

Frances Cress Welsing, *Isis Ascendant: Teaching Self-Respect, Reasoning and Resistance*

by

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The passing of Dr. Frances Cress Welsing (1935-2016) calls on us to pause and pay rightful homage to her—this accomplished and committed psychiatrist, activist-intellectual, author, way-opener and African woman of great weight and worth in the world. She audaciously and defiantly inserted herself in the annals of psychiatry and behavioral science and in the resistance discourse of Black people with her controversial and influential “The Cress Theory of Color-Confrontation and Racism (White Supremacy)”. And she would, amidst continued consternation from some and increasing admiration from others, dare to extend and deepen discussion of this provocative theory in her major work *The Isis Papers: The Keys to the Colors*. She chose Isis as the divine, moral and social image and ideal for the title of her major work. We praise her, then, as Isis Ascendant, herself, molder and maker of men, women and children, restorer, protector and preserver of the people; she who “admires truth and justice and made justice stronger than gold and silver”, as she states in her preface.

Through her writing and her professional practice, lectures, interviews and debates, she enriched and expanded our discussion, moving it beyond victim analysis and pioneering a bold initiative of psycho-analyzing the oppressor and his disorder and deficiencies. And she challenged us to think calmly and rationally, develop a deep self-respect and engage in serious and sustained resistance against this psychological and social disorder which is one of the world's most persistent and pervasive problems, racism, i.e., White supremacy.

Dr. Cress Welsing enters the progressive and radical Black intellectual tradition, then, reversing the customary order of psychiatric study, turning the focus of diagnosis, prognosis and prescription for an identified pathology on the oppressor rather than the oppressed, on the victimizer rather than the victims. It is part of the project of the continuing search Black people have engaged in since meeting White people. Indeed, it is a constant quest for the answer to an unescapable question: what is the etiology, the ultimate source, of White peoples' unprovoked hatred, hostility, violence and domination directed so ruthlessly and irrationally toward Black people and other people of color?

Borrowing from Neely Fuller's work, *Textbook for Victims of White Supremacy*, she focuses on White supremacy as the "only functional racism in the known universe". She reasoned it is this globalized system of behavior and practice which opens the way to discovering the source of Whites' behavior toward peoples of color. Moreover, Cress Welsing agrees with and cites W.E.B. DuBois' contention that "the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color line". And she argues that the problem requires "an adequate analysis of the nature of the color line, the exact nature of local and global racism", White supremacy. Thus, she urges an "ever-increasing understanding of the behavioral phenomenon of white supremacy as a global terroristic power system". She noted that "as a psychiatrist, my thinking tended to focus on what possible motivational force, operative at both the individual and group levels, could account for and explain the evolution of these patterns of social behavioral practice seemingly functional in all areas of human activity (economics, education, entertainment, labor, law, politics, religion, sex and war)".

Cress Welsing reasoned that the drive for White supremacy, like "any neurotic drive for superiority and supremacy is founded upon a deep and pervading sense of inadequacy and inferiority". Moreover, she contended that this profound sense of deficiency is rooted in Whites' realization that the "quality of whiteness is indeed a genetic inadequacy or a relative deficiency, state or disease based upon the genetic inability to produce the skin pigments of melanin which are responsible for all skin coloration". Given that the majority of peoples of the world are people of color, Whites, she maintains, have this deep fear of genetic annihilation. Thus, Whites have "an uncontrollable sense of hostility and aggression developed defensively which has continued to manifest itself throughout the entire historical epoch of mass confrontation of whites with non-whites" or people of color. Here Cress Welsing contends, "racism is a behavioral system for survival of white people" as well as a drive to dominate.

Although she had early identified melanin as a key concept in her theoretical framework for understanding White supremacy, she realized that it was racism, itself, in all its manifestations that had to be confronted, resisted and destroyed. Therefore, in an interview, she states “If I had my way, there wouldn’t be all the discussion about melanin. I would say ‘discuss white supremacy’ ”. Again, then, it is racism, White supremacy as violent imposition, ideology and institutional arrangement that must be engaged and defeated.

She saw our oppression as “open warfare being waged against the Black collective”, a war which is genocidal in its intention and impact. And though we might argue about its intention, history and daily life document its disruptive, disabling, devastating and ongoing impact. Focusing on the struggle in Ferguson, Dr. Cress Welsing reaffirms, in the face of post-racial fantasies, the ongoing and aggressive character of racism, asserting that “all the issues that are in Ferguson are related to racism/white supremacy”, especially the constant killing of Black males and creating “living death” in various ways.

She counsels us to remember we are Africans and the standards of excellence this identity obligates and encourages us to honor. “Black people have to get in their mind frame that ‘Black’ means dignity and being serious, that people respect each other” and that “the strength of Black people (is) valuing themselves, respecting themselves and having dignity”. And as we say in Kawaida, we must engage in righteous and relentless struggle to secure free space in which we can develop and flourish. Thus, she says, we must: “*get over fear; learn and understand what is happening; begin thinking (deep); start getting quiet so you can think; begin analyzing and planning; learn the meaning and practice of deep self-respect*” and engage in “the ultimate organizing of all of the appropriate behavior necessary to neutralize the great injustice of the white supremacy power system” and bring “justice and peace to planet Earth” (emphasis mine).

Dr. Cress Welsing advises us that we must develop and direct our lives toward “the ultimate goal of liberation and justice”. Therefore, what we do in life must be evaluated by whether a given pattern of behavior detracts from or enhances our struggle for total liberation. She states, “if the behavior detracts from the long-range objective, it must be eliminated. If the behavior enhances the achievement of the ultimate goal, it must be reinforced among the people”.

Like our foremother, Anna Julia Cooper, Dr. Cress Welsing teaches and tells us repeatedly, our struggle is a “joint struggle” with Black male and Black female. There is no single sex or gender liberation. Liberation is a collective concept and practice which raises up and pushes forward each and all of us. “When both Black male and Black female take up the struggle for justice against white supremacy, they are endowed with the strongest possible (e)nsurance that they will be united” and succeed, she says.

For “they are united in a common effort against injustice and simultaneously they express the strongest possible statement about respect and love for themselves as individuals”. And “they confer on themselves the highest possible value”—by self-consciously and cooperatively winning and building the quality relationships and the ever expanding realm of human freedom, health, well-being and flourishing they want and deserve.

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