

# SANDY DARITY HAS SOME THOUGHTS ABOUT I N E Q U A L I T Y

*As politicians adopt ideas he's researched for decades, the economist patiently stays the course.*

BY LUCAS HUBBARD | PHOTOGRAPHY BY ROGER HAILE

**T**he clip lasts just five minutes, but little about it seems right. Sure, Sandy Darity is talking about one of his ideas to combat the racial wealth gap, but absent are his laidback nature, his ubiquitous laugh. It's July 2018, and Darity's the guest on Bloomberg's *What'd You Miss?* His posture and movement—hunched; fidgety—reflect a man aware of the stage and of the fact that he has brought his ideas, at least briefly, to the center of it.

Darity is the rare award-winning economist who boasts both a twenty-five-page curriculum vitae and a rather active online presence. He tweets (and retweets) with the zeal of a brand ambassador; he writes long-form pieces for *The Atlantic* and commentary for *HuffPost*; and his research earns citations in Paul Krugman's *New York Times* column (albeit with his last name misspelled). Most of all, Darity pops up time and again on the circuit of YouTube channels and the embedded videos of blogs, affably discussing the sorts of topics that, more often than not, leave one relieved to find a closed comments section.

But on Bloomberg, at the peak of what he fears is his moment in the sun, Darity is tense. He and the show's host, Joe Weisenthal, are talking on different levels, making the chat almost cringeworthy. Before asking a second question, Weisenthal paints Darity's proposal for a federal jobs guarantee as "radical," and Darity, the Samuel DuBois Cook Professor of public policy, must re-route to amend the record: His suggestion has a long lineage, dating all the way to Great Depression-era New Deal policies.

It's occupied his thoughts and research for at least a decade. And so, when pushed to justify its merits, Darity speaks with the terse, deliberate nature of a man on the phone with tech support, who knows how badly his computer is broken and is tired of hearing that he try unplugging it. Much like his other ideas to help remedy the staggering racial wealth gap in this country, the federal jobs guarantee isn't so much a brave new concept as one that has long been passed up for more "reasonable" solutions.

"If you took ninety-nine out of a hundred economists and brought them into the Council of Economic Advisers," says Patrick Bayer, the Gilhuly Family Professor in economics at Duke, "the kinds of things they would propose are those more marginal changes." What Darity has advanced and made more amenable to politicians and the public, Bayer says, actually comes close to the sort of reform that's needed. The important next question, then, is will folks listen—and for how long?

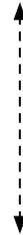
Near the end of the segment, Weisenthal asks Darity about seeing the audience for these suggestions grow, particularly in Congress. "I'm absolutely surprised to see this catching on," Darity says, smiling his deep-creased, default smile that's been dormant for much of the interview, "because for many, many years, people told me this is an idea that wouldn't have any wings."

By the new year, though, even as more and more Democratic presidential candidates come out in support of his proposals, Darity is fretting about the

longevity of this wave. "My fifteen minutes may have all taken place in 2018," he says, "so we'll see."

Watch the Bloomberg clip online today, and before Darity can even finish his statement about how his plan is finally gaining steam, the next video is already playing: an interview with a newly minted executive, or a market analyst combing through earning reports, or an expert breaking down a company's upcoming IPO.

The dreamer stops by, shares his life's work, and then the regular programming continues like nothing happened.



**W**illiam Alexander Darity Jr. tells his origin story cautiously, hesitant to ascribe outsized importance to a particular slight or wrong. He isn't so much surprised that he has spent his life studying inequality as he's bemused that others haven't; as far as he can remember, the topic has always weighed on him. It was, Darity concedes, "probably a little weird" for someone to be asking these massive questions at the age of seven. But such realities were unmissable for him growing up, and so, with the cognitive dissonance of youth, and the curiosity that would later spark him to dive into Twitter in his late fifties, he tried to make sense of it.

His father, the first known African American to receive a Ph.D. from UNC-Chapel Hill, studied health education, and by virtue of his international work with the World Health Organization, the family grew up in a range of environs. In Egypt, Darity first noticed the high number of panhandlers in the streets. Then, he realized that the beach in Alexandria provided different experiences, based on whether he was on the private side of the corniche or on the other, free side, with his "domestique" friends.

