

The College of Wooster

## Open Works

---

Senior Independent Study Theses

---

2020

# Repairing a Nation: A visual exploration into the American debate on reparations

Desi Jeseve LaPoole

*The College of Wooster*, [dlapoole20@wooster.edu](mailto:dlapoole20@wooster.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://openworks.wooster.edu/independentstudy>



Part of the [African American Studies Commons](#), [Digital Humanities Commons](#), [Film Production Commons](#), and the [Visual Studies Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

LaPoole, Desi Jeseve, "Repairing a Nation: A visual exploration into the American debate on reparations" (2020). *Senior Independent Study Theses*. Paper 8884.

This Senior Independent Study Thesis Exemplar is brought to you by Open Works, a service of The College of Wooster Libraries. It has been accepted for inclusion in Senior Independent Study Theses by an authorized administrator of Open Works. For more information, please contact [openworks@wooster.edu](mailto:openworks@wooster.edu).

© Copyright 2020 Desi Jeseve LaPoole



---

THE COLLEGE OF  
**WOOSTER**

---

REPAIRING A NATION:  
A VISUAL EXPLORATION INTO THE AMERICAN DEBATE  
ON REPARATIONS FOR SLAVERY

by Desi LaPoole

An Independent Study Thesis  
Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Course Requirements for  
Senior Independent Study in Journalism and Society

March 25, 2020

Advisor: Dr. Denise Bostdorff

## Abstract

The debate on reparations for slavery in the United States of America has persisted for generations, capturing the attention and imagination of America in waves before falling out of public consciousness over the decades. Throughout its longevity, the debate on reparations has had many arguments in support of and opposition towards the idea and has inspired many different proposals which seek to solve many different problems. Today, reparations have found new mainstream attention, thanks in part Ta-Nehisi Coates' article, "The Case for Reparations," published in *The Atlantic*, and to two new reparations bills in Congress. My research explores the debate on reparations — the arguments for and against, the types of proposals that have been made, and the persisting racial inequalities in wealth and housing that stem from slavery and Jim Crow Segregation — through both a written document and short documentary titled, *Reparations: An American Dilemma*, available to watch on .

**Key Words:** *reparations, racial inequality, documentary*

## Acknowledgments

Completing this project would not have been possible without the mentorship and support of several individuals throughout this Independent Study process. I would like to thank my advisor, Dr. Denise Bostdorff, for her support and guidance she has provided me since our first meeting. I am incredibly grateful for the creative freedom she gave me, and the encouragement to strive for excellence in both my written and visual components of my project. Dr. Bostdorff has supported my goals both academically and professionally not only through this project, but also through my years at the College of Wooster. She has always pushed me to have confidence in my ideas, my writing, and my ambitions, and for that, I cannot thank her enough.

I would also like to thank *The Wooster Voice* for first introducing me to the world of journalism, and for being instrumental in developing my interviewing, writing, and editing skills. Through this paper, I learned many of the concepts I utilized throughout the completion of this project, from journalistic ethics to media law, and anything in between.

I owe my friends thanks, as well. Many of the accomplishments I made throughout the completion of this Independent Study would have not been possible without their help and support. Specifically, I owe my gratitude to Fiona Armoo and Akalia Samms for being my producers, camerawomen, and extras in my film. I couldn't ask for better best friends.

Lastly, I owe the most gratitude to my family. They laid the foundation of morals and values that has shaped my character into what it is today. Words cannot express how grateful I am for all of the investments and opportunities they provided me to pave the path that I am on today. It is certainly a reflection of their unconditional love, encouragement, and support in me. I love you Mom, Dad, and Dennis, and I hope I've made you proud.

## Table of Contents

CHAPTER ONE: LET’S BEGIN.....	1
The goal of this project.....	3
Why study the reparations debate?.....	3
Conclusion.....	5
CHAPTER TWO: HOW WE GOT HERE.....	6
Ground Rules.....	7
Setting the Scene.....	11
American History in a Nutshell.....	12
History as Innocence vs. History as Implicature.....	14
The Debate.....	17
The Range of Reparations.....	21
America’s Modern Issues.....	28
Conclusion.....	34
CHAPTER THREE: THE FILM.....	35
John Clay, President of the Wooster/Orville NAACP.....	37
Dionissi Alipratis, Senior Research Economist at the Federal Reserve Bank of Cleveland.....	39
Yvonne Williams, Professor Emeritus of Political Science and Black Studies, and Former Dean of the Faculty at The College of Wooster.....	40
Davis Houck, Fannie Lou Hamer Professor of Rhetorical Studies at Florida State University.....	42
CHAPTER FOUR: IN CONCLUSION.....	45

What did the film teach us?.....	45
What's the significance?.....	47
What do we do now?.....	47
Some final thoughts.....	48
WORKS CITED.....	49

## CHAPTER ONE: LET'S BEGIN

When I was a child, my parents made an effort to educate my younger brother, Dennis, and me about our history — black history. I know the stories and legends of both sides of my family, we celebrated Kwanzaa right after Christmas, and every day of Black History Month was a day to honor the legacy of someone powerful and monumental. For me, this was a normal part of life, and was something I thought everyone did.

I didn't realize this was far from the truth until I entered third grade. My family had recently moved to Atlanta, Georgia, from our previous home in Houston, Texas, and Dennis and I were enrolled in a public elementary school nestled in a nice, upper middle class, and predominantly white neighborhood. We were lucky to attend this school, because our home was not zoned for it. The difference between the neighborhood school I was supposed to attend, and the one I did was staggering. My elementary school was listed in the top 25 schools in our county with a grade of "A"; they didn't bother assigning a ranking to the school I was zoned for, but graciously gave it a "C-".<sup>1</sup> How my parents got us in the school is beyond me, but we loved it. Our teachers were nice, we made friends we still have today, and the playground was much nicer than the school around the corner.

However, when February came around, I realized a difference between the conversations I was having at home with my family, and the conversations I was having at school; the main difference being that conversations about Black History Month at school were nonexistent. At previous schools I attended, we at least took our crayons to coloring sheets with Martin Luther King Jr.'s face printed on the paper, but here, at this mostly-white school, they did not even acknowledge black history — my history.

---

<sup>1</sup> "2020 Best Public Elementary Schools in DeKalb County," Niche.

Looking back, I realize black history's lack of recognition at this school, and frankly lack of recognition at my other schools, was very telling of how the United States reconciles with its racial history: it tries its hardest not to. It's easy to see why. For all the great accomplishments and strong legacies in America's history, it also has some ugly, disturbing stains. That's hard to see in a country you love and call home. So, it's easier to want leave those parts in the past and believe that the country has overcome that troubling history.

As Americans, we hold our defining notions of individuality and freedom of personal choice so close to the chest that it can blind us from how collective, historic actions continue to affect us today, especially in terms of race. The official end to Jim Crow segregation came in 1964, marking the first time since the passage of the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> amendments and the Civil Rights Act of 1875 — all gutted by the Supreme Court in 1883 — that the federal government outlawed differential treatment of individuals based on race.<sup>2</sup> For many, since black people were no longer slaves and seemingly all legal barriers to the American Dream were now dismantled, there was no reason that African Americans could not achieve that dream. Racism was solved.

However, for me, that has not been the case. From listening to my parents' stories of growing up in the Southern ghettos their parents were forced to live in, to witnessing white flight in the neighborhood my family moved to when I was a child, to hearing my white high school classmates blame my culture for "failing" young boys like Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown, I have seen that racism, and the effects of slavery and Jim Crow are still prevalent today. And yet, we have done very little to mitigate those effects.

It wasn't until I spoke with my mom one day that I remembered individuals and institutions have made efforts to address these historic injustices and their lasting effects. We

---

<sup>2</sup> David Lyons, "Racial Injustices in U.S. History and Their Legacy," ed. Michael T. Martin and Marilyn Yaquinto, *Redress for Historical Injustices in the United States*, p.35.

talked about the failed promise to freed slaves that they would receive 40 acres and a mule, about Representative Conyers' H.R. 40 bill, and Ta-Nehisi Coates taking the stand for a Congressional hearing about reparations.<sup>3</sup> As we talked, I began to wonder why the United States was still having this debate, and how would reparations look over a century and a half after slavery?

### **The Goal of This Project**

When I decided to do my senior thesis on the American reparations debate, it was because I was curious. My purpose in pursuing this topic was to examine the debate itself and to understand the arguments on either side and how they evolved throughout our history. Another goal was to explore the lasting legacy of slavery and Jim Crow segregation today. In addition, I chose to create a film that would showcase the human faces impacted by the issue of reparations and the reparations debate. I opted to explore these matters in the context of the City of Wooster, a small town in rural Ohio of approximately 26,000 people, with an African American population of about 3.3%.<sup>4</sup> While this may seem like an odd location to discuss reparations, I take a new approach to the debate by including the perspectives of African American communities living far from the struggles of inner-city life. I aim to answer the question: How does the debate manifest outside of cities like Chicago, Detroit, Atlanta, and New York?

### **Why study the reparations debate?**

Reparations' newfound acceptance by mainstream politicians is cause to examine the debate in the context of 2020. Many people trace this newfound acceptance to 2014, when Ta-Nehisi Coates published his article, "The Case for Reparations," in *The Atlantic*, which ran as the cover story and sparked another resurgence in the discussion on reparations for African

---

<sup>3</sup> "Booker Reparations Bill Reaches 12 Senate Cosponsors," Cory Booker | U.S. Senator for New Jersey.; Clare Foran, "House Panel to Hold Hearing on Reparations for Slavery next Week," CNN.

<sup>4</sup> "Wooster, Ohio Population 2019," Wooster, Ohio Population 2019 (Demographics, Maps, Graphs).

Americans around the country. Coates' article and ensuing debates have since proven that his piece has stuck with Americans since it was first published, and mainstream presidential candidates now publicly support reparations, and even go so far as to propose legislation in Congress, a first in U.S. politics.<sup>5</sup>

I aim to combat stereotypical ideas that racism is only an issue historically rooted in the South by exploring communities that Americans might not consider as facing racial injuries from slavery and Jim Crow. When thinking of these past eras, imagery of Southern cotton plantations, the Confederate army, and "whites only" signs may come to mind. These images however, are symbols of the overt nature of Southern racism, and don't acknowledge the racism of Northern states as well. Common ideas about racial oppression is that it is and always has been an issue in the South, when it was also a persistent and pressing issue in the North.

Lastly, my project will offer a greater understanding of the debate over both the idea of reparations and different reparations proposals. The reparations debate has persisted in the decades since the end of slavery, capturing the attention and imagination of America in waves before falling out of public consciousness. While the debate is not new, uncertainty about any reparations policy has been a contributing factor to reparations continuing to be unfulfilled. Questions about how the United States would fund such a policy, who would pay reparations, and if it's even necessary in the 21<sup>st</sup> century are all valid points to ask about the idea. In the visual and written components of my thesis project, I will not only explore reparations supporters' and opponents' arguments, but also the complexities and nuances in implementing reparations on a national scale.

---

<sup>5</sup> "House Panel to Hold Hearing on Reparations for Slavery Next Week."

