What Is Owed?

The vicious clockwork of slavery was the backbone to early America, in which millions of Africans were bought and sold like commodities. Through generations they remained enslaved, directly benefiting the young country and their masters, without anything in return. Their stolen labor built the nation; and now, centuries later, the topic of reparations is in the spotlight. One such contributor to this discussion is Nikole Hannah-Jones, creator of *The 1619 Project,* which highlights America's history. She argues Black Americans are owed for their suffering, which would be paid to living descendants. While true, these reparations should not be limited to the form of money or a check. Monetary compensation is too ambitious of a goal standalone; so what is owed should be the opportunity to fair housing, jobs, and education.

The concept of improving quality of life in the lower-income areas isn't unheard of, but is it that simple? A process known as "redlining" began in 1933, in which many Black neighborhoods were "excluded from government-issued loans" (Source D) by housing markets. Labeled as "hazardous" areas, those living within them had a difficult time moving out into nicer zones, fueling the cycle. Black Americans were never considered to receive funding or have companies settle in, deterring investors from bringing wealth into their zones. The detrimental impact on communities in these areas is still present today, even after redlining was abolished. Businesses are few and far between, the homes are of lower quality, and living utilities are subpar. It isn't enough in this case to simply pay these descendants and expect them to make it work in these conditions. Instead, the problem should be tackled at its core, channeling funds into improving housing and getting more businesses to aid in their local economy. With this, people won't be forced to move from their homes and networks to have a stable life, and a more flourishing community will be a result.

Discrimination in the working world and the devastating wage gap between white and Black Americans has proven to be another focal point of justice long overdue. The 1930s brought several changes under Franklin D. Roosevelt's presidency, many of which limited the opportunities of black Americans. Laws were put in place to ensure that "Social security, minimum wage protection, and the recognition of labor unions" (Source E) were not extended to Black workers, accomplished by targeting the jobs in which they "predominated: agricultural and domestic service." (Source E). This included sharecroppers and housemaids, sources of employment that were oftentimes the only available options to them. The National Recovery Administration (NRA) and the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) worked together to oppress the occupations of Black Americans further, establishing "industry-by-industry minimum wages, maximum hours, and product prices"(Source E), while at the same time restricting them "to menial jobs" to prevent them from developing "higher skills" and advancing in their careers. There was the deliberate cherry-picking of what was considered a "northern" or "southern" jobs, with "southern" occupations being majority African American. The result was lowering wages for those working "southern" jobs, and despite all qualifications, many higher-paying or "northern" jobs were white-only and prohibited their employment. Even after this set of policies was changed in 1964 by the National Labor Review Board (NLRB), "racial income inequality by then was firmly established" (Source E) and still impacts black Americans today. The average Black American family has a significantly lower average income to a white American family, a consequence of these policies that still impacts descendants and African Americans as a whole. It is unfair to raise the wage of Black Americans disproportionate to their job, but better access to labor unions and government-run programs to combat against discriminatory employment practices and expand employment reach can help mend the wealth gap.

While some may argue that reparations aren't owed to living descendants, as "the people who are owed for slavery are no longer here" and the concept of "collective guilt" grows (Source G), the purpose of this indemnification is to encourage "remembrance and repentance for for the wrongs of the past" and the lasting societal impacts slavery and suffering left behind. The idea that uninvolved white people should have to take on the sole responsibility for their ancestors' atrocities and others is wrong, but this shouldn't have been the line of thinking to begin with. Reparations should aim to advocate equality and the unification of a nation torn apart by slavery and its grueling consequences, whether it be providing "better schools, more jobs, some form of universal health coverage" (Source G) or other types of government aid that don't require the downfall of another race to compensate for the suffering of Black Americans. Furthermore, collective guilt is a system which only pits people against one another for the actions of a small margin, which is a twisted view on the outcome of the enslavement of millions of Africans. Despite the lack of living enslaved people within the country, their descendants and other people of color still face the struggle against racism and inequity so many centuries later. To say they aren't owed anything for their past or current suffering is part of the worsening racial divide, one which can only be closed when there is a general consensus met about the topic of such reparations and reforms to American society.

It is only after reparations are given that the country can consider its sins atoned for, and with such diligence the issues facing Black Americans today can be slowly diminished. They are owed the opportunity to lead a stable life like that of a white American, in the form of their homes, jobs, and access to education. The impact slavery had on the United States is not one that should be forgotten, and for the majority of descendants, these reparations will make a drastic difference in their lives and future generations.