Every other summer, he'd visit his grandmother in Wilson, North Carolina, where he'd walk to get "fantastic" chili dogs at the Stoplight Grill, whose sanitation rating "was always grade B, and it always stayed open," Darity recalls. A block farther were the train tracks, and he saw the stark role they played, as they do in so many American cities, in segregating the town into white and black, those with and those without.

Darity's family, too, benefited from factors other than grit and determination. His mother and father had made the jump from very-low-income to middle-class, in part due to their own extraordinary efforts, but also due to infusions of financial aid at crucial times from the community. "My parents never took the position that the folks who had less deserved to have less," he says. "I always was inclined to think—and encouraged to think—that this was the result of the luck of the draw."

When his dad joined the faculty of UMass-Amherst, where he would become the founding dean of the school of health sciences, Sandy spent his high-school years in a college town. He wore many hats there—including blues harmonica player and nationally ranked debater—but the questions that bothered him seemed most likely to be solved via academia. Childhood friend Phil Greenfield describes the atmosphere as idyllic: "Knowledge for its own sake, research as being among the noblest of pursuits—that was in the water, that was in the air."

As an undergraduate at Brown, though, in his initial economics classes, he witnessed "the way in which economists would explain, say, inequality across individuals or across social groups as attributable to something they call 'human capital differences,'" Darity says, outlining the theory that states, roughly, that poor people are poorer because of deficits in intelligence, skill, education, or something similar. "And that did not resonate with my sense of how the world works."

But he didn't search for a more amenable department. He instead leaned into the headwind, choosing a field in which, even by 2015, only forty-seven black economists were on the faculties of the 127 Ph.D.-granting economics departments in the U.S. Darity eventually landed at M.I.T., amidst the university's

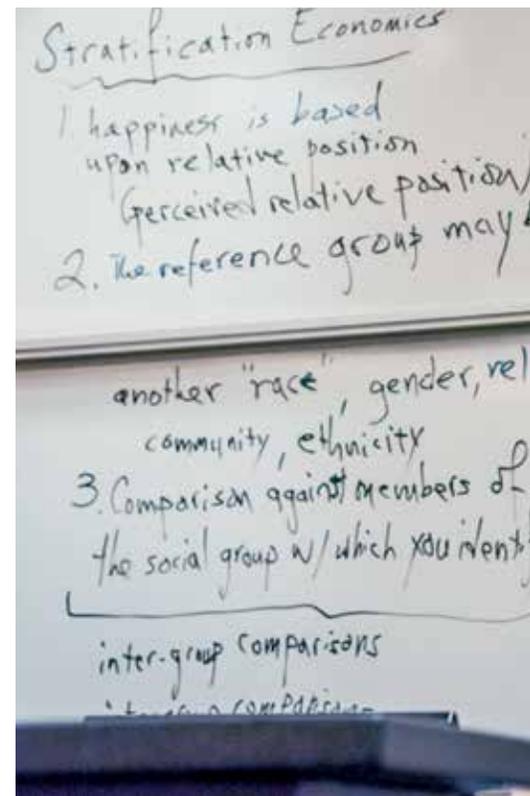
**"I tend to think that everybody has the possibility of doing very well, with the proper support and encouragement."**

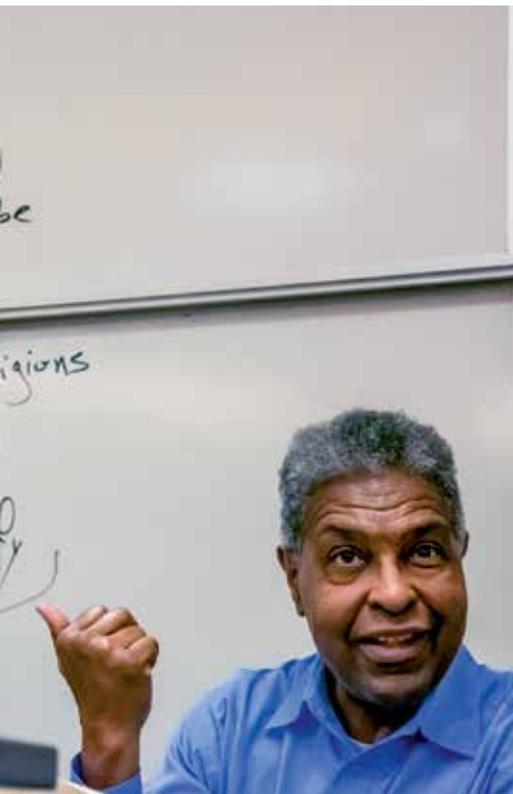


attempts in the '70s to desegregate its top-rated economics Ph.D. department. He found pockets of support in Cambridge, notably from his dissertation supervisor Lance Taylor and economic historian Charles Kindleberger, but such backing was rare. "As black graduate students, we received strong signals that research on race and discrimination was not valued

by most of the economics faculty... Nevertheless, most of us did do work that involved an exploration of racial inequality while at M.I.T. or thereafter," Darity wrote in 2014. "We were stubborn."

