



Reparations Argumentative Writing Assessment

Introduction

No one can know what would come out of such a debate [in the U.S. Congress over reparations]. Perhaps no number can fully capture the multi-century plunder of black people in America. Perhaps the number is so large that it can't be imagined, let alone calculated and dispensed. But I believe that wrestling publicly with these questions matters as much as—if not more than—the specific answers that might be produced. An America that asks what it owes its most vulnerable citizens is improved and humane. An America that looks away is ignoring not just the sins of the past but the sins of the present and the certain sins of the future.

-- Ta-Nehisi Coates, "The Case for Reparations," June, 2014

African-American writer and public intellectual Ta-Nehisi Coates may not yet have gotten a debate over reparations to the halls of Congress, but his 2014 essay in *Atlantic Monthly* has most certainly provoked a renewed debate over the issue in the public square. Reparations, of course, can mean "the act of making amends, offering expiation, or giving satisfaction for a wrong or injury," but it can also mean more specifically the payment of money for damages or harms done (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2017). Coates and other advocates for governmental reparations to be paid to African-Americans for slavery and its aftermath (i.e., Jim Crow segregation and other discriminatory laws and policies) have not been highly specific about what reparations would

provide to current black citizens of this country (though Coates refers at one point in his essay to a figure of \$35 billion, to be paid out over ten years). What he has been clear about is the compelling moral justification for significant financial compensation coming in some form to the descendants of those who have borne the burden of the history of anti-black racism in this country.

Coates goes through the economic history of slavery: that it was the driver of a substantial portion of the wealth generated in America between the time of its introduction to Jamestown in 1609, through its abolition in 1865. He also tells the lesser-known historical story of the exploitation of black people in the Jim Crow South and the criminally discriminatory North, bolstered by federal housing and other laws. The disastrous economic plight of the average African-American family, compared to its white counterpart, is a product of this history, and this country will never be morally whole until it faces, acknowledges, and rectifies this reality.

Coates's eloquence and persuasive power in his 2014 essay (and subsequent media tour) have generated the kind of debate (at least among writers and commentators, if not elected officials) that he called for. Opponents of reparations have made a range of arguments, some philosophical, some practical, some defending the interests of the majority of the country that isn't black, and some from the perspective of the interests of African-Americans themselves.

Today, proponents of reparations can point to a handful of recent cases where the courts or legislatures have passed reparations laws – in Chicago, notably, the City Council approved \$5.5 million to be paid to the victims of racist police commander Jon Burge. But the nation as a whole has not yet moved closer to adopting a national reparations program for the slavery and the legacy of anti-black racism in this country. Still, the moral force of the question raised in the Coates essay remains and resonates.

Issue

Should the United States pay reparations for slavery and the historical legacy of anti-black racism?



Directions

Carefully read and annotate the attached set of secondary-source document excerpts. Use information from at least four of the sources in a coherent, well-developed essay that has an introduction, argumentative body, and conclusion. Your essay should take a clear position, stated in a thesis, on the issue. Your thesis should be supported and developed by 2 – 3 arguments. Each argument should have a claim, evidence, and reasoning, using one or two pieces of evidence from the set of sources. You should also address and refute at least one counter-argument, either in a separate paragraph or in your argument paragraphs.

Use the set of sources to identify evidence that will support your claims, and supply your own reasoning to explain how it is that each piece of evidence proves that your claim and your overall position are true. Avoid merely summarizing sources. Indicate clearly which sources you are drawing from, whether through direct quotation or paraphrase. Cite sources either by their letter (A – H) or (even better) by their author, emphasizing qualifications where appropriate.