Can Contemporary America Compensate African Americans for Past Injuries and Present Inequalities?

A Candid History, Analysis of Reparations, and Possible Solution

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**Abstract:** *Racially charged events in 2014, such as the riots in Ferguson, Missouri the murder of two white New York City Police Officers by a black man presumably seeking to avenge the death of Eric Garner, and the thousands of protesters who demanded social justice in cities coast to coast, highlighted America’s persistent struggle for racial equality.* *Although these developments were demonstrative of the multitude of problems stemming from racial inequality, they failed to present municipal police forces, Congress, or the American public with a clear, implementable solution. Identifying means for the United States to address race related issues and thus become a more perfect Union is the objective of this piece. The paper analyzes reparations for African Americans, the history of slavery and segregation as well as the systemic forces behind persistent racial inequality. Part I provides context by presenting a brief yet encompassing account of America’s racial history. The antebellum slave trade, the Civil War and post war period, the effectiveness of the Civil Rights Movement, and the influence of these events on the present are central focuses. Part II assesses traditional reparations proposals and formal apologies for slavery and discrimination. In the conclusion, Part III, the author presents a possible solution to be wielded in America’s persistent fight for racial equality.*

**Introduction:** In February 2013, I left the familiar landscape of my home in eastern Iowa to serve as an AmeriCorps Volunteer. My community development assignment placed me in the storied river city of Vicksburg, Mississippi. Upon arrival, Vicksburg’s connection to the past was evident. Statues honoring Civil War heroes line streets such as Confederate Avenue; cast iron signs denote heritage sites along the Mississippi Blues Trail; and grand antebellum homes with sweeping verandas juxtapose rustic shotgun houses. Along with its romantic nostalgia, Vicksburg bears the scars of a deeply troubled past. It was the location of one of the Civil War’s bloodiest battles. In 1874, a mob of white men disrupted a black Republican meeting and swept through neighborhoods killing approximately 50 blacks in what would be remembered as the Vicksburg Massacre. Older natives can recall the blatant segregation of a not so distant past while other residents occasionally made recommendations of where folks, “not from around here,” should and shouldn’t go.

A year after my work in Vicksburg introduced me to America’s racial history and present tensions, events in 2014 shifted the nation’s attention towards racial inequality and injustice. Riots in Ferguson inspired by the shooting of black man, Michael Brown, by white police officer, Darren Wilson, followed by the murder of two white New York City Police Officers at the hand of a black man presumably seeking to avenge the death of Eric Garner, in addition to the thousands of protesters who gathered in cities nationwide to call for social justice, demonstrated the deep seated racial divides of the American public.

As the struggle for racial equality unfolded on the nightly news, I thought back to Vicksburg and how in such a place one can easily observe the connection between America’s present condition and its’ past. Because of this experience, I understood that the actions of Michael Brown and Eric Wilson did not take place in a vacuum but rather that they occurred under circumstances created by centuries of social, economic, and political influences. It stuck me then, as it continues to do now, that the absence of this historical perspective from today’s civil discourse is a tragic omission. Moreover, the status of current and future race relations are at stake and will continue to be stifled if Americans continue to function without an accurate understanding of their collective history. With this paper, I hope that by complimenting my firsthand experience with pre-existing scholarship and original analysis, the relationship between past and present racial injustice will become clear and that, going forward, my readers will have a better understanding of how to address race related issues in their personal as well as public lives.

**Part I**

*History:* The great black novelist Ralph Ellison once shared that he was motivated by what he called: “an old slave-born myth.”

The myth, secret and questioning, of the flawed white Southerner who while true to his Southern roots has confronted the injustices of the past and been redeemed. Such a man, the myth holds, will do the right thing however great the cost...and will move with tragic vulnerability toward the broader ideals of American democracy. The figure evoked by this myth is one who will grapple with complex situations that have evolved through history, and is a man who has so identified with his task that personal considerations have become secondary” (Joyner 37).

Like the mythical white Southern, in order for contemporary America to address present injustice, it too must confront the racial inequities of the past. Achieving an authentic understanding of American history is the first step towards reaching this goal.

“Slavery's contradictions and spiritual stresses were inescapable in antebellum America,” Charles Joyner claimed in his article, “From Civil War to Civil Rights” (29). Familiar with the zeitgeist of this period and the war that it inspired, Joyner wrote:

To understand the Civil War at all is to feel its great tragedy. Today the word tragedy is often used loosely. I mean more than that the Civil War was sad.’ I intend the word at its deepest Aristotelian significance: the purgation by pity and terror of the most profound questions of human fate. The tragedy began not with the war itself, but with America's embrace of human slavery. Slavery was a deliberate choice of men who sought to reap what they did not themselves sow, men who sought greater returns than they could earn by the sweat of their own brows. Slavery—placing a property or monetary value on our fellow human beings—was the South' s tragic flaw. Those who chose to adopt and to preserve slavery could no more escape responsibility for their choice than they could escape its consequences (29).

