



**NO SANCTUARY IN THE CITY:
RESISTING REPRESSION IN WARZONE AMERICA**

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DR. MAULANA KARENGA

PART 1. IT WOULD BE DISHONEST AND SELF-deluding to deny that we, as a people, are living in dangerous, difficult and demanding times. And one of the defining features of these problematic times is the death-dealing and disabling conditions of our lives; conditions in which we live and too often die; conditions of ongoing and severe oppression; and personal and collective insecurity about our safety and survival. It is an urgent issue of security, i.e., *safety* and *survival*, raised by the repeated police violence and killings that have swept through the Black community like a grim-reaper arctic wind. And its killing-fields character was brought into stark focus by the forest fire of righteous resistance beginning in Ferguson and spreading outward across the country. And we must not abandon this righteous and relentless resistance.

Shock, insecurity and righteous anger were felt and expressed after the police-pretender vigilante killing of Trayvon Martin, but it was the police killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson that drove home and reaffirmed the pervasive problem of police violence and the deep-rooted racist disregard for Black life and rights it represents. And it also reaffirmed how police violence against Black people—men, women and children—is not only legally allowed, but also socially sanctioned and accepted as a proper and needed way to suppress those deemed a menace to society and its armed representatives.

This is the message constantly sent by the police department's repeated failure to discipline their own and ruling in almost every case of unwarranted police violence and killing that the beating, shooting or killing was within policy. And the tired and tattered "reason" offered for killing unarmed children, women and men is that the heavily armed and reputedly highly trained police officer, often backed by other officers, was afraid for his/her life. In any other situation, such easily and perpetually frightened persons would be rec-

ommended for psychological treatment and referred to other employment. But everyone knows, including the jury that exonerates these uniformed killers that occasionally come before them, that it's not a question of fear.

Rather, it is question of a shared racist disregard for Black life and rights which is pervasive and persistent in America and acceptance of the racialization of crime and the criminalization of the race—Black people, and thus, the assumption of guilt and unworthiness for justice. It is also an issue of deferring to authority and therefore closing one's eyes to evidence of every kind. In a word, it is turning a blind eye to injustice and a deaf ear to truth, pretending a sanctity for the system and its armed guardians and offering them not only benefit of the doubt, but also immunity from the questioning, prosecution and punishment to which other citizens are subject.

And so, in such a system locked and loaded against us, there is for us as a people *no sanctuary in the city*, no safe place, not in our homes, our cars, parks, playgrounds, schools, or even our religious institutions. There is a lot of talk in the country about sanctuary, in churches, mosques and temples. Even cities advocate and offer sanctuary to immigrants, refugees and asylees, but we are not noticeably included. Africans—Continental, Caribbeans or other Africans of the diaspora are not discussed openly and often as recipients equally worthy for sanctuary. And yet, even animals have sanctuaries, safe places where they cannot legally be hunted or trapped.

But it seems that in too many cases, this does not hold true for Black people on whom it often seems there is a continuous open season. This may seem extreme or an exaggeration to those who have not lost loved ones, family members, friends or familiars, but those who have lost and those who walk the streets and drive their cars on the highway in fear and anxiety and who have heard the siren,

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seen the flashing lights and wondered whether they will be next can offer an evidence that reaffirms the truth and awesome tragedy this represents and reflects.

Sanctuary is central to human life and human rights, for it is another way of talking about security, that is to say, *safety* and *survival*. Indeed, the first article that speaks to human rights in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights lists *life, freedom* and *security* together. For they are linked and life has less meaning and cannot realize itself in its fullness in conditions of unfreedom and insecurity, especially those imposed and sanctioned by society or the state. But again, there seems to be no sanctuary for us in the city, no guarantee of safety or survival in the country. In such a context, justice is not about giving our people their due. On the contrary, it is about holding them suspect and guilty for being different, present and vulnerable. In this context, they have no rights except those the racist society assigns them, no real standing in the court except for what a racist society grants and no chance for justice except that which is extracted in righteous and relentless struggle.

We are thus, on this particular issue, in a place that reminds us of the Dred Scott enslavement case where Dred Scott and we, his people, are told in no uncertain terms, we have no rights that White people, the state or the law are bound to respect. And thus, it is played out in the streets and the courts of today as our having no rights the police have to respect; no standing in the court that would warrant an objective weighing of the evidence; and no status in society that would justify being given justice that the favored race takes for granted.

There is, then, no sanctuary or protection from those who take the hypocritical oath “to protect and serve” all—us included. Indeed, it turns out that we must protect ourselves and

be protected from the so-called protectors, and are best served by the absence of these so-called servants whose service is really service to a system of oppression. As Min. Malcolm X taught in the 60s, the police have historically served and continue to serve as an occupying army in our community, there to repress and suppress, to defend the interests of others, especially those of the White ruling race/class. And they do this by *targeting, attacking* and *killing* us with ruthless regularity. In a word, they are in effect waging a war against us.

Again, it is Min. Malcolm, noble witness to the world for us, master teacher who taught the clear, enlightening and uplifting word, who pointed out that Black people live under the constant fear and force of systemic violence, especially physical violence from the police. Therefore, he said, Black people must “realize they are living in a *war zone*” and that they are “at war with an enemy that is as vicious and criminal and inhuman as any war-making country has ever been.” Malcolm was speaking in the context of the constant and brutal killing by lynchers, bombers of churches and killers of children during the Black Freedom Movement. But he also spoke in similar terms about the police and the whole system itself and the many ways it imposes violence on us.

Now, if we live in a war zone, Malcolm says, we must recognize it and once we recognize that war is being waged against us, we can adopt measures and develop means to defend ourselves and end our oppression. This ultimately and unavoidably means that we must set aside all illusions and engage in righteous and relentless resistance, remembering we are our own sanctuary, our own liberators and we are never defeated until we surrender in our hearts and minds and cease to resist.

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