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The Ethics of Reparations for Slavery

Kyla A. Jermin

Abstract

Reparations has always been a lingering topic in American history – one that is heavily discussed, but never quite put into action. Though there are many who agree that payment is owed for slavery, or that a crime was committed, they are often dissuaded by various issues, or by the idea that reparations are “too divisive” and would encourage racial dissention. In my project, I address these arguments, and establish a case for reparations and the ethical responsibility behind it. My project explores themes of duty, responsibility, and compensation for wrongdoing as applied to the American slave trade. In this project, I explore what makes people so uncomfortable with the idea of reparations, and how this discomfort has created a level of social denial. I also discuss the moral implications of this denial, and how it connects to the historical mistreatment of black individuals. Through the use of various philosophy texts such as Margaret Urban Walker’s *Moral Repair* and Professor Bernard Boxill’s work in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, as well as other, more socially based media, such as Ta-Nehisi Coates’s *The Case for Reparations* and the documentary *Traces of the Trade*, I have compiled a series of arguments designed to explain the rationale of anti-reparations arguments, and to explain that reparations are not only right, but a moral necessity.

Section I: Introduction

In the early 2000s, members of a wealthy and expansive family were brought together in order to dig into their family history. What they found surprised them — and perhaps only them. After years of self-congratulation and familial pride in their accomplishments, the family was dismayed to learn that the source of their wealth was not due to the ingenuity or hard work of their forefathers, but rather to the immense part they played in the northern slave trade. The family was deeply shaken by this news, and so they went on a journey — what I myself consider to be a sort of “apology tour” — to several places where their ancestors had traded human lives, in an attempt to empathize with those who their family had purchased, and to begin the process of moral repair with those their ancestors had wronged. As part of this repair, they filmed their journey, so that others like them might also inspired and begin to facilitate repair within the community.¹

The family written about here is the DeWolf family, who ventured out on their journey after a member, Katrina Browne, learned of the true roots of their wealth. Along with several cousins and siblings, Browne ventured to parts of the East Coast, as well as Ghana and Cuba. While their immediate intentions were good — Katrina in particular seemed to express a deep desire to repair the wrongs done by her family — in my eyes, the trip seemed less about fixing the damage their forefathers had done, and more about assuaging personal feelings of guilt. As they traveled, they became increasingly uncomfortable with the status held by their family, and by other white people in general, and attempted — quite awkwardly, and with little success — to beg

¹ Katrina Browne, Alla Kovgan, and Jude Ray (directors), *Traces of the Trade*, available at <http://www.tracesofthetrade.org/>.

forgiveness from the various black/African people they encountered. At the end of their journey, various members committed themselves to aiding those wronged by the DeWolf family, and attempted to foster change within their communities.

I will admit, I found little to empathize with or enjoy in their journey. While I assume that their overall intentions were good, I found the family to be disruptive and invasive to the countries they visited, and many members seemed more preoccupied with alleviating their own personal angsts as opposed to acknowledging the painful truth of their history. Several members were hurt by the distant behavior of various black people they encountered, yet blissfully ignored their intrusion into a predominantly black space, during a time meant to mourn the very history they had come to explore.

While their trip was by no means an easy one, I was disturbed by how much their travels were marked by privilege -- the privilege to travel so freely, and to demand to be taken notice of, regardless of circumstance or demographic. They refused to accept minority status; they demanded attention and friendliness, even in a place where the inhabitants would quite reasonably be hostile. In one instance, they take it upon themselves to try and meet a black woman in the area -- perhaps to share experiences with, or hear her thoughts -- and as a group are quite hurt when she wants nothing to do with them. Though I'm sure they considered her denial to be very mean, I found that their insistence to meet with her was even worse. Not only had they intruded into her space -- a space she hadn't intended to see white people in, according to their story -- and demand her time, they also did so during an important cultural event. Their hurt at her refusal to meet with them said less about her manners, and more about their disturbing lack of empathy -- something that comes out multiple times during their travels. One member in

particular worries that he won't "feel anything" when touring old slave trading posts, and others remark at how much easier it was to relate to their fore-fathers than to examine how the slaves they owned might have felt. What attempts they made to sympathize felt vaguely voyeuristic, and slightly plastic, as though they could not truly identify with the horrors committed under their family name. This is another way that their privilege marks the documentary -- through their obvious struggles with empathetic behavior.

There were other issues as well: when exploring the ports in Ghana, Browne tries to equate the actions and status of white slave owners to the African rulers they traded with, in an attempt to create a sort of joint experience with the Ghanaians in the area. She is quickly shot down by a Ghanaian historian. The issue here is not so much that she tried to find a shared experience between two peoples, but that doing so can create a false equivalency — one that allows her and others like her to turn a blind eye to the nature of their own privileges. While her intentions might have been benign, her question echoes many arguments used to dismiss the horrors of slavery — namely: "other people had slaves too!" When discussing matters of privilege and oppression, we must be especially careful to not leave loopholes or "exit strategies" -- qualifiers that allow for us to say "well, that's not what *I* do..." and thus feel as though we've escaped our moral responsibility. By adding in a side narrative about Africans who were complicit in the slave trade, attention is diverted from the true nature of the issue -- her family's wealth and those who suffered for it -- into an inconsequential discussion about who is more responsible for the success of the slave trade.

Lastly, the ending. Browne, a relatively reasonable if not enjoyable narrator, nearly undoes all of the work of her documentary in its final moments by casually informing the viewer that none of

the money her family earned from the slave trade “exists” anymore. This statement is dangerous, because it implies that the very root of the contemporary DeWolf importance — their wealth, and by extension their influence — has little to do with the money they incurred from the slave trade. Not only is this a direct untruth, but it also exemplifies a major problem within discussion about slavery as a whole. Slavery is not a closed chapter of American history. While the practice itself no longer remains, its aftershocks are still present in society. The same goes for Browne and the DeWolfs. While the physical money may no longer exist, its presence is still felt in every part of the documentary. It exists in the expensive stained glass paid for by an ancestor, and in the factory co-started by another, one that still exists today. While the money no longer physically exists, its benefit is palpable. By ignoring this, Browne does herself a major disservice.

The critiques are not to say that her documentary does not convey an important message. In many ways, Browne’s wishes for her travels align with the purpose of my paper — to invoke feelings of community responsibility for past wrongdoings, to expose how deep issues of moral repair run, and to push forward an urgent need to rectify the past to present a healthier future. Browne’s documentary brings forth another issue I intend to address within my paper — why people are so threatened by the idea in the first place. Initially, it is easy to pass off reparations as a simple demand for payment — a payment many feel they do not owe. At the heart of the issue, however, discussing reparations requires that people be honest, and admit that their success in life is not wholly their own. Thus, reparations becomes an issue that can shake people to the core — if they are not completely responsible for their lot in life, then this means that they are a) less in control, less skilled — less impressive than they thought they were, and b) others are not completely responsible for their lots either — which means that rightful complaints of

inequality and unfairness can no longer be ignored. This is shown toward the end of Browne's documentary, when she and her family members compare college educations. Out of the nine family members she journeyed with, only one had not received an Ivy League education, and many of the eight others had multi-generational relationships with the college they attended. One member of the group grew quite upset when Browne suggested that his acceptance to Harvard was because of his family name. The relative in question refused to admit that his family's wealth and influence might have anything to do with his acceptance, and preferred to believe that he was accepted solely due to his intellect.