Ellison’s wisdom combined with Joyner’s insight captures the connection between slavery, the Civil War, and persistent racial inequality.

It is important to recognize the extensive horrors of slavery in America. Describing the position of slaves within ninetieth century American society, Fredrick Douglas, author of, *Narrative of the Life of Fredrick Douglas, an American Slave*, wrote, “We were all ranked together at the valuation. Men and women, old and young, married and single, were ranked with horses, sheep, and swine. There were horses and men, cattle and women, pigs and children, all holding the same rank in the scale of being,” (27). Reflecting on his suffering,Douglas claimed: “I have found that, to make a contented slave, it is necessary to make a thoughtless one. It is necessary to darken his moral and mental vision, and, as far as possible, to annihilate the power of reason. He must be able to detect no inconsistencies in slavery; he must be made to feel that slavery is right; and he can be brought to that only when he ceases to be a man” (35).

Dramatized in the 2014 Oscar winning film, *12 Years a Slave,* author of the memoir on which the film was based, Solomon Northup, provides a first person account of the tactics employed by slave owners to darken the moral and mental vision of a man.

It was rarely that a day passed by without one or more whippings. This occurred at the time the cotton was weighed. The delinquent, whose weight had fallen short, was taken out, stripped, made to lie upon the ground, face downwards, when he received a punishment proportioned to his offence. It is the literal, unvarnished truth, that the crack of the lash, and the shrieking of the slaves, can be heard from dark till bed time, on Epps' plantation, any day almost during the entire period of the cotton-picking season. The number of lashes is graduated according to the nature of the case. Twenty-five are deemed a mere brush, inflicted, for instance, when a dry leaf or piece of boll is found in the cotton, or when a branch is broken in the field; fifty is the ordinary penalty following all delinquencies of the next higher grade; one hundred is called severe: it is the punishment inflicted for the serious offence of standing idle in the field; from one hundred and fifty to two hundred is bestowed upon him who quarrels with his cabin-mates, and five hundred, well laid on, besides the mangling of the dogs, perhaps, is certain to consign the poor, unpitied runaway to weeks of pain and agony (Northup 179-180).

It is clear the classification of blacks as property in addition to the treatment that stemmed from this categorization makes the African American experience unique among the various marginalized populations that have existed throughout the country’s history. Although other minority groups, such as: Irish, Italian, Chinese, and American Indian, have experienced oppression and hardship, African Americans are alone in the fact that they were denied basic human rights, subjugated, and forced to live and work as slaves. Douglas described this hopeless form of economic destitution.

I was now getting, as I have said, one dollar and fifty cents per day. I contracted for it; I earned it; it was paid to me; it was rightfully my own; yet, upon each returning Saturday night, I was compelled to deliver every cent of that money to Master Hugh. And why? Not because he earned it,--not because he had any hand in earning it,--not because I owed it to him,--nor because he possessed the slightest shadow of a right to it; but solely because he had the power to compel me to give it up (Douglas 59).

The passage of the Emancipation Proclamation was a turning point in American History. Not since it enactment has one American been empowered by the U.S. Constitution to compel another to give up what they rightfully earned. The unique disparities of the conditions prior this landmark piece of legislation make the suffering of the African American community a singular and valid case for redress.

The consequences of slavery reverberated in America long after the Civil War and continued to foster racial inequities nationwide. In their article, “Local Public Goods and Jim Crow,” authors Dennis Halcoussis and Anton D. Lowenberg assessed the connection between local public goods and racial prejudice. Their conception of local public goods can be qualified as access to housing, jobs, education, land, tax revenues, market goods and services or understood as access to any asset that contributes to the quality of life within a community: parks, entertainment, or other venues for leisure and enrichment. Trouble stems from the fact that local public goods are, by nature, limited or specific to a certain time and place. To demonstrate, consider how a municipal band concert can only be enjoyed at one time and in front of one stage, a city block of 20 well-crafted homes can only be occupied by 20 family units, or the tax dollars invested in one public high school cannot then be invested in a different public high school on the other side of town. Halcoussis and Lowenburg’s piece presented the unfortunate relationship between the scarcity of local public goods and racial prejudice. There is “ample evidence from the history of US race relations that racial discrimination and segregation are often driven by the concern of white communities to avoid spatial congestion” (Halcoussis 607). To clarify, “spatial congestion” occurs when the number of citizens competing for the public goods within their community is disproportionate. Conflict and prejudices flare under these circumstances. The Halcoussis and Lowenburg study found “a strong positive relation between urban population or density and segregation in US cities from 1890 to 1990. Confirming that, at least during part of this period, segregation was caused by collective action undertaken by whites to exclude blacks from white neighborhoods” (607). This report describes how the competition for urban space in northern US cities resulted in emergence of black ghettos (607).