Darity earned his doctorate in three years; had he stayed longer and proved his readiness to department superiors, he likely would've jumped his career in the Ivies. Yet his arrival at the University of Texas was fortuitous. There, he'd meet a cohort of thinkers (including his wife, the





folklorist Kirsten Mullen) who'd dramatically shape his future.

By then, Darity was already an outlier. A voracious reader, he had long looked to far-flung sources for ideas and answers. As an undergraduate, following the recommendations of fellow students he consumed books like Eric Williams' *Capitalism and Slavery*, C.L.R. James' *The Black Jacobins*, and Walter Rodney's *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*. "Economics is a discipline that ignores its own history, as a field," he says, bemoaning the field's lack of reading and its emphasis on contemporary questions. Through his time at Brown and M.I.T., he never engaged with any articles older than a few decades—no Adam Smith, no David Ricardo. Even a seminal work like John Maynard Keynes' *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money* (1936) wasn't on the syllabus. (Today, Darity points out that Duke is unique "insofar as there still is a presence of the history of economic thought here.")

While working toward tenure in Austin, Darity began hearing a different perspective, from

peers Bobbie Horn and Michael Pyne—the latter a Jamaican scholar about whom, even today, Darity is "not really sure what his original attachment was to the university." At Pyne's urging, he began reading "the literature in its original form"; in these works, he made quite the discovery: "What people had told me was there," he says, "really wasn't."

"I think it was one of the most intellectually useful investments I could make," Darity says. It fit the scholar's nascent mold: reflecting a skepticism about the prevailing wisdom, a willingness to consider anyone's intellectual contributions, as well as a desire to unearth a more nuanced truth. Some thirty-five years ago, he found that the historical works "were quite salient, and there were some ways in which the economics profession, in trying to move forward, had papered over the cracks," Darity says.

"So, I went back and explored the cracks, and that's been an obsession of mine ever since."

**A**t twenty-one, Darity summarized the problem in the first sentence of his first published paper: "Black people have always been troublesome for social scientists studying the United States." In no field is this more apparent than in economics, a world of assumptions and approximate models. Whether intentionally, or because of the blind spots that economists possess, much of the standard thinking doesn't account for discrimination.

Take the labor market: The unemployment rate for black Americans has long hovered around twice the rate for all Americans. Economists have often favored a personal (or human capital) explanation for this divergence: The unemployed must have some shortcoming—a lack of schooling, or insufficient "soft skills"—that make them less productive for and thus less appealing to these companies. Or, they must present an additional cost (like a heightened risk of a wrongful-termination lawsuit) that employers have to consider.

Economists, then, don't ignore discrimination because it's bad and unpleasant. They do so because, according to conventional thinking, it's irrational, shrinking labor pools and raising wages. In modern society, no such bigotry could exist in the long run. Plus, says Bayer, the Duke colleague, "the burden of proof in economics to establish something as racial discrimination is extremely high."

Different people see the world differently, and exploring the effects of race has long been a playground for white scholars. When someone like Darity tries to measure it, the result is not celebrated as research so much as it's denigrated as "me-search." Within academia, "objectivity is not something that can be achieved," Darity says, adding that all scholars choose to focus on a question of relevance to them, invariably bringing their unique frameworks and personal experiences to these inquiries. "What can be achieved is honesty about methods and procedures," he says, as well as how one arrives at certain findings. "I'd say that we all do 'me-search' to some degree."

It's a tricky dance, going against the grain. One needs to understand the conventional thinking thoroughly, both to develop an explanation for what traditional economists miss and to coherently express the flaws in their reasoning. In a way, heterodox research almost requires an additional peer review, says Art Goldsmith, Jackson T. Stephens Professor of economics at Washington and Lee University, who has frequently collaborated with Darity. The findings must make sense within the new framework, as well as resist attacks from inevitable critics. "I just feel like you have an extra set of hurdles to overcome," Goldsmith says. "But

as a scholar, I think that's good—because then you believe that your work is more sound.”