## Conclusion

I know from my experiences in my childhood and adolescence that America generally avoids discussing its history of racial injustice. However, the resurgence in the reparations debate has brought the conversation to the forefront once again, and the debate deserves to be explored in the context of 2020. Additionally, the traditional focus on big, predominantly black cities is good when appealing to politicians, but ignores the smaller black communities living outside of popular American cities, communities I wish to highlight. I take this route because reparations has entered mainstream politics, conceptions of historical injustices are mainly focused to the South rather than the North, and reparations is not fully understood by the public. In Chapter Two, I will go through the history and different aspects of the reparations debate to explain how we as a nation came to the point we find ourselves in regarding the debate. My third and fourth chapters will respectively describe Wooster and my interviewees more thoroughly, and the techniques I used in the filming and editing process. My final chapter will wrap up with the conclusions of my study, as well as its implications and limitations.

## CHAPTER TWO: HOW WE GOT HERE

On June 19, 2019, the House of Representatives' Judiciary Committee held the first hearing on reparations in U.S. history. The hearing, titled "H.R. 40 and the Path to Restorative Justice," was about a bill proposed by Rep. Shelia Jackson Lee (Democrat-Texas), which would, if passed, create a commission to study the legacy of slavery and make reparations proposals. Presidential candidate Sen. Corey Booker (Democrat-New Jersey) has sponsored a companion bill to Jackson's in the Senate, making it the first post-Reconstruction Senate reparations bill.<sup>6</sup> His fellow candidates, Sen. Elizabeth Warren (Democrat-Massachusetts) and former U.S. Secretary of Housing and Urban Development Julián Castro, have expressed support for reparations for African Americans on the campaign trail, as well.<sup>7</sup> To put it frankly, this is all unprecedented. The renewed focus on reparations for African Americans in mainstream politics, especially from presidential candidates, shows a positive shift in America's willingness to reconcile with its past and find a way forward.

The call for reparations is not a recent phenomenon, however. Since the emancipation of African Americans from slavery, both white and black political figures from different eras in America's history have called for and proposed reparations legislation.<sup>8</sup> However, it's been 155 years since the institution of slavery came to an end, and as a nation we're still wondering how to repair that terrible injustice. This is a longstanding, complex, and ever-evolving debate that requires exploration in light of its resurgence in U.S. politics.

Before diving into the debate itself, I will first define a few terms I will use frequently, as well as the theoretical framework that I take here. I will then discuss the two primary

---

<sup>6</sup> Stolberg, Sheryl Gay. "At Historic Hearing, House Panel Explores Reparations." *The New York Times*.; "Booker Reparations Bill Reaches 12 Senate Cosponsors."

<sup>7</sup> "House Panel to Hold Hearing on Reparations for Slavery next Week."

<sup>8</sup> Lyons "Racial Injustices" p. 41.

interpretations of U.S. history, including how they inform supporters' and opponents' arguments, and the interpretation to which I subscribe. Lastly, I will describe the enduring legacy of slavery and Jim Crow, the major arguments of reparations supporters, as well as major issues within African American communities that proposed reparations plans seek to address.

### **Ground Rules**

Discussing reparations would be fruitless if I don't explain the foundation on which I base my arguments. So, it's time to do some groundwork by defining the terms I use frequently throughout the rest of my work. Some of these terms have been employed in the public sphere yet may have different meanings for different groups, while others are specifically used in discussions on reparations and may not be widely known. My second objective here is to explain Critical Race Theory, the foundational theory I work from, and why it serves as the framework for my project.

Reparations is undoubtedly a divisive topic, and the term itself has different meanings depending on the stance that people take on this issue. Supporters would define it as a means to close social and economic gaps between white and black communities, while opponents consider it an example of good but ultimately misguided intentions or, in some cases, a chance to get quick cash from the federal government.<sup>9</sup> What exactly do I mean when I talk about reparations? While different interpretations of reparations exist, I assume a broader definition. For my purposes, reparations are "benefits extended in various forms to those injured by racial

---

<sup>9</sup> David R. Williams and Chiquita Collins, "Reparations: A Viable Strategy to Address the Enigma of African American Health," ed. Michael T. Martin and Marilyn T. Yaquinto, *Redress for Historical Injustices in the United States*, 2007, 305; Juan Williams, *Enough: The Phony Leaders, Dead-End Movements, and Culture of Failure That Are Undermining Black America — and What We Can Do about It*, p.67.

discrimination practiced by, or with the acquiescence of, the government of a representative democracy,” rather than blank checks written to nonwhites.<sup>10</sup>

The idea of and debate over reparations fall under the umbrella of Critical Race Theory (CRT), the framework I will work from here. CRT was developed by several legal scholars and concerns itself with the evolving relationship of race, racism, and power in broader categories such as economics, history, and group- and self-interests.<sup>11</sup> Rather than focusing on achieving incremental success like civil rights movements do, CRT aims to transform the very foundation of “the liberal order” and the way we interpret and implement our ideologies into America’s institutions.<sup>12</sup> In order to do this, CRT has four basic tenets that serve as the foundation for the theory: 1) Racism is not only inherent to U.S. society, it is normal; 2) both white and non-white Americans support racism through hegemony; 3) words are powerful and should be used to create counter-narratives to our social reality; and 4) the individual experiences of people of color should be recognized and made public.<sup>13</sup> Not only do aspects of CRT show up in the different elements of the reparations debate, namely racial injury, institutionalized racism, and white guilt, but CRT also serves as a basis for exploring the reparations debate. Advocating for reparations for black Americans inherently provides a counter-narrative, that which claims the United States has not moved past the horrors of slavery and Jim Crow — contrary to popular, color-blind beliefs — and utilizes the stories and lived experiences of African Americans as the basis for its arguments.

---

<sup>10</sup> James Bolner, “Toward a Theory of Racial Reparations,” ed. Michael T. Martin and Marilyn T. Yaquinto, *Redress for Historical Injustices in the United States*, 2007, 134.

<sup>11</sup> Richard Delgado, Jean Stefancic, and Angela Harris *Critical Race Theory (Third Edition): An Introduction*, p. 3. NYU Press, 2017.

<sup>12</sup> Delgado et al., *Critical Race Theory*, p. 3.

<sup>13</sup> Audrey P. Olmsted, “Words Are Acts: Critical Race Theory as a Rhetorical Construct,” *Howard Journal of Communications* 9, no. 4 (1998), p. 325.; Delgado et al., *Critical Race Theory*, p. 4.

These lived experiences also unfortunately involve stories of racial injury, or historic injustice, something reparations seek to address. This is something that scholars, activists, and public figures agree on regardless of their stance.<sup>14</sup> Racial injury is the economic and/or emotional suffering one experiences at the hands of individuals, institutions, or governments because of their racial identity. Events that I classify as causing racial injury are the seizures of Native American land, the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II, and naturally the enslavement of black people and the segregation black and other Americans of color during the Jim Crow era. As quoted in *Long Overdue*, Vincent Verdun defined racial injury specifically for African Americans as the failure to compensate slaves for their labor and “the presumption of inferiority, devaluation of self-esteem, and other emotional injuries, pain, and suffering, that resulted from the institution of slavery.”<sup>15</sup> While some agree that these injuries are enduring, others believe any harms have long faded into history and no longer exist, especially on a large scale.

I argue these racial injuries do persist into today and stem from two interrelated forms of racism. The first comes from individuals, and is overt and direct in its targets. This is individual racism, and is the type of racism that is seen as unacceptable and condemned by most Americans today.<sup>16</sup> The second type, institutionalized racism, is more subtle in nature yet affects far more people for far longer. Institutionalized racism is a term defined by Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton as originating “in the operation of established and respected forces in the society, and thus receives far less public condemnation,” than overt racism.<sup>17</sup> Where individual

---

<sup>14</sup> Williams, *Enough*, 71-73.; David Horowitz, *Uncivil Wars: The Controversy over Reparations for Slavery*, p.10.; Bolner “Toward a Theory,” p. 134.

<sup>15</sup> Charles P. Henry, *Long Overdue: The Politics of Racial Reparations*, p.23.

<sup>16</sup> “Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation* (Vintage, 1967), p.4.

<sup>17</sup> Stokely and Hamilton, *Black Power*, p. 4.

racism is easy to identify because it can be attributed to specific people, institutionalized racism isn't as easily recorded, photographed, or documented as it is unintentional discriminatory practices committed by public institutions and perpetuated by unwitting individuals.<sup>18</sup> CRT theorists state that since racism benefits whites materially and psychically, little incentive is present for one of the largest segments of our society to eradicate it.<sup>19</sup> I argue that institutionalized racism exists in all facets of our society and negatively affects people of color living in America.

One of clear example of institutionalized racism is the disparity between arrests of African Americans and whites for possession of marijuana. According to the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), white and black people use marijuana at roughly the same rates; however, black people are far more likely to be arrested. In 2010 in Iowa, for instance, 1,454 African Americans were arrested for possession of the drug, compared to the 174 whites; that is, African Americans were 8.35 times more likely to be arrested than whites, despite the fact that Iowa is an overwhelmingly white state.<sup>20</sup> While many factors may contribute to this vast disparity, I argue that unethical police practices, such as racial profiling and targeting, play a major role in the differing arrest rates. This is only one instance of institutionalized racism, but this type of racism exists in all facets of society.

Yet, instances like these aren't met with the same collective vitriol as individual racism, primarily because the concept of institutionalized racism implies that racism is based in unconscious behavior rather than consciously motivated actions, a sentiment that prompts white

---

<sup>18</sup> Stokely and Hamilton, *Black Power*, p. 4; William Macpherson of Cluny, "The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry: Report of an Inquiry by Sir William Macpherson of Cluny ; Advised by Tom Cook, John Sentamu, Richard Stone."

<sup>19</sup> Delgado et al., *Critical Race Theory*, p. 9

<sup>20</sup> "Report: The War on Marijuana in Black and White," American Civil Liberties Union, accessed September 26, 2019, p. 17

guilt and makes it harder for white Americans to acknowledge institutional racism and how they have benefited from it. White guilt, like the term suggests, is the guilt felt by white Americans over their perceived involvement in acts of racism and ties to their race's history of imperialism, colonialism, and slavery, as well as the human rights abuses that comes with that type of political and economic dominance over another group of people.<sup>21</sup> White Americans generally try to distance themselves from their history by claiming their ancestors did not own slaves, immigrated from another European country, or that they "don't see color." The last claim falls into the post-Jim Crow era notion of color blindness, or "conceptions of equality, expressed in rules that insist only on treatment that is the same across the board," regardless of race.<sup>22</sup> This idea is particularly alluring to those attempting to avoid feeling guilty for being white, because color blindness implies that individuals are not and will never be racist because they don't see others as the race they are. However, the concept of color blindness only attacks the most blatant forms of racism, leaving covert forms of racism to flourish. Color blindness extends to a national scale as well, as "color-blind" policies have been enacted that often serve to perpetuate inequalities, rather than providing an equal playing field.<sup>23</sup>

### **Setting the Scene**

No discussion of reparations is complete without first overviewing the objective history of injustice towards African Americans in the United States. I specify 'objective' because two subjective and contrasting interpretations of America's history exist and serve as the foundation of pro- and anti-reparations arguments. I will explain these interpretations and how they inform

---

<sup>21</sup> Fernando Estrada and Geneva Matthews. "Perceived Culpability in Critical Multicultural Education: Understanding and Responding to Race Informed Guilt and Shame to Further Learning Outcomes among White American College Students," p. 317.

