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Black Writers Challenge: Coming Together at Howard

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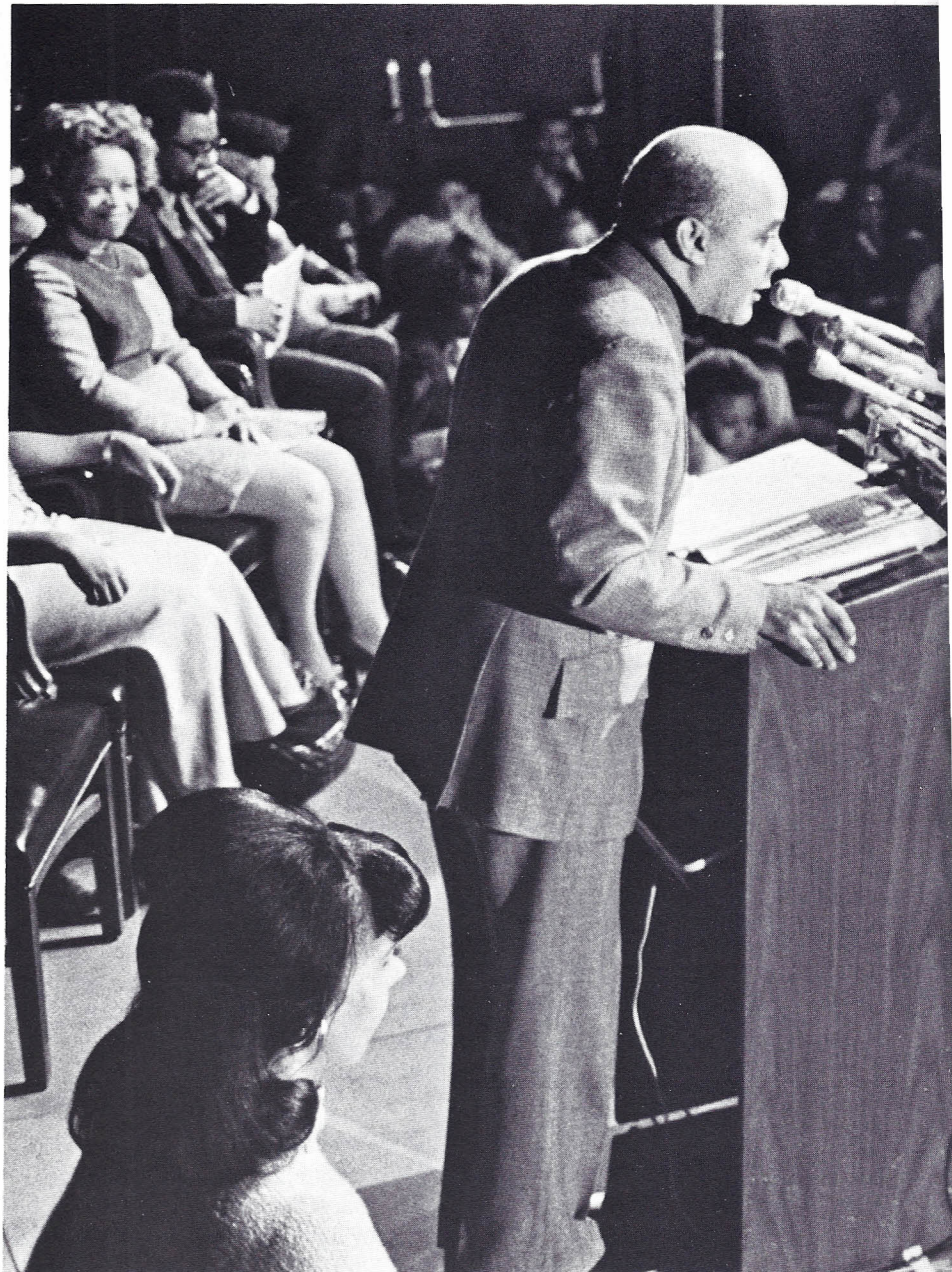
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4 ***“Dig the clowns limping down the Honky Tonk boulevard in high heeled sneakers underneath wide pimp hats with built-in processed sideburns. Some of the hats are so wide the sun can’t get to the brothers, and they are turning pale for loss of sunlight.”***



John O. Killens—delivering the welcoming address in Cramton Auditorium

Black Writers Challenge

Coming Together At Howard

By Genevieve Ekaete

“How many Jews were killed during the European World War II” asked Poet Haki Madhubuti, formerly known as don I. lee. The overflowing audience in the School of Social Work Auditorium said in unison, “Six million.”

