



**RESISTING THE ERASURE OF BLACKNESS:
HUMAN RIGHTS AND RACIAL JUSTICE**

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DR. MAULANA KARENGA

There is a war being waged against the concept, consciousness and practice of Blackness, against our understanding and asserting ourselves as a self-conscious community, and against our presence and self-presentation as a people who embody and express a unique and equally valid and valuable way of being human in the world. It is a war waged on various fronts to deny us human rights and racial justice, i.e., the right to exist, the right of presence, of self-representation and self-determination, of cultural practice and preservation, and the right to a good life as a self-conscious community, free from domination, deprivation and degradation.

But whatever strategies and tactics used, it is to estrange us from ourselves, alienate and isolate us from others, and eliminate us as a valid, valuable and viable communal presence from intellectual discourse, policy considerations and public space. Here it is important to note that Blackness is defined not simply by color or phenotype, but by *color*, *culture* and *consciousness*, i.e., a unique and equally valid and valuable way of being human in the world, and a “consciousness-in-movement” which asserts itself in liberational and life-affirming ways. It is this attempted erasure of our culture and consciousness that is at issue and that forms what is called and condemned in UN documents as cultural genocide.

Leftists, liberals, labor leaders and right-wingers alike, all tell us we should not insist on a Black identity, have Black interests or offer a Black agenda. It is a regular refrain of the ruling race and their “colored” allies that we are bitter, if we do battle for social justice; separatist, if we insist on self-determination; and essentialist, if we assert that we are an African people in world-encompassing

cultural and communal terms. Of course, no such widespread criticism is offered of Jews, Latinos or even Armenians. Indeed, their diversity is not used to deny their identity and commonality. Only with us is diversity raised to deny commonality rather than reveal a rich and complex *identity-in-diversity*.

Also, we are constantly told we must tone down or dilute our assertion of ourselves and not be “too Black.” This is peddled as an essential requirement for success and acceptance by the ruling race who defines what is proper and profitable, what is civilized and savage, beautiful and ugly, using themselves as the exemplary model and measure. Thus, we start out with an ethically unacceptable ethnic disadvantage, for we cannot be ourselves, measure ourselves by our own culturally-grounded standards and represent ourselves in dignity-affirming ways that do justice to our humanity and our cultural conception of ourselves. Instead, we must present ourselves in the image and interests of others, i.e., the ruling race.

We are also told we are in a post-racial moment in history and society, but actually, this only applies to us. In fact, post-racial is what we are supposed to pretend; it’s not what White people really practice. Thus, our pretension and their practice are at great and ever-growing variation. For, they still monopolize wealth, power and status, and control the economy, political system and cultural apparatus of this country. And we are continuously called to self-efface and distance ourselves from our people and cultural center to put them at ease, get a job, receive funding or be elected and serve as president. Indeed, we are duly advised and admonished, with funeral seriousness, that Blackness is no longer fashionable, favored or funded in this world of post-racial pretensions and illusions.

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Furthermore, the ruling race/class has additionally problematized our presence in life and literature by cultivating and funding a collaborating group of intellectuals to facilitate the indictment and erasure of Blackness. Indeed, these intellectuals have gone beyond the crisis of intellectual sterility and parasitic dependence on the ruling race which Harold Cruse described in his classic work, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*. They have, in addition, positioned themselves to become little more than *intellectual scavengers*, constantly searching for stench and stain, defects and faults among Black people, and creating and sustaining pathological discourse as the essential, even primary, way of understanding Blackness.

Thus, they write history and social science as a ritual of revelation of racial deficiencies, disorder and failure. They present literature as life and a substitute for social engagement. And they praise the routine cinematic presentation of racial caricatures and moral mayhem as a needed teaching tool and corrective for deficient internal discussion of communal problems. Likewise, in a promised discourse on hidden and suppressed voices of popular culture, the masses in motion and struggle are too often missing and instead there is an almost religious seeking of signs and wonders in youthful words, songs and sayings, pretending they contain a socially subversive content which is absent and unintended. Indeed, they fail to understand or appreciate Sekou Toure's assertion that "to take part in the African revolution, it is not enough to write a revolutionary song. You must make the revolution with the people and the songs will come by and of themselves."

They offer little or no creative challenge to young people, but much contemptible catering, calling themselves into unsolicited service, not only to defend misrepresentations of youth, but also to discredit legitimate concerns and correctives for some youths' negative and self-destructive approaches to the world. However, there is a rightful and necessary concern for the well-being and good future of a people which youth embody and express by embracing and advancing further the best of their people's culture.

This is the meaning of Frantz Fanon's affirmation that "each generation must . . . discover its mission and fulfill or betray it." It is a generational mission which is to be discovered and pursued within the context of the best of its culture in constant exchange with the world. And there is within our culture a legacy of liberational "consciousness-in-movement" which resists erasure and informs our daily practice and historic motion to be free and flourish and open up new avenues of human history.

It is a legacy at its best, summed up by Anna Julia Cooper, in which we see ourselves as a people, men and women, in work and struggle "for the universal triumph of justice and human rights . . . demanding an entrance not through a gateway for ourselves, our race, our sex or our sect, but a grand highway for humanity" as a whole. And within this world-encompassing mission, we are never to accept or hold as less than central and sacred our own selves and our unique and equally valid and valuable African way of being human in the world.

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