognition that the act of redress is adequate for the victimized community to make no further claims on the culpable party. Now, this doesn't mean that you forget about the harms. In fact, one of the things that we emphasize as an important component of a reparations plan is an educational and instructional activity, set of activities, that would set the record straight about America's past, particularly with respect to slavery, the Civil War, and the Reconstruction era.

Michael A. Betts, II: But, under Darity and Mullen's proposal, the restitution payments would mean the account is settled for all time so long as atrocities against the Black community don't continue or start again.

John Biewen: To be sufficient, they say, the U.S. government's payments would have to total ten to twelve trillion dollars. That's what it would take to close the wealth gap between Black and white Americans.

Music

Michael A. Betts, II: You've talked about reparations before on this show, John. In fact, Dr. Darity appears in that same episode we mentioned earlier, "White Affirmative Action," from the Seeing White series.

John Biewen: That's right. But it seems appropriate to touch on reparations again in the context of this story, Wilmington 1898. Because it's such a powerful example of the damage white supremacy has done to living, breathing human beings and their children and grandchildren. The violence, the political disenfranchisement, yes. But also the overwhelming harm done to people's livelihoods and their efforts to create some kind of economic security for themselves.

Michael A. Betts, II: Wilmington 1898 is also a stark reminder that a lot of that damage was done *after* slavery was abolished.

Music

John Biewen: So, Michael. What's left to say?

Michael A. Betts, II: Well, since you ask, John, this is a bleak, frankly horrifying story that we've told here. It's traumatizing, honestly. So I feel we should end on a different kind of note. Here's the thing. We wouldn't be talking about any of this if white supremacy had been completely successful.

John Biewen: Mmm.

Michael A. Betts, II: I'm proof that it didn't work. Every Black American who's alive today and doing just fine, thanks, is proof of that. And it's because of the resilience of Black and Brown communities that white supremacy has to keep reconstituting itself, taking different forms and new disguises. Think Lee Atwater. And, I know you don't usually go in for a lot of touchy-feely stuff on this show. Or references to comic books.

John Biewen: Well, I haven't read a comic book since 1971 and it was probably *Archie*. But hey, my friend, you have the floor.

Michael A. Betts, II: OK, so I'm talking about the superhero comics where they're fighting to save the world, right? There's a reason that so many of those stories rely on

the power of love to destroy evil. Love is the only thing that, in its exhaustion, rebuilds. It is actual perpetual emotion.

John Biewen. Whoa. Preach.

Michael A. Betts II: Well, now that you mention it, I can't help but think of my childhood upbringing in the church. Not trying to proselytize, but there's a passage that feels salient. You know how, when people get married in a church, they'll often use that reading about the characteristics of love?

John Biewen: Love is patient, Love is kind....

Michael A. Betts II: That's the one. It's a letter from Paul, and in the verses right before that, he says: "If I could speak all the languages of earth and of angels, but didn't love others, I would only be a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal."

John Biewen: Right, right.

Michael A. Betts II: And lines like this: "If I gave everything I have to the poor and even sacrificed my body, I could boast about it; but if I didn't love others, I would have gained nothing."

John Biewen: So, I think what you're trying to say is, it's great to talk about policies and programs and structural changes to make things better....

Michael A. Betts II: In fact we *have* to talk about those things, and do those things. But it would sure help if all of us could approach one another, and our painful history, with a commitment to kindness and love. It's the only way forward, really. Love.

John Biewen: That sounds like it could be the last word. But it's not, is it.

Michael A. Betts II: Nope. To be honest, that bit was mostly for white folks. There's one more person I want us to hear from, and this is for Black and Brown people. It's someone you and I both know: Michelle Lanier.

John Biewen: You're talking about the folklorist, former director of the North Carolina African American Heritage Commission, and now Director of the Division of Historic Sites for the state of North Carolina? That Michelle Lanier?

Michael A. Betts II: That's the one. She and I had a long conversation, but I want to end this series with just a few minutes of it. See, what Michelle does here is she addresses the fear, the terror, and the nihilism that a lot of Black and Brown people can so easily fall into.

John Biewen: You mean, in the face of white supremacy's relentlessness? Its seemingly unlimited capacity to morph, to change with the times, and to create a pretext for backlash, or whitelash, every time the country seems to be making a breakthrough on race?

Michael A. Betts II: Yes. Here's Michelle.

