



**DIALOGING WITH DUBOIS ON HISTORY:  
PRESERVING MEMORY, MAINTAINING CULTURE**

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**DR. MAULANA KARENGA**

The relevance of Black History Month is not determined by our debatable changed or changing position in American society, nor by unfounded assumptions that diversity is divisive, and that in the interest of unity we must sacrifice or forego our own unique cultural contribution to how this society is reconceived and reconstructed. Our role in the necessary remaking of America is not to come to the table naked and in need but consciously rooted in our own history, comfortably clothed in our own culture and ethically and actively committed to creating a shared ideal and reality of this unfinished multicultural project we call America. For as we've said so often, America is not a finished White product, but an ongoing unfinished multicultural project and each people has the right and responsibility to speak its own special cultural truth and make its own unique contribution to how this society is reconceived and reconstructed.

Thus, as we celebrate Black History Month I and II and move more and more toward an unconscious and unexamined Americanization under our current President, it is important to remember that the process has its price and does not come without costs. As passive participants, it means, at a minimum, a tragic trivializing and degraded transformation of so much of what it means to be African, i.e., our own unique and equally valuable way of being human in the world. Indeed, this is why we must always be concerned about the quality, content and self-determined character of our contribution to the reconception and reconstruction of the ideal and reality of America.

In an insightful essay titled "Whither Now and Why" (1960), Dr. W.E.B. DuBois

expressed a similar concern about whether we would collaborate in our disappearance as a people or preserve this distinct, rich and complex culture and this most ancient of human histories which accompanies it. For DuBois, this problematic appears in the midst of our move toward equality and resultant rush to integrate into the existing social order without its needed reconception and reconstruction.

He argues that even "complete civil and social equality", once achieved, will not bring "as many assume an end to the so-called (African American) problems, but a beginning of even more difficult problems of race and culture because what we must now ask ourselves is when we become equal American citizens what will be our aims and ideals and what will we have to do with selecting these aims and ideals?" Continuing his questioning, he asks us "are we to assume that we will simply adopt the ideals of (White) Americans and become what they are or want to be and that we have in this process no ideals of our own?"

These questions of aims and ideals are questions of culture and history, of values and memory and how we understand ourselves as persons and a people. For culture, in its most expansive sense for us, is the totality of thought and practice by which a people creates itself, celebrates, sustains and develops itself, and introduces itself to history and humanity. And at the heart of this process and practice are a people's views and values. So DuBois is concerned that we remember, raise up and bring to the table of a multicultural society our own views and values, and not passively accept and adopt the aims and ideals of White America.

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He is concerned that if we do not self-consciously help shape society and the world and in the process define and develop ourselves, “that would mean that we would cease to be (Black) and become white in action if not in color. We would take on the culture of White Americans doing as they do and thinking as they think”. Indeed, he says not only would this mean the loss of physical evidence of our existence, but also, “We would lose our memory of (Black) history and of the racial peculiarities which have long been associated with (Black people)”. These particularities of Black people are our spiritual, ethical, intellectual, musical, literary, artistic, and activist world-transforming history and heritage by which we understand and assert ourselves in the world.

Even more, DuBois says, with the loss of historical memory also “we would cease to acknowledge any greater tie with Africa than with England or Germany” and “we would not try to develop (Black) music and art and literature as distinctive and different, but allow them to be further degraded as is the case today”. Bent on trying to “solve our racial problem in America by committing racial suicide,” we would mistakenly create a great loss not only to ourselves but to humanity as a whole.

DuBois notes that “any statement of our desire to develop (African American) culture, to keep our ties with colored people, to remember our past is being regarded as ‘racism’ ”. However, he states he has “devoted (his) life to efforts to break down racial barriers”, but he is “not fighting to settle the question of racial equality in America by the process of getting rid of the (Black) race;

getting rid of Black folk, not producing Black children; forgetting the slave trade and slavery, and the struggle for emancipation; of forgetting abolition and especially ignoring the whole cultural history of Africans in the world”.

Here DuBois reaffirms the Kawaida conception of the morality of remembering and the immorality of forgetting. To forget or fail to remember and pay due homage to those who came before us, who opened the ways and cleared the paths for us, who taught us the good way, the best of beauty and the highest of right is to be ungrateful and immoral. To forget or fail to remember Fannie Lou Hamer or Harriet Tubman, or Malcolm X and Frederick Douglass, and all our other ancestors, the struggles of our people and the achievement of our ancestors is to create a *holocaust of memory* in which a whole people dies and disappears from the history of humanity.

For DuBois, the corrective for this “calls for intelligence, cooperation and careful planning” to achieve the simultaneous and dual goal of “the utter disappearance of color discrimination in American life and the preservation of African history and culture as a valuable contribution to modern civilization as it was to medieval and ancient civilization”. And to achieve this, self-determination is indispensable. For as Fanon states, it is this choosing for oneself, this independence which is “an indispensable condition for the existence of men and women who are truly liberated” and capable of the radical transformation of society and the world.

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