



## STILL STRUGGLING IN FERGUSON AND FLINT: HOLDING OUT HOPE FOR HOLLYWOOD

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**DR. MAULANA KARENGA**

**W**ITH FERGUSON AND FLINT serving as two of our most real, urgent and symbolic sites of oppression and resistance, and so many pressing problems confronting us as a people, Hollywood issues seem, in one sense, small in comparison and isolated from the concrete lived experiences, initiatives and aspirations of our people. Indeed, in the face of burning issues like continuing police violence; the water poisoning of our people; homelessness; early and needless deaths; outrageous rates of unemployment; inadequate healthcare; and inferior education; the issue of the Oscars and anything associated, at first sight seem unimportant, diversionary and little more than a demonstration of episodic and seasonal anger of Hollywood's Black celebrities.

But, in fact, at the source and center of every major or minor struggle for justice, relief or radical and revolutionary change are the ongoing issues of wealth, power and status. In other words, it's about breaking the monopoly some have on wealth and power and to destroy the hierarchical claims and structures of superiority and supremacy that diminish and destroy our lives. Thus, while still struggling in Ferguson and Flint and elsewhere, we can also hold out hope for Hollywood. So, it is good to see even some Black Hollywood celebrities stand up and declare "enough" and demand equal treatment, due recognition and rightful reward for their excellence and achievement, and to call the community to action.

But if it is to be real resistance, it must be a call to boycott not only the Oscars, but also the movies and confront the industry as a whole. And above all, it must be linked to our larger struggle for racial and social justice and create a reciprocal relationship between the community and those who call on the community to support them. Going forward, however, we should face the fact that given the history of such episodic and seasonal anger by professionals and celebrities, the anger and activity might not last long, but the larger struggle will

and must continue. Indeed, struggle is the only real way forward and it is good to rebel and resist everywhere. And what better way to welcome in Black History Month than with righteous and relentless struggle whether in Ferguson or Flint, Haiti, Harlem, Harare or Hollywood?

As Paul Robeson, a consummate performing artist and actor, asserted in his statement to artists, actors, writers, intellectuals and others seeking exemption from service and struggle in the war against fascism, Nazism and White supremacy in the world, "the battlefield is everywhere; there is no sheltered rear". Indeed, in a struggle so vital, there is no exemption and in a context of all-inclusive war against our people, even the rich Black elite must ultimately accept that there is no sanctuary or safe place, except in victory achieved in righteous and relentless struggle in the ranks of the people. And certainly, there is no sanctuary or safety in the seductive and serpentine arms of the oppressor nor in the deceptive womb and disabling web of post-racial fantasies and Americana opiates, fed daily to those starved for any sign or signal of White acceptance, even if it is an invitation to degradation, humiliation and dishonor.

Hollywood, like America, the society in which it is situated and sustained, is a land of both dreams and nightmares, especially for Black people and people of color. From the beginning, Black people had to deform themselves to find work, wear masks of distorted faces and features, diminished intelligence and low-life ways and then had to pretend and express gratitude for *being allowed just to be present*. Thus, the struggle around the Oscars is part of the larger struggle in Hollywood around issues of dignity and equity, as well as issues of increased money, star-status and media coverage, and social messages of who and what has meaning and who is representative of excellence in a wide range of things, whether thru nomination or winning.

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But, once again they have invited us to the Oscars to observe, entertain and assist as they celebrate the cinematic representation of themselves, in living Whiteness, express the high esteem in which they hold themselves and recognize and reward themselves for an excellence in the arts, which, it is rumored and claimed, only they can achieve. This is again White folks' big night out, and we, Black people, and other peoples of color are challenged to imagine ourselves diners at a dinner with nothing on our plate, in spite of Min. Malcolm's admonition to the contrary. Indeed, we are invited to open the envelope and announce the winners and know for sure our names will not be among them. Moreover, we are to watch, with worshipful eyes, others honored for their achievements and imagine ourselves, without exception, unachieved and unworthy. And our consolation prize is to provide entertainment as host and performers and be present as symbols and signs of diversity and local color in an otherwise White and wintry gathering.

Hollywood is a battleground, then, and there is clearly a need for Black people to turn from complaint to confrontation, to ongoing strategic action inside and outside the movie industry to bring about and sustain real and rightful change. This involves confronting not only the Academy, but also the producers, studio heads and boards and advertisers. Also, it will involve not only internet actions, boycotts of events and movies, but building a movement to achieve this. And again, this movement must in turn be linked to a larger movement for racial and social justice. In this way, the initiative builds on the experience, knowledge and best practices of past and present struggles; builds a united front that facilitates the process of education, mobilization, organization, confrontation and transformation every movement must produce; and cultivates

the indispensable practice of reciprocal support.

Without a linking of this initiative in Hollywood with the larger movement, the people in power will divide and defeat the struggle with symbolic placements, episodic inclusions and honors, separate deals and a host of hired "explainers away" and excusers of their racialized, racist and harmful acts and practices. Even the call for diversity can be so diluted, inclusive and amorphous that Black people will still remain marginal and unworthy of even honorable mention in the mix. Thus, only with a movement that extends beyond Hollywood, and calls for Blacks in the movie industry to end their general celebrity non-engagement with critical issues of Black people, and contribute in ways that they can to the advancement and victory of our shared struggle for racial and social justice, can this proposed initiative succeed or be morally sound and significant.

**W**e don't expect every actor or movie industry person to be Paul Robeson, Ruby Dee and Ossie Davis, Harry Belafonte, Danny Glover or even Eartha Kitt or others with a history of resistance, but surely more is called for than episodic and seasonal anger about a single issue. And if we really go into battle around this issue, then, let's soberly and seriously put it in context and consider the commitment struggle requires. We live in a context of capitalism and racism in which wealth and money are the measure of all things; race is a calculated construction for oppression, and oppression is understood as "normal" and even necessary. And in such a context, we are compelled to conclude that capitalism has no conscience; racism has no restrictions; and oppression has no limit except that which the people, rising up in righteous and victorious resistance, place on it.