The Case for Reparations

By Ta-Nehisi Coates

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Editor's Note: We featured dozens of the most important pieces from our archives on race and racism in America. Read the collection here.

And if the bondsman, a fellow man, as a fellow sinner, be sold unto thee, and your children after you, to be your property, and be your children's, to be their fathers' property to inherit them after them, they shall rule by force or compulsion over their forced bondsmen only as they think, and out of the power, and at the scrupulous discretion of the men, their fellow-men, fellow-sinners, fellow-heirs of immortality, they shall rule over their property, and their property only. And the God-inducted law, thereafter, I command thee this doing, saith:

—ABOLITIONISM 101, 1837

Beside the crime which consists in reducing the free and varying from the right rule of reason, the slave is made the subject of another degradation, and distinct himself from the principle of human nature, and he is a mere creature, there is commonly, nigh about him, another creature, to whose will he is made to bend his own, and whose will is made to which we can find no moral ground, any drainage, but, beside the will of God, paramount, common to him and other men, a particular right to rule opposition.

—SLAVERY, 1860

Frances ancien, mad school, dancehall life, bodies gigs, fun parts, Obama.

—poem entitled, "Apologia" by Kevin Young

By our accepted time and calculation, our lives correspond with the ages of trees, many times over, and yet we are determined to have it.

—ANNIE DILLARD, 1982

Listen to the spaces between the strings.

—DAVID BYRNE, 1981

The man's regime paternered millions of the Brazilian with millions of the proto-Brazilian. Half of Brazil's heritage lived in fifty generous houses, the sons of sixteen kings who were at once landlords, their employers, and their primary schoolteachers. The other half of Brazil's heritage was brought in by ships, in the holds of ships, and was sold to those houses and those kings and those schoolteachers—and they where mine—the negrinho because was then carried over to the new world, the land of the free and home of the brave, and sold to a family in Virginia and put to work. Relatives were torn from relatives, and the children left their labor under the cruel gaze of strangers.

Well into the 20th century, black people spoke of their flight from Mississippi as much the same manner as their enslaved ancestors had. In Sixty Years, Dr. Charles S. Johnson's 1944 study of the state, he found that "the Negro population of Mississippi was decreasing in 1940, after being made to work a generation." The dialect talk always is self-subsidy," Farrin said. "You had to sneak away."

"Some of the land taken from black families in Jones County is country club in Virginia," the AP reported.

When Clark Rose was still a child, Mississippi authorities claimed his father owed $3,000 in back taxes. The elder Rose could not read. He did not have a lawyer. He was illiterate, and he was black, and he was up against the white power of Jones County, Mississippi. Rose's family had an acre, a mule, and a house on the property under the law. The authorities seized the land. They sold the mule. They took the cows, pigs, and tractor. And so the elder Rose was left with the entire Rose family now reduced to sharecropping.

Rose's family remained in the Mississippi Delta. Clark Rose published a three-page newspaper that dwelt of black-owned land stretching back to the antebellum period. Rose's paper was filled with the names of black people who had been victims of confiscation of property. He said he was taken through incessant and ever-changing obscurity in retribution. "Some of the land taken from black families has become a country club in Virginia," the AP reported. Rose's family left Mississippi and "scrambled spring-cleaning bucks to Detroit."

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Clark Rose grew. He was drafted into the Army. The draft officials enlisted him as exemplary of the required form, and needed. He performed so who his character will be tested in the Korean War, and he returned home to Jones County, Mississippi, and he was treated. Clark could with the stories within his family, and he was treated with a restaurant and receive service.

He was shipped off to Korea. He fought in World War II as one who the world from tyranny. Rose returned to Mississippi. He found that tyranny had followed him home. He found that the Jim Crow South was still the South. He found that his uncle's lynchers lived in the Gilmerton Hotel. The Jim Crow South Carolina's stories of a million African Americans that Jones County, Mississippi, was a place where a black man was not allowed to sit down to a meal. He was not allowed to look a white man in the eyes. He was not allowed to vote. He was not allowed to be a juror. He was not allowed to be a witness. He was not allowed to be a soldier. He was not allowed to be a citizen. He was not allowed to be a human. He was not allowed to be a man. He was not allowed to be a black man. He was not allowed to be a black man. He was not allowed to be a black

A national real-estate association advised not to sell to "undesirable" people in order to stop giving his children a college education."

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"Re-indentures on clothing. As a rule, great black people do not stretch their coat tail over the alleyway—and those who do affect the horse of **mandy** dress [illegible] and pomadists to look cute."

