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Slavery Reparations

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Slavery Reparations

An issue that has become very prevalent in the past few years is the matter of slavery reparations in America. Advocates of this cause have begun to raise awareness in an effort to make reparations to African Americans affected by the crime of slavery in the United States. This is an extremely controversial subject, especially since there are so many different considerations and opinions surrounding the issue. Anthony Gifford's article, "The Legal Basis of the Claim for Slavery Reparations", Ta-Nehisi Coates' "The Case for Reparations", and chapter nine of Michael Sandel's book, *Justice: What's The Right Thing To Do?* all dig deeper into this issue and take a look at the idea of slavery reparations from various different angles. One of the big questions to reflect on while considering the possibility of slavery reparations in America is: What can be done in order to begin resolving the issue of slavery reparations? The following pages will explore this question in depth.

A possible reason why it has taken so long for reparations to be made to those who have been affected by the American slavery system in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries may be because of the many questions raised on the legal side of pursuing reparations: "Who should claim? Against whom? For what amount? In what court? Some find these questions so daunting that they conclude the idea of reparations is 'fanciful' " (Gifford). In "The Legal Basis of the Claim for Slavery Reparations",

Anthony Gifford gives a strong argument for how the United States can start taking steps towards making amends to slavery victims. An interesting statement that Gifford shared in his article was that “no amends have ever been made, nor even an apology offered. Only the slave owners received compensation...” (Gifford). Gifford’s opinion appears to be that anything is better than what our country has done thus far to make up for such awful deeds. The writer further gets his point across by comparing the current situation of African Americans seeking slavery reparations to the many other issues around the world that have required compensation for wrongdoings in the past. For example, Japan has made reparations to South Korea for the invasion that the Japanese made in Korea during World War II. In addition, the United States has already made amends to Japanese-Americans whom were affected by poor treatment from American authorities during World War II. All of these examples of reparations around the world in the past display the potential that America holds in order to make amends to those affected by the slavery system.

Despite the various examples Anthony Gifford gives as to how we can continue to try to mend the situation at hand, he does acknowledge that there are also obstacles in the way of pursuing this goal: “Reparation is more about collective responsibility than hereditary guilt” (Gifford). It is difficult to suddenly take away from those whose ancestors contributed to the slavery system so many years ago: “Today’s governments are not responsible for fostering the slave trade. But they would be irresponsible if they did nothing to remedy the injustice, the suffering, the poverty, and the racism...” (Gifford). In no way is Gifford directly blaming the current United States for the issue of slavery, but the United States government does possess the “moral responsibility to do something

to atone for the wrong” (Gifford). Citizens of America who are alive today should not necessarily feel guilty for slavery, yet many of them currently possess money that African Americans earned for their ancestors during slavery. It was always in my mind that the United States had offered some form of apology, at least verbally, for the slavery system that was permitted in the past, but after reading Gifford’s writings, it was to my disbelief that I have been making the wrong assumption all along. Anthony Gifford’s article does a great job of displaying several different propositions that can help advance the process of United States slavery reparations.

Ta-Nehisi Coates takes a similar approach from a different angle in his article “The Case for Reparations”. When Coates introduces Congressman John Conyers’ bill, HR 40, Coates is suggesting that we start from the beginning and work our way forward. The HR 40 Bill, also referred to as the Commission to Study Reparation Proposals for African Americans Act, suggests that we begin simply by studying reparations in order to find possible solutions for what is owed to those who were negatively affected by the slavery system for nearly two hundred years. As Coates puts it, “we would support this bill, submit the question to study, and then assess the possible solutions” (24). However, Coates not only reveals that this bill has not been passed, but also that it has not even made it to the floor of the House of Representatives under neither Democrats nor Republicans. In Coates’ opinion, the unwillingness, thus far, for any politician to consider passing this bill hints at that fact that there is more to the hesitance than just paying money. In Nkechi Taifa’s words, a woman who helped found N’COBRA, “this bill does not authorize one red cent to anyone” (Coates 25), so why is there any sort of resistance to merely study the possibility of slavery reparations?

Ta-Nehisi Coates proposes the idea that “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” (55). This is not to say that certain citizens would not be outraged if their taxes were raised, but there is an additional hesitance when the possible threat of changing America’s history comes into the picture. Despite all of the possible “risks” being taken as slavery reparations inches closer to becoming a reality, Conyers’ HR 40 bill starts at the bare bones of the matter at hand and offers a realistic suggestion that will hopefully be considered one day soon. Whenever I heard of the argument over slavery reparations, it never occurred to me that citizens went as far as to even deny the idea of studying them. Coates opened my eyes to another side of the issue, which is that the proposition to mend the injustice that slavery caused barely even gets considered.

“Dilemmas of Loyalty”, which is chapter nine of Michael Sandel’s book, *Justice: What’s The Right Thing To Do?*, is another writing that addresses the situation of slavery reparations from a variety of angles. Sandel, too, briefly brings up Congressman John Conyers’ proposed HR 40 bill, but also points out the statistic that “while a majority of African Americans favor reparations, only 4 percent of whites do” (210). That being said, it is quite clear that in order to make slavery reparations happen, advocates for the cause are going to have to specifically reach out to white American citizens and open their eyes to the viewpoint of African Americans who were affected by the slavery system that our ancestors created. Sandel does a great job of approaching the question at stake from multiple sides. First, he asks the reader if we should take responsibility for our predecessors’ actions: “Who living today is guilty of slaveholding and thus capable

of apologizing for the offense? The obvious answer...no one. We are not answerable for the sins of our parents or our grandparents..." (Sandel 213). However, Sandel then suggests that by accepting the fact that part of our moral responsibility as human beings may be to atone for the sins of the people before us who did not apologize; then the nation is one big step closer to achieving what many African Americans are seeking – reparation for what was taken from them.

The information that I knew about slavery reparations previous to reading these several works was very limited. However, with this small window of knowledge about the topic, I always tended to wonder if it would be fair to suddenly take money from those whose ancestors contributed to slavery. By no means was slavery humane, yet I always went back and forth on whether punishing those who were not first-hand culprits of slavery was the right answer. After reading Coates', Gifford's, and Sandel's works on the issue, I am now able to reconsider my opinion from various angles. Until now, I was unaware of some of the grueling facts of slavery and the consequences and results of the system. Becoming educated about the topic before we form an opinion is crucial, and even then, we still need to remember that we do not know all of the facts. In the meantime, we can study the issue further by reading informative and reliable sources similar to those I have discussed.

Chapter nine of *Justice: What's The Right Thing To Do?* by Michael Sandel, "The Case for Reparations" by Ta-Nehisi Coates, and Anthony Gifford's article "The Legal Basis of the Claim for Slavery Reparations" are all informative writings that explore the many questions that revolve around the issue of slavery reparations. It seems as though the calls for these reparations are only going to increase as the years pass by, so reading

enlightening articles like to the writings explained in this paper can help America come to a realistic compromise to please all citizens that are proponents and opponents of slavery reparations.

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