



International Journal of African Studies

Publisher's Home Page: <https://www.svedbergopen.com/>



Research Paper

Open Access

For Better or For Worse: Western Mainstream Media and the 'Renarrativization' of Black Heroes

Patrick Radebe¹*

¹Lakehead University, 500 University Avenue, Orillia, Ontario, Canada L3V 0B9. E-mail: pradebe@lakeheadu.ca

Article Info

Volume 1, Issue 4, December 2021

Received : 17 June 2021

Accepted : 21 November 2021

Published : 05 December 2021

doi: [10.51483/IJAFRS.1.4.2021.1-8](https://doi.org/10.51483/IJAFRS.1.4.2021.1-8)

Abstract

Western mainstream media are a potent and ubiquitous source of information for all those seeking to keep abreast of 'newsworthy' events and developments unfolding anywhere in the world. Accessed daily by audiences numbering in the hundreds of millions, the media shape minds and hearts by framing such events and developments in ways that advance deep state agendas. For this reason, their representations of Black heroes require close scrutiny and critical analysis.

Keywords: *Afrocentricity, Black/African heroes, Mandela, Western mainstream media*

© 2021 Patrick Radebe. This is an open access article under the CC BY license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license, and indicate if changes were made.

1. Introduction

In the aftermath of the death of Nelson Mandela, South Africa's first Black president (1994-1999), the Western media's representation of this seminal figure underwent an abrupt change. Once signified as an implacable terrorist and communist, Mandela would be re-signified as an African hero and icon. What accounts for this sudden rehabilitation? Why did the Western media assume the role of chief mourner, inundating the bereaved family and the anti-apartheid fraternity with commiserations? While such an outpouring of sympathy and grief may have been genuine—and I for one would not dismiss it out of hand—plastering Mandela's image on the front pages of newspapers and magazines and across television screens, with little input from the family or others who knew the former president intimately, amounted to grandstanding, to pandering to the mood of the moment. What was missing amidst all the adulation was any mention of the media campaigns that had been directed, not so long ago, at vilifying the now acclaimed freedom fighter? The lesson to be drawn here is simple: accounts of Black heroes presented by the Western media need to be interrogated through the lens of an African perspective, one that aims to expose the political and ideological project at work while at the same time revealing how Black/African culture, i.e., values, attitudes, assumptions and norms, and the traditions and customs they inform, has proven instrumental in preparing them for greatness.

I am a lecturer at the Faculty of Education, at a Canadian University where I teach the following courses: "Social Differences in Education," "Democracy and Education," "Society and Education," "History of Educational Thought and Practice" and "Teaching in a Multicultural Setting." While reviewing previous course outlines, I observed that Black/African heroes were noticeably absent. This omission prompted me to revise my course outlines with a view to reflecting

* Corresponding author: Patrick Radebe, Lakehead University, 500 University Avenue, Orillia, Ontario, Canada L3V 0B9.
E-mail: pradebe@lakeheadu.ca

the diversity of my students, especially those enrolled in the “Social Differences in Education” and “Democracy and Education” courses. During the 2018 winter semester, I began to sense a growing tension among some of my White students, which at times surfaced in open disapproval of some of the racially-charged themes that would crop up now and then. Students who were once best of friends, or so I assumed, often took opposite sides in class debates.

During one class discussion on the erasure of the Black contribution to Canada and the preponderance of White Canadian history in the public education system, along with the impact this has had on Black students, one student asked me whether I believed that the underperformance of Black students was the direct result of some White conspiracy on the part of policymakers and/or educators to undermine Black education. I denied that I believed anything of the kind. Other students failed to see the connection between Black/African Canadian history and Black student achievement. Moreover, the thought occurred to me that at least some might perceive me as obsessed with race-based issues and the wholesale revision of Canada’s past, while at the same time less mindful of the country’s achievements, including multicultural education. How should I respond to this situation, I asked myself? Clearly, tact was called for. Moreover, as a scholar, I was determined to fathom the source(s) of the palpable tension that had surfaced during classroom discussions.