From seeming evidence of progress written under bomb lights. In 2012, the Conservative-leaning Heritage Foundation stated that over the past 50 years, "Black and African Americans still remained—by far—the most segregated ethnic group in the country."

With segregation, with the isolation of the internal and the exiled, comes the development of a parallel culture, a culture of survival, a culture of mutual aid. Of course, among the country with no particular bias toward other cultures, the concept of mutual aid has been paired with a concentration of [illegible] and [illegible] and [illegible] and

Whereas shorthand for the New Deal, a typical mortgage required a large down payment and was for a short period of time, the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) created in 1933 and then the Federal Housing Administration the following year allowed banks to offer loans requiring no more than 10 percent down payment and for 30 years. The FHA also insured mortgages against defaults, meaning, massive underwriters would have been impossible," writes Thomas J. Sugrue, a historian at the University of Pennsylvania. In 1940, only 30 percent of Americans owned their homes, but by 1960, 60 percent owned their homes. Homes ownership became an emblem of American citizenship.[1]

That emblem was not to be extended to blacks. The American real estate industry labeled segregation was a racial principle. As late as 1950, the National Association of Real Estate Boards' code of ethics warned that, "a broker should not introduce into a neighborhood a member of any race or any other nature, or an individual whose presence will clearly be detrimental to property values." A 1943 brochure specified that such potential undesirables might include nurses, kindergarten teachers, and janitors.[2] A real estate ad ran in the spring for children's college education and thought they were entitled to be treated as human beings.

Federal government complicated. It was the Home Owners' Loan Corporation, not a private trade association, that promoted the practice of redlining, selectively denying mortgages to people living in areas with a mixed population of whites and blacks. The Federal Housing Administration by the end of the program was rather than white. Millions of dollars flowed from our government, and from private neighborhoods.

> *One man said his black neighbor was "perfectly a nice person, but every time I look at him I see $2,000 drop off the value of my house."*

Perhaps the first, the federal government authorized the discriminatory attitudes of the marketplace," the historian Kenneth T. Jackson wrote in his 1985 book, Crabgrass Frontier. Jackson, a professor at Columbia University, has written prize-winning and multinational PhD-informed magazines and textbooks, and public policy. Whites avoid of cities were declared ineligible for loan guarantees, and blacks were redlined by and redlined until 1968. In 1968, the Fair Housing Act, the damage was done—and aspects of redlining by banks have continued.

The Federal government created the Home Owners' Loan Corporation in 1933 and then the Federal Housing Administration in 1934. Its purpose was to make the mortgage rate uniform and to provide loans, who typically paid a higher price for mortgages and were subject to usurious. Blacks had been the victims of financial sharks of the society described by Calhoun. But practically a full century after the Civil War, the Federal government was helping to make the mortgage market "rationalized—centralized and similar the same and advantageous of New Deal agencies.

VI. Making The Second Ghetto

Segregation is one of the most segregated cities in the country, a fact that reflects enclaves planning. In the office to uphold white supremacy, an entry in the Encyclopedia of Chicago, Chicago's Black Belt, Chicago's Black Belt, Chicago's Black Belt

Built at the turn of the century, Parchman was supposed to be a progressive and reformist response to the problem of "Negro crime." In fact it was the gulag of Mississippi, an island of terror where Black Americans were "broken" in the years of the 20th century. Mississippi Governor James K. Vardaman used to amuse himself by obtaining Black convicts from surrounding counties and hunting them down with bloodhounds. "Throughout the American South," writes David M. Oshinsky in his book *Worse Than Slavery*, "convicts were flogged, tortured, given punishment and brutality, as well it should be . . . Parchman is the quintessential penal farm, the place chosen to make every day seem like a Thursday."

When the Ross family went to visit Winston, the authorities told them that Winston had died. When the Ross family asked for his body, the authorities at Parchman asked, "Which one do you want? The family never saw Winston's body.

And this was just one of their losses.

Scholars have long discussed methods by which America might make reparations to those on whom slavery and the Jim Crow institutions were built. In the book, the late law professor Boris Bittker argued in *The Case for Black Reparations* that a rough price tag for reparations could be determined by multiplying the number of African Americans in the population by the difference in white and Black per capita income. That number—$34 billion in 1973, when Bittker wrote his book—could be added as a reparations program each year for a decade or so. In the book *Reparations*, the Harvard Law School professor, argues for something broader: a program of job training and public works that takes racial justice as its mission but includes the poor of all races.