When I first watched Browne's documentary, I was surprised how deeply he felt about his education, but with further thought, I now understand. For the relative, it was not a matter of privilege; it was a matter of self-worth and skill. To acknowledge that his family played a part in his acceptance would mean that he was simply not as smart as he believed himself to be — and that shook him deeply. While I cannot dictate the feelings of those who will read my work, I would hope that they would be able to distance their self-esteem from their privilege, and continue to work on repairing the damage wrought by slavery.

Section II: Literature on Reparations

Part A: *Moral Repair*, Margaret Urban Walker

Before discussing anti-reparations arguments in the next section, I will offer a few other viewpoints, as expressed through various types of literature. The first comes from Professor Margaret Urban Walker, whose theories on Moral Repair are deeply relevant to the reparations

movement, and the second comes from Professor Camille Paglia, who offers a less sympathetic word to the reparations conversation.

One of Walker's most compelling arguments about our moral responsibility centers around the concept of hope. Walker's hope is not what we are traditionally used to; she explains hope not as wishful thinking, but as an intrinsic human need, one necessary for survival.² To deprive someone of hope, Walker argues, is to do them a moral wrong, and one for which the community should demand repair and restitution. "Given that some human beings are sometimes responsible...for unnecessary and unjust losses of hope for others, the destruction of hope is a moral matter." (Walker, 62) The loss of hope is damaging on multiple levels. It can snuff out creativity and imagination, and create a lasting sense of despair in those who suffer from it. In Walker's view, hope is inherently tied to desire, possibility, and the future. Those without desire or the methods to achieve what they desire have nothing to hope for, because hope is deeply rooted in realism — people do not hope for the impossible, for reasons I will discuss later on. If one has nothing to hope for — nothing that is remotely possible to achieve — then their future prospects become severely limited.

As hope wanes, so does personal success. Walker uses the concept of learned helplessness — in which researchers learned that an animal repeatedly subjected to abuse can become so passive and accepting of their torment that they eventually die — to accurately explain what the loss of hope looks like within people. While hope can be relatively self-sustaining, when it is repeatedly blocked or rendered useless — for example, through lack of equal rights and opportunities — it

² Margaret Urban Walker, *Moral Repair: Reconstructing Moral Relations after Wrongdoing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

begins to falter until it no longer exists. Consider this concept in regards to black people, who face societal limits from birth. While hope may not be as openly and intentionally destroyed as in years prior — for example, black people now have far more social opportunities than they would have before, let alone during the tortures of slavery — there are still very present roadblocks. In small amounts, these sorts of “setbacks in hope” are not particularly life-threatening and can be successfully dealt with. In the long term, however, they can contribute to the erosion of hope. As Walker puts it, “As important, though less dramatic...are the grinding and cumulative effects of the everyday institutions and practices that discriminate against people...the costs of lost hope in a lifetime of frustration, slight, insult, humiliation, and exhaustion may be crushing in effect.” (Walker, 65) This erosion of hope can also contribute to broader social change within a community. In discussions of the attitudes of minority groups, particularly that of black Americans, they are often described as under-achieving, and lacking the ambition to succeed. However, if we apply Walker’s ideas of loss of hope and learned helplessness, what is mistakenly seen as an unwillingness to work can be seen differently.

Throughout history, people have adapted to their circumstances. If people themselves can adjust, then surely their hopes and desires would also adjust to their standard of living. These hopes are called Adjusted Expectations — and they are the result of a consistent downturn in standards of living. To put things more simply, if black Americans are continually placed in situations where their hopes are crushed or made virtually impossible, then they will adjust their desires accordingly. According to Walker, hopes are intrinsically bound to realism. If something is not realistically possible, then any desire concerning it is a wish, not a hope. Thus, if hopes are directly sourced from reality, and the reality of one’s circumstances leaves little in the way of

opportunity or success, then those successes will not be hoped for. To give a more real-life example, consider the age old arguments about education: why don't black youth go to college, why don't they want better for themselves?

When we apply the idea of Adjusted Expectations, it becomes clear — this is their better. Under Adjusted Expectations, there is no room for hopes above a certain level, because the individual has adapted to become satisfied with their circumstances, however lowly they may be. As Walker puts it, “Where desires are rendered pointless...certain hopes are put out of reach. And some lives are not furnished with access to ideas, representations, experiences and information that would allow one to form certain desires at all.” This is a prime example of the relatively subtle aftereffects of a wrongdoing, and how they may not immediately be visible to those outside of the wronged community. What has for years been mistakenly — and intentionally — attributed as a race-wide character flaw is simply yet another offshoot of the original injury committed. Thus, when considering the issue of moral repair, and by extension, reparations, it is important to note not only the immediate and present effects of wrongdoing, but the subtler ones. While the deliberate restraint of hope and desire is obvious in the treatment of enslaved people — for example, lack of education and denial of social rights such as marriage — it is perhaps harder to directly pinpoint in the treatment of their descendants, and so we must be careful not to dismiss what we do not understand. While I will discuss the specifics of this issue further on in my project, I would ask that any reader begin to consider the more nuanced ways that hopelessness has infiltrated society and black culture, and how society might repair that wrong.

In her book, *Moral Repair*, Walker demands responsibility not only from communities and from committers of wrongdoing, but from bystanders. Continuing her work on the subject of hopelessness, Walker states that lack of bystander intervention can contribute to the stress and injury of the victim. Earlier on in the book, Walker explains that victims may be further damaged by the denial of their victim hood, because this implies that society's moral guidelines do not fit theirs. If the community is absent, or makes no acknowledgement of the moral wrong committed, then the wrongdoing is essentially found acceptable. This allows the perpetrator of the wrong to continue to operate in society without punishment, and distances the victim from the community. This same denial of victimhood — or the refusal of others to “get involved” when wrongdoing occurs — can contribute to an overall loss of hope for the victim, a theme I will explore more thoroughly in the next section. This loss is two-fold — again, it represents the alienation between the victim and society, and it also tells the victim that nothing will be done to aid them. As Walker puts it, “for the most part, our hopes naturally attach to ideas that someone...could make a difference and might actually do so.” When victims are proved wrong, they can experience a new level of despair and alienation from society. A few lines later, Walker expands on this point, explaining that it is much more damaging for victims to know that others could have helped them and did not, as opposed to believing that nothing could have been done. To apply this directly to my project, I would ask that those reading consider some of the age old arguments against reparations — specifically, those that deny direct responsibility or benefit. Under Walker's arguments, even if one has not directly committed a moral wrong, their treatment of the victim afterwards may mark them as complicit in the crime.