While my White students readily embraced the conventional view that the European contribution was decisive in informing Canadian history, including the development of a public education system, and rightly so, at times they were visibly hostile to alternative narratives foregrounding the contribution of Black/African Canadians to the latter, for example, the opposition of Black/African parents to the “Separate School Act of 1850” passed by the Legislative Assembly of Upper Canada and their determination to establish separate schools after their calls for desegregating the education system were rejected.

The university is located in Simcoe County, an area rich in Black history. Indeed, the Oro African Methodist Episcopal Church, located in the Township of Oro Medonte, was built by Black settlers in 1849, and its remains are visible from the Old Barrie Road. I am aware that my White students, some of whom I assume to be residents of Simcoe County, have little or no knowledge of the existence of pre-Confederation Black settlements in the area, let alone of the significance of the church to the Black community. I believe these students, some of whom will go on to teach Black children in the inner cities would do well if they were equipped with alternative and critical accounts of Canadian history and Black heroes with which to challenge the erasure and falsification of the Black contribution, particularly on the part of the media. My experiences as a teacher, together with negative media representations of Black heroes, have motivated me to write this paper.

In this paper, I examine the ways in which the Western mainstream media signify Black heroes, using their post-mortem coverage of Nelson Mandela as a case study. Drawing on an Afrocentric system of thought, I argue that despite notable progress in race relations within Canada and the West in general, as evinced by the widespread adoption of multicultural policies, the media still wield considerable influence in so far as determining the ways in which African heroes are framed within public discourses. Exploiting the public’s ignorance of African history, the media represent African heroes, and most notably Nelson Mandela in the aftermath of his death, in ways that patronize their achievements and legacies. In eulogizing these figures, the media succeeded in avoiding any responsibility for signifying them as terrorists and tyrants.

First, I examine how the Western mainstream media represent, or more accurately misrepresent, Black heroes, and in particular Nelson Mandela, in ways that distort their character and achievements, all with a view to advancing a neo-colonialist agenda. Second, the central tenets of Afrocentricity are delineated to provide a counter perspective to that of the mainstream media. I next investigate the failure on the part of some mainstream Black scholars to challenge the media’s appropriation of Mandela, both the person and the legacy. The media’s lack of understanding of African collectivist traditions, e.g., the practice of working cooperatively for the common good, is discussed. Lastly, the various ways in which Africans can reclaim ownership of their heroes are examined.

The terms ‘Black’ and ‘Blackness’ are used here to designate an African identity that exists among peoples residing within Africa as well as the lands of the African diaspora; African citizenship applies to all who claim African ancestry, their place of birth and geographical location notwithstanding. The terms ‘Western mainstream media’, ‘Western media’, ‘mainstream media’ and ‘media’ will be used interchangeably.

2. Media Misrepresentation of Black Heroes

While from a normative and functionalist standpoint, the role of the media is to inform and educate the public in ways that are as objective and neutral as possible, the evidence suggests otherwise, however. Along with the imperative to maximize profit, the media work to preserve the status quo by informing public perceptions. Thus, for example, in the

immediate aftermath of Nelson Mandela's death, the Western mainstream media began heaping praise upon a man it had once branded a "terrorist." "Anti-apartheid warrior loses his final battle" and "President of the World" trumpeted *The Sun* (Losh & Dunn, *The Sun* (UK), 6/12/2013); "Nelson Mandela-The Man of the 20th Century" and "Icon of Icons" gushed the *Irish Examiner* (*Irish Examiner*, 06/12/2013); "Protector, Prisoner, Peacemaker—Nelson Mandela—1918-2013" effused *Time Magazine* (Anon. *Time Magazine*, 6/12/2013); "The nation's healer is dead" lamented the *Washington Post* more soberly (*Washington Post*, 6/12/2013). In death, the former "terrorist and an ex-convict" had become the man of the hour.

