

Ending the Slavery Blame-Game, By Henry Louis Gates Jr.

1 THANKS to an unlikely confluence of history and genetics — the fact that he is African-
2 American and president — Barack Obama has a unique opportunity to reshape the debate over
3 one of the most contentious issues of America’s racial legacy: reparations, the idea that the
4 descendants of American slaves should receive compensation for their ancestors’ unpaid labor
5 and bondage.

6 There are many thorny issues to resolve before we can arrive at a judicious (if symbolic)
7 gesture to match such a sustained, heinous crime. Perhaps the most vexing is how to parcel out
8 blame to those directly involved in the capture and sale of human beings for immense economic
9 gain.

10 While we are all familiar with the role played by the United States and the European
11 colonial powers...there is very little discussion of the role Africans themselves played.... The
12 historians John Thornton and Linda Heywood of Boston University estimate that 90 percent of
13 those shipped to the New World were enslaved by Africans and then sold to European traders.
14 The sad truth is that without complex business partnerships between African elites and European
15 traders and commercial agents, the slave trade to the New World would have been impossible, at
16 least on the scale it occurred.

17 Advocates of reparations for the descendants of those slaves generally ignore this untidy
18 problem of the significant role that Africans played in the trade, choosing to believe the
19 romanticized version that our ancestors were all kidnapped unawares by evil white men....

20 In recent years, some African leaders have become more comfortable discussing this
21 complicated past than African-Americans tend to be. In 1999, for instance, President Mathieu
22 Kerekou of Benin astonished an all-black congregation in Baltimore by falling to his knees and
23 begging African-Americans’ forgiveness for the “shameful” and “abominable” role Africans
24 played in the trade. Other African leaders, including Jerry Rawlings of Ghana, followed Mr.
25 Kerekou’s bold example.

26 Our new understanding of the scope of African involvement in the slave trade is not
27 historical guesswork. Thanks to the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database, directed by the
28 historian David Eltis of Emory University, we now know the ports from which more than
29 450,000 of our African ancestors were shipped out to what is now the United States....

30 For many African-Americans, these facts can be difficult to accept. Excuses run the
31 gamut, from “Africans didn’t know how harsh slavery in America was” and “Slavery in Africa
32 was, by comparison, humane” or, in a bizarre version of “The devil made me do it,” “Africans
33 were driven to this only by the unprecedented profits offered by greedy European countries.”

34 But the sad truth is that the conquest and capture of Africans and their sale to Europeans
35 was one of the main sources of foreign exchange for several African kingdoms for a very long
36 time.... Did these Africans know how harsh slavery was in the New World? Actually, many
37 elite Africans visited Europe in that era, and they did so on slave ships following the prevailing
38 winds through the New World.... African monarchs also sent their children along these same
39 slave routes to be educated in Europe. And there were thousands of former slaves who returned
40 to settle Liberia and Sierra Leone. The Middle Passage, in other words, was sometimes a two-
41 way street. Under these circumstances, it is difficult to claim that Africans were ignorant or
42 innocent.

43 Given this remarkably messy history, the problem with reparations may not be so much
44 whether they are a good idea or deciding who would get them; the larger question just might be
45 from whom they would be extracted.

46 So how could President Obama untangle the knot? In David Remnick’s new book “The
47 Bridge: The Life and Rise of Barack Obama,” one of the president’s former students at the
48 University of Chicago comments on Mr. Obama’s mixed feelings about the reparation
49 movement: “He told us what he thought about reparations. He agreed entirely with the *theory* of
50 reparations. But in practice he didn’t think it was really workable.”

51 About the practicalities, Professor Obama may have been more right than he knew.
52 Fortunately, in President Obama, the child of an African and an American, we finally have a
53 leader who is uniquely positioned to bridge the great reparations divide. He is uniquely placed to
54 publicly attribute responsibility and culpability where they truly belong, to white people and
55 black people, on both sides of the Atlantic, complicit alike in one of the greatest evils in the
56 history of civilization. And reaching that understanding is a vital precursor to any just and lasting
57 agreement on the divisive issue of slavery reparations.

