

REPARATIONS: AN ISSUE WHOSE TIME HAS COME

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TEDX PRESENTATION

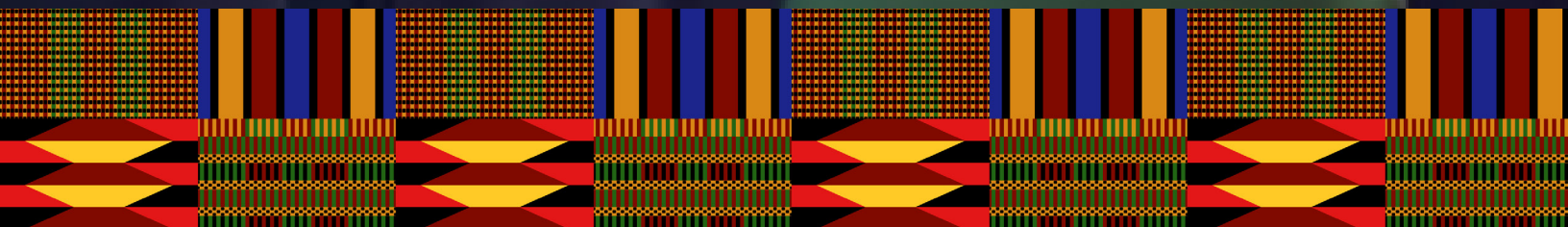
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Transcript of the TEDx talk

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NKECHI TAIFA

Reparations. *The issue is hot, scalding, and once unthinkable by mainstream America. Yet, it poses only a question. Does the United States government, as well as other culpable entities, owe reparations to the descendants of Africans once held as slaves?*

*Nkechi Taifa – attorney, scholar, and author of the upcoming book, **Reparations on Fire: How and Why It’s Spreading Across America**, answers that question with formidable facts. Her powerful talk, sprinkled with a personal journey, also describes ongoing legacies from the enslavement era visible today. Reparations for Black people, once fringe, has now captured the imagination of faith, academic and civic groups, as well as corporations, cities, states, and the federal government. Taifa shows unequivocally that reparations is an issue whose time has come, and fundamental to a long overdue national reckoning of race in America.*

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Transcript of Speech, with Citations

[YouTube Link](#)

I was inspired by an awesome revelation when I was young, and it propelled nearly everything I did in life. Why I adopted an African name. Why I kept my hair natural. Why I marched and rallied. Why I became a lawyer fighting for justice. So, what is my story?

Tight hip-hugger bell-bottom blue jeans. Platform stacked heels. Huge towering African gele wrapped around my head. I had the whole look, y'all. Sixteen-year-old high school teen age rebellious me. I remember those days like they were yesterday. Racing to catch the bus down Georgia Avenue, past Howard University, to the office of the Black Panther Party. I was not a Panther. I was just a curious young naïve girl who relished sitting on the lap of that fine brother in the front office who was supposed to be pulling security. Every Saturday, I excitedly met the brothers and sisters downtown in front of the Soul Shack record store to help sell the organization's newspaper.

One sizzling hot day, I took a break, wiped my brow, sat down on the curb, and flipped open the paper. My eyes fixated on the 10-point program — "What We Want, What We Believe." I just could not get the wording of point number three out of my head.

"We believe that this racist government has robbed us and now we are demanding the overdue debt of forty acres and two mules ... promised 100 years ago as restitution for slave labor and mass murder of Black people.

...on a psychic level I could feel within my bones and see within my communities the trauma from the enslavement era down through the years – the ever-present cultural assault on our pride, dignity, and self-esteem.

We will accept the payment in currency which will be distributed to our many communities.”¹

Wow! It sounded magical. A magic way more powerful than Shazam or Abracadabra or Open Sesame. A magic which gave my rebelliousness definition. It was the concept of reparations. Reparations. To finally find an idea, one I had unknowingly been searching for, it imbued me with a new awareness.

I was captivated, I was excited, and I talked about reparations whenever and wherever I could. Amongst outsiders I was ridiculed. ‘Too militant.’ Amongst non-believers I was ostracized. ‘Too controversial.’ But I was not deterred.

