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# **Narrative, conflict & change**

## ***Journalism in the New South Africa***

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Thesis presented for the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

*in the Department of Social Anthropology,*

UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN

January 1999

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'Stories are the secret reservoir of values: change the stories individuals and nations live by and tell themselves, and you change the individuals and nations.'

Ben Okri  
(1997:112)

## Abstract

*Narrative, Conflict and Change: Journalism in the New South Africa* investigates the idea that narrative and reality do not have a mimetic relationship but that news texts take their shape and structure from prior cultural forms. Developing this point, the study argues that news-gathering practices are embedded in a common sense of the moment that is radically shaped by prevailing currents of power.

Opening with the observation that current disputes about the media and democracy in South Africa have been constrained by a narrow economism, the work sets out to broaden the scope of the debate by identifying news texts as more than informational artefacts but as narratives that reproduce and generate processes of making meaning and claiming identity in society. The study holds that polemic about the media's objectivity (or lack of it) and intentionality (to support white capital or black development) have taken on an exaggerated importance. News texts, it is argued, are cultural products that are formed in established practices and take their significance from metanarratives that have a long prior history; moreover, subjects of news stories easily communicate this dominant discursive consciousness to journalists. Narrative is not, however, of necessity the province of dominant consciousness; indeed, the need to make sense of the contradictions between practical consciousness and dominant narratives constitutes a major source of creativity and agency for journalists and news audiences alike.

The work comprises six theme-driven studies that develop an understanding of the relationship between narrative products and established journalistic practices. Throughout, attention is paid to journalistic agency, in the belief that news media are not homogeneous. Innovative practices highlight areas in which media is beginning to transform, and the pitfalls that attend such efforts.

Grounded in ethnographic research and textual analysis, the chapters incorporate ethnographic material from a four-month period of research at the *Natal Witness*, in the city of Pietermaritzburg, South Africa, as well as material from other newspapers in South Africa and

material provided by the writer's experience as a freelance journalist.

## **Findings**

Studies of the journalism of violent events in KwaZulu-Natal and on the East Rand demonstrate that newsroom practices encourage the reproduction of prior metanarratives of social schisms, even where those narratives may be radically inappropriate and counter to available evidence. The work argues that constraints placed on media during the State of Emergency years created structures of practice that took on a life of their own, inevitably reproducing the discursive structures that governed news texts generated by the apartheid regime. The case is made that 'the body-count story' constitutes a genre of news that is rooted in discursive structures.

Chapters three and four draw attention to resistance and transformation within the newsroom over the election period and the first few months of Mandela's government. It is argued that struggles over the cultural politics of news take the form of struggles over metanarratives of identities and the meaning of nationhood. This is most apparent in the work of journalist Khaba Mkhize, whose innovative approaches and unorthodoxies have seeded different practices, and alternative metanarratives.

The fifth chapter, on the storying of the crisis in Matatiele, focuses on the reportage of a conflict over the transformation of a small town. It demonstrates that media narratives of the event were shaped not by the strategised bias of a cabal, but by newsgathering practices that privileged the ideas of those who were resisting change - thus, journalistic practices made reportage a tool of one set of players in a conflict. The Matatiele story raises questions about the role of journalists in times of transition and conflict.

*Presence and absence*, chapter six, suggests that the ideology of objectivity encourages an approach to people and events that is premised in the notion of absence - that is, the idea that a journalist ought to eliminate any feelings of personal commitment to or responsibility for the people and events she or he writes about. This study demonstrates that the practical experience of many journalists is not one of spectatorship (or absence) but participation in the events on which they report: reflecting an ethic in which news is understood to be part of the communicative processes in society.

The final chapter reflects on the challenges of realist narrative in a multicultural, conflicted environment. This work demonstrates that many journalists regard narrative as

either mimetic or untrue. The material concludes an argument that journalists urgently require an understanding of narrative as a communicative device; that it is possible to write realist narrative without falling into the traps of cultural chauvinism.

