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America Reckons With Racial Injustice

A Call For Reparations: How America Might Narrow The Racial Wealth Gap

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Heard on Fresh Air



TERRY GROSS



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A man kneels and raises his fist in the air during a march and protest to mark the Juneteenth holiday at the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial June 19, 2020 in Washington, DC.

Chip Somodevilla/Getty Images

The killing of George Floyd has ignited protests and inspired conversations — and changes — across the globe. But *New York Times Magazine* writer Nikole Hannah-Jones says more needs to be done to address America's racial wealth gap.

"Very few Americans have created all of their wealth on their own; it's passed down through generations and then built upon," Hannah-Jones says. "Black Americans never really had a chance to do that."

Hannah-Jones traces the wealth gap to slavery, and the fact that enslaved people were not allowed to own property. She notes that the legalized segregation and racial terrorism that followed slavery exacerbated the problem and "prevented generation after generation of Black Americans from acquiring the type of wealth or foothold in the economy that allows you to live a life that is much more typical of white Americans."

Hannah-Jones won a Pulitzer Prize for creating the 1619 project at *The New York Times*, which tracks the legacy of slavery. Her latest article for the *Times Magazine*, *What is Owed*, makes the case for economic reparations for Black Americans.

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"Reparations, to me, is about repair," she says. "In the context specifically of Black Americans, reparations has to do with 250 years of chattel slavery, followed by another

100 years of legalized segregation or apartheid and racial terrorism, and how that impacted the economic well-being of Black Americans."



NPR ED

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Interview highlights

On the wealth gap between white Americans and Black Americans

Black Americans never really had a chance to [create wealth]. Of course, 250 years of slavery where they are unable to accumulate any capital and then coming out of slavery, Black Americans face the dragnet of discrimination and segregation that further prevented them from building any type of wealth. Black people were denied access to colleges, were denied access to high schools, were denied access to higher paying jobs. And when Black people were able to get some land or to build a business, oftentimes they face those businesses being stolen or burned down or destroyed.

So we saw really from 1619 until 1968, when the last of the civil rights legislation was passed saying you could no longer discriminate against Black Americans, Black people being denied access to the primary wealth-building tools, homeownership, federally financed loans, the G.I. Bill to be able to purchase housing that white Americans use to build their wealth. And so what we see today is the stark chasm that was built up over generations, and then only made worse by the fact that today Black Americans still face discrimination across the spectrum of American life.

On calling for a national conversation about reparations

I think that reparations can't just be any one thing. I think that you have to have targeted investment in Black communities and Black schools that have been generationally under-resourced. You certainly need to have a commitment to strong enforcement of existing civil rights laws, because reparations don't do any good if you're still facing rampant employment and housing and educational discrimination.

But the center of any reparations program has to be cash payments. The only thing that closes a wealth gap is money.



You cannot close a racial wealth gap without transferring wealth to the people who have the gap. So cash payments to me have to be central to any program.

Nikole Hannah-Jones

I think a lot of the times when we have these discussions about, well, let's give scholarships and let's pay for Black people to go to college — one, the facts show that Black people with a college degree still earn less than white people, still have less wealth than white Americans who have a high school degree. So, again, that discomfort with a cash payment is something I think we need to understand is also racialized. And this belief that Black people are not deserving or won't spend their money the way that people think that they should. But you cannot close a racial wealth gap without transferring wealth to the people who have the gap. So cash payments to me have to be central to any program.

On the conversation about reparations at the time of emancipation

We are often taught in this country that Black people are emancipated and then everyone is on an even footing. We don't often question what does that mean to be emancipated after 250 years of bondage — to be emancipated with no job, no home, no money, no clothes, no bed, no pots, nothing. Enslaved people were unable to own anything or to accrue anything at all. And so what happens at emancipation is this expectation that the government should help formerly enslaved people to get a foothold. And what Black people wanted more than anything was land. ...



There are stories of mass starvation of Black people after they had been freed, having to leave the plantation and find shelter in burned out buildings, trying to forage for food in burned-out fields. It was a devastating period for Black people. This

country decided that it was going to do nothing, that it owed these people nothing.

Nikole Hannah-Jones

So Gen. Sherman takes that to heart and he issues Field Order 15 and Field Order 15 declares that Black families will get 40 acres of former Confederate land, and that they will be able to work that land. ... But unfortunately, that period was very, very brief. President Lincoln was assassinated and he was replaced by his vice president, Andrew Johnson, who was a Southerner who was a white supremacist and who believed, like many white Americans at that time, that Black people were deserving of nothing after slavery, that they should be grateful for their freedom. And he confiscated the land and returned the land to the former confederates. And that ended the only real effort in the history of this country to provide reparations for those who have been enslaved. And that really left formerly enslaved people in absolute devastating poverty. There are stories of mass starvation of Black people after they had been freed, having to leave the plantation and find shelter in burned out buildings, trying to forage for food in burned-out fields. It was a devastating period for Black people. This country decided that it was going to do nothing, that it owed these people nothing.

