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Getting Beyond Tarzan: Teaching Africa and Teaching Diversity

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I've known rivers:
I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than the

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.
I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.
I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it.
I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln
Went down to New Orleans, and I've seen its muddy
Bosom turn all golden in the sunset.

I've known rivers:
Ancient, dusky rivers.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

("The Negro Speaks of Rivers"
By Langston Hughes)

Greetings, Recognitions, Thanks, etc. etc.

-I am opening my discussion today with a clip from a video, "The Many Faces of Tarzan," because I think it crucial to examine how America views Africa. As part of this opening set of imagery, I also want to share the cover of the May 13, 2000 issue of The Economist (London) and a syndicated cartoon by Jimmy Margulies which appeared recently in the Chicago Sun Times.
Historically, and even to the present, "Africa" is an unknown entity for most Americans. "Africa" is perceived and discussed as one country, an undifferentiated tropical, steamy land mass consisting of Egypt and South Africa. And in its most exotic application the word is used as much as a verb as a noun. If US citizens know anything at all, it is usually a negative point. Or, as is the case with Tarzan and the related stories, bears little, if any, resemblance to Africa and its realities.

A French political scientist, Jean-Francois Bayart, author of the State in Africa: The Politics of the Belly (1989) takes a much more critical stance. Noting that there is a direct relationship between "the reluctance to recognize African societies as having their own unique identity and the subjugation of Africa by the West through the slave trade and colonization," Bayart thoroughly documents the formative views that give birth to a Western practice of negating and de-historicizing Africa and Africans. He cites Montesquieu as believing about Africa that:

> Most of the people on the coast of Africa are savage or barbarian, they are lazy, they have no skills, they have an abundance of precious metals which they take straight from nature. All civilized peoples therefore are in a position to trade with them to their advantage. They can get them to value many things which are of no value, and get a very high price for them.

Much of what is known about Africa in the United States consists of images. For centuries words like "gold coast," "ivory coast," "diamondland," "cocoaville" conveyed the impression that Africa existed solely and simply to provide raw materials and commodities for the West. There is the image of Africa projected in one recent fashion magazine with a photo of a head chopped off sitting on a dining room table with the caption, 'a too familiar sight.' The marketing and cinematic industries have played a special role in shaping popular Western perceptions of Africa. Africa equals "Elephants, gorillas and "George of the Jungle." Africa is "Elsa the Lion/Born Free" and "Out of Africa" with landrovers and blonde, Banana Republic-clad safari guides and sleek, single word-uttering black servants, like the single word-uttering red Indians in the cowboy movies. The cinematic representations, more and more, offer a sex siren like Bo
Derek playing Jane opposite Miles O'Keefe's Tarzan or Kim Bassinger playing Kuki Gallman in the new movie, "I dreamed of Africa." Not to be outdone by Hollywood, the winter 1998 swimsuit issue of Sports Illustrated sinks to a new low of combining sex, race and exoticism in a story about some of their "super-models" encountering some pristine, raw Masai tribesmen in the middle of Kenya.

Then there is the starving child representation of Africa, i.e., the one that sees Africa as nothing but negativity and despair. It is the image of the emaciated figure with the bulging eyes, the reddening hair and the swelling elbows. Maybe it's a woman with a child on her back but there is definitely an extended hand, palm up. It is usually a compelling photo or clip. Its objective—often not even subliminal—is to get the viewer to donate money; to feel empathy, not solidarity...empathy.

It is an imagery which is commendable but it also conveys a sub-text which is about a relationship between a dominant (rich)(white) donor and a subordinate(poor)(black) grantee. It is a relationship which, as the photograph, advertisement or film footage presents, will no change. (A recent book exploring "otherness" in advertising, Culture and the Ad, raises an additional dimension noting "what is never mentioned in this (type of) advertising: The needy children are depicted without social relationships of any sort. As far as the reader can tell, they have no parents, no siblings, no families at all. There is no indication that their governments provide any sort of assistance. The children stand alone. [THEY NEED TO BE ADOPTED! ITALICS MINE] Only the rich American looms on a distant horizon as a possibility for placing these lonesome children in a stable relationship."(p.100)

Lastly, there is the currently en vogue depiction of Africa. It is Africa with unending violence-Africa with gun-laden child soldiers on tanks smoking cigarettes. The cover of the May 13,2000 London Economist with the continent silhouetted around a bazooka-toting young guerrilla and the caption "the Hopeless Continent" amply illustrates the point.