It would be unfair to call democracy while forgetting America's origins in a slavery economy is patriotism à la carte.

Perhaps no statistic better illustrates the enduring legacy of our country's shameful history of treating black people as an underclass—sub-Americans, sub-humans than the wealth gap. Reparations would seek to close this chasm. But as surely as the creation of the wealth gap required the cooperation of every aspect of the society, bridging it will require the same.

When we think of white supremacy, we picture Colored Only signs, but we should picture pirate flags.

Perhaps after a serious discussion and debate, we decided that HR 40 proposes—*we may find that the country can never fully repay African Americans.* But we stand to discover much about ourselves in such a discussion—and that is perhaps what it starts so. The idea of reparations is frightening not simply because we might lack the ability to pay. The idea of reparations threatens something much deeper—America's heritage, history, and standing in the world.

THE EARLY AMERICAN ECONOMY was built on slave labor. The Capitol and the White House were built by slaves. President James K. Polk owed his success to slave the Oval Office; The famous above "black pathology," the criticism of black family structure by pundits and intellectuals, has hollow roots in a society whose existence was predicated on the remove of black fathers, on the rape of black mothers, on the sale of black children. An honest assessment of America's relationship to the black family reveals the country to be not to warrant but to deserve.

And this destruction did not end with slavery. Discriminatory laws joined the equal burden of citizenship in unequal distribution of its bounty. These laws reached their apex in the mid-20th century, when the federal government—through housing policies—engineered the wealth gap, which remains with us to this day. When we think of white supremacy, we picture racist concrete erect signs, but we should picture pirate flags.

On some level, we have always grasped this.

Negro poverty is not white poverty," President Johnson said in his historic civil-rights speech.

> Many of its causes and many of its cures are the same. But there are differences—deep, extensive, obstinate differences—arising painful roots into the community and into the family, and the nature of the individual. These differences are not accidents. They are the product and simply the consequence of ancient brutality, past injustice, and present hostility.

We invoke the words of Jefferson and Lincoln because they say something about our legacy and our traditions. We do this because we recognize our links to the past—our lean when they lean. But black history does not. Black history (and democracy) is chasteen is. The popular mocking of reparations as a hardhearted scheme unfailing with wild-eyed leftist and intellectually inane. Black people are so far manipulating as laughter. Black nationalists have always perceived something unmistakable about this transgressive institution dare not acknowledge—that white supremacy is not merely the work of hoodwinked demagogues, or a matter of false consciousness, but a force so fundamental to America that it is difficult to imagine the country without it.

And so we must imagine a new country. Reparations—by which I mean the full acceptance of our collective guilt and its consequences—is the price we must pay to see ourselves squarely. The recovering alcoholic may well have to live with his illness for the rest of his life, but he is not living a drunkard. Reparations beckons us to reject the introduction of hubris and see America as it is—the work of fallible humans.

Won't reparations divide us? Not any more than we are already divided. The wealth gap mostly puts a number on something we feel but cannot say—that American prosperity was built and selective in its distribution. What is needed is an airing of family secrets, a reckoning with old ghosts. What is needed is a healing of the American psyche and the banishment of white guilt.

What I'm talking about is more than recompense for past injustices—more than a handout, a payoff, hush money, or a reparations bribe. What I'm talking about is a national reckoning with our history and our spiritual renewal. Reparations would mean the end of scarling hot dogs on the Fourth of July while denying the facts of our heritage. Reparations would mean the end of yelling "America, love it or leave it" on Confederate flag. Reparations would mean a resolution of the American consciousness, a reconciling of our self-image as the great democratic with the facts of our history.

X. "There Will be No 'Reparations' From Germany"

WE ARE NOT the first to be summoned to such a challenge.

In 1952, when West Germany began the process of making amends for the Holocaust, it did so under conditions that included the instruction to its Resistance was violent. Very few Germans believed that Jews were entitled to anything. Only 5 percent of West Germans surveyed reported feeling guilty about the Holocaust, and only 25 percent believed that Jews were owed restitution from the German people.

"Apostle of restitution"
The Auschwitz All Around Us
Jews who survived the Holocaust returned to a germany that was not interested in their suffering. Yet, as a result of their persistence, a new, or improved, or a momentary bout of insanity.
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"The new," the historian Tony Judt wrote in his 2005 book, *Postwar*, "were divided between those (some two-fifths of respondents) who thought that only people who really committed Nazi crimes should be responsible and should pay, and those (21 percent) who thought that the Jews themselves were partly responsible for what happened to them during the Third Reich."