Later in her work, Walker discusses trust. Trust, Walker argues, is yet another part of the relationship between people and their communities. Just as the denial of wrongdoing damages hope, it also works to erode the trust between victims and their communities. When this trust is damaged or lost, it can lead to further alienation and distance as the victim learns that they can no longer trust that their safety is ensured by their community. The loss of trust can cause larger problems as well. The victims may now hold a fundamental distrust or skepticism of others, further destroying chances for reconciliation. Loss of trust can also upset the victim's worldview, causing them to question themselves, their people, and their own beliefs. Consider this, then, from the perspective of black Americans. Due to repeated wrongdoing, there is little trust between many black Americans and their communities — and it could be argued that because of the horrors of slavery, there is a fundamental lack of trust between black Americans and their government, because the trust itself never had any sort of solid foundations. To use a more recent example, a black Home Depot employee recently came under fire for wearing a hat that stated “America Was Never Great” — a mockery of the campaign slogan of Donald Trump, which reads “Make America Great Again.” Her hat speaks to two issues — one, that America has always had a fairly turbulent, mistrustful relationship with its black citizens, and two, that there was no real basis for trust between the groups in the first place. Walker states that trust is the “ground of moral relations.” However, given the unsavory beginning of the moral relationship between black Americans and their government, and the many other instances of moral wrongdoing which continue to taint the relationship, it is hard to see how any sort of positive moral trust could have flourished between the two parties. Thus, reparations would have an additional goal: to foster a new moral relationship between black Americans and their community. Without this new groundwork, the trust between both parties will remain damaged

and unsuitable to create a prospering future. Walker brings another important issue regarding moral trust — violence. When a community fails to recognize wrongdoing, the victims are left floundering, and can become prone to bitterness, and with no attempts made to appease or restore the relationship, that bitterness simply continues to increase. In Walker's view, this bitterness is perfect for those who wish to incite violence or otherwise cause chaos. When the voices of the wronged go unheard, they find other methods of expressing their dissatisfaction. Thus, Walker argues that it is even more crucial for communities to address wrongdoing so that they might circumvent the development of bitterness and resentment. "Resentment can be exploited by opportunistic political leaders, who can use it to kindle intergroup violence. For this reason, it is important...to make sure that serious injustices are not ignored even if it is inconvenient." Perhaps the most common example of this resentment is shown throughout the various responses to incidents of police brutality. Faced with yet another denial of victimhood and proper justice, members of the black community took it upon themselves to drive the point home in another manner. Though people seemed stunned by the various riots and other acts, when we consider the words of Walker, their actions, while violent, are not particularly surprising. Once again, I would entreat any reader of this project to examine the subtleties of the world in which we live. What on the surface may seem simple and uncomplicated may be the direct result of years of oppression and moral wrongs, something I will discuss in more detail as my project continues.

Part B: *When Sorry Isn't Enough*, Roy L. Brooks

Roy L. Brooks' collection of essays spans many topics, from the historical mistreatment of Native Americans, to the reparations given because of the Japanese government's involvement with comfort women. Though there is much to discuss in his book, I have selected a few essays that I feel most directly relate to my project and its topics. In particular, I've chosen a short essay written by Camille Paglia and published by Salon magazine in 1997.³ The essay was part of an advice column run by Paglia, and endeavored to answer the question: "Should the U.S. Government apologize to African Americans for the existence of slavery?" Of course, those reading my project may voice concern here — after all, this is about reparations, not a formal apology. Personally, I consider the act of apology and the act of reparations to go hand in hand, or perhaps to even be extensions of one another, though this is something I will elaborate on at a later point. With that small point out of the way, we can return to Paglia's response, which was a resounding *no*. I chose to respond to Paglia's essay for several reasons; partially because it's good to represent an opposing opinion, partially because I found many inconsistencies within her argument, and because her opinion represents what has become a standard in the discussion about slavery and apology.

Many people, Paglia included, have written off the act of public apology — and by extension, reparations — as an attempt to revive a dead conversation. While this attitude seems quite forward thinking on the surface, it ignores an important moral question: Does a wrong stop being wrong when the original victims are no longer with us? Does a crime with an enormous legacy

³ Roy L. Brooks, *When Sorry Isn't Enough* (New York: New York University Press, 1999).

stop being a crime simply because the original offender has moved on? In the very beginning of her letter, Paglia dismisses the idea of an apology because “an apology can be extended only by persons who committed the original offense.” Slavery, Paglia argues, was an “operation tolerated but not invented by the government.... the government cannot logically apologize for it.”

(Brooks, 353) The first argument leaves much out, and places a very narrow statute of limitations on wrongdoing and repair. If an apology can only be given by those who originally committed the crime, then what of those who come after? How should those who benefit from a moral wrong work to correct the world around them? Her second argument also leaves much undiscussed, and seems almost absurd. To describe the century-plus-long institution of slavery as an operation merely “tolerated but not invented” by the government is to be willfully ignorant about the foundations on which this country was built. When we consider that some of founders of this country owned slaves, and look back at the tireless efforts to prove that black people were less than human — which made enslaving them justifiable, almost merciful — both within legislation and outside of it, it becomes impossible to say that the government was not in *some* way complicit in slavery. To tolerate something is to allow it, and do so without interference; to tolerate is not to *participate*.

Later in the essay, Paglia falls back on the most common of anti-apology arguments: responsibility. Much like members of the DeWolf family, mentioned earlier, Paglia says that no apology is necessary because as the daughter of an immigrant, she had nothing to do with slavery personally. In her eyes, America is no longer responsible because the country's demographics are so varied, and most people had “nothing to do with” the slave trade. Like the DeWolfs, Paglia fails to realize the way that slavery has permeated modern society. While the institution itself

may no longer exist, the scars it left remain. The government cannot change hearts, it can only change actions through law. When slavery itself was no longer allowed, no longer viable, people did not simply lose their hatred and disgust for black Americans. Instead, as Michelle Alexander argues, that hatred simply changed form.⁴ As these beliefs lost legal traction, they were simply expressed in other, more palatable ways; through stereotyping, lack of opportunity, in the countless other ways racism has been and will continue to be expressed within this country. In short, while more modern white residents of this country may have not been personally active in slavery, they continue to reap the benefits it left behind.

Paglia's last arguments do no better than her first; they continue to be patently ineffectual and rely heavily on intentionally misunderstanding the issue at hand. Paglia starts first with the timeless claim "other societies had slaves too! We didn't start anything!" — an argument so ludicrous, especially when considering the severity and total damage dealt by American slavery, that I can scarcely believe that I'm mentioning it within my project. She then says that if the American government apologizes, "all the nations" of west and central Africa must also apologize because of the role they played. On the surface, this is a potentially lucrative argument, but with any level of examination it is clear to see that it is a complete red herring. The role of various African countries is not the issue here; the issue is the role of the *American* government, and whether it can be held responsible for its crimes. Her last, and most blatant ~~red herring~~ argument is the "everyone is important" stance. Paglia, rather than discussing the issue at hand, diverts, calling the discussion an example of "liberal identity politics" which have "sharpened racial consciousness in this country to a dangerous degree." Personally, I am concerned that anyone

⁴ Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow* (New York: The New Press, 2012).

would dismiss the moral duty to repair wrongdoing as “identity politics” and find her tone to be dismissive. Paglia argues that we would be better off spending time reforming the country to aid those in poverty and “inner city neighborhoods,” and asks that we stop identifying African-Americans as former slaves and instead teach children about all cultures and histories. This is an idealistic — and again, willfully ignorant — argument, and as stated earlier, a complete red herring. The issue, once again, is the government’s duty to apologize, not society’s cruel tendency to “reduce” black people to former slaves. I am also confused by Paglia’s demand that we stop focusing on the past and aid those who are impoverished. While this is not an unreasonable demand, it is absurd to demand that we fix the symptoms of a disease without even attempting to treat the disease itself. In other words, it makes little sense to focus on fixing the “disgusting conditions of inner city neighborhoods” if we make no attempt to trace back why the conditions are the way they are. I find Paglia’s arguments to be ultimately short sighted and unoriginal, and though they seem hopeful, they offer little. But Paglia represents something important: opposition. As I will discuss later on in my project, arguments like these represent an overarching problem within the reparations debate — people are opposed because they are unwilling to address what is being asked for, or because they are in denial about the circumstances in which they live.