“How many African people were killed during the modern slave trade?” This time the same audience mumbled different figures in unsure hush tones.

The point was well made and that was the crux of the matter at the three-day historic First National Conference of Afro-American Writers which convened at Howard University last November under the auspices of the Institute for the Arts and the Humanities. The theme was THE IMAGE OF BLACK FOLK IN AMERICAN LITERATURE. Just about every major

writer in the country was invited and more than forty attended.

What resulted was a major braintrust, with each writer or artist suggesting how his or her expertise and ideas could be applied to the liberation struggle for Black survival here and abroad, and for the eventual health, happiness and peaceful coexistence of all humankind.

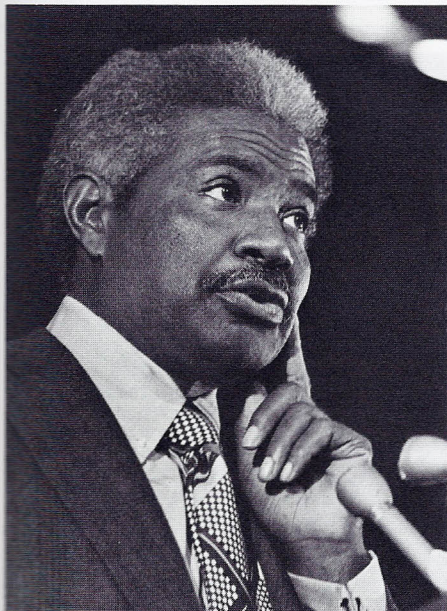
Madhubuti’s question cried for answers and many came, including his own, during the conference which lasted from the morning of November 8 to the night of November 10, 1974.

Historian John Henrik Clarke who is deep in a special project researching the alliance of Black people with non-Black people as far back as 3000 years ago, laid a major portion of the blame for Black



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PHOTOGRAPHY BY JIM WELLS



people's scanty knowledge of themselves on the up-to-the-present Eurocentric approach to reading history as well as the Eurocentric way Blacks look at themselves.

It all began in the 15th and 16th Century, Clarke said, when the European, not quite sure whether the world was round or flat, "decided that round or flat, he was going to take that world." And when he took that world, "he redesigned it: Europe was his home. The rest of the world was his servants' quarters," with Blacks being the servants.

This explains why most Blacks know white history but not their own. The pattern exists still in other non-white former and present European colonies. But unfortunately, in learning white history and

culture, Blacks often fail to see the contradiction in white people's code of living and neglect to use these contradictions to their own advantage. Thus, willy nilly, Blacks have become collaborators in their own enslavement.

Clarke said that Black people created Christianity as *religion*. Europeans, after initially killing Christians, became Christians, and Christianity died. Christendom, which we have today come into being, according to Clarke. But the difference between Christendom and Christianity, Clarke noted, is that Christendom is a political instrument while Christianity is a religion. It is no accident, he stated, that European people do not live by Christianity (nor do they live by democracy). "They cannot afford to. They'd dismantle

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their entire society if they lived by it 24 hours. Obey one commandment—'Thou shalt not steal' and that's the end! The entire economy of this society is based on stolen property," he pointed out. "And who did they steal? YOU!" He leaned forward to make his point to an auditorium filled with African-Americans. "Return you and the whole thing is over!"

Madhubuti concurred: "We did not get here (the U. S.) by TWA first-class. A race of people from another continent raped us from a continent, brought us to a continent they had just stolen from somebody else. They then pushed us into building this continent."

The biggest hoax or hypocrisy of all, said author John Oliver Killens in his welcoming address, is this: While the newly settled Europeans in America "were spouting all those magnificent slogans about the Rights of Man and fought a bloody war in the name of these inalienable rights," the very same so-called founding fathers owned slaves. In an attempt to cover up, or rationalize this glaring contradiction, Killens charged, as did others at the conference later, white America started a campaign in its literature and other art forms to show that the slave was sub-human and undeserving of human rights and sympathies. "Hence those rights endowed to man by his creator did not apply to the slave. The first task was to prove to the white American the slave's 'inferiority.' The second job was to prove his sub-humanity to the outside world. The third, the cruelest hoax of all, was to prove to the slave that he deserved to be a slave."