With the world grieving the loss of an African icon the Canadian press jumped on board with equal enthusiasm, notwithstanding Mandela's former status under Canadian law as a terrorist (Walkom, *Toronto Star*, 2013). Indeed, his death would warrant front-page headlines in all the major papers. The man who had led South Africa out of apartheid was as "clever as he was virtuous, as cunning as he was bold", a "Benign Machiavelli: A Master of Persuasion" proclaimed the *National Post* (Hamilton, *National Post*, 7/12/2013), "Racial hatred was no match for [Mandela's] grace [and] compassion" (Watson, *The Toronto Star*, 7/12/2013) and "Tributes to one who 'belongs to the ages...'" pronounced *The Toronto Star* with unbridled enthusiasm (Ross, *The Toronto Star*, 7/12/2013). Federal politicians seized the moment to recall Canada's role, and their personal contributions, in persuading the British Commonwealth to censure South Africa's White minority government for its apartheid policies. Former prime minister Joe Clark went so far as to claim his government had allocated funds for the purpose of undermining Pretoria: "There were budgets for it. And there was a (public) willingness to support it" (*The Toronto Star*, 7/12/2013).

However edifying and well meant—and I fully acknowledge Canada's contribution to the anti-apartheid struggle—these tributes reveal a colonial subtext, the gist of which is that South Africa's transition to a democratic and pluralist society would not have been possible but for help from the West. What is entirely absent from this discourse is any sense of Black agency and the sacrifices made—recall the Sharpeville Massacre (March 21, 1960) and the Soweto Uprising (June 16, 1976). The message implicit here is that in light of Black paralysis in the face of oppression, only White intervention could save the day. What is revealed here is the dominant order's facility in reconstructing history by formulating media narratives that work to advance a neo-colonialist agenda.

3. Afrocentricity: Liberating the African Mind from the Twin Legacies of Colonialism and Slavery

A theory and movement of global scope, Afrocentricity originated in the struggle against Black oppression. It would reach the peak of its influence during the Civil Rights and Black Panther movements of the 1960s. Afrocentricity was inspired by the African independence movement, which emerged following World War II; the decolonization of Africa and Asia beginning in the late 1940s with the withdrawal of Britain from the Indian subcontinent; and the writings of some of Africa's foremost anti-colonial leaders, among them, Kwame Nkrumah, Ahmed Sekou Toure, and Julius Kambarage Nyerere.

For these founding fathers of African independence, unity among the continent's peoples was to be grounded in a sense of common purpose in charting a trajectory outside the neocolonial orbit. Herein lay the *sine qua non* for liberating Black Africa. By developing a sense of unity and agency, they contended, Africans could challenge a neocolonial system that preached the gospel of goodwill to all men while working to preserve White supremacy.

Afrocentricity aims to lay bare the duplicitous character of this project. Moreover, one of its chief targets in this respect is the Western mainstream media and their proxies that churn out false narratives on African heroes. More importantly, it affords Africans a platform from which to present their stories—stories that contest the mainstream media's patronizing and sometimes derisive accounts of African heroes. Marketing its version of 'all things African' as the 'truth,' the media dismisses the maxim that "where one speaks from affects the meaning and truth of what one says" (Alcoff, 1991).

Although the theory of Afrocentricity was embraced by Blacks following the Civil Rights era, its origins lie in the thought of William Edward Burghardt Du Bois, Marcus Garvey and Kwame Nkrumah, Black leaders who had worked tirelessly to promote Black unity, freedom, and the will to uphold African values. Molefe Kete Asante is currently its chief theoretician and proponent. Asante (2003) defines Afrocentricity as:

A mode of thought . . . in which the centrality of African interests, values, and perspectives predominate. . . . [It] is the centerpiece of [African] regeneration. It challenges and takes to task the perpetuation of White racial supremacist ideas in the imagination of the African world. . . . It has become revolutionary, [a]ttacking the falsification of truth and attitudes of self-hatred that have oppressed a great many [Africans]. Thus, Afrocentricity is purposeful, giving a true sense of identity [to Africans] based upon the facts of [their] history and experience. Afrocentricity is . . . associated with the discovery . . . of African agency within the context of history and culture (pp. 2-3).