While at the University of Texas, Darity wrote a book with Bobbie Horn, a specialist on the economist Thorstein Veblen. (Today, the economist is known as the namesake for the term “Veblen goods,” luxury items for which demand increases as the price does.) At Horn's urging, Darity made himself familiar with Veblen's research; his papers stressed “invidious comparisons” that humans make to judge their lot in life. “Most of conventional economics is about people's

absolute position, but Veblen points us to thinking about relative position,” explains Darity. He then latched onto the writings of sociologist Herbert Blumer, who argued that “prejudice is instrumental”; instead of being an outgrowth of ignorance, this bias is functional, helping to maintain a certain group's position of dominance.

“Sandy just read whatever other disciplines had to offer about the questions of interest, and he didn't favor economic conventional reasoning over anything else,” says Goldsmith. “He just let them compete away. This led him to such deeper and broader insights about things.”

Eventually, this blending of disparate findings from Veblen and Blumer—the byproduct of a lifetime of reading and curiosity—became what Darity coined as “stratification economics.” The subfield articulates a world in which individuals focus not just on their status but also their group's relative position in a social hierarchy. Dominant groups strive to maintain their power, and so stratification economics doesn't consider discrimination to be irrational. Rather, it posits the exact opposite. As Goldsmith explains, “It's all about preserving privilege—you can discriminate against somebody without hating them. What you want is to maintain the advantages that you have garnered through institutions that have historically been discriminatory.”

The presence of discrimination helps explain, for example, the doubled unemployment rate that blacks have historically held in this coun-

“It's all about preserving privilege—you can discriminate against somebody without hating them.”

try, but it illuminates much more. Like the findings of the late Harvard sociologist Devah Pager's urban field experiments that black men with no criminal records face lower odds of a callback for a job than do white men possessing criminal records. Or the findings of Karen Gibson, Darity, and Samuel Myers Jr., Roy Wilkins Professor of human relations and social justice at the University of Minnesota, that black workers, who purportedly lack “soft skills,” are crowded into low-paying service-industry jobs. Or Darity and Goldsmith's findings that the darker the worker's skin, the lower their wages—evidence of colorism that can't be attributed to something like educational attainment. (“It's pretty hard to argue that when black kids go to school, that the lighter-skinned blacks get to go to better high schools or middle schools or kindergartens than the darker-skinned ones,” says Goldsmith.)

Nor are these damaging effects confined to the workplace. Racial disparities start in the womb and persist, showing up in infant (and maternal) mortality rates, in who gets identified as “gifted and talented,” in disparate levels of incarceration and early death. According to stratification economics, such differences aren't caused by individual factors but rather by structural ones. Under closer scrutiny, the former fall apart.

With the help of frequent collaborators Darrick Hamilton and Alan Aja, among others, last April Darity published a report called “What We Get Wrong About Closing the Racial Wealth Gap.” While black people constitute 13 percent of the U.S. population, they hold less than three percent of the nation's wealth. The report explores ten common explanations for this disparity—from a lack of sufficient educational attainment, to a lack of saving behavior on the part of black people, to the suggestion that they should “emulate successful minorities”—and finds them all inadequate. That is, at every level of educational attainment, black people have significantly less wealth; once household income is considered, they exhibit the same, if not greater, savings behavior as whites; and minority groups who find success in America often do so on the ballast of start-up capital that black people lack.

The “What We Get Wrong” report is the culmination of a career-long effort; it also merely marks the start for Darity and his peers. “There's a particular image that many of us would like to have about this country, as the land of opportunity, as a society that promotes freedom and promotes equity,” he says, “and these kinds of findings from my research are inconsistent with that image.”

Wealth is increasingly considered a better assessment of economic well-being than income. Wealth, which represents one's net worth, has less volatility than income, the stream of wages one earns through work. Besides providing extra financial security during emergencies and economic downturns, wealth can benefit subsequent generations by providing payments for college tuition or assisting with a mortgage down payment. A racial income gap exists, but the racial wealth gap is that much more striking: While the median African-American household has consistently held 50 to 60 percent of the income of the median white household over the past half-century, it possesses just 5 to 10 percent of the wealth.

Darity has a simple answer for why African Americans are behind: Differences in wealth linger and lock in systemic advantages or disadvantages. And that population, more so than any other, has never inherited wealth—or had a legitimate opportunity to accrue and maintain it—for as long as this country has existed.