<sup>22</sup> Delgado et al., *Critical Race Theory*, p. 8.

<sup>23</sup> Delgado et al., *Critical Race Theory*, p. 8-9.

both sides of the debate in a later section, but for now we must understand significant points in America's history on which there is agreement before moving forward.

### **American History in a Nutshell**

Slavery was integral to the American economy long before the United States became a sovereign nation. Jamestown was the site for some of the earliest documented cases of chattel slavery; as early as 1619, Virginia colonists were buying African people from Dutch ships, condemning them, their children, and their descendants to lives of servitude. While some African people in the colonies worked as indentured servants rather than slaves during this time and could gain their freedom, chattel slavery was eventually institutionalized in the last few decades of the 17<sup>th</sup> century through carefully written legislation from colonial legislative bodies.<sup>24</sup>

For the next 246 years, black people were bought and sold as the property of wealthy white men and forced to work tobacco, sugarcane, and most infamously, cotton plantations primarily located in the South of the United States of America. It wasn't until 1865, after the Civil War and the implementation of the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment, that slavery was officially abolished in the country.<sup>25</sup> It was during this same period, in 1875, that the first Civil Rights Act was passed.<sup>26</sup> However, even though African Americans were freed from legal bondage and secured human and civil rights during a period known as Reconstruction, it did not last long.

The Civil Rights Act of 1875 was overturned by the Supreme Court almost a decade later, and Southern States established Black Codes as a means of reestablishing white political power. Not only did white supremacists focus on regaining political control over the country, but also they aimed for social control. After the Civil War, white people chose extremely violent

---

<sup>24</sup> Lyons, "Racial Injustices," p.35.; Ronald P. Salzberger and Mary C. Turck, *Reparations for Slavery: A Reader*, p. 5.

<sup>25</sup> Lyons "Racial Injustices," p.41.; Salzberger and Truck *Reparations for Slavery*, p. 20

<sup>26</sup> Lyons "Racial Injustices," p. 45.

means of putting African Americans back in their place. White mobs and the newly established Klu Klux Klan terrorized not only black communities but Republicans as well. Burning crosses were erected in front of black homes, and lynchings skyrocketed to unprecedented numbers all over the country. Between the 1860s and the 1930s, tens of thousands of people, mostly black, were lynched throughout the country for “crimes” such as talking back to a white man and registering to vote.<sup>27</sup>

During the midst of these violent acts fueled by racism, the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision was made, which established the “Separate but Equal” doctrine as the law of the land and started the era of Jim Crow segregation. According to the Supreme Court, whites and minorities were meant to have separate facilities — schools, neighborhoods, and, just to be petty, separate water fountains. This system was strictly and violently enforced for nearly 70 years before it would eventually collapse. The Supreme Court’s decision in 1954’s *Brown v. Board of Education* case was a historic milestone in gaining equality for African Americans, as it ruled separate school facilities were inherently not equal, and therefore unconstitutional.<sup>28</sup> The civil rights movement of the 1960s secured additional rights for African Americans through the Civil Rights Act and Voting Rights Act, putting an legal and definite end to overt segregation and oppression of African Americans.<sup>29</sup> This is generally where reparations opponents end their analysis of America’s history of racial oppression and the start of the country’s new “color-blind” society, while reparations supporters argue racism and discrimination continued in more covert methods. This difference in interpreting America’s history is one of the major differences between supporters and opponents, and serve as the basis for their claims.

---

<sup>27</sup> Salzberger and Turck. *Reparations for Slavery*, p. 21.

<sup>28</sup> Lyons “Racial Injustices,” p. 45.

<sup>29</sup> Lyons “Racial Injustices,” p. 45.

## History as Innocence vs. History as Implicature

It's next to impossible today to find someone who would deny America's history of exploitation and oppression. The major events regarding race relations in America are taught in every school: slavery in the American South, the Civil War's battles over the future of slavery in this country (no, it was not about states' rights — unless we're talking about the states' rights to own slaves), and the late twentieth century civil rights movement that legally brought an end to institutionalized white supremacy. These are the facts of U.S. history. However, when it comes to discussions about reparations and whether America still owes a debt to African Americans for the centuries of human rights abuses they endured, interpretations of history begin to differ depending on one's level of support (or lack thereof) for reparations to black people. Understanding these interpretations of history is integral to understanding the different sides of the reparations debate.

As previously mentioned, the seemingly two primary ways of interpreting the United States' history regarding the reparations debate. The first, which presents the country's history through a lens of white innocence, supports reparations opponents and their arguments. Jacqueline Bacon terms this view as "history as innocence." The second interpretation argues that America's history has a direct connection to contemporary issues and supports the arguments of reparations defenders. Bacon calls this view "history as implicature."<sup>30</sup>

The "history as innocence" stance attempts to distance white America's connection to its own racial history, while still maintaining the power and privilege whites have gained from that history. In his book *The Rhetoric of Racism*, Mark Lawrence McPhail describes this view of history as the "politics of innocence," since it creates a pretty, nostalgic vision of white

---

<sup>30</sup> Jacqueline Bacon, "Reading the Reparations Debate," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 89, pp. 173.

Americans' racial history.<sup>31</sup> This perspective reveals itself in ideals such as “color-blindness” and claims that America is a post-racial society, assertions that are hard to support in today’s social and political climate.

Anti-reparations opponent David Horowitz makes the claim that, “in the thousands of years of [slavery’s] existence, there was never was an anti-slavery movement until white Christians — Englishmen and Americans — created one,” and he goes on to say, “If not for the sacrifices of white soldiers and a white American president who gave his life to sign the Emancipation Proclamation, blacks in America would still be slaves.”<sup>32</sup> I could poke holes in Horowitz’s claims all day: his argument blatantly ignores the fact that chattel slavery was a uniquely American practice (slavery in Africa more closely resembled the indentured servitude practice that brought many Europeans to America in its early days), and that white Christians created the very conditions that required abolishment in the first place; most egregiously, he omits the black abolitionists fighting for the freedom of black slaves long before white people took up the fight.<sup>33</sup> However, the main point I want to make here is that Horowitz’s arguments serve one major purpose: to depict Christian white Americans as the “good guys” of U.S. history who have already paid their debt for slavery in blood, whether through the Civil War or political assassination.<sup>34</sup>

The history as innocence stance falls closely in line with the hegemonic historical narratives presented in the United States, which perpetuate the idea that America is an otherwise peaceful, industrious, and free democratic state despite the “abnormality” of chattel slavery.<sup>35</sup>

---

<sup>31</sup> Bacon, “Reading the Reparations Debate,” p. 174.

<sup>32</sup> David Horowitz, *Uncivil Wars: The Controversy over Reparations for Slavery*, p. 15; Salzberger and Turck *Reparations for Slavery*, p. 129.

<sup>33</sup> Bacon, “Reading the Reparations Debate,” p. 174.

<sup>34</sup> Bacon, “Reading the Reparations Debate,” p. 174.; Horowitz, *Uncivil Wars*, p. 129.

<sup>35</sup> Bacon, “Reading the Reparations Debate,” p. 178.

Working with this narrative, reparations opponents are able to ignore the systemic nature of racism that continued through Reconstruction through the modern day. Additionally, opponents reinforce these views by appropriating the words, philosophies, and memories of civil rights leaders, such as Martin Luther King Jr., to present the narrative that civil rights had already been achieved.<sup>36</sup> For individuals such as Horowitz, the idea that justice has already been served to African Americans not only absolves modern white Americans of responsibility for modern inequalities, but also places the fault on those who suffer from these inequalities. With every legal barrier to the American Dream seemingly broken down, it is no longer the action or inaction of the government that perpetuates social and economic inequality in black communities, but the black individuals who perpetuate this inequality themselves.<sup>37</sup>

In other words, the history as innocence stance primarily aims to absolve white people of any guilt they may feel for their connection with historic injustices, removes a sense of culpability for racial injuries and modern inequalities resulting from historic injustice, and places the responsibility of solving those injustices on those who suffer from them.

Conversely, implicative history denies the notions of personal choice and goals of absolving strict categories of people in favor of a more interrelated interpretation of America's history. Implicature seeks to showcase the interconnected nature of people in society, and "the belief that we are materially, ideologically, and spiritually implicated in each other's lives," as McPhail describes it.<sup>38</sup>

---

<sup>36</sup> Bostdorff, Denise M., and Steven R. Goldzwig. "History, Collective Memory, and the Appropriation of Martin Luther King, Jr.: Reagan's Rhetorical Legacy," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 35, p. 679.

<sup>37</sup> Juan Williams, *Enough: The Phony Leaders, Dead-End Movements, and Culture of Failure That Are Undermining Black America — and What We Can Do about It*, p. 73.

<sup>38</sup> Bacon, "Reading the Reparations Debate," p. 175.

Reparations supporters base their arguments in the history as implicature stance. Unlike Horowitz and other opponents, they would argue that no one living in the United States has ever been isolated from the effects of slavery, whether they lived in the past or present. Even though only a minority of white Americans owned slaves, all white Americans benefitted from the institution. The cotton, tobacco, and other crops produced through slave labor were distributed across the country and consumed by Americans whether they owned slaves or not. Businessmen who may not have owned slaves themselves profited from the materials produced by slaves, as did white politicians and white citizens.<sup>39</sup>

This stance is closely aligned with the main points of critical race theory, particularly the notions that race and racism are interwoven in American society and that the nation as a whole is still working to overcome that racism.<sup>40</sup> The tension in the reparations debate is rooted in these contradicting interpretations of U.S. history. The innocence stance does not attempt to trigger white guilt, nor does it attempt to reconcile it. Instead, it staunchly avoids the former and completely ignores the latter. Implicative history, however, has the power to disrupt hegemonic ideals of personal choice resulting in personal outcomes, the nobility and innocence of white Americans, and most importantly, addressing the country's history head-on. By accepting reparations policies or legislation, the United States will also have to accept that everyone is culpable for modern inequalities that stem from slavery and Jim Crow, and that racial issues did not end with Martin Luther King, Jr. For America, that's a hard pill to swallow.

### **The Debate**

If the United States had honestly reconciled and made right its history of institutionalized racism and white supremacy — in other words, if racism and discrimination in America truly

---

<sup>39</sup> Bacon, "Reading the Reparations Debate," p. 178.

<sup>40</sup> Olmsted, "Words Are Acts," p. 325.

ended with the civil rights movement — the continued demand for reparations would have likely ceased. The fact that activists still call for reparations in 2020, 155 years after the end of federally-supported racism and segregation, means that America still has a sincere need to address the wrongs it committed against African slaves and to redress how those wrongs have negatively affected slave descendants.

