

Beating the Black Drum



Abbey Mokoe gets mad at the media for perpetuating racism.

An acquaintance of mine, a white fellow, recently told me about his confrontation with the bosses of the Independent Newspapers. "I told them," he said, "that you have no business having blacks on your staff because they bring no diversity into your newspapers. They write what you tell them to write and, they have no choice! After all, they have children and their families to look after."

This acquaintance went further to say Walter Sisulu's 80-something birthday story and picture was played very small in the inside pages. Yet some unknown white woman made front pages because of her relationship with the British Queen.

This was the observation of a reader. There are many more like him.

However, I want to point out right here that I work for Independent Newspapers in Gauteng. No one, yellow, pink or pale will dare order me to write what they would want me to write. I speak vehemently for myself. I am no tool of anyone.

Now, let me also hasten to put my other colours to the mast: racism in the media is actively alive, and is kicking black asses. Most honest black journalists know this too well.

The most glaring examples of racism are in the everyday coverage of news. One quick look at our media offers plenty of evidence.

A white-run newsroom, despite a sea of black faces, recently went frantic after hearing that some squatters had chopped off a dog's ear in their informal settlement. The concern, the determination to find the culprits, the resolve to pressure the police in effecting a speedy arrest, all these were elements in the bosses' brief to their young black reporters.

What the powers-that-be did not realise is that, as a black scribe, my immediate concern about squatter camps is the plight of men, women and children who languish in squalor and filth in those set-ups. This primary concern has nothing to do with my liking, or disliking, of dogs and, indeed animals in general. I have a dog that has just given birth to two puppies, for interest's sake. And I'm looking well after the threesome.

Take another example. Makhaya Ntini was vilified in the media even after being acquitted of rape. Some lily-white women's groups still persecute him to this day. You see, like most of us, Ntini remains guilty as charged.

On the other hand, Hansie Cronje admitted to taking money for giving information to bookies. There has been no condemnation of Hansie, like there was of Ntini. Whatever condemnation Hansie experienced has been so little it is not worth talking about.

Business reporting is also largely racist, showing white people who always save the companies they run, while black people run them down. White people can do no wrong, according to the business press.

The only time black people make headlines is when something negative occurs, but on the whole they're never paraded or depicted as pioneering crusaders. There are many, like Dikgang Moseneke and Zwelake Sisulu, who warrant space, but the only time they get it is when they share the limelight with the likes of Marinus Dalling in reports on mergers between Afrikaners and black empowerment drivers.

Ironically, in business publications convicted fraudster Greg Blank is considered a hero despite his despicable white-collar crime record. His skin-colour has much to do with his rehabilitation. Hooray New South Africa!



In 1997 I was elected the founding president, or chairperson, of the Forum of Black Journalists in Johannesburg. The reason we formed this pressure body was exactly our response to our plight as recipients of racist practices in the workplace. I was at the time a magazine editor for a group I choose not to mention because nothing would have me stoop so low.

Just a day after my photograph appeared in newspapers, my bosses in Cape Town arranged a plane ticket and the next day I was at the Waterfront under the guise of a working lunch when in fact I was being grilled about the FBJ.

"We thought you were just a member of this new organisation, so you are actually the boss?," they said. Not a question as much as a remark of a bitter disappointment. Another boss, one of the two very old Afrikaner chaps obviously stuck in history's myopic quagmire, inquired sheepishly: "Do you believe in trade unionism?" At this point I was getting really flabbergasted.

"As a matter of fact I am a registered member of Mwasa," I replied. The grilling session abruptly ended. We went back to the office where I was politely told: "Please be careful about the work for which we have employed you. We don't want your involvement with this FBJ to affect your job."

From that day the bosses started to find fault with every little thing that I did or said. All the way from Cape Town they could call me to say "we hear you have been out of office for the last two hours. Please don't take long lunch time."

Eventually, I had to choose between my principles and appeasing the blokes in Cape Town. So I quit!

Racism in the media runs deep and do not be fooled by smiles and hugs and lunches and sweet talk.

It remains common that if you are black and you speak out, you are jeopardising your career path and hampering your chances of upward mobility. Recently, there was an incident in which a black journalist had white colleagues harassing him because he had planned to do a story on their white friend. I am pointing this out to illustrate that even white colleagues at the same level as you cannot escape the illusion of white monopoly on intelligence.

When you object you are accused of racism in reverse by these same experienced racists, bigots and zealots! Sad.

■ Abbey Makoe works for the *Sunday Independent*

LIZ KHUMALO, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF, DRUM, RESPONDS:

Mr Makoe's recollection of the informal discussion with two colleagues (not management) is so selective that it does not really merit a response. The questions about the Forum centred around the Forum's intention to get involved with the training of black journalists and he was in fact encouraged to continue his involvement.

He should know best that the true reasons for his resignation from *Drum* had nothing to do with his involvement with the Forum.

