

WHAT IS IN YOUR BACKPACK? WE WHO BELIEVE IN FREEDOM CANNOT REST

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Congressman John Conyers, Dr Ron Daniels, fellow panellists, brothers and sisters all, warm greetings from the Caribbean! We have been battered by the raging storms, but we will rise again; and those who left the region infrastructurally weak will also have to shoulder their responsibility and help to repair the damage and clean up the colonial mess.

Congressman Conyers, we are here to give more strength to you for not being weary yet; for keeping HR-40 alive, revising it so that we are not only studying whether reparations are warranted but discussing remedies; remedies on behalf of those ancestors who lost their lives in the anti-slavery and seemingly never-ending decolonial movement and those who live with the legacies. We must invite the spirits of those who have gone before us to occupy the spaces around us this afternoon as we seek for the appeasement of their torture and the redemption of their souls. Our responsibility is not only to mobilize support for HR-40, but also for the global reparation movement, because we have not yet reached the

mountain top where justice and true freedom reside for all regardless of class, race, colour, origin or gender.

I am happy to have been invited to be with you all this afternoon in this Decade for People of African Descent. I speak as a descendant of enslaved African ancestors. I am not uncertain about my personal connection to them. A few days ago, I discovered the name of my great-great grandfather, Alexander Mighty, born in 1829 in St. Catherine and freed in 1834 at six years old, barely escaping the Apprenticeship System. In addition, as a result of today's scientific possibilities, I know that others were kidnapped from the country given the name Cameroon, placed in chains, enslaved and shipped across the Atlantic to the island given the name Jamaica; an island settled by the Tainos; an island stolen from the Tainos by the Spanish and then by the English in 1655; an island that like the others in the Americas, were all captured lands in Jamaican reggae singer Chronixx's artistic proclamation. But also an island where its people have always maintained a liberation ideology and demonstrated an uncompromising opposition to systems of domination, even if they suffered in the process.

Today, we in the Caribbean, the region I represent this afternoon, may have political independence, but pro-colonialism is squeezing our throats so tightly that at times, we cannot breathe. African people are still walking in a circle, so vividly represented in 2015 Man Booker prize winner Marlon James' historical novel, *The*

*Book of Night Women: “Every Negro walks in a circle. Take that and make it what you will. A circle like a sun, a circle like a moon, a circle like bad tidings that seem gone but always comes back.”*¹

That is why we are in the movement, carrying the load of our ancestors. Now, a few years ago, on one of my trips to the USA, I came across an article in *American Way* titled “More than Remembering.” It was by Navy Seal Clint Bruce, who introduced readers to an alternative strategy for the annual Memorial Day. For him, Memorial Day is not only a holiday, but a day that conjures up memories of sacrifice and loss; an opportunity to honour and commemorate.

He explained how some years ago, as he struggled to deal with mixed emotions on Memorial Day, he decided to strap on a backpack and just start walking – or more accurately marching - out of respect for those who had either given or dedicated their lives for the public good. On his march, he encountered a veteran who asked him: “Son, whom are you carrying?” In that moment his project “Carry the Load” was born. Carry the Load – founded by Bruce and Stephen Holley – is a non-profit organization based in Dallas, Texas that seeks to restore the true meaning of Memorial Day, urging Americans to do something to honour those who have sacrificed for their country.

So, this afternoon, I pose the war veteran’s fundamental question to Clint Bruce, to you: whom are you carrying in your backpack? In your storehouse of

memories? As Randall Robinson reminds us, "*memory is the active agent of collective social progress.*" If you should stretch back into the past to retrieve your heroine or hero, whose name would you choose to carry? Whose name would inspire your actions and those of your children and motivate you to achieve social progress and development?

In the Caribbean, we know who our heroes and heroines are; we know whom we are carrying in our back packs. Like you here in the USA, we live everyday with the memory of the suffering of the Indigenous Peoples and the Maroons, who bore the impact of the first assaults of Europeans on their communities. We are carrying the load for Chief Takyi of Jamaica, beheaded for leading a war for liberation in 1760; for Boukman Dutty who inspired the Haitian Revolution before Cecile Fatima, Toussaint, Dessalines and Christophe took up the fight; for Solitude of Guadeloupe, who after the Haitian Revolution and the extension of freedom to Guadeloupe and Martinique, joined in the struggle for lasting freedom in 1802, gaining for herself the designation of heroine of Guadeloupe; for Nanny Grigg of Barbados, who along with Bussa struggled to end one of the greatest crimes against humanity in Barbados in 1816; for Betto Douglas of St. Kitts/Nevis who in 1825 demonstrated the power of hunger strike while in the stocks. For Philda, Queen and Aba of Antigua, and Charlotte, Angelique,

Tranquille and Calypso of Dominica - all recognised as quintessential rebel women who embodied the spirit of Black women's resistance to systems of domination.

