



**JUXTAPOSING JUNETEENTH AND JULY FOURTH:
EMANCIPATION, INDEPENDENCE AND DEMOCRACY CLAIMS**

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DR. MAULANA KARENGA

SEBA MALCOLM SAID IT, WE SAW IT AND history has proved it. Indeed, he taught that “of all our studies, history is best qualified to reward our research.” Likewise, Dr. W. E. B. Du-Bois stated that “We can only understand the present by continually referring to and studying the past.” Thus, he continues saying “When anyone of the intricate phenomena of our daily life puzzles us, when there arises religious problems, political problems, race problems, we must always remember that while their solution lies in the present, their causes and their explanation lies in the past.” Within this understanding, if we want to know about and solve the problems of the present: the Supreme Court decisions gutting the Voting Rights Act; police violence; gentrification; racial deprivation, degradation and oppression in various forms; and the hypocrisy of claims of commitment to diversity, democracy, equity and inclusion, we must refer to and study America’s past.

And, of course, the guardians of the gate to radical and meaningful social change do not want this. They don’t want to be informed and reminded of the genocidal, enslaving and other oppressive ideologies and practices that went into the framing and founding of this country. They are against critical race theory, the 1619 Project, Black Studies, Ethnic Studies, and critical thinking which exposes and explains the racist roots and continuing costs and casualties of the American system. And they are against us and the freedom, justice, equity and real democracy we seek. They want the old system back of education as authoritative allocation of knowledge, really information, that idolizes Whites and turns the curriculum into one long, shameless self-congratulatory White narrative.

In such a maze of racial myths and self-medication on illusions, it is claimed that the union is not flawed, but is perfect and only seeks to be “more perfect.” Likewise, to such self-delusory minds, there is no genocide against Native Americans, only the need to “kill the Indian to save the man,” leaving out also appropriation of their land and human and material resources.

Also, in such a maze of founding myths, the enslavement of Africans was not Holocaust, but trade with perhaps humanitarian problems, in other words, business gone bad with collateral damage. Indeed, the resident racist rumor, no longer openly offered but still maintained in unexpected corners of the realm, is that the Holocaust of enslavement was a salvational project in both the religious and cultural sense. There are similar and ample idiocies, insensitivities and immoral beliefs and assertions about the dispossession and oppression of Mexicans and about the brutal labor exploitation, pogroms and immigration exclusion against the Chinese. Thus, it is in the history of this maze of racist fantasies, hatreds, hostilities, and state and societal violence that we find the sources of resurgence racism, deeply rooted in American history and of current patterns and practices of domination, deprivation and degradation of different and vulnerable peoples.

It is our lived history and study of this history that informs our understanding of America and of the critical junction in our lives and struggle at which we now stand and think deeply about how to continue to move forward in the most ethical, effective and expansive ways. And we are confronted with the urgent demands of our time to continue the struggle, to keep the faith and to hold the line. For at each point there are retrograde and reactionary forces almost insanely anxious to reverse all gains we’ve made to create a truly free, just, equitable and democratic society.

Recently, there have been conversations which juxtapose Juneteenth and July Fourth and the claims of emancipation for one and independence for the other, “given” to one and “achieved” by the other. But there is an undeniable distance and difference between Juneteenth and July 4th. Indeed, there is a clear difference between “granting” Juneteenth status as a national holiday and paying reparations owed us, providing conditions and cultivating capacities for us to live lives of dignity and decency due every human being. I speak here of the right to security of person against systemic violence – police and vigilante,

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against voter suppression and other denials of freedom, and the right to adequate housing, healthcare, quality education, guaranteed income, and a clean environment, i.e., of land, air and water. In other words, there is a difference in granting national recognition to a holiday and conceding human rights of freedom, justice and equality to fellow human beings and between *effusively sharing* #hastag messages of solidarity and *equitably sharing* wealth, power and status at every level of social life.

As to be expected, then, this year the marking of July 4th came with critiques and reflections on a larger scale than the usual Black nationalist and radical community. Congresspersons, entertainers, athletes, everyday people and others spoke of the hypocrisy of the celebration, its racially exclusive origin and current meaning. References were made as usual to Nana Frederick Douglass roaring freedom in our minds as we barbecued, picnicked, danced and did beach things, telling us that the Fourth was/is their holiday and celebration, not really or fully ours. They can rejoice in their freedom, he said, but we must mourn the awesome suffering and loss of life of our people in enslavement, and continue and intensify the struggle for liberation. In a word, he said we must become in righteous anger and struggle “the fire, the storm, the whirlwind and earthquake” that radically reorders the structure and functioning of things.

Thus, Nana Frederick Douglass tells a White crowd in Rochester in New York, it would be a mockery of the moral and decent for him to celebrate their independence in the midst of our enslavement and oppression. He speaks of the savage hypocrisy of thought and practice attached to claims of independence and freedom for all when it is essentially for Whites and enslavement and oppression for us. He will not blind himself to the suffering of his people in enslavement,

even if he is out of it, but not really free himself. For he realizes with his sister and companion in the liberation struggle, Nana Harriet Tubman, that freedom is indivisible and the escape of one or many is not freedom in its fullest sense. This is why Nana Harriet defied capture and a threatened horrible death if captured, and went back several times and worked tirelessly to free all of us. “Go free or die” was her battlecry; dedication, discipline and sacrifice for the liberation of our people was her chosen way of understanding and asserting herself in the world.

Malcolm, like Douglass before him, emphasizes our need to avoid embracing an infantile patriotism and celebration of a system of oppression. They call on us to reject holidays that cultivate forgetfulness of our oppression and resistance, divert the righteous discontent of the masses, and create a false consciousness of unity that covers up and denies differences and division on vital questions of freedom and oppression, life and death.

AND THEY WOULD POINT OUT THE hypocrisy of a Senate and a country that can pass a bill to make Juneteenth a holiday and deny the full rights and protection of the vote for Black people. Indeed, it is easy to nationalize a Black holiday which, through their interpretation honors them as saviors and liberators, and perpetuates the stereotypes of us as grossly unaware, dependent and deserving of restraints and restrictions. And after all, it’s symbolic, not substantive. Thus, in the final analysis, it is not about Juneteenth or July Fourth, but about justice, freedom from oppressions of all kinds and freedom to live good and meaningful lives, and to flourish and come into the fullness of our beautiful Black, soulful and sacred selves. And to this, as our ancestors taught, we can “sing to sunshine” and celebrate all year round and even forever. ▲

Dr. Maulana Karenga, Professor and Chair of Africana Studies, California State University-Long Beach; Executive Director, African American Cultural Center (Us); Creator of *Kwanzaa*; and author of *Kwanzaa: A Celebration of Family, Community and Culture* and *Essays on Struggle: Position and Analysis*, www.AfricanAmericanCulturalCenter-LA.org; www.OfficialKwanzaaWebsite.org; www.MaulanaKarenga.org.