The desire to mitigate these inequalities has been the foundation of reparations proposals since these types of proposals were first introduced during the Reconstruction period. The first and most infamous reparations proposal for slavery was the unfulfilled promise of 40 acres and a mule made to slaves by Union General William T. Sherman in 1865.<sup>41</sup> Two years later, Representative Thaddeus Stevens of Pennsylvania proposed H.R. 29, a bill that would confiscate lands from former slaveholders in the South and redistribute them to former slaves as reparations for their enslavement. In his words, the four million people who had been freed from bondage would have no means of providing for themselves on their own, and “they must, necessarily, therefore, be the servants and the victims of others unless they are made in some measure independent” of their former owners.<sup>42</sup> Congress did not pass the bill, and as Stevens expected, the freed African Americans were legally oppressed and exploited for another century for their economic benefits to the country. In the South, freed slaves were forced to work as tenant farmers and domestic servants at subsistence wages for white land owners through systems such as sharecropping, a state of affairs that kept them perpetually in poverty.<sup>43</sup>

Individuals and institutions made other efforts in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to gain reparations for African Americans, but those failed, as well. Reparations were essentially a dead cause until

---

<sup>41</sup> Jeffrey R. Kerr-Ritchie, “Forty Acres, or, An Act of Bad Faith,” ed. Michael T. Martin and Marilyn Yaquinto, *Redress for Historical Injustices in the United States*, 2007, p. 222.

<sup>42</sup> Salzberger and Turck, “Reparations for Slavery,” p. 66.

<sup>43</sup> Lyons, “Racial Injustices,” p. 41.

1969 when James Forman published *The Black Manifesto*, which proposed no less than \$500 million in reparations be paid to black communities. The major difference in his proposal from earlier ones was, rather than making these demands of the U.S. government, it called on white churches and synagogues of the United States to make these payments. According to Forman, American churches and synagogues “are part and parcel of the system of capitalism . . . . We are also not unaware that the exploitation of colored peoples around the world is aided and abetted by the white Christian churches and synagogues.”<sup>44</sup> *The Black Manifesto* was met with outrage and outright rejection, as many religious institutions agreed with reparations in principle but not in practice. The few institutions that did raise money for Forman’s cause did not send the money to his group, but rather the larger organizations under which Forman was acting.

Ultimately, although *The Black Manifesto* failed, it did bring the topic of reparations back in the public’s consciousness. Twenty years after Forman made his effort to secure reparations for African Americans, Representative John Conyers sponsored and introduced for the first time in 1989 his bill, H.R. 40. Named after the initial broken promise of 40 acres and a mule, H.R. 40 called “to establish a commission to examine the institution of slavery, subsequently de jure and de facto racial and economic discrimination against African Americans, and the impact of these forces on living African Americans,” with the ultimate goal of making reparations recommendations to Congress.<sup>45</sup> H.R. 40 never made it out of committee in 1989, but Rep. Conyers proposed his bill again every year until his retirement in 2016 in hopes it would make it onto the voting floor. Representative Shelia Jackson reintroduced the bill in 2019, and following

---

<sup>44</sup> Lyons, “Racial Injustices,” p. 70.

<sup>45</sup> Lyons, “Racial Injustices,” p. 91.

Jackson's lead, presidential candidate Senator Cory Booker sponsored his own companion bill in the Senate.<sup>46</sup>

These are the major historical markers in the long battle to gain reparations for slavery for African American communities nationwide; however, smaller legal battles for reparations for past injustices have been fought — for African Americans and other racially injured minorities. The federal government established the Indian Claims Commission in 1946, which conducted research on the effects of the long history of the country seizing indigenous lands on modern Native Americans, and granted about \$1.3 billion to 176 tribes across the country as redress for those injustices. However, when distributed, the money only averaged about \$1,000 per person and was placed in trust funds held by the government. Critics claim these funds have been mismanaged over the years.<sup>47</sup> In 1988, the federal government of the United States passed the Civil Liberties Act, which granted \$20,000 to each surviving victim of World War II's Japanese internment camps.<sup>48</sup> This is the most prominent case of the federal government granting monetary reparations to groups it historically oppressed and subjugated, and it sparked a resurgence in efforts to obtain slavery reparations. In similar fashion to Japanese reparations, the Florida state legislature voted to pass an act giving monetary reparations to the victims of the 1923 Rosewood massacre, a racially charged white riot which left six African Americans dead and hundreds more displaced from their homes. A similar incident happened in Tulsa, Oklahoma, in 1921, in which estimates of the number of African Americans killed range from a low of 27 to a high of 250. Again, thousands more were displaced with no way to return to their

---

<sup>46</sup> "Booker Reparations Bill Reaches 12 Cosponsors"

<sup>47</sup> Erin Blakemore, "The Thorny History of Reparations in the United States," History.com.

<sup>48</sup> Blakemore, "The Thorny History of Reparations."

homes. The Tulsa case, however, only resulted in surviving victims receiving a medal from the state legislature in 2001.<sup>49</sup>

The efforts that have successfully gained reparations for victims of racist acts have had three commonalities: 1) specific events could be pointed to as the basis of the case; 2) checks were written to victims of those events; and 3) with the exception of Native American reparations, those checks were only written to surviving members of those events. However, Tulsa met the same criteria.<sup>50</sup> Why did these cases only garner an apology, while others gained monetary redress?

### **The Range of Reparations**

The history of reparations proposals for African Americans is littered with differences in their requests for redress, who they request redress from, and how that redress would be distributed to victims seeking reparations. Within the advocacy for reparations to African Americans, however, two primary approaches exist: personal and civic liability.

The personal liability approach emphasizes the effects of the acts of historic injustice committed by private parties —individual people or families, organizations, and companies — and seeks redress from those parties. The redress can be for slavery alone, Jim Crow alone, or slavery and Jim Crow, and attempts to identify specific people or entities from whom to seek reparation payments.<sup>51</sup> Proposals that fall under this approach include *The Black Manifesto*, which called on religious institutions to pay reparations to the black community, Rosewood and Tulsa cases which survivors sought reparations from their state governments, and both the Indian

---

<sup>49</sup> Bokum-Fauth, Tobias, "Reparations in "Post-Racial" Society: What Makes a Winning Case" (2010). *Senior Independent Study Theses*. Paper 3879.; Henry, *Long Overdue* p. 87

<sup>50</sup> Bokum-Fauth, "Reparations."

<sup>51</sup> J. Angelo Corlett, "Reparations to African Americans?" edited by Michael T. Martin and Marilyn Yaquinto. *Redress for Historical Injustices in the United States*, p. 172.

Claims Commission of 1946 and the Civil Liberties Act of 1988 sought redress from the federal government through litigation.<sup>52</sup> The personal liability approach also includes the idea of identifying the descendants of slaves and slaveowners with the goal of mandating that the descendants of slaveowners pay their forefathers' debt directly to the descendants of their slaves, most popularly in the form of individual checks. Lawsuits against private companies that profited from the institution of slavery, such as J.P. Morgan and Aetna, are a prime example of how this approach might work.<sup>53</sup> This stance is also the most publicly discussed, as it is the most racially charged. It triggers white guilt over white Americans' racial history, instigating visceral rebuttals against this type of proposal.

In his ad "Ten Reasons why Reparations for Slavery is a Bad Idea — And Racist Too," Horowitz lays out several points that argue against the implementation of reparations, many of which argue against personal liability arguments.<sup>54</sup> Some of his points are titled "There Is No Single Group That Benefitted Exclusively from Slavery," "Only A Minority of White Americans Owned Slaves, While Others Gave Their Lives to Free Them," and "Reparations to African Americans Have Already Been Paid."<sup>55</sup> Not only does Horowitz argue that most white Americans do not descend from slaveowners, but also that most white Americans today likely descended from those who fought to free slaves. Horowitz's fourth point, "Most Living Americans Have No Connection (Direct or Indirect) to Slavery," furthers the point that slavery is too far removed from the 21<sup>st</sup> century United States to consider reparations at this point, an argument rooted in the history as innocence stance.<sup>56</sup>

---

<sup>52</sup> Henry, *Long Overdue*, p. 21.

<sup>53</sup> Henry, *Long Overdue*, p. 21.

<sup>54</sup> Horowitz, *Uncivil Wars*, p. 10

<sup>55</sup> Horowitz, *Uncivil Wars*, p. 14

<sup>56</sup> Horowitz, *Uncivil Wars*, p. 13

This point is a very popular rebuttal to arguments advocating reparations for African Americans, especially in court cases. The time between the end of slavery and today is a major opposing argument and hurdle for reparations supporters to overcome, primarily because the fact is that no one living today was a slave or a slaveowner. Additionally, the outcomes of some lawsuits ruled in favor of the defendants, rather than the plaintiffs seeking redress, because presiding judges argue the statute of limitations has passed.<sup>57</sup> Scholar Robert Fullinwider argues that a personal liability approach that pursues reparations through the court system falls victim to one of the primary models of American law: the focus on individualism. According to Charles P. Henry, in order to bring a lawsuit to court, one plaintiff, or victim, must have been injured by one defendant, or perpetrator, and the type of injury must be able to be compensated.<sup>58</sup> Suing companies or religious institutions for their participation in the slave trade might have some merit; since they are considered a single entity, the modern-day defendant is the same historical perpetrator. However, the plaintiffs are not the people whom those entities injured; the case becomes weaker when the defendants are individual descendants of slaveowners. This might be the reason why most successful cases of reparations have had surviving victims of the injury who brought the lawsuit to court in the first place.

However, for some, the consequences of pursuing reparations with an emphasis on personal liability are more far reaching and detrimental to the very people seeking them: the African Americans. To black journalist Juan Williams, black Americans advocating for reparations isn't just a foolish, time-wasting endeavor, but it also asks the black community as a whole to remain victims by accepting that white Americans are still in control of the inequality

---

<sup>57</sup> Henry, *Long Overdue*, p. 22

<sup>58</sup> Robert Fullinwider, "The Case for Reparations." edited by Michael T. Martin and Marilyn Yaquinto. *Redress for Historical Injustices in the United States*, p. 124.; Henry *Long Overdue*, p. 22.

and issues that exist within the black community.<sup>59</sup> He claims not only that this line of thinking asks black Americans to accept that “whites have all the power, you are weak, you can’t make a difference for yourself or your family, and you will always be a victim,” but also sends the message to the rest of America that “assumptions about black American inferiority are true, since immigrants from Asia and the Balkans are not asking for anything . . . . They ask only for a chance to get to America, and then compete and make it in America.”<sup>60</sup> Williams argues that America is the land of opportunity, a place where people are responsible for their own success. In his eyes, black Americans advocating for reparations are absolving themselves of responsibility for their own, personal life outcomes and asking the government or other entities to solve their problems for them, a stance that plays into stereotypes of laziness, unwillingness to work, and black exploitation of existing government welfare programs.