Section III: Anti-Reparation Arguments and Denial

Introduction to Section III

In this next part of my project I will move away from my examination of other works, and attempt to ‘flesh out’ the resistance toward reparation movements. In this analysis, I will be focusing on the act of denial, and its specific connection to anti-reparation arguments. To do this, I have compiled several arguments which I will use to explain the depths of this denial and its effects.

- A. It’s All in the Past (A post-racial society)
- B. Everyone This Happened to is Dead (This isn’t a current issue)
- C. It’s Not My Fault (*I* didn’t own any slaves)
- D. Status Issues (Admitting wrongdoing means big changes)
- E. It [Reparations] Won’t Solve Anything

Each argument represents a specific type of denial, and the reasoning behind this denial. Though the arguments may overlap, each is necessary to truly understand the depths of denial. After reading the list, several questions may come to mind: Why is this important to the topic of reparations? Why not just write out a plan?

When I began this project, my thought was that I would simply write out why reparations were part of the American moral duty, supplement that argument with some base evidence, and go on

my way. This is not to say that I have no plans for the actual implementation of reparations, but rather that I recognize that my project cannot go on forever and thus must be narrowed down to a few topics. Much like Ta-Nehisi Coates in his article “The Case for Reparations”⁵, I am attempting to list the many reasons why reparations are necessary, not to institute an actual reparations program. Before I started my project, I was under the impression that most people against reparations were simply ignorant about the true nature of the issue — they believed it to be a strictly monetary dispute, not a discussion about moral wrongdoing — and I sought to correct that ignorance. After researching, I have come to the conclusion that anti-reparation sentiments are less about lack of knowledge, and more about lack of perspective. Statistically, people are aware of the reasons why reparations would be necessary and can agree that a wrongdoing took place, but they no longer believe this wrongdoing is relevant. It is quite easy for those on the “outside” of the issue to have little understanding of the pervasiveness of this wrongdoing, because they have never had a reason to.

For these people, wrongdoing against blacks began and ended with slavery — and perhaps, for the more knowledgeable person, Jim Crow — and there are no current issues that demand restitution. Coates describes this attitude perfectly in his follow-up article, “The Case for Considering Reparations.”⁶ “White Americans did not oppose reparations because they were flummoxed by the practicalities of making good on the debt. They opposed them because, ultimately, they didn’t think the legacies of slavery and Jim Crow were any longer that big of a deal.” This attitude creates a gap of sorts within history, one that allows for confusion and

⁵ Ta-Nehisi Coates, “The Case for Reparations,” *The Atlantic Monthly* (June 2014), accessed July 15, 2016 at <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/06/the-case-for-reparations/361631/>.

⁶ Ta-Nehisi Coates, “The Case for Considering Reparations,” *The Atlantic Monthly* (January 2016), accessed July 19, 2016 at <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/01/tanehisi-coates-reparations/427041/>.

misappropriation of wrongdoing. If the slave trade was a single, isolated event within human history, then it has no connection to the later mistreatment of black people. If people are unable to see the links between one atrocity and another, then they can convince themselves that these acts were the result of the individual attitudes of the time and have had no bearing on the future. This would also mean that any damage to black individuals after this time is simply a result of their own actions and nothing else — for example, stereotypes about lack of education or poverty can now be solely attributed to cultural laziness and an inability to “do better,” as opposed to structural inequality — and as such there is no obligation to try and correct any of these issues. Of course, one need only trace back a few years to find historical patterns of mistreatment and prejudice stemming from slavery forwards. But because of this gap, people can willfully ignore these patterns, and never look for them until it influences their lives in a more personal fashion.

A perfect example of this is the DeWolf family, who I discussed in the introduction to this paper. For the DeWolfs, their wealth and social status were completely isolated within modern constraints, and they had little understanding of how deep the injuries caused by their family ran until they were forced to confront them. While their attempts to mend relationships and repair the wrongs of their family were right, it is unlikely that they would have took on the project if they did not have a personal connection to it. This is not to cast a shadow over their work or the character of the family as a whole; rather, it is to acknowledge that they would probably have had no reason to be concerned about the effects of the slave trade had their family not had ties to it. Most people cannot trace direct family connections to slavery, and as such feel no personal duty to inform themselves. This severe lack of perspective allows people to effectively write off the symptoms and completely ignore the disease — any sort of racial incident or disadvantage

can be chalked up to individual shortcomings or community failings, not an institutionalized problem. Denial destroys the chance for any sort of dialogue or discussion, because denial erases the idea that there is any issue.

Thus, anti-reparations arguments are not rooted in misunderstanding, but rather what Coates describes as in-curiosity. People are not anti-reparations because they don't understand what reparations are for; they are anti-reparations because they feel there is no debt owed for historical wrongdoing. This incuriosity allows people to shroud themselves in denial, and never truly address their history. In order to have a true and honest discussion about reparations, we must be able to have a true and honest discussion about the historical mistreatment of black individuals, from slavery onward, and none of this is possible unless we work to eradicate denial and foster reason and authenticity in its place.

Part A: It's All In the Past

The first argument, "It's All In the Past," is a direct descendant of the incuriosity mentioned earlier. For people who employ this type of denial, the playing field is equal, so to speak. Reparations and other acts of moral repair aren't necessary, because racism is effectively over - and with no ill effects to speak of! Thus, reparations aren't an act of repair, but rather an act of division, because it'll separate black people from everyone else, and corrupt an otherwise color-blind society. These sentiments, while...nice, are impossible to maintain after one has done the bare minimum in terms of research, and this type of denial is one that should be easily broken. It

is impossible, in my mind, for any reasonable and rational person to deny that black people are still at a societal disadvantage. To ignore this is to deliberately ignore and purposefully misconstrue history. Yet, there are plenty of people perfectly comfortable believing that nothing is wrong, and that people are generally on a more level playing field, one that provides everyone with equal opportunity — and perhaps too much opportunity, if you are Abigail Fisher (she will be discussed in greater detail later on in the paper). This would not be an issue on a more individual, personal level, as people are allowed to govern their intake of knowledge as they see fit, but it becomes problematic when this denial prevents repair from occurring. As stated earlier, people will become resistant to acts of repair if they believe no wrongdoing has occurred, and this may even cause them to become resentful or dismissive of the victims in the situation. This damage of this phenomenon is mentioned earlier, in the review of Margaret Urban Walker's *Moral Repair* in which she describes the damage that denial of wrongdoing can cause to victims. In short, this type of denial, while seemingly well-intentioned (no one wants to believe that they benefit from racist or immoral acts) can actually add to the injuries dealt, because the community has essentially normalized their pain. This normalizing harms both parties, because it leaves the victims unheard and alienated from a society meant to protect them, and it desensitizes the wrongdoer to the severity of their actions. If wrongdoing is denied or disguised as typical behavior, then it cannot be fixed, and neither party can get what they need from the situation. It's all the past, while ostensibly benign and well-intentioned, can become a source of misrepresentation and confusion.

