



# Black Mountain Institute

News and Events

---

## BMI Senior Fellow Soyinka Responds to Charges of Racism

22 June 2007

from: Wole Soyinka

to: Fellow Writers and Others of Allied Pursuits

cc: The Jewish Theatre of New York  
The Anti-Defamation League, New York.  
The Theatre Communications Group, NY  
Aspen Writers Foundation, Aspen  
The Nobel Laureates "Petra" Initiative  
The Elie Wiesel Foundation for Humanity, NY  
Dubois Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge  
The Black Mountain Institute, Univ. of Nevada.  
Index on Censorship, UK.

### **An Interim Statement**

I have an obligation to bring the following to your attention, as engaged individuals and collaborators – direct or indirect - on humanist issues - racism, democracy, freedom of expression, and fundamental human rights in general. Even if it has come to your notice already, my own thoughts on this bizarre episode have not. I have taken some time to review the unpleasant distraction, and have now decided to respond in a number of ways, of which this is the beginning.

The clip from the Jewish Theatre of New York website (<http://www.jewishtheater.org/>), one that has generated numerous exchanges on that site, runs thus:

"Jewish Theater Shuns Nobel Laureate"  
June 11, 2007  
By Nicole Kristal

Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka drew ire from the Jewish Theater of New York after lauding Louis Farrakhan during a keynote address to the Theatre Communications Group June 8 at the Guthrie Theatre in Minneapolis.

According to statements released by the Jewish Theater and the Anti-Defamation League, Soyinka referred to the Nation of Islam minister as "an exemplary human being" and suggested that others follow in his footsteps. Farrakhan said in a March 18 interview on Al Jazeera television, "The real anti-Semites are those who came out of Europe and settled in Palestine and now they call themselves the true Jews."

A Jewish Theater representative said Tuvia Tenenbom, JTNY founder and artistic director, criticized Soyinka during a Q&A after the speaker's address.

Soyinka responded by saying that "certain groups" frequently complain about racism and stated that Farrakhan has scaled down his anti-Semitic comments in recent years. Soyinka said he selected Farrakhan as a concept more than a man.

In a press release sent today, the JTNY expressed shock that none of the American theatre leaders at the event spoke out against Soyinka's comments.

"We have no doubt that if a Jewish speaker had uttered similar comments about the black community he would be taken off the podium at once," the statement said. "We are wondering: Is Jewish blood less red than African blood? In the Jewish Theater we have a policy of zero tolerance toward any racism ... and we demand an immediate apology from Mr. Wole Soyinka. His blind racism should not stand."

Owing to contractual conditions governing my public lectures for impending publication, I am unable to place the text of my lecture on Internet. I am however copying this statement to the directorate of the TCG with my consent that, on request, any recipient on this limited circulation list be sent the full transcript of the lecture and the ensuing Q &A session. In the meantime, I shall exercise my right of reply through select channels. For now, please note:

1. Nowhere did I refer to Louis Farrakhan as an "exemplary human being", a description that appears in the news item in inverted commas.
2. Nowhere did I suggest, even by inference, that others should follow in his footsteps.
3. The close coupling of Farrakhan's March 18<sup>th</sup> comment with my alleged call to emulate him is worthy of Josef Goebbels. Farrakhan's interview did not feature in my lecture – indeed I am learning of it for the first time. It has been introduced in this tendentious manner to insinuate that it was on the basis of

Farrakhan's March statement that I came to recommend him as 'an exemplary being', worthy of emulation. Such crude tactics thus reinforce the original LIE, an all-too-familiar, unprincipled proceeding.

4. The first sentence of the last paragraph in the news report is mind-boggling. My lecture did not implicate any racial community. The theme of my lecture – *Rituals for our Time* – deployed, as springboard, Louis Farrakhan's decade-old call for a day of Universal Atonement. Reference to the Jewish experience will be found, ironically, in a single remark which proposes that, if Farrakhan's exhortation were indeed to be heeded, Rwanda, Cambodia, the Jewish Holocaust etc. provide more than ample justification for such a ritual of global remorse.

To sum up: I recognize, in Mr. Tuvia Tenenbom a being deficient in hearing, language, logic, and/or intellectual integrity. On the strength of shameless fabrications, he declares me a blind racist. I am taking advice from my solicitors on the option of letting the courts decide if he is right, or if, rather, he is an attention seeker, a compulsive hate-monger undergoing a temporary dearth of convertible material.

Of course it could be that the world is now forbidden to introduce the name of Mr. Farrakhan in any public discourse, no matter what. If so, this secretive Censors Board should openly advertise its interdiction. Tenenbom's demagogic "zero tolerance of all forms of racism" needs to take on board also a zero tolerance of all forms of capricious, self-serving censorship, especially the kind that decontextualizes, distorts and fabricates in order to accommodate censorship.

I have two engagements in the US in the coming weeks - one at a Literary Festival of the Aspen Writers' Foundation, week of June 24. and the other, at the National Black Theatre Festival at Winston-Salem on 31<sup>st</sup> July. I shall release this statement at both events.

Wole Soyinka  
June 22, 2007

---