If there's one person to make these connections and reach these conclusions, it's Darity. Ask anyone, and they gush about his effortless brilliance, efficiency, and versatility: Rhonda Sharpe, the editor of *Black Political Economy*, remembers teaching herself to speed-read to keep up with Darity's book consumption. Tressie McMillan Cottom recalls that, following an initial lunch together when she was an undergraduate, Darity arrived at their next meeting toting a ten-year plan to launch her academic career. The easiest criticism might be that, as he self-effacingly puts it, he's "a dilettante and spread too thin." In truth, he's connecting with a wider audience. "Anyone who's done any type of in-depth research on race and class," says Keisha Bentley-Edwards, assistant professor of medicine at Duke, "if you haven't come across Sandy's work, then you really were not doing any research on race and class."

"I've heard him go from humanities to critical race theory to literature studies all the way back to macroeconomics—I don't think I've ever heard him say there's a thing that he doesn't do," says McMillan Cottom, now an associate professor of sociology at Virginia Commonwealth University. Darity isn't a "traditional" economist, but he's not someone who has skipped crucial checkpoints along the way. He's simply bringing in outside perspectives and applying frameworks in novel ways: As McMillan Cottom says, he's a traditionally trained economist "who tackles questions that a traditional economist has been unwilling to tackle."

In November, Darity delivers a lecture to roughly a dozen undergraduate and graduate students in his "Global Inequality" research seminar. Here—in this cookie-cutter room off Science Drive, where the tables have coalesced into a horseshoe to aid discussion—he is the closest he'll be to his ethos: that is, a jolly pessimist. Few uncork as many depressing one-liners and belly laughs. When studying the racial wealth gap for a living, the Venn diagram of what's depressing and what's worth a laugh blurs into a single circle. Avoiding levity leads to depression, which in turn means gloom and hopelessness. "Your capacity to keep going is contingent on your sense of humor," explains Darity.

With his close-cropped gray hair, and eyes perpetually twinkling behind his glasses, he has the aura of a grandfather with stories to share. He traces back to economists Adam Smith and David Ricardo the lineage of ideas suggesting certain climates, populations, or geographies are inherently less productive than

others. Two centuries later, these ideas have persisted, thanks to folks like Ellsworth Huntington, Arnold J. Toynbee, and Jeffrey Sachs. They claim that temperate zones (meaning Europe and America) are more conducive to economic output, that the Arctic is too challenging for growth, and that the tropics make growth too easy. Or that creativity peaks at a certain level of diversity (coincidentally, that of Europe and America). Which means, Darity says, since Smith's *The Wealth of Nations*, flawed reasonings for uneven development—and thus, inequality—have proven remarkably resilient. "These ideas do not die!" he exclaims, and the deep, M-shaped furrow in his brow fades, replaced by his resting state of knowing amusement. "It is fascinating."

Teaching and mentorship are oft-ignored aspects of academia. But Darity boasts "a almost limitless amount of time to invest in people," says McMillan Cottom, who initially met Darity through a UNC program designed to springboard underrepresented students into doctoral research. One of his main coauthors is his former graduate student at UNC, Darrick Hamilton, and a decade ago Darity and Sharpe cofounded the Diversity Initiative for Tenure in Economics (DITE) project, which pairs junior minority faculty members with mentors in hopes of assisting the former group's path to tenure. His peers praise him for doing everything possible to aid in their career advancement, even allowing others to be named as first authors on collaborations where Darity would typically take top billing.

"A lot of faculty members are interested in folks who are already shining," says Sharpe, who's also now the president of WISER, the Women's Institute for Science, Equity, and Race. Any investment of time, she explains, can be seen as risk—especially when "talking to junior folks who are unknowns." By contrast, says McMillan Cottom, "what Sandy offers is one of the rarest forms of mentorship. He doesn't just give general advice, which can be useful, but it's also the lowest form of mentorship investment there is.... The deepest form and most meaningful form of mentorship is the person who gets invested in learning you."

"I tend to think that everybody has the possibility of doing very well, with the proper support and tangible resources and encouragement," Darity says. His commitment to aiding nascent scholars is matter-of-fact, but it highlights the reality that the fight over these ideas will outlast him. He must do what he can to foster connections—Darity even went to an American Eco-

conomic Association meeting on his honeymoon—and open doors for the next wave of thinkers. “I think that his [research] might be his second life’s work,” says McMillan Cottom. “I think his first life’s work will be the things he’s built for people.”