Part B: Everyone This Happened to is Dead

This next argument is part of a pair, along with the “It’s not My Fault” argument. Both imply a lack of responsibility due to proximity — either through death, or the absence of personal action. Though they are similar to one another at the root, each deserves its own space for discussion.

The “Everyone This Happened to is Dead” argument, or the ETHD for short is a fairly common argument. People are often taught that wrongdoing begins and ends with the wounded party, and are resistant to attempts to change this mindset. The problem with this argument, however, is that it ignores the possibility for continued wrongdoing. If all wrongs become closed books when the immediately injured party is no longer in the picture, then there is no longer any reason to assess the aftereffects of that wrong. At its most harmless, this argument contributes to a sort of selfish ignorance, one that allows people to escape the full effects of their wrongdoing. In its worst, it is a dangerous tool of mass delusion, allowing people to continually inflict damage without a thought to what they are actually doing. Though it seems admirable to want to move forward without the constant burden of un-righted wrongs, we must be extremely careful not to dismiss legitimate claims simply because we feel there is no longer a particular victim.

This argument brings an important question to mind: Does wrongdoing end simply because the original victims no longer exist? In some cases, yes — for example, cases where the original offense had no lasting effect on other people, such as small thefts. While the act itself is wrong, it does not necessarily have a multi-generational effect, and as such there is no need for apology after the original participants have died. However, if we apply this argument to something as

large as reparations, there is a very different answer. Under this argument, there is no duty to try and repair the wrongs committed during the slavery period; after all, the statute of limitations has passed, and there is no way to compensate the original victims, because they are deceased. But when we look more closely at the issue, this argument becomes obviously flawed. There are still after-effects from the slave trade, as discussed earlier. If there are still remnants of the wrong today, then the discussion of “original victims” becomes inconsequential because there are current, active victims even now.

When discussing the issue of reparations, we must also remember that there are multiple wrongs involved. Reparations are required not only for slavery, but for the scars it left on black society, from poor treatment and lack of opportunity to outright poverty. There are clear examples of these scars; for example, redlining, which kept better homes and other services away from black people through unfair lending practices. But there are also more covert examples. Take, for instance, an impoverished family, recently freed from slavery — such as the one used by Bernard Boxill in his Stanford Encyclopedia entry on reparations.⁷ In the piece, he argues that reparations are not only owed to the parents in the family, but are also separately owed to their child because they could not adequately provide for her under society’s restraints. While people were quick to agree that the “original” victims of the slave trade should be compensated, they often fail to realize that the injury did not cease to exist when those people passed on. To make things clearer, if the two parents, who Boxill called Tom and Beulah, could not sufficiently provide for their child, Eulah, then her quality of life suffered as well as theirs. It can also be implied that her future children would also suffer from this impoverishment, for a multitude of

⁷ Bernard Boxill, “Black Reparations,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, accessed July 19, 2016 at <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/black-reparations/>.

reasons. It could be that she too cannot provide for her children because of her circumstances, thus creating a new generation of those wounded. As Boxill puts it, “They harmed her by keeping her parents in poverty and ignorance and by therefore also keeping her in ignorance and poverty. They...harmd her by causing her to be raised by parents with the various disabilities that the experience of slavery...causes its victims...if she acquired these disabilities from her parents by imitation and necessity...if these disabilities harmed her, the government’s wrongs caused those harms too.” It is entirely possible for this same system of dysfunction to be passed along generationally, especially because there has never been any attempt to correct it.

This is not to say that the government has done nothing to correct its wrong; after many years of toil and frustration, it did — however grudgingly — provide black people with seemingly equal rights. But this brings to light another, sillier argument; one that implies that the injuries of slavery are now healed because of minor attempts to forge equality. Boxill disproves this argument as well, by explaining that reparations and equality are not the same. Equality was and is owed to enslaved persons and their descendants, but that does nothing to reimburse them for the damage they have already endured. Boxill uses an excellent analogy here, one about breaking an arm. If you cause someone to break their arm, you would be obligated to pay that person back for the injury. But you would also be obligated to reimburse them for the time spent without the use of that arm, as well as medical bills and other inconveniences. In short, you may “level the field,” so to speak, and compensate someone for a loss or to make things more equal. This would not, however, mean that you did not also owe the person for the time spent disadvantaged and the effects that those disadvantages have had on them. If we apply this to the discussion of reparations, then it is impossible to see any discussion of slavery as a “closed book,” because the

continuing effects are evident, even if they could be seen as relatively minor in comparison to the original wrong.

Of course, one could spend thousands of pages detailing the exact crimes committed against black people. There is simply not enough time or space within this project to accurately detail such offenses. Boxill offers a more concise description of this wrong, and explains the government's role in the slave trade and its responsibility towards victims. "The U.S. Government did not merely fail to compensate the former slaves, but continued to persecute them after they were freed. Indeed, adding injury to injury it prevented them from even competing for opportunities that were already owed to them as compensation and which therefore should simply have been turned over to them. This double injustice with its resultant harms, continued through succeeding generations..." As stated above, because of the continued injury, there is still a duty to repair the wrong, and also to reimburse the victims.

While I have talked about later generations of those affected by slavery, it is important to remember that those affected are very much still alive. As I stated earlier, the more modern effects of slavery may be more subtle than their vicious counterparts; while black people no longer live under the promise of enslavement, they are beholden in many other ways. When we consider the difficulty that black individuals still face when searching for schooling or employment, or when we examine the poverty rates for black children — which, as of 2013, meant that they were four times as likely to be living in poverty as their white counterparts — it is evident that the marks of slavery are still very much tied to our society. This has been addressed years before, in President Lyndon B. Johnson's fairly iconic speech on poverty: "For

Negro poverty is not white poverty. Many of its causes and many of its cures are the same. But there are differences — deep, corrosive, obstinate differences — radiating painful roots into the community, and into the family, and the nature of the individual. These differences are not racial differences. They are solely and simply the consequence of ancient brutality, past injustice, and present prejudice. They are anguishing to observe. For the Negro they are a constant reminder of oppression.”⁸ It is mystifying to me that this issue can still be thought of as unimportant, or finished with. If LBJ could discuss black poverty as the “consequence of ancient brutality” in 1965, then why, over fifty years later, have we relegated slavery to a sort of historical background noise? Some may say that it was an issue then, but no longer. But I would ask, how much has truly changed in fifty years? Has it been enough to finally disconnect the umbilical cord of slavery, which has fed racism, poverty and prejudice for over a hundred years? I think not. To deny that the history of slavery has an active effect on society today is not to be progressive or enlightened; it is to be in blatant, unrepentant denial of our circumstances.

