



Juneteenth, reparations, and the unmet promise of '40 acres and a mule'

Fabiola Cineas

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Born into slavery, Henrietta Wood was legally freed in 1848 in Ohio when she was about 30. She only basked in that freedom for five years.

In 1853, a white sheriff empowered by the Fugitive Slave Act abducted Wood and sold her back into bondage, taking her on a journey from Kentucky to Mississippi and finally to Texas, where she'd toil on a plantation through the Civil War. Though President Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, Wood did not regain her freedom until 1866, months after Union soldiers traveled to Texas on June 19, 1865 — Juneteenth — to enforce emancipation.

Wood — whose pathbreaking story was only recently surfaced — returned to Ohio and sued her abductor for \$20,000 (worth more than \$440,000 today). In the lawsuit, she claimed that because she had been abducted, sold back into slavery, and lost wages (about \$500 per year), she was entitled to payment.

After eight years of meandering litigation, 12 white jurors in a federal courtroom in Cincinnati found Wood's claim valid and assessed her damages at \$2,500. The final decision was just a pittance compared with what Wood demanded, but 144 years later, it remains the largest known payment ordered by an American institution in restitution for slavery.

Wood's story was widely covered at the time for its singularity, but fell out of the news as white Americans tried to distance themselves from slavery and its aftermath. Yet the questions that Wood's victory raised then are the same ones hanging sullenly over America today.

“Who will recompense the millions of men and women for the years of liberty of which they have been defrauded?” an 1878 New York Times [article](#) about the court's decision asked. “Who will make good to the thousands of kidnapped freemen the agony, distress, and bondage of a lifetime?”

What the writer recognized was the growing call for reparations that began at the close of the Civil War and continues to this day. When slavery ended, the federal government promised to provide “40 acres and a mule” — an idea proposed by Black leaders at the time — to nearly 4 million recently freed men and women. The effort would have redistributed land previously owned by the Confederates, giving the formerly enslaved a chance to own their own land and become economically self-sufficient — until the government, after Lincoln’s assassination, reneged.

That early proposal helped establish the concept of reparations as compensation to be paid to Black Americans for slavery. When it was overturned, the struggle for reparations only grew. Activists such as Callie House led a movement after Reconstruction and into the early 20th century to demand pensions for poor and aging formerly enslaved people, suing the federal government and arguing that it owed ex-slaves \$68 million. HR 40, a federal bill named after the federal promise more than 150 years ago for 40 acres of land, was introduced in Congress to task a commission to study and develop reparations proposals, but it has floundered in the House for more than three decades, leaving advocates wondering why America is still keeping freedom out of reach.

At the beginning of May, a coalition of organizers, including the National Coalition of Blacks for Reparations in America (N’COBRA), Color of Change, and the Black Voters Matter Fund, sent a letter to President Joe Biden to demand that he create a federal commission by Juneteenth to study and develop reparations proposals for Black Americans. (The administration had not responded to the coalition by the time this article was published.)

The demand, the continued organizing for racial justice, and the recent recognition of Juneteenth as a day of national importance calling for solemnity as well as celebration, have all brought a new wave of urgency to the centuries-long reparations debate.

“We need something much more substantive than the Juneteenth federal holiday. We need reparatory justice, and we need it now,” said Nkechi Taifa, the director of the Reparation Education Project, a nonprofit organization that teaches about reparations, and one of the signatories of the letter. “Our communities are crying out for it. Our communities are demanding it.”

Over time, a more comprehensive reparations framework has emerged. In addition to cash payments, true reparations would be a program of “acknowledgement, redress and closure for a grievous injustice” including “slavery, legal segregation (Jim Crow), and ongoing discrimination and stigmatization,” economist William A. Darity and folklorist A. Kirsten Mullen argued in their 2020 book *From Here to Equality: Reparations for Black Americans in the Twenty-First Century*.

Decades of demands on the federal government to atone for the harm it inflicted on enslaved people — and the resultant racism, discrimination, and segregation that cripple the Black community today — haven't moved federal leaders to act, not toward acknowledgement nor apology, nor toward the kind of redress that economists say would be necessary to level the field for Black Americans.

Darity and Mullen estimate that restitution in the form of direct cash payments would cost the American government \$10 trillion to \$12 trillion, or about \$800,000 for each eligible Black household. The payments could eradicate long-standing racial disparities in wealth, health, income, education, incarceration rates, and overall quality of life, experts have argued.

“We don't have reparations right now because America isn't sorry. We have not had an adequate apology for slavery,” said Edgar Villanueva, founder of the philanthropic organization Decolonizing Wealth Project, which funds reparative giving efforts. “There's a deep-seated fear of even the word reparations and a related scarcity mindset around America's unwillingness to grapple with its history that connects back to colonization. So instead, we're experiencing the rewriting of history, the banning of books, and a fear of truth-telling.”

If the federal government's commitment to reparations is doubtful, at the local level, a movement is gathering.

Asheville, North Carolina's City Council established a Community Reparations Commission in 2020. That year, Providence, Rhode Island's mayor signed an executive order to pursue a “truth-telling and reparations process” in the city; Burlington, Vermont, established a reparations task force; and Wilmington, North Carolina, considered doing the same. The following year also saw momentum: California launched its reparations task force in 2021, while separately, a group of mayors, Mayors Organized for Reparations and Equity, pledged to pay reparations to small groups of Black residents in their cities to show the federal government what is possible. Greenbelt, Maryland, voters approved a commission to study reparations, as did Detroit voters and the New York State Assembly.

