



**BLACK HISTORY, RED TAILS & TUSKEGEE:
CRITICAL CONVERSATIONS 'BOUT OURSELVES**

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DR. MAULANA KARENGA

No matter what we think, say or write about the movie *Red Tails*, about its message, meaning, worthiness or weight, the discussion is ultimately and unavoidably about us, about how we perceive and understand ourselves, what we accept as real and rightful representations of us, and how we read and relate to the historical and current lived experience and initiatives of our lives in the context of both oppression and “constrained freedom.” Now, to define freedom here as constrained is, of necessity, to recognize the limitations, especially of race, class and sex (gender) placed on us, even the most “privileged” among us, and its effect, not only on how we assert ourselves, but also and particularly, how we understand ourselves.

It is important at the outset to note that the discourse that has emerged around the release of this movie demonstrates again how we have come to discuss our history and our lives thru literary fiction and media fantasy, sometimes settling for less than an accurate or adequate depiction of ourselves. Part of this is rooted in the Americanization and popular cultural process in which stereotypes are taken as not really correct, but nevertheless convenient, ways to view and understand ourselves and others. Likewise, simple solutions to complex problems are preferred and can be summed up in seconds on the nightly news, texted in abbreviated codes and shown in shorthand on the silver or multi-colored screen. Thus, critical thinking and history are more often respectable references rather than regularly used resources to determine the meaning or worthiness of a picture or our depiction in it.

At the outset, it is important to state that any self-conscious and critical review of the movie *Red Tails* cannot seriously list it among the must-see movies, except as an act of faith or returned favor to the producer for at least trying. Or it could be recommended, as it was presented, as a necessary act to assure the industry we support our own, want good movies about us and will come forth to heroically “Save Private Ryan” also. Indeed, it was billed and built up as a make or break movie on Black people, a kind of acid test of the viability of a Black movie in the larger (read White) marketplace, made most difficult by the absence of the anchoring and comforting presence of in-control Whites to reassure other Whites of their centrality to all things good, “God-sent” and financially successful.

This PR strategy paid off and the movie came in as the second highest grossing picture in the first week of its release. Still, there is something gratingly uncomfortable and morally unseemingly about having to prove ourselves worthy, in any way, of White Hollywood’s recognition and inclusion in its low-flying racialized flights of fantasy about us or themselves. For to talk about Hollywood is not to speak simply of industry racialized attitudes and practices, but also about societal ones and society’s rulers’ racial self-interest in White racial dominance and privileging, not only in the movies and media as a whole, but also in the larger areas of wealth, power and status.

Moreover, it is neither right nor in our interest to argue that any movie, even a grossly bad one, is better than no movie, or that bad history is better than no history and that at least we are working. This not only

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reflects a lowered conception of ourselves and of the right, the excellent and the possible, but also sends a self-surrendering signal to the industry and society concerning the low level at which some of us can be satisfied. There is no reason we can't have a good or excellent movie with accurate, instructive and inspiring history. Even at the height of the 60s with heavy stress on the social rootedness and social function of art, we still maintained concern with excellence of the message and the medium. For, we argued, bad art does damage to both the message and the medium thru which it is expressed.

Thus, anyone looking for a "Black" version of the ennobling self-sacrifice of "Saving Private Ryan" or the life-and-death soldiering in "Band of Brothers" will not find it in "Red Tails," and is reduced to self-medicating hope for improvement in its promised prequel and sequel forms. In spite of the producers spiel about wanting to provide examples of patriotic heroism by the Tuskegee air combat fighters, there are few, if any, traces of the heroic, self-sacrificing history these men made against overwhelming odds in the sky and on the ground, winning a wide range of top medals and other recognitions and awards for valor and distinguished performance of duty. On the contrary, there are ample stereotypical, falsified and fantasy representations of these heroic men, Hollywood stand-ins, lacking the discipline, dignity and distinction which define heroism, and showboatin' and clownin' their way thru the constant danger and brutal destructiveness of war.

Another weakness of the movie is its superficial, almost ahistorical, presentation, which lifts the Tuskegee fighter pilots out of

the context in which they were grounded and grew into the heroes, disassociating them from family, community, wives, girlfriends, and other friends, and our struggle against the savagery of segregation in its various forms. Certainly, it would have been good to include these and to offer a relevant reference also to women like Mary McLeod Bethune who lobbied President Roosevelt to establish pilot training at Tuskegee and other historically Black colleges, and Willa Beatrice Brown, a pilot herself, who built institutions to enhance interest in flying and train Black pilots. This would obviously have been more meaningful and accurate than the contrived introduction of the White woman as a fantasy substitute for the real women who actually loved, supported and sustained these Black men.

Among the many things to learn from this movie and the conversations about it, one of the most important is Paul Robeson's assertion that "the battlefield is everywhere, there is no sheltered rear." It is thus not only in the fields and remaining factories, in educational institutions, government settings and corporate buildings, but also in the media and everywhere else decisions are being made about the depiction, direction and living of our lives. And this too, is worth remembering, as Marcus Garvey taught, "Our history is too important to be left in alien hands" It is on us, then, to make and write the history we want to read, make the movies we want to see, and create, in relentless and transformative struggle, the social conditions to achieve and sustain these critical, corrective and emancipatory initiatives.

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