# Acknowledgements

This work owes an intellectual and conceptual debt to Hannes Siebert and Melissa Baumann of the Media Peace Centre, whose work as media producers challenges conventional thinking about media, conflict and social transformation. Others to whom I am indebted include Khaba Mkhize; Raj Thamotheram of Action Aid; Gordon Adam and Lori Hieber of the Radio Partnership; Fiona Lloyd; Mandla Langa, Sheldon Himelfarb and Jonathan Deull of Common Ground Productions; Mark Kaplan and Jane Taylor who worked with me on the Media, Truth and Reconciliation Workshop; Ron Kraybill (formerly of the Centre for Conflict Resolution at UCT), Caesar Molebatsi of the Media Peace Centre, and Doug Stone of the Conflict Management Group (CMG) in Boston.

I owe a great deal to my seniors and colleagues at the Department of Social Anthropology, UCT: particularly supervisors David Coplan (now at Witwatersrand) and Pamela Reynolds; and fellow graduate students Sally Frankental, Fiona Ross, Patti Henderson and Stuart Sholto-Douglas. Inspiration along the way came via Steve Martin, David Bunn, Robert Thornton, George Marcus, Cheryl Uys, Gabeba Baderoon, Andre Wiessner, and Steve Robins. John and Jean Comaroff offered some valued advice on the Tokoloshe chapter for which I am grateful. Sixteen Wesley Street was a great place to stop, reflect and write with others who were thinking through similar issues: Lauren Muller, Jane van der Riet, Shaun Field, and Heather Hunt.

The *Natal Witness* and *Natal Witness Echo* deserve many thanks for allowing the intrusion of an anthropologist who was exploring the borders of her own profession while asking questions about another. Particular thanks go to editors John Conyngham and David Willers, and Derek Alberts, and to Khaba Mkhize, Yves Vandehaegen, Donna Hornby, Anthea Garman, and to Carol for sharing her desk and PC. I hope that this work might be of use. May creativity and innovation continue to be strengthened in your newsrooms.

Thanks to Ian Jennings, and the MacArthur and Garman families for accommodation in Pietermaritzburg, and, in Cape Town, enormous gratitude is due to Joan Campbell who

provided an uninterrupted refuge and uncountable meals in the final stretch.

Grateful thanks for financial assistance, at critical junctures, to the Mike Reid and staff at the ABC Branch of Standard Bank, and to my Dad, thanks to whom the last student loan is repaid.

The financial assistance of the Centre for Science Development (HSRC, South Africa) towards this research is hereby acknowledged. Opinions expressed in this work, or conclusions arrived at, are those of the author and are not to be attributed to the Centre for Science Development.

Research funding is also gratefully acknowledged from the Harry Oppenheimer Institute for African Studies, the University of Cape Town Research Committee, and the United Nations Education and Training Programme in Southern Africa.

Without a bequest from my god-parents, the late Ken and Alva Beetlestone of Tulip Avenue, Port Elizabeth, this work would have remained an idea. Bequests aside, their passion for books, travel and pursuing the unorthodox will remain an inspiration.

David Green: what can I say? The road continues.

Most important thanks go to my mother, Averil Fordred, who supported this work beyond the call of duty, and to my late father George Fordred who encouraged me so much in his last months.

# Abbreviations and Organisations

**ANC** - African National Congress

**Azapo** - Azanian People's Organisation

**Ecna** - East Cape News Agency

**Goldstone Commission** - A commission of enquiry into public violence headed by Judge Richard Goldstone, appointed by former State President FW de Klerk in 1991.

**Idasa** - Institute for Democracy in South Africa

**IFP** - Inkatha Freedom Party

**Inkatha** - Inkatha yeNkululeko Yesizwe, meaning 'national cultural liberation movement'. In the 70s and 80s, Inkatha defined itself as a non-political Zulu cultural organisation. It developed into the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) in 1990.

