

## American Indian Boarding Healing Project

During the 19<sup>th</sup> century and into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, American Indian children were forcibly abducted from their homes to attend Christian boarding schools as a matter of state policy. The policy of boarding schools again demonstrate the links between sexual violence and state violence. Sexual, physical and emotional violence was rampant. This system was later imported to Canada in the form of the residential school system. Recently, the International Human Rights Association of American Minorities has issued a report which documents the involvement of mainline churches and the federal government in the murder of over 50,000 Native children through the Canadian residential school system. The list of offenses committed by church officials include murder by beating, poisoning, hanging, starvation, strangulation, and medical experimentation. In addition, the report found that church clergy, police, and business and government officials were involved in maintaining pedophile rings using children from residential schools. The grounds of several schools are also charged with containing unmarked graveyards of children who were murdered, particularly children killed after being born as a result of rapes of Native girls by priests and other church officials. While some churches in Canada have taken some minimal steps towards addressing its involvement in this genocidal policy, churches in the U.S. have not. Because the worst of the abuses happened to an older generation, there is simply not the same level of documentation or vocal outcry against boarding school abuses.

As a result of boarding school policies, there is now an epidemic of child sexual abuse in Native communities. However, because of the shame attached to abuse, there has been no space to address this problem. Consequently, child abuse passes from one generation to the next. This project becomes the entry way to address child sexual abuse. By framing abuse, not primarily as an example of individual and community dysfunctionality, but as the continuing effect of human rights abuses perpetrated by state policy, we may take the shame away from talking about abuse and provide the space for communities to address the problem and heal.

By framing the U.S. as accountable for boarding school abuses, it provides an opportunity for native peoples to demand that the U.S. begin providing adequate funding for healing services Native survivors of boarding school abuses. It could also be used to pressure the U.S. to support language and cultural revitalization programs to reverse the effects of boarding schools. It is critically important now to make demands, because the U.S. government is not only not making progressing towards instituting needed policies, it is actually going backwards. The U.S. is cutting tribally-controlled education and social services programs, and state governments are increasingly supporting “English-only” laws which threaten the survival of indigenous languages.

The Boarding School Healing project, a coalition of several organizations around the country, seeks to document these abuses so that Native communities can begin healing from boarding school abuses and demand justice from the U.S. government and churches. This project will entail the following components: 1) healing; 2) education; 3) documentation; 4) accountability. It is our goal not to replicate the strategies in Canada which have depended on individual lawsuits, but to build a political movement that calls on the U.S. to provide redress for the human rights abuses perpetrated by boarding school policies.

This project is located in South Dakota as the beginning point of our work. Groups currently involved in the project include: The South Dakota Coalition Against Sexual and Domestic Violence, Tribal Policy Institute, Indigenous Women's Network, American Indian Law Alliance, First Nations North and South, Ka Lahui Hawai'i, Seventh Generation Fund, Incite! Women of Color Against Violence, the Center for Human Rights Education, and the Indian Desk of the United Church of Christ. In collaboration with the South Dakota Coalition, we have begun training programs in the areas of healing, documentation, legal/political strategies, and community education, so that reservation communities can be fully aware of their options and can be empowered to determine the various strategies of the project.

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Reparations and the Question of Land  
by Andrea Smith

“You can have the mule; but the forty acres are ours.”

Pamela Kingfisher (Cherokee) in a dialogue between indigenous and African descendants over the issues of reparations at the UN Conference Against Racism

Pamela Kingfisher's comment encapsulates the tension between indigenous peoples and peoples of African descent over the issues of reparations. Although there are a wide variety of demands articulated under the banner of “reparations,” the common demand that African Americans and other peoples of color be given land by the U.S. government is generally opposed by indigenous peoples who argue that the U.S. government has no land to give anyone. At the NGO Preparatory meeting for last year's United Nations Conference on Racism, in Quito, Ecuador, both Roma and African-descendant groups called for “self-determination over their ancestral landbases in the Americas.” Of course, indigenous peoples took issue with this demand as it implicitly denied indigenous title to these same land bases. Native activist Sherry Wilson describes the similar tensions that have existed between Native activists organizations and the Republic of New Afrika which calls for land title in the U.S. to be transferred to New Afrikans. Her comments are provoked by her reaction to a representative of the Republic of New Afrika who stood up at a preparatory meeting for the WCAR that took place in Atlanta, Georgia (November 2000) and said: “Welcome to the Republic of New Afrika,” which was a shock to the Cherokee peoples in attendance at that conference who see Georgia as their ancestral land, despite the policies of relocation that displaced many Cherokee to Oklahoma in the 1800s. States Wilson:

I don't think any other people of color would object to reparations who were victims of slavery. I certainly would support that. I just don't think it's going to be somebody else's land though. That's like participating in the oppression of another person (personal interview).

