

Introduction

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During the 2019 phase of the US presidential campaign, a number of serious contenders for the Democratic Party's nomination actually invoked the term *reparations*, a few even indicating their support for restitution for black Americans. The leading voice at the time was Marianne Williamson, who recommended an outlay ranging from \$100 to \$500 billion as recompense for the many decades of racial injustice in the United States. And while they offered no specifics, both Julian Castro and Tom Steyer also endorsed black reparations.

The stresses of the COVID-19 pandemic coupled with the international protests in response to the highly visible police murders of unarmed black people, especially the killing of George Floyd, led to an additional dramatic surge in interest in black reparations in 2020. That interest has carried over to the present, in which more and more racial justice advocates and their allies are proclaiming a desire to pursue a program of redress on behalf of black America. It is, perhaps, an interest in reparations not witnessed since the Reconstruction Era.

However, not everyone means the same thing when referring to “reparations.” Not everyone shares identical views about who should be eligible to receive reparations, what form reparations should take, how large the reparations fund should be, how reparations funds should be distributed, or who should pay the reparations debt. Moreover, this is truly a situation where the devil is in the details. While many Americans can agree, in principle, on the moral case for reparations, there are deep

cleavages among reparations proponents over the substance of an actual program of restitution.

Many of us engaged in research on black reparations over the years have long been aware of these sharp differences in visions regarding the features of an act of redress. In 2019, two of the editors of this volume were anticipating the upcoming publication of their book *From Here to Equality: Reparations for Black Americans in the Twenty-First Century*, where, in the final chapter, they would offer a detailed plan for black reparations. They also were aware that others laboring in reparations research were trying to think through similar issues, and they knew that it was highly unlikely that the last chapter of *From Here to Equality* would be the final word.

Coupled with growing national interest in reparations, it was apparent that there would be tremendous value in bringing members of the reparations research community together to further refine and motivate the case and plan for reparations. The Reparations Planning Committee (RPC) assembled with the aim of producing a volume that would function as an extensive guide for designing and implementing a national black reparations initiative.

Financial support for the project came from an award from the William T. Grant Foundation to the Samuel DuBois Cook Center on Social Equity at Duke University given to aid the Cook Center in doing the research to further develop and consolidate an African American reparations plan.

Not all members of the RPC contributed chapters to the volume, but all provided advice and guidance on the path to the current edition. Nor is this a “consensus document” per se, although there is consistency in the shared vision of what black reparations should be among the contributors.

All of the essays in this collection have been written with the goal of pushing forward the black reparations project. These essays are working papers for African American reparations and hence working papers for a new America.

The chapters in this volume fall into two sections. The first section consists of chapters that interrogate and outline the case for reparations through the racial disparities observed across different areas—wealth, housing, education, and health—before highlighting potential and necessary paths to restitution that can be achieved as redress in each area. The second section considers the logistical elements of a reparations plan: potential pitfalls the plan should avoid, eligibility standards for reparations, methods of delivery of reparations, the parties responsible

for delivering reparations, and the necessary next steps and timeline for effecting such a plan.

William A. Darity Jr. and A. Kirsten Mullen’s opening chapter, “Where Does Black Reparations in America Stand?,” provides an overview of the evolving terrain of an unfolding national conversation on black reparations. The authors examine the implications of the attempted coup d’état on January 6, 2021, for the black reparations movement and the policies that have made and sustained the immense racial wealth gap. They outline the four essential pillars of a sound plan for black reparations.

Calculation of the size of the bill for reparations starts in earnest in “Wealth Implications of Slavery and Racial Discrimination for African American Descendants of the Enslaved,” by Thomas Craemer, Trevor Smith, Brianna Harrison, Trevon Logan, Wesley Bellamy, and William A. Darity Jr. These detailed estimates, ranging from \$5 trillion to a fantastic \$22 quadrillion, provide a grounding for the remainder of the volume, quantifying the costs of atrocities that later chapters—in particular, the three chapters that immediately follow, which highlight, largely, postslavery injustices—study in a more qualitative manner.

While the bulk of the chapter highlights various methods for estimating the economic losses black Americans have suffered from slavery times to the current moment, the authors settle on elimination of the racial wealth gap as the fundamental goal of a plan for reparations for black American descendants of US slavery.

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“Unequal Housing and the Case for Reparations,” by Walter D. Greason, addresses the first area of qualitative consideration, studying inequitable housing policies in the US since the Civil War—particularly in the past century—as a basis for reparations. Greason identifies how the New Deal and civil rights eras, while transforming America’s surface appearance, nonetheless failed to transform the racial hierarchy at the country’s core.

In particular, Greason writes that “policies designed to promote black inclusion and equity were sabotaged” in favor of techniques that eradicated the small elements of wealth that black families had gathered during the Jim Crow years. Highlighting the effects in communities across the country, Greason shows the stagnation of progress that has defined the postslavery period, the obstacles to equity that black Americans (and

well-meaning policy makers) have faced, and the missed opportunities that have warped the national trajectory.

Malik Edwards's chapter, "Education Inequities and the Case for Reparations," considers similar shortcomings in the education sphere. Providing a history of educational deprivation and its deleterious effects on black well-being, Edwards details the inequities long present in the educational system that persist to this day.

Focusing on the pre-Civil War period, the pre-*Brown v. Board of Education* era, and the lack of progress in the post-*Brown* era, Edwards highlights the disputes, debates, and objections to equal education that have defined each era of schooling in America. The most recent pattern of resistance dovetails neatly with Greason's discussion of contemporary residential segregation.