I do not agree with Williams’ arguments about what personal liability for reparations will encourage Americans to assume about black Americans, but his points do illustrate a big issue in the public’s conception of reparations for African Americans, primarily in the individual payment proposals. Some, like Williams, believe that black Americans are searching for a “pay day” from either the American government or the private entities they sue, and making claims of “healing America’s wounds” just as a means to mask their true intentions. This falls in line with the idea that reparations supporters are unjustly victimizing African Americans, as they are trying to “cash in” on their ancestors’ exploitation. Williams, himself African American, states that at worst, reparations are an update on the “40 acres and a mule” promise, whose greatest contemporary beneficiaries are the poorest black Americans. The result, he claims, is that “the most dysfunctional, badly educated, even criminal black person is hailed as truly black and the

---

<sup>59</sup> Williams, *Enough*, p. 69.

<sup>60</sup> Williams, *Enough*, p. 69.

inspiration for reparations.” At best, then, this opposing argument to personal liability insists, reparations advocates trick poor, young black people into supporting a movement that is simply exploiting their image and hardships for “a one-time payout.”<sup>61</sup>

On the other hand, the civic liability stance emphasizes the actions, or inactions, of the government of the United States, and consequently, its citizens as well. Rather than blaming individuals for their racist actions, it places responsibility on the state and federal governments for institutionalizing the racism that black Americans have faced for generations. Like the personal liability approach, the civic liability position can be applied to slavery, Jim Crow, or both, but is more likely to pursue legislation, rather than litigation.<sup>62</sup> Conyers’ and Jackson’s H.R. 40 bills fall under this approach, as they seek legislation to investigate and redress the legacies of slavery and Jim Crow. Going this route also offers more flexibility in the mode of compensation: while individual checks are one option, other possibilities include implementing wealth generation programs, subsidies for black businesses, or special skills training for black communities.<sup>63</sup> For some, since the amount of time that has passed since slavery and Jim Crow is a major objection to reparations, approaching reparations through an individual lens is a moral issue. After all, how can we ask people who didn’t participate in slavery to pay for slavery?

Fullinwider recommends supporters use the civic liability approach to treat the nation as a corporate entity that is able to acquire and maintain debts as long as it exists. Through civic liability, advocates place the debt of slavery and Jim Crow on the country as a whole rather than specific generations or demographics of people, while also maintaining the nation’s debts are inherited by future generations so long as they go unpaid.<sup>64</sup> Fullinwider’s suggestion also places

---

<sup>61</sup> Williams, *Enough*, p. 82.

<sup>62</sup> Corlett, “Reparations to African Americans?” p. 172.

<sup>63</sup> Fullinwider, “The Case for Reparations,” p. 129.; Williams, *Enough*, p. 75.

<sup>64</sup> Fullinwider, “The Case for Reparations,” p. 126.; Henry, *Long Overdue*, p. 27

responsibility for paying reparations in the hands of the citizens, whose civic responsibility is to contribute their fair share in “honoring the nation’s obligations,” as Americans did in the case of Japanese reparations.<sup>65</sup> While this approach has had more successes in gaining reparations than the personal liability approach, it still comes with limitations.

One primary question that challenges civic liability reparations is: Who would pay for this? Under Fullinwider’s proposal, every tax-paying American citizen would pay into a reparations fund, whether they were directly connected to slavery or not. This tosses notions of personal choice and individualism to the wayside in favor of collective atonement, something opponents reject. In his ad, Horowitz listed a number of ethnicities and nationalities that immigrated to America in 1880 and 1960, and questioned if those groups would be asked to pay reparations, even though they had no connection to slavery or Jim Crow.<sup>66</sup> Under the personal liability approach, the answer is yes. As American citizens, they, too, share that duty of honoring America’s obligations and would help pay into a reparations fund. This would mean that African Americans, the group reparations aims to help, would also pay into a reparations fund as American citizens. Fullinwider’s approach to reparations through the civic responsibility of all Americans offers both a strong suit and remaining weakness. While it may quell opponents who find issue with reparations based on personal liability and avoid triggering white guilt, civic liability may not sit well with African Americans, who would have to pay for their own redress and whose communities might experience diminished moral and emotional catharsis in comparison to that of a personal liability approach focused on slavery. Nevertheless, other Americans may still reject the idea of collective responsibility for what they perceive as a wrong that ended with the demise of slavery.

---

<sup>65</sup> Fullinwider, “The Case for Reparations,” p. 123.; Henry, *Long Overdue*, p. 27

<sup>66</sup> Horowitz, *Uncivil Wars*, p. 13.

To counter such opposition, scholars like Fullinwider argue that modern inequalities between whites and blacks can be directly attributed to the post-Civil War oppression of black Americans more so than slavery, claiming that if “the federal government [had] done nothing after 1865 except vigorously protect the civil and voting rights of blacks, the legacy of slavery would have faded considerably,” through the work of African Americans themselves.<sup>67</sup> As opponents such as Williams like to point out, after the Civil War, African Americans built their own schools, businesses, and created opportunities for themselves in various industries.<sup>68</sup> If the country defended their right to be industrious on their own, African Americans would not face lingering issues from that period of American history. However, because the federal government was reluctant to defend the human rights of black Americans after the Civil War, and later established racial segregation as the law of the land, the black community remained stunted economically, socially, and politically for a century. Because of this, the federal government — more so than individual people, institutions, or companies acting within the legal parameters of the United States — holds primary responsibility for the persistent legacies of historical injustices.

Regardless of whether reparation advocates take a personal or civic liability approach, they argue that America must address structural and institutionalized racism in order to solve racial inequalities, whereas reparation opponents emphasizes individualism and the importance of the personal choices of African Americans in solving collective issues. The arguments on the two sides of this debate differ greatly because they establish their foundations in contrasting interpretations of America’s history and its connection to present issues. In this debate, the various parties find it hard to come to a consensus on whether reparations are viable, necessary,

---

<sup>67</sup> Fullinwider, “The Case for Reparations,” p. 128.

<sup>68</sup> Williams, *Enough*, p. 70.

or even morally a good idea. However, supporters of reparations like Fullinwider and opponents like Williams understand that the goal is to remedy modern racial inequalities, whether they see these inequalities as resulting from our history or not. So, what are the inequalities that reparations seek to address?

### **America's Modern Issues**

What seems clear to me and other subscribers to “history as implicature” is that the hundreds of years of little to no basic human rights protections and deliberate exclusion from public and political spheres was not undone with the simple stroke of President Lyndon Johnson’s pen. If it were that easy, I would be exploring a different, possibly more light-hearted topic right now. Unfortunately, slavery and Jim Crow’s legacies can still be seen and felt today, so I am drawn to present the enduring effects of institutionalized white supremacy.

So, how have these wrongs persisted through the generations? The legacy of slavery and Jim Crow can be visibly seen in two major areas: (1) residential segregation; and (2) the wealth gap between whites and African Americans. These issues are not mutually exclusive and are often interrelated.

One of the most enduring, in-your-face legacies of U.S. racial history is the persistence of racial segregation in America’s cities and towns, despite the end of the Jim Crow era and state-sponsored segregation. This is most apparent in residential segregation, which is just one area where institutionalized racism persists and affects many factors that contribute to the potential for success in individuals, families, and communities.

The real estate industry institutionalized racism and discrimination during the 1920s, and discrimination in sales and rental properties persisted without consequence for decades.<sup>69</sup> In the

---

<sup>69</sup> Douglas S. Massey, “Residential Segregation and Persistent Urban Poverty,” Edited by Michael T. Martin and Marilyn Yaquinto. *Redress for Historical Injustices in the United States*, p. 334.; Martha Biondi and Marilyn

1940s institutionalized racism entered the lending industry via the Federal Housing Administration (FHA). The FHA invented and established the practice of redlining, the practice of mapping neighborhoods according to how secure they were for loans, which had the impact of barring predominantly African American neighborhoods, neighborhoods adjacent to African American communities, or neighborhoods at risk of attracting African American families from receiving FHA-backed loans, undermining black homeownership significantly.<sup>70</sup> In 1968, the Fair Housing Act was passed, but the practice of redlining wasn't dismantled until the 1970s after lawsuits and pressure from civil rights activists to expand FHA's lending program to African Americans.<sup>71</sup>

Federal and local government promoted residential segregation covertly in another way, as well, through urban renewal and public housing programs while the real estate industry practiced other methods. By bulldozing black neighborhoods encroaching on white communities and placing public housing projects further from or even on the cleared land, federal and local officials trapped black families in urban ghettos in the name of "urban development."<sup>72</sup> Within the real estate industry, realtors are more likely to hide available options from black home-buyers than white home-buyers. Realtors will also steer black clients towards predominantly black or integrated neighborhoods, while steering white clients to predominantly white, if not all-white, neighborhoods unless they explicitly state otherwise.<sup>73</sup>

However, whites are far less likely to desire to live in an integrated neighborhood.

According to a 1992 survey in Detroit, one-third of whites reported they would feel

---

Yaquinto. "The Rise of the Reparations Movement," Edited by Michael T. Martin. *Redress for Historical Injustices in the United States*, p. 257.

<sup>70</sup> Massey, "Residential Segregation" p. 339.

<sup>71</sup> Massey, "Residential Segregation" p. 339; Biondi and Yaquinto, "The Rise of the Reparations Movement," p. 257.

<sup>72</sup> Massey, "Residential Segregation," p. 339.

<sup>73</sup> Massey, "Residential Segregation," p. 336.

uncomfortable living in a neighborhood that was 20% black, and one-third would be unwilling to enter an area with the same percentage of black residents. Those numbers rise significantly when asked if they would be willing to live or enter a neighborhood that has a 50-50 black/white mix: 73% said they would not want to enter such a neighborhood, and 53% say they would attempt to leave.<sup>74</sup> These numbers are vastly different from what African American respondents reported, as a 50-50 mix represents the most desirable neighborhood for African Americans. This difference in the desire to live in an integrated neighborhood has contributed to white flight, a phenomenon where in the wake of black and other minority families moving into predominantly white neighborhoods, white Americans move out of their homes to more homogeneous communities.<sup>75</sup> During this process, neighborhoods will be integrated for a time, but may eventually become predominantly occupied by black and other minority families, essentially resegregating the area that was for a time integrated.

Federal, private, and individual forces over time have contributed to the segregation and resegregation of urban and suburban areas around the country. Not only does this impact the geographic mobility of African Americans, but also their social mobility, as well. Douglas S. Massey argues, “because life chances are so decisively influenced by where one lives,” other factors that contribute to social mobility are impacted as well, particularly employment, education, safety, and most importantly, wealth generation.<sup>76</sup>

The racial wealth gap, a term for the disparity in median household wealth between races, is one of the most harmful legacies of slavery and Jim Crow.<sup>77</sup> In 2014, The U.S. Census Bureau

---

<sup>74</sup> Massey, “Residential Segregation,” p. 334

<sup>75</sup> Massey, “Residential Segregation,” p. 335; Alana Semuels, “White Flight Lives on in American Cities.” *The Atlantic*.

<sup>76</sup> Massey, “Residential Segregation,” p. 331.