**KZP** - KwaZulu Police - police force associated with the territory known as KwaZulu, under apartheid rule; now incorporated into the South African Police.

**National Peace Secretariat** - A national network of locally-based committees set up prior to the 1994 elections, dedicated to mediation of community disputes and eradication of the causes of community conflict.

**NGO** - Non-governmental organisation

**PAC** - Pan-Africanist Congress

**Pagad** - People Against Gangsterism and Drugs

**RGH** - Radio Good Hope

**SABC** - South African Broadcasting Corporation

**SAP** - South African Police

**Sapa** - South African Press Association

**SAUJ** - South African Union of Journalists

**TRC** - Truth and Reconciliation Commission

**UDF** - United Democratic Front, an alliance of anti-apartheid organisations comprising mostly ANC supporters, prior to the unbanning of the ANC, from 1986 to 1990.

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# Introduction

*'History is accounted for, not as a narrative progression,  
but as shifts in meaning structures'*  
George Marcus and Michael Fischer, 1983:106

## The thesis

Across the globe in the 1990s, technological developments have vastly increased the reach of the media. More information is accessible to more people than ever before. Yet in the moment that technology is providing optimum conditions for depth of analysis and diversity of opinions, a market-driven approach to news media products has institutionalised an imperative to dumb-down; to sensationalise; to create news texts that name and gaze at provocative detail while leaving perceptual categories of audiences intact (cf. Bourdieu 1998:44ff).

Simultaneously, the epistemological grounds of the news industry have shifted greatly in the post-sixties decades. Ostensibly rooted firmly in modernist realism and objectivity, the truth-claims of journalism have been radically challenged by post-modernism and post-colonialism - ideas that have generated a vast number of books and scholarly papers demonstrating that news journalism is not neutral, impartial, non-political, or gender-free.

In the late nineties, then, the news industry is beleaguered by internal contradictions: in the concepts underlying the trade in news, and in the routines of daily practice. Almost all journalists, for example, agree that objectivity is impossible, but continue to use the concept as an evaluative tool for writing, and a guideline for practice - seeking, for example, the opposed opinions of 'experts' in the belief that polemic will create balance. Journalists will also agree that there cannot be a single truth about an event, but a worthy news text is still considered to be one that takes a single angle on an event; that is, to make of an event something of significance to readers in one particular respect. In these ways and many others, commitment to realism and balance entrenches a particular ideological perspective, precisely because 'balance' and 'reality' are established by consensus about the nature of life and society.

In the mid-nineties, South African journalism became a field in which the agreements

that structured practice were challenged. As the nation's narrative changed, news narratives adapted to new values attached to race and gender; and news practices had to change, too. Point of view became an issue, as did language (the terrorists became cadres), and the selection of experts. At an organisational level, many South African news organisations attempted to find different colours of voices and writers - with the promise of subaltern perspectives. But none of these changes were easily implemented, nor were they without many layers of contradiction. In Cape Town, the *Cape Times*' coverage of Pagad became eloquent testimony to the reality that stereotypic images of Islam fundamentalism may flourish under a Muslim editor (see Baderoon 1998). In my research, one Indian journalist in KwaZulu-Natal told me angrily that she refused to cover 'Indian community issues', arguing that she was employed to be a journalist, not an Indian.

It seems that at every level of change in South African media, managers and journalists had simplified the relationship between media and society, assuming that by changing social attitudes within news organisations, that racism would be eliminated. What everyone underestimated was the extent to which news as a field was structured by a set of practices and dispositions that would continue to shape news production in powerful but non-visible ways.