I am not arguing herein that there is no armed conflict in Africa. Clearly, there is and has been extensive and deadly strife in various countries, e.g., thirty inter-state wars since 1970. What’s absent in the depiction is any attempt to describe and explain the causal factors or to indicate the West's (especially the USA's) involvement. Arms scholar William Hartung, for example, has recently noted that while the United States is dead-last amongst industrialized nations in providing non-military aid to the developing world, especially Africa, it is recently one of the key players, if not the key player, given the demise of the Soviet Union and its affiliates, in the provision of critical armaments and military training to various countries "in the motherland."(See Hartung and Moix, Deadly Legacy: US Arms to Africa and the Congo War)

Also missing in the imagery of Africa projected to most Americans is the Africa which is not at war (although there is a plethora of TV wildlife and game safari stories) and/or African governmental and non-governmental efforts to end conflicts, e.g., how often does one read, hear or see stories about ECOWAS, SADC or the OAU and their peace initiatives? I suspect most Americans, if quizzed, would identify these crucial African political institutions as types of food or tribal groupings?
Internationally renown entertainer Harry Belafonte, in a recent collection of interviews edited by theologian Cornel West, recently recalled how Tarzan movies evoked in him not only a negative image of Africa. They also imbued him with negative feelings about black people in the United States generally, including himself and his family:

My earliest knowledge of Africa was really through the Tarzan movies. The very first Tarzan movie I saw was in 1935, Tarzan and the Apes. I went to see this film about this place called Africa, with these people of color who were steeped in ignorance, steeped in folly, steeped in the absence of any articulation whatsoever and were not redeemable except when the great white hero came swinging through the trees and landed in the midst of them to give them direction and to describe life as they should aspire to it. For a long time I thought of Africa as a place I really did not want to be. Those were people that I would just as soon not know. And it was strange that so many people in my own community looked like them or something like them. And how lucky they were to have white leadership to help them.

(Belafonte in West, Cornel, ed., RESTORING HOPE)

Almost all people who have spent any time whatsoever on the African continent recognize that Africa is little understood and largely ignored by most in the world. Many people, relatively uninformed and unsophisticated about global racial and ethnic questions, realize that Africa consistently gets short shrift in the world’s media coverage. A 1995 Special Report by Africa News Service based in Durham, North Carolina points out that the only time that Africa gets substantive news coverage in the US media is when there is a crisis involving a lot of deaths. The Report cites another finding by a University of Washington scholar, James Larson, who looked at the period between 1972 and 1982 and found that while African stories were noticeably less likely to be on network television than stories from elsewhere, of those that did appear, they were 11% more likely to be about crisis.

A recent book by John Reader, a former British photo-journalist who lived in Cape Town and Nairobi in the 60’s and 70’s states cogently how Africa and African contributions are either stigmatized or totally negated:

Humanity simply does not recognize its debts and obligations to Africa. In Western imagery, Africa is the “dark continent.” A synonym perhaps, but also the potent symbol of a persistent inclination to set Africa and its inhabitants apart from the rest
of humanity. The double meaning of the phrase is clear. The "dark continent" does not refer only to the depths of Africa's equatorial forest, to the density of its tropical shadows, to the blackness of African skin, or even to a widespread lack of knowledge concerning the continent. Above all, the phrase tacitly labels Africa as the place where a particular form of darkness is found—**the darkness of humanity.** [italics mine] In this context, Africa is where people do terrible things, not because the aptitude for such behavior is a characteristic of all humanity, but because **Africa is believed to be inherently more barbaric and less civilized than the rest of the world.** [italics mine]

(Reader, AFRICA; A BIOGRAPHY preface p. x)