Part C: It's Not My Fault

As discussed earlier, there are many reasons why people are uncomfortable with the topic of reparations. To discuss reparations means that there should be repayment, and repayment means that there must be an admittance of wrongdoing. This is especially hard for those who wish to deny their own personal ties to reparations, be it through ancestry, privilege, or any other connection. Thus, there is one particular more insistent argument that is used to deny reparations:

⁸ Lyndon B. Johnson, “Commencement Address at Howard University,” *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States*, accessed July 19, 2016 at <http://www.lbjlib.utexas.edu/johnson/archives.hom/speeches.hom/650604.asp>.

denial about personal responsibility. Those who are anti-reparations are quick to use such an argument, because it alleviates guilt and removes any sense of duty. In one sense, this reaction is perfectly understandable. No one likes to feel guilt or shame, and so it is natural that we would try to avoid situations that would cause those feelings. However, when we allow our own comforts to get in the way of justice and moral repair, things become problematic. While self-preservation is again, natural, the denial of wrongdoing is an addition to the original wrong. In short, by attempting to avoid feeling guilt, we may actually implicate ourselves further.

It's Not My Fault, or INMF for short, has been displayed in countless ways, from immigration disputes to birthdays. Some argue that they owe nothing to black people, usually because they are the descendants of immigrants — like Camille Paglia — and thus feel that they have no connection to the atrocities of slavery. Others feel that their age prevents their accountability, because slavery ended many years before they were born. Both arguments, while seemingly legitimate on the surface, rely on the idea that slavery is a closed chapter of history that has no current participants, and no current bearing on society. This is untrue, as I have mentioned earlier, but allows for arguments like INMF to flourish, unchecked. For example, if the slave trade had no real aftereffects and had no influence on the modern treatment of black people, then the argument that those who immigrated years later were innocent could stand; after all, they had no direct hand in the original wrongs committed. The same would hold true for those born after slavery was already over. But if we apply the realities of the “real world” to both situations, neither one holds up. Historically, the mistreatment of black people did not end after slavery; in fact, it still continues, perpetuated by society, and some would argue, by the government. Black people, while free of forced servitude, remained socially imprisoned by stereotypes and lack of

opportunities — as well as attacks and other ill treatment. This created a privilege system, one where white people would automatically be given a set of advantages at birth, due to no other attribute than their whiteness. Black people, on the other hand, would be born with a set of disadvantages, for no other attribute than their blackness, and these advantages and disadvantages have remained throughout history. (There is much to say on the subject of privilege; much more than this paper can handle. But I would hope that this explanation, though simplistic, gives a sort of base reasoning as to why personal involvement matters little on the subject of reparations.) Thus, any white person, regardless of time of entry into the country, personal affiliation or date of birth, can benefit from the access that privilege provides them. In that same way, any black person, regardless of entry into the country, personal affiliation or date of birth can be suffer from the disadvantages placed upon them, simply by nature of being black.

Of course, those reading this may ask: If I'm born with that privilege — with or without personal intervention — then how can I be held responsible for it? This question is legitimate; from the surface, privilege merely seems to be an unfortunate remnant of historical racism, and something that works outside of our control. In one sense, this is correct; after all, privilege has been given to white individuals with seemingly little intervention on their parts. But this does not negate their responsibility to repair wrongdoing and to correct inequality. Though they may not have had a personal hand in the wrong, they are still bound to improve the circumstances of others, because they are fundamentally complicit in the privilege system, even though they did not choose it. In short, there are dual types of responsibility: personal responsibility, for when the person has committed a wrong themselves (for example, someone who's broken something is responsible for fixing it) and complicit responsibility, for when a person has not directly

committed the wrong, but is still involved in the structure of the crime; they may not have directly committed the crime, but are still participating (for example, those who purchase “blood” or “conflict” diamonds). Professor Christopher Kutz explains the complicity argument quite neatly, and easily sorts out the issue of responsibility when he is quoted in the book *Consuming Choices* by David T. Schwartz.⁹ “The Complicity Principle: I am accountable for what others do when I intentionally participate in the wrong they do or the harm they cause. I am accountable for the harm or wrong we do together, independently of the actual difference I make.” Under Kutz’s explanation, those who benefit from privilege are still obligated to repair their wrongs, because they are actively involved in a harmful system. Thus, specific arguments about fault are made irrelevant, because they are still at fault through complicity.

This privilege system completely destroys the notion of any sort of “statute of limitations” on reparations, because it applies regardless of personal background. In fact, it disproves the INMF completely. If privilege is not correlated with background (outside of race) then the issue of personal fault becomes irrelevant. Privilege, in its basest sense, transfers by birth, not by action. Of course, action plays its own part, and there are various ways to ensure that your descendants are privileged and prosperous, much as the DeWolf family did. But regardless of familial circumstance or the actions of one’s predecessors, there will always be a base level of benefit, one that is based on race, and exists apart from any other determinant. Of course, this benefit may not be immediately visible, depending on other factors — for example, those who suffer from other social afflictions, such as extreme poverty, may argue that they hold no benefit over anyone else. While this may be true in a purely monetary sense, there is always a level of power

⁹ David T. Schwartz, *Consuming Choices: Ethics in a Global Consumer Age* (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2010).

that a white person will hold over their black counterpart at the same economic level. This does not start out as a personal choice, though there are those who revel in and exploit this power difference. But again, at the basest level, this privilege is based in the historical mistreatment of black people, not in a currently-living person's actions.

To clarify: This is most certainly not to say that people cannot use this privilege to their advantage, that they do not engage in racist behaviors and thus fuel the same mistreatment of black people or that they somehow cannot be implicated because they did not *choose* this privilege. Rather, it is simply to state that the concept of personal responsibility is irrelevant to the discussion of reparations, because the wrongs of slavery are still being benefitted from.

Privilege itself may be a remnant of historical wrongs, but it can only exist as long as someone else is present to take benefits away from. One can only be better if there is something or someone to be better than. Without the exploitation and marginalization of black individuals, there would be no privilege system because there would be no inherent advantages or disadvantages — or not ones based on race, at least. This is yet another reason why INMF is irrelevant to the true discussion of reparations: because the obstacles faced by black individuals are directly tied to the leverage given to white ones. As such, even if one feels they've had no direct impact on the fate of black people, they are automatically involved, because they have automatically profited from their disadvantages.

The INMF argument is appealing, on the surface. It is a seemingly legitimate discussion of responsibility and personal action, neatly comprised in one short sentence. But as shown, it

cannot hold up to any sort of logical scrutiny; there is no real way to prove that one has had no part of the benefit, because that benefit can take many different forms. To go back to my earlier analogy: A person who is severely impoverished may see no real “benefit” in their life, but that benefit exists, all the same. It merely depends on who you compare that person to. For example, a poorer white person will not be well-off as compared to say, a richer black person, because their monetary circumstances have provided them with different lifestyles. But if we compare black and white people in a scenario that provides similar lifestyles, privilege becomes apparent. A perfect example of this are the many instances of unfair employment practices, where equally qualified (or at times, more qualified) black applicants are often bypassed in favor of their white counterparts. It has even been shown on paper; if an applicant’s name is too “ethnic” sounding, they are likely to be passed by. This same privilege can be shown in thousands of other ways; from treatment in stores to stereotypes; I could spend hundreds of pages detailing the ways this privilege presents itself. But for this project, and to defeat the INMF argument, it is enough to know that this privilege exists, and it is present.