While northern cities experienced black ghettoization, Jim Crow laws emerged throughout the South. Halcoussis and Lowenburg explain:

Although racism was certainly prevalent during the Jim Crow era, the foregoing discussion suggests that labor market discrimination or social segregation need not have been motivated by bigotry per se. Instead, we can view such discriminatory public policy or behavior as reflecting individual utility maximization by a majority of established community residents. Race is simply one of many mechanisms that might be employed to regulate entry into a community. The motive for such regulation is to maximize the utility of community members, both in terms of their factor market earnings and in terms of their average net benefit obtained from consumption of public amenities. Racist policy or practices, among other things, can then be treated as endogenous, not as unexplained psychological propensities (609).

Despite revealing some of less odious motivations behind Jim Crows, the laws had a tragic effect on the perception and standing of African Americans. Through social segregation and economic exclusion, Jim Crow superseded the Emancipation Proclamation by promoting the exclusion of African Americans from mainstream American society. The de facto segregation phenomenon made a critical contribution in carrying pre-Civil War racial prejudices into twentieth-century and present day America.

*Enduring Injustice and its Consequences*: Through a quantitative assessment and comparative analysis, Douglas S. Massey presented another effect of America’s history of prejudices and present day inequality in his article, “American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass." He argued that “racial segregation is crucial to explaining the emergence of the urban underclass during the 1970s,” along with an “interaction between rising rates of poverty and high levels of residential segregation” (329). Recognizing the economic influence on the lived experience of white and black Americans, Massey created “simulations that replicated the economic conditions observed among blacks and whites in metropolitan areas during the 1970s” (329). Qualified as City 1) No Racial Segregation, City 2) Low Racial Segregation, City 3) High Racial Segregation, and City 4) Complete Racial Segregation; Massey’s study showed a positive correlation between the degree of segregation and that society’s poverty levels. Members of the hypothetical cities with low to no segregation were wealthier than their counterparts in the cities with high to complete segregation (335). This suggests that there are economic benefits for blacks and whites at every socioeconomic level to strive for greater racial equality.

Author, Jeff Spinner-Halev, grappled with some of the challenges associated with racial inequality in his piece, “From Historical to Enduring Injustice.” “The reason why the examples of’ African Americans are so powerful,” he wrote, “is not only that they have suffered from injustice in the past, but also that these historical injustices continue on the present. Together, they constitute what I call enduring injustice. Enduring injustice has a historical and a contemporary component” (Spinner-Halev 578). Spinner-Halev’s enduring injustice concept encapsulates the totality of the racial inequality issue because it accounts for slavery, the Civil War, post war segregation/oppression, and the effects of all four on the present while asserting that the injustice which endures should be addressed.

Daniel Butt presented a nuance in the relationship between past and present injustice by replacing the conventional “successive generations” societal concept with an “over-lapping generations” societal concept (357). Like Spinner-Halev, Butt observed the interconnection between past and present injustices; however, he saw this relationship as more fluid. Consequently, he put forth a “new way of thinking about the relationship of those living in the present.’ this is done by drawing upon an idea taken from economic theory. The idea in question is that when one thinks of the existence of communities over time, a model of over-lapping generations is more realistic than a model of successive generations” (358). By re-contextualizing these circumstances, Butt invoked the need for rectification; “it may well be that those living in the present day are not only connected to past wrongdoing in such a way that it gives rise to restitutive and/or compensatory obligations” (358). Pressing to acknowledge further implications, Butt claimed: “It may be that they are implicated in wrong doing, in that they are themselves guilty of injustice to present generations” (358).

Supporting evidence for Butt’s claim that enduring injustice is both the direct influence of a past injustice on the present as well as the injustices committed in the present by the society’s members whose actions are under the influence of unjust, preexisting circumstances was revealed by psychologists, Kenneth Bancroft Clark and his wife, Mamie Phipps Clark. Studying the psychological effects of segregation on black children in the 1940s, the couple designed and executed “the doll test.” The Clarks used four plastic, diaper-clad dolls, identical except in color. They showed the dolls to black children between the ages of three and seven and asked them questions to determine racial perception and preference. Almost all of the children readily identified the race of the dolls. However, when asked which they preferred, the majority selected the white doll and attributed positive characteristics to it. The Clarks also gave the children outline drawings of a boy and girl and asked them to color the figures the same color as themselves. Many of the children with dark complexions colored the figures with a white or yellow crayon. The Clarks concluded that “prejudice, discrimination, and segregation” caused black children to develop a sense of inferiority and self-hatred. This conclusion was presented by the Legal Defense Fund, the legal offspring of the NAACP, as part of their arguments in the landmark case, Brown v. Board of Education. The Majority verdict, siding with Brown, ruled in its conclusion: The object of the [Fourteenth] amendment was undoubtedly to enforce the equality of the two races before the law, but in the nature of things it could not have been intended to abolish distinctions based upon color, or to endorse social, as distinguished from political, equality. . . If one race be inferior to the other socially, the Constitution of the United States cannot put them upon the same plane. The perennial consequences of enduring injustice—highlighted by the doll test—undoubtedly influenced the justices understanding of “the nature of things” and their ruling.

