



**STEPPIN' OFF STAGE AS N'S:  
RETURNING TO HISTORY AS AFRICANS**

*Los Angeles Sentinel, 11-07-13, pp. 6-7*

**DR. MAULANA KARENGA**

The road to recovery from the Holocaust of enslavement is a long and difficult one, full of twists, turns, relapses and losses. But we are a resilient, steadfast and defeat-resistant people. We know that this ongoing struggle we wage to free ourselves is larger than the one to break physical chains or eliminate unjust and immoral laws. Moreover, we know it is about removing the residue of the Holocaust, segregation and other forms and features of oppression from hearts and minds. And it is about an ongoing and unfinished fight to secure our rights and establish conditions to live lives of dignity, decency and promise in our time and for future generations.

We know too, as Amilcar Cabral says, that in our ongoing liberation struggle, regardless of the obstacles the oppressor puts in our path, the greatest struggle is the struggle against our weaknesses, against that in us which is in contradiction to our highest values and the choice we've made for liberation and ever higher levels of human life. It is in this context that the ongoing discussion of the use and disuse of the n-word must be placed. For it is part of the struggle to free ourselves, reconceive and reconstruct ourselves and our world in our own image and interests and join other progressive people in the awesome task of repairing and transforming the world.

The decision by Black leaders and others to lead an assault on the use of the N-word then speaks to two levels of struggle—a personal and social struggle. The personal struggle is to break the monopoly the oppressor has had on our minds, think our own thoughts, understand ourselves in dignity-affirming and life-enhancing ways, and assert ourselves similarly. But a successful

struggle on a personal level also requires a struggle on the social level to eliminate the conditions which produces not only the n-word but those who embrace it as their own and defend their oppression and oppressor. Indeed, the call for a free self-respecting language and person is at the same time a call and requirement for a social context conducive to freedom and self-respect, as well as respect for others. So it is not enough to announce the need to end the evil of social and self-degradation, it is imperative to wage a wide-ranging and deep-reaching struggle to end it.

In the Sixties, we used to say that “inside every Negro, there is a Black person struggling to come into being,” struggling to be his real self, and to realize her internal capacity for living the good and righteous life we all long for in our most divine and dignified moments. So when I think of Black people willfully using the “n” word or trying to justify it or experiencing other oppression-induced psychological disorientation and disorder, I remember the teachings of Frantz Fanon. An active participant in the Algerian liberation struggle, Fanon gained deep insights into psychological disorders and the way oppression works to erode and erase one's dignity and sense of self, and to instill a will to identify with and defend both their oppressor and oppression in the liberation struggle in Algeria.

From his writings, Kawaida philosophy extracts four basic stages of personality erosion, disorientation and disorder in the midst of the most severe, savage and inhuman oppression. And this holds true for all oppressed peoples. Those who unravel and reject resistance, Fanon teaches us, go thru four basic stages: self-doubt; self-denial;

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self-condemnation; and self-mutilation. First, they *doubt themselves*, i.e., wonder if their oppressor is right in his assertion of their inferiority, incompetence, and unworthiness, personally and racially. Secondly, they *deny themselves*, i.e., refuse to accept the obviousness of their Blackness, or if they are mixed, privilege and promote the non-Black components of their identity, especially White, in order to escape the severe penalties for belonging to the wrong race in a White-dominated society.

Thirdly, they *condemn themselves*, i.e., accept and embrace the oppressor's definition and devaluation of them and their people, borrowing from and building on his racist vocabulary, views and arguments of indictment and devaluation of us and other peoples of color. In a word, they see themselves as "n"s. And finally, they *mutilate themselves*, i.e., psychologically and physically disfigure themselves with desperate and degrading alterations of mind, mouth, nose, eyes, speech, color and consciousness of self in order to look and sound like those who caused the pathology of self-revulsion and rejection in them.

Surely, it takes more than a day or night at the comedy club to become even an unconscious "n". But to become a conscious and willing one speaks to a history of heavy hurt and deep and persistent pain of victims for whom the righteously religious should pray and the ethically sensitive reach out to with empathy and loving kindness and a therapy of self-confrontation and radical change of self thru personal and social struggle. For this perverse attachment to one's own statement and status of degrada-

tion reflects a radical break with reality in which the victim identifies with the image, interests and ideals of the victimizer and accepts them as his or her own. It is called in psychology the Stockholm syndrome and is expressed most clearly in persons captured, kidnapped, brainwashed and abused. And only in the process and practice of freeing oneself thru personal and collective struggle can this monstrous hold be broken and the person affected regain her/his health and wholeness again. Indeed, those who struggle are strengthened in this struggle and, as Fanon notes, learn new things about themselves, their worth, and capacity for positive and productive self-assertion in the world.

"Liberation is coming from a Black thing," we used to shout and share in the Sixties. It will come not on TV or in comedy clubs, football fields, basketball courts or even in the classroom of large or small universities. It will, as Malcolm taught us, Be-thune informed us and Fanon, Cabral and Tubman showed us, come into being in the midst of struggle, in the midst of the battles we wage for the hearts and minds of our people and for the new and good world. In this free and dignity-affirming space, there will be no need for yellow-wigs, blue-eye contacts, and self-mutilating surgery on the nose, mouth or mind. There will be no sitting in a sewer of n-words and negative names, pretending it's a sauna and something special. And every self-declared and closet "n" will step off the stage of self-mutilation and return to history urgently aware of and committed to the awesome responsibility of being African in the world.

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