

EDITORIAL

Examining the source of biases

by Kwame Dawes

Childhood images are very important in the shaping of the ideologies that we lean towards as adults.

Image: A father, a black intellectual living in Ghana, demanding that three well dressed and brief-cased C.I.A. agents leave his home in their slick Jaguar. The cowed, blushed looks of the agents, the controlled anger of the father and the sigh after the car has purred off; as if the world was conspiring to offend his very dignity.

Image: A massive poster of an afro-haired woman, her eyes squinting with a glaze of silver on the pupils and her mouth contorted in mid-dramatic-speech. The name cannot be forgotten, and the picture of this young America woman revolutionary, Angela Davis, overturns the techni-coloured magic of cartoons like Johnny Appleseed and Daniel Boone. America becomes increasingly black and white.

Image: A soft covered book filled with black and white photographs. On the cover, a pensive looking man, the close up so intense that his pores show. He is alive on the front page. On the back he is dead. The drama of the assassination reenacted through photographs and death suddenly seems significant. "I have a dream" becomes a part of the child's vocabulary. The bespectacled, stern fisted foil to Martin Luther King Jr. is given a single shot. He is a fascinated puzzle to the imagination. His name is enigma: Malcom X.

Image: A bustle of activity. Too energetic and spontaneous to be a holiday trip. The tension is there but not explained. The children; four and a baby are pushed into the massive grey Rover and the ride to Cape Coast is as pleasant as always; yet something seems wrong. Later we see the photograph in the paper; the deportation report and we realize the danger of being an alien in a coup-ridden nation.

Image: Gun fire at night. Distant but exciting. You think of the watchman with his baton and bow and arrow. You don't feel very safe. Newspaper photographs of men who were once alive and are now dead. Kotoka shot at the airport that has been a playground for the child. Distinguishing between automatic fire, pistol fire, rifle fire, mortar fire.... There is an uncle who was in the war... he understands guns. He is out there somewhere.

These are images of a child who has not reached the age of thirteen. They remain vivid and as I mature I become more and more aware of the way in which they have shaped my thinking as an adult. The need to examine the biases and prejudices that have been shaped by our childhoods becomes increasingly pressing when faced with difficult political and social developments in the world. It is also difficult to pretend that the Gulf Crisis is an easy one to ignore and it is even harder to ignore the ironic fact that the possible instigation of hostilities will begin on a week that commemorates the peace initiatives for human rights by the American Martin Luther King Jr.

One of the curious features of King's teachings was his apparent ability to see the world from the perspective of those who should have been his enemies. We underestimate the immense character that such an act requires for, very often, it is an act that goes against years of effective conditioning by the society. In the height of a struggle, morale is garnered through the generation of strong emotions; emotions rooted in a series of moral values that must never be complex. These values are couched in the language of good versus evil. When both parties are convinced of their rightness the battle is far more dramatic and intense. But are these values always accurate in their collective judgement of a people?

I have discovered that even as one living far away from the United States and even as one who has developed a suspicion of American actions (a trait I share with many Canadians), I was drawn into the paranoia about Asian people because of the effectiveness of the crucial tools of propaganda. Much of knowledge about the First and Second World Wars came from war comics and films published and produced in Britain and America complete with the discourse of these people. In the language of good versus evil, it wasn't difficult to see who was evil. My information about Vietnam came from similar sources with equally effective biases. I always wondered what the comics written by the Germans, the Japanese and Vietnamese would have looked like. Would my thoughts and feelings about these people have changed significantly?

One is convinced that while Hitler would remain a villain in my eyes, and the Japanese ambition expressed through wanton forays for expansion, complete with their brutal techniques of torture would still have offended me. But the collective mystique of the people would have altered somewhat and perhaps my understanding of the motives for war and the nature of human relations in that context would have improved. The fairest and, perhaps, most productive entry into history must involve the examination of the several stories that constitute the "actual events." We are seeing the shaping of another process of mystique creation for the purposes of morale in the Gulf. The television stations are very careful to maintain the image of the Iraqi as a brute enemy whose war-hardiness has created a being that understands only, the language of violence. The image will grow more complex as time proceeds. I suspect that Martin Luther King Jr. would want us to be less inclined to accept the stereotypes but rather contend with the brute facts of humanity clashing with itself.

This attitude is especially useful when the hostilities are over. What is left, if anything, will have to be shared by a people who have developed inaccurate misconceptions about each other. The Iraqis will have to reexamine the perception that all Americans are the same as George Bush; and similarly, Westerners will have to develop a conception of the Iraqis as being distinct from that character of Sadaam Hussein. One does not expect much change in the comics and films that will be produced about this crisis, but we may hope that there will be a change in approach to the question of conflict.

I began this editorial with a look at a few of the images that left a great impression on me as a child. In 1990, what will children be left with as images of the times? Will they have a moral touchstone in the form of a Martin Luther King Jr. on which to rest an inexplicable but persistent respect and love for humanity? Will they have the image of an Angela Davis, beautiful, defiant yet articulate to remind people of the sheer brilliance of social struggle? It is impossible to dictate what the images will or should be for children, but one hopes that in the millions of homes around the world, this crisis in Iraq will not be producing another world of bigotted and limited individuals with misguided perceptions of people who look different from them.

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