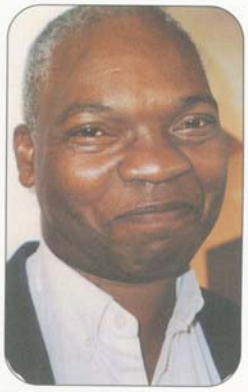


To understand the Truth Commission is to take responsibility for one's journalism, says **MANDLA LANGA.**

The writing was always on the wall, but where were the reporters?

ON A VISIT to Michigan in August 1979, I took a Greyhound bus from Ann Arbor to East Lansing via Jackson. Inside the bus, I was struck by the tropism to the back seats by African American passengers. Those who seemed white — 'seemed' because I'd left my Race-o-Meter in sunny South Africa — would enter from the back and stride purposefully and confidently to the front. This gravitational pull to opposite poles left a gap as menacing as a demilitarised zone. Up ahead, seeming to emerge out of wheat fields and orchards, loomed a brownstone structure which later turned out to be Jackson's main penitentiary.

The driver announced on the intercom, "Jackson, East Wing!". With the announcement of each cardinal point, the bus would stop before imposing gates and the black passengers would file out. I'd struck up a conversation with a middle-aged woman who told me that her son was serving a long sentence for a murder he hadn't committed. Since I was a black man from South Africa, she presumed that I knew how she felt; before alighting to enter the gates of the South Wing, she wished me luck. Alone, I looked at the woman's fellow Americans ensconced in the seats of the mighty, and it occurred to me that they hadn't actually seen the massive prison fronted by barbed wire above which stood armed guards in observation posts with guns at the ready. When we hit East Lansing, the driver drawled: "East Lansing. Keep your left hand on your wallet and your right hand on your pistol." There was a titter of nervous, self-conscious laughter up in the front.

The blacks shuffled out in a stony, unamused silence. Recently, a journalist friend of mine who once worked for the *Rand Daily Mail* spoke of the way print journalists were seduced into thinking that they were major players when South Africa still had an all-white parliament. During the debates, they would sit in the gallery and spin words about the no-bullshit debating style of, say, BJ Vorster as opposed to the cunning arguments — which means the ability to vex Vorster — offered by a member of the opposition. In those years whatever reportage which could be termed remotely anti-apartheid revolved around lampooning the excesses of apartheid, especially the Pass Laws. That, too, was mostly with regard to what extent these odious pieces of legislation impinged on or frustrated white people's pursuit of life and happiness. There is no record, at least not one that I have come across, that the journalists ever seriously questioned what they were doing, as white people in a forum that was decidedly designed to air white grievances in a country that was remarkably black. In a word, no-one was hit by a blinding, epiphanic light of revelation or suffered — even momentarily — an existential crisis. If, perhaps, any one

➤ *continued on page 15*

"...black people who weren't pale imitations of their masters always took what the press said or didn't say about them with a liberal pinch of salt. And they passed this knowledge onto their children. The skeptical cannot be lied to."

journalist flinched at this omission, that could have well been interpreted by his mates as a nervous tic. Everything was normal. If the papers had simply ignored the suffering of black people and continued on their weaving of a magical white Utopia — and not started their own campaign against black political activism — most of us would simply have shrugged our shoulders and dismissed their past lofty editorials as a further testimony to their irrelevance, something we should have expected anyway. With a few exceptions, many journalists did not howl out in rage when their editors played down the numbers of casualties in police attacks.

It took a collaboration of Joseph Lelyveld of the *New York Times* and photographer James Cole to expose the iniquities that South Africa had visited on her darker children. It was also people like Anthony Sampson, who trained and nurtured journalists and writers under *Drum* magazine, for white people to start having a glimpse into what was being done on their behalf. The photo-journalistic exposés by Peter Magubane and Henry Nxumalo in *Drum*, *Post* and *The World*, among a few beleaguered and courageous publications, of what went on in prison plantations, hostels and all such arenas outside the orbit of white consciousness, should have been the starting point for white newspapers. Here, at least, journalists would have been given a chance to report and reflect the nature of the society in which they lived and take responsibility for the accuracy and quality of their final messages.

The heightening of political temperature and the acceleration of the struggles in the 1980s spawned the alternative media. To me, the excuse that the mainstream media could not do more than what it was definitely not doing — because of the Byzantine legislation against reporting on security matters — is blasted to smithereens by the commitment of the alternative media. While papers like *The Star* and the *Sunday Times* gloated over the SADF's cross-border raids, the alternative media strove to put the nature of the apartheid beast into perspective. The question which should be asked is, how was it that those white journalists who spearheaded the alternative press also came from the same society of those in the mainstream? If it wasn't a question of colour, we can surmise it was certainly a question of balls. Certain journalists in the mainstream press, it must be admitted, did have courage, witness the accounts on removals, witdoekke, Soweto 1976, the uncovering of police culpability in the slaughter of what is now known as the Gugulethu Seven, and so on. Many brave white journalists were incarcerated in prison, some lost their lives; others went into exile. But, with these few exceptions, what was lacking was reportage which suggested that black people should be taken more seriously, that their lives mattered also. Some detractors of this contention point out to the media's role in the uncovering of Muldergate, but to me this was still functioning within a white context and revealed a level of venality that was insupportable only because it had overshot the mark of acceptable banditry.