Pierre Bourdieu's *On Television* (1998), is an essay on what he terms the 'structural corruption' within the news industry. He argues that the structuring conditions of the industry (such as the compulsion to cater to mass audiences) create radical contradictions of practice:

like other fields, the journalistic field is based on a set of shared assumptions and beliefs, which reach beyond differences of position and opinion. These assumptions operate within a particular set of mental categories; they reside in a characteristic relationship to language, and are visible in everything implied by a formulation such as 'it's just made for television'. These are what supplies the principle that determines what journalists select both within the social reality and among symbolic productions as a whole. There is no discourse (scientific analysis, political manifesto, whatever) that does not have to face this trial of journalistic selection in order to catch the public eye. The effect is censorship, which journalists practice without even being aware of it. They retain only the things capable of interesting them and 'keeping their attention', which means things that fit their categories and mental grid; and they reject as insignificant or remain indifferent to symbolic expressions that ought to reach the population as a whole (Bourdieu 1998:47).

The study of media in a time of social change makes it possible to see the lacunae in many models of media, most particularly those models of media in society that rely on a conceptualisation of power in the newsroom as editors' 'power over' journalists' texts rather than journalists 'power to' innovate. Recent studies of resistance, innovation, creativity,

imagination and subversion (such as Abu-Lughod (1991) and Scott (1990), among many others), make it possible to understand journalists as agents who have choices, rather than individuals who operate within a sphere of power relationships over which they have no control. What is so valuable in Bourdieu's approach is the depiction of media as a field of institutionalised imperatives that compel functionaries to choose a course of action out of a very narrow set of options: a view which allows for resistance, innovation and creativity, and accounts for many of the contradictions between practical and discursive consciousness in the industry.

This study seeks to explore media at a time when the nation seeks to redefine itself as one in which power and wealth are no longer distributed by race; and a time in which journalists had to contend with a heightened awareness that the standard practices of news gathering and news writing affirm and generate precepts about race and identity.

The focus of study is news narratives and practices as products of both societal and institutional fields of power. The discussion begins with an assessment of the debates in the years 1990 to 1997, and a study of a moment of violence on the East Rand in 1990 - the reportage of which crystallised the challenges facing South African journalists.

The second part of the study is based on fieldwork at the *Natal Witness*, South Africa's only independent daily paper, and a newsroom that had become known internationally for its efforts to cover the war in KwaZulu-Natal. From that period of study I offer case studies of innovation, seeking to understand efforts to transform narrative and practice - and the success or failure of these efforts to refigure the news.

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The impetus for this work came from my experiences as a journalist. After graduating in Anthropology in 1990, I began to work as a features journalist for a magazine called *Cross Times*, a publication that sought to generate dialogue about apartheid and social change in the church-going sector of South Africa. My first day of work was February 2; my first assignment: covering the opening of Parliament when De Klerk announced that Mandela would be freed and apartheid laws scrapped. The right wing was full of sound and fury after De Klerk's speech; in a three-week assignment in Johannesburg and Pretoria I tried to understand the cultural sources of their wrath, and fear. Though a handful seemed capable of

doing damage, my impression was that the right was misrepresented by the media. The test of good anthropology, which I believe to be whether those whom one claims to represent can see themselves in your representation even if they disagree with your interpretation, was comprehensively failed by most newspapers.

What was missing in most media reports, in my view, was the perplexed expressions I saw on the faces of right wingers I had gotten to meet in suburbs and churches. These were the people who had believed apartheid's ideologues, and who had made profound and deep investments in that ideology. They had done tours of duty in the army, their identity was constructed against the bulwark of race, anchored in a belief in the divinely-ordained inequality of dark and light. Of course it was never an impossible challenge to step outside of those commitments and renounce them: the Braam Fischers and Verwoerd juniors were testimony to that. Courage to step outside the belief in benevolent racism was, nonetheless, sorely lacking.

In the months that followed, the right was a big story. Many journalists wrote about them, taking at face-value the expedient rhetoric of their would-be leaders. It would not overstate the case to say that the media assisted in the creation of the right by marginalising those who resisted the chameleonism of the times. A more insightful approach would have looked seriously at their fears, recognising that in almost every other white South African, similar fears of social change lurked unattended. It was easier, though, to vilify an evil twin than to explore the right as a group that had taken to a conclusion the ideas about race as social divide that were thoroughly imbricated in South Africanness. Binarism was a hard narrative habit to break, and a painful one, as breaking it required a personal investment and a willingness to confront self, experience, and reality.

