



Waste, good stories and bad feelings

Kopano Ratele wonders what sort of new collective identity our media are making for us.

It is a Tuesday morning in May 2004, a few weeks after the big celebration of 10 years of political freedom at the Union Buildings. Before even stepping out the back door of the house, I know there will be a small foreign tribe on the streets of the neighbourhood where I live. Some members of the tribe, from the experience of other Tuesdays, are young-looking, others old, some thin as a new year's wind around these parts, and all are in dirty clothes; all my colour, all but one, my sex.

On cue, as I push the bin through the gate, there is a head inside neighbour David's garbage bin. David moved into number 12 a few months ago. I've never met him, to tell the truth. We may only have nodded at each other once. My partner has spoken to David's parents. They had bought the property for him, they said.

The head lifts, as I leave my bin on the kerb for the garbage truck and walk back into the yard, but not before our eyes meet.

I nod. He nods back.

I get back into the yard, close the gate behind me, and make my way into the house, as he closes the lid of the bin, throws something onto his Pick 'n Pay trolley, steps off the kerb onto the road, and pulls away.

I will forget the man. No, this is not entirely true; there are more processes happening here than I am able to describe in this story. Psychosocial relations and identities in particular, and everyday

life in general, are characterised by excess, waste, a thousand and one fragments which, however hard we try, can never fit into a story. (This debris of our daily lives is, ironically, what motivates stereotype, racism and sexism. All these are attempts to reduce and regularise social relations and simplify the world.) The same holds for cultural life and psychological relations in South Africa: distinguished not by linearity and natural order, but by complexity, disorderliness and always excess; not by formulae but by illuiveness, fragmentation, movement – and because of the spectacle, the madness of apartheid in our country, exaggeratedly so.

It is a social scientific truism that a group is more than its individual constituents. This ought also to be understood in the sense that the whole may be lessened and coloured by the parts that constitute it. There is therefore profit to be drawn, from studying the differences among the individual elements of the group, in trying to understand the group, in investigating the personal in an attempt to make sense of the socio-political subjectivities, in trying to understand the nation.

These twin mirror problems have bedevilled the social and psychological sciences from the onset: that the nation is made up of individuals, and that the single individual is nothing if not an incomplete representative of the different groups that make up the nation.

To get back to the man... no, I can't forget the man, for then I would have to forget myself. How can I, when he is part of us, something that can't be overlooked; when he reduces our freedom, something that has to be reported until it is fixed. Having said that, I will be able to go on with the minutiae of my still fairly new suburban life, my still fairly new democratic right to be here.

In particular, it is the wretched situation of the men that can't be pushed out of the head that easily; the picture of these men pulling contraband shopping trolleys and foraging for rotten food that can't be forgotten. For what occurred this morning is a variation of an interaction that happens every Tuesday morning around here. This is replayed on suburban streets around the country on garbage collection day. And what happened today, the mind is learning, not without struggle, to process, or more correctly, repress; and the eye is learning to overlook, not without unwelcome emotions, the images at many traffic lights of our new country.

If for no other reason, I can't ignore the situation of the men because another man, or perhaps this same man, came to David's or my bin last week, or the week before that. This or another man will knock on my door on another day in the near future. Maybe I will rifle through the refrigerator or food cupboard for something for him, if I feel generous at that moment. If I don't, I will peep at him from behind the slot for letters in the front door and say sorry, I have nothing. I will lie. I will feel uneasy for a beat or two. And then I will go back to listening to Gil Scott-Heron about the revolution that's not on television, or finish last Friday's *Mail&Guardian*, or brew myself a cup of Kenyan coffee, while visualising Walden Bello's different world before going to work.

Beside the big stories this month, Abu Ghraib, Brenda Fassie and the football World Cup bid, a man scavenging in the garbage bins in a Cape Town suburb on a May morning in 2004 is not going to make front page. Come to think of it, it won't make any other page.

Why not? Besides the fact that hordes of able-bodied men are always having to rummage for dumped food is a story with no words to tell it, this



Benny Gool

is another kind of surplus to the story of freedom and the rainbow nation. More to the point, there is no story to this story. Not when compared to getting an angle on Danny Jordaan, or, going back a few years, to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings. Not against the exploits of Colin Chauke nor the case of Moses Sithole. Not when put alongside stories of the Norwood killer, urban terror in the Western Cape, or the station strangler. And there is certainly no contest, when put alongside Nelson Mandela becoming the first president of the democratic society and the winning of the 1995 Rugby World Cup. Abjectly poor men on the street of formerly white suburbia are not an important story. Only a mad editor would send a journalist to cover this one.

And the matter here is a good story, isn't it? But what in freedom's name is a good story?

Winnie Mandela, for what Desiree Lewis might call her "uncontainable excess", is always a good story. A gory crime story is always good, especially if it involves lots of blood. Or treachery, be it racial, familial, national. Something or other about race can be winner. A spectacular piece about racism can fill up the time nicely and get us audiences, particularly if it makes us feel good about ourselves and makes others feel bad. A scoop involving corrupt executives and public officials, that's also good and easy enough to put on a street pole. I can't see how you can beat these.

In other words, bad stuff makes good copy. Give me death, then we can give our readers something. Rape will do fine as well. Let it be something horribly sensational: a woman who murders her husband; a father who sodomises his stepdaughter.