Sam Yette, author of *The Choice: The Issue of Black Survival in America*, veteran journalist and journalism professor

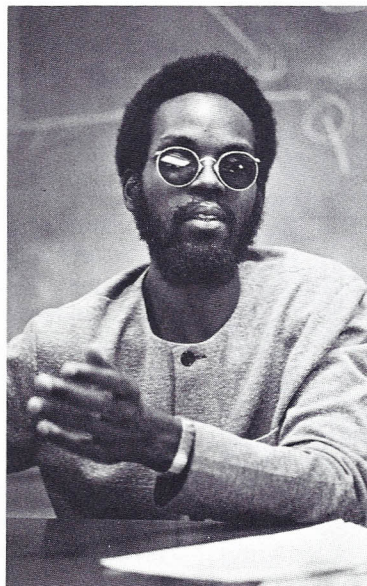
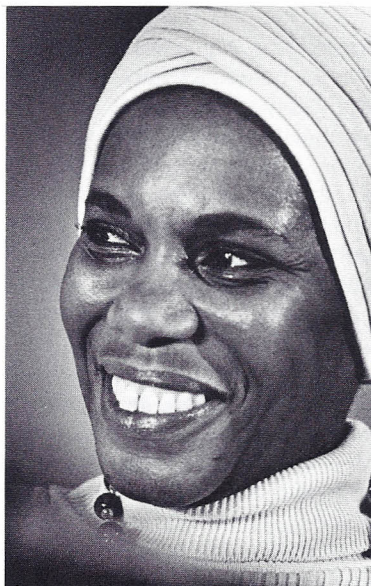


"The Black Woman. We know that the Black woman was a worker—laboring in the fields alongside the Black man. True, it was forced labor, backbreaking and humiliating. Yet out of that painful experience came certain valuable assets over the years: A resourcefulness, an independence, an ability to take hold and manage under situations that would have wiped out a Miss Anne. . . .

"These Black women—when you examine them in history—escaped that white Western image of female passivity and uselessness and the white woman's object inferiority vis-a-vis the white man.

"Although both the Black man and woman were oppressed, the Black woman had a greater sense of equality than the Black man due to the fact that they shared the labor. *Equality*, I said, not *dominance*. An equality which seemed to them perfectly natural and was in keeping with the life they once knew in Africa."

Paule Marshall, Novelist



"Let the image makers as architects step forward and identify what to tear down, what to build up, and be example. Be example of force moving forward."

Kalamu Ya Salaam
(Val Ferdinand), Poet

at Howard, illustrated the methods used to ensure that Blacks—and whites—have a distorted view of themselves. After stating the undeniable fact that the mass media are political, Yette focused on a particular period in American history—the late '50s and early '60s, and on a particular town in the South—Montgomery (even though the practice he described occurred in many other towns and the effects endure to this day). The morning daily newspaper in Montgomery, *"The Montgomery Advertiser"*, had a policy of separating 'Negro news' from 'white news' in such a way as to reinforce negative Black images and positive white images," Yette noted.

One edition of this newspaper was sent to Black homes; a different one was sent to white homes. The Black edition carried a page of "News of Negro Event," which contained some positive news about Blacks. The newspaper going to whites did not carry this page, and this was the *only* page that carried *all* the positive news relating to Blacks. The same newspaper had a policy of prominently displaying negative news about Blacks in *both* the Black and white editions of the paper going to *both* Black and white homes.

Consequently, Yette said, "Both Blacks and whites were carefully taught that the most important aspects of Black lives were negative and destructive. White children never saw anything good about Black people, and Black children saw positive—heroic—images of white children prominently and expertly displayed as a matter of course."

This is how Yette enumerates the formula which guided—then and now—white mass media workers' approach to a news story:

1. Glorify white
2. Defame Black.
3. If white not glorified, blame Black.
4. If Black not defamed, *credit* white.
5. If white is neither glorified nor credited, and Black is neither *blamed* nor defamed, *forget it*.

This, in addition to being the article of faith whites in the mass media use, worse still, it is sometimes copied by Blacks in the media who rely "too heavily on the white media as valid sources of information and inspiration," said Yette. And it is not surprising, he continued, that many Blacks have acted along the negative lines that the media have presented to them as the "truth." Indeed, this is how the mass media control Black culture. The importance of this is astounding, Yette said, especially when one realizes that "culture is the consummate worth of a people. It is the total history, power, skills, joy, wisdom, and destiny of a people. . . . It is a repository of a people's will and style of survival."

