



**AGAINST AIRBRUSHING HISTORY AT SELMA BRIDGE:
REAFFIRMING BLACK IDENTITY AND DIGNITY**

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DR. MAULANA KARENGA

THERE is no justice-yielding present or dignity-affirming future for a people that concedes its rightful place as primary subject in its own history and willingly becomes at best secondary in the self-congratulatory myths and airbrushed history of a society that refuses to face and thus cannot repair its flawed and broken self. The coming to Selma by current and retired elected officials to join the 50th anniversary commemoration of the March in Selma already suggested that the history of the March and the larger Black Freedom Movement, both its Civil Rights and Black Power phases, of which the March was a part would be drastically revised. Indeed, as expected, it was a history airbrushed, bleached of its Blackness, almost void of the actual people and organizations who made it, redirected and redefined in its resistance and merged into the enduring monocultural myths of America searching for its higher self.

In such an airbrushed history, Selma is defined as one of the “sites that symbolize the daring of America’s character—Independence Hall, Seneca Falls, Kitty Hawk and Cape Canaveral”. First, we were resisting America’s “racist character” not trying to emulate its “daring character”. Second, there was at these places, no brutalizing, bloodletting, suffering, sacrifice and bodily resistance in the face of a ruthless and rabidly racist oppressor. The former two sites were sites of deliberation and declaration; the second two were sites of testing inventions and imagination. And Selma was a site of resolute resistance to a brutal system of oppression, i.e., White supremacy.

The high official speaking, who still can’t seem to identify Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. by name and continually calls him in this and other speeches simply “a Baptist preacher”, wants us to submerge ourselves in a mindless Americanism that Dr. W. E. B. DuBois

warned us against. It is an Americanism that will not allow us to identify ourselves as a people, have clear interests and aspirations, and celebrate ourselves as a people who changed the course of American history and expanded the realm of freedom in this country and the world. And it is an Americanism that peddles a self-demeaning and other-degrading patriotism that turns a blind eye to injustice, a deaf ear to truth, and a cold heart to American-caused-and-supported suffering in the world. It asks us to put country over conscience, concerns for security over civil and human rights, and corporate cultivated selfishness over the interests of the health and wellbeing of humanity and the world.

In such a history, we are nameless “ordinary Americans”. And yet, he doesn’t miss an opportunity to praise Jews as Jews, gays as gays, and other groups who are the subject of the point or speech he’s making. Certainly, this high official knows that we are by no means “ordinary Americans”, that we are African Americans, and that this Africanness makes all the difference. America has made it a mark, means and reason of oppression. And we have resolved as persons and a people to relentlessly resist this on every level. Also, even if one had never read Malcolm X, Martin King, Fannie Lou Hamer, Harriet Tubman or Frederick Douglass, s/he knows we are no “ordinary Americans”. Indeed for centuries we’ve been, as Min. Malcolm taught, victims of America and Americanism, “victims of democracy”, which he defines as “nothing but disguised hypocrisy”, i.e., claiming ideals it does not honor, pretending values it does not practice, and putting forth promises it does not keep.

There are places in his speech at Selma where the high official seems to recognize the awesome meaning of this struggle and the

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larger Black Freedom Movement. He uses the right words and references in scattered places, but he always tries to fit our struggle in a monocultural American framework and does not name our people as the subject of our own history, regardless of how many allies we had and have. He talks about the heroes, downtrodden and demeaned; yet he does not name them us. But we are the downtrodden and demeaned he dares not name; the heroes and heroines that expanded the realm of freedom in this country and the world and the subjects of the history he revises to make us disappear in a melting pot myth, long proved unnecessary and oppressive.

The commemoration marks a historic confrontation in the overall struggle of Black people for freedom, justice, equality and power over their destiny and daily lives. The bridge is a symbol of the struggle to cross over the troubled, tragedy-filled, murky and murderous waters of racial segregation and all its various ways of brutally denying the rights and destroying the lives of Black people. Our people were confronted with a horde of murderous men assembled, under the camouflage and color of law, to maim, batter, terrorize and kill. But they would not be deterred, even in their apprehension of not knowing whether they would live or die during the savage assault on them. And when this brutalizing and bloodletting ritual of repression was temporarily over in this place, they did what our tradition and culture of struggle teaches us. They picked themselves up off the ground, wiped the grit and blood off their face, assisted others, cleaned and bandaged their wounds, and defiantly resolved to continue the struggle regardless.

So the commemoration at Selma is not a commemoration of the “American experiment”, but a commemoration at a central site of struggle in the awesome march of our people, Black people, through history; a commemoration of the suffering and sacrifice, the resourcefulness and resilience that they demonstrated, and a reaffirmation of their identity and dignity as a great and noble people. It is clearly a reminder of Dr. King’s inaugural speech in his assuming leadership of the Montgomery Improvement Association. For there he says, “when the history books are written in future generations, the historians will have to say ‘there lived a great people—a Black people—who injected new meaning and dignity into the veins of civilization’. This is our challenge and our overwhelming responsibility”.

Let us not forget or fail to give rightful attention to the fact that the police violence that our people faced at Selma finds its current expression in Ferguson, Los Angeles, New York, Oakland, Madison and all across America. The Voting Rights Act which the struggle in Selma helped to achieve lies gutted in this self-defined democracy. And racial structural disadvantages, injustice, violence and inequities remain endemic as a disease, i.e., particular to a country or place and constantly present in spite of denials in high and low places. And finally, let us remember this: in the face of oppression, there is no remedy except relentless resistance; no strategy worth its name that doesn’t require struggle; and no way forward except across the casualty-laden battlefield on which a new society and world are conceived and brought into being.

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 *Introduction to Black Studies*, 4th Edition, www.OfficialKwanzaaWebsite.org; www.MaulanaKarenga.org.