Like the Supreme Court, wider America must function in accordance with the nature of things. This demands that the contemporary body politic must first acknowledge its position within the context of overlapping generations then grapple with the implications presented by the interconnection between the nations’ responsibility to rectify the wrongs of enduring injustice (358). Black America’s journey from slavery to full U.S. citizenship and equality under the law calumniated with the passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964 and the 1965 Voting Rights Act. Today, achieving de facto racial equality requires a method that addresses enduring injustice via rectification. Part III, the possible solution portion of this paper, will present such a measure.

**Part II**

*Reparations:* The U.S. government and the American body politic have previously assessed, asserted, and implemented various methods to redress the enduring injustice of racial inequality. Predominate examples include: public apologies, affirmative action, and traditional reparations proposals. Part II assesses the status of these measures.

*Apology:* State sanctioned apologies in the present for the past wrongs of the state are problematic. In 2012 Alabama passed a resolution titled, the "Moore-Sanders Apology for Slavery Act.’ The resolution encouraged the remembrance and teaching about slavery and Jim Crow as well as other injustices in order to remember the past” (Davis 38). Unfortunately, substantive changes to the state's curriculum were never made. Moreover, the lengthy title of this resolution, "Apologizing for the Wrongs of Slavery; Expressing Profound Regret for Alabama's Role in Slavery; and Expressing Intent that this Resolution Shall not be used in, or be the basis of, any type of Litigation,’ unequivocally expresses the intent of the legislature to preempt the use of the resolution as the basis of any reparations claims” (38).

Author, Angelique Davis, elaborated on the troubling implications of such legislation in her article, “Racial Reconciliation or Retreat? How Legislative Resolutions Apologizing for Slavery Promulgate White Supremacy.” “Although the apologies under discussion appear to promote racial healing and reconciliation they actually promulgate white supremacy by covertly thwarting reparations claims or other racial justice efforts for blacks while simultaneously providing the illusion of substantive racial progress” (42). The progress through sentiment alone is not progress. Even in a state where an apology resolution is passed racial, disparities will persist if not complimented by addition mitigation. The wealth gap between blacks and whites will be unaffected, inequity in the criminal justice system remain, what legal scholar Michelle Alexander calls, a "human rights nightmare,” and as Pan American Health Organization study found, the 5.3 year shorter life expectancy of black men compared to white men will continue (43). What does change after the passage of an apology resolution, however, is the state’s ability to shrug responsibility for the situation. Therefore, apologies that eliminate instead of inviting additional reparations can be regarded as a present injustice instead of a remedy for a past one.

A legal distinction must be made between apologies and expressions of sympathy or regret. “Apologies entail blameworthy wrongdoing, and because blameworthy wrong doing entails control over the occurrence of the wrong, apology entails control over the occurrence of the wrong. The third party uses the same expression of sorrow in an attempt to console the victim, not to take responsibility, express remorse, or seek forgiveness” (Schedler 126). Consequently, a state or Federal Government sanctioned apology for slavery would imply that the apology granting institution had control and that they are therefore guilty. The presence of guilt implies the existence of a perpetrator-victim relationship, in which case, it is within the rights of the victim to seek *reparations* from the perpetrator.[[1]](#footnote-1)

 Nicholas Tavuchis draws different distinctions in his book, *Mea Culpa: A Sociology of Apology and Reconciliation.* “Apologies arise in circumstances similar to those that elicit excuses and justification,” actions which “seek to restore order, a social relationships, and identity by accounting for an offense” (521). Speaking with Terry Gross, on NPR’s: Fresh Air, Edward Ball exemplified the virtue of Tavuchis’s definition of apology.

Gross: In the course of the research for this book [*Slaves in the Family*], you connected with several African Americans who were the descendants of slaves that had been owned by your family. Did you apologize? Did you ask for forgiveness? Do you feel forgiveness of something like that could be granted?

Ball: I have apologized to two different families that I’ve spent time with. Not to all of the families, because I think an apology is an important gesture.’ Part of the legacy of slavery is that whites, not just the descendants of slaveowners, but all whites, are members of a caste that has greater privilege than black Americans, who are a part of a different caste.’ And by reaching out to individual families, I’ve tried to lessen that separation somewhat. I also think that an apology is not something that I, or that white Americans or even the government, can give to black Americans or to black individuals. That’s really the wrong way around. Although, it has made a difference in the lives of the people to whom I’ve apologized. It’s also true that an apology does more for white people than it does for black, because it allows us the opportunity to acknowledge that our history has been at least marked by the legacy of slavery as the lives of black people have been marked by it (Weyeneth 9-10).

If “structured, intergenerational communities—groups capable of making and keeping trans-generational commitments—are obliged to repair historical injustices,” then Tavuchis’ understanding of apology, as a non-state action to restore a relation conducted on an interpersonal level, is an effective redress (Thompson 1122). The caveats Davis highlights regarding state resolutions combined with recognition of Ball’s tactful implementation of Tavuchis’ style suggests the value of interpersonal apologies.