All this tied in with the mass campaign waged to get people to look at themselves, and Blacks particularly, to look at themselves from the vantage point of Europe and Europeans. And where does that leave Blacks? The conferees seemed to be saying that it left Blacks in a struggle to retake their minds by working for a change, for their interests. Says Madhubuti: "We have not been taught to work for the race. We have been taught to work for everybody else but ourselves. Our total existence at this point demands that white people give us water, give us clothing. Give us used housing, used cars. Give us mis-education, warped values—everything that is life-saving. . . ."

"In New York city you do not see Jews sending their children to the Black community to be taught nothing. . . . In Maryland you don't see the Greeks sending their children to the Black community to be taught nothing. And in Chicago, the Irish don't even want to sit with Black children. Yet we still send our children to any and everybody in the world to teach and we wonder why they come back Jewish Negroes, Greek Negroes, and, of course, Irish Negroes."

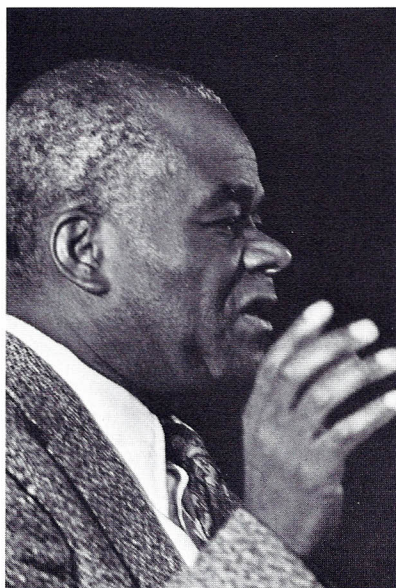
Richard Wesley, who wrote the screenplay for the movie "Uptown Saturday Night," spoke of how he had participated in carrying on a revolution not quite eight years ago when he was a senior at Howard. Standing on the stage of Cramton Auditorium and facing an attentive audience which included many students, he said: "The last time I stood on this stage I was working backstage as a stage hand to get a Sister elected as Homecoming Queen who wore an Afro and she won. And it was such a revolutionary act at the time that *Jet* magazine ran six pages on it the very next week. The Queen was Robin Gregory.

"When we put Robin Gregory on the throne for Homecoming Queen in 1967, we put in *Jet* magazine, a national magazine, the image of a Black woman wearing a Natural proudly and thousands of Black students rallying around her. We created an image and controlled it. We got that image out into the mass media and the very next year Hampton Institute, Fisk University, Morgan State College, A and T University, Atlanta University, Clark College, Morehouse College, you name it and they had it—they had a Sister up there going for that Homecoming title with a Natural." This was a victory and continues to be, and shows sharply the

"The writer serves as the brain and the watchdog of a people. He is a servant of a people. He is not a presider over. It is his role to read harder, study harder, learn faster in order to find answers. . . ."

"History is a clock that people use to tell their time of day. And it is the compass that a people use to locate themselves on the map of human geography. History is supposed to give people basic direction. But the most important thing that history is supposed to do for a people is to tell them where they are, what they are and, still more important, what they still must be."

John Henrik Clarke, Writer



"Some whites believe that Black people like their condition. That Blacks not only forgive their oppressors, they *love* them. This belief keeps white people functional. Not *sane* but *functional*. They tend to maintain it tenaciously, against all evidence to the contrary."