Despite these tensions, it would seem that given the mass land thefts that have taken place against indigenous nations, Native peoples would be demanding reparations of their own. However, once again another prevalent demand of reparations movement presents a barrier to indigenous peoples participating in this movement; that is, the demand of financial compensation to individual victims or descendants of victims of slavery or other forms of oppression, or sometimes just financial compensation. To see why this issue would be of concern, it is important to focus on the particular nature of land-based struggles of Native peoples in the U.S. During the 1950s, the U.S. government pursued the policy of “termination” against Native nations, which was designed to terminate the tribal status of Native peoples and hence end their collective control over their lands. One component of this policy was the strategy of compensation for outstanding land claims. In 1946, the U.S. formed the Indian Claims Commission, which was designed to adjudicate land claims. In its award, the Claims Commission could deduct the monies the U.S. government spent in funding the military to massacre that tribe or kidnap the children from the tribe to put them into boarding school. But the most significant problem with the Claims Commission is that compensation could only take the form of compensation; lost lands could not be restored to indigenous control. So tribes have often found that simply by the act of bringing their claims to the Commission, they have given up land title in the eyes of the U.S. government. Thus, the basic premise of the Claims was to settle all land claims by providing financial compensation in order to free the U.S. government from any ongoing treaty obligations between it and Native nations, further consolidating of Native lands under U.S. government control.

A case in point is the Western Shoshone who filed a claim with the Claims Commission to have title to their lands guaranteed under the 1868 Treaty of Ruby Valley respected. At stake is the fact that the Nevada Test Site is currently sited on the 24.5 million acres of land guaranteed to the Shoshone under this treaty. At this site, there have already been at least 650 nuclear explosions on Western Shoshone land. Fifty percent of these underground tests have leaked

radiation into the atmosphere.<sup>1</sup> A lawyer, Ernest Wilkinson, interested in acquiring a substantial attorneys' fee, encouraged the Shoshone to take the case before the Commission. The Commission settled the claim at \$21 million because supposedly they lost their land in 1872 and should be compensated at 1872 prices - although the land itself is worth more than \$41 billion. The Shoshone tried to fire Wilkinson, but the BIA retains his services, and earned \$2.5 million for services rendered. Thus, since then the Shoshone have continued to retain control over their lands, but the courts have ruled that since they brought the case before the ICC, they have lost title to their land.<sup>2</sup>

A huge blow to their struggle was the recent congressional act to locate a permanent high-level nuclear waste repository on Yucca mountain, which is sacred to the Western Shoshone. This land is also part of the same territory covered by the Treaty of Ruby Valley. Yucca Mountain is located on an active volcanic zone. Kiloton bombs are also exploded nearby, thus increasing the risks of radioactive leakage.<sup>3</sup> In addition, many nuclear facilities had closed down because there was no permanent site for nuclear wastes. However, Bush has used the war on terror as a pretext to increase energy resource extraction in the U.S. by arguing that the U.S. needs to harness its domestic energy reserves to support the war on "terror." Thus, by opening Yucca Mountain, the Bush administration has opened the way for nuclear facilities to re-open. It is important to remember that the vast majority of energy resources are on indigenous lands, and almost all uranium mining takes place on or near Native lands. So whenever we hear the rhetoric of developing U.S. domestic energy resources, we are hearing a veiled attack against Native sovereignty. But ultimately, this recent decision will not just impact indigenous peoples, but all

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<sup>1</sup>Valerie Tallman, "Tribes Speak Out on Toxic Assault," Lakota Times, December 18, 1991.

<sup>2</sup>See further description of this case in Ward Churchill, Struggle for the Land. Monroe: Common Courage Press, 1993.

<sup>3</sup>Valerie Tallman, "Tribes Speak Out On Toxic Assault," Lakota Times, December 18, 1991.

of us. The proposed repository on Yucca mountain would receive nuclear wastes throughout the nation. Only five states would not be impacted by the transportation of high-level radioactive wastes. With up to 4,000 shipments of radioactive waste crossing the nation annually, trucking industry statistics reveal that up to 50 accidents per year could occur during the 30 year period that nuclear waste would stream to Yucca Mountain.<sup>4</sup>

Thus the reluctance to join a movement where a common demand is financial compensation on an individual basis is a cause of concern for Native peoples. What is at the heart of the issue is that no matter how much financial compensation the U.S. may give, such compensation does not ultimately end the colonial relationship between the United States and indigenous nations. What is at the heart of the struggle for native sovereignty is control over land and resources rather than financial compensation for past and continuing wrongs.

