



**MUHAMMAD ALI IN CONTEXT:
RESISTING THE ERASURE AND DIMINISHING OF BLACKNESS**

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DR. MAULANA KARENGA

THERE IS NO DOUBT THAT Muhammad Ali deserves all the homage being paid to him now, but if we are to ever really understand and appreciate his real legacy and meaning, we must place him within the heart and womb of his people, Black people, African people, that nurtured, cultivated and supported him, and invited him to participate consciously in the tumultuous context of his time, i.e., in the righteous and relentless struggle to free ourselves and be ourselves as persons and a people. Indeed, even if we use an ocean of ink to write his praise and an infinite number of images to highlight our stories of interaction and exchange with him, it is incomplete and unworthy if he is not understood and engaged as a noble son of his people and an awesome yet allied and added voice concerning the issues and struggles of his time.

But the problem posed here is one posed for every great and celebrated Black man and woman, the tendency of society, and even too many of us, to talk about the person discussed as if he or she existed in a vacuum, can be separated from their people, and came into being by themselves. Moreover, there is a tendency to erase the radicalness and Blackness from the excellence achieved and to present a picture of an icon duly subdued and transformed into a representative of Americana and a universalism which is little more than veiled Whiteness.

We need to stop doing what no other people feel compelled or justified in doing, whether Gentile or Jew, Japanese, Chinese, French or German or others. And that is declare the great and celebrated among us are not really from us, are not really communally derived and defined, but rather abstractly human as if Black is not human in the fullest and most expansive sense of the word. And we must stop compulsively saying it's not about color, because it is, especially when color is synonymous with people and its relevance is denied to deny Black people credit for their creations and for producing the context and conditions for the great and celebrated to emerge from among them.

So let us also raise up and duly praise the name, good works and professional achievements of Muhammad Ali: consummate boxer, defiant draft resister, conscious athlete, speaker of needed truth, honored representative of his people, defender of his religion, peace-maker for the world, philanthropist and loveable advocate for the vulnerable. And let us also remember and reaffirm that all of this is rooted in the reality of his Blackness, the life, culture and communal struggle of his people in the interests of Black and human liberation and against White supremacy by its various names—racism, colonialism, imperialism and warmongery.

Otherwise, Ali would have been like so many of those corporate cultivated, cuddled and controlled athletes, wedded to the green giant and giantess called money, sitting on the sidelines of Black life and struggle waiting to walk or jump in the paymaster's shoes, seeing themselves as an island of achievement into themselves and imagining ways to escape from the felt "prison of their skins", as Malcolm taught. Ali refused to be seduced or subdued by money. He is reputed to have said "damn the white man's money". Indeed, he said, they want me to endorse the worst "when I'm promoting Black as best. They want me advertising all the stuff that would make me rich, but hurts so many others. But by sacrificing a little wealth, I'm helping so many others".

It is Muhammad Ali as a Black man and Black Muslim, not "Cassius Clay" as the young self-focused, inactive sufferer of racist oppression that stands up in defiant resistance to the draft, building on the history of his organization, Nation of Islam, his people and the Black Power Movement's commitment to draft resistance and resistance against the Vietnam War. It is in this context also that part of his self-liberation is to cast off his "slave name" as so many of us also did and gladly received the name given to him by the Hon. Elijah Muhammad.

He refuses to participate in America's imperial war against Vietnam saying "No, I'm not

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going 10,000 miles from home to help murder and burn another poor nation simply to continue the domination of white slave masters of the darker people the world over". Indeed, he said, echoing the ethical position of Muhammad, Malcolm and the Movement, "The real enemy of my people is here. I will not disgrace my religion, my people or myself by becoming a tool to enslave those who are fighting for their own justice, freedom and equality".

Finally, he dismisses being jailed for his defiance saying, "So I'll go to jail. So what? We've been in jail for 400 years", again echoing Malcolm's teaching that "If you are born in America with a Black skin, you are born in a prison" and you have both the right and responsibility to resist and end your imprisonment. And again with Malcolm, in taking this stand, he reaffirms our solidarity with other Third World oppressed and struggling peoples of the world which has been an ongoing fundamental part of our struggle for liberation.

There are also teachers, mentors and supporters along the way: his own family—especially his wife, Lonnie, who loved, believed in and supported him; Malcolm who mentored him in his early days and advised him in courage and confidence and the power of the faith; Mr. Muhammad, who taught him the dignity and divinity of being Black and named him Muhammad Ali—worthy of praise and the greatest. And there were predecessors in his profession who opened the way and offered models of mastery, smoothness and gracefulness under the most fierce and savage fire from the audience and society.

Certainly, we remember Jack Johnson, the defiant one who had what W.E.B. DuBois called "an unforgiveable Blackness"; who taunted the "great white hopes" hustled in the ring to defeat

him, and then taught them lessons in racial modesty, predicting the round he would temporarily free them from their racist illusions. And there were Joe Louis, Sam Langston, Henry Armstrong, Sugar Ray Robinson and others, masterful in their profession, fighting especially in a violent context Ali did not have to deal with because they and our people fought to open the way. But he benefitted greatly from these openers of the way and the Black Liberation Movement that gave him fighting words, added courage and confidence, and a fan-base the established order's money could not buy, bewilder or drive away. For we of Us, SNCC, CORE, the Olympic Project for Human Rights, the National Black Power Conference and other groups stood up with him and reaffirmed, as we said in the Movement, "Hell No. We won't go"; "We will not fight for our oppressor especially against other Third World peoples"; "Racism and oppression must be defeated" and "Liberation is coming from a Black thing".

None of this is to suggest Ali does not deserve all the praise he gets, nor to deny his uniqueness or diminish his claim to greatness and popularity conceded and reaffirmed on a global level. It is to place him in the context of his people and their ongoing struggle and to refuse to let the established order separate him and the reasons for our honoring him from his people or to idolize Black athletes and entertainers while denying the beauty, creativity, strength, dignity, human excellence, resilience and greatness of the people from whom their own greatness and celebratedness come. In fact, Muhammad Ali once told a group of Black students in a lecture during his imposed absence from boxing, "I'm the greatest, but once you find out who you are, then you'll start saying I'm the greatest too".

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