We are carrying in our storehouse of memories the travails of all anti-slavery activists from Alida of Suriname who before becoming a Maroon, wove rice into her hair so she would have a source of food in the bush and who also carried weapons of war under her breasts, to Whaunica, called a demon who fomented petticoat rebellions; of all post-slavery activists from Paul Bogle to George Wood who negotiated and fought for rights, respect and reparatory justice within the context of a post-slavery era of racial apartheid; and of all pro-and post-independence activists from Antigua and Barbuda to Trinidad & Tobago; from Marcus Mosiah Garvey to Henry Sylvester Williams and beyond who understood that the legacies of colonialism are still with us and who like Sweet Honey in the Rock who sing Ella's Song proclaim unambiguously that "we who believe in Freedom Cannot Rest Until it Comes."

The people of the Caribbean are in the global movement for reparatory justice, acting on the knowledge and memory of our ancestors' experiences to engage in the politics of memory, advocating for reparatory justice. The pioneers were enslaved Africans all over the Caribbean, who knew their illegal entrapment in Babylon was a violation of their human rights. In the immediate post-slavery period, the newly emancipated took up the struggle, enforcing ideas of moral

economy in their efforts to secure land and decent wages for decent work. The 1930s labour protests across the Caribbean all continued this search for reparatory justice as the governing classes sought either to maintain slavery, or recreate the mentalities and practices of slavery in the post-slavery period, and the masses refused to cooperate in their project. The post-1930s advocates for freedom, democracy and reparatory justice were the Rastafari, whose claim was for African redemption and repatriation. The Rastafari laboured in the vineyard, suffering the indignity of being regarded as a lunatic fringe until joined by NGOs, academics, civil society and even by regional governments.

THE Caribbean Community (CARICOM INITIATIVE)

CARICOM entered the movement as a bloc in July 2013, when at its 34th Heads of Government meeting, it agreed to establish a CARICOM Reparations Commission (CRC) and National Committees on Reparations in each country to establish the moral, ethical and legal case for the payment of reparations by the former colonial European countries, to the nations and people of the Caribbean Community for native genocide, the transatlantic trafficking of enslaved Africans, deceptive Indian indenture and racialised post-slavery societies, the legacies of which remain. The CRC, headed by Prof Hilary Beckles, comprises the Chairs of the National Committees, about 12 now, and a representative of the UWI, reporting directly to a Prime Ministerial Sub-Committee on Reparations, chaired by the

Prime Minister of Barbados, the Hon. Freundel Stuart. The CRC and the National Committees have all been engaged in a range of activities designed to build public awareness of the issue of reparatory justice, especially among the youth. Right now there is a baton relay – “run for reparation” – going right across the region.

The Centre for Reparation Research at the University of the West is also an outcome of the CARICOM initiative. That Centre was established this year and will be launched on October 10 and we hope many of you will come down to Jamaica to support us on that historic day; historic because as far as can be ascertained, this is the only Research Centre of its kind in the academy, even though Universities /cities with a slavery past are increasingly establishing Institutes/Centres to research slavery and its legacies. The University of Amsterdam does have a War Reparations Centre, but it does not cover the anti-slavery and post-slavery wars of liberation in the African Diaspora.

The Centre for Reparation Research will support the CARICOM Reparatory Justice Movement, build awareness and conduct research which will advance the claim to Europeans for reparations for native genocide, African enslavement, deceptive indenture, colonialism and its legacies. The CCR will primarily be motivated by two other interlocking objectives: to broadly foster awareness around the lasting and adverse consequences of colonialism in the Caribbean, and offer practical solutions to halting and reversing them. Both these objectives grow out of

an understanding that many of the injustices and adverse effects of colonialism in the Caribbean did not end with formal independence and still need to be addressed and repaired. The over-arching strategy for public engagement and research is the Ten Point Action Plan crafted by the members of the CARICOM Reparation Commission.