Sitting on the curb that day, I did not know about the massacres of Black people and destruction of Black settlements in Rosewood FL², Tulsa OK,³ Elaine AK,⁴ or Wilmington NC.⁵ I was ignorant of the brutal gynecological experiments on enslaved women devoid of anesthesia which led to modern medicine.⁶ I had no clue about the enormous profits made by corporations,⁷ insurance companies,⁸ the banking and investment industries,⁹ and academic¹⁰ and religious institutions¹¹ from enslavement, or that this uncompensated labor, not only helped to prop up these entities but also the federal government,¹² as well as states, and municipalities.

¹ BPP NEWSPAPER TEN POINT PROGRAM - <https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/primary-documents-african-american-history/black-panther-party-ten-point-program-1966/>

² ROSEWOOD MASSACRE - https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rosewood_massacre

³ TULSA BLACK WALL STREET MASSACRE - <https://www.tulsa-history.org/exhibit/1921-tulsa-race-massacre/>

⁴ ELAINE MASSACRE - https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elaine_massacre

⁵ WILMINGTON, NC INSURRECTION - <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/08/wilmington-massacre/536457/>

⁶ MEDICAL EXPERIMENTATION - <https://www.amazon.com/Medical-Apartheid-Experimentation-Americans-Colonial/dp/076791547X;> <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/factcheck/2020/06/19/fact-check-j-marion-sims-did-medical-experiments-black-female-slaves/3202541001/>

⁷ CORPORATIONS - <https://yourblackworld.net/2013/08/29/shocking-list-of-10-companies-that-profited-from-the-slave-trade/>

⁸ INSURANCE COMPANIES - <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-49476247>

⁹ BANKING AND INVESTMENT INDUSTRIES - https://economics.yale.edu/sites/default/files/banks_and_slavery_yale.pdf; <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/article/how-slavery-helped-build-a-world-economy>

¹⁰ ACADEMIC INSTITUTIONS - <https://time.com/5013728/slavery-universities-america/>, <https://www.apmreports.org/episode/2017/09/04/shackled-legacy>

¹¹ RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS - <https://www.nyu.edu/about/news-publications/news/2020/february/-the-reckoning-is-real---on-slavery--the-church--and-how-some-21.html>

¹² FEDERAL GOVERNMENT - <https://www.acslaw.org/expertforum/the-proslavery-constitution/>; <https://www.whitehousehistory.org/questions/did-slaves-build-the-white-house>; <https://www.businessinsider.com/american-landmarks-that-were-built-by-slaves-2019-9#the-white-house-in-washington-dc-1>

But on a psychic level I could feel within my bones and see within my communities the trauma from the enslavement era down through the years – the ever-present cultural assault on our pride, dignity, and self-esteem. The continuing negative impact on jobs and income. The inequalities in education; disparities in health; and the unfairness in the justice system.

Reparations. Reparations, Yes! The issue is hot, its scalding, it's on fire! – and at one time unthinkable by mainstream society as viable public policy. Yet it poses only a question. Does the United States government, as well as other culpable entities, owe reparations to the descendants of Africans once held as slaves? 'Just a question,' the late Congressman John Conyers would muse. 'We ask questions about everything. What's in space, what's underneath the water? Interesting questions,' he would say to me. 'But this one, this one, has been studiously avoided.'

Why? The answer may be because few questions challenge society to consider over 400 years of history all at once. To tunnel within our souls and discover what we truly believe about race, equity, and the value to be placed on human sufferings.

Think about what, if anything, is owed to the descendants of those who were kidnapped, sold, raped, castrated, and stripped of humanity, language, and culture? Indeed, why shouldn't the great-great grandchildren of those who after emancipation were denied land;¹³ leased by prisons as convict laborers;¹⁴ subjected to Jim Crow segregation laws; stripped of the right to vote; forcibly sterilized;¹⁵ relegated to substandard housing worsened by the denial of credit known as redlining;¹⁶ blocked from military benefits under the GI bill;¹⁷ economically dispossessed; forced into the lowest paying jobs; bound to an inferior and false education; inundated with disparate health care; and imperiled to a mass incarceration unmatched in the world¹⁸ ... Why should Black people NOT be compensated?

