



**THINKING DEEP ABOUT BLACKNESS:
STRESSING THE SERIOUS AND SACRED**

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DR. MAULANA KARENGA

IN THE SIXTIES and even for a short time afterward, Blackness was conceived and engaged as a very serious and sacred thing. It was serious because it dealt with our identity and our duty derived from it; with our culture and the conception of what it means to be African and human in the world; and with our essential conception of ourselves and the relation it had to the life we were living and the struggle we were waging. And Blackness was sacred because it was our unique and equally valued and valuable way of being African and human and possessors of dignity and divinity. And thus, we took the uncompromising position that there are no lives more sacred than our own; no people more chosen or worthy of ultimate respect; and no people's history more holy or narrative more worthy of being taught and told or that serves more as a source of lessons and light for us than our own. Here, we of Us raise up Africa—continent and world community, as a moral and spiritual ideal and derive from its sacred texts vital teachings that ground and guide our lives at every level.

The category Black, the colloquial for the cultural term African, was a self-conscious and special way of being African and human in the world, the way we lived life and opened ourselves to love, danced and did music, practiced our religions, raised our children, fought for freedom, sought justice, enjoyed doing good, and walked in dignified defiance in the world. In those former times and free spaces, unengaged and confused academics held no sway and the corporate and foundation dispensers of funds and favors were given no quarter. And there was certainly no place or embrace for “blackish” media mascots and self-degrading minstrels, peddling themselves as interpreters of Blackness as pathology for White entertainment and to indulge Whites' false and pitiful sense of racial superiority.

Moreover, our Blackness as defined in the process of a dignity-affirming liberation struggle was varied, complex and deep and expressed in innumerable ways. It might be expressed as a well-informed aesthetic observation, like in the statement “Black is beautiful”. Or it might be a defiant and context-demanding declaration of self-respect, such as “I'm Black and I'm proud”. And it might also be expressed as a prophecy and practice of freedom, as in the battle cry, “Liberation is coming from a Black thing”.

There was also this conceptionally rich and varied notion of *soul*, a defining Black character trait and spirit which infused our being and undergirded our constant becoming. We attached the word to almost everything we did well; it was a measure and standard of excellence. We spoke of soul food and soul music; soul moves, soul beat and Soul Train; soul preaching and soul teaching; soul brother, soul sister, soul man, soul woman, and soul people. We were a self-defined and self-conscious soul people—a people of *creativity*, *sensitivity* and *improvisation*, a people with depth of feeling and thought, highly spiritual and rightfully attentive to the ethical, the life-affirming and the demands of human dignity and decency in clear contrast to our oppressor. And with Curtis Mayfield, we pitied “the hopeless sinner (oppressor) who would hurt all mankind just to save his own”. But no matter “(we) got soul and everybody knows, it's all right” regardless.

It is important to note that, although we were sure and certain as sunrise that nobody had it but us, we never understood this to be a concept of racial superiority or a way to deny other people their own equally defining valid and valuable ways of being human in the world. Rather soul was for us, a valued category of distinction, a distinction of culture and peoplehood that was realized and reinforced in

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the midst of life and struggle; in a context of oppression and resistance and through our people's internal capacity to create spaces of freedom, meaning, good and beauty, regardless of context. Again, it spoke to us of beauty and depthfulness of being that served as a foundation of our resilience and resourcefulness so that we could raise up, repair, replenish and remake the world in the process of repairing, replenishing, remaking and expanding ourselves.

From day and hour one, 50 years ago, we of Us maintained we had both a right and responsibility to speak our own special cultural truth and make our own unique contribution to how this society and world are reconceived and reconstructed. For with Frantz Fanon and Mary McLeod Bethune, we see in our legacy and in the demands of history, freedom and justice, a compelling need and mission to remake the world. Black, then, was always more than color; it was, we said, *color*, how we come and claim; *culture*, our values, vision and resultant practices; and *consciousness*, our critical and effective understanding of our life issues and struggles and our active engagement in and with them.

In the final analysis, we knew *practice proves and makes possible everything*, even our rightful claim to this serious and sacred thing we call Blackness. Thus, we said all claims to Blackness must be informed, undergirded and made real and ultimately relevant by a righteous and relentless practice—to represent and realize in life the best of what it means to be African and human in the world.

We put at the heart of our practice the *Nguzo Saba*—The Seven Principles of Kwaaida philosophy: *Umoja*—Unity; *Kujichagulia*—Self-determination; *Ujima*—Collective Work and Responsibility; *Ujamaa*—Cooperative Economics; *Nia*—Purpose; *Kuumba*—Creativity; and *Imani*—Faith. And then we put in place what we called the Seven-Fold Path of Blackness, i.e., Think Black, Talk Black, Act Black, Create Black, Buy Black, Vote Black and Live Black. I remind you though, this is a time when Black was considered beautiful, audacious, outrageous, defiant, radical and even revolutionary, confrontational and resistant, and with no doubt about the rightness and eventual triumph of freedom, justice and good in the world.

Thus, we said, *Think Black*—think relational, about others, especially our people, but also the world. *Talk Black*—speak truth and good to the people and criticism to power and speak about the possibility and power of the people. We said *Act Black*—be aware, audacious, and engaged, in love and in struggle and in building the good world. *Create Black*—create good in the world, beauty, possibility and promise. *Buy Black*—support community economic efforts and interests. *Vote Black*—vote in the interests of our people, always with concern for its effect on others and the well-being of the world. And *Live Black*—live righteously, caring and committed, and in reciprocal relationship; in respect, in peace with justice and in the interests of the well-being, health and wholeness of the world.

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