Edwards constructs a thoughtful through line between present-day disparities and those of centuries past, showcasing the inability to equalize opportunities for students across all schools—and the hesitancy of powerful entities (especially the Supreme Court) to set up and protect enforceable policies that might achieve such a goal.

The last chapter of Part I, written by Keisha Bentley-Edwards, focuses on the case for reparations from a health perspective. "The African American Health Burden: Disproportionate and Unresolved" looks at how a range of disparate health outcomes for black Americans can be traced back to a litany of policies and practices that have for centuries reduced the quality of—if not outright eliminated—medical care for this population. Bentley-Edwards describes how this arena, like many others described in this book, was long defined by outright subjugation and maltreatment of the black body. Moreover, when the Reconstruction era seemingly brought a flicker of opportunity, that hope was quickly squashed—most notably by the Flexner Report of 1910, which culminated in a shuttering of most black medical schools at the time. Finally, as universal policies like the Medicare Bill of 1965 came into being and tried to fix past injustices, they were built upon slanted ground in a discriminatory environment. Thus these attempts merely managed to create a newly unequal playing field for black medical professionals and, in turn, black patients.

The second section of the volume begins with "Learning from Past Experiences with Reparations," by A. Kirsten Mullen and William A. Darity Jr. Reiterating the focus on closing the racial wealth gap as the preeminent goal for reparations, the authors consider other efforts

that have been undertaken—both in America and around the world—in response to previous atrocities. Mullen and Darity study the actions of five commissions that convened to study past atrocities (four of which awarded some form of reparations to victims and/or their families) to identify patterns and lessons for bringing black reparations to fruition.

The authors highlight myriad lessons: these commissions can be valuable even without significant popular support for reparations; indeed, a commission's report could prove valuable in increasing support for black reparations. They also determine that uniform payments, largely, are desirable; that the perpetrators of the atrocities should not benefit from having committed such actions; and that allies who support the push for reparations are valuable in swaying public opinion.

"Considerations for the Design of a Reparations Plan," by Trevon D. Logan, continues the strategic discussion of logistics for a reparations plan. Logan first notes, among other caveats, that estimates of the racial wealth gap may be less than the full debt owed to black Americans—both because of the outsized gains achieved by the enslavers and because of the intangible costs that the enslaved and their descendants have been forced to carry across generations.

Logan then proceeds to enumerate a bevy of concerns and considerations surrounding the administration of such a program of reparations. Among these he identifies the need for a committee to be established to study it, the need for the program to be national in scope, the need for it to be based on knowledge obtained from precedents (in parallel with Mullen and Darity), and various possibilities regarding the format of and funding of payments. Moreover, Logan emphasizes the need for a more factual treatment of American history and its record of racial atrocities, both as a necessary element of the process of restitution and as a means of engendering support for redress.

Lisa R. Brown's chapter, "Reparations and Adult Education: Civic and Community Engagement for Lifelong Learners," focuses on the role that adult education can play in the reparations push. Brown highlights the opportunity for this field, which has been at the forefront of numerous American social justice movements, to advance reparations by increasing general public knowledge and support.

The latter sections of the chapter explore Brown's adaptation of Clare Graves's ECLET (Emergent Cyclical Levels of Existence Theory) framework outlining stages of adult development in terms of individual

and collectivist thinking. Brown posits that it could be a useful tool in identifying those adults most likely to become supporters of black reparations, as well as cultivating, through education, the kinds of collectivist thinking that are most likely to lead to reparations support. The framework, in conjunction with adult development provided by the educational systems Brown highlights, provides a path to forging the necessary broader coalition for this cause.

“The Children of Slavery: Genealogical Research and the Establishment of Eligibility for Reparations”—written by Evelyn A. McDowell—considers logistics in the process of delivering reparations to eligible individuals. Building off the qualifying criteria outlined by Darity and Mullen (2020), McDowell delineates a methodical process both for identifying relatives and for acquiring supporting evidence that establishes an ancestor’s enslaved status.

McDowell walks readers through the types of source materials—census, federal, property, and other records—that can prove valuable in this research process. She presents a system for evaluating the strength of pieces of evidence, and she showcases this in two rich and nuanced examples. McDowell’s chapter is a powerful rejoinder to critics who believe that it is impossible to establish a genealogical trail to one’s enslaved ancestors.

Darity and Mullen’s concluding chapter, “On the Black Reparations Highway: Avoiding the Detours,” explores common complaints lodged against black reparations as well as alternative plans that have been suggested in lieu of a comprehensive form of targeted payments to black Americans. The chapter also argues that local initiatives labeled as “reparations,” congressional legislation to form a study commission for black reparations, H.R. 40, the charge that reparations “must be more than a check,” and an array of proposed universal or indirect measures to close the wealth gap, are diversions from an essential comprehensive national plan for reparations. The conclusion makes clear that nothing but reparations conducted at the federal level will alleviate the black-wealth gap and that if equality is the goal, then nothing but “true reparations” will suffice.

Taken as a whole, the chapters found in *The Black Reparations Project* provide a wide-ranging and emphatic argument for this long-overdue cause. The journey to get to this point has been arduous, and while there is some momentum currently, much ground still must be covered before redress becomes a reality. Our hope is that the contents

of this book, and its presence in the nation's wider discourse in the coming years, will motivate, guide, and speed the final leg of the journey.

REFERENCES

Darity Jr., William A., and A. Kirsten Mullen. 2020. *From Here to Equality: Reparations for Black Americans in the Twenty-First Century*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.