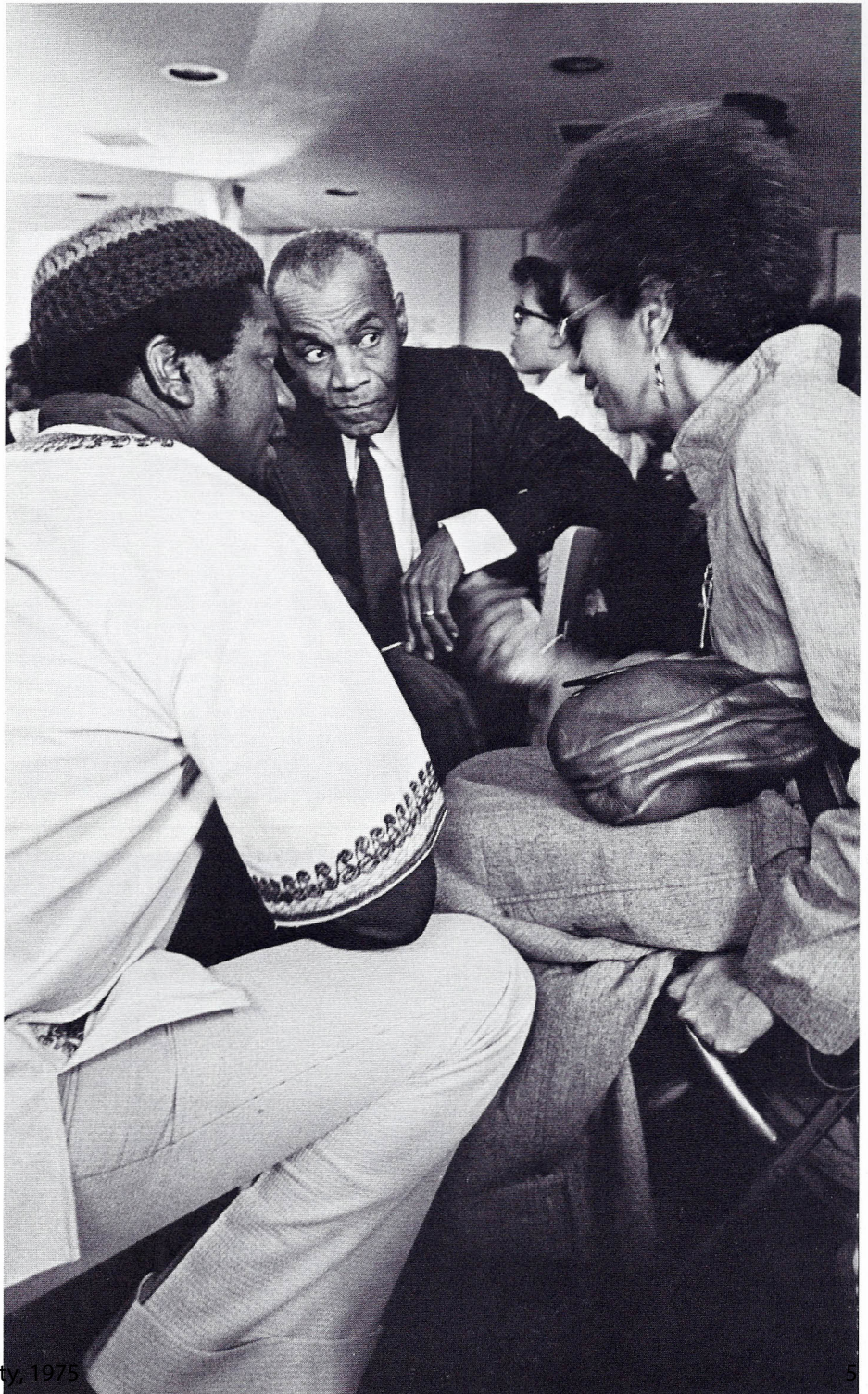
Kristen Hunter Lattany, Writer

perverted eyes through which Blacks had been conditioned to look at themselves. In a normal environment, there would not be anything revolutionary about a people wearing their hair the way it *naturally* grows on their heads. Whites wear theirs the way it naturally grows on their head. But many whites' Eurocentric way of looking at the world and steering others to do likewise, makes Blacks want to simulate whites in hair-styles and other physical aesthetics, though in the full knowledge that they will never acquire white hair and looks. That way, Blacks can be doomed to everlasting frustration of never measuring up to the European ideal. (This should not be confused with the white hair-length (or hippie) controversy. For that has to do with *length*, not the natural make of the hair.)

Even Wesley conceded that many times the images Blacks fought for do not endure because of external variables or thorough brainwashing. One of which is: "We have this myth about white people. We say white people stick together. 'Crackers will not let us do anything. When niggers get on the move, white people come together like a solid wall.' That is a lie!" he said emphatically. And recalling readings from African history by W.E.B. Dubois, Wesley said: "When Europe decided to go after Africa, a couple of European countries got mad because they could not get as much of Africa as the Pope allowed some other countries to get of Africa. Consequently, you had World War I. Twenty-five years later, you had World War II. For 300 years before the 20th Century you had 25 wars fought between white people because they could not agree on terms dealing with the colored people of the world."