Back in the seminar, as students share drafts of their capstone projects, Darity interrupts a master’s candidate’s proposal to analyze the media coverage of race and genetics in Australia. He gently chides her for perpetuating the empirical flaws of the previous literature. “The things that we examine are a function of the questions we ask,” Darity says, “and the questions we ask are a function of our priors.”

If the previous investigator’s framing is wrong, then it doesn’t behoove future researchers to answer an identical question more accurately. Instead, the latter investigator must inquire better—and persuade others to follow suit.

**T**he longer one talks to Darity, the more the sad irony of the situation becomes clear. The statistics he has helped uncover—for example, that white households in Boston have a median net worth of \$247,500; for African Americans, that number is a mere eight dollars—are striking snapshots that at first seem like typos. “It’s disturbing,” Darity says, “but before examining this work or this data, I would not have expected the gaps to be this large.”

These gaps aren’t accidents but rather the culmination of discrimination past and present: from chattel slavery, to the lynchings and plunderings during Jim Crow, to the police killings and mass incarceration of today; from housing practices like redlining and predatory lending to the ongoing threats—eviction, air pollution, tainted water—that people of color must disproportionately weather; from the government’s New Deal policies that restricted Social Security and the G.I. Bill to mostly whites, to the ravaging of the welfare state since these benefits were expanded. The arc of the moral universe has been stunted: By most any measure—unemployment, wealth, family income—



“I don’t really worry so much about whether something is likely to be embraced immediately, but if I think it’s a good idea to change the world, I’ll work on crafting it.”



the relative economic position of black Americans hasn’t changed since the Civil Rights Act.

Anyone familiar with this history must also know two things: the substantial work required to unseat these inequities, and the low odds of its success. Darity is fighting a battle where victories, if secured, will likely come decades later; he compares the requisite mindset to that of abolitionists in the U.S. in the early 1800s or activists rallying against South African apartheid in the 1950s. “I don’t really worry so much about whether something is likely to be embraced immediately,” he says, “but if I think it’s a good idea to change the world, I’ll work on crafting it.”

So, he’s crafted massive solutions. A “baby bonds” proposal, which would provide a child, upon her turning eighteen, a trust fund with anywhere from \$500 to \$50,000 based on her family’s position on the economic ladder. A federal jobs guarantee that would eliminate involuntary unemployment and provide workers health insurance and non-poverty wages.

These will not be cheap fixes: Darity and Hamilton estimate baby bonds, for example, would require an \$80 billion annual expenditure; the annual bill for a federal jobs guarantee would land north of \$500 billion. The jobs the government offers must thread a needle to identify important needs and projects that won’t require substantive training, meaning that anyone eighteen or older could find work. Plus, to many, the concept of government just giving away funds and jobs seems crazy.

But as Darity notes, his ideas stem from a long list of predecessors. “Baby Bonds” was termed not by him but by the Pulitzer Prize-winning Manning Marable, and a similar program currently exists in the United Kingdom. Likewise, in 1944, Franklin D. Roosevelt spoke of an “economic bill of rights,” guaranteeing a right to work, in addition to housing and health care. Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I have a dream” speech preceded a March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom: The third goal for organizers was a public-works project for the unemployed. And in 1978, the country almost achieved this goal with the Humphrey-Hawkins Full Employment Act: If individuals were willing to work but unable to find work, the act empowered the president to establish “reservoirs of public employment and private nonprofit employment projects” to fix those gaps. The legislation steadily weakened before passage, though, and today the act effectively guarantees nothing.

Since 2015, Darity has operated as the founding director of the Samuel DuBois Cook Center for Social Equity at Duke, and he produces research that’s easily conveyable to laymen and politicians alike. The center grew out of Darity’s vision to pull together social scientists and historians and health-science scholars to find remedies for these troubling disparities: As Bentley-Edwards, the center’s associate director for research and director of the health equity working group, points out, the center is interdisciplinary in a way that many places aspire to be but few actually are. “One thing that it makes it easier to do is present data, present research, in ways that could be understood by a lot of different people,” she says. “You can’t get away with speaking in a bunch of jargon around here.”

