

A Global Perspective on African-American Political Activism and Human Rights

Youth today must broaden their horizons to meet the challenges of the present century

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Global Research, February 14, 2015

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [History](#), [Police State & Civil Rights](#)

This year is the 100th anniversary of the formation of the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History (ASNLH) in 1915, formed by Dr. Carter G. Woodson, who founded Negro History Week some 11 years later in 1926. In 1916, Dr. Woodson initiated the Journal of Negro History (JNH) to provide a scientific approach to the research and chronicling of the affairs of the African people in the United States and the world.

Dr. Woodson provides a prime example of how oppressed people can transform not only themselves but the world in which they live. Woodson was born in 1875 in Virginia, the first former British colony to enslave Africans in North America beginning in 1619.

Born into poverty, Woodson worked in the coal mining industry and put himself through school. He was over 20 years old when he finished high school.

Later Woodson would earn a scholarship to Harvard where took a Ph.D in history. He went overseas to teach in the Philippines, then under occupation by U.S. imperialism in the aftermath of the so-called Spanish-American war, a turning point in the historical development of Washington-led foreign occupations of oppressed peoples.

After teaching for a number of years at Howard University in Washington, D.C., Woodson recognized the limitations of the Negro education model imposed upon the African American people in the aftermath of slavery. After resigning from Howard, he would build the ASNLH, the JNH and later Negro History Week into formidable intellectual institutions.

He would later write during the Great Depression in 1933 a seminal work entitled "The Mis-education of the Negro," examining the problems associated with preparing the oppressed for an independent existence in the 20th century.

Woodson was a pioneer in the development of the field of African American Studies. He worked with meager resources but accomplished tremendous feats in his scholarly endeavors.

Although Woodson died in 1950 at the age of 75 and was not able to witness the explosion in interests in African American Studies during the 1960s and 1970s, his work set the stage for this revival in scholarship. Later in 1976, the U.S. government declared February as Black History Month, recognizing the contributions of African people to U.S. and world civilizations.

Lorraine Hansberry: The Struggle Against Racism and the Role of the Arts

Another transformative figure in African American history was Lorraine Hansberry (1930-1965), an activist and writer who would break numerous barriers.

Her father, Carl Hansberry, was a successful businessman who fought against racism in housing. When he purchased a home in a previously all-white neighborhood in Chicago, the family was met by a white mob demanding that they move out.

Later a community association attempted to bar the family from living in the area saying that restrictive covenants prevented African Americans from moving into white neighborhoods. These restrictive covenants were common during the 20th century where racism prevailed in the housing industry.

Carl Hansberry would take this case to court challenging restrictive covenants. A favorable ruling by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1948 set the stage for the proclaiming of restrictive covenants unconstitutional in 1948.

Lorraine Hansberry attended the University of Wisconsin and became an activist with youth organizations fighting racism and the Cold War. She would leave the University and move to New York City where she worked with Paul Robeson, W.E.B. Du Bois and others on various projects related to the anti-imperialist movement.

She became a proponent of the national liberation struggles in Africa where a re-awakening after World War II led to tremendous anti-colonial movements. Hansberry served as a writer and editor for Freedom newspaper, which was founded by Paul Robeson during the early 1950s. The newspaper was eventually forced out of existence due to the anti-communist hysteria of the McCarthy era.

Turning to the theater, Hansberry wrote "A Raisin in the Sun" which premiered on Broadway during 1959. The success of the play dealing with the struggles of an African American family to better their social condition, won a huge audience and subsequent awards.

The play was made into a film that starred Sidney Poitier and Ruby Dee in 1961. Hansberry became the first African American woman to achieve such success on Broadway in New York.

Unfortunately, Hansberry's life was cut short when she was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer leading to her sudden death in Jan. 1965 at the age of 34. However, today there is resurgence in interests related to her work in the areas of African American affairs, anti-imperialism, civil rights, gender equality and the relationship between literature and social advancement.

Malcolm X: Fifty Years After His Assassination is Still Revered

Coming up on Feb. 21, we will be commemorating the 50th anniversary of the martyrdom of Malcolm X, El Hajj Malik Shabazz. Malcolm X was killed at the age of 39 but during the short span of his adult life of activism, he made a monumental contribution to the intellectual and political life of the African American people.

Malcolm came from an activist family where his parents, Earl and Louise Little, were members of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), founded by Marcus and Amy Ashwood Garvey in 1914. When the Garveys moved to the U.S. in 1916, the movement grew by leaps and bounds.

Earl and Louise met at a UNIA Convention in Montreal in 1919. After 1920, Garvey would gain tremendous support building a large organization with chapters throughout North America, Latin America, the Caribbean, Europe and Africa.

Marcus Garvey was framed-up on bogus mail fraud charges, imprisoned and later deported from the U.S. in 1927. He would later die in England in 1940.

Due to the militancy of the Little family they became targets of the Ku Klux Klan and other white terrorists organizations in Omaha, Nebraska, where Malcolm was born and in Lansing, Michigan, where they settled during the late 1920s. Earl Little was found dead near a streetcar rail in Lansing during 1931. The family believed that he was killed by a white racist mob.

The pressure brought to bear on the survivors led to the commitment of Louise Little to a mental institution and the breaking-up of the family. Malcolm was an outstanding student but was discouraged from pursuing a career in law by a racist teacher.

He later moved to Boston to stay with his older sister Ella Collins. Turning to menial jobs and petty crime to survive, Malcolm was arrested and prosecuted for burglary in Boston, spending six years in prison.

While in prison his siblings were recruited into the Nation of Islam which was founded here in Detroit in 1930 by W.D. Fard. After being paroled in 1952, Malcolm rapidly rose through the ranks of the NOI becoming a minister in Boston, Philadelphia and eventually New York City.

He would build the NOI into a major force in the African American freedom struggle in the U.S. Later he was forced out of the NOI in late 1963 and early 1964. Forming two other organizations, the Muslim Mosque, Inc. and the Organization of Afro-American Unity (OAAU), he sought to internationalize the struggle of the Black masses in the U.S.

During 1964, he spent considerable time in Africa and the Middle East seeking alliances with other oppressed peoples and newly-independent states. His assassination in early 1965 cut his plans short, but his efforts played a role in the progression of the African American struggle over the last five decades.

History and Contemporary Struggles

These are some examples within African American history that can provide guides to our work today. We must think globally and act locally.

Not only should we seriously study African American, African and world history, but we must make history ourselves. Racist violence against African Americans and other oppressed people must be eradicated because “Black Lives Matter.”

The task of the present generation is to ensure that the legacies of our heroes and “sheroes” continue. We have to eliminate poverty and national oppression.

Our communities need our assistance to build organizations that will take on the true predators which are the banks and corporations with have looted Detroit and other major cities around the U.S.

The recent upsurge in mass demonstrations since the police murder of Michael Brown in Aug. of last year portends much for 2015. We must join this movement to make our contribution to the liberation of our people and humanity in general.

The above article are excerpts from an African American History Month lecture delivered by the author at Henry Ford College in Dearborn, Michigan, a suburb of Detroit, on Feb. 11, 2015.

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