<sup>77</sup> Kimberly Amadeo. “How to Close the Racial Wealth Gap in the United States.” *The Balance*. (The Balance).

found that black households' median wealth was only 7% that of whites. This is a far cry from the survey responses that showed white Americans assume that black wealth is 80% that of whites. In the same year, white households' net worth was measured at \$130,800 compared to black households' net worth measured at \$9,590. Part of the reason for this disparity in overall wealth of the races is the disproportionate ratio of impoverished families in each race.

Comparing the 10% of whites with zero to negative net worth compared to the 25% African Americans with this status, it is easy to see how this could affect the economic standing of the races as a whole. However, these differences exist even in wealthier households or families whose breadwinners have graduate or professional degrees, with black households earning on average \$200,000 less in wealth than whites with the same degrees.<sup>78</sup>

All of this information explains the current predicament of the nation regarding racial wealth inequality, but it doesn't explain how this problem came to be. The first and most fundamental explanation of the origins of the wealth gap is of course chattel slavery, which legally barred slaves from accumulating wealth or earning any income. Conversely, they were used as a means of creating wealth for their owners. This clearly wasn't the case after the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> Amendments of the Constitution were ratified. Since blatant discrimination was no longer legal, new covert practices emerged that has led to the structural inequality we see today. Along with the violence and intimidation African Americans endured during the Reconstruction and Jim Crow periods, many African Americans living in the South—as noted earlier—were essentially forced into work contracts with plantation owners, where they were paid menial wages.<sup>79</sup>

---

<sup>78</sup> US Census Bureau. "Wealth, Asset Ownership, & Debt of Households Detailed Tables: 2014." (The United States Census Bureau).

<sup>79</sup> Salzberger and Turck, *Redress*, p. 19; Lyons, "Racial Injustices," p. 44

While President Franklin D. Roosevelt's Social Security Act of 1935, one of the most celebrated pieces of social welfare legislation of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, helped American citizens build wealth during the Great Depression, it excluded agricultural and domestic workers from receiving benefits. These two forms of work are overwhelmingly represented by African Americans and, as a result, three-fourths of African Americans could not benefit from the Social Security Act while the rest of the nation pulled itself out of the economic collapse.<sup>80</sup> This exclusion was neither accidental nor color-blind; Roosevelt had a large voting constituency in the South where African Americans could not vote, and he was forced to work with Congress to compromise on universal coverage of the Social Security Act. Southerners feared that a rise in black wages would undermine not only their economic stronghold over black Americans, but also their political control as well. They would not stand for a welfare program that included black workers, even at the expense of white farm and domestic workers. This did not change until 1954.<sup>81</sup> By that time, labor discrimination minimized what African American workers could receive from Social Security, which hurt black families financially so much so that by the 1960s African American families accounted for two-fifths of welfare recipients.<sup>82</sup> President Lyndon B. Johnson's Great Society plan helped black communities economically for a time; however, many of those programs were rolled back under the Reagan Administration, again disinvesting tax dollars in some of America's most economically venerable and disadvantaged neighborhoods.<sup>83</sup> This history of excluding African American communities from economic and wealth-generating opportunities has resulted in the modern racial wealth gap.

---

<sup>80</sup> Amadeo, "How to Close the Racial Wealth Gap.": Michael K. Brown, Martin T. Carnoy, Elliot Currie, Troy Duster, David B. Oppenheimer, Marjorie M. Schultz, and David Wellman. "Race Preferences and Race Privileges." Edited by Michael Martin and Marilyn Yaquinto. *Redress for Historical Injustices in the United States*, p. 79; Biondi and Yaquinto "Rise of the Reparations Movement," p. 263.

<sup>81</sup> Amadeo, "How to close the Racial Wealth Gap.": Brown et al., "Race Preferences," p. 81.

<sup>82</sup> Amadeo, "How to Close the Racial Wealth Gap.": Brown et al., "Race Preferences," p. 81.

<sup>83</sup> Lyons, "Racial Injustices," p. 47.

Although the black middle class has been growing since the civil rights movement, generational wealth has been slow to develop, a result of persisting racial segregation and discrimination in the housing markets, making it harder for African Americans to build wealth through equity. As a result, the black middle class has had to rely more on their income to maintain their economic status, rather than their accumulated wealth like their white counterparts. While long-term employment does a lot for black middle class households, relying on income rather than wealth keeps their economic status unstable and leaves them just one crisis away from falling into poverty. These crises could be losing a job and source of income, medical expenses, or an economic downturn, such as the economic recession in 2008.<sup>84</sup> According to *The Atlantic*, not only did the recession widen the racial wealth gap to the largest it has been since 1989, but it will also affect African American households for decades to come.<sup>85</sup> This is mostly due to the fact that the recession gutted home ownership and property values, an area where black Americans historically trailed behind white Americans already.

These forces have maintained the structural inequality between whites and African Americans that exists in the country today. Massey explains, “If one group of people is denied full access to urban housing markets because of skin color, then that group is systematically denied access to the full range of benefits in urban society.”<sup>86</sup> Residential segregation and the racial wealth gap are just two of the lasting, tangible effects of chattel slavery and Jim Crow segregation that reparations proposals seek to redress.

---

<sup>84</sup> Gillian B. White, “The Recession Was Much Worse for Black Americans,” *The Atlantic*. Atlantic Media Company, June 24, 2015.

<sup>85</sup> White, “The Recession.”

<sup>86</sup> Massey, “Residential Segregation,” p. 339.

## Conclusion

As I've said before, the reparations debate in the United States is a long, complex, and ever-changing one. Reparations advocacy has always tried to redress African Americans for their enslavement and has taken many forms over the years to do so. From granting land, paying checks to, or implementing programs for African Americans, it's always been focused on righting a wrong suffered by black people. Some see today, more than 150 years after the end of slavery, as the perfect time to seriously consider implementing reparations, while others believe such compensation to be wholly unnecessary in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. However, evidence of the persistent racial wealth gap, as well as continued discrimination in the housing and lending markets from the Jim Crow era to the present shows that institutional racism is still felt today. While reparations opponents fail to see the historical connection, numerous studies have shown that racial injuries persist long after the people who did the harm and directly suffered from the harm are dead. The United States is at a point in time where reparations are supported by presidential candidates and bills await consideration in both the House and the Senate. As a nation, perhaps we're finally ready to have the conversation.

### CHAPTER THREE: THE FILM

From the time I started college, I wanted to go into the media industry, and for me, journalism was the route I would take. It wasn't until my junior year that I began looking into broadcast journalism as a potential option, however. I started consuming more broadcast media out of interest — social media algorithms have a knack for pushing content you're already interested in — but it wasn't network and cable news that really stood out to me, but rather news that came in the form of brief videos ranging anywhere from five to 15 minutes in length that media organizations such as Vox, NowThis, or Vice News posted. Their ability to present interesting, yet complex topics in an engaging and entertaining way really struck me. As I began narrowing down how I wanted to approach my project, I kept these types of videos in mind, which ultimately shaped my decision to create a film on reparations.

Initially, I knew I would need three key components to make my film work: video editing software, b-roll footage, and interviews. The first was the easiest to get. A few years ago, I started playing around with iMovie, Apple's video editing software, to create book trailers for various novels I enjoyed. I've also used it for class projects assigned in both high school and college. So, out of the many kinds of video editing software available, I decided for this project to use the one I was most familiar with: iMovie. That's not to say I knew everything there was to know about using the software. Throughout the process, I learned about various tricks and shortcuts I could employ to enhance my film visually and auditorily through iMovie. For example, during the "citizens' opinions" segment of the film, the part where I ask people about their views on reparations, the background noise from other patrons, restaurants, and advertisements drowned out the responses of the people. This would have been a major setback had I not learned iMovie is able to eliminate the background noise while elevating a person's

voice on clips through one of its audio functions, giving me clear sound to match the clear visuals.

Naturally, the visuals of any film are extremely important, and I wanted to do well in this area particularly through the use of b-roll footage. I set aside several days throughout the completion of this project to travel around the City of Wooster to film different places, landmarks, and symbols unique to the town. I did this primarily to convey visually aspects of the stories that my interviewees were telling in the film. Two of my interviewees, Yvonne Williams and John Clay, have a significant amount of b-roll footage intercut throughout their stories. The footage includes places around Wooster such as the historic courthouse and the downtown, but also shows images of neighborhoods, people, and places to give a sense of what Wooster is like. Making decisions on which clips to use and which to leave out was more tedious than organizing the interviews in some ways. I attempted to visually match the tone of the story being told vocally through the b-roll footage, which left me searching for specific moments that lasted seconds in my seemingly endless footage. However, the searching worked out in my favor. During Clay's story about the racism he and his son have faced, I used footage of Wooster from a day I filmed when it was distinctly cloudy. I used this footage in an effort to match the sad story Clay was recounting; however, the b-roll did not overtake the footage of him telling this story, and stories like Clay's make up the core of the film itself.

This leads me to the third key component of my film: the interviews. In my effort to acquire in-depth interviews, I used various channels to make connections with those I wanted in my film. I started through some research into the community of City of Wooster and reached out to the Wooster/Orrville NAACP, the Wayne County Historical Society, and the Wayne County Public Library. I also found sources through my personal contacts and met a couple of my

interviewees through them. There were also instances where I met contacts by chance; it's a less reliable method, but it worked, nonetheless. Each of my interviewees provided valuable insight into the issues of racial inequality I wanted to present in my film through their personal experience and expertise.

### **John Clay, President of the Wooster/Orrville NAACP**

I met John Clay when I went to my first Wooster/Orrville NAACP meeting, where his welcoming demeanor was immediately evident. After that initial introduction, we met several times, and I began to learn a lot about him and how he led in his role as president of the organization.

John was elected to this role at the start of a tumultuous period for the country: 2016. Within a year of his presidency, a terrifying incident happened in Wooster that grabbed Clay's attention. In 2017, just a few weeks after the deadly Charlottesville riots, a group affiliated with the Ku Klux Klan, known as the East Coast Knights of the True Invisible Empire, distributed advertisements for their group throughout Wooster. The ads, which were folded in sandwich bags with peppermint candy to weigh them down, were found in residents' front yards where they had been tossed. According to Clay, "I guess they thought something was going to pop off here like it did in Charlottesville." However, nothing violent happened as a result of the recruitment effort; instead, Wooster came together for a peaceful rally hosted by the NAACP that denounced race-based hate in the city. In this rally, Clay and the NAACP were able to address the incident publicly, use the platform for the city to denounce hate and promote love, and look to bettering Wooster for the future.

The most challenging issue for me related to my conversation with John was deciding whether to use John's stories about the KKK and other cases of race-based violence in my

documentary. While the stories are interesting and, quite honestly, showcase the modern racism that black and brown people experience in this country today, I did not want to conflate those individual acts of racism with the systemic racism that reparations proposals seek to solve. It is terrible that the KKK was promoting membership in Wooster, but the KKK is not an institution or market that can determine the outcomes of people's lives in the same way the housing market or banks do. During the editing process, I realized I would have to prioritize some themes over others in order to make my documentary as concise as possible. John's stories were one example where it was better to cut than to keep the clips I had. With these stories in mind, however, throughout our conversation I believed he might support reparations legislation. So, I was surprised when he stated, "I don't support reparations." Prior to meeting him, I assumed that the president of the local chapter of the NAACP would support such a policy; after all, it was a civil rights organization that fought for African Americans for generations. The fact that he was adamant about opposing reparations intrigued me.

