



**FANNIE LOU HAMER AND RIGHTEOUS RESISTANCE:
COURAGEOUS QUESTIONING IN THOUGHT AND PRACTICE**

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DR. MAULANA KARENGA

THIS HUNDREDDTH ANNIVERSARY OF THE BIRTH and coming into being of Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer (1917 October 6 - 1977 March 14) is a day, month and year of commemoration, celebration, reflection and recommitment to find meanings and models in the life she lived, the work she did and the struggle she waged, all in the interest of liberation and bringing small, great and enduring good in the world. So, let us pause and pay due, rightful and grateful homage to this mindful memory keeper of her people; this courageous questioner of America; this steadfast and fearless freedom fighter; this uncompromising witness to truth to and for her people; and this righteous keeper of the faith – faith in the self-liberating capacity of our people, and the eventual and inevitable triumph of the Good that is righteously and relentlessly struggled for.

If we indeed honor the life-work and life-struggle of Mrs. Hamer, we must constantly study her written, oral and living practice texts and extract from them lessons and models of African and human excellence and achievement. And there are no richer, relevant or more applicable and enduring lessons of her life, work and struggle than that of courageous questioning in thought and practice. That is to say, courageously and continuously questioning our lives: the conditions of our lives; the meaning of our lives; the purpose of our lives and the principles and practices by which we understand and live our lives and direct them toward good and expansive ends.

Here first, the question is what is going on, what are the conditions of our life as a people in oppression and resistance? And then, it's what we are to do and what are we willing to do to radically change and reconstruct the conditions of our lives? We are always confronted with the question of "what's happening" and what does our history, culture and humanity demand we do about it? And in the context of oppression, there

can be no rightful response except resistance, righteous and relentless resistance on every level.

Thus, Mrs. Hamer questioned her life on the plantation as a central site of oppression. Her written, oral and living practice texts teach us that the plantation is not simply a place of labor exploitation and oppression, not simply a physical and social reality, but also a psychological reality. And like the larger society in which it is located, the plantation is a system of domination, deprivation and degradation, internally as well as externally. It is not satisfied with enslaving the body, it seeks to enslave, sedate and ravish the mind, robbing it of its self-knowledge, memory, sense of humanity and will to resist.

Mrs. Hamer tells us she reasoned that she could never be free if she stayed on the plantation. So, she said, "one day, the 31st of August, I walked off the plantation". It is a model and message for us all, to discover any and every plantation we are situated on in society and any on which we live inside ourselves, and to walk off that plantation. That is to say, the physical, political and mental plantation—where White is "right" and rules, where color and class illusions make too many of us believe we can and even need to escape the reality of our Blackness. But we need not "escape" the reality, beauty and divine endowment of our Blackness. On the contrary, we must embrace it, defend it and create an expanding realm of freedom in which it and all others can flourish and contribute to human good and the well-being of the world.

The plantation we live on daily is the oppressive system of race, class, gender and various other forms of oppression, exploitation and degradation. And it is these conditions that led Mrs. Hamer to declare, "America is a sick society", sick with racial hatred and hostility, with the wanton will to make war on the vulnerable, and with the inability to stop lying, face its flaws and admit this is not really the country the media-magicians of the corporate world spend so much

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time trying to convince us it is. The statue of liberty, she says, must be turned around so that it faces inward and serves as a symbol for the severe self-criticism and the radical self-correctives this country must engage in.

In the midst of the madness American society is experiencing and imposing on us, the voice and audacious insights and teachings of Mrs. Hamer come through loud, clear and with enduring relevance. Thus, she reminds us no one has the moral authority or right to tell us how we should understand this country, honor it or the flag, and demonstrate patriotism. Indeed, she reminds us no one with the exception of Native Americans' special claim, have more claim to this country than us, and certainly not our White oppressors. She roots her moral authority to speak concerning this country on what we contributed, sacrificed and suffered in this country and continue to suffer. Indeed, she reaffirms our right to resist wrong and injustice wherever we find it.

She reminds us that the history of Black people is written in blood in the struggle to expand the realm of freedom in this country, saying "every red stripe in this flag represents the Black man's (and woman's) blood that has been shed". In fact, "the flag is drenched with our blood. Because, you see, so many of our ancestors were killed because we never accepted slavery". Thus, again she reaffirms not only our incontestable authority to speak about conditions in this country, but also to challenge it with the *criticism of words* and the *corrective of struggle*. And she recovers and reaffirms the message and model of our ancestors who gave their lives and blood in righteous and relentless resistance to slavery and oppression, refusing to die physically and psychologically in passive acceptance.

Indeed, the spirit of Mrs. Hamer hovers over the NFL players who resist evil and injustice in

the place they work which can be considered a corporate plantation itself. She asks them and all of us, not to forget the bridges that carried them over and opened the path down which they now walk in dignity and defiance. These include *entertainers* in clubs and concert halls and on the playing fields such as: Jackie Robinson, Louis Armstrong, Eartha Kitt, Walter Beach, Jim Brown, Curt Flood, Muhammad Ali, John Carlos, Tommy Smith, Craig Hodges, Arthur Ashe and others. But Mrs. Hamer's approach to standing for the flag represents a widespread position by Black people of her time, of not pretending America is a "perfect union", free from the social and psychological diseases that make it a sick society.

Thus, she says, "I cannot stand when people stand to sing the national anthem, 'O say can you see by the dawn's early light, what so proudly we hail'...I ask myself the question, what do we have to hail when actually 'the land of the free and the home of the brave' means 'the land of the tree and the home of the grave' in Mississippi?" But as Min. Malcolm taught, America is a single country and cannot escape criticism and condemnation for what it does, encourages or allows to be done in any part of its house, whether Mississippi or Flint, Michigan.

Finally, Mrs. Hamer stresses the need for our unity, especially Black men and women in love, respect, equality and struggle. The point, she says, is not to liberate ourselves from each other, but to liberate ourselves from our oppression. And to do this we "work side by side...to bring liberation to all people". Mao Zedong, the Chinese revolutionary leader, had called for "power to the people" and Mrs. Hamer reminded us "power is the people", the people united, self-conscious agents of their own life and liberation, refusing to be dispirited, diverted or defeated.

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