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BLACK
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Commentary, analysis and investigations
on issues affecting African Americans
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**Think Piece
Unpaid Debt=Anger
By Wilson Riles
BlackCommentator.com Guest Commentator**

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At the root of any discussion of racial-relations/slavery/white-supremacy is the conundrum of The Debt: what (if anything) is owed, who is owed, how much is owed, how to collect, how to distribute and whom to distribute to, etc. The majority of people in the U.S. are stuck on the first of this set of questions. White minds calculate an answer that says that the debt has been paid and nothing is owed. Whites weigh the gift of freedom from slavery versus the number of Caucasian people that died in the war to end slavery – more than 600,000 if you count both sides of the Civil War conflict. This majority is entangled in the urban legend [\[i\]](#) that the Civil War was about slavery specifically. For whites, the conclusion of the Civil War adds up to slavery paid for. To their eyes, discrimination was/is paid for with anti-discrimination laws, the Voting Rights Act, Affirmative Action, welfare, and the negative consequences of crime. They say, "Just look at the success of Oprah Winfrey, Colin Powell, Condoleezza Rice, Bill Cosby," and other lucky black folks and superstars. "Look what some African Americans can do...nothing is owed!" If Obama wins, he will be added to this list and nothing will change.

Blacks slice those balance books at a longitudinal angle rather than at a contemporaneous angle. The black view demonstrates that phrase "the past isn't past." Their view is through the depths of the injury. Blacks count the loss of the contribution of a great mass of humanity that totals more than twenty million souls. They count the loss of earned equity and the over-writing of essential African cultural building blocks versus the resultant distribution through the population of economic

wealth as compared with those groups who have lived in this country of the United States as long as African Americans have. In other words, all populations of human beings that are equitably treated (including equitable justice) would have similar distributions of wealth, given similar periods and given a cultural milieu that is, at least, neutral - if The Debt was truly paid. We are "all created equal," right? Blacks know that differences in effort, creativity, and bravery are not the reason for the prosperity differences.

Some crimes have no statute of limitations and regardless of the opportunities and well-being of the victim or the descendants of the victim, justice still requires accountability. Blacks see segregated communities that are not "gated" enclaves, mis-education, and misappropriated governmental resources. Starting from an equitable "starting line" **today** will not make up for generations of stolen lives and mal-accumulated material and social assets. Blacks see a money-weighted electoral system that disadvantages them and bends the government to favor the status quo, a status quo that is weighted with the encrustation of counting Africans as 3/5 of a person who could not even cast that 3/5 vote fraction nor have standing in the courts. Blacks point to persistent poverty unalleviated by any previous efforts, and, most particularly, an unjust criminal justice system that herds their youth onto the slippery slope of criminality at an early age. They see continued discrimination in hiring, promotion and college entrance; and they see, last but not least, environmental racism (Katrina).

This is evidence of The Debt that persists despite any law that is on the books. That adds up to The Debt that is not just unpaid and not just a check, marked insufficient funds, but also a continued piling-up of The Debt and persistent blindness to the consequences. That **should** make people angry. Only those without the ability to feel empathy for a human target of injustice would not understand that anger. That anger grows when the victims of the crimes are blamed for their deficits or when their very being, physical or cultural, is blamed. Feelings of shock and paranoid fear from displays of African American anger will arise in those who are blind or in denial about The Debt.

African American culture is a wondrous, life-saving, reactionary construction to slavery and discrimination. African American culture is forged in the "manifest destiny," "chosen people" expression of cultural oppression; that is from where black cultural intensity arises including the prophetic tradition of the Black Church. Black culture offers black mental survival. It is different from the majority European American culture. African American culture has deep, dark roots with certain African tribal cultures that squeeze out Gospel, Blues, Jazz, and what Aimé Césaire called Negritude, pushed up through the weight of this amalgamation of European culture that is falsely called "normal" American culture. Despite the constraints, Blacks excel in all arenas; truth be told. It is, however, in those cultural spaces where the cost of entry is low, the rules are relatively clear, and without bias - such as in some sports fields - that blacks focus and excel in great numbers.

These are the precipitating elements of this Debt: an insufficiently checked historical momentum of racism, the structural rigidity of U.S. societal institutions, and the ubiquitous, mostly unrecognized weight of white supremacist cultural mores (traced to the foundations of U.S. and European nationality). This Debt has been visited on most

people-of-color. From the very beginning of contact with the American continent, when Christopher Columbus encountered the Arawaks on the island of Haiti, The Debt was most egregiously visited on Native Americans, the "first people" from which this land was stolen by acts of genocide and many, many treaty violations. It was rained on Chinese and Japanese immigrants from the time of the building of the Transcontinental Railroad, to the ghettoization into Chinatowns, to the World War II internment. The Debt is owed to those who migrate from our South American neighboring countries, whose home countries have been devastated by U.S. imperialism. The Debt is also owed to poor white people who are collaterally damaged by the products of institutional white supremacy, of which they might be the most ardent supporters.

Blacks say that balanced books and forgiveness are available with reparations (repair) and change. Justice is more than an apology (which has not been forth coming except from a tiny number of U.S. institutions). We are told by Biblical sources that redemption is only achievable through actual change. Once it is agreed that The Debt is owed, the other questions of to whom, how, and from where resources for repair and recompense are gathered, properly comes to the fore. Jumping to these questions first is like going to the sentencing trial prior to the completion of the convicting trial; this tends to retard the whole process of resolution. The Debt accumulation crime must also be adjudicated in a restorative justice context rather than in a retributive justice context. This is not about vengeance. This is about repairing and building community. If we are to be one nation, one family, then the actions we take, based upon agreement on The Debt, must be to repair all our weakened and broken parts.

Clearly, this would entail rooting out the institutional biases that militate against non-European (white) cultural adepts, the poor, those who have criminal records, and/or have limited education. With ALL the land and resources that have been stolen, there should be no homeless person in the U.S.; resolving that tragedy would take only a tiny, tiny fraction of a percent of the owed Debt that is in the U.S. treasury. Let's start there! In some sense, we must move toward a Marshall Plan for poor urban and rural areas, universal health care, universal access to college, and many other actions. However, the discussion of actions to take to accomplish change and repair - a discussion in which everyone should take part - will not and should not happen until there is agreement that The Debt is owed. Any talk about gains through merit rings hollow when folks luxuriate in gains earned through genocide, theft, slavery, and discrimination.

[\[i\]](#) The Civil War was about the balance of power between white males in the North and white males in the South – read the actual language of the Emancipation Proclamation and Lincoln's response to Horace Greeley on this question. The Emancipation Proclamation does not put an end to slavery everywhere – not even everywhere in the South. It only frees slaves in those parts of the South where the Union army was fighting. It leaves the slave system intact in those parts of the South that were not fighting. Neither does the 13th Amendment end all slavery; it allows for legal slavery in prisons.

BlackCommentator.com Guest Commentator, Wilson Riles, has been serving the


people of Oakland and the Bay Area in countless ways. He was the Regional Director of the American Friends Service Committee for over nine years and administered a \$1.4 million budget supporting programs which addressed issues of economic justice in the African American community; non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, the plight of farm workers, homelessness, progressive reform of the criminal justice system, Native American and Asian Pacific Islander community concerns, and youth empowerment. Click [here](#) to contact Mr. Riles.

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