The INMF argument is tempting, at least on the exterior. But as shown throughout this paper, it does not provide a sufficient retort against the reparations movement. At best, the INMF is suitable for passing conversation, or any other venue where arguments may be expressed without any need for dialogue or details. At worst, it is a red-herring in the multitude of topics available for a true discussion on reparations. In short, it sounds good, and can be used as a satisfying counterargument as long as one does not do any real research. But if we are to truly take anti-reparations arguments seriously, the INMF cannot be among them.

Part D: Status Issues

The next form of denial, Status Issues, is closely related to INMF and the discussion of privilege. Status Issues, or SI, for short, is a different sort of denial tactic than the others discussed previously. While the other forms of denial mentioned are based around specific arguments against reparations (lack of responsibility, for example), SI's goal is to explain anti-reparation attitudes, and answer the question: why *are* people so threatened by the idea of reparations? SI is less of a philosophy issue, and more a psychological one, though it does have roots in both. While I cannot claim any full psychological expertise in this area, I will attempt to explain this phenomenon to the best of my ability.

Arguments like “It’s not My fault” and “Everyone This Happened to is Dead” are ways to excuse oneself from a moral duty, SI is one of the reasons behind that excuse. There are a multitude of reasons involved in anti-reparations arguments, and not all of them are outright malicious. Some anti-reparations commentators find reparations to be an impossible task; some find the topic as a whole to be divisive and unfruitful, and others are simply uncomfortable with the subject. But there are other reasons, ones whose roots lie not in misunderstanding or concern, but in a desperate need to cling to the racial status quo. This is what SI is about. Without this status quo — without it, many people find themselves lost, unable to establish their self-worth and achievements. As mentioned earlier on in this project, privilege can only exist if there is another group alongside, taking on the disadvantages. This has allowed for one group to have virtually unlimited advantage over another, while concealing the true nature of these advantages. To put it more simply, privileges have been given, but they have also been normalized — what is a matter

of exceptional benefit and good luck has been disguised as natural born skill and intellect. This is not to say that privileged people cannot be exceptional, but we must also acknowledge that they have been given a gift that others do not have access too, and told that this gift is a result of personal uniqueness and rarity, which it is not. This injures both the privileged and the disadvantaged, because it creates groups of people who are unable to see themselves realistically, and it convinces others that disadvantaged groups have somehow *earned* that disadvantage and are not deserving of aid.

A recent example of this injury is the case of Abigail Fisher, a white former student who recently lost her Supreme Court case, in which she and her lawyer argued that affirmative action unfairly discriminated against white students — and caused her to miss out on the college of her dreams. Fisher is perhaps the peak example of the delusion that this privilege can induce. She argued that students of color — specifically, black students — had received spots at the University of Texas's Austin flagship campus, even though they had lower grades than she did. This is not a particularly new or creative argument; many white students create the idea that they have been cheated out of top-college opportunities by students of color because of affirmative action, though this has repeatedly been proven untrue through statistical data. Still, it remains a comfortable argument for the student afraid of their own mediocrity; the only surprising part of Fisher's story is that it made its way to the Supreme Court. Fisher's story in particular made little sense when examined with her grades and the protocols of the school, especially when it was revealed that she would have never been accepted into the school to begin with, regardless of affirmative action programs. The University of Texas, Austin, had a particular program in place when Fisher applied, one that guaranteed that high schoolers who made the top 10% of their

class would automatically be granted admission. Fisher did not meet this requirement, nor did she meet the other base grade requirements.¹⁰ The University of Texas admitted that it did allow applicants with lower scores than Fisher to attend, but of the 47 students allowed in, only one was black, and four were Hispanic. The other 42 were white, meaning that Fisher's complaints had no basis in reality. In short, rather than admit that her grades were insufficient, Fisher did what many fed the lie of exceptionalism do: blame someone else.

Fisher is but one example of the pervasiveness of privileged ideals. What her story in particular brings us is a current one, and one that is deeply intense; after all, she was willing to waste money, and time (she applied to UT Austin in 2009) she could have spent toward her education (the school offered her a transfer if she brought her grades up, but she did not take their offer), risk public humiliation, and put the educations of thousands of other students in danger rather than admit her own shortcomings. Of course, students of color had nothing to do with her rejection. But it was easier to blame them, than to admit that she did not perform well enough. This attitude is a main component of SI — there are many who are comfortable with inequality and the mistreatment of black people, because it affords them a level of personal security. If there is a disadvantaged group, then there is always someone to be better than, and many of these same people are convinced that history has no bearing on these disadvantages and prefer to believe that black individuals simply suffer from a mass character defect. This is, of course, impossible. But it also explains why so many anti-reparations arguments have a distinctly biased, and at times racist, undertone. If people are taught to believe that oppressive or unfair

¹⁰ Molly Reilly, "5 Things to Know About the Woman Whose Case Could End Affirmative Action As We Know It", *The Huffington Post* (December 2015), accessed July 19, 2016 at http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/abigail-fisher-5-things-to-know_us_56719717e4b0dfd4bcc026a4.

circumstances are purely based in the now with no connection to the past, then their view on those who are struggling will be unkind, because it *must* be their fault.

Consider the member of the DeWolf family mentioned earlier on in this project — the man who was deeply shaken by the idea that he might not be solely responsible for his acceptance into an Ivy League school. Of course, it is patently obvious that his family name, wealth and his level of opportunity were all major contributing factors to his acceptance. But when he was confronted with this knowledge, he quickly lapsed into denial, arguing that it was because of him and him alone, and that his acceptance would be guaranteed, regardless of his personal circumstance (for example, had he been born into poverty). He is most likely incorrect about this assessment; after all, a variety of factors are considered in the application process, and it is a touch presumptuous to assume that he could merely ride the strength of his intellect into an Ivy without any other sort of intervention; for example, he argues that part of his mental prowess developed as a young child who read at the age of two. This ignores, however, the level of privilege involved to a) own reading materials and b) have a dedicated teacher at that age. Even that declaration of greatness has several stipulations attached, ones that might not have been possible if he was not from a wealthy, white family. For example, if his parents were part of a rigorous work force, they may not have had the time to indulge their child's desire for knowledge quite so early, and thus he might have grown up feeling quite normal. The basis of his intellect relies not so much on "brain power" and neurons, and more on strategic opportunity.

SI can be very dangerous; as mentioned earlier, it does injury to both the privileged and the disadvantaged. But it does a special disservice to the disadvantaged. As stated earlier on, SI can

invalidate the struggles of disadvantaged groups, making it difficult for requests for help and aid, or even for restitution, to be considered legitimate. There is, however, another level to this disservice — exceptionalism. For this example, I will be talking strictly about disadvantaged black individuals. If the struggles of black people are consistently written off as cultural dysfunction or inability, then cries for aid will be ignored. This also means that very successful or wealthy black people, who are the exception, and not the norm, will be not be considered exceptional; rather, they will be looked at as a sort of racial catch-up. To explain: If black disadvantage is solely the result of cultural shortcomings, then the success of wealthy black people is the result of them avoiding or distancing themselves from those shortcomings and joining the ranks of everyone else who became successful through sheer “hard work and ability” which is of course impossible, but is the rhetoric sold. This makes those who are impoverished seem lazy or unmotivated, or culturally inept, as opposed to disadvantaged persons in need of aid and compensation. This form of denial creates risk for all involved, and damages each party individually.