Knowing the African continent, its history, culture and politics better enables us to more fully understand the United States, especially its various citizens of African origins. As US citizens, we believe that in better understanding Africa, we better understand ourselves. Ignorance of Africa and the detrimental ways that Africa has been taught in the United States is intimately linked to the patterns of racism that have so deeply permeated and shaped American society. A recent excellent article in the April, 1998 issue of Essence magazine illustrates the point very well. The author, Dr. Deborah Toler of the San Francisco-based Institute for Food and Development Studies, opens up the article with the following observation:

In this part of the world, a child is born into poverty every 34 seconds and 30 million people suffer chronic hunger. **"It's Africa,"** you might guess. **But you would be wrong: It's the United States.**

Dr. Toler then follows up her point noting:

There's no denying that some very real problems exist In Africa. But the media and various policy and humanitarian and/or relief organizations often present the causes of problems as unique to Africa and as Africans own fault. Even their language describing events and issues on the continent is biased. What is called an "ethnic conflict" in Bosnia becomes "Tribal warfare" in parts of Africa, no matter who's fighting.


Popular ABC television host Ted Koppel, too, has pointed out that there is serious inattention to Africa and its situation by the US media. He believes that international news in general, gets scant attention and that Africa is particularly poorly covered. **And he believes that "there still is a fundamental racism in this country (the USA)" which explains why half a million Ethiopians dying doesn't provoke the same response as would the deaths of half a million Italians.**
Koppel and others would do well to examine the record of some of their colleagues' coverage of Africa. I remember vividly when Shaba Province in then-Zaire exploded with one of the steady incidences of anti-Mobutu uprisings. Walter Cronkite opened the May 19, 1978 6:30 evening news with the words:

"GOOD EVENING. OUR WORST FEARS IN THE REBEL INVASION OF ZAIRE'S SHABA PROVINCE REPORTEDLY HAVE BEEN REALIZED. REBELS BEING ROUTED FROM THE MINING TOWN OF KOLWEZI ARE REPORTED TO HAVE KILLED A NUMBER OF EUROPEANS." (Italics mine)

The mistake was caught and by the next run of the evening news, the suggestion that white deaths mattered and black deaths did not had been removed. I remember this incident well for I quoted what Cronkite had said in an educational documentary on Kenya and was nearly sued, along with documentalist, David Koff, by CBS for information defaming Cronkite's character.

The Cronkite incident is not so exceptional. But because of the role such occurrences play in shaping how Africa is imaged in the West, I believe and hope that regular and substantive media and educational information flows on Africa (especially targeted at youth in the USA) will be a contribution to not only enhanced understanding of Africa in the USA but also to the undoing of racism in the USA.

The extensiveness of the ignorance of the general US public about Africa cannot be over-stated. And it is not just US relations with Africa that suffers from this ignorance. In some respects the primary victims are the US people themselves, can all fit at the same time within just the African coastline. Journalist John Reader, cited earlier, has noted that "the Sahara alone is as large as the continental United States." The Republic of Angola alone can contain an area two and a half times the size of Texas. And the coastline of Mozambique is longer than that of California and Oregon combined.

In many respects Africa's potential and power remain to be fully measured, let alone appreciated. It is well-known that Africa has some of the world's richest deposits of oil, gold, diamonds, copper, manganese and various other minerals. What is less well-known are other findings like Mozambique having some of the world's largest natural gas deposits. Many know that rivers like the Niger, the Congo, and the Nile are amongst the world's longest. The Congo, for instance, four thousand kilometers long, drains a basin covering 3.7 million square kilometers, an area larger than all of India. Few realize the power potential of rivers like the Congo and the Zambesi. An impressive new book by Adam Hochschild, King Leopold's Ghost, points out, for instance, that during the 220 miles that the Congo descends to sea level, "so great is the drop and volume of water that the hydroelectric potential equals that of all the lakes and rivers of the United States combined!" (p.17)

What this all means is that Africa, its size, its majesty, and diversity should not be relegated to simplistic and rhetorical renderings. As a recent children's book put it: AFRICA IS NOT A
Far too many people, especially in the United States, believe that Africa has no value. Sadly, the remark by conservative North Carolina senator, Jesse Helms, that giving aid to Africa is like “pouring money down a dark hole,” cannot be simply dismissed as the ravings of a lone, deranged and racist fanatic—who incidentally is the head of the US Senate’s Foreign Relations Committee. Many people in the United States hold the same view or similar ones. It is now common knowledge that some of the top decision-makers in the USA have had decidedly racist and bigoted views, especially towards Africa.

