



**REFLECTING ON RACIAL JUSTICE:  
SOME NECESSARY NOTES**

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**DR. MAULANA KARENGA**

**T**HE HISTORY of Black people in this country is a complex, engaging and thought-compelling history, a history of Holocaust and enduring hope; of savage enslavement and yet an insuppressible desire and demand for freedom. It is a history of an awesome and undeserved suffering and an amazing self-healing of a people in the process of bringing health to a sick society which refuses to recognize its illness or surrender the racial and religious illusions that complicate its cure. And thus, it is, of necessity, a history of an unfinished struggle for a consciously lived freedom and substantive justice in a land that promised freedom and claimed justice, even while enslaving us and continuously evidencing a deeply rooted racial and religious commitment to White supremacy.

To speak of substantive justice for us is to speak of racial justice, a particular people-focused justice which requires a particular set of remedies. It seeks to end a particularized racial oppression rooted in history of enslavement and segregation and continuously expressed and experienced in current realities of structural disadvantages, disparities and oppression. Thus, subsuming us under all-embracing categories like “underrepresented”, “minorities” and even “people of color” does not speak directly to the nature of our oppression nor offer the substantive justice required to end the varied forms of oppression we experience in particular and particularized ways.

To be Black in a racist context is to encounter and endure a particularly savage form of racist and racialized oppression. For race is a socio-biological category constructed to assign human worth and social status using White people as the paradigm, the exemplary model. And Black, as even the most pitifully unaware know, is assigned the lowest place in this morally monstrous system of domination, deprivation and degradation.

Such an assignment of human worth and social status is reflected in social relations and at every level. Thus, it is so with the continuing

racial public humiliation in its various forms in the media, at work, and in the academies; racial targeting, euphemistically called profiling, and the accompanying police abuse and violence; sacrifice of the usual racial suspects; disparities in sentencing, mass incarceration, and the ever-widening door and highway leading Black juveniles and young men to enduring identities and destinies as prisoners, parolees and probationers in the criminal justice system. Moreover, this racialization and resultant structural disadvantages and disparities imposed on us are expressed and experienced also in education, employment, access to health care, housing and almost every other area of social and public life.

The conventional wisdom and most comforting way of thinking was that the election of President Obama, the country’s first African American president, was posed as a signal of a post-racial beginning, if not achievement and as uncontested evidence of a miracle only America could promise and produce. There was even talk of its representing an end to the need for a Black agenda or for our advocacy and our social struggle for racial justice. Indeed, part of our tearful and joyful celebration on election night and those weeks, maybe months after, was the sense and ever-present hope that after centuries of struggle, the country had come to terms with its oppressive and self-destructive contradictions, retired its racial illusions and recovered from its addiction to racist practices.

But with clearer heads, we would not seriously think that a person acquiring an office, however high and socially symbolic, could magically transform and transcend the racial status society has assigned him and his people without a continuing and uncompromising movement and struggle. For in such a racialized context, as Obama and we discovered or honestly came to concede, presidents, preachers, judges, janitors, lawyers, lay-persons or doctors all share the racial status of their people.

This is the hard, heavy and brutal racialized truth that Obama and the post-racial fantasy

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fans were forced to face as the racist monster raised its diseased and deformed head and continuously dogged him during his campaign; came with watermelon post cards and demands for birth documentation to the White House; and has followed him with open racial harassment and hostility, even in the so-called “hallowed halls” of Congress even up to now.

Racial justice, not only general social justice, is, thus, sorely needed and can be defined as policies and practices which produce opportunities outcomes and conditions that insure Black persons and people receive their due in equal treatment and shared social goods and that reflect a clear and equal commitment of society to their well-being and flourishing. These opportunities and conditions are not satisfied with broad social policies which promise and promote diversity as a piece of social propaganda rather than real commitment to shared wealth, power and status. Indeed, diversity is not racial justice, but a requirement of justice as a demand for the equitable and effective presence of racial groups in every area of critical social space.

Moreover, racial justice is not achieved by symbolic placement of Blacks and others in visible, but ineffective places. And no amount of the manipulation of multiculturalism, diversity and people of color language and literature can substitute for a substantive racial justice. These written and spoken references in many, if not most, cases have become little more than ways to claim us present, although we're absent; formally included, although we're effectively excluded; and given honorable mention, although we're less than honorably marginalized.

To be considered seriously for government and foundation funds, we are urged to subsume our identity as Black people under the category “people of color”. Multiculturalism often seems, at crucial times, to suggest or even insist that we

honor everyone's culture and community, except our own. And diversity has become a means to dilute the strength of our particular communal claim as a people.

Indeed, although diversity demands evolved as a way to insure the occupation of critical space of wealth, power and culture, as a race, ethnicity or community of color, it is used to satisfy a myriad of categories of difference, including different kinds of Whites as women, gays, religious adherents, ethnics, etc. And given the dominance of Whites as a race and ruling class, Black people often find themselves at the end of a long list and line of “protected categories” and still are denied racial justice under the claim of diversity.

As we talk of racial justice, then, it is important that we stress we are talking about justice for a particular people in the context of our historic and ongoing struggle for a just and good society and world that, as the Husia says, “truly does justice for all the people.” But we must not and will not go out of existence to please our oppressor, render ourselves nameless and needless to accommodate our allies or pretend with “the President of all America” that such a defensively claimed title disqualifies or diminishes our rightful claims.

**N**or does it render us, his core constituency, less worthy of mention in his messages and of having our agenda addressed than Jews, Gentiles, labor, Latinos, gays, lesbians and others. And certainly, we must not, for political expediency or a one-sided sense of solidarity, engage in shameless self-erasure and self-silencing and accept the lack of response to the concrete needs of our people and the moral imperatives we, as a people, have constantly put and pushed forth to expand the realm of freedom, justice and promise for us and everyone.

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