According to Asante (1998), Afrocentricity does not dismiss White, i.e., Western mainstream media, narratives or interest in African affairs. Rather, it contests dominant formulas and assumptions that malign or belittle African heroes, African agency and African intellectual capacity (Asante, 1998). An African-centered theory, Afrocentricity promotes African history and contributions to humankind by “reestablish[ing] the centrality of . . . an African perspective in much the same way that [European history and knowledge systems] . . . serve as reference points for [mainstream media]” (Asante, 1998, p. 11).

For Africans to appreciate the true scale of their heroes’ contributions to humankind would require, argue Afrocentrists, a paradigm shift in thinking, a radical departure from the “intellectual plantation” (Asante, 2007, p. 7) that for so long has promoted an unquestioning and compliant attitude toward Western domination and the mainstream media that work assiduously to preserve it. Once such a shift has occurred, it will be possible to develop, among the mass of the people as opposed to a coterie of intellectuals, a critical perspective capable of deconstructing media representations of Africa and Africans to reveal their neocolonial project. In this way the African mind may be freed from the straightjacket of words and images that works to disempower it by framing news and entertainment in ways that reproduce Western domination.

According to Mazama (2001), Afrocentricity is a “remedy” (p. 387) for so many of the ills plaguing Black Africa. It contests Western narratives that “relegate [Africa] to . . . the margins [of public consciousness]” (Mazama, 2001, p. 387), in the process reinforcing White supremacy. A corrective theory, it instills in Africans the will to contest the asymmetrical power relations existing between them and Europeans that the mainstream media reproduces. As I understand Mazama, Afrocentricity works to restore the self-confidence of Africans and set them on the path of self/collective discovery; it also challenges them to assume ownership of their history and stories, something that requires rejecting external interference into matters exclusively African. Writes Mazama (2001):

Our failure to recognize the [true reasons behind the] . . . European [construction of African heroes] . . . has led us, willingly or unwillingly, to agree to [our] footnote status in the White man’s book We do not exist on our own terms but on borrowed, European ones. We are dislocated, and having lost sight of ourselves . . . our liberation . . . rests upon our ability to systematically displace [a] European [perception of African heroes], . . . and replace them with [one] that [is] germane to our African cultural experience (pp. 387-388).

Motlanthe (2014) believes Afrocentricity has been misread by its critics. For him, this paradigmatic theory promotes self-agency and collective determination. Founded on African systems of thought and practice, it enjoins Africans to reject foreign reservations about their capacities. This self-knowledge, drawn from an inexhaustible cultural reservoir, can equip them to tell their own stories via a homegrown African media. In the case of Mandela, for example, Africans hardly need the Western mainstream media to tout the greatness of one who has contributed so much to the cause of freedom, justice and equality. Obsequious media representations can never suffice to capture the essence of a hero of this stature.

4. Challenging Mainstream Media Accounts of African Heroes from an Afrocentric Perspective

A sense of Mandela’s greatness, and by implication that of other African heroes, may be captured vicariously through the personal accounts of Africans who knew the man, served under him, were spellbound by his charisma and shared his vision of a ‘rainbow nation’ and a non-racial world governed by the rule of law and imbued with respect for all humankind. From an Afrocentric perspective, having celebrities, politicians and mainstream media immortalize one of Africa’s greatest political and moral icons amounts to an indictment of Africans themselves, in that it reveals a craven passivity to the foreign typecasting of a giant whose greatness the Pan-African family and its revolutionary allies are aware, or at least sufficiently so to render superfluous the intrigues of those who saw in Mandela’s passing merely an opportunity to insert themselves in the discourse on global justice and/or build a political legacy.

From an Afrocentric perspective, Mandela’s leadership was genuinely African, particularly in the sense that it was informed by a “servant-leader paradigm” (Nwagbara, 2013, p. 141), a revolutionary African leadership style that aims at serving humanity. Its uniqueness lies in fostering “intimacy, service, engagement, motivation and [an] altruistic [desire] to act without coercion or pressure, [in the belief] that humanity [can] be galvanized to act by consent” (Nwagbara, 2013, p. 142). This mode of leadership challenged the media’s depiction of Africa leaders as dictators and homicidal maniacs; but more importantly, it revealed that Africans possessed the ability to lead themselves.