*Affirmative Action*: Affirmative action was the legislative manifestation of a significant shift that “occurred in the theory of disadvantage” during the 1960’s (Graham 57). Hugh Davis Graham described this change in his article, “The Origins of Affirmative Action: Civil Rights and the Regulatory State.” “The Kennedy-Johnson war on poverty emphasized the stunting effects of deprivation: the ‘culture of poverty’ trapped its victims in a chain of disadvantage. And antipoverty planners therefore concentrated on compensatory programs,” affirmative action being the most notable (57). Unfortunately, despite its progressive intentions, affirmative action’s usage of public goods, notably: tax dollars and non-competitive education/employment opportunities, as compensation for past discrimination, inflamed racial prejudices in the present. The result was a polarization of American society into two blocs, the supporters of a) equal individual opportunity and b) equal group results, both which positioned to legitimately claim “moral grievances and social injustice” (62). Put simply, using a local public good to compensate a victim or victim group for a past injustice commits an injustice in the present by infringing on the access of a contemporary individual or group. As a result, hostility between the benefactor and denied populations escalates and, in some cases, a cycle of injustice, reparation, injustice, reparation is initiated.

 Reparations proposals have evolved over time. Seminal conceptions of reparations for slavery can be traced back to 1854 when a “black emigrationist convention called for ‘national indemnity’ as a ‘redress for [their] grievances for the unparalleled wrongs, undisguised impositions, and unmitigated oppression” (Allen 2). Today, over a century and a half later, the role of the American state in the underdevelopmentof the African American community presents a legitimate case for reparations while the lessons learned from affirmative action’s missteps indicate addressing enduring injustice must be done without the use of public goods (7).

*Non-Traditional Reparations:* Thomas McCarthy advances this idea in his piece, “Coming to Terms with Our Past, Part II: On the Morality and Politics of Reparations for Slavery.” Transitioning the debate over reparations for slavery from a black nationalist focus to an increasingly broad-based movement for social justice is essential. “The collective compensation approach I want to defend appeals to a different type of forward-looking argument for reparations,” continuing, McCarthy wrote, “the type of ‘calculation’ involved in this approach is not a putatively objective search for monetary equivalents but a democratic deliberation upon the requirements of equal justice” (755-756). In “targeting corporate agents; that is, legally constituted bodies that persist over time,” the collective responsibility approach focuses on the individual as the central agent in the “moral-political case for reparations” (756). Put simply, McCarthy appeals to *individual civic responsibility* as a means to affect *collective civic responsibility* for an enduring injustices—a prime example of a non-public good reparation.

 In addition to overcoming the public good hurdle that hindered affirmative action, the collective compensation approach avoids the legal implications of traditional reparations. “Proponents of reparations often focus monomaniacally on the historical injustices inflicted upon victim groups, while minimizing the serious problems of policy design that reparations pose;” i.e. traditional reparations claims place an inappropriate degree of guilt on the present American body politic for the actions of a pervious (Posner 690). Authors, Eric A. Posner and Adrian Vermeule, did not deny or invalidate the enduring injustice concept, rather their article, “Reparations for Slavery and Other Historical Injustices,” published in the *Columbia Law Review*, argued that reparations aimed to address enduring injustice must pass legal muster. Posner and Vermeule highlight the ambiguity of *group membership*, white Americans do not all belong to a coherent group just as black Americans do not, thus the perpetrator-victim categorization, a relationship on which traditional reparations claims depend, is invalid (706).

These legal caveats and the “problems with identifying beneficiaries confine reparations’ to the level of discourse,” but allow “within the discourse, the broader topic of *rectification*” to be addressed. Collective compensation being the overarching end of all reparations, “Reparations and the Rectification of Race,” by Naomi Zack, presented racial rectification as a viable means. According to Zack, rectification is comprised of three elements. First, “race is irreparable and racism cannot be addressed without an elimination of false taxonomy” (Zack 150). False taxonomy contends that racism, being the result of situational prejudices and finite public goods, cannot be addressed by focusing on biological race alone. Second, “an understanding that racial distinctions are not biologically based (false taxonomy) would emphasis the need for special consideration of the disadvantaged plight of African Americans” (150). And third, cognitive dimensions of racism would lose all credibility in light of this broader understanding. Consequently, the rectification of race could be the best method for “restoring humanity to our ideas of slaves, their living descendants, and their future descendants” (150-151).

In May of 2014, *The Atlantic* published, “The Case for Reparations,” by Ta-Nehisi Coates. The article’s subtitle encapsulated the *enduring injustice* concept: “two hundred fifty years of slavery, ninety years of Jim Crow. Sixty years of separate but equal. Thirty-five years of racist housing policy. Until we reckon with our compounding moral debts, America will never be whole.” Affirmative action was not the answer and traditional reparations proposals have negligible legal, political, and social standing. *Racial Rectification* through conscientious, interracial, interpersonal interactions would heighten *collective responsibility* for past injuries and persistent injustice and may be the *reparation* that makes America whole.

