THIS is the month of remembering and raising up Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer (1917-1977), honored giant in a generation of great leaders. Let us raise and praise her sacred names, life-giving work and liberating struggle then in the tradition of our ancestors. We pour libation for her first in her sacred name of memory keeper. It is she who emphasized our ancestors’ teaching on the morality of remembrance saying: “There are two things we all should care about: never forget where we came from and always praise the bridges that carried us over”. It is a teaching on reciprocal caring, rightful remembering and deserved honoring. And it is about giving rightful attentiveness to the people, culture and history that made us possible and enabled us to come into the fullness of ourselves.

Thus, she tells us that in her visit to Africa, she experienced a deep joy, beauty and pride in being African. She admired those she met in how they were so “natural, just being their real selves and not having to pretend to be somebody else. And that was beautiful to me”. It was this dignity, self-determination, and sense of commonality with continental Africans that led her to say, “then I could feel myself, never, ever being ashamed of my ancestors or my background” and thus of herself and her people. For she was grounding herself in her own culture and returning to her own history and dignity-affirming sense of self.

Moreover, we praise her in her name as committed and courageous questioner of America. Mrs. Hamer questions America’s unpunished evil, unredressed injustice, unrepaired injuries, the mental and social health of the country, its self-illusions, and its imperialist wars against the people of Vietnam, the Dominican Republic, “my people in Angola” and vulnerable peoples everywhere. “I question America”, she declared in an audacious and unwavering voice, inviting us to look at America without the blinkers and ideological blindness born of a mind-disabling mixture of self-imposed ignorance and patriotic illusion. For “miles of paper and film cannot record the many injustices this nation has been guilty of”. Thus, “when you take a very close look at this American society, its time to question these things”, not only with a criticism of words, but also with the criticism of practical struggle on every battlefield and front.

We praise her also in her name, long-standing and fearless freedom fighter, who struggled to free us from the plantation of mental and physical enslavement and oppression and directed us to a safer, saner and dignity-affirming place and charged us to imagine more and advance further. Fellow freedom fighter, Malcolm X, introduced her at an OAAU meeting to which he invited her as “one of this country’s foremost freedom fighters”. Her fight was to liberate Blacks and all peoples and this country in a struggle for freedom and justice, and not equality. For she says, “I couldn’t tell anybody in my right mind that I’m fighting for equal rights”. Like Malcolm, whom she admired as he did her, she says, “I’m fighting for human rights because I don’t want to be equal to people that raped my ancestors, killed out the Indians, destroyed my (sense of) dignity and took my name”. She instead wants with Fanon a new history and a new mutually respecting humanity. In a word, she wants to
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