In the fall, U.S. Senator Cory Booker, Democrat of New Jersey, announced legislation that drew heavily on Darity and Hamilton’s baby bonds idea. Booker and Senator Bernie Sanders, independent of Vermont, have both put forth plans that would provide a job for anyone who wants it. And Senator Kirsten Gillibrand, Democrat of New York, is among those pushing for a public banking option, another page in Darity’s playbook, in which U.S. post offices will provide basic financial services to citizens who currently have no access to them.

There is so much momentum, and yet, to borrow one of Darity’s self-made aphorisms, “things can always get worse.” Darity is wary of implementing piecemeal policies that merely offer lip service to desired outcomes and alleviate

pressure for a proper fix. “The partial measures can often become obstacles to getting to the full measures,” he says, pointing out that this is what happened with the Humphrey-Hawkins Act.

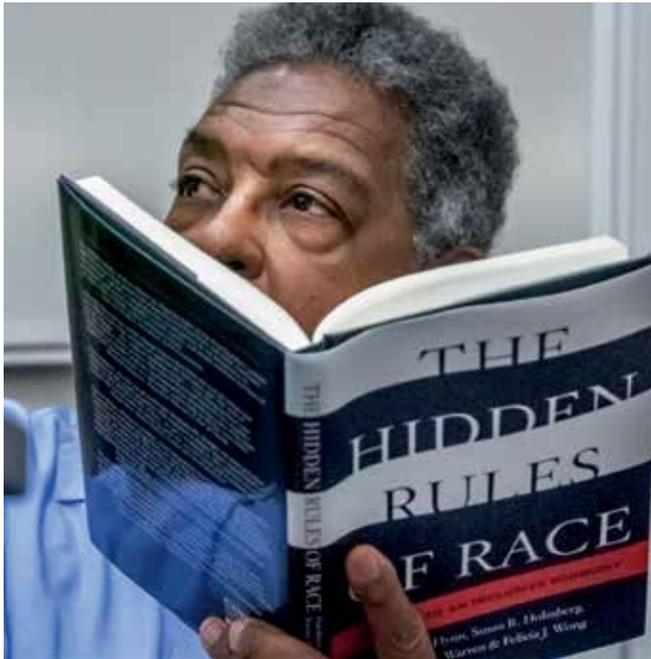
As Bentley-Edwards notes, the common thread with the researchers at the Cook Center is that “we all have a low tolerance for complacency.” Not just any solution will do: Only the right, complete answer will suffice. Most important, Darity has a sense of what full equality would look like. “If we’re going to get to that condition,” he says, “then there’s some very, very difficult work that has to be done.”

**D**arity’s Cook Center office, in the brick Erwin Mill complex just off Ninth Street, sums him up neatly: both unpretentious and swelling with scholarship. Right in the center of his tome-laden desk is Ibram X. Kendi’s National Book Award-winning *Stamped From the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America*. In the book’s conclusion, Kendi authoritatively states that anti-racist ideas in America will never be adopted until it’s in the best interest of the ruling class to adopt them.

The growing discussion around baby bonds and a federal jobs guarantee seems like they might reflect such a change: Indeed, a larger share of benefits would go to the least-wealthy people and those most in need of employment, who are disproportionately black. But Darity believes the push behind these ideas isn’t driven by a newfound tolerance but instead by the extreme outcome of the 2016 election—and the Democratic party’s belief in the efficacy of bolder policies. “If you want to talk about a truly anti-racist project,” Darity says, “you’d have to be talking about America adopting a national reparations program.”

In September, Darity convenes a panel to discuss that very idea. Bathed in the golden light of East Campus’ Nelson Music Room are a half-dozen speakers, spanning two schools and six discrete departments. Darity appears as the elder spokesman; in the concluding Q&A, time and again the panelists defer to Darity to provide a definitive response. And as others speak, Darity sits with a perpetually cocked eyebrow, jotting down notes with either hand, his chuckles of ac-





knowledge contributing the backing track for his peers' addresses.

Reparations have happened elsewhere for similar injustices, and they've occurred in America many times before. In the last fifty years, the U.S. government has delivered payouts to Native Americans, to Alaska Natives, and to Japanese Americans who were interned during World War II. It's only logical to Darity that since forced labor built this country, those wrongs, too, require atonement.

Resistance to reparations for black Americans, Darity claims, once he receives the microphone, hinges on the narratives of the heroic nature of the Confederacy and of black dysfunction. He goes on to dismantle one of the ten myths that his "What We Get Wrong" report dismissed: the idea that buying black and banking black can close the racial wealth gap. His speech is an onslaught of numbers—passionate, but argued from a place of empiricism.