**Part III**

*Possible Solution:* Like Ellison’s “mythical white southerner,” who was willing to “do the right thing however great the cost...and will move with tragic vulnerability toward the broader ideals of American democracy’ and grapple with complex situations that have evolved through history,” achieving collective responsibility for racial inequity through racial rectification requires national understanding of America’s prejudiced history (Joyner 37). Part I of this paper initiated this process by presenting a brief yet encompassing history of slavery and the Civil Rights Movement. This narrative contrasts the widely upheld version of America’s racial history which scholars of American history, African American Studies, and social movements call the Long Movement Narrative. To summarize, the Long Movement Narrative’s linear conception of America’s racial history presents a reductionist series of events in which blacks were freed from slavery thanks to the North’s defeat of the Confederacy in the Civil War, blacks then struggled under adverse social conditions for a century or so but eventually, thanks to MLK Jr. and the civil rights movement, achieved equality in the mid-1960s.

Timothy J. Minchin explored the implications of this false reality. His article, “Beyond the Dominate Narrative: The Ongoing Struggle for Civil Rights in the U.S. South, 1968-1980,” stated that “studies of the civil rights movement have been heavily influenced by a dominate narrative that concentrates on the successful protest of the 1954-1968 era” while neglecting “to examine the important period after Martin Luther King’s death in 1968” (Minchin 65). This, in fact, is crucial “if we are to gain a full understanding of the movement” (65). The article goes on to describe the numerous civil rights demonstrations and protests that occurred in to the 1970s. The recent unrest in Ferguson and other cities in 2014 can be viewed as supplemental to Minchin’s point. In theory and in everyday life, America’s racial narrative continues to develop. The reality of these issues, however inconvenient, is reconcilable with the account presented by the Long Movement Narrative.

Overcoming the Long Movement Narrative and its “tendency toward expanding periodization schemas, erasing conceptual differences, and eliminating regional distinctions,” should be the paramount objective of any reparation (Cha-Jua 284). Authors, Sundiata Keita Cha-Jua and Clarence Lang, describe the injustice of the alternative in their piece, “The ‘Long Movement’ as Vampire: Temporal and Spatial Fallacies in Recent Black Freedom Studies.” They write, “if the social landscape of oppression and resistance is undifferentiated, historians oriented toward movement politics inadvertently absolve themselves of the necessity of critically assessing the unique political, social, and ideological climate of their own time, and the limits and possibilities it poses” (284).

Redefining the current social landscape of oppression and resistance demands that the Long Movement Narrative be supplanted and its influence rebutted. The desire to do so presents an opportunity for a novel form of reparation. Unlike traditional reparation measures that failed to solve the enduring justice problem, my proposed *Rectification through Collective Responsibility Reparation* *(RCRR)*, upholds the same promise while avoiding the social, economic, and political pitfalls of previous, traditional approaches. I will now articulate the dimensions of RCRR and highlight its’ potential benefits.

*RCRR:* Undermining the Long Movement Narrative requires that Americans progress from racial blindness to racial awareness. The popular, racially blind, mindset can be understood through the language of John Rawls in his essay, “Theory of Justice.” With good intentions, Rawl presented the idea: “that we had to start with ideal theory [veil of ignorance: an original condition in which every member of society is granted equal status] because it was necessary for’ remedying injustice” (Yancy 6). Unfortunately, “what was originally supposed to have been merely a tool has become an end in itself; the presumed antechamber to the real hall of debate is now its main site” (6). In other words, operating behind a “veil of ignorance,” being color blind so to speak, provides a vacuum for wider society to think, discuss, and address the issue of injustice without taking race into consideration. To claim that one is “color blind,” though seemingly equitably, neglects preexisting inequities as well as the influence these inequities have on the present.

 As Americans contemplate the events in Ferguson or the killing of the two New York City police officers, either accurately or inaccurately, the connection between race and injustice is being made. Howard McGary called attention to a common misconception in the public discourse around race; “acknowledging black victimization is often described in pejorative terms as ‘playing the race card,’ or as a ‘victim’s mentality.’ And playing the race card is a practice that is taken to be at odds with the U.S. ideal of judging persons by their deed rather than their racial identifies” (McGary 100-101). This, so called “U.S. ideal,” has a clear connection to Rawl’s “blindness” and the Long Movement Narrative tendency to stifle deeper introspection into the country’s race related issues.

The conception of Martin Luther King Jr. held by most Americans has been limited by the Long Movement Narrative and skewed to serve the color blind ideal. There is more to King’s Dream than the phrase: “I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.” Earlier in the “I Have a Dream” speech, King called for an end to the disproportionate degree of poverty experienced by black Americans in comparison to white Americans. “One hundred years [after the Emancipation Proclamation],” King said, “the Negro lives on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity. One hundred years later, the Negro is still languished in the corners of American society and finds himself an exile in his own land.” Pressing further, King proclaimed from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial to the crowd assembled for the March on Washington:

We've come here today to dramatize a shameful condition. In a sense we've come to our nation's capital to cash a check. When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the [Declaration of Independence](http://americanrhetoric.com/speeches/declarationofindependence.htm), they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir. This note was a promise that all men, yes, black men as well as white men, would be guaranteed the "unalienable Rights" of "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." It is obvious today that America has defaulted on this promissory note, insofar as her citizens of color are concerned. Instead of honoring this sacred obligation, America has given the Negro people a bad check, a check which has come back marked "insufficient funds." But we refuse to believe that the bank of justice is bankrupt. We refuse to believe that there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity of this nation. And so, we've come to cash this check, a check that will give us upon demand the riches of freedom and the security of justice.

