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From King to Mandela and Beyond: A Personal History of Black Economic Empowerment

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Dear Editor,

As a girl of the 1980s growing up in Southeast Washington, DC in the shadows of the Civil Rights Movement, I recall taking public transportation and having my choice of seating. As the routes moved north to south and east to west, from my mobile window to the city I would notice how some sections of the nation's capital were robust with proprietors open for business—few of which were African American-owned and operated—while other parts were desolate, windows and doors boarded up, and buildings scorched to embers that remained unclaimed and uncultivated.

As I aged and traveled to other cities along the East Coast, I noticed this same pattern within the inner cities, from Baltimore to Philadelphia to Newark, where I learned of dreams that once were flourishing businesses becoming the reality of a dying movement. I could only imagine the frustrations that mounted over the 1968 assassination of the Dreamer, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.—the inner turmoil that manifested within African American communities; the pressure of a collective boiling point within a generation all too familiar with discrimination, dreams deferred, and disappointment. These frustrations were the results of what my eyes beheld in disenfranchised communities nationwide.

From slavery to Emancipation—despite the broken promise of 40 acres and a mule—from Reconstruction to the Great Migration, I grew to learn that African Americans oppressed by the Jim Crow South still rose above violence, harassment, intimidation, and systemic bias to build communities. Still, many of those communities lacked quality access to education and public services. Like Dr. King said in his December 1955 Montgomery Bus Boycott speech that we as “the disinherited of this land” could, many sojourned outside of their community borders, some even seeking the American Dream of homeownership and the intergenerational wealth it could provide in suburbia. Unfortunately, it was there that they often faced the American reality of financial and social disapproval by the banks and their White neighbors, especially when Dr. King and his marchers were welcomed to the Marquette Park neighborhood in Chicago with bricks thrown at their heads in 1966.

As a teenager from my mobile window to the city on the bus in Southeast Washington, DC, I would recall what I learned of how African Americans were denied free choice of seating on public transit systems, and how they realized that the majority of revenues generated for White-owned and operated city bus systems came from the ridership of African Americans. With Dr. King and civil rights leaders empowered through a successful boycott of the Montgomery, Alabama public transit system between 1955 and 1956—sparked by the tenacity of Ms. Rosa Parks—as well as with the potential to disrupt discriminatory practices and bankrupt other segregationist service industries, Dr. King called for mass boycotts. Later, he helped organize the 1963 March on Washington as a strategy to advocate for racial harmony and protect economic rights for African Americans.

I learned that one of Dr. King's chief supporters and financiers, Ms. Mahalia Jackson, helped to ensure that the message and the movement had strong financial backing. I also learned that the Queen of Gospel knew firsthand what was involved in overcoming poverty in the Jim Crow South and achieving wealth with her gift of song. Her voice, star quality, faith, and service to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference afforded her the platform and the finance for a movement that would declare a new anthem for civil rights everywhere: “We Shall Overcome.”

Dr. King knew about the “classic pattern of disenfranchisement” that Blacks faced when he wrote about it in his March 1965 article, “Selma – The Shame and the Promise.” With Dr. King at the helm of mass boycotts, sit-ins, and peaceful protests, his efforts effectively targeted the pockets of oppressors, thereby penetrating through the walls of the Supreme Court to end segregation in public transit in 1956 and then through the stony corridors of the U.S. Capitol when Congress passed the 1965 Voting Rights Act.

Although favorable rulings against discriminatory practices were being won, I learned that Dr. King would not be comfortable fighting only for the rights of Blacks in the U.S. but would also be concerned with raising awareness of civil rights on a global scale. Inspired not only by biblical principles and the teachings of Mahatma Gandhi but by his African co-laborers in the struggle as well, Dr. King’s respect for the work of Dr. Kwame Nkrumah in the hard-fought independence of Ghana in 1957, and his encouragement of Dr. Nelson Mandela to stay the course against colonial oppression in South Africa, showed how Africans and Black Americans worked together to stand for social and economic empowerment.

I read that as Dr. King attended Ghana’s independence ceremony, he was overcome with emotion at the significance of Africans becoming leaders of their own political parties and country. He acknowledged Dr. Nkrumah as its first president, and later regarded the sacrifice of Dr. Mandela who was imprisoned for opposing Apartheid through strategic defiance campaigns.