But even when the evidence is as good as it gets, nothing guarantees people will change their views. It's a testament to the unfairness of the world Darity inhabits: A mythbuster has to rely on facts despite their ineffectiveness. Like his laugh in the face of misery, or his decisions to persist with

economics, read classic texts while fighting for tenure, and devote an exorbitant amount of time to junior scholars when he has so much on his own plate, the life of a mythbuster is paradoxical until it isn't. For it to make sense, one needs a longer-term horizon and a belief in the power of trying to, as Darity says, "imagine worlds that would be better and think about how we might get to those worlds."

When one of the forty or so audience members gathered asks about what the effects of providing reparations might be, no one's surprised that Darity chimes in. What's surprising is that he says something speculative, almost optimistic, a counterweight to the fact-laden speech he just delivered. "I'm not sure that we'd solve all the racial issues in the U.S.," he says, of providing reparations, "but I sure would like to run the experiment."

**T**hen, in the spring, the experiment inches closer to reality. Following 2020 presidential candidate Marianne Williamson's call for reparations, aspiring nominees are put on the spot, asked about their beliefs. *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, NPR, and C-SPAN all discuss reparations: Darity's quotes appear in each.

His fifteen minutes aren't over.

Few have outlined what reparations might actually look like, but Darity has considered this question for twenty-some years. That is his essence: the person running ahead of ideas, talking about them well before politicians or writers like Ta-Nehisi Coates—let alone David Brooks—are willing to, and discussing things in definitive terms while others are operating in the abstract.

“I’m not sure that we’d solve all the racial issues in the U.S., but I sure would like to run the experiment.”



Back in 1997, Darity noted how after the Civil War, the freed slaves were promised “forty acres and a mule” along the coast in Georgia and South Carolina before Andrew Johnson revoked this agreement. In 2003, he cowrote a paper with Dania Frank, “The Economics of Reparations,” which explored how much African Americans are owed for slavery and decades of Jim Crow, as well as five potential forms that payment should take. In a forthcoming book, Darity and his wife, Mullen, will further the specifics of both eligibility for reparations and the size of restitution, likely estimated based on the present-day value of the post-Civil War promise: As Darity and Frank said in their paper, “the damages to the collective well-being of black people have been enormous and, correspondingly, so is the appropriate bill.”

In mid-March, Darity guests on WBUR, the Boston NPR station. He’s paired off against John McWhorter, the Columbia English and comparative literature professor often called to supply the wet blanket for these discussions. McWhorter outlines how these conversations have happened before, around 2000, following the publication of Randall Robinson’s *The Debt*. “There was a big, big debate...and reparations, frankly, was soundly defeated as a viable notion,” he says. McWhorter is pithy and energetic, speaking with the fervor of someone who can’t believe his time is being wasted with this chatter.

Darity, by contrast, sounds weary but persistent, his responses providing muted sound bites but laced with historical context. Conditions have changed, he says. In the early 1990s, 4 percent of white Americans said they supported the idea of reparations; a 2016 Marist poll suggests those numbers are around 20 percent, with even higher numbers among millennials. Presidential candidates are willing to discuss these topics and express their support for it, and other elected officials are developing interest. From 1989 until 2017, each year U.S. Representative John Conyers, a Michigan Democrat, advanced a bill (HR-40) to start a com-

mission to study the case for reparations for black Americans and develop proposals for delivering them. U.S. Representative Sheila Jackson-Lee, a Texas Democrat, now oversees the bill, and since she proposed it in January, it has accrued additional cosponsors in a manner the bill hasn’t in previous sessions.

Darity notes that before the 1990 delivery of payouts to Japanese Americans, Congress convened a committee—the Commission on War-time Relocation and Internment of Civilians. “And so, I think as a prelude to the development of a comprehensive reparations program for black Americans, it’s appropriate to have a similar kind of commission,” Darity says.

A promising sign would be if his book, *From Here to Equality: Black Reparations in the Twenty-First Century*, gets published. Fittingly for a project with such an ambitious title, it’s been a long time in the making. He’s teased it since 2014, and now the book is set to come out next February, amidst the presidential primary season.

Darity’s a patient man when it comes to advancing policy, but he wants his and his wife’s work in public before the window of relevance has shut. “I hope it’s no later than that,” he says. And then, of course, he starts to laugh. ■