

## Creating a New World – the Politics of Race and Respectability.

*“I could not comprehend the justice of that law or that religion, which upholds or recognizes the principle of Slavery, and never once, I am proud to say, did I fail to counsel anyone who came to me to watch his opportunity and strike for freedom,”*  
*the words of Solomon Northup, autobiography, **TWELVE YEARS A SLAVE** (1853)*

Some would say that remembering slave history is just a way of placing blame.

Blame is a waste of energy and serves no useful purpose in dealing with **prejudice and racism**. *Today, these two imprints of slavery largely go unnoticed often as expressions of dehumanization.*

While learning and studying our slave history as American History is educational, history for history sake is nothing if we do not take away from it something relevant for us today. Blame in of itself liberates no one, but neither should we be indifferent to the new subtle forms and images of the *slave-mind consciousness* that shapes so much of American life. This *slave-mind consciousness* is a quality of mind that seeks to muzzle and muffle the voices of too many whose lives are unfulfilled, to limit them, the unheard. They are identified best by pains that largely go unnoticed; and the unheard find themselves conforming to someone

else's idea of correctness, someone else's idea of respectability, someone else's idea of law, someone else's idea of religion.

A Black woman's astuteness and unwillingness to accept what has been her plight is often seen as *'the angry black woman'* – when in fact it is her recognizing exactly what is offensive as prejudice and racism arriving full frontal, directly at her; and, she is, rightfully, angry about it. Her witness to the brutality of slavery and the continued struggle for survival of her people over time is complex; for she has been called to renew herself, her family and her community in the fields and places where little or nothing was life-affirming.

**Should Black folk seek to conform as a means of acceptance?**

**Need we be so grateful to be invited to the board room and obtain the key to the executive washroom, at the expense of our soul?**

Certainly the Black Bourgeoisie, have been made to become comfortable with their place and seek only to work toward becoming more *'respectable'* by someone else's gauge. In the meantime, the soul of black folks is unheard; and Northup's understanding of freedom remains unrealized.

**Solomon Northup** reminds us all to live lives of vigilance; we are all called to be ‘*watch-persons*’ for the opportunities to challenge the imprints of *white-mind consciousness* that seeks to define our freedom. Black folk can no longer take on the burden of explaining themselves; **as if**, black folks have to give account for their blackness, their humanity; **as if**, apologizing for prejudice and racism, that *white-mind* imprints suggest, that blackness causes, will make whites embrace Blacks; it will not. **Race is a social construct** and racism is white-folks problem.

Our issue is understanding our own history and moving forward with a plan—real opportunities--of our own – that can end our own suffering. To do so, we must overcome—within ourselves—the *slave-mind consciousness* the mind of *prejudice and racism*.

According to the **Global Slavery Index**, Steve Mc Queen’s 21 million is not quite accurate. In 2013, there was an estimated 30 million slaves around the world; with Mauritania ranked number one in the index with close to 160,000 slaves in a population of 1.3 million.

Today, the control of the Negroes has become a full-time job, both nationally and internationally; those who control the levers of the systems make it clear that we must conform in order to be accepted, in order to succeed. **But are we hurting ourselves by this way of living – this constant quest for acceptance and respectability?**

**To whom are we accountable?**

**What does justice look like for Black people?**

The age-old mantras were: Get an education, attend the right school, drive the right car, leave the hood, get the right house in the right neighborhood, join the right club. These quests for inclusion have been long and arduous tasks.

**Should we be challenging this for the future of Black folk?**

**What about mass incarceration, income inequality, joblessness, home foreclosures and land repossessions?**

The content of our racial discussions must expand to the systemic causes of inequality. The Legislative, law-making, decisions and the ways of the corporate board room must come to light. If we are not careful, someone other than

ourselves will decide for us who is to have cumulative advantage and who is to have cumulative disadvantage.

We want to believe that we are in a post-racial society because we have a Black President when nothing could be further from the truth.

Black folk are more educated than ever before in the history of America, yet we are still unemployed or grossly under-employed; with the income equality gap ever widening.

There exists in America today those who have *cumulative advantage* and those who have *cumulative disadvantage*.

Depending on who you are, you experience one of these over the other, in different ways; right up close and personal, right where you live today.

Wealth and income inequality is directly related to the theme of *advantage and disadvantage*; but it is not the whole picture.

Most families seek to buy homes and make a quality of life for themselves --

Everyone wants to take part in the American Dream, but for some it has been the American nightmare.

For example, at the time of the national housing market crash, Blacks were being steered into *sub-prime loans*. We are currently seeing the repercussions of this play out in foreclosures, short sales, and land repossessions all across the country; affecting Black people disproportionately. Wells Fargo lost a major lawsuit to the City of Baltimore centered around this very practice.

Wealth is accumulated mostly generationally. And income inequality is directly related to the theme of *advantage and disadvantage* and it is clear which group has the cumulative advantage.

Having survived the brutality of the Middle Passages, - *the MAAFA* - the African has come a long way on this continent in a short period of time, given his struggles and experiences; yet, we know through statistical research the Black poverty rate is three times that of Whites, regardless of education. Obviously something from the zone of prejudice, systemic and institutional racism is coming into play that even education nor any other merit principle alone cannot level the playing field.

Understanding the role slavery played in shaping the modern world and continues to shape it today is a way of paying homage to our ancestors.

Solomon returned with a different look at life. The post-slavery Solomon, along with his abolitionist friends, launched what can be considered the first campaign for reparations long before *40 acres and a mule*. In the later part of 1853 he, and other abolitionist friends, petitioned Congress for reparations for the time he spent in bondage. However, receiving only \$3,000 for the copyright to his autobiography he was never rightfully compensated. Like so many African-Americans today, justice never came to Solomon Northup.

**Solomon Northup** makes it clear in his autobiography that we should all ***“strike out for freedom”*** when we see opportunity.

For this nation to regain its world standing as a country in freedom and heal from its tainted past there must be a collective intervention – **a dual commitment**. If we are to call ourselves modern day Abolitionists, **Whites** must learn the truth of their history, understand and acknowledge their *cumulative advantage* and work arduously to promote opportunity for those without it.

**For people of color** and all people throughout the **African Diaspora** knowing whose shoulders we stand on is a critical part of our self-discovery, a necessary

step toward obtaining true freedom. We must, acknowledge and remember the sacrifices and contributions that have already been made, by embracing our common history and experiencing our own connectedness to fully realize **what we owe each other.** ***Good Afternoon!***

*Speech by Renee Moore, Founder, Solomon Northup Day July 19, 2014 at Skidmore College.*

# ###

Confidential - Do Not Copy - Renee Moore