Other forms of repayment that some have called reparations are worth noting. This year, in Evanston, Illinois, 16 Black families were selected at random from a pool of applicants to receive up to \$25,000 in tax-free grants that can be used to pay for a home, pay off a mortgage or make home improvements. Almost 100 years after California seized a Black family's Bruce's Beach property via eminent domain, the state agreed to return it to the descendants of the family who owned it. Finally, a judge last month ruled that the three known living survivors of the 1921 Tulsa white mob massacre could move forward with their lawsuit seeking reparations, despite motions by the defendants, including the city of Tulsa, to dismiss the case.

If local leaders can find the space to grapple with reparations, why can't the federal government?

At a federal level, President Biden's evolving stance on reparations illustrates the country's glacial pace of change and glaring unwillingness to engage in the reconciliation that would bring healing and closure to the people it has harmed.

In a 1975 interview, he criticized the idea: "I do not buy the concept, popular in the '60s, which said, 'We have suppressed the black man for 300 years and the white man is now far ahead in the race for everything our society offers. In order to even the score, we must now give the Black man a head start, or even hold the white man back, to even the race.'"

As Biden campaigned for the presidency in 2020, however, the nation saw what may be the largest uprising against systemic injustice after a white police officer murdered George Floyd in daylight, and he embraced the idea of studying reparations. But in the past two years, as he navigated his priorities and failed to garner enough congressional support to pass some of his biggest agenda items, his administration has put the idea out of view.

Beyond the few local lawmakers and federal officials who already back HR 40, support for reparations in general remains low. In 2014, 68 percent of Americans polled by YouGov opposed financial payments to Black Americans as compensation for slavery, Jim Crow, and redlining, while only 15 percent supported them. Recent polling found similar results. In 2020, 63 percent of Americans polled by ABC News and the Washington Post opposed cash payments, while 61 percent were opposed in 2021. Yet in 2020, at the height of the Black Lives Matter protests, more people than ever (76 percent of Americans surveyed) agreed that racial discrimination is a big problem in the United States.

Smaller-scale local programs help keep the reparations dialogue going — and may bring the country closer to a wider-scale reparations program — but they fall short of the country's national imperative.

"No amount of material resources can ever compensate for what Black folks went through. Whatever ends up happening is going to be a negotiated settlement," Taifa said. "Whether [reparations make] a material difference or not, the fact is there's a debt that is owed and a debt that is due. If I choose to just keep the money under my pillow and never do anything with it, that's my right."

Major questions motivate the activists and thinkers pushing for reparations. Where would the descendants of enslaved Americans be if it weren't for the more than 200 years of forced labor? Does the United States want to live up to the ideals and exceptionalism it has touted for centuries?

More than any logistical quandary about reparations, these questions lie at the heart of the fight. They get to the center of what America represents and whether it has the power to truly change.

“Our national debt is already now up to around \$26-27 trillion given the money we’re spending on Covid,” Michael Tanner, a senior fellow at the conservative Cato Institute, told CNBC in 2020 about paying reparations. “And we’re losing more money because we’re not picking up the revenue because economic growth is so slow right now. This hardly seems the time to burden the economy with more debt, more taxes. Essentially what you want to do is stimulate economic growth for all our benefits.”

But most reparations advocates agree that stimulus plans that stand to boost all Americans won’t close the Black-white wealth gap. They note that the formation of the republic after slavery intentionally excluded the formerly enslaved and their descendants in the decades after. During the Reconstruction era, Blacks were routinely disenfranchised, while the New Deal and GI Bill later also failed to fully include Black people. Even the passage of civil rights legislation didn’t open the door for America to fully grapple with racism.

Questions about who should be eligible for reparations and how much ought to be paid remain.

Some believe that only descendants of people enslaved in the United States who can prove their lineage — that at least one ancestor was enslaved — can be eligible. (California’s task force, for example, decided that only residents with direct lineage to people formerly enslaved in America should be eligible for reparations.) The plan mapped out by Darity and Mullen adds that eligible recipients must pass an identity standard — they must be able to prove that they self-identified as Black or African American for 12 years prior to the enactment of a reparations plan.

Others believe that eligibility must be more inclusive, arguing that Black people who are third, fourth, and fifth generation in the United States could be part of the global network of enslavement that saw their ancestors enslaved in the Caribbean or South America. They, too, have suffered under American racism and discrimination. “The system of enslavement was intertwined to the point that we do not know and could never know for certain if one’s ancestor was not harmed by US enslavers and the US government based on a geographical North American residence of enslavement,” N’COBRA activists wrote in a memo.

There’s also discussion about the window for the reparations claim. Should 1619, the year enslaved people landed in Jamestown, Virginia, be the beginning date for the claim, or the year 1776, when America was founded?

What would constitute reparations? Some have argued that reparations don’t have to be direct cash payments but can take the form of programs like housing vouchers, as in the case of Evanston, Illinois, or educational grants, as in the case of Georgetown University. The university has said it would help the descendants of enslaved people pay off school debts, an effort to contend with the fact that its founding relied on stolen Black labor. Some warn, however, that these limited programs can muddy efforts to secure federal cash payments. “Reparations seems

to be all over right now, but as we have these discussions, we have to be cautious [to not] water it down or let [reparations] be co-opted,” Villanueva said.

Many also believe that there is a grave need for a “truth-telling” effort that makes way for an apology: Without acknowledgment and a formal apology from the federal government, there can be no closure. Though Henrietta Wood got money that helped her raise her son at the turn of the century, she never received an apology from the man who re-enslaved her. Nor did she get an apology for being born into a system that reduced her to bondage. Instead, Wood’s abductor tried to deny his crime and even boasted about growing famous for having bought one of the “last slaves” before the end of slavery.

“He cannot escape the law, which will follow him and his property into the remotest nook of the Republic,” the New York Times wrote of Wood’s captor. Why should America?