DECADES OF PSYCHOSOMATIC TRAUMA FOR PEOPLE OF AFRICAN DESCENT

WHY SHOULD WE KEEP TALKING ABOUT IT?

Born into a modest and militant Haitian family, **Darlène Lozis** was introduced early to social activism. Darlène works at the Public Service Alliance of Canada, as the national coordinator of oppression prevention. She lives with her family in the National Capital Region. Her own activism, as a young adult, began consciously in Port-au-Prince, Haiti around 1997, with *Les servantes de Dieu* (the maidservants of God), an organization whose goal was to guide and support street children (girls and boys) aged between 6 and 17 years old. Darlène has volunteered with several local and national organizations: CALACS, Centraide Outaouais, Jaku Konbit and Canada Haiti Action Network, among others.

Since the great MAAFA on the Kamita continent, the Kémit people are doing their utmost to survive while at the same time trying to come to terms with the burden imposed on them and which connects them with their fellow human beings, some of whom were formerly their tormentors.

These psychosomatic traumas, experienced, rarely discussed and in some respects even avoided, have serious consequences both for Afro-descendants as well as for the descendants of former settlers. The reasons behind the failure to come to grips with the lived experience and eventual healing of the descendants of settlers and Africans are many. On both sides, the history has been obscured, whether consciously or not. We do not intend to dwell on these reasons here, as they are multiple and will not serve our present interest.

However, we consider it necessary, even imperative, to recount the sequelae, that have thus far been minimized, but that have had a very serious impact on the health and psyche of Afro-descendants throughout the world. We will highlight three aspects that are relevant and fundamental to the necessary process of healing, so that we can combine rhetoric with action.

COLLECTIVE WOUNDS

The first consists in recognizing the collective wounds that resulted from and are intrinsically tied to post-colonial traumas. Here we refer to the fact that, as a result of past wounds, the future of all people of African and Aboriginal

descent is marked by indelible scars. Like it or not, the colonial past defines both their social integration and their present socio-economic situations.

Sociological research clearly demonstrates this and indicates that there is still much work to be done to remedy the discrimination, harassment and socio-economic insecurity that Afro-descendants experience. Beyond these physical and psychological prejudices, racialized people still feel obliged to defend and justify their precariousness on a regular basis, too often misunderstood and minimized in political debates. Being forced to endure such discrimination on a daily basis leads some Afro-descendants to turn their back on their reality and their identity, in order to avoid being socially stigmatized.

Others, on the other hand, do everything possible to educate, inform, conduct scientific research to document the past and present experiences of racialized groups, with a view to restoring truth and reconciliation, wherever there is an opportunity to do so. Some intellectuals are convinced that information campaigns have the power to play a role in the collective healing process, since these efforts are aimed at the entire world population. The idea is also to remove the misplaced guilt of some Afro-descendants over the transatlantic slave trade that endangered several African societies. Indeed, this misplaced guilt is generated by the deliberate misinformation spread by reactionary and racist groups. Their desire to undermine the claims of oppressed groups raises the following question: what is there to gain from the unconscionable exclusion of some members of our society, when this exclusion harms not only the groups in question but their very ability to build a better future for generations to come?

There can be no doubt that history must serve as a basis for collective understanding and healing. By opting for a frank and open social discussion, we ensure a better understanding of the poverty of racialized groups, their current needs and the appropriate way to remedy their socio-economic precariousness. The United Nations has understood the urgency of rectifying history and advocating for international dialogue by proclaiming the International Decade for People of African Descent in General Assembly resolution 68/237, to be observed from 2015 to 2024. This sets the right tone for Western Governments and, in so doing, makes possible recognition on an international scale of the realities lived by Afro-descendants and their ancestors, realities that have been repeatedly highlighted by historians, researchers, intellectuals and racialized communities around the world.

Several experts, including psychologist Linda James-Myers, explain how difficult it is for black people, who are forced to deal on a daily basis with hidden, multiple, compounded and ongoing discriminatory attitudes based on intersecting factors such as age, gender, language, religion, political opinion, social origin, disability and other forms of prejudice. It is vital to make an account of these racist acts against blacks, rooted in ignorance and the denial of historical facts. Wherever school curricula take account of both the realities of discrimination and the diverse and rich contributions made by Afro-descendants to Western societies, we can consider ourselves to be participating in a real collective effort at inclusion and the building of a promising future.

