



**REAFFIRMING OUR RIGHT TO EXIST:
A TRANSFORMATIVE BLACK AGENDA**

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DR. MAULANA KARENGA

No matter how innocent the concerns and conversations seem, the interrelated questions of whether we need to have and celebrate a Black history, affirm and assert a Black identity or even propose and pursue a Black agenda are in a larger and more serious sense, questions of our right and responsibility to exist as a people. It is to call into question and by extension, raise doubts about the value and validity of a self-conscious, self-determining Black community.

This questioning of Black existence, affirmation and agenda most often arises in the context of posing an American identity against a Black one, as if America means anything without the various peoples who conceive and compose it. However, there is no similar questioning of whether we need a Jewish identity, agenda and history or heritage month. Nor is there any post-racial or post-ethnic arguments for replacing Jewish identity with American identity rather than using “American” to further define a core Jewish identity.

But if one people has a right to exist, then so does every people. The right to life of a person or people and the companion concept of the dignity of both, which was first raised and reaffirmed in ancient Africa (Egypt) and later enshrined in UN documents, do not give preference to one people over another. Indeed, the ancient Egyptian concept *shepesu*, human dignity, affirms an inherent worthiness that is transcendent of all social and biological attributes, and equal and inalienable for all persons and peoples.

Furthermore, UN documents specifically prohibit ethnocide, i.e., any and all acts to deprive a people of its “integrity as a distinct people, its cultural values and ethnic identity.” This is done, the documents say, by dispossessing a people of its land, population

transfer, assimilation or integration and “propaganda directed against them.” All of these acts have been committed against us as a people, and yet we have not only survived, but prevailed and advanced, exhibiting an unsurpassed human resilience, durability and adaptive vitality.

However, it is the propaganda directed against us, against people and things Black and African, that represents in this era one of our greatest challenges. As I’ve said so often, *one of the greatest powers in the world is the power to define reality and make others accept it, even when it’s to their disadvantage.* And there can be no more definitive or destructive example of this than to convince a people that they have no right, responsibility or reason to exist, to understand and assert themselves as a distinct people with a history and culture worthy of preserving, promoting and living in the most expansive and meaningful ways.

Indeed, we are the only people who are deemed and denounced as too much of themselves, too concerned with their culture, “too Black.” But, we are taught and often feel compelled to praise others for the practice, preservation and promotion of their cultures. We are told the President cannot respond to our legitimate concerns because he’s the President of all the people, not of Black people, as if we and our interests are not inclusive and included in the core conception of the American people and their essential and expansive concerns. No one tells other ethnic or interest groups their concerns cannot be addressed because the President is the President of all the people, not the President of their people or group. It is not said to Latinos, labor unions, Jews, gays, environmentalists, clean-energy advocates, women, anti-war activists, or others to whom the President

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regularly responds. And it is on us to challenge and change this limited conception and unequal treatment of us and our interests.

Now, if we have the right and responsibility to exist as a community and people, we have the right and responsibility to define, defend, promote and pursue our interests. And this, of necessity, requires an agenda, a consciously and collectively conceived plan or program of things to be *done* and *dealt with* in the ongoing interest of constantly improving our lives and expanding the realm of human freedom and human flourishing in this country and the world. Moreover, this agenda must not simply be prepared for presidents, Congress or others, but for the actual living of our lives and meeting our needs in the most ethical, effective and expansive ways.

Thus, it's important not to embrace or let stand the dominant society's limited and limiting conception of Black. For it is a racialized and ghettoized conception, petty, pathetic and "preciously" pitiful, unworthy of serious respect or recognition. Here, as always, our oppressor cannot be our teacher or tell us who we are or can and ought to be.

A Black agenda or anything Black that we put forth must always be the best of what it means to be African and human in the world. It must be rooted in and rise out of our conception of ourselves as a world historical people and as a moral and social vanguard in this country. And it must revive and reflect commitments of the period in which our agenda, a *transformative agenda* of freedom,

justice, equality and power for all, was at the core of the country's agenda.

Indeed, in that period, we launched, fought and won with our allies struggles that expanded the realm of freedom in this country, altered its course and conception of itself, and produced an instructive and inspirational model of human liberation struggle for the marginalized, oppressed and struggling peoples of this country and the world. Thus, it is the White agenda, not ours, that has been limited and limiting from the founding of this country to the current attempts of Republicans and the right wing to make the country ungovernable under President Obama.

Discussions of the issue of a Black agenda must take place within this framework, a framework that respects our historical role as a *moral and social vanguard* in this country and the world, recommits us to our *social justice tradition* and establishes a *protocol of exchange and accountability* among leaders and the masses of our people. This protocol will, of necessity, begin with putting the interests of our people first and include mutual respect, the constant search for and commitment to common ground, and the practice of *operational unity*, unity in diversity, unity without conformity.

Fanon assures us that the world is waiting for something from us other than an obscene imitation of Europe, something new and liberating, something essentially African and expansively human. And given the heaviness of our history and our hope for the future, how could we dare do less?

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