Stereotypes’ impact

Negative images can fuel injustice

Mariam Williams

obeyed. We believed we were in danger. When the
Colombian challenged his instinct, he rationalized his
actions by saying, “When it’s a group of guys like that you
just don’t know what they’ll do.”

He had mailed a list of crime statistics, crime examples and
advice on how to avoid being a victim to us before we left the
United States. (My favorite: Don’t wear any jewelry, especially
earrings that dangle. Thieves have been known to rip
women’s earrings right out of their ears, and you don’t
want to lose your earlobe in the process.) We were already
conditioned to fear the people, particularly the men, around us,
even as we stayed with Mexican host families.

And it worked. The next morning, two other women and I
ran — as best we could in dresses and sandals — to
breakfast at a restaurant a few blocks away because we were
the only women we saw out on a quiet morning in a dangerous
city.

Those may be two of many examples I could use to illustrate
how I returned to the U.S. alive, untouched, unharmed
and with all the money I didn’t spend on silver during a day
trip to Taxco. Or they may be examples of me being prejudiced.

I write this not to give people in general and white people
in particular a pass for proceeding with caution when
they find themselves around black men. Because a 17-year-old
boy is dead, his parents are grieving, a community is divided,
a nation is outraged and black parents are scared.

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want you to recognize how easily negative stereotypes imprint upon the human mind and give you the opportunity to think differently. Whether or not Stand Your Ground laws in the states, including Kentucky, that have them are ever re-examined or repealed, Trayvon Martin’s killing should warn us of how images, words and even statistics are used every day to recreate and reinforce narratives invented centuries ago to justify behavior people knew then was morally reprehensible. People say things differently now. “Savage” has become suspicious, threatening, angry black man or woman, drug dealer or thug. “Inferior” becomes reverse discrimination, affirmative action beneficiary, lazy, dumb children in failing schools or poor children with no work ethic. “Sexually depraved” shows up in legislators joking about the first lady’s “large posterior.” “Don’t be so sensitive” has replaced commands to stay in one’s place. “You’re not like us. You’re not one of us, and you don’t deserve the same rights we have,” summarizes doubt about the president’s religion, allegations he ascribes to a “phony theology” and demands he produce his birth certificate.

News outlets that African Americans rarely control verify the stereotypes with images of blacks in criminality disproportionately to the amount of crime they truly commit. Entertainment companies back up their claims with reality television shows starring black women with natty attitudes, music videos featuring scantily clad black and brown bodies partying or thugging and nothing to counter or balance the debase-ment.

The shooting of this unarmed black child also demonstrates how effective the new quiet, euphemistic rhetoric, fitting for few but applied too often to all, is. It’s the reason black children ages 5 to 10 made up 25 percent of the children in Kentucky who had criminal complaints filed against them from 2009 to 2010, although they made up only 9 percent of the age group. It’s why black males on free or reduced-price lunch in Jefferson County Public Schools receive more suspensions than any other group.

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It’s why, according to a recent study out of the University of Pennsylvania, charities that help black teens struggle to get funding. It’s the reason black teens and adults are followed in stores or stopped without probable cause by police and why white women can murder their kids and buy some time by blaming their disappearance on a mysterious black man. It’s the reason President Obama held a beer summit after defending his friend, Henry Louis Gates Jr., when police arrested him for looking suspicious in his own home and why the president can call Sandra Fluke to extend sympathy for her in the wake of nine hours of verbal assault by a talk radio performer but hasn’t (as of this writing) expressed condolences to Tracy Martin and Sybrina Fulton.

One page of scary statistics made me act and probably look at least a little foolish my first time in a foreign country. A lifetime of foreboding images, stories and stereotypes applied ubiquitously resulted in an innocent teen carrying Skittles and iced tea being shot point blank in the chest. What have the narratives constructed to justify the unjust done to you?

Mariam Williams is a writer who lives in Louisville. More of her writing can be found at RedboneAfropuff.com.