Michelle Lanier: I was raised primarily in Columbia, South Carolina and Hilton Head. I was raised in the shadow of a state Capitol building before Brie Newsom brought it down that had a Confederate battle flag flying. And so I was taught by my elders to seek safe haven away from any symbols, mention, or celebration of anything to do with the American Civil War. Because in their estimation, Civil War memory equaled Confederate memory, equaled white supremacy, equaled racial violence. You need to run. So, for me to enter into the field of public history at a time when many public historians were starting to prepare for the 150th anniversary of the American Civil War – so when I started in 2006 as a curator, we were beginning the process, five-year process, of planning the Civil War sesquicentennial. And that meant we had a decade of commitment to that commemoration – five years of planning, five years of commemorating. And so I had to find something inside of me that would be able to engage that commemoration with something other than terror.

Music

Michael A. Betts II: How did Michelle come to shed that sense of terror, and to face U.S. history, including the history around the Civil War, without wanting to run or even flinch? She learned. She studied Black people, in North Carolina, who had fought back, persevered, and sometimes thrived. She learned about Princeville, a town in Eastern North Carolina that was founded by people freed from slavery in 1865 – the first community in the United States to be chartered and governed by Black people. She learned about Pauli Murray, the gigantic civil rights leader, legal scholar, and Episcopal Priest who grew up in Durham and wrote the memoir *Proud Shoes*.

Michelle Lanier: Reading *Proud Shoes*, reading more closely *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, reading the work of Anna Julia Cooper, who was born enslaved in Raleigh as the war was raging, remembers being awakened, being asked to prophesy as a child who was dreaming whether the war was going to end with freedom – and then goes on to get a doctorate at the Sorbonne and starts, you know, works in education in D. C. So, reading all of these connecting points, the U.S. Colored Troops of New Bern, 4,000-plus U. S. Colored Troops from North Carolina who fought on the side of the Union. The Black and Lumbee and Waccamaw Siouan people who are forced to build Fort Fisher.

Music

Michelle Lanier: Learning, digging, seeking opened up not only an opportunity for me to heal from my sense of terror around the Civil War, now I'm a Civil War buff. I'm now interested in, teach me how to read, troop movement maps. I want

to know about that, that's interesting to me. I want to know why reenactors have certain buttons and not others. What were the washerwomen doing and why did some of them wear red shoes? I want to know – yes! I want to know all of these things. I want to know about the Gullah Geechee baskets, traditions, and how we can be a good steward of the lands that still hold sweet grass. I became less afraid. It has allowed for me to bond with people I have never expected to bond with. It has allowed for me to feel more at peace in my skin. I can walk through a gathering of Civil War reenactors and not feel a bit of anxiety as a black woman. I can walk through and say, good afternoon. How are you? Allow me to introduce myself. This is why I'm here. Would you mind sharing what brings you here, and to listen. Sometimes those conversations don't go well. (Laughs) And sometimes those conversations are so moving and beautiful and transformative that I leave feeling changed into a stronger version of myself.

Music

John Biewen: Michelle is saying so much. But at least one important piece of what she's talking about is the power of knowledge, right?

Michael A. Betts II: Yeah. That's a big part of how we overcome, and step more effectively, and more courageously, toward freedom and healing.

Music

Michael A. Betts II: John, before we go, I just want to say thank you for this opportunity to tell this story about Wilmington, a place that's becoming more dear to me everyday, as I'm now spending more time and teaching there.

John Biewen: Thank you for asking me to take the journey with you. And I'm pleased our amazing listeners could come along. Where can folks follow you and your work, Michael?

Michael A. Betts II: Find me on Instagram, AT kidsweater, that's k-i-d-s-w-e-a-t-e-r.

John Biewen: All right, Season 6 is a wrap. I hope you all are subscribed because Season 7 is coming – not in two years, not in a year, but much sooner. And we're taking a big swing with this next one. Just saying.

Credits:

John Biewen: Echoes of a Coup is an initiative of America's Hallowed Ground, a project of the Kenan Institute for Ethics at Duke University. It is written and produced by Michael A. Betts, II and me. Our story editor is Loretta Williams. Voice actor, Mike Wiley. Music by Kieran Haile, Blue Dot Sessions, Okaya, Kevin MacLeod, Lee Rosevere, Jameson Nathan Jones, and Lucas Biewen. Logistics by kidSweater Design Group, Ltd. Thanks to the Kenan Institute team: Our website is managed by Christian Ferney. Communications, Sarah Rogers. The Director of the Kenan Institute is David

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