Informed by Afrocentric narratives, Mandela’s message of peace, addressed to all humankind, was inspired by a tactic used by African mothers to protect their families, especially the children, from abusive husbands. When the African National Congress (ANC), once branded a terrorist organization by the mainstream media, won the national

elections in 1994, Mandela did what all African mothers do best: place the interests of the family above their own. In 1997, in a conciliatory gesture aimed at “promot[ing] reconciliation” (Ferreira, *Irish Times*, 1/2/1997), he appointed his arch-nemesis, Chief Mangosuthu Gatsha Buthelezi, head of the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) and Minister of Home Affairs, in addition to acting president while he and vice president Thabo Mbeki were attending the World Economic Forum hosted by Switzerland (Udogu, 1999). This move was meant to preempt, in my view, the outbreak of further violence between supporters of his party and the ANC in Buthelezi’s home province of Kwa-Zulu Natal. To his credit, it should be added, Mandela never spoke ill of any member of the White minority. For him, the transgressions of the past were hard won lessons to be profited from if South Africans were to build a brighter future.

Mandela crossed ethnic, political and ideological lines in assigning “Thabo Mbeki, a Xhosa [who would become his deputy and later president of the Republic], and Cyril Ramaphosa, a Venda, . . . [the current president,] both former members of the South African Communist Party (SACP)” (Udogu, 1999, p. 229), to key positions in the African National Congress (ANC). For Mandela, a unity government was central to steering the country away from civil war. These two very senior political appointments put paid to the stereotypical view harbored by the media that Africa is governed by tyrannical leaders driven by caprice.

Mandela adhered scrupulously to the Constitution of 1994 as the surest means of facilitating the growth and stability of the nation. Recognizing the diversity of the country, its framers had provided for a “bill of rights; an independent judiciary, including a constitutional court; an electoral system based upon proportional representation; and hybrid federal/unitary arrangements” (Welsh cited in Udogu, 1999, p. 225). Reflecting Africa’s communal and egalitarian culture, moreover, the Constitution proscribed the “authoritative allocation of [power]” to any one political party or ethnic group.

On another front, Mandela’s support of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), launched in 1996 was a tacit admission that healing the nation would require a forum where the victims of apartheid, along with African political organizations, including the ANC, might confront those who had wronged them, the purpose being to share their pain and offer forgiveness. Based on the restorative justice model, this forum underscores one of Africa’s most deeply rooted traditions; forgiving each other’s flaws and extending the wrongdoer the opportunity to redeem himself.

5. Black Silence Greets the Mainstream Media's 'Hijacking' of Mandela

The media’s success in reframing African history and reformulating discourses on Africans, while remaining unchallenged by some mainstream African scholars, speaks to a collective susceptibility to Eurocentric constructs of African history that serves to advance a neocolonial project and, more generally, Western geopolitical interests.

The media’s practice of reframing African heroes is evinced by its occlusion of those narratives that might contest dominant discourses. With African intellectuals denied a public space in which to assess the life and achievements of Mandela, African voices are effectively suppressed. As Wright (2000) points out, what is given prominence in public discourse is mediated by authorities and institutions that comprise or serve the ‘deep state’ or dominant order. In “Why write back to the new missionaries? Addressing the displacement of Africans from the discourses of empowerment” Wright cites the case Robin Kelly to reveal the ways in which African intellectuals are marginalized by corporate media.