Between that research trip and publication of the article came several months of hardship as *Cross Times Magazine* ran into funding trouble. During the months of waiting for publication, deputy editor Melissa Baumann ran training seminars on journalism and conflict. The central question she raised was whether media could exacerbate or reduce social tensions. These became a series of three-day workshops known as the Mediation Project for Journalists, with journalists from across the country in attendance.

Publication date arrived at last, one sunny winter day in July 1990. In the weeks that followed, responses were a lesson in the articulation of media and identity. I will never forget the piles of magazines returned by Christian bookshops with covering letters that asserted we

were doing the work of the devil. Responses from 'struggle sectors' were far more encouraging, but black readership, by and large, had no money, and consequently little appeal to advertisers, many of whom spent on our pages out of corporate social responsibility accounts rather than marketing budgets. For these reasons, distribution had to be *gratis*. It was a powerful lesson on the relative powerlessness of media to effect change; on the reality that it was almost impossible to produce a publication that challenged readers to think about the politicisation of daily life and practice, precisely because those were grounded in identity. People wanted, from news media products, an affirmation of their personal intrinsic goodness. They did not want the cornerstones of their identity to be moved. And advertisers, in as much as some were prepared to show black faces in middle-class dress, were reluctant revolutionaries.

After two more editions, *Cross Times* ceased publishing and in time the Mediation Project for Journalists became the Media Peace Centre. In 1998, the MPC continues to train journalists to cover conflict constructively, and takes on media projects that seek to facilitate conflict resolution.

I moved into the book trade, but the pull to engage with questions of media, conflicts and social change, remained. Two years later I resigned my editing position to become a student and freelance journalist, beginning this study.

As a freelancer, I found that I grappled with old ways of structuring stories. One feature I wrote in early 1995 went through eight drafts as *Sidelines* editor Denis Beckett cajoled, teased, and goaded a 'non-struggle' metanarrative into being. 'You sound like a spoilt rich white liberal kid,' he said in response to the first draft which had contrasted white and black experiences of a river in flood.

In working on that article I began to understand what many South African journalists were grappling with on a daily basis. Blacks could not unquestioningly be represented as homogeneous. The racial binary lost its resonance with experience, making claims to represent events truthfully, more complex. Writing about racial difference became a politically loaded activity, and many newsrooms developed codes for race (mentioning township names, for example, was an easy way to say a subject was black without saying so). In short, events no longer stood well their telling in the easy binary of race. The development of new insights into society and newly politicised sensitivities to race and difference demanded that new meanings be made of events. With that came a fresh appreciation of different angles on old themes.

Feature writers made a good living, for a while, in finding new ways to tell of the familiar and the hidden: like Dennis Beckett, Kaiser Nyatumba, Donna Hornby, and Khaba Mkhize. In Donna's case, she tended to give away what she earned to the subjects of her features, and eventually quit journalism to become a rural development worker.

The re-weaving of the fabric of meaning was a fascinating process to watch. An event such as a farm killing, in order to be of significance to readers, needed to have a particular meaning attached to it that somehow confirmed to the readers of the paper that despite the murders, community existed among local farming families. Meaning in a news story of the murder of a farmer and his wife, came from the affirmations of the 'knowable community' (the phrase is Raymond Williams') of farmers, police, and family, that the deed was a tragedy and the killers (assumed to have been from the unknowable community - viz. blacks) would be hunted down and punished. The story fits into the classic narrative schema of a racial binary:

- black v. white;
- unknown community v. knowable community;
- constitution of subjectivity: worst fears of 'them' confirmed; best hopes for 'us' affirmed in a story of community solidarity and heroism.