But then, think about this. What about white American taxpayers who never owned any slaves, never lynched anyone, never participated in redlining, why should they pay for the sins of forefathers and foremothers they never even knew?

Or, what about those whites whose ancestors arrived long after the chattel enslavement period?

Hasn't the United States government already paid reparations through affirmative action?

What type of price tag should be put on over two centuries of legalized inhumanity?

What about Oprah???? Should she get a check?

¹³ BLACK LAND LOSS - https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black_land_loss_in_the_United_States

¹⁴ CONVICT LEASING - <https://eji.org/news/history-racial-injustice-convict-leasing/>

¹⁵ STERILIZATION - <https://www.thoughtco.com/u-s-governments-role-sterilizing-women-of-color-2834600>

¹⁶ REDLINING - <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/06/the-case-for-reparations/361631/>; <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/17/realestate/what-is-redlining.html>

¹⁷ GI BILL - <https://www.history.com/news/gi-bill-black-wwii-veterans-benefits>

¹⁸ MASS INCARCERATION - <https://www.vera.org/blog/the-chains-of-slavery-still-exist-in-mass-incarceration>

Reparations is not a fairytale, but a well-established principle of both domestic and international law, which the United States government is aware of and has participated in.

Regardless of what one may think about all these queries, one fact is sure. Reparations is not a fairytale, but a well-established principle of both domestic and international law, which the United States government is aware of and has participated in.

The 16-year-old native-Washingtonian-me sitting on the curb that day had not learned in school that reparations were paid right here in the nation's capital pursuant to the 1862 DC Compensated Emancipation Act¹⁹ – but the funds weren't paid to the newly freed Black people – the reparations went to the former white slave owners.

The 20-year-old college-student-history-major-me, had not learned that the country of Haiti, which heroically won its freedom in 1803, was forced to pay reparations to France, all the way up through 1947, long after both the original enslaved and enslavers were dead.²⁰ I did not know that the British government paid reparations when it abolished slavery in 1833, not to the formerly enslaved, but again, to the former slave holders, and the reparations payments to the white descendants of slave-owning families continued all the way down through the year 2015.²¹

And the elder me was flabbergasted upon learning that in 1892, the descendants of eleven Italian lynching victims in New Orleans received cash reparations from the United States government.²²

Why, why are Black people not respected and treated like others? Why, why are atrocities committed against Japanese Americans²³ and Native peoples²⁴ addressed, to an extent, but not those of African Americans? How, how can an administration righteously seek justice for immigrant children separated from their families at the border,²⁵ while historically ignoring the snatching of Black babies from mothers' breasts? How, how can an anti-Asian hate crimes bill sail through Congress,²⁶ while anti-lynching legislation struggled, for over a century, up

¹⁹ DC COMPENSATED EMANCIPATION ACT - <https://www.archives.gov/exhibits/featured-documents/dc-emancipation-act>

²⁰ HAITI REPARATIONS TO FRANCE - <https://www.npr.org/sections/money/2021/10/05/1042518732/-the-greatest-heist-in-history-how-haiti-was-forced-to-pay-reparations-for-freed>

²¹ BRITAIN PAID SLAVEHOLDERS AND THEIR DESCENDANTS - <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/factcheck/2020/06/30/fact-check-u-k-paid-off-debts-slave-owning-families-2015/3283908001/>


²² REPARATIONS TO DESCENDANTS OF ITALIAN LYNCHING VICTIMS - <https://newsone.com/3849689/lynching-reparations-new-orleans-apology-italian-immigrants/>

²³ JAPANESE-AMERICAN REPARATIONS - https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Civil_Liberties_Act_of_1988

²⁴ NATIVE AMERICAN CLAIMS ACT - <https://www.justice.gov/enrd/lead-indian-claims-commission-act-1946>

²⁵ BORDER SEPARATIONS - <https://www.borderreport.com/hot-topics/immigration/biden-families-of-separated-children-deserve-compensation/>