An African-American professor of History and African Studies and prolific writer, Kelly is the “youngest person to be promoted to full professor at [New York University].” He is also “the recipient of several prestigious awards for his books and [sits on] the editorial boards of several journals” (p. 123). Professor Kelly’s experience speaks to the barriers confronting Africans seeking to have their voices heard in the mainstream media. Despite his standing among scholars, Kelly “has not had his work reviewed in *The New York Times*” (Winkler as cited in Wright, 2000). While I am in no way implying that race was a factor in *The Times*’ decision, Kelly’s analysis of race as an unspoken impediment to Black intellectuals and Black voices in general underscores the mainstream media’s power to dictate whose views are to have currency in the marketplace of ideas. According to Wright (2000), even in a time where freedom of thought is presumed to be the foundation for an inclusive and tolerant world, those African scholars bold enough to offer alternative perspectives often run up against the stone wall of tradition that obliges them to reference dominant canons and narratives that are antithetical to their principles and views. In order to advance careers, they are often compelled to conform to established norms or risk “bit[ing] the hand that (force) feeds [them]” (p. 124). Thus does the Western media exclude African perspectives that might contest dominant narratives (Wright, 2000).

In the absence of alternatives, African intellectuals who wish to address nation-wide audiences, have no recourse other than the mainstream media, which precludes their presenting “counter arguments to dispel misguided and inaccurate perceptions [of African heroes]” (Gordon, 1990,). Thus, they are obliged to comply with editorial strictures or risk “bit[ing] the hand that (force) feeds [them]” (Wright, 2000).

Nombuso Dlamini's inquiry into the pervasiveness of White dominance is instructive in this regard (Dlamini, 2002). In her view, dialogue between dominant and marginalized/oppositional groups, even on relatively trivial matters, can often degenerate into a 'war of attrition.' Drawing on her experiences as a graduate student, Dlamini (2002) recalls that White students were less accepting of alternative perspectives "either in text or in person" Dlamini (2002). Their racialized counterparts bold enough to challenge their views were invariably labelled "trouble-markers" and subjected to "sophisticated and intimidating language" (Dlamini, 2002). Such was the intensity of these exchanges that Dlamini opted for "silence," rather than suffer the retribution meted out to those that dared challenge dominant narratives. Moreover, in discounting oppositional voices, the former are aided and abetted by a mainstream media committed to preserving the status quo through such standard practices as ignoring inconvenient facts and developments, framing debates and issues, offering up red herrings, presenting bogus counter-arguments in the name of balanced reportage, citing 'expert', albeit biased, opinion. Even more odious, any challenge to media accounts is discredited on the grounds of a lack of objectivity. Enamored to White "superiority and expert syndrome" (Dlamini, 2002), the media work to program African minds to the point where most especially the younger generation, are incapable of sustained critical thought and thus susceptible to taking at face value foreign media accounts of African heroes. Those Africans that do challenge such accounts are often characterized as angry, implacable cynics with an axe to grind. And with the advent of the Internet, all these media imperatives and practices have become even more pervasive and deeply entrenched. It is hardly surprising that in such a milieu most Africans, young and old, accept as irrefutable 'truth' dominant media depictions of African heroes.

6. The Western Media's Lack of Understanding of African Collectivist Traditions

African traditions are unique and complex. By 'African traditions' I mean a set of practices pertaining to how power is distributed among stakeholders—and by implication how Africans are governed—with a view to promoting the wellbeing of the collective (Keto, 2001). To the Western mind, these traditions appear primitive vis-à-vis those of the West. In rural African communities, decision making is in no way the monopoly of the chief; rather it is a communal exercise involving close advisors, including queens, and representatives of the community, including women. Through training and experience chiefs learn that power rests on the allegiance of heads of clans and families. It is this power relation that preserves peace and unity and for this reason was promoted so assiduously by Mandela.

While Mandela was unquestionably a great leader, by singling him out for praise, the media again revealed a lack of understanding of African traditions. Building a peaceful South Africa hinged, I would argue, not on him alone but also on the efforts of his comrades in arms and progressive allies both within the country and without. For Africans, moreover, keeping peace in 'the village' requires a commitment to saving its inhabitants, including one's 'enemies' (Moosa, 2014). The media's lack of understanding of such collectivist traditions would translate into a profound ignorance of how they worked to sustain Africans during the long fight against oppression.