I spent the better portion of our conversation trying to understand why he opposed reparations, and learned he had two major qualms with idea. He began explaining his first issue with reparations by asking me a question we both knew the answer to. "Were you a slave?" he asked, pointing to me. When I responded "no," he stated, "Neither was I. Why should I get paid for it?" For Clay, the most important issue with reparations was the amount of time that's passed since the end of slavery and Jim Crow. This argument was almost identical to Horowitz's "Ten Reasons" ad.<sup>87</sup> Clay believed that everyone has to stand on their own and make the best of the present, rather than dwelling on the past. I asked if there were any forms of reparations he might support. He shrugged and said, "No."

---

<sup>87</sup> Horowitz, *Uncivil Wars*, p. 13

**Dionissi Alipratis, Senior Research Economist at the Federal Reserve Bank of Cleveland**

Meeting Dionissi Alipratis was a matter of being at the right place at the right time. A friend of mine happened to be talking about a conference they were attending in Cleveland the following week. Hosted at the Federal Reserve Bank of Cleveland, the conference was titled “FedTalk: What is Behind the Persistence of the Racial Wealth Gap?” My ears perked up once I heard those words; I knew I had to be there. A few emails and face-to-face chats later, I was walking into the Federal Reserve Bank for the first time, ready to learn what the economists had to share. The second time that I entered the building was for the interview.

A senior research economist at the Cleveland Fed, Alipratis’ primary interests have been applied econometrics, labor and urban economics, and education. In February 2019, he and another Fed Bank researcher published their study on the American racial wealth gap. Unlike previous research on this topic, which typically labeled the issue as too large to explain by income inequality alone, Alipratis and his collaborator aimed to “capture the dynamics of wealth accumulation over time.” Through their findings, which they presented at the FedTalk conference, Alipratis and his team concluded that the persistence in the racial wealth gap was almost entirely due to the persistent racial gap in earnings. When I sat down with Alipratis, he admitted these findings came as a small shock to him, but ultimately made sense. “In some basic way, you can just think about wealth as accumulated income over time,” he explained. “So, if you have very different earnings across groups, over time that’s going to turn into very different wealth.”

Throughout our conversation, Alipratis was especially solution-oriented. His work, specifically the research on the racial wealth gap, aims to identify the source of a problem so that solutions can be created to solve it. In a way, Alipratis’ research is doing the type of legwork

that bills such as H.R. 40 hope to do in terms of researching the lasting effects of slavery and Jim Crow. The racial wealth gap, Aliprantis said, is a primary indicator for many racial inequalities that exist in America today. From education and job markets to residential segregation and the criminal justice system, the racial wealth gap is implicated. As Aliprantis put it, “It’s really an everything-problem.” Any attempts at solving the “everything-problem” that is racial inequality would, in his eyes, have to directly address the racial wealth gap. This was his rationale for supporting a more structured and universal program over reparations in the form of individual checks. Aliprantis explained, “What I would think of as solutions would have to be a multifaceted, multidimensional approach” that would direct resources to areas such as education and housing. This idea would likely be best achieved through a civic liability approach which — because of its nature of emphasizing the action or inaction of the government rather than individuals would — more likely take the form of legislation rather than litigation in the court systems.<sup>88</sup>

**Yvonne Williams, Professor Emeritus of Political Science and Black Studies,  
and Former Dean of the Faculty at The College of Wooster**

The first time I met Dr. Yvonne Williams was actually during the fall of 2019, although I doubt she remembers. During The College of Wooster’s Black and Gold Weekend, the school’s homecoming celebration, the College welcomed several alumni back in a celebration of the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Galpin Sit-In, a 1989 student demonstration in which students seized the administrative building, Galpin Hall, in light of racist events occurring on- and off-campus. As a professor of Black Studies and dean of the faculty at the time, Williams was integral to the negotiations between student protestors and the College’s administration that led to major

---

<sup>88</sup> Corlett, “Reparations to African Americans?” p. 172.

structural changes for The College of Wooster. Williams and her family moved to Wooster in 1959, when her husband, Ted Williams, secured a position at the College as a chemistry professor and the distinction of being the first black professor at Wooster.

Much has happened locally and nationally since the Williams family moved to Wooster decades ago. The time that has passed since 1959 to 2020 is no small amount. This is something Williams is fully aware of and spoke about when we reached the topic of reparations. She, like Aliprantis, is opposed to the individual payment framework of some reparations proposals. “Even if we could get the money together, it would mean a few thousand dollars in everyone’s pockets, which would soon be spent. I don’t see how that helps,” Williams explained. Instead, her ideal version of reparations would first and foremost address the education gap, then housing, and lastly, job access through more systemic means. Like Aliprantis, her arguments and suggestions most closely align with the civic liability approach that some reparations proposals take, which is more likely to result in reparations legislation.<sup>89</sup> When asked about her thoughts on H.R. 40, however, she simply shrugged and said, “I want people to put their money where their mouth is. It is time,” suggesting neither her support nor opposition towards the bill, but rather a desire for it to get passed into law.

This desire is understandable, as she has lived through the Jim Crow era and had seen first-hand the effects it had on African Americans. Housing discrimination, in particular, is an issue she has witnessed and, especially during her family’s first few years in Wooster, experienced personally as she learned about the divide between the north and the south ends of the town. Outside of her family, Williams explained, only one African American family lived on the north end of town for many years. Black families instead lived south of Bowman Street,

---

<sup>89</sup> Corlett, “Reparations to African Americans?” p. 172.

which served — and still largely does — as the town’s racial dividing line, as well as its boundary between wealth and poverty. The systemic reason explaining why the majority of Wooster’s black population lived south of Bowman was because realtors and lessors barred their access to housing north of Bowman. When Williams and her family first moved to Wooster, they were forced to face this practice of redlining directly. A property owner refused to rent to the family after finding out they were black in one instance. In another, news that they were renting a home for the summer sparked protests outside of the house they intended to rent because the white neighbors did not want to live next to a black family. In both cases, the Williams family had to arrange to live elsewhere. The story of the Williams family’s first few years living in Wooster exemplifies not only the racial and social disparities in the city, but also demonstrates that the practices of segregation explicitly legalized in the South were socially practiced in the North, despite not being written into law.

**Davis Houck, Fannie Lou Hamer Professor of Rhetorical Studies  
at Florida State University**

Dr. Davis Houck visited The College of Wooster during the school’s 2020 commemoration of Martin Luther King Jr. Day to speak about the work that he has done in his role in Florida State University’s Fannie Lou Hammer professorship. Houck is a communication studies scholar who is incredibly interested in racial, political, and mediated discourse, particularly in the 20<sup>th</sup> century’s civil rights movement. His interest in the civil rights movement and the stories of African Americans living under Jim Crow segregation led him to create the only archive of primary and secondary material related to the life and death of Emmett Till in America, a major accomplishment. It was for these reasons that I was particularly interested in hearing Houck’s perspective on reparations.

For Houck, his views are rooted in his work on matters of racial injustice. He shared a brief story with me during our conversation on how his own research shaped his perspective on reparations to African Americans. As he tells it, Houck was indulging his intellectual curiosity by looking into the 1940 census records of the Mississippi Delta. He wasn't looking for anything in particular, but what he found was shocking. According to Houck, there were pages upon pages of black families who reported they worked 52 weeks per year, 60 hours per week, and earned zero dollars in income. Black men and women worked anywhere between five to six thousand hours a year on plantations under the sharecropping system and had no income to show for it. According to Houck, families would be charged to live on plantations, for the seeds used to grow crops, and the tools needed for the work, which left them with little to no money in the end. "So ... here's the reparations argument that we've documented," said Houck. "There are hundreds of thousands of names of all these Mississippians — and of course, you go to Georgia, Alabama, Louisiana, Florida — and it's the same. You have this cruel, inequitable system that just continues to perpetuate itself, and that's just 1940. So that really brought the reparations argument home to me. Because I just call it theft. Theft based on white supremacy."

Unlike my other interviewees who supported reparations, Houck didn't specify any particular form of reparations he would like to see. Instead, he was more focused on the social impact reparations could have, not only for black Americans, but for all Americans. Pointing to his census example, he maintained that the evidence exists for America to consider, and even implement, reparations to African Americans. Houck's arguments primarily rested on the idea that the United States has a moral obligation to acknowledge and address the injustices in its past. In Houck's eyes, a U.S. reconciliation with its history is essential. Similar to other supporters of reparations such as Fullinwider, Houck connects contemporary inequalities with

the post-Civil War oppression of African Americans, and indicts the federal and local governments, as well as the actions of individuals for their part in maintaining the systemic inequality America faces today.<sup>90</sup> “I think white people should feel guilty,” he told me when asked how the idea of reparations prods white guilt. “But the question becomes, what are you going to do with that guilt?”

The four individuals I sat down with and ultimately included in the film created the core of the visual narrative I created in this project; however, only having the responses of my interviewees could not work on its own. The other elements I used, the b-roll footage and the effects available through the video editing software, supplemented and elevated the visuals I chose to add into the film. The final product, which ultimately stands at 25 minutes long, is the culmination of the goals achieved, questions answered, and lessons learned over the course of completing this film.

---

<sup>90</sup> Fullinwider, “The Case for Reparations,” p. 128.

## CHAPTER FOUR: IN CONCLUSION....

I started this project because I was curious about one question: How does the debate on reparations and the racial inequalities that reparations seek to solve manifest in small, American towns? Given my interest in films and filmmaking, I set out to answer this question in the form of a short documentary, one that would explore the reparations debate through the City of Wooster, a small Northern Ohio town. At the start of the project, my knowledge of both the City of Wooster and filmmaking were amateurish at best, and I only had a few months to create something that was educational, entertaining, and meaningful all at once. For me, it was a monumental task. There were several hiccups throughout the process—namely handling unresponsive contacts and dealing with faulty equipment—and at times I wondered why I decided to undertake such a project. However, watching my finished product, *Reparations: An American Dilemma*, after the months of work left me with a sense of satisfaction—not only because I completed that monumental task, but also because I was able to answer the question I set out to answer in the beginning in an educational, entertaining, and meaningful way.

### **What did this film teach us?**

The objective of this film was not only to find answers to the question I asked at the start of this project, but also to use those answers to educate and inform my audience. The journey that resulted from the research led me to creating a film that leaves audiences with three primary takeaways.

The first lesson of the film is that the end of slavery did not mean the end of racial oppression, particularly in economics and housing, but rather perpetuated the existing systematic racism against African Americans through Jim Crow segregation in the South. This is particularly evident in Davis Houck's story of his research into census records of the Mississippi

Delta, a segment of our interview I included in the film. In this segment, Houck recalls the shock he felt as he flipped through seemingly endless records of black families in 1940 reporting working 60-hour work weeks year round, yet retaining no income, a result of the system of sharecropping. By including this story in my film, I provided a platform for Houck to share with the viewer tangible evidence of the effects that exploitative systems such as sharecropping had on African Americans economically long after the end of slavery in America.