HEALING OF THE SOUL

Second, we must define and identify the tools that are essential to a genuine healing of the collective soul. By soul, we mean the state of mind of the racialized person who has been a victim of racism on an institutional and/or individual basis. Without this psychosomatic repair, even the resilient individual will have difficulty confronting the demands of his/her society.

We address this issue in a way that draws inspiration from the therapeutic, scientific philosophy of those African Ancestors who believed, and with good reason, that healing is only possible when we honour the Nature's fundamental principle – that the healing of all beings must be essentially three-dimensional. Psychological renewal becomes a reality on the condition that one heals the body, the spirit (soul) and the environment of the subject, caught in the quagmire of mental distress. In this context, genuine social change is dependent on ensuring the healing of marginalized groups, social redress, recognition of the contributions of these groups to the socio-economic development of societies that have benefited from their presence, and reconciliation, through institutional programmes aimed at restoring social justice.

This doctrine, which dates back to time immemorial, is at the heart of all individual and collective recovery. It is imperative, therefore, that we ensure that this social awakening, this cultural change, is manifest in the most minor decision of the state, in the judicial system, in the educational field, etc.

ADDRESSING DISCRIMINATION AND INEQUALITIES

Thirdly, historical recognition is not enough; appropriate social measures, public consultations to better identify the challenges faced by members of minority groups, the collection of disaggregated data to grasp the extent of racism in Canadian society, among other things, are obviously required. A number of research projects highlight the inequalities that racialized communities face on a daily basis. Indeed, all the studies converge in one direction: people of African descent continue to have limited participation in the political sphere, and access to influential positions in major public and private institutions. We would add that both national and international studies highlight the limited access to adequate

housing, social security and quality health services, as well as the overrepresentation of black and indigenous men in correctional settings, and of their youth in juvenile institutions, exacerbated by racial profiling.

What can be done about these issues? In spite of these many social obstacles, it is important to focus on the numerous studies that have been conducted and the coordinated actions carried out by community groups, citizens' groups, and activist groups all calling for deep reflection, towards bringing about change for the groups who continue to be victims of racism. In addition, the International Decade for People of African Descent has prompted some Western governments to review their policies and programmes in support of racialized groups. Canada has moved in this direction at both the provincial and federal levels. Municipalities have also committed to collecting data that can help understand the extent of racial profiling, for example. Other initiatives are underway to understand the needs of incarcerated racialized people. Interventions are multiple and ongoing, though they have not yet succeeded in transforming the discriminatory system we have been navigating for decades. The slow pace is understandable, as any real social change requires a serious collective reassessment that shakes things up. An enduring political will, brought about by the tenacity of marginalized groups and their allies, will ultimately make this social change possible.

Our societies are continuously evolving, customs are quietly changing, but raising social awareness remains a necessary and never-ending endeavour. We are aware that perfection is utopian, however, the desire to move society forward to create an inclusive, just and equitable community must become a dream to be shared by all, the ultimate goal.

We must continue to keep a close eye on the initiatives undertaken by our politicians, legislators, private and community decision-makers to make the dream come true. We must insist on better integration, on providing a fair chance for future generations. Incarcerating black youth in an oppressive system, while depriving them of the necessary tools and of hope for a potentially better future, inevitably ensures their decline and acts as an impediment to the socio-economic development of racialized communities.

We conclude this essay with the wise words of Martin Luther King:

> "Today, in the darkness of the world and in hope, I affirm my faith in the future of humanity. I refuse to believe that present circumstances render men incapable of making a better earth. I refuse to share the opinion of those who claim that man is so captive in the night that the dawn of peace and brotherhood can never become a reality. I believe that truth and love, without conditions, will indeed have the last word. Life, even if temporarily defeated, is always stronger than death. I firmly believe that there is still hope for a bright morning, I believe that peaceful kindness will one day become the law. Every man will be able to sit under his fig tree, in his vineyard, and no one will have any reason to be afraid."

A better world is possible, but only if we desire it to be so.