Understanding the African *Weltanschauung* requires a profound knowledge of African belief systems. From an African ontological perspective, there exists a connection between the living and the spiritual world whereby the latter assigns the former a "social [and a spiritual] responsibility" (Dei, 1996). Among other things, this pact requires Africans, and especially African heroes, to conduct themselves in ways that promote the collective wellbeing of humankind; thus, for example, they are to abstain from behaviors that could "destroy [any] one component of the web of cosmic elements [thereby] destroy[ing] the entire universe—even the creator" (Schiele, 1994). The media's lack of understanding of such belief systems leads to their misrepresentation, which, in turn, contributes to the stereotyping of African heroes.

7. The Way Forward

As a Pan-Africanist, I view Blackness as a continuum extending beyond the African continent to include the African Diaspora. I also subscribe to the proposition that a transnational African identity takes on meaning and finds expression through the struggle against White domination—a domination enabled by, among other things, media colonization. Given the persistence with which the mainstream media frame African narratives, true independence can only come to fruition when Africans and a homegrown media gain sufficient confidence to challenge foreign representations of their heroes, however flattering. To operate beyond the orbit of the neocolonial media, the African media must chart a path for itself by using African narratives to counterpoint Western stereotypes of African heroes. Rather than partnering with Western media to boost ratings, which some admittedly do, African media must challenge the commonplace perception that parting ways with the former would be tantamount to writing their obituary.

The Western media's framing of Black heroes in ways that advance a neocolonial agenda demands of African journalists and intellectuals that they challenge these stereotypical constructs, which all too often are accepted in the

West as factual. They might also focus their efforts on portraying African heroes in ways that are realistic, i.e., that place them within the social, cultural and political context in which they operate. This can be achieved by bringing to bear on their subjects an Afrocentric perspective and African-centered frameworks. Thus will they come to see Black heroes through new eyes and develop the strength of mind to challenge foreign narratives, many of which, though seemingly innocuous, are directed at promoting a neocolonial agenda. It is only by speaking in defense of such exceptional figures will an African voice be heard and our views taken seriously. In failing to do so, Africans have only themselves to blame when the mainstream media offers up patronizing accounts of the achievements and legacies of Black heroes (Asante, 1993; Hooks, 1989).

Regardless of their differences, it is incumbent upon African intellectuals and political leaders to cooperate in thwarting media campaigns directed against their mutual heroes. Urging such a course is not to suggest these strange bedfellows form a friendly alliance. Rather, what I propose is that they evaluate critically the achievements and legacies of these icons in the media, in scholarly writings and in public debates, all with a view to inspiring Africans to challenge their misrepresentation, if not outright caricature, by Western mainstream media (Motlanthe, 2014).

History shows that failure on the part of Africans to challenge such representations has served only to foster stereotypes of all things African, thereby giving credence to White supremacist narratives. Confronting and remedying the media's pathology of distortion requires African intellectuals and political leaders to do more than publically censure the media, something they are often loathe to do given the very real threat of a backlash. They must also encourage African-centered discussions that foreground indigenous stories; and they must recover the writings and speeches of Marcus Garvey, Kwame Nkrumah, Ahmed Sekou Toure, Kenneth Kaunda, Julius Nyerere, etc., anticolonial leaders whose perspectives could ignite a movement to reconsider the role of the mainstream media in the areas of governance and geopolitics. By working together, Africans can, their differences notwithstanding, reclaim what they have been denied so long: a voice that impels them to assume ownership of Africa and to speak directly to their history and heroes unmediated by foreign perspectives and imperatives.

8. Conclusion

In the Africa of the new millennium, the challenge confronting its disparate peoples is no longer the presence of White colonial administrators, but a crisis of confidence, attributable in no small measure to the Western mainstream media's misrepresentation of African heroes, of which the great majority have been political leaders. This creates the indelible impression that African leaders lack the wherewithal to govern effectively. Adrift in a rudderless state, the mass of the people loses confidence in ever making landfall.

Let me conclude with an African story. Life on the great plains of the continent does not revolve around the trophy hunter who, from a safe distance, kills the lion for sport with no consideration for the fate its cubs. There are no eyewitnesses to challenge the hunter's account or relate the victim's side of the encounter, for the dead tell no stories. Until the lion learns to tell his own history, the hunter will unabashedly assume the role of historian and recount the lion's last moments from his perspective. And so it is that until Africans learn to document the history of Black heroes in ways that capture an African sense of their achievements, the Western media will do so on their behalf. We Africans possess the wherewithal, in the form of an Afrocentric perspective and African-centred frameworks, to challenge media representations of Black heroes. What we lack is the will.