It was a powerful story with deep roots in the cultural politics of white South Africa; a tale that Nadine Gordimer had developed in the novel *The Conservationist* (1978). As a news angle the metanarrative was a powerful one for white audiences, connecting with a hegemonic notion of Europeans as the civilisers, under threat from Africa's intrinsic anarchy.

Journalism in apartheid South Africa had drawn heavily on a metanarrative of the struggle between anarchy and culture: a metanarrative that resonates strongly with nineteenth century poet Matthew Arnold's writings about England in *Culture and Anarchy*, at a time when '... that profound sense of settled order and security, without which a society like ours cannot live and grow at all, seems to be beginning to threaten us with taking its departure' (Arnold (1869) 1993:89).

As much of white South Africa began to realise, in the early 1990s, that the continued political separateness of white and black had unaffordable economic consequences, the categories of culture and anarchy took on a new content in news narratives: racists and non-racists. Racists like Eugene TerreBlanche were among the anarchists of the moment, and became headline figures.

Journalism in the late 1990s has not completely abandoned the trope; indeed, it continues to surface in many news texts which are made meaningful in a metanarrative in which the nation steadily decays into anarchy brought on by crime, corruption, and the inclusion of African tradition in public life.

This study examines journalists' narrative strategies in a time of transition. It is not intended to be exhaustive. Rather, I have tried to document richly a few cases in which I have observed journalists grappling with hegemony, and experimenting with new practices. I have also examined situations in which for want of self examination, habitual ways of doing journalism generated reports that eventually appeared to be false precisely because the power of truth was becoming detached from hegemony at the same time (see chapters 2 and 5). My interest throughout is in the narrative strategies that structure interpretations of events, and the relationship between narrative strategies and the imagination, construction and reconstruction of audiences. I am most particularly interested in the work of journalists who are innovators: those who, within the profession, have found ways to write against hegemony, for it seems to me that if media is to find a way out of its current crisis of contradiction, it will be through the imagination and ingenuity of journalists who negotiate their way through the prevailing field of power that defines what it is that media do, and the courage of editors who give them the space to do so.

## **The projects in the study**

With the desire to improve my journalism I had returned to anthropology, the ethnographic method, and the critiques of writing culture. My first port of call as a researcher was the *Natal Witness* where assistant editor Khaba Mkhize worked. We had met at the Mediation Project for Journalist workshops and I had been astonished at efforts to use narrative as a peace-making strategy in reporting the war in KwaZulu-Natal. At the *Witness*, I found other journalists similarly occupied in in-depth research, seeking new narratives, and experimenting with ways of separating truth from hegemony.

My next stop was the Media Peace Centre, where much of my work involved developing training material for journalists. The brief was to explore the articulation of media and society; I also began to look at at media and development, and media and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

At roughly the same time, the television arm of the Media Peace Centre, Ubuntu Film

and TV, was developing the series *Africa: Search for Common Ground* together with the Washington-based NGO, Search for Common Ground. When the series began, I was tasked with adapting it for radio: a job that meant reviewing rushes, working intensively with scriptwriters and approving the studio work. The aim of the series was both straightforward and complex: straightforward in telling different kinds of tales of events in Africa; complex in that Africa suffers an inordinate number of wars, and peace-making efforts were not really part of the briefs of foreign correspondents. Generating new kinds of narratives was tricky - it was tempting to veer into simplistic peace propaganda; tough to communicate the complexity of peacemaking in a good story where popular narrative conventions demanded heroes and villains. Nonetheless by the end of June 1997, thirteen half-hour programmes told twenty-four stories of efforts aimed at fostering reconciliation, justice, or peace-building across the continent.