As both a non-public good and serious affront to the Long Movement Narrative, recognizing race’s connection to enduring injustice is a dividend that the American bank of justice could readily payout.

 RCRR’s strongest attribute is its’ independence from public goods. As evidenced by the relationship between public goods and Jim Crow, legal/policy stipulations, and blowback of affirmative action, RCRR is a step forward that will not result in two steps back. Notwithstanding, by cultivating an accurate collective memory, RCRR could have a chilling effect on the mistrust held by victims of enduring injustice. Mistrust defined as the “result of repeated mistreatment over time of members of the same social group,” indicates a) persistent mistrust amongst the African American community towards wider American society is understandable and b) continued national subscription to the Long Movement Narrative can be considered a “mistreatment” and thus a contributor to “mistrust” (Spinner-Halev 585). Going forward, RCRR hopes to positively affect interracial trust by encouraging individuals to “play the race card” and “see color” as they confront race, inequality, and injustice alongside fellow community members.

 An appropriate understanding RCRR requires one to have a firm grasp of what it is not. RCRR is a reparation for the injustices of slavery, segregation, and oppression experienced by African Americans overtime. Theoretical yet designed to be readily applicable to American society in its present state; RCRR was conceived under the obligations, reputation, and limitations of the reparation idea. Reparation defined as “compensation intended to remedy an undesirable situation,” RCRR is a rudimentary mitigation that seeks to compensate, to the best degree possible, present and future African Americans for the undesirable nature of past and present circumstances. RCRR should not be viewed as a direct or panacea type solution for economic, educational, or other disparities linked to racial injustice. That said, the Massey piece, which found a positive correlation between desegregation and prosperity for all members within a community, suggests that RCRR could improve the status of these externalities by increasing racial awareness and subsequent integration (335).

*RCRR in Action:* Venerating sites, locations, and space significant in America’s racial history is central to RCRR.Increasing awareness of significant people and places will contribute to the cultivation of a more accurate collective memory. The South does a particularly good job of this already. Museums, road markers, and Blues music tell the story of slavery, poverty, lynching, economic hardship, and tensions between whites and blacks. In this regard, the South may be seen as a progressive example to be emulated by non-southern states. Acknowledging white flight, redlining, and acts of police brutality in Chicago, Detroit, Los Angles, and New York City could loosen the Long Movement Narrative’s nationwide hold.

What the RCRR proposes to do nationally has already been achieved on a micro-level at various colleges and universities. Prime examples include the University of Mississippi and Brown University. The William Winter Institute for Racial Reconciliation at the University of Mississippi, “grounded in the university’s history,’ aims to promote a process of restorative justice through ‘the creation of truthful dialogue that encourages action to redress historical inequity’ and to enhance awareness of the history of injustice, particularly in the American South. This emphasizes public awareness of the ‘responsibilities and culpability of both perpetrators of historical wrongs and those who continue to benefit from the cyclical nature of oppression” (Clarke 82).

Similarly, Brown University created the University Steering Committee on Slavery and Justice. Charged “not to achieve a consensus, but to provide factual information and critical perspectives that will deepen our understanding of the sociocultural milieu in which Brown University was founded and the Brown family lived,” the committee thrived (90). Diverse in membership, the committee carries out the belief “that powerful debate is one of the hallmarks of intellectual engagement and that universities do well when they encourage examination that rests on factual rather than emotional basis” (90). The RCRR contends that the same could be said for America as a whole.

Transitioning away from color blindness to color awareness is crucial to RCRR’s success. The U.S. government, academic institutions, and market place are not inherently prejudiced. They are human constructs maintained and executed by the participation of individuals. Consequently, organizational/institutional prejudice can be reduced by addressing the prejudices held by individuals within the organization or institution in question. Cultivating racial consciousness throughout the American body politic would thus have a profound and unprecedented effect. In her book, *The Emperor Has No Clothes: Teaching About Race and Racism to People Who Don’t Want to Know*, Tema Okun articulates how prejudice can be diminished through proper education. Her method and its positive effect are highlighted by her “Columbus curriculum,” a lesson plan she administers to first and second graders (125). The assignment begins by asking a class what they know about Columbus. Typically, “all the students can do s identify the date 1492 and recite the mythological ‘discovery’ story” (Okun 125). She then proceeds to show two films 1) a cartoon that tells the basic, stereotyped version of Columbus’ voyage to the New World and 2) a complete historical documentary, including the facts that Columbus never landed in modern day U.S., that he led a genocidal campaign against indigenous people, and that he initiated the slave trade. “The assignment turns out to be rich in multiple ways,” Okun wrote, “it stimulates discussion and thought about how soon children can begin to engage in critical thinking” while suggesting that even young children are capable of dealing with challenges and complex experiences related to racism, abuse, violence, and poverty (125).