True, the good stuff can be used to fill the inches sometimes, but we are not Oprah, or some women's magazine; we have to have a good angle. Elections

are okay too, but they have to be reported in an entertaining way. What about a president sitting on the floor in a shack somewhere? Otherwise sport. That is always a sure-fire winner; if all else fails you can count on sport.

What do these fat sensational stories make us, though? For it is out of these and other representations and images that identities are formed, reproduced, challenged. There is no evading it: a story on the gang-rape of Swiss tourists can't but say something about us. No, I am not saying the press should close its eyes to bad stories, but one must wonder what tragic story after tragic story, when put along a thousand possible other stories, signals about the collective identity we're trying to build here.

In addition, since it is commonplace that the media is a centrally influential grouping of social actors in making subjects, we can't but wonder what sorts of new subjects our media is making us into. What, a careful reader going through our papers, watching our television channels and listening to our radio might at some time think, is the sort of nation being fashioned or reinforced?

This, such a careful reader might think, is a nation of sensationalists. Now if it were always before the 1990s, then all the media are doing is simply holding up for us a mirror so we can see ourselves. If this is the case, then our media are among the best in the world. In other words, South African journalists, Felicia Mabuza-Suttle and disc jockeys can't be blamed if we are a nation that feeds on voyeurism. The words and images found us like this. All the media is doing by reserving depth and thought for the opinion or comment pages is giving the people what they want. What the people do not need is critical intellectual twaddle.

There was *South* and *New Nation* back then of course. There is John Matshikiza, and there was



Kopano Ratele is professor of Psychology at the University of the Western Cape where he teaches in the Departments of Psychology and Women's & Gender Studies. His current interests include epistemology, critical studies of men and masculinities, discursive psychology, sexualities, and research methodology. He is the editor of *Social Psychology: Identity & Relationships*.

the *Daily Mail* and *Weekly Mail*. There is something funny about David Bullard, but then there was Stephen Mulholland's other voice before his. There are the features of Bongani Madondo and there is Phyllicia Oppelt. And not too long ago we used to receive the beautiful and barely concealed love-letters from Justice Malala from London and then New York. There is the *Mail&Guardian* and *ThisDay*. The *Despatches* in the *Sunday Independent* are also a good way to pass a weekend morning, even when they report the horrors committed in the name of freedom. There are the documentaries on SABC1, of varying quality as they are. And there is Zola.

Notwithstanding these, let us not get carried away. Emotion, and a bit more easing up on the analytical bit, is what should be our nation's motto. Look at the sales figures of *Die Son* and *Daily Sun*; the readership of *You*. People love titillation, you can't change their nature.

But I could swear, I learned that there were once many serious revolutionaries around here, men and women dedicated to noble and other big and darkly causes. Some of them even went to jail for a long time rather than live unfree lives. And so if this latter is what is true about South Africa, then much of our media are busy making us into a people with a shallow inner life and little idealism, exactly at the moment when they could write us into authentic equality. From much of the media we learn that most of our lives is surface. To watch the news and read the dailies about the lives of South African subjects goes no deeper than their erogenous zones.

So what has a journalist to do?

How about thinking twice about killing a singer before she is dead. How about telling the only worthy story to tell when reporting on a psychically conflicted young man of mixed descent, a story of a life that's lived. And when one truly follows a story, one realises that reality always exceeds its representation. It can't be reduced to a sensational headline.

As anyone who has ever dared to put it into just the right words shall tell you, there is always more interview material than you can put into 800 words. There is usually more footage than we can use. There is more that's going on than we have senses. People say: it's hard to explain. Or they might say: you had to be there. It does not matter whether the story is about a master robber, a serial murderer, a freedom fighter who became president, People Against Gangsterism and Drugs, or Francois Pienaar: what is written or shown about an event, relations between people, or a person's action is always less than the event or action itself.

It is true that, at the same time that we are confronted with this excess, the modes we employ to represent social psychological life, a nation becoming free, or two men's relations with one another or with themselves, limits what we can say about it. The same holds for what we call identity.

An individual or nation's identity, like the life they emerge out of, are characterised by inessentials rather than essentials. Thus essence is a fake. At best, essence is, like stereotype, a bad attempt at trying to get a handle on society, not an attempt to understand it. Identities have more to them than we can capture in words or pictures, or any other sign.

Indeed the very attempt to put it down into words is an attempt to fix it. In writing about identity we cannot but be reductive. Yet since we can't do without identifying ourselves, trying to represent as fully and complexly as possible our community, neighbours, nation, who we really are, is an illusion which is absolutely necessary.

Knowing who we are, reading about ourselves, and talking to ourselves and to others, is something

we cannot live without.

In a way this is the major struggle of South African media today: to be aware that it is to the papers and radio and television that many people look to find out who we, or they, are. To put it differently: seeing there is always a deep sense of insecurity about our identities, since who we are is illusive, we

constantly have to rehearse and reinforce our sense of who we are. Thus, if there is one function that reporters, radio deejays and television news-anchors perform for their audiences, it is that we get it, if only for a Tuesday morning; it is a damn hard task, but they must assist South Africans to understand, not merely react, feel, rage.