On why she uses the term "enslaved person" and not "slave" in her writing



CODE SWITCH

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It was very important in the 1619 Project and whenever I write about this, to not use language that further dehumanizes people who every system and structure was designed to dehumanize. I think when we hear the word "slave," we think of slavery as being the essence of that person. But if you call someone an enslaved person, then it speaks to a condition. These people were not slaves. Someone chose to force them into the condition of slavery, and that language to me is very important, as is using the word "enslaver" over slave owner because these people didn't have a moral right to own another human being, even though the society allowed it, and I think it needs to

be active, that this was an active system of people choosing to treat other human beings as property.



Nikole Hannah-Jones has received the MacArthur "Genius Award," as well as a Peabody Award and George Polk Award. She co-founded the Ida Be Well Society for Investigative Reporting, which is dedicated to increasing the ranks of investigative reporters of color.

The New York Times

On where the concept of the 1619 Project came from

[As a kid] I never knew that enslaved people, that African people, that my people, had been on this land that long, that we actually arrived here before the pilgrims. And I think I understood even at that moment that there was a reason we had all heard about the ship, the Mayflower, and there was a reason none of us had been taught about the ship, the White Lion, even though it arrived a year earlier and was just as significant. So that intentional erasure and the power of that erasure stuck with me. ...



AMERICA RECKONS WITH RACIAL INJUSTICE

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So as the 400-year anniversary was approaching, [I] had this nagging feeling in my stomach, a very unsettling feeling that this tremendous anniversary ... that I thought was so foundational to the American story was going to pass, and it was likely going to have very little fanfare. Most Americans probably wouldn't even hear of the date. And like so much about the history of Black Americans and slavery, it was going to be buried and marginalized. And here I am at *The New York Times* and I have a huge megaphone and platform. I could do something about that. But I didn't want it to be a history. ... I wanted to use that anniversary as a time, not to just examine what happened in the past, but to really help us focus on how if you look across modern American life, so much of our institutions, our politics, our culture can be traced back to slavery and bring that story from the margins and make it a central.

On talking to her 10-year-old daughter about the death of George Floyd and the demonstrations against police brutality

The simple way that you talk about things with a younger child just doesn't work anymore. She wants to know why. And it is the hardest thing as a parent when your child asks you, "Why would that police officer do that to him?" And you don't have an answer because you don't know why. And how do you explain to your child the sweep of 400 years of history that leads this man to think that that would be OK and he wouldn't get in trouble and to feel so little humanity towards this man because he's a Black man?

Those are really hard conversations. And I often wonder if I'm failing at them, if I'm either telling her too much or not explaining it well enough, because, of course, this is tough as a parent ... wanting to protect your child's innocence as long as possible. But being Black in this country and [I understand that] by protecting her too much, I'm actually harming her. I need to prepare her for the world. I need to give her the armor and the language and the understanding to know how the world is going to see her and

treat her and people like her. And it's probably one of the things about parenting that I question myself the most [about].

On the challenge of having conversations about race with white people

I personally don't have a problem talking with anybody about race ... but the challenge — particularly when you're talking to people who are not Black — is the bases of knowledge are just so different. It can be hard to have the same conversation. Black people have to study race. We cannot survive without understanding how race works in this country, without understanding white Americans. It is not a luxury for us not to know, and white Americans can largely exist in society without having to understand that history, without having to understand the social science, really not having to engage [with] it with any level of depth. And so when you're trying to have that conversation, there's so much groundwork that has to come first. And that can be really challenging, because it seems like you can't ever really get to the meat of it.



LIFE KIT

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Then the other thing is, it's very hard for white Americans not to take it personally and get defensive when you're talking about structures that exist and will exist whether an individual person is racist or not. And it speaks to the really superficial way we've dealt with racism in this country, it's either, "Are you saying I'm a bad person?" It's not about that. You don't have to be a bad person to buy a house in a neighborhood that was a creation of racist housing policies. But you are benefiting from those racist housing policies. So I think to me, that is the most challenging part. We don't have a common language and understanding of our history and ... why things are like they are. And a lot of Black folks just get frustrated and don't feel like we should constantly have to teach things that are easy to know.

Amy Salit and Joel Wolfram produced and edited the audio of this interview. Bridget Bentz and Molly Seavy-Nesper and Meghan Sullivan adapted it for the Web.

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