



What's a melanin-deprived journo to do?, asks Yves Vanderhaeghen

# White Man Whingeing



I don't think of myself as a problem. I use the phrase "white middle aged male" with an objective awareness of the imperative for change that it connotes. But since it describes three attributes pertaining to me, I say it with a light ironic inflection calculated to convey to the listener that I do not consider it to apply to me.

That's because I have all my adult life considered myself to be progressive and feminist (pace Ms Dworkin). I have also, since before the term became jargon, actively promoted and, where possible, implemented transformation.

It doesn't help. I'm still freaking out.

Since about the start of the HRC hearings into racism in the media last year I have felt unexpectedly and unbearably defensive. My very reaction has been emotionally distressing because, given my beliefs and personal history, it has been so incomprehensible as to prompt a crisis of conscience almost debilitating in effect. To be told that it goes to show that, deep down, all whites are irredeemably racist has not been helpful.

Nevertheless, the possibility had to be considered. So I did. I ran a virus scan. It found a Hatebug with readings as high for Armani Africanists as for Gucci Gringos. There was a "Die Yuppie Scum" bug there too, but apart from identifying some subliminal misanthropic tendencies I concluded that my defensiveness had nothing to do with closet racism.

This turmoil came to a head with a fax about two days before a SA National Editors Forum (Sanef) workshop asking, among other things, whether I had ever been passed over for promotion. I flipped. Obvious question, irrational response, I know, but I flipped. Innocuous though it may have been, the question was really saying that if you are black it is expected that your answer will be yes and that it would have been because you are black. Conversely, if you are white, you are unlikely to have missed out and if you did you probably deserved it.

I am angered because my very self and my entire career in journalism, are all dismissed and trivialised by the insensitive, fuzzy assault on "white middle aged males" and "white media" without regard to individuals who may inhabit those terms. Secondly, the style of the debate about "white media", however much I agree with some of the criticism at an intellectual level, makes me very vulnerable.

On the first count, I am aggrieved personally and professionally. When I think of the Eighties, which is when I reached adulthood, went to university, joined the student political leftwing, started working, I think of regular harassment by the cops, offering shelter to refugees from burning townships, arriving home after night-shift to find my partner had been detained. Not an ounce of my being identified with "The System". Sure, I'm not Joe Slovo, or Ronnie Kasrils, or Bram Fischer. My actions may have fallen short of my aspirations, and my courage short of my ideals, but I object to being cast into the same white hole of apartheid sins, from which nothing good can emanate, together with assorted political psychopaths and racists.

The use of the adjective "white" as an all-purpose pejorative is inaccurate, unethical and so lacking in insight and subtlety as to be a hazard to humane discourse.

It fails to acknowledge that rational thought and individual conscience can enable the individual to overcome circumstance. If the term is applied, pejoratively, to a particular white person who, motivated by racial animosity, harms or oppresses an individual or group, then okay. To use it as a politically generic category into which all whites are lumped indis-

criminally, is to deny me my life, my struggles, my crises. I'm not claiming any great contribution. But it is not nada.

At the risk of protesting too much, I am as defensive about my career in newspapers. I cut my teeth as a night-sub. The entire table was white. All were liberal to left. I, fresh out of the student movement, brought with me a principled commitment to change.

We dissected the emergency regulations, pored over the legal opinion on loopholes, and took our chances. Every opportunity to slip one through, we took. It didn't make a huge difference, I suppose, but a lot of effort went into it and it heralded the start of change. Also on that team was the future chief sub who epitomised for me integrity, fairness and plain old decency. He's now been swept out of management along with the dead wood by Independent Newspapers.

What's my point? Good riddance to genuine racists, but the failure to distinguish between who is and who isn't, is destructive and terrifying. Secondly, while acknowledging the historical racial ills of almost all South African media, it is simply not accurate to make sweeping generalisations about "white media", now or then, to describe a homogenous set of (presumably reactionary) values. To do so dismisses the efforts of good people as of no relevance, and their values as worthless.

You know what's so terrible about this, is that I find myself doing it too. At the Sanef workshop, for example, there was a white woman who looked like she had "transformation problem" written all over her. It turned out she had great political credentials and a black husband to boot. Did I feel a jerk.

I don't really expect to be transformed out on to the street. But I fear that I am vulnerable. Made vulnerable not by being incompetent, racist, fascist or unprofessional, but because my position is so easy to undermine amid indiscriminate broadsides aimed at "white media" and "white middle aged men".

I know my words sound no different from those of beleaguered racists, but that can't be helped. I still feel that to have been guided by conscience and principle is insufficient armour against crusaders whose righteousness has blinded them to the weasel of calumny lurking at their heels. And I'm terrified that when the dust has settled, all you'll be able to see of me is a white man whingeing.

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## HILLARY GRAHAM b.1943

### The Battle of Grahamstown: action at the mud fort

The lithographic image is supposed to look like an early nineteenth century print in a local newspaper, perhaps made in Grahamstown immediately after the battle. I suppose one could refer to the image as a form of 'popular realism'.