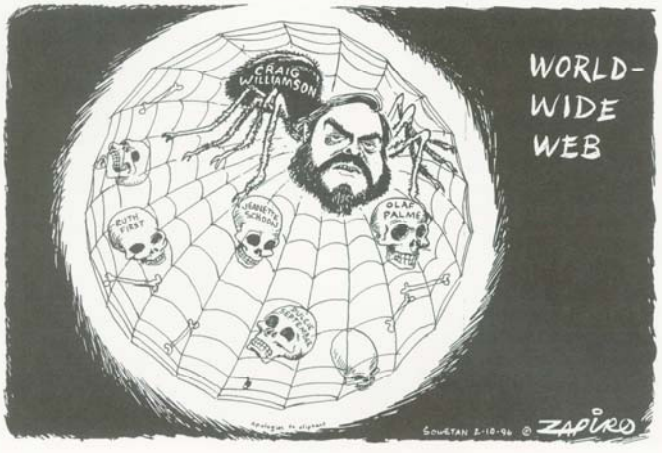
Right now, amid the clamour of mea culpa and the suggestion of a need for a press truth commission, many facts are being revealed of the media's collusion with the apartheid security apparatus in the misinformation of the mainly white readers. I say "mainly" because black people who weren't pale imitations of their masters always took what the press said or didn't say about them with a liberal pinch of salt. And they passed this knowledge onto their children. The skeptical cannot be lied to. It is also true that white South Africans, for a very long time — and despite their famed admiration for their collective intellect — were left in the dark. They only knew what they were supposed to know and they didn't know that they didn't know. Had they known, I think, they would have taken responsibility for what was being done, and the pace with which South Africa came to its senses would have been hastened. Which means that many more lives would have been saved.

The saving of lives, the acknowledgment and possible reclamation of those lost, and the rehabilitation of the blasphemed, form part of the TRC's central thesis. Reporting on the Truth Commission requires inner reserves on the part of journalists, reserves that might have not been called up before. This, because all of us agree that, even though we might have guessed that the testimonies would be horrific, the magnitude of what has been done can easily lead witnesses to the very gates of a madhouse.

When the hearings started, media attention was at its premium, the testimonies made headlines and came into our living rooms, in living colour. The reports were vivid, striving as closely as possible to detail what had existed. They tried to unpack the meaning of the silences and absences and communicate to us, the new voyeurs, the gravity of it all. In doing that, they were providing a narrative that would lead us out of a Kafkaesque nightmare. But journalists can easily be inured into horror. That distance, by the way, is how they have managed to remain sane in a mad world. One more dead body, one more woman collapsing on being overcome by the burden of memory, become routine. And — more importantly — there is a certain South African familiarity — and attendant absence of indignation — with a dead body. Especially if it is a black body and we are somehow intimate with the circumstances of its journey from life to death. Unless there is a new wrinkle added to the death, or the body belongs, in that rare eventuality, to a white person, the reports are laconic and without accompanying words of compassion and understanding. This detachment comes, moreso, from a lack of real understanding of the issues underpinning the TRC.

The work of the TRC has implications of sustaining a memory of what has happened in this country, with an aim of providing an object lesson so that South Africans never again regress to their retrograde past. For journalists to fully understand the implications of the TRC presupposes an ability on their part to accept the TRC on its own terms. This opens up the possibility of examining their own culpability, their own silence when they could have spoken, when they had the requisite weapons to analyse and give society a glimmer of light. To understand is to take responsibility, and it is my contention that this can be achieved through an arduous self-appraisal and criticism. It is only now that we know that the media knew about Vlakplaas

➤ *continued on page 19*



➤ THE WRITING WAS ALWAYS ON THE WALL *continued from page 15*

and the existence of the Third Force. It is now that we know that the media knew of the bodies now being exhumed in KwaZulu-Natal; if the media didn't know, then they have no business pretending to be the fourth estate, which is supposed to have its nose on the ground. What remains unrevealed remains so mainly because its time to come to light has not come, not because it is unknown. To know without the possibility to disclose creates a disjuncture between the profession or trade and basic humanity. Antjie Krog has written eloquently about this, and the possible schizophrenia which affects journalists reporting on the process of the Truth Commission. Add to this the burden of prejudice and the language which conveys what is happening and you are left with a bewildering possibility of conclusions. One of them is that journalism is still overly subscribed by people who, by accident of birth and the lying history of this country, cannot be beyond a language which has to be acceptable to the most powerful sectors of this society. To that regard, the truth itself is packaged, sanitised and made palatable if only to sell newspapers and maintain the continued interest of advertisers.

Much more importantly, the journalists have to acknowledge the terror which induced cowardice and the vast silences which followed. To complicate their predicament, they, more than anyone knew that the balance of power would one day shift in favour of the wretched of this country. The writing has always been on the wall, it just needed readers. They must have known that nowhere in the world has oppression been left unchallenged. But this knowledge would have meant taking sides with the oppressed if only by telling it like it is. Vorster, Botha and de Klerk, through their collective moral failure, might not have been able to assess or imagine the price paid by their victims, or that it is fatal to create too many victims or even have the vision that the will of the victim is as inexorable as a river. The journalists did.

On the bus to East Lansing, the birthplace of Malcolm X, there might have been some white people whose relatives were also in Jackson. The black woman's son might have been guilty of the crime which had landed him there. What, perhaps, could have leavened the gloomy atmosphere in that moving vessel, was a communion among fellow Americans. They, at least, are bonded by the same language, or variations thereof. To that effect, they might have been able to interrogate that intolerable excess of terror which articulates itself as hatred.

In South Africa, a new dawn is breaking, every day. Journalists have a chance of confronting the past, to participate, without the weight of unresolved baggage, in helping all of us face up to the task ahead.

Mandla Langa is a writer and media consultant. He was also chair of the Commission of Enquiry into Government Communication (Comtask).