“If the United Kingdom and the United States decided tomorrow morning not to buy South African goods, not to buy South African gold, to put an embargo on oil; if our investors and capitalists would withdraw their support for that racial tyranny, then Apartheid would be brought to an end. Then the majority of South Africans of all races could at last build the shared society they desire,” declared Dr. King in his December 1964 Speech on South Africa in London. He went on to say, “Though we in the Civil Rights Movement still have a long and difficult struggle in our own country, increasingly we are recognizing our power as voters; already we have made our feelings clear to the President; increasingly we intend to influence American policy in the United Nations and towards South Africa.”

As a young woman who watched and heard from my mobile window to the world beyond my city, I had seen newspaper headlines and had heard songs about the need to end Apartheid—how South Africans under the Nationalist Party regime had not been citizens in their own country for many decades. I learned that Dr. Mandela had been pursuing a law degree while in prison, where he was mistreated compared to White inmates, and often slept naked, hungry, and heartbroken over being absent from his family for 27 years.

I began to see and learn more about Dr. Mandela, and how he and the Anti-Apartheid Movement had been inspired by other African nations in the struggle for freedom—particularly by Dr. Nkrumah and the plight of the Gold Coast. The world began to see that Africans involved in the long struggle for freedom could not prosper financially because of colonial rule and its exploitation of African people and natural resources.

By the time of my high school graduation in 1994, I had witnessed the release of Dr. Mandela from prison, the fall of Apartheid, the new era of democracy with social and financial promise in South Africa, and the great accomplishment of Dr. Mandela in becoming its first president. I learned of Black empowerment programs forming in South Africa to ensure that people of color would be considered for work and represented in business ownership. As African Americans were progressing yet still working to attain full financial and social status, Africans free from Apartheid were still limited in attaining wealth, business, trade, and access to quality education and health care.

I heard the cries of Africans and African Americans calling for reparations for the price of free labor that preserved the wealth of many generations besides our own. As a freshman enrolled at Syracuse University I learned about the reparations activism of Queen Mother Audley Moore, who relocated from the Jim Crow South to New York City, inspired by the Pan Africanist teachings of Marcus Garvey—who inspired Dr. Nkrumah.

During the same year Ghana had won its freedom, Queen Mother Moore dared to petition the United Nations, demanding land and billions of dollars in reparations for people of African descent while requesting direct support for African Americans who sought to immigrate to Africa. In 1963, she founded the Committee for Reparations for Descendants of U.S. Slaves as well as the Republic of New Africa, and published *Why Reparations? Reparations Is the Battle Cry for the Economic and Social Freedom of More than 25 Million Descendants of American Slaves*, in which she upheld that the root problem of race relations in America was reparations left outstanding for the atrocities of slavery and Jim Crow. Through her petitions, she mentored a new generation of activists by providing the reparations framework to incorporate into their political programs, including members of the Black Panther Party and the Revolutionary Action Movement.

I noticed that Queen Mother Moore embodied the spirit of economic empowerment as a social movement birthed by Civil Rights Mother Rosa Parks, nurtured by SCLC supporters like Gospel Queen Mahalia Jackson, and delivered by Dr. Nkrumah, Dr. King, and Dr. Mandela. While Moore attended the funeral of Dr. Nkrumah in 1972 in Ghana, I learned the Ashanti nation there honored her with the title, “Queen Mother.” She was also present to witness Dr. Mandela’s release from prison in 1990, and spoke on reparations as a social movement in 1995 at the Million Man March.

I stand on the shoulders of the civil rights activists to inherit many rights they had been denied. At the turn of the century as a young adult who abandoned public transportation with the purchase of my own vehicle, I was registered to vote, had attained an undergraduate degree, worked successfully in the career of my choosing, owned a business, and experienced the joy of homeownership twice in diverse, suburban communities. However, my experiences with discriminatory practices in the workplace, legal system, and financial services confirmed the generational residue still remaining within racism, classism, and sexism in America. With every anti-social and anti-financial act of oppressors internationally against the human spirit and the building of wealth throughout the centuries, “We Shall Overcome” remains the anthem of oppressed people. With every Black soul unjustly imprisoned and every Black life curtailed in the age of Black Lives Matter, not only do mothers and fathers mourn the loss of their dearly beloved but another generation pays the unredeemable price of an absent soul being unable to financially benefit.

In the new millennium with the Black Lives Matter Movement, the relaunch of the Poor People’s Campaign, and the South African Black Economic Empowerment Program, we build upon the foundation laid for economic empowerment while considering how crucial the efforts of world leaders were in calling for action against the strategic footholds on the purse strings of the oppressed. In honor of Dr. King and Dr. Mandela—who were recipients of the Nobel Peace Prize and proponents of economic empowerment inspired by Dr. Nkrumah—both would agree that social and economic independence is meaningless unless it is linked with total liberation for all people of African descent.

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Sincerely,

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