²⁶ ASIAN AMERICAN ANTI-HATE BILL - <https://www.npr.org/2021/05/20/998599775/biden-to-sign-the-covid-19-hate-crimes-bill-as-anti-asian-american-attacks-rise>



until just last week, to finally see the light of day?²⁷

We must be straightforward about rights and wrongs. We must stop the false narrative that because slavery ended over a century ago, that nothing is due. There is no statute of limitations on addressing human rights violations²⁸ and debts are neither absolved nor diminished by the passage of time. In fact, as anyone with a credit card painfully knows, over time, debts grow larger with interest.



The issue of reparations is no longer fringe but is now front and center. The conversation is growing.

We all stand on the shoulders of those who came before us. Each generation passes its debts as well as its assets on to the next generation. The heritage which whites in this country enjoy is what has been called white skin privilege – benefitting from a society, a state, a social structure which is governed by white supremacy, and although we may debate the who, what, when and how of remedy, there is no question that Caucasians in this country, no matter when they arrived, and no matter their guilt or innocence, enjoy the fruits of over 400 years of unjust enrichment.

Today is April 4th, the very day Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated in 1968. On this day, if none other, we pay homage to the man who once talked about coming to Washington to cash a check. A check, he preached, which deplorably has come back marked, “insufficient funds.”²⁹

But let’s not get stuck on just a check. You see, my reparations journey has allowed me to develop a much broader view of remedy than I had as a teenager, as well as recognition that repair is not for the enslavement era alone, but for its living, continuing legacies that last down through today.

You see, more, more, more than Black bodies were stolen. Our names, our religions, our languages, our history – our very peoplehood – has been gutted. The harms from the enslavement era and beyond were multi-faceted, thus the remedies must be multi-faceted as well. Indeed, a reparations settlement can be fashioned in as many forms as necessary to equitably address the incalculable injuries that have been sustained as a result of this crime against humanity.³⁰

²⁷ ANTI-LYNCHING BILL SIGNED INTO LAW <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/legislation/2022/03/29/bill-signed-h-r-55/>

²⁸ NO STATUTE OF LIMITATIONS ON HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS - https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/atrocity-crimes/Doc.27_convention%20statutory%20limitations%20warcrimes.pdf

²⁹ MARTIN LUTHER KING CHECK ANALOGY - https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/revisiting-kings-metaphor-about-a-nations-debt/2011/07/26/gIQArshBaJ_story.html

³⁰ SLAVERY AND SLAVE TRADE A CRIME AGAINST HUMANITY - https://legal.un.org/ilc/sessions/71/pdfs/english/cah_wg_epad.pdf

Thankfully, I'm no longer amongst the isolated talking about reparations; no longer ridiculed or ostracized. I've been in the reparations movement nearly 50 years now; the magic has long since worn off, but I have never been more optimistic.

The issue of reparations is no longer fringe but is now front and center. The conversation is growing. There are now more faith organizations, sororities and fraternities, professional and social justice groups, and civil and human rights organizations than ever, advancing reparations.³¹

Congressional legislation is escalating.³² The state of California is engaged in historic hearings.³³ Local jurisdictions are enthusiastically establishing commissions. Evanston, IL is a trailblazer.³⁴ The U.S. Conference of Mayors,³⁵ the Players Coalition of professional athletes, coaches, and owners across leagues,³⁶ Amalgamated Bank³⁷ and many more have picked up the banner.

Past damages are being uncovered. White allied groups are committed to truth-telling.³⁸ Even Ben and Jerry's Ice Cream³⁹ has issued a call to other corporations to support reparations.⁴⁰

However, despite being on the frontlines of this movement, I humbly admit I don't have definitive answers to all the questions being raised about reparations. Indeed, I've spent the lion's share of my life just trying to get people to feel comfortable merely uttering the word. Today's reparations movement is not monolithic; there will be and are different understandings — that is why the federal, state, and local jurisdictions exploring and establishing study commissions are so important. So, please, don't fret being uninformed, ill-informed, misinformed, or oblivious, but do be part of the momentum embracing reparations as a legitimate conversation.

