

**The
BLACK
C o m m e n t a t o r**
Commentary, analysis and investigations
on issues affecting African Americans
www.blackcommentator.com

Issue 173 – March 2, 2006

*Bruce's Beat
"Brand Name" Black Folks
Wal-Mart Worshippers and Acolytes
Katrina: The Greatest Shock of All
and eMail from our readers
by BC Editor Bruce Dixon*

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We hear a lot about A. Phillip Randolph and Bayard Rustin and Ella Baker and James Foreman and especially about Martin Luther King every February. The names of Malcolm X and Garvey and Paul Robeson and W.E.B. DuBois are dusted off and thrown around, along with those of Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Frederick Douglass, Henry Highland Garnett, David Walker and Nat Turner. A few even mumble the name of Zumbi. All these tried to organize slaves and the descendants of slaves to stand up and take some action. Any real organizer will tell you, every minute's worth of action is preceded by and accompanied with at least an hour's worth of talk. It's a good thing then, that talk is cheap, because organizing requires a lot of it.

Still there are those who say they don't have the patience for talk, and want only the answers. In response to **BC's** February 16, 2006 cover story, "A Movement Against Wal-Mart", reader Delilah Brown says:

We as black people talk a good game but where do we draw the line? Denounce Wal-Mart and shop where? I'm on a fixed income trying to raise children in a name brand world. What do we replace Wal-Mart with? Talking is not going to clothe my children at reasonable prices. Let's cut the talking and do something that helps – give us other alternatives please.

Let's see. Seven sentences. Three questions, one about where to shop. Two personal statements, and two demands, one to stop talking, the other for alternative places to shop. We respectfully suggest that Ms. Brown's priorities are just a little off. If the objectives of our people are limited to less talk, more or different shopping, and figuring out how to raise children in a "brand name world" we should give up any hope of constructing a movement to better ourselves and our condition, now or ever.

Soulless and greedy corporations have constructed the "brand name world" specifically to replace the influence of conscious and aware parents with their marketing imperatives. As both Michael Dawson explains in his indispensable work *The Consumer Trap: Big Business Marketing in American Life*, it exists to educate our children to consume their marketing messages and prepare them to engage in lifelong unpaid behaviors which will enrich those corporations while materially and spiritually impoverishing our individual lives, our families and our communities.

Shopping is what consumers do. Talking to each other is what families should do, and talking about building a movement that improves life for all our families is what citizens must do. Despite what we hear in the media, movements are not declared into existence by charismatic leaders who stand up or sit down, or even by influential publications like this one. Progressive movements for social change are founded on the widespread realization by a lot of nameless and ordinary people that the established order is unjust, and on their determination that it will be changed in their lifetimes. Pharoah won't let us go until well after enough of us let him go. That will require prodigious amounts of informed and informing talk.

Delilah didn't tell *BC* where she lived, and even if she had she knows the local shopping choices better than we. The challenges we face are in fact much deeper than where we can get the lowest price for the kids' school clothes this year, as important as that is. Rather than telling Delilah where to shop *BC* suggests that she arm and educate herself and her children with facts, starting with who built and who benefits from the "brand name world." A good start would be to ankle on down to the library and borrow or get online and buy Michael Dawson's aforementioned book for about twelve bucks.

If Delilah has internet access – and she did email us – there are plenty of educational resources available. Nothing conveys the essence of the "brand name world" more effectively and seductively than the music videos which are a viewing staple of black youngsters. Too many draw as much of their idea of what it is to be adult and authentically black from these sources as they do from the positive examples of parents and others. For a look inside how the authentic inspirations of our young people are cynically captured, colonized, vulgarized, commodified and spit back at them as "music" Delilah can go online and check out the PBS Frontline documentary, *The Merchants of Cool*, which includes revealing interviews of MTV and other execs who explain how and why they show what they show. Ms. Brown might want to take her kids back from the "brand name world," before it's too late.

On *BC*'s past issues page she can find nine or ten articles about Wal-Mart written over the last two years. There's another very good PBS Frontline documentary explaining Wal-Mart's negative effect on the standards of living of families on both sides of the Pacific which can be viewed [online](#) in its entirety. Its web site also includes full transcripts of interviews that are only excerpted in the documentary. Delilah can click on over to <http://www.walmartmovie.com>, where she can order another excellent Wal-Mart movie on DVD for only \$12.95. For \$50 she can get a 5-pack with shipping free to share with family and friends. After watching the movie with her children and relatives and neighbors, she can lend it to other relatives, or take it to her church or community group and have them show the one copy or give away the 5-pack.

And to keep Delilah and her well-informed family and friends from feeling isolated, there's *Wal-Mart Watch*, a comprehensive array of resources for citizens and activists that explains what others around the country and the world are doing to confront Wal-Mart in their workplaces, schools and communities. She might find some of her neighbors already involved. Maybe it's time for less shopping. And more talking. There's plenty to talk about. That's what families are supposed to do anyway, isn't it?

