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## African Canadians & African Americans demand reparations for the legacy of slavery

by Alex Reslin Canadian University Press

Members of Canada's Black communities are looking with increasing interest at an idea growing in popularity south of the border — reparations for slavery and for the intensive racism that continues to hurt African-Americans.

The idea dates back to post-Civil War America when there was talk of compensating freed slaves with 40 acres of land and a mule. It never happened. Today, the reparation movement takes many shapes — mostly involving massive spending and changes to social and economic institutions — but what unites it is the desire to address once and for all the structural racism in the United States and Canada.

Last April, the *Village Voice* ran an article which gave a glimpse of what it is like for many Black people to live in the United States. In the article, L.A. police officers spoke anonymously to reporter Marc Cooper shortly after the beating of Rodney King, a Black man, by L.A. police.

"You want to save this city," one of the officers asked. "I say you start out with carpet-bombing, level some buildings, plough all this shit underground and start all over again."

Another officer agreed. "Anything you say along these lines is going to be construed as racism. But I am talking about Black women having 80 per cent illegitimate babies."

Police have turned many Black communities in the U.S. into police states, according to the Chicago-based Task Force to Confront Police Violence. African-Americans are imprisoned at a rate four times higher than in South Africa, according to the Washington-based Sentencing Project.

Middle-class Whites who commit identical crimes often receive much lighter sentences. If caught with drugs, for example, they are often sent to private drug rehab centres.

Since the late 1960s, the number of prisoners in the U.S. has tripled to 1.15 million, a recent Sentencing Project study says. And 45 per cent of these prisoners are Black, even though Black people make up only 12 per cent of the population.

In fact, according to the Task Force, nearly one out of every four Black males between ages 20 and 29 is in prison or on parole, probation or supervision. There are more Black men incarcerated in prisons than in universities.

The condition of health care for Black people is just as depressing. The gap in life expectancy rates between African-Americans and whites has recently widened. The U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services recently reported that Black people have the life expectancy of whites in the early 1950s.

Then there is AIDS. African-Americans account for 30 per cent of the 152 000 AIDS cases to date. AIDS is the leading killer of Black women in the 25-44 age group, according to a recent report by the Task Force to Confront Police Violence.

Liberal politicians and some African-Americans hoped affirmative action would solve these problems. But years of government hiring quotas have left many frustrated with the lack of progress.

"African-American communities are worse off in 1991 than in 1970 if you consider the proportion of the national income they earn compared to whites," said Dr Jamadari Kamara, dean of the University of Massachusetts' College of Public and Community Service, in Boston.

The median income for Black families in the U.S. is about half that of white families. About 10 per cent of all white



people live below the poverty line, compared to 25 per cent of Latinos and 32 per cent of Black people.

The problem with affirmative action is not the idea — which is a good one, according to Kamara — but the way it is enacted as public policy. Over the last 10 years especially, he said, right-wing governments have gutted progressive policies and rolled back any progress that had been made.

"We're being told to pull up our bootstraps instead," Kamara said, referring to a rise in what he called "reactionary rhetoric" against affirmative action and multiculturalism. "That's fine, but if you don't have any bootstraps to begin with, it's not very helpful," he said.

"Over the last 10 years, government regulators have stopped monitoring progress under affirmative action policies; the courts have eroded affirmative action; social policy has disintegrated into a patchwork."

Other critics charge that affirmative action improves the lives of only a minority of African-Americans. Small numbers of Black people have the opportunity to acquire status and better incomes; but the majority of African-Americans continue to suffer from unemployment, racism and police repression. Inner-city neighbourhoods are hurt as members of the new Black middle-class flee to the suburbs, depriving the ghettos of role models and money.

Current American social policies often exacerbate problems in African-American communities because they are applied in a piecemeal way, without any clear goal of improving life for Black people, Kamara said. Instead, what is needed is far-reaching structural change which will address all the problems afflicting African-American communities systematically.

A growing group of African-Americans are seeing just such a wide-ranging structural change in the idea of reparations — government repayment for the years of slavery that still lie at the roots of North American racism.

The American National Bar Association recently released a joint position paper in support of reparations together with the National Conference of Black Lawyers; a 1990 conference in Nigeria sponsored by the Organization of African Unity endorsed reparations and a rescheduling of the foreign debts of African countries as ways to redress slavery and colo-

nialism; last spring, 24 members of Congress sponsored a Bill which would establish a commission to study reparations.

Most of the proposals are concerned with eliminating structural racism in America, instead of merely doling out money. But money is important, too. Estimates of the cost range from \$700 billion to \$4 trillion, to be spent over 20 years or more.

According to Massachusetts Senator Bill Owens, who has been pushing for a state-level reparations law since 1989, the idea of reparations won't go away. "Even if my bill is not heard this year, this issue has received a significant boost. It will only grow as the years go by."

The debate about reparations in Canada is not as advanced as in the U.S. Many groups in Toronto are focusing more on the NDP government's proposed employment equity plan. The bill will likely include mandatory targets for hiring people from four disadvantaged groups — visible minorities, women, people with disabilities and First Nations peoples. As a result, many Black activists are not as interested in the idea of reparations; after all, the idea emerged in the U.S. only after a long period of frustration with government hiring policies.

"People are talking more about immediate problems," said Dudley Laws of Toronto's Black Action Defense Committee. Still, he said, the talk about reparations is picking up, partly because of a revival of interest in the past among Black youth. Today's African-Canadian youth are increasingly interested in African history and cultures, as well as exploring the history of Black people in Canada and the legacy of slavery here, he said.

Interest in reparations is stronger in Montreal's Black communities. "There is a wide sentiment in the Black community in favour of the idea," said Ariel Deluy of the Montreal Black youth group AKA-X.

Montreal Black activists are currently discussing reparations "very actively," according to Alfie Roberts, a long-time local anti-racism activist. An organized campaign on the issue will possibly emerge in the late fall.

At this point, however, African-Canadians in Montreal are in "a state of emergency" because the community's attention is focused on a number of incidents of racism in Montreal this summer, Deluy said.

Deluy said the reparations campaign may be planned to coincide with the 500th anniversary of Christopher Columbus' arrival in the "new world" in 1492. First Nations peoples are planning continent-wide campaigns to debunk the official quinquennial festivities which will take place in January 1992.

According to Deluy, the quinquennial festivals are "pretty outrageous." By some estimates, at least 100 million African people died as slaves in the Americas. "To us celebrating Christopher Columbus is like celebrating the Holocaust for Jews."

Deluy said there is an illusion that there were no slaves in Canada. Recent historical studies have shown, however, that there were as many as 10,000 Black slaves in Canada at the height of slavery. "People are discovering a lot of new names of prominent Canadians who had slaves," Deluy said.

James McGill, founder of McGill university, kept slaves in the early 1800s, for example. Marguerite Bourgeoys, a Quebec nun who lived in the 1600s and was recently canonized by the Vatican, also had a number of Black and Native slaves.

The first Black slaves arrived in Canada in 1606, and the practice continued until the 1830s, according to Dan Philip of the Black Coalition of Quebec, who cited the recent book *Sins of the Fathers* which discusses slavery in Canada.

"Black people didn't come here because they wanted to," Philip said. "After slavery, Black people were left to fend for themselves. Nothing was done to assist them after hundreds of years of exploitation, and this is why we are interested in the idea of reparations."

"In the United States, for all the inequality, at least they recognize the legacy of slavery. In Canada the issue is ignored."