References

- Alcoff, L. (1991). *The Problem with Speaking for Others*. *Cultural Critique*, 20(20), 5-32.
- Anon. (2013) *Protester, Prisoner, Peacemaker—Nelson Mandela—1918-2013*. *TIME Magazine*, Retrieved from <http://www.globeandmail.com>
- Asante, M.K. (1993). *Malcolm X as a Cultural Hero and Other Afrocentric Essays*. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press.
- Asante, M.K. (1998). *The Afrocentric Idea*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
- Asante, M.K. (2003). *Afrocentricity: The Theory of Social Change*. Chicago, IL: African American Images.
- Asante, M.K. (2007). *An Afrocentric Manifesto: Toward an African Renaissance*. Cambridge, England: Polity Press.
- Dei, G.J.S. (1996). *The Role of Afrocentricity in Inclusive Curriculum in Canadian Schools*. *Canadian Journal of Education*, 21(2), 170-186.
- Dlamini, N.S. (2002). *From the Other Side of the Desk: Notes on Teaching About Race When Racialized*. *Race, Ethnicity and Education*, 5(1), 51-66.

- Ferreira, A. (1997, 1 February). Buthelezi is Made the Acting President in Peace Move By Mandela. *Irish Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.irishtimes.com>
- Gordon, B.M. (1990). The necessity of African-American epistemology for educational theory and practice. *The Journal of Education*, 172(3), 88-106.
- Hamilton, G. (2013, 7 December). Benign Machiavelli: A Master of Persuasion. *National Post*, p. A 17.
- Hooks, B. (1989). *Talking Black: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*. Boston, MA: South End.
- Keto, C.T. (2001). *Vision and time. Historical perspective of an African-centered paradigm*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America.
- Losh, J. and Dunn, T.M. (2013). President of the World. *The Sun*. Retrieved from <http://www.thesun.co.uk>
- Mazama, A. (2001). The Afrocentric Paradigm: Contours and Definitions. *Journal of Black Studies*, 31(4), 387-405.
- Moosa, E. (2014). In Memoriam: Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela (1918-2013). *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 82(1), 7-14.
- Motlanthe, K. (2014). The Role of the African Intelligentsia in Post-Mandela Africa. *The Thinker*, 60, 1-23.
- Nwagbara, U. (2013). Nelson Mandela, the Human Side of Political Leadership: Conversations with Myself (2010) As A Reflection of Servant-Leadership. *Leadership*, 9(1), 141-144.
- Schiele, J. H. (1994). Afrocentricity: Implications for Higher Education. *Journal of Black Studies*, 25(2), 150-169.
- Ross, O. (2013). Tributes to One Who 'Belongs to the Ages'. *The Toronto Star*, December 7, p. A28.
- Udogu, I.E. (1999). Prospects and Challenges in Post-Apartheid South Africa. *Journal of Developing Societies*, 15(2), 220-234.
- Walkom, T. (2013). Our Law Says Madiba's a Terrorist. *The Toronto Star*, December 7, P. A10.
- Watson, P. (2013). Racial Hatred Was Not Match For Grace, Compassion. *The Toronto Star*, December 7, P. A28.
- Wright, H.K. (2000). Why Write Back To The New Missionaries?: Addressing The Exclusion Of (Black) Others From The Discourses Of Empowerment. In G. J. S. Dei & A. Calliste (Eds.), *Power, Knowledge And Anti-Racism Education: A Critical Reader* (Pp. 122-138). Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada: Fernwood Publishing.

Cite this article as: Patrick Radebe (2021). For Better or For Worse: Western Mainstream Media and the 'Renarrativization' of Black Heroes. *International Journal of African Studies*. 1(4), 1-8. doi: 10.51483/IJAFRS.1.4.2021.1-8.