Secondly, though many of the laws of the Jim Crow era were set in place in the South rather than the North, such as redlining and neighborhood segregation, they were still culturally practiced in the northern states, creating barriers for African Americans even in the North. Having experienced redlining herself in a small, Northern town, Yvonne Williams provided one of many, many examples of how structural racism affected all African Americans living in the country during the Jim Crow era, not just those living in the South. Additionally, John Clay's testimony revealed that race-based inequality still exists in the City of Wooster as a result of these types of exclusionary practices from the past. In my film, the inclusion of these two interviewees' stories also demonstrated how their lived experiences in the same small town shaped their opinions on the reparations debate and gave insight into the rationales behind each argument.

Lastly, the end of Jim Crow segregation did not mean the end of racial disparities such as wealth inequality but rather has perpetuated this issue into the contemporary era. Dionissi Aliprantis' segment on the persistence of the racial wealth gap provides explanation as to how racial inequalities continue over time if they aren't directly addressed.

### **What's the significance?**

Many of my interviewees, particularly Houck and Aliprantis, believed that projects like mine are important in presenting inequalities in housing and wealth to the public, and I agree. The more exposure that American audiences have to knowledge of racial inequalities, the more likely we are to act to change them. Presenting my project in the form of a documentary certainly makes the information more accessible to a wider audience. Additionally, online video sharing websites such as YouTube and Vimeo will also provide the platform for my documentary to be viewed and shared by the public audience, disseminating the information quickly and easily. Unpacking the reparations debate through a compelling visual narrative backed by research and individual testimony will, in turn, spark conversations among viewers not only about reparations, but also about the inequalities they seek to solve. It's a small step towards the goal of equality, but it's a step in the right direction.

### **What do we do now?**

Ideally, lawmakers will sit down, examine the research that has already been conducted on racial inequalities in the United States, and create policies that will effectively address them. To contribute to available knowledge and to build public support for such actions, though, filmmakers can use their craft to highlight racial injustices in America by investigating aspects of racial inequality that I was not able to research myself. Racial disparities in education, health care, and job access—along with their systemic roots—call for greater attention, especially regarding their progression from the end of slavery to today. Through future film and related outreach projects, we could offer a fuller picture of the many long-lasting effects of slavery and Jim Crow not only on African Americans, but Americans as a whole. As a nation, we cannot fully realize our human potential when segments of our population remain disadvantaged after

generations of slow social progress. Future research into this topic has the potential to frame the issue as one that affects all of America, both now and into the future.

### **Some final thoughts**

Reparations to African Americans may take years to establish, if they are ever implemented at all. The United States has a long way to go in terms of adequately reconciling with its past injustices towards its citizens, both emotionally and monetarily. The effects of slavery and Jim Crow segregation may extend much further into the future than we expect, and if we choose to continue to whitewash or outright forget our history, then it may make the current situation worse for our country in the future. None of us, of course, got to choose our race or had a say in the lives of our ancestors. For those with slaveowners in their ancestry, the topic of reparations may feel like a personal attack. However, for those with enslaved people in their ancestry, like myself, it feels as if the struggles, hardships, and barriers my ancestors lived with daily are delegitimized and dishonored when the government and those who continue to benefit from the profits of past black labor disregard atoning for that past. Looking back on my childhood, I'm grateful for the lessons my parents taught my brother and me about black history and, especially, the significant figures in that history. Every one of those black icons fought for equality between the races. With this project, I hope that I can begin to fill their very big shoes.

## WORKS CITED

- “2020 Best Public Elementary Schools in DeKalb County.” Niche. Accessed November 24, 2019.  
<https://www.niche.com/k12/search/best-public-elementary-schools/c/dekalb-county-ga/>.
- Amadeo, Kimberly. “How to Close the Racial Wealth Gap in the United States.” The Balance. The Balance, June 25, 2019. <https://www.thebalance.com/racial-wealth-gap-in-united-states-4169678>.
- Bacon, Jacqueline. “Reading the Reparations Debate.” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 89, no. 3 (2003): 171–95. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0033563032000125304>.
- Biondi, Martha, and Marilyn Yaquinto. “The Rise of the Reparations Movement.” Edited by Michael T. Martin. *Redress for Historical Injustices in the United States*, 2007, 255–70. <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822389811-016>.
- Blakemore, Erin. “The Thorny History of Reparations in the United States.” History.com. A&E Television Networks, August 28, 2019. <https://www.history.com/news/reparations-slavery-native-americans-japanese-internment>.
- Bokum-Fauth, Tobias, "Reparations in "Post-Racial" Society: What Makes a Winning Case" (2010). *Senior Independent Study Theses*. Paper 3879. <https://openworks.wooster.edu/independentstudy/3879>
- Bolner, James. “Toward a Theory of Racial Reparations.” Edited by Michael T. Martin and Marilyn T. Yaquinto. *Redress for Historical Injustices in the United States*, 2007, 134–42. <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822389811-007>.
- “Booker Reparations Bill Reaches 12 Senate Cosponsors.” Cory Booker | U.S. Senator for New Jersey, June 14, 2019. [https://www.booker.senate.gov/?p=press\\_release&id=937](https://www.booker.senate.gov/?p=press_release&id=937).

- Bostdorff, Denise M., and Steven R. Goldzwig. "History, Collective Memory, and the Appropriation of Martin Luther King, Jr.: Reagans Rhetorical Legacy." *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 35, no. 4 (2005): 661–90. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-5705.2005.00271.x>.
- Brown, Michael K., Martin T. Carnoy, Elliot Currie, Troy Duster, David B. Oppenheimer, Marjorie M. Schultz, and David Wellman. "Race Preferences and Race Privileges." Edited by Michael undefined Martin and Marilyn undefined Yaquinto. *Redress for Historical Injustices in the United States*, 2007, 55–90. <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822389811-003>.
- Carmichael, Stokely, and Charles V. Hamilton. *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation*. Vintage, 1967.
- Cluny, William Macpherson of. The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry: report of an inquiry by Sir William Macpherson of Cluny ; advised by Tom Cook, John Sentamu, Richard Stone, The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry: report of an inquiry by Sir William Macpherson of Cluny ; advised by Tom Cook, John Sentamu, Richard Stone § (1999).
- Coates, Ta-Nehisi. "The Case for Reparations." *The Atlantic*. Atlantic Media Company, September 24, 2019. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/06/the-case-for-reparations/361631/>.
- Corlett, J. Angelo. "Reparations to African Americans?" Edited by Michael T. Martin and Marilyn Yaquinto. *Redress for Historical Injustices in the United States*, 2007, 170–98. <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822389811-010>.
- Delgado, Richard, Jean Stefancic, and Angela Harris. "Introduction." In *Critical Race Theory (Third Edition): An Introduction*, 1-18. New York: NYU Press, 2017. [www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1ggjjn3.6](http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1ggjjn3.6).

- Estrada, Fernando, and Geneva Matthews. "Perceived Culpability in Critical Multicultural Education: Understanding and Responding to Race Informed Guilt and Shame to Further Learning Outcomes among White American College Students." *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education* 28, no. 3 (January 1, 2016): 314–25.  
<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=eric&AN=EJ1125096&site=ehost-live>
- Foran, Clare. "House Panel to Hold Hearing on Reparations for Slavery next Week." CNN. Cable News Network, June 13, 2019. <https://www.cnn.com/2019/06/13/politics/house-reparations-hearing/index.html>.
- Fullunwider, Robert. "The Case for Reparations." Edited by Michael T. Martin and Marilyn Yaquinto. *Redress for Historical Injustices in the United States*, 2007, 121–33.  
<https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822389811-006>.
- Henry, Charles P. *Long Overdue: the Politics of Racial Reparations*. New York: New York University Press, 2009.
- Horowitz, David. *Uncivil Wars: the Controversy over Reparations for Slavery*. San Francisco, CA: Encounter Books, 2002.
- Kerr-Ritchie, Jeffrey R. "Forty Acres, or, An Act of Bad Faith." Edited by Michael T. Martin and Marilyn Yaquinto. *Redress for Historical Injustices in the United States*, 2007, 222–37.  
<https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822389811-013>.
- Lyons, David. "Racial Injustices in U.S. History and Their Legacy." Edited by Michael T. Martin and Marilyn Yaquinto. *Redress for Historical Injustices in the United States*, 2007, 33–54.  
<https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822389811-002>.

- Massey, Douglas S. "Residential Segregation and Persistent Urban Poverty." Edited by Michael T. Martin and Marilyn Yaquinto. *Redress for Historical Injustices in the United States*, 2007, 331–48. <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822389811-021>.
- McPhail, Mark Lawrence. *The Rhetoric of Racism Revisited: Reparations or Separation?* Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002.
- Olmsted, Audrey P. "Words Are Acts: Critical Race Theory as a Rhetorical Construct." *Howard Journal of Communications* 9, no. 4 (1998): 323–31. <https://doi.org/10.1080/106461798246934>.
- "Report: The War on Marijuana in Black and White." American Civil Liberties Union. Accessed September 26, 2019. <https://www.aclu.org/report/report-war-marijuana-black-and-white?redirect=criminal-law-reform/war-marijuana-black-and-white>.
- Salzberger, Ronald P., and Mary C. Turck. *Reparations for Slavery: A Reader*. Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004.
- Samuels, Alana. "White Flight Lives on in American Cities." *The Atlantic*. Atlantic Media Company, July 30, 2015. <https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2015/07/white-flight-alive-and-well/399980/>.
- Stolberg, Sheryl Gay. "At Historic Hearing, House Panel Explores Reparations." *The New York Times*. *The New York Times*, June 19, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/19/us/politics/slavery-reparations-hearing.html>.
- "The War on Marijuana in Black and White." New York, New York, June 2013.
- US Census Bureau. "Wealth, Asset Ownership, & Debt of Households Detailed Tables: 2014." *The United States Census Bureau*, November 13, 2019. <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/2014/demo/wealth/wealth-asset-ownership.html>.

White, Gillian B. “The Recession Was Much Worse for Black Americans.” *The Atlantic*. Atlantic Media Company, June 24, 2015. <https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2015/06/black-recession-housing-race/396725/>.

Williams, David R., and Chiquita Collins. “Reparations: A Viable Strategy to Address the Enigma of African American Health.” Edited by Michael T. Martin and Marilyn T. Yaquinto. *Redress for Historical Injustices in the United States*, 2007, 305–30. <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822389811-020>.

Williams, Juan. *Enough the Phony Leaders, Dead-End Movements, and Culture of Failure That Are Undermining Black America-- and What We Can Do about It*. New York: Three Rivers Press, 2006.

“Wooster, Ohio Population 2019.” Wooster, Ohio Population 2019 (Demographics, Maps, Graphs), December 5AD. <http://worldpopulationreview.com/us-cities/wooster-oh-population/>.