The 10 Point Action Plan

The Ten Point Action Plan begins with a restatement of the rationale for the reparation movement in the region, with the CRC asserting that the region's indigenous and African descended communities who are the victims of Crimes against Humanity in the forms of genocide, enslavement, human trafficking, and racial apartheid have a legal right to reparatory justice, and that those who committed these crimes, and who have been enriched by the proceeds of these crimes, have a reparatory case to answer. The plan recognizes the special role and status of European governments in this regard, being the legal bodies that instituted the framework for developing and sustaining these crimes and served as the primary agencies through which slavery based enrichment took place, and as national custodians of criminally accumulated wealth. The Plan calls for:

Full Formal apology rather than a statement of regret that assumes no responsibility and commits to no repair for the crimes against humanity;
repatriation to Africa for those who desire it; an Indigenous Peoples

development programme; the establishment of cultural institutions; plans for addressing the public health crisis; illiteracy eradication; the development of an African knowledge programme; psychological rehabilitation; technology transfer, located within the right to development framework and **debt cancellation** - on the basis that the Caribbean governments that emerged from slavery and colonialism have inherited the massive crisis of community poverty and institutional unpreparedness for development. As the late Guyanese historian, Walter Rodney said, Europe was developed while Africa and the Caribbean remained under- and undeveloped. European States and individuals benefitted from the outset from the wealth generated by the Maafa.

CONCLUSION:

Of course, there is no certainty that we will see the fulfillment of the struggle for reparatory justice in our lifetime. The European Governments have so far refused to meet any of the demands sent to them in a 2016 letter from the Chair of the CARICOM Prime Ministerial Sub-committee on Reparations (PMSC), Hon Freundel Stuart of Barbados, acting on behalf of the other members of the PMSC and Heads of CARICOM, and ultimately the people of the Caribbean. The historic letter set out the evidentiary basis for the Caribbean reparatory justice movement and the reasons such countries were singled out for claims of redress.

Former UK Prime Minister, David Cameron, in his response of April 2016 reminded CARICOM of the UK's longstanding position that "the British Government does not believe that reparations are the answer". Spain suggested that it has done enough by contributing to the Permanent Memorial to Slavery at the UN in New York; and that through the Spanish Development Cooperation has developed educational programmes for schools "that teach children and young people the history of Spanish presence in America, inclusive of the good and the bad aspects"; and President Hollande stated that "History cannot be erased. We do not erase it. It cannot be the subject of transactions at the end of an accounting exercise which would be, at all points, impossible to establish". This is ironic, as Emancipation was made a financial transaction with the £20M paid to planters.

But they will be written to again; for reparation is not an act of begging. It is a right: Jose Marti summed it up best: "*rights are to be taken, not requested; seized, not begged for*"². Sir Ellis Clarke, Trinidadian Government's UN representative to a sub-committee of the Committee on Colonialism in 1964, put it well: "*An administering power...is not entitled to extract for centuries all that can be got out of a colony and when that has been done to relieve itself of its obligations...Justice requires that reparation be made to the country that has suffered the ravages of colonialism before that country is expected to face up to the problems and difficulties that will inevitably beset it upon independence.*"

Ta-Nehisi Coates' view is that reparation, like emancipation and independence, will only come when there is a threat to white supremacy. He holds that *“It became impossible ...to think about emancipation without the threat presented by disunion, to talk about the civil-rights movement without the ghost of Nazis or the Cold War. It began to seem to me that black politics was the wind at the American window. At rare moments the window opened and black people pushed through. The window seemed to open for one reason and one reason alone—some threat to white interests becoming intolerable.”*³

In this formulation, it is not enough to be hopeful that good will triumph over evil because, *“Hope” [might be] an overrated force in human history; but “Fear” did not.*⁴ So what will be the wind at the American and Caribbean window that will open up, create fear among former colonizers to enable the cause of reparatory justice to push through, especially in the face of the tenacity of white supremacy and the tenacity of injustice? I do not have the answer; all I know is that the struggle will continue until there is freedom and justice. Justice Repairs all Crimes!! So we who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes.

¹ Marlon James, *The Book of Night Women* (New York: Riverhead, 2010), p. 32

² (*Inside the Monster, 1975 trans by Elinor Randall: 27*).

³ Ta-Nehisi Coates, “Hope and the Historian”, *The Atlantic*, December 10, 2015, Retrieved from <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/12/hope-and-the-historian/419961/>

⁴ Coates, “Hope and the Historian”.