Reich."

Germany's unwillingness to squarely face its history went beyond polls. Movies that suggested a secret complicity for the Holocaust beyond Hitler were banned. The German soldiers fought bravely and honorably for his homeland," claimed Defense Department films celebrating the Teutonic martial spirit. Yet, at the same time, "throughout the Hitler West German officialdom encouraged a comfortable view of the German past in which the Wehrmacht was heroic, while Nazis were in a minority and properly punished."

Konrad Adenauer, the postwar German chancellor, was in favor of reparations, but his own party was divided, and he was able to get an agreement passed only with the votes of the Social Democratic opposition.

"If I could take German property without sitting down with them for even a minute but go in with jeeps and machine guns," said David Ben-Gurion, "I would do that."

Among the Jews of Israel, reparations provoked violent and venomous reactions ranging from demonstrations in assassination plots. On January 7, 1952, at the Knesset—the Israeli parliament—convened to discuss the proposal, a crowd of protesters gathered with Menachem Begin, the future prime minister of Israel, stood in front of a large crowd, investigating against the country that had plundered the Jews, and the property of the Jewish people. Reparations that all Germans were Nazis and guilty of murder. His condemnations then spread to his own young men. He called the crowd to stop preying upon and attacked the first nascent Israeli nation characterized the fight over whether or not to accept reparations as "war to the death." When elected that the police watching the gathering were carrying tear gas, affiliated with German manufacturer, Begin yelled, "The same guns that unfortunately one painted!"

Begin then led the crowd in an oath to never forget the victims of the Shoah, lest "my right hand lose its cunning" and "my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth." He took the crowd through the streets toward the Knesset. Trucks carrying police repelled the crowd with tear gas and smoke bombs. But the wind shifted, and the gas blew back toward the Knesset, billowing through windows and opening the rocks. In the chaos, Begin and Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion exchanged insults. Two hundred civilians and 140 police officers were wounded. Nearly 400 people were arrested. Knesset business was halted.

Begin then addressed the chamber with a fiery speech condemning the actions the legislature was about to take. "Today you arrested hundreds," he said. "Tomorrow you may arrest thousands. No matter, they will go, they will sit in prison. We will sit there with them. If necessary, we will be killed with them. But there will be no 'reparations' from Germany."

Survivors of the Holocaust feared laundering the perpetrators of Germany with money, and mortgaging the memory of their dead. Beyond that, there was a fear for revenge. "My soul would be at ease if I knew there would be 6 million Germans killed to match the 6 million Jews," said Meir Dworetzki, who'd survived the concentration camps of Estonia.

Ben-Gurion countered this sentiment, not by repudiating vengeance but with cold calculation: "If I could take German property without sitting down with them for even a minute but go in with jeeps and machine guns to the warehouses and take it, I would do that. I would do it without remorse, we had the ability to send a hundred divisions and tell them, 'Take it.' But we can't do that."

The reparations conversation set off a wave of bomb attempts by Israeli militants. One was aimed at the foreign ministry in Tel Aviv. Another was aimed at Chancellor Adenauer himself. Any one of them could, in the post-Hitler, when the people bought with reparations money were arriving. West Germany ultimately agreed to pay Israel $1.34 billion deutsche marks, at the time the equal of $822 million dollars. Individual reparations claims followed—for psychological trauma, for offense to Jewish honor, for failing low causes, for life insurance, for time spent in concentration camps. Seventeen percent of funds went toward purchasing ships. By the end of 1953, the reparations money consisted two-thirds of the Israel merchant fleet," writes the Israeli historian Tom Segev in his book *The Seventh Million*. "From 1953 to 1965, the reparations money funded about a third of the total investment in Israel's electrical system, which tripled its capacity, and nearly half the total investment in the railways."

Israel's GNP tripled during the 12 years of the agreement. The Bank of Israel attributed 15 percent of this growth, along with 45,000 jobs, to investments made with reparations money. The Segev reported, "Reparations had the impact on Israel. Reparations "had indispensable psychological and political importance," he writes.

Reparations could not make up for the murder perpetrated by the Nazis. But they did launch Germany on a long, difficult road, and perhaps provided a road map for how a great civilization might make itself worthy of the name.

Assessing the reparations agreement, David Ben-Gurion said,

> For the first time in the history of relations between people, a precedent has been created by which a great State, as a result of moral pressure alone, sides in upon itself to pay compensation to the victim of the government that preceded it. For the first time in the history of a people that has been persecuted, oppressed, plundered and despoiled for hundreds and thousands of years in the countries of Europe, a prosecutor and despoiler has been obliged to return part of his spoils and has even undertaken to make collective reparation as partial restitution for material losses.