Okun’s Columbus assignment indicates the benefits of exposing youth to an unedited version history and race relations. Imagine presenting first and second graders with a more accurate account of U.S. past prejudices and their influence on the present. It would, similar to the Columbus assignment, prevent the disingenuous Long Movement Narrative from taking hold and, expectedly, be more in line with the day to day lived experiences of the students. Moreover, equipping young Americans with enhanced racial awareness would enable them to navigate present and future personal, professional, and public biracial relationships with greater tact and fairness.

It is easy for a piece of undergraduate, political science scholarship to present the need for public action or demand the disruption of the status quo. After all, the stakes, like the readership, are low and the approach is in keeping with disciplinary norms. On the other hand, if a paper presents what could be an appropriate solution for a pressing real world problem then is it not the civic duty of the individual, be they a plumber or a Congressman, to heed the new information and act? It is. At least, Howard Schultz and I think so. Schultz is the sitting CEO of Starbucks Coffee, an international company with almost 200,000 employees, some 21,000 stores, and over 15 billion in annual sales. Clearly Starbucks has a vested interest in avoiding revolution and social upheaval. For this reason, Starbucks’ response to racial unrest in 2014 is significant.

TheFebruary 16, 2015 issue of *TIME* ran with the cover story, “Starbucks for America.” With Schultz at its center, the article’s first line read: “62-year-old Starbucks CEO doesn’t mind tears or hugs or displays of emotion of any kind,” an attribute he utilized as he stood “front and center on an icy January afternoon in New York City,’ leading a forum on race” (Allen 20). Shocked by recent police shootings and unrest in Ferguson, New York City and Oakland, Calif., Schultz decided to hold open meetings in five cities where Starbucks employees from top managers to entry-level baristas could speak frankly about their experiences with racism. Addressing the crowd, Schultz said: “People have told me we shouldn’t touch this issue, that we might stir things up, upset the shareholders. I don’t agree with that. Conversations are being ignored because people are afraid to touch the issue. But if I ignore this and just keep ringing the register, then I become part of the problem. So here we are. Let’s talk” (20). America, Howard’s right, instead of suppressing the struggles of 2014, its time to recognize race related questions, opinions and anxieties. The well-being of communities demands that these topics be included in civil discourse.

*Conclusion:* Dear Reader, recall your initial reaction to the situation that unfolded in Ferguson last August. What did the streets in this little Missouri town look like in your mind’s eye? Did you imagine the scene of the crime? What were your assumptions about the two men involved? One man clad in a neatly pressed, dark blue uniform with a shiny gold badge the other sporting faded jeans and hooded sweatshirt. These two individuals had never met before but their paths crossed and their names are now forever tied. As you reflect over these thoughts, consider what they might suggest about you, your past, and our time.

RCRR is motivated by the ideal of a racially equal, harmonious, and just America but recognizes the limitations of the nation’s social, economic, and political realities. By supplanting the Long Movement Narrative with a racially aware a collective conscious, RCRR’s implementation could decrease racial prejudice within the American body politic. RCRR hopes to affect the normative assumptions that events such as Ferguson elicits. To put it another way, RCRR aspires to elevate the American psyche to a point where a reduced account of a biracial interaction between a police officer a citizen does not evoke immediate preconceptions of criminality, inferiority, dominance or racial prejudices.

RCRR resembles the approaches taken by the University of Mississippi, Brown University, and Starbucks. First is a commitment to active consideration through overt acknowledgement of the enduring injustice and its effects. This can be done by city, state, and the federal government by identifying locations and people of significance in public via markers or other modes of recognition. Second, involves encouraging analysis, debate, and the process of apology and reconciliation, similar to the type of ongoing dialogue that universities, coffee shops, and democracies are designed to facilitate. Libraries, festivals, public forums, churches, and local watering holes are all appropriate venues for such dialogue to occur. And third, widespread awareness of an ideal America, that is, a racially, just, harmonious, and unbiased society, for which to strive for.

If the American body politic constituted of human resource managers, school teachers, neighbors, police officers, waitresses, taxi drivers, nurses, delivery men, landlords, receptionists, doctors, electricians, department store clerks, and so on, could keep racial equality in mind as they carried out the daily business of life then that would be the grandest affront to enduring injustice and thus the most influential form of reparation. Elements one and two are attempts to achieve the third and final element of RCRR, that when practiced would initiate a progressively reinforcing cycle of racial rectification. In conclusion, my Rectification of Race through Collective Responsibility Reparation is a novel approach that may increase racial equality by promoting awareness of America’s prejudiced past and enduring injustice’s persistent influence on African Americans and their right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

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1. The implications of perpetrator-victim/reparations relationship is discussed further in the *Non-Traditional* *Reparations* section of Part II.  [↑](#footnote-ref-1)