

America's Moral Debt to African Americans

by

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Lonnie G. Bunch III is the founding director of the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture (<http://nmaahc.si.edu>). Previously he served as the president of the Chicago Historical Society, the associate director for curatorial affairs at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History, an education specialist with the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum, and a curator of history for the California African American Museum in Los Angeles. He holds a master's and bachelor's degrees from American University in Washington, D.C. In 2005, Bunch was named one of the 100 most influential museum professionals of the 20th century by the American Association of Museums.

As a historian, I know slavery has left a deep scar on America. The reasons are many. I have found wisdom in the words of Cornelius Holmes, a former slave, interviewed in 1939, a man who saw brutality and separation of families. Holmes shared the dreams and melodies before freedom and then witnessed the reality of freedom.

One reason for my current retrospection is the fine essay by Ta-Nehisi Coates in the June issue of the *Atlantic* arguing that reparations are deserved and long overdue. He has gathered an amazing array of facts about racism, economics, violence and the role of the U.S. government, implicit and explicit. With pinpoint clarity, Coates has focused a scholarly light that shines into all the dark corners of this shameful chapter in our history.

The debate over reparations—a payment for slavery, segregation and unequal lives—has a beginning, but it seems no end. Our forefathers spoke of the promise of 40 acres and a mule. Our leaders cried out, few as eloquently as Rev. Martin L. King, Jr. more than 50 years ago: “Instead of honoring this sacred obligation, America has given the Negro people a bad check—a check that 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 in this nation.”

While the conversation with scholars and ordinary citizens often centers on financial payment, I'm emphasizing that the moral debt is more important. While fairness would dictate that the descendants of the Tulsa Riots of 1921 to see the goal of their reparations campaign be finalized with some remunerations. Yet the moral debate is equally owed.

The current discussion of reparations has made me consider how relevant the question remains, given the success and prosperity of the 21st Century. Honestly, we are still grappling with one of the unsolved issues that started the day a handful of Africans stepped onto the shores of Jamestown in 1619. How can America repay those bent backs and calloused hands for their slave labor, and satisfy the descendants that all the chattered years have value?

In his essay, Coates presents us with a clear roadmap on how we got to this point. Maya Angelou, the wise writer, bequeathed us this philosophy: "History, despite its wrenching pain, cannot be unlived, however, if faced with courage, need not be lived again." In so many ways, the American experience is the African American experience. In every development of our country's history, every step that has made America better is tied to African American lives, patriotism and sacrifice. Indeed, profits from slavery provided a reservoir of capital that allowed America to grow into a world power. The image of America as a just society is stained by the lack of moral reparations and fair treatment for a group of its earliest and most loyal laborers and residents.

What we will have in the National Museum of African American History and Culture is a place for dialogue and the exploration of historical movements. We can facilitate a discussion of what reparations really mean, providing a key to the debate. The exhibitions will show how segregation—a direct outgrowth of enslavement—and its shadows shaped the country for so long and how African Americans were treated, both legally and informally. For example, one of our key artifacts, the guard tower from Louisiana's Angola prison, will show how the prison systems were repurposed plantations and populated by black men exploited as free labor through convict leases.



Founding director Lonnie G. Bunch III outside the National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, D.C. (photo by Joanne S. Lawton).

That is why the moral debt is what most concerns me. African Americans helped force America to live up to its stated ideals. This nation's sense of citizenship, its notion of liberty, its understanding of justice for all owes a debt to the African American; these are the people who believed in the promise of America, and who, by their struggles, helped make that promise more accessible to all.

How does a nation repay its moral debt? The greatest repayment would be to ensure that African Americans now and generations from now, have access to quality education, affordable health care and neighborhoods that are safe. That would make all those who once suffered smile, because they didn't suffer in vain.

Source: <http://smithsoniannag.com>; Retrieved May 21, 2016. Posted June 6, 2016. Second photo: the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture founding director Lonnie G. Bunch III outside the museum by Joanne S. Lawton (*Washington Business Journal*, February 2, 2016).