Something more than moral pressure calls America to reparations. We cannot escape our history. All of our relations to the great problems of health care, education, housing, and economic inequality are troubled by what must go unspoken. "The reason black people are so far behind now is not because of now," Clyde Ross told me. "It's because of then." In the early 2000s, Charles Ogletree went to Tulsa, Oklahoma, to meet with the survivors of the 1921 race riot that had devastated "Black Wall Street." The past was not the past to them. "It was amazing seeing those black women and men who were crippled, blind, in wheelchairs," Ogletree told me. "I had no idea who they were and why they wanted to see me. They said, "We want you to represent us in this lawsuit."

On the spring of 1921, a white mob leveled "Black Wall Street" in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Many wounded survivors told me so. Every house and every business in the community was burned to the ground. Not a single person was ever prosecuted for the crime.

A commission authorized by the Oklahoma legislature produced a report affirming that the riot, the knowledge of which had been suppressed for years, had happened. But the lawsuit ultimately failed, in 2004. Similar suits pushed against corporations such as Aetna (which insured slaves) and Lehman Brothers (whose co-founding partner owned them) also have thus far failed. These results are dispiriting, but the crime with which reparations seeks to avenge the country implicates not just a few towns or corporations. The crime indicts the American people themselves, at every level, and in nearly every combination. A crime that implicates the entire American people seems to be hearing in the legislative body that represents them, John Conyers's HR 40 is the vehicle for that hearing. No one can know what would come out of such a debate. Perhaps no number can fully capture the multi-century plunder of black people in America. Perhaps the number is so large, it can't be imagined, let alone calculated and dispensed. But I believe that wrestling publicly with these questions—as much as—if not more than—the specific answer that might be produced. An America that asks what it owes its most vulnerable citizens is imposed itself upon. An America that looks into its opening to see just the sins of the past but the sins of the present and the certain sins of the future. Most important that any single check cut to any African American, the payment of reparations would represent America's unsurprised out of the childhood myth of its innocence into a modern security of its founders.

IN 2015, JOHN R. SMITH, then a doctoral candidate at Princeton, and the sociologist Douglas S. Massey published a study of the recent foreclosure crisis. Among the crimes they found an old foe: segregation. Black homeowners even after controlling for factors like creditworthiness—were still more likely than white home buyers to be steered toward subprime loans. Decades of racist housing policies by the American government, along with decades of racist housing practices by American businesses, had conspired to concentrate African Americans in the same neighborhoods. As in North Lawndale half a century earlier, these neighborhoods were filled with people who had been cut off from mainstream financial institutions. When subprime lenders went looking for prey, they found black people waiting like ducks in a pen.

"Wells Fargo mortgage had an emerging-markets unit that specifically targeted black churches."

"High levels of segregation create a natural market for subprime lending," Rugh and Massey write, "and cause riskier mortgages, and thus foreclosures, to accumulate disproportionately in racially segregated cities' minority neighborhoods."

Plunder in the past made plunder in the present efficient. The banks of America understood this. Wells Fargo pioneered the practice of targeting black churches. Strategies seminars. Dubbing itself "the nation's leading originator of home loans to ethnic minority consumers," the bank with the familiar black public figures in ostensible effort to educate blacks on building "generational wealth." But the "wealth building" seminars were a front for predatory theft. In 2010, the Justice Department filed a discrimination suit against Wells Fargo alleging that the bank had directed blacks into predatory loans regardless of their creditworthiness. This was not magic—it coincidence or recklessness. It was racism rolling itself. According to the *New York Times*, affiliates found loan officers referring to their black customers as "meal people" and to their subprime products as "ghetto loans."

"We just never right after them," Beth Jacobson, a former Wells Fargo loan officer, told *The Times*. "Wells Fargo mortgage had an emerging-markets unit that specifically targeted black churches because it figured church leaders had a lot of influence and could convince congregants to take our subprime loans."

In 2012, Bank of America agreed to pay $355 million to settle charges of discrimination against its Countrywide unit. The following year, Wells Fargo settled its discrimination suit for more than $175 million. But the damage had been done. In 2009, half the properties in Baltimore whose owners had been granted loans by Wells Fargo between 2005 and 2008 were vacant; 71 percent of those properties were in predominantly black neighborhoods.

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