While the 1998 presidential trip of William B. Clinton to Africa must be hailed as precedent-setting and historic, the over-all attitude of US presidents towards the continent of Africa reflects the racism so omnipresent in American society. President Richard Nixon, for instance, constantly used the words “nigger” and “Jigaboo” or “jigs” in his phone conversations. And several people have reported Nixon’s phone call to Henry Kissinger calming a jealous Henry down about the extensive coverage which his underling, Secretary of State William Rogers, had received during an African trip. Nixon calmed Kissinger with the words: “Henry, let’s leave the niggers to Bill and we’ll take care of the rest of the world.” Various authoritative sources, including commentator Roger Morris and journalist Seymour Hersh, have discussed how White House National Security Council meetings were often entertained by former Assistant Secretary of State, Alexander Haig beating his hands on the table, as if it was a drum, and hooping whenever the subject of Africa came up. Occasionally, he would vary his response with a few choice Tarzan jokes. (O’Reilly, Kenneth, Nixon’s Piano, p.292)
Fundamentally, "going beyond Tarzan" in teaching Africa is a substantive and not mystical.

The sourcebook 'Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice' asserts: "Our goal in social justice education is to enable students to become conscious of their operating world view and to be able to examine critically alternative ways of understanding the world and social relations." (trans. xvi)

Going beyond Tarzan is a path toward enabling students and teachers, all, to examine critically a body of lies, myths and delusions.
COUNTRY! Teaching about Africa necessarily involves beginning from a fundamental and pre-requisite recognition that Africa is big, complex and challenging. While it is not easy to teach “Africa” because of its variety and scale, it is also very satisfying to learn and experience such a panorama of different places.

There are additional reasons for this book. Far too many people, especially in the United States, believe that Africa has no value. Sadly, the remark by conservative North Carolina senator, Jessie Helms, that giving aid to Africa is like “pouring money down a dark hole,” cannot be simply dismissed as the ravings of a lone, deranged and racist fanatic-who incidentally is the head of the US Senate’s Foreign Relations Committee. Many people in the United States hold the same view or similar ones. It is now common knowledge that some of the top decision-makers in the USA have had decidedly racist and bigoted views, especially towards Africa.

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Far from believing that Africa is the continent of negatives, we write this book out of our conviction that Africa has made and continues to make singularly rich and profound contributions towards solving some of the abiding problems facing the world at the commencement of the twenty-first century. We are including in this collection, for instance, some original writings from some of Africa’s premiere and visionary political thinkers and philosophers. Many of these writings have seen little circulation to US audiences. Some have never been published before. All are characterized by the depth and humanity which resonates in the thinking and actions of some of Africa’s foremost leaders like Tanzania’s former President, Mwalimu Julius Nyerere, South African Nobel laureates Chief Albert Luthuli, Archbishop Desmond Tutu and President Nelson Mandela. It is our contention that, impressive as it is, the 1997-98 South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) with its seemingly novel levels of non-racialism, generosity and embrace, did not emerge in a vacuum. Rather, it is the product of a continuum of political and humanitarian thinking that has characterized the liberation struggles waged on the African continent in the latter half of the twentieth century. Some of the selections we include in this resource book illustrate this historical pattern and are part of the reason that we believe that regions of Africa are taking steps and doing things from
which the world has much to learn. British historian David Birmingham wrote a book in 1995 entitled the *Decolonization of Africa*. He opened the book with the two sentences below. We are closing this brief introduction with the same two sentences for they convey a sense of the belief and conviction which underlies the Africa behind poet Langston Hughes' poem, 'I've Known Rivers:'

"The decolonization of Africa was one of the turning points in the history of the post-war world. It captured the imagination of a new generation of idealists who enthusiastically proclaimed their belief in racial equality and individual liberty." (*Decolonization*, p.1)