Fifty and even forty years ago it was possible to rely on mainstream print and broadcast media, including the black press, for at least some news of the Freedom Movement. But that's not the case any more. If you're waiting to hear about the next movement or the next great black leader on the tube, you will be disinformed. Ongoing battles are being waged for democratization and community control of media, but part of that responsibility is on us too.

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Activists, who are most often ordinary people, must take on the responsibility of spreading information among their own families, neighbors and friends, and being the media. The only thing that beats organized money is organized people. And people never get organized without the sharing of information.

When black America looks to the corporate media for news about ourselves, the narratives we get are often nearly unrecognizable. The funeral of Coretta Scott King is a case in point. The focus of the corporate press, besides the staple, contentless "Dreamer" image of Dr. King, was how certain disrespectful African Americans "politicized" the affair by publicly stating opposition to the misguided "war on terror" and other administration policies. **BC** is thankful for the February 16, 2006 contribution of Guest Commentator Donald Smith, "[Coretta King Goes Home](#)" in which the glaring contradiction between Ms. King's life and work and the shameful hijacking of her funeral by Republican-funded prosperity gospel preachers including King's own daughter were spelled out.

BC reader Phillip Bannamon responded to our Guest Commentator thusly:

I enjoyed reading your article about the service for Mrs. King. I must say that the Rev. Bernice King has all but lost her way. As a matter of fact it seems to me that none of the children of Dr. & Mrs. King are true to their legacy. As for all these self made Bishops, you hit the nail on the head.

And Lonzie Cox Jr. weighed in as well:

The truth that Bush heard at the King funeral was probably the only truth he has heard in years. He is a protected person. No one should have altered their message to suit Bush. Not letting Rev. Jesse Jackson speak, for instance, was criminal. I saw Bernice King at a college in Pennsylvania about 1990. I expected the brilliance of Martin and Coretta, but was disappointed. What I saw was a young woman who was more interested in selling her book than she was in giving us a message of hope. We came to see Dr. King's daughter, not a black right wing preacher who is learning to hate almost as deeply as Jerry Falwell or Pat Robertson or Franklin Graham. We expected better then, and we deserve better now. The black American nation is watching.

They are indeed watching. Accountability is not just for black elected officials. It's for the black clergy too. As Cornel West says in *Democracy Matters*, the right "...is even making inroads into ... fervent black prophetic Christianity. The sad truth is that the black church is losing its prophetic fervor..." **BC** understands that there are organized and progressive black clergy who are taking it upon themselves to directly counter the spread of rightist influences in the black church, and hopes to soon print a submission from some of them.

Last week's **BC** cover article, "Katrina: Shock Therapy for Black America," outlined how virtually the entire Congressional Black Caucus was directed to stand down and stay away from congressional hearings on the Katrina debacle, not by any decision of their own, but by House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi (D-CA). Effectively, the Black Caucus left Georgia's Rep. Cynthia McKinney, our only voice in those hearings, out to dry, not for the first time, eliciting the following email from reader Tirandez:

"Posture & Primp." Thank you, gentlemen for describing the CBC accurately in terms they fully deserve. Rep. McKinney has more "you know what" than the whole of the CBC.

We think Tirandez's arithmetic is about right. As the attempted ethnic cleansing of New Orleans unfolds in front of our eyes, though off the radar of much of the corporate news media, we should be redoubling our scrutiny of the CBC, and demanding more, not less commitment to the rights of Gulf Coast residents to return, to remain and to rebuild.

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Finally, Dr. Andre Insan Muhammed wrote us about a September 29, 2005 *BC ThinkPiece* we reprinted from Playahata.com.

Having just re-read the article by Morpheus Reloaded for the tenth time, several questions came to mind. The obvious question was what was the author's purpose in writing the article? Was there a realization that those groups referred to might tune out and digress into being insulted? Or was the idea to inform and educate those who aspire to those categories listed or to vilify them? Or was the idea to stir the pot of critical thinking, thereby forcing us to look into the mirror if we find ourselves trapped into one or more of said categories, and look for cogent ways to express our outrage at living in an extremely racist society?

As one of the Fantastical Fact Fellowshipers, I appreciate Morpheus' polemic and alert those who may claim one or all of the categories to watch or read Malcolm X, among others, and see how they channeled anger into pro-active action.

I have read the article about as many times as Dr. Muhammed and have at times belonged to at least one of the groups described by its author, and a couple of others he mercifully omitted. For their sakes, I must decline to identify them at this time. My best guess is that Morpheus intended to compare, contrast and draw our attention to some of the varying tendencies that make up "conscious" black America. Just as you can often tell more truth in fewer words with good fiction than you can with non-fiction, an artist truly on her or his game can spin out multilayered truths that tell us more than we like to admit about ourselves, that enrage us and make us laugh at the same time. Morpheus pulled it off nicely, and we are all in his debt. Our thanks again to Playahata, who first published it.

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