

The crisis of youth violence and the demand for reparations

Written by Dr. Ron Daniels

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The crisis of youth violence and fratricide ripping at the sinews of the fabric of Black communities across this country should intensify the demand for reparations to repair the damage from enslavement and its aftermath. On the surface one might question the relationship between the current crisis and slavery; after all, the enslavement of Africans ended in the 19th century with the Emancipation Proclamation and 14th Amendment.

The answer lies in one of the most neglected aspects of the discussion on reparations, the inter-generational deficits and damage incurred by Africans in America as a consequence of the system of chattel slavery. I emphasize chattel slavery because only in the U.S. was a system of enslavement adopted which reduced human beings to property, to be owned like a "chicken, cow or a horse" as Malcolm put it. This dehumanization included cultural aggression, a concerted effort to take away the identity, institutions, language, music, religion, and wipe out the historical memory of enslaved Africans. A crucial element of the chattel slave system was the quest to de-Africanize the African as a mechanism to engender subservience and facilitate control.

Obviously the dehumanization and de-Africanization processes did not succeed. Our survival and development as Africans on these hostile shores is stark testimony to our resiliency and will as a people. In spite of the assault on our culture and humanity, our forebears forged a new African community in the U.S., built institutions and mustered the resolve to challenge a racist/exploitive system. However, the path from the auction block to the White House has been strewn with the "blood of the slaughtered." We have triumphed despite trials, tribulations and adversity, but it has not been without scars and damage.

One of the most insidious effects of enslavement was the unevenness of the survival and development process due in part to lapses in historical memory and the lack of consistency in what Dr. Maulana Karenga calls "identity, purpose and direction." The continuity of culture and identity served as a foundation for social, economic and political advancement for other ethnic groups that migrated to this country. For African people, however, the assault on culture resulted in discontinuity, disorientation and became an obstacle to community development.

Time and time again during the course of our evolution in America, we have had to rediscover our cultural roots and learn to re-identify ourselves as African people. This is the problem Carter G. Woodson sought to address in his seminal work *The Mis-Education of the Negro*. Whether it was in the early days of the Republic when leaders like Richard Allen and Absalom Jones created parallel institutions clearly identified as "African," the "search for a place" during the deliberations in the "Colored" People's Conventions in the pre-Civil War era, the intense debates on the direction of our people in the Post Reconstruction period, the Nationalism and Pan Africanism of Garvey and the explosion of "new Negro" creativity in the Harlem Renaissance to the era of Black Power and Black consciousness, previous generations have had to address the problem of identity, purpose and direction.

I contend that this disrupted path of survival and development is the direct consequence of the holocaust of enslavement and the destructive experience under the system of chattel slavery. The violence and fratricide afflicting our communities is in part attributable to historical amnesia or the loss of historical memory by significant numbers of Black youth and their parents in contemporary Black America. The social movements of the era of the 60s which strove to

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achieve freedom, justice and equality and an emphasis on pride in self and kind are largely absent from the minds and memories of this generation - let alone a knowledge/awareness of the centuries of struggle African sheroes and heroes waged for our survival and development.

Like my friend Dr. Ramona Edelin, I believe a "cultural offensive" with a focus on African-centered educational processes which reaffirm our identity as African people and challenge us individually and collectively to struggle to rescue and reconstruct our communities in the 21st century is imperative. It will take more than the standard educational, jobs, gang prevention and anti-violence programs to end the crisis of violence and fratricide in Black communities. We must restore historical memory and instill a new sense of identity, purpose and direction among this generation of young people. And, to overcome the recurring pattern of loss and rediscovery of historical memory we must put in place permanent structures, institutions and programs that continually transmit the culture and history of struggle which is responsible for our survival and development.

This is where the demand for reparations becomes crucial. The principal purpose of reparations is to repair the mental, cultural, spiritual and physical damages to a people. The assault on African culture under the system of chattel slavery is clearly a major cause of the recurring loss of memory that has plagued our community. That damage must be repaired. Reparations will enable Africans in America to institute the kind of permanent "cultural offensive" required to heal our communities so that epidemics of self-hating fratricide and violence are a phenomena of the past. Therefore, as we devise strategies to cope with the current crisis, the demand for reparations must be an indispensable part of the plan. America must pay for "taking away our names."

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