The harms from the enslavement era and beyond were multi-faceted, thus the remedies must be multi-faceted as well.

³¹ PLETHORA OF ORGANIZATIONS SUPPORTING REPARATIONS - <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/07/31/why-we-cant-wait-coalition-statement-urges-us-congress-pass-hr-40-reparations-bill#>

³² HR40 - <https://www.npr.org/2021/04/14/986853285/house-lawmakers-advance-historic-bill-to-form-reparations-commission>

³³ STATE OF CALIFORNIA REPARATIONS TASK FORCE HEARINGS - <https://oag.ca.gov/ab3121/meetings>; <https://www.cnn.com/2020/10/01/us/california-bill-slavery-reparations-trnd/index.html>

³⁴ EVANSTON, ILLINOIS - <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/nbcblk/evanston-s-reparations-plan-noble-start-complicated-process-experts-say-n1262096>

³⁵ US CONF OF MAYORS - <https://www.usmayors.org/2020/07/13/u-s-conference-of-mayors-president-writes-to-senator-booker-rep-jackson-lee-to-express-support-for-their-legislation-on-reparations/>

³⁶ PLAYERS COALITION - <https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/players-coalition-urges-passage-of-reparations-bill-hr-40-in-partnership-with-congresswoman-sheila-jackson-lee-301135971.html>

³⁷ AMALGAMATED BANK - <https://www.amalgamatedbank.com/news/amalgamated-bank-becomes-first-major-us-to-bank-endorse-hr-40>

³⁸ WHITE ALLY GROUPS - <https://reparations4slavery.com/white-allyship/>; <https://www.fundforreparationsnow.org>; <https://www.forbes.com/sites/sethcohen/2020/06/28/reparations-now/?sh=632e0e547e44>

³⁹ BEN AND JERRY'S GENERAL ON REPARATIONS - <https://www.benjerry.com/about-us/media-center/reparations-statement>

⁴⁰ BEN AND JERRY'S CALL TO OTHER CORPORATIONS TO SUPPORT REPARATIONS - <https://www.fastcompany.com/90606081/benjerrys-ceo-to-move-forward-america-must-be-honest-about-our-racist-past-and-fix-it>

What else can you do? Encourage your companies, universities, and faith organizations to keep an open mind and support initiatives. Put a 'Reparations Now' sign in your front yard. Talk about the issue with your family, friends, co-workers, and neighbors at the holiday and at the dinner tables. And ahhh yes, after dinner, visualize with me dessert topped off with a sweet reparation-themed ice cream from Ben and Jerry's – uummmm – I can almost taste it! Can you? A dark-chocolate minty blend flavor drenched with luscious cherries – A yummy taste of freedom in red, black, and green – if you know what I mean!

I'm no longer that sixteen-year-old selling rebellious newspapers in downtown Washington with the tight hip hugger bell bottom blue jeans, but I still have my natural hair. I still love my African headwrap. And I'm still pumping up reparations. The woman you see today, though far more enlightened, may not have absolute solutions to the tough questions, but one issue, one answer, one fact in my mind is crystal clear.

Regardless of what the future may hold for atonement for the enslavement era and its awful, awful legacies, reparations ... reparations ... reparations ... is an issue whose time has come, and fundamental to a long-overdue national reckoning of race in America.

Thank you.

Nkechi Taifa is an attorney, activist, academician and author. She is the author of a best-seller memoir, [Black Power, Black Lawyer: My Audacious Quest for Justice](#) and an upcoming book, [Reparations on Fire: How and Why It's Spreading Across America](#). Attorney Taifa is a passionate visionary professional, she enjoys decades of experience as an accomplished justice system reform strategist and advocate. Taifa excels at advancing creative, cutting-edge approaches that encourage out of the box thinking and action. The wealth of her experiences has allowed her to pursue justice from different vantage points – as a litigator, lobbyist, scholar, advocate, policy analyst, community organizer, convener, and grant-maker. This talk was given at a TEDx event using the TED conference format but independently organized by a local community.