Despite these tensions, however, it is critical that indigenous peoples be part of a global movement for reparations. If we think about reparations less in terms of monies as compensation for social oppression, and more about a movement to refigure the neo-colonial economic relationships between the U.S. and people of color, indigenous peoples, and Third World countries, we see how critical this movement could be to all of us. The articulation of reparations as a movement to cancel the Third World debt, for instance, is instructive in thinking of strategies that could fundamentally alter these relations. As the history of neo-colonialism shows us, we cannot achieve political sovereignty without economic sovereignty. And certainly one of the primary reasons why the demands of sovereignty by indigenous nations are often reluctant to go as far as political independence from the U.S. is because indigenous peoples know that without a solid economic infrastructure, which the U.S. government has systematically destroyed for most tribes (stereotypes about Indian gaming notwithstanding), political independence in and of itself could contribute to further economic devastation. Thus a successful struggle for sovereignty must incorporate a struggle for reparations.

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<sup>4</sup>Tallman, op cit.

Despite these tensions that have historically prevented indigenous peoples from joining the reparations movement on a large scale, there is currently an opportunity to further dialogue and develop alliances between indigenous peoples and other peoples of color for this movement. This opportunity is developing struggle among indigenous peoples in the U.S. to demand reparations from both Christian churches and the U.S. government for boarding school abuses.

During the 19<sup>th</sup> century and into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, American Indian children were forcibly abducted from their homes to attend Christian boarding schools as a matter of state policy. The stated rationale of the policy was to “save the child; kill the Indian.” That is, U.S. colonizers, in their attempt to end Native control over their landbases, generally came up with two policies to address the “Indian problem.” Some sectors advocated outright physical extermination of Native peoples. Meanwhile, the “friends” of the Indians, advocated cultural rather than physical genocide. Separate children from their parents, inculcate Christianity and white cultural values into them, and encourage/force them to assimilate them into the dominant society. Of course, because of the racism in the U.S, they could never really assimilate into the dominant society. Hence the consequence of this policy was to assimilate them into the bottom of the socio-economic ladder of the larger society.

Attendance at these boarding schools was mandatory, and children were forcibly taken from their homes for the majority of the year. They were forced to worship as Christians and speak English (native traditions and languages were prohibited).<sup>5</sup> Sexual/physical/emotional violence was rampant. Even when teachers were charged with abuse, boarding schools refused to investigate. In the case of just one teacher, John Boone at the Hopi school, FBI investigations in 1987 found that he had sexually abused over 142 boys, but that the principal of that school had

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<sup>5</sup>U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs, "Rules for Indian Schools," Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, 1890, Washington DC, cxlvi, cl-clii, cited in Frederick Binder and David M. Reimers, eds., The Way We Lived, (Lexington: D.C. Heath and Company, 1982), p. 59.

not investigated any allegations of abuse.<sup>6</sup> Despite the epidemic of sexual abuse in boarding schools, the Bureau of Indian Affairs did not issue a policy on reporting sexual abuse until 1987, and did not issue a policy to strengthen the background checks of potential teachers until 1989.<sup>7</sup> While not all Native peoples see their boarding school experiences as negative, it is generally the case that much if not most of the current dysfunctionality in Native communities can be traced to the boarding school era.

This system was later imported to Canada in the form of the residential school system. Recently, the International Human Rights Association of American Minorities has issued a report which documents the involvement of mainline churches and the federal government in the murder of over 50,000 Native children through the Canadian residential school system. The list of offenses committed by church officials include murder by beating, poisoning, hanging, starvation, strangulation, and medical experimentation. Torture was used to punish children for speaking Aboriginal languages. Children were involuntarily sterilized. In addition, the report found that church clergy, police, and business and government officials were involved in maintaining paedophile rings using children from residential schools.<sup>8</sup> The grounds of several schools are also charged with containing unmarked graveyards of children who were murdered, particular children killed after being born as a result of rapes of Native girls by priests and other church officials in the school.<sup>9</sup> While some churches in Canada have taken some minimal steps

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<sup>6</sup>"Goodbye BIA, Hello New Federalism," American Eagle Vol. 2 No. 6, December 1994, p. 19. Incidentally, after the allegations of abuse became public, the BIA merely provided a counselor for the abused children, who then used his sessions with them to write a book.

<sup>7</sup>"Child Sexual Abuse in Federal Schools", The Ojibwe News, January 17, 1990, p. 8.

<sup>8</sup>Alan Huges, New Internationalist, January- February 1999.

<sup>9</sup>Suzanne Fournier, "Gatherers Mark School's Grim Litany of Death," The Province, June 4, 1996.

towards addressing its involvement in this genocidal policy, churches in the U.S. have not. Because the worst of the abuses happened to an older generation, there is simply not the same level of documentation or vocal outcry against boarding school abuses.

