



**BEING BELAFONTE ON THE BATTLEFRONT:  
SUMMONING RADICAL THINKING AND THE REBELLIOUS HEART**

*Los Angeles Sentinel, 05-04-23, p.C1*

**DR. MAULANA KARENGA**

THERE IS CLEARLY SO MUCH TO SAY IN paying rightful homage to Nana Harry Belafonte in meaningfully marking his recent transition and ascension to sit in the sacred circle of the ancestors, and people around the world have been offering well-deserved and appropriate praise to him. I had seen him first at the funeral service for Nana Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. for whom he was a good friend, fundraiser, counselor and strategist and had sung his songs while still in high school. But I followed his work as an activist and finally met and spoke with him briefly when he, Minister Louis Farrakhan and I presented along with other leaders at the Second Gary Convention in 2006. And I admired the life he lived in resistance and appreciated the truths he spoke and the achievements he made in the interest of African and human good in the world.

This piece is not to recount all the good and meaningful things he accomplished in his well-lived life, but to seek and engage the vision and values of “the rebellious heart and radical mind” that grounded and motivated him and caused him to dare and sustain resistance in what he called “an era of injustice” which persists to this day, and which he resisted to the end of his life on earth. Indeed, he lived a principled, purposeful and productive life of artistry, activism and expansive achievement. And we find him at the battlefield in numerous places of oppression and resistance.

Indeed, he tells us that wherever he witnessed oppression and resistance, he felt compelled to join the resistance. It is a value and principle learned from his mother who he said, “never resisted the opportunity to fight oppression”. Thus, we find him an advocate and activist for his people in the civil rights

phase of the Black Freedom Movement; for occupied Haiti; apartheid-suppressed South Africa; famine-stricken Ethiopia; boycotted Cuba; encircled Venezuela; warred on and invaded Iraq; and for a world terrorized by America as an aggressive empire, using claims of terrorism by others to camouflage and conceal its own.

He does not want us to simply admire his achievement and status as an award-winning artist and a world-changing activist, but to see and emulate how he has used it to contribute to the struggle for freedom and justice in this country and the world. Indeed, his understanding and assertion of himself as an activist artist comes from the lessons of life, work and struggle learned especially from the one whom he defines as his “mentor, moral compass and model,” the unbreakable rock of resistance and consummate activist artist, Nana Paul Robeson.

Belafonte states that Robeson was the life-grounding teacher who taught him the transformative power and social responsibility of art and artists which he feels many current artists have abandoned and set aside for less worthy reasons. Robeson was described by the great educator and leader, Nana Mary McLeod Bethune, as “the tallest tree in our forest” of freedom fighters. Belafonte tells us that Robeson taught him that “the purpose of art is not just to show life as it is, but (also) to show it as it ought to be.” And he taught him that artists are to be a moral and radical voice and force in and for the world. Finally, Robeson taught him, other artists, writers, intellectuals and scientists and the world that in the face of oppression “the battlefield is everywhere there is no sheltered rear.”

Belafonte informs us that given the critical juncture and crossroads of history at

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which we stand, there are two essential even indispensable strengths and assets we must have. They are he says the rebellious heart and radical thought. Questioned by a group of young Black people in Harlem in 2016 as to what he was looking for at an advanced age and in the culminating season of his life, he told them he is still looking for “the rebel heart,” the rebellious heart. For he assures us that “without the rebellious heart, without people who understand that there is no sacrifice we can make too great to retrieve what we’ve lost, we will forever be distracted with possessions, trinkets and titles.” For him it is not simply material things we should use our hearts and minds to acquire, but especially to retrieve and achieve conditions and capacities for freedom and justice.

In this regard, he criticizes Trump for misreading and misusing Dr. King’s concepts of reparations, reducing it to money. He states that it was not only money obviously needed, but also what King called “the riches of freedom and the security of justice.” He states that those big time players in the capitalist society, Hollywood, and the corporate and political world become “player(s) in the game of their own demise”. Thus, in spite of the fact that “we pay the penalty” for rebellious and radical thought and action, our lives, freedom and justice depend on it and so regardless, “the heart has to find greater space for rebellion.”

In his acceptance speech at the NAACP Awards, he joined with his call for expanded

space for the rebellious heart the parallel call and concept of the need for radical thought. He reasoned that those of our community who should use their talents, influence and power, hearts and minds for the liberation and uplifting of our people are missing an opportunity and obligation. Thus, he says, “Never in the history of Black America has there been such a harvest of truly gifted and powerfully celebrated artists, yet our nation hungers for the radical song.” All the groups, youth, women, labor, religious and others must “unleash radical thought,” dare sing radical songs, raise radical voices, engage in radical thinking, and wage radical struggle.

**H**e SEES US, AS NANAS MARY MCLEOD Bethune, Haji Malcolm, Martin King, Fannie Lou Hamer and others, as a moral and social vanguard and calls on us as a people to honor this task assigned by both history and heaven. He tells us that in spite of the diversity of peoples in this country, it is our specific responsibility to take the initiative to radically rethink and transform this country. For he says “the most powerful force is the voice of African Americans. And America will never become whole and America will never become full of dreams to be until we are truly free and truly a bigger part of this.” This was his concept of us and how better can we honor him than to strive mightily and meaningfully to embrace and embody his teachings in the radical and rebellious ways he lived and left as a legacy.▲

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DR. MAULANA KARENGA, Professor and Chair of Africana Studies, California State University-Long Beach; Executive Director, African American Cultural Center (Us); Creator of Kwanzaa; and author of *Kwanzaa: A Celebration of Family, Community and Culture* and *Introduction to Black Studies*, 4th Edition, [www.OfficialKwanzaaWebsite.org](http://www.OfficialKwanzaaWebsite.org); [www.MaulanaKarenga.org](http://www.MaulanaKarenga.org).