1. The primary rhetorical strategy in the first paragraph of the passage (lines 1-5) is

- a. generalization
- b. definition of key terms**
- c. direct address to the audience
- d. personal anecdote
- e. outline of key arguments

ANS: B

Rationale: The introductory paragraph defines the topic of the article. Knowing the definition of reparations (“the idea that the descendants of American slaves should receive compensation for their ancestors’ unpaid labor and bondage”) is key to understanding the author’s argument in the rest of the passage.

2. In context, the term “judicious” (line 6) most nearly means

- a. prudent**
- b. discreet
- c. political
- d. discriminating
- e. expedient

ANS: A

Rationale: In context, the term “judicious” most nearly means “prudent.” The speaker suggests that there is no easy way to solve the dilemma raised by the concept of reparations for slavery.

3. In context, the word “vexing” (lines 7) means

- a. to torment or distress**
- b. to annoy or provoke
- c. to discuss with vigor
- d. to disturb by motion
- e. to afflict with physical pain

ANS: A

Rationale: While all of these connotations apply to the word, in this context, the term “vexing” most nearly means “to annoy or provoke.”

4. The third paragraph of the passage advances the speaker’s argument by
- I citing expert opinions
 - II challenging a common narrative
 - III discussing both sides of the debate

d. I and II only

- e. I and III only

ANS: D

Rationale: The third paragraph of the passage advances the speaker’s argument by citing expert opinions (historians John Thornton and Linda Heywood), challenging conventional wisdom about the reparations (pointing out that African slaves were often captured and sold by their African countrymen). This sets up an introduction to one side of the debate in the next paragraph.

5. The speaker’s argument in lines 26-29 uses which of the following perspectives?

a. historical

- b. personal
- c. emotional
- d. logical
- e. narrative

ANS: A

Rationale: In this section of the passage, the speaker cites historical “data from the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database, directed by the historian David Eltis of Emory University,” in order to make an argument that the blame for the tragedies of slavery does not lie on the shoulders of the white slave owners and traders alone.

6. In the sentence that begins, “Given this remarkably messy history...” (lines 43-46), the relationship between the sentence segment that precedes the semicolon and the sentence segment that follows the semicolon can best be characterized as

- a. evidence: claim
- b. claim: counter claim
- c. claim: clarification question**
- d. subjective claim: objective fact
- e. generalization: specific evidence

ANS: C

Rationale: The relationship between the sentence segments before and after the semicolon is one of claim (“the problem ... is not whether [reparations] are a good idea or deciding who would get them”), and a clarification question, (“from whom [reparations] would be extracted.”)

7. What is the primary function of the rhetorical question in lines 46?

- a. to make an implied statement
- b. to support the central topic of the essay**
- c. to challenge conventional wisdom
- d. to set up a straightforward answer
- e. to correct a common misconception

ANS: B

Rationale: The question, “So how could President Obama untangle the knot?” represents the central conflict, or topic, that the speaker seeks to explore. Rhetorical questions can be used for the other purposes listed above, but the question presented in this context is not of the implied statement type, it does lend itself to simple answers. Instead, it establishes the complex issues reparations that the passage explores.

8. The sentences that describe Mr. Obama’s “mixed feelings about the reparation movement” (lines 48-50) advance the speaker’s argument by

- a. **emphasizing the need to reconcile a major dilemma in addressing reparations**
- b. proposing a counterargument to a mainstream idea about reparations
- c. defining a commonly understood term in a novel way
- d. presenting a call to action
- e. challenging conventional wisdom about who is to blame for slavery in the United States

ANS: A

Rationale: This sentence emphasizes the need to reconcile the dilemma at the heart of reparations: while reparations have theoretical value in terms of morality and apology, the practical matters about individual accountability and shared blame make reparations “unworkable.”

9. The concluding paragraph of the passage builds to a final sentence (lines 56-57) that offers a

- a. question about the next steps
- b. **recommendation about an approach to take**
- c. hypothesis about the culpability for slavery
- d. factual statement about the history of slavery
- e. counterargument against providing reparations to slaves’ ancestors

ANS: B

Rationale: The development in this paragraph builds to the recommendation that citizens must first understand that there is shared responsibility and culpability for the evils of slavery, before making any decisions about what to do about reparations. “...Reaching that understanding is a vital precursor to any just and lasting agreement on the divisive issue of slavery reparations.”