However, a boarding school project in the U.S. has recently begun this year to document these abuses and demand accountability from the U.S. government and churches. These project, which is a collaborative project involving many indigenous organizations, is taking this opportunity to learn from the experiences of our Canadian brothers and sisters in order to develop a movement that will further our sovereignty struggles. This issue is one in which churches are directly implicated. And in fact, Canadian churches are now currently threatened with bankruptcy over the lawsuits that have been filed against them. Consequently, the stance they have taken is that Native peoples should be content with an apology and nothing else. But as Gerry Oleman, boarding school activist states, churches have two choices, financial bankruptcy or moral bankruptcy.

That said, however, churches in the U.S. could take a unique opportunity to avoid both forms of bankruptcy by proactively engaging with Native communities to develop appropriate reparations strategies, which might be everything from setting up funds to support Indian education, to nullifying the papal bulls on which U.S. Indian case law is based that holds that due to “the doctrine of discovery” articulated in these papal bulls, Native peoples are only entitled to occupy land, but not to own it. Churches could also become involved in developing collaborative strategies to support Native peoples ongoing sovereignty claims against the U.S. government. In any case, it is incumbent upon Christian churches to be the leaders in dismantling Christian imperialism because white supremacy and Christian imperialism are inextricably linked. John Ascroft’s defunding of Native domestic violence programs in favor of “faith-based” (that is, Christian) programs as well as his demand that Native-based sexual/domestic violence curricula delete reference to colonialism demonstrate this link.

This boarding school project has the potential not to make a meaningful contribution to the larger reparations struggle in the following ways:

- 1) It would contribute to a discussion of what reparations should be. In Canada, accountability has

taken the form of individual lawsuits against churches. However, this strategy has led to a situation where the struggle becomes individualized, and the compensation, (which is relatively small per individual) does not do justice to the oppression Native peoples have suffered. Consequently, of the first men who first spoke out against boarding school abuse in Canada, 22 committed suicide. In the U.S. we are concluding that what we ask for is critical. Perhaps we should demand land rather than financial compensation. Perhaps, reparations could include canceling the Third World debt. That question to ask is, what are the demands that will fundamentally challenge the economic and political status quo?

2) This project demonstrates the need to internationalize our struggle. This is because, being less than one percent of the population, Native peoples can never be under any illusion that they can win a successful campaign on their own. And in fact, Native peoples have led some of the most significant victories against multinational corporations and governments because of the creative coalitions we have carved.<sup>10</sup> For reparations to be successful, the national struggles must be simultaneously internationalized. The successes that racial justice struggles have achieved have been in large part because the U.S. government wanted to avoid embarrassment in the global arena.<sup>11</sup> But the news about our efforts to struggle against U.S. policies will not reach activists in other countries unless we get that news to them ourselves. We, who live in the belly of the beast, have the responsibility to address US imperialism here at its source. Meanwhile, if we can expose U.S. policies of racism domestically to activists abroad, we give them the ammunition to embarrass the U.S. and challenge its claim to be the protector of democracy abroad. White supremacy is a global problem and requires a global response.

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<sup>10</sup>See description of Native peoples' successful struggles against Exxon and Kerr McGee in Andrea Smith, Bible Gender, and Nationalism in American Indian and Christian Right Activism. Unpublished dissertation, University of California - Santa Cruz, 2002.

<sup>11</sup>Doug McAdam. Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930-1970. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982.

3) We need to frame the issue of reparations as a human rights issue. By that I mean, human rights are those rights seen under international law to be inalienable and not dependent on any particular government structure. When we limit our struggles around solely a fight for “constitutional protections” we forget that it is the constitution that states that black peoples are 3/5 of a person. Furthermore, to rely solely on such a framework does not question the legitimacy of the U.S. government which is fundamentally founded on the gross human rights violations of people of color. While we may use a variety of rhetorical and organizing tools, are overall strategy should not be premised on the notion that the U.S. should or will always continue to exist - to do so is to fundamentally sanction the continuing genocide of indigenous peoples on which this government is based.

4) We should look at the issue of reparations as it affects not only oppression directed at communities of color, but oppression within our communities. The issue of boarding schools forces us to see the connections between state violence and interpersonal violence. It is through boarding schools that violence in our communities was introduced. But we continue to perpetuate that violence through violence against women, child abuse, and homophobia. To successfully we decolonize, no amount of reparations will be successful if we do not address the oppressive behaviors we have internalized. Women of color have for too long been presented with the choices of either prioritizing racial justice or gender justice. This dualistic analysis fails to recognize that it is precisely through sexism and gender violence that colonialism and white supremacy have been successful. This failure to see the intersectionality of racism and sexism in racial justice movements was evident at the UN World Conference Against Racism, where the types of racism that women of color disproportionately tend to face (such as racism in reproductive rights policies), failed to even register on the radar screen. A question to ask ourselves then is, what would true reparations really look like for women of color who suffer state violence and interpersonal gender violence simultaneously.

To receive more information on the boarding school project, contact Incite! Women of Color Against Violence, at [incite\\_national@yahoo.com](mailto:incite_national@yahoo.com).