Part E: It [Reparations] Won't Solve Anything

The last form of denial discussed in this project is a return to the previous style of argumentation, one that is primarily philosophy oriented. Unlike the previous arguments, my discussion of It Won't Solve Anything will directly address past reparations movements for other crimes, such as reparations for Japanese internment. It is important to reference past movements when debunking this form of denial, because it is based in the idea that reparations are useless, when historically, they are not. If past reparations movements have been successful, then why would

reparations specifically given to black people fail to be the same? Unfortunately, the answer to this question is often rooted in some level of racism or stereotypical stigma, as opposed to actual fact. As I work through this issue, I will also attempt to root out and separate the racially coded arguments from the truly legitimate.

There is another facet to the It Won't Solve Anything, or IWSA argument, and that is moral duty. Though I've discussed moral obligations throughout this project, I would like to firmly reiterate that the duty to right one's wrongs is not dependent on what the perpetrator feels the victim might do afterward. To be concerned about what might happen to the victim(s) after they are compensated is acceptable, but withholding compensation because of an assumed ineffectiveness is not. To put it simply, let us consider a smaller level of wrongdoing. Perhaps I stole something of yours, or broke something. I thus have a moral duty to compensate or repay for the loss of that item, and that duty does not cease to exist because I decide that repaying you wouldn't do any good. I am still responsible for that wrongdoing and your compensation, regardless of whether or not *I* feel that it will be helpful. Compensation is not about the perpetrator, it's about the victim. To try and dictate moral repair based on the desires and opinions of the perpetrator is yet another wrong, because you have effectively erased the victim from the conversation, and made their restitution dependent on your wishes.

If we are to discuss the potential success of the black reparations movement, we must also discuss the United States' previous experience with reparations. Historically, the United States has been responsible for many crimes against minority groups, both within the country and outside of it. In all of these cases, some form of restitution or compensation is rightfully owed, at

least to try and repair the damage done. Yet to date, the only other reparations movement (there have been other programs that can be considered acts of repayment, but this is the most deliberate, formal compensation thus far) is the repayment given to Japanese-Americans for their time imprisoned in internment camps. In 1988, President Reagan approved the Civil Liberties Act, an act that made Japanese-American reparations part of federal law.¹¹ Under the act, Japanese-Americans (or their descendants, if they had already passed away) were given a formal apology, and a tax-free monetary compensation of 20,000 dollars. The number of original victims of internment camps — that is, those who were originally detained — comes out to about 120,000 people. The United States paid about 82,000 victims and/or descendants of victims, and later paid a smaller sum of 5,000 to 145 Japanese Latin-Americans who had been deported from their homes and held in internment American camps.¹² Overall, that's over 1.6 billion dollars in reparations, and yet many feel that the same results cannot be repeated for black Americans today. This is not to say that these reparations came easily; the Civil Liberties Act was passed after a decade of advocacy and pressure (and rightfully so) from the Japanese-American community. Still, reparations *were* granted, however grudgingly. We must ask ourselves, then, why reparations for black Americans is treated as an impossibility, when there is a perfectly fine — if not wholly similar — example of a successful reparations movement, and one that is relatively current, at that.

Of course, there will be those that argue that the Japanese-American reparations movement is

¹¹ Bilal Qureshi, "From Wrong to Right: A U.S Apology for Japanese Internment", *NPR Code Switch* (August 2013), accessed July 19, 2016 at <http://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2013/08/09/210138278/japanese-internment-redress>.

¹² National Archives "Japanese Americans: About the Redress Program", *National Archives*, accessed July 19, 2016 at <https://www.archives.gov/research/japanese-americans/redress.html#ora>.

radically different from that of black Americans. To some extent, this is not incorrect; the situations are different, and were handled quite differently by the government. These differences stem from several different places; namely, time, publicity of the act, and intensity of damage. Before I explain, let me be clear: this is not to compare oppressive acts or to display one traumatic act as worse than another; this is to convey the differences (and the similarities) between the circumstances of Japanese-Americans and Black Americans. The first, and perhaps most importance difference is *time*. Internment camps are a relatively recent crime, with an even more recent act of restitution. There are people left alive who can remember the original crime of imprisonment, and there were even more who could during the repayment, which happened around 40 or so years after the original crime. This makes it extremely difficult to deny both a) that a crime took place and b) the effect it had on Japanese-Americans, because there is so much evidence for both. Both events occurred in a time in history where evidence of the crime could be more readily available, and in a time where the behavior itself was not considered *normal*. Of course, the forced imprisonment was made out to be a necessity by society/the government at the time, but has rightfully been decried as an atrocity. Lastly, the extent of the damage was smaller, because the imprisonment took place over a much smaller window of time and with a much smaller group of people. It will always be more difficult to conduct reparations for Black Americans, for two reasons: a) The sample size is much, much larger, and, as I argue earlier on, still increasing, and b) reparations would not be isolated to one incident, but rather a continuing stream of incidents that take root from slavery onward. Another difficulty arises in the form of historical attitudes. Because slavery was so long ago, in a time many modern people feel very disconnected from, they are comfortable with writing off the slave trade as an unfortunate historical atrocity, as opposed to the basis for many other oppressive acts. While fundamentally

incorrect, it is relatively easy to pitch the idea that slavery was merely an acceptable part of normal life in “its day” and that modern people know better, and have no use for examining past history. Thus, any reparations movement on behalf of black Americans will seem bitter, and trite; a century-plus demand for restitution that they have no claim to. Of course, as discussed earlier, this is blatantly incorrect, but allows people to comfortably dismiss their responsibility to repair past crimes. All of these factors mean that it will be intrinsically harder to convince society that Black Americans are entitled to anything, and in what form — but that doesn’t mean that reparations for slavery are no longer just or necessary. While there are many difference between the crimes against both groups, the Civil Liberties Act proves that reparations are not only necessary and just, but *possible*.

Section IV: Conclusion

Throughout this project, I have done my best to illustrate the problem – that is, the problem of reparations – and also to detail the reasons why reparations are disliked, and why they are necessary. I have illustrated the moral demand for reparations, and debunked counterarguments to the best of my ability. There are hundreds of other arguments to respond to, and one could quite reasonably spend a lifetime on the subject of reparations. The intention of this project is not to be all encompassing, but rather to bring the reader to a rather forceful awakening. To continue to list the reasons why reparations are necessary is a separate project, for a different time. The first, and perhaps most important reason, is that it is morally *right*. I have done my best to hammer this point home throughout my project, because all other discourse aside, it is the most

important, most damning argument. At the root, reparations is not merely a racial issue or a historical issue, it is a moral one -- one that demands that people take responsibility for and correct their actions, no matter how long ago, or how little they want to. Regardless of how one personally feels about the subject, there is no denying that a crime was committed – and is still being committed – and that there is a moral demand to compensate the victims for that crime. Thus, I would hope that any reader would leave my project more aware than when they found it, and that they would feel some measure of responsibility to aid in the process of repair.