Many took the view that while a few Blacks know their history and the history of whites well enough to quote and use both to their advantage, it is obvious that the majority do not. Blacks are badly in need of reeducation and redefinition, some writers argued; and the Black writer now has the responsibility of collating and disseminating the information. As Madhubuti noted, the Black writer must be willing to give his or her *best* free or at a minimal cost to the community because "there are less than 300 Black writers in this country who are published with any kind of regularity. Three hundred reflecting 35 million (people's views) is heavy." So is the responsibility.

Not much is happening in the '70s to further the interest of Blacks in this country, many conferees contended, pointing



to the straight hair comeback for both men and women. Killens says Blacks are in "very grave danger of losing the cultural revolution which showed such great promise in the '60s." The symbols of that cultural revolution included Afro's, dan-shikis, name-changing. Killens fears Blacks are in danger of losing even that "shaky ground on which we stood." And if you don't believe him he invites you to New York's 42nd Street. "Dig the clowns limping down the Honky Tonk boulevard in high heeled sneakers underneath wide pimp hats with built-in processed sideburns. Some of the hats are so wide the sun can't get to the brothers, and they are turning pale for loss of sunlight."

How does one account for this retrogression in values on the heels of the blistering '60s. Poet Kalamu Ya Salaam expressed the view that the images given and projected in the Black poetry and raps of the '60s are good, but that the people—poets and otherwise—seem unable to live up to the poems. This has to do partly with the fact that many Black poets of the '60s were too preoccupied with being *more* poets (and stars) than Blacks, he said. Many Black poets, he said, have stopped reading their own poems. Couple this with the fact that the image makers of the '70s are no longer Blacks, he added.

"The Black image makers of the '70s are white people who benefit from our confusion, who oppress and exploit us, and teach us to do the same to each other . . . because the control of the media, and more important, the control of our lives is in the hands of white people. That means the effective image control is in their hands too. And Black poets being people, are manipulated and subject to the same control as anybody else out here suffering for survival." Kalamu emphasized the need for a number of effective mediums to deal with the Black experience.

A few of the symbols of the '60s need themselves to be demystified, according to Clarke. "We need to open the clenched fists and understand that there is no power inside of it. We need to know that there is nothing magnificent in being Black and beautiful. White people will concede that and make cosmetics to make you more beautiful. This world is not ruled by Blackness or beauty. It is ruled by power. To be *Black* and *powerful* is the ultimate end."

There was, though, a cautionary note on the pursuit of self-controlling power: Black people should be wary of the alliances they make with whites, advised historian Clarke. "Of Black-and-white alli-

ances there has never been a good one." He cited these two examples: "After the Civil War, the Black farmers united with white farmers. Many of these same white farmers joined the Klu Klux Klan and killed the Black workers."

Another instance: Blacks built the old Knights of Labor Union. Immigrant craftsmen from Europe came into the Knights of Labor and drove the Black craftsmen out of the Knights of Labor and created the American Federation of Labor.

The reason Blacks have fared poorly in former alliances with whites, according to Clarke, is that the term of the alliances have never been clearly stated. While he said he saw no reason why two hungry people, regardless of their race, should not unite, he believes they should do so on the basis of equality. In the executive branch of the alliance the Black party to the alliance should have equal votes to do the white party in if it breaks the term of the agreement.

Turning to Black Nationalism and Marxism, Clarke described the current ideological feud between them as a ridiculous confrontation. "There is no party line that I love more than the party line that liberates my people. I will take from Marx. I will take from the devil if it will free you," he said to his Black audience. "So long as it is in your behalf, I will work with anybody that works for you. I will desert anybody that fails to work for you."

Karl Marx, he said, had some interesting things to say about Europe of his day. "Some of those things are relevant to us. Most of them are no longer relevant to the Europe of this day, and least relevant to us." He said Karl Marx is obsolete even in the Soviet Union today. If that were not so, he asked rhetorically, why would Russia "come begging for wheat" from the U. S.? "And why would there be a branch of Chase Manhattan in Moscow? Why is there a Coca Cola concession in Moscow?" He answered all the questions: "These people (the Soviets) are on their way back to Capitalism."

Clarke felt Blacks should take "Socialism, Communism, but (go) far beyond anything Karl Marx ever dreamed about. We will have to take it into a dimension where it is the liberating force for all mankind, and not merely an extension of the mechanism of European domination. And when we do this, we will have to read into it some of our (Black) Marxist-Leninist equivalencies."

Socialism, to Clarke, is the way the world has to go in the future because he feels it is a more equitable system. As most writers who are properly attuned to