Media conferences and training workshops were many in the years of study; I attended as many as I could in an effort to stay in touch with wider debates on media and social change in South Africa, and meet as many journalists as possible. In the course of 1994 I coordinated media monitoring over the election period in the Western Cape for the Media Monitoring Project. I attended the International Press Institute meeting in Cape Town in 1994; the Symposium on Political Tolerance and the Media in 1993; three Institute for the Advancement of Journalism workshops - two on radio in 1993, one on journalistic ethics in 1997. In 1996 I was privileged to represent the Media Peace Centre at an international conference on the role of radio in development, followed by a workshop at the BBC on the possibilities for radio drama to teach conflict resolution skills in Afghanistan. A workshop for community radio journalists on covering gang-related violence in Cape Town offered some interesting insights into the role of narrative and radio drama in lowering tensions between conflicting groups. In the course of 1996-7, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was high on most journalists' agendas, and I attended two workshops for journalists covering the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in 1996 and 1997. And, of course, as a media consumer I could follow many of the debates on media that were held in public as media organisations underwent a tortuous process of dissent and change, disaster and success.

## **Research methods**

Throughout the research, I wore two hats: that of journalist, and that of media researcher.

At the *Witness*, intensive research was much easier, primarily because I was there wearing the hat of a researcher. Early on in research at the *Witness* I learned that hiding my own opinions about journalism was (a) impossible and (b) going to stultify the kinds of dialogue I was needing to engage in with journalists. I gave up trying to be an impartial conversationalist who held her own opinions close to her chest. Relationships immediately became a whole lot easier: it was easier to converse, to interlocute, to learn.

Barbara Christian argues that cultural critics need to 'let go of their distanced and false stance of objectivity and ... expose their own point of view - the tangle of background, influences, political perspectives, training, situations that helped form and inform their interpretations' (cited by Elspeth Probyn 1993:138). I found this approach to be far more helpful. Once my opinions on journalism (particularly the role of journalism in situations of conflict) were out of the closet I enjoyed spirited discussions on the pretense of objectivity in 'the field'.

Ironically this discovery was a belated one and came only came out of sheer exhaustion. I had spent two months (December 1994-January 1995) working at the newsroom - often late into the evening, weekends included - and going back to my flat at night to develop the notes I'd taken, complete freelance features, and plan undergraduate anthropology lectures in order to earn a living. By the end of January I was exhausted; by mid-February, ill. The energy to maintain a semblance of distanced objectivity; to do all the analysis in the privacy of one's head instead of in dialogue simply wasn't there. That way of working is lonely - and unbearably awkward - but once I had learned what it was to be fully present 'in the field', I became much closer to several journalists. 'Detached objectivity' as a strategy for qualitative research is counter-productive: one is searching for humanness, and strangers' humanity is encountered only when one is fully present to them. The realisation resonated with Khaba's philosophy of *ubuntu* journalism: a journalist (or anthropologist) is a person through other people.

At conferences, negotiating the right to make observations for the purposes of research was not always easy. Workshop discussions are often possible only when there is an agreement among participants that discussion is not for publication. Where that hurdle was encountered, my options were to assure anonymity and promise to check afterwards whether I had the right to quote someone. The other option was to omit reference to the conversation entirely and try to find a situation where its dynamics were expressed, and write about that instead.

At the Media Peace Centre and *Africa: Search for Common Ground*, my primary role

was that of employee. The use of detailed observations of conversations and dynamics constituted an ethical dilemma which I resolved by choosing to limit my research to productions and projects. While details of debates and dynamics could have produced extremely interesting chapters, it would have compromised my relationships with colleagues and superiors. Analysis of this work does not appear in these pages but contributed much to my experience of media and conflict, mediation, and the complexities of narrative at the *Witness* and elsewhere.

### **On note-taking and recording**

Much of this thesis consists of dialogue, and reconstructions of conversations from the copious notes I made most evenings while researching at the *Natal Witness*. I used a tape recorder freely at the beginning of my research (particularly during my first visit in February / March), and again towards the end of my stay in February 1995 when I was possessed of a panic that I ought to take home more tapes. But I felt that the presence of the machine tended to introduce an additional element of performance into conversations, and I preferred the genuinely relaxed conversations I became used to when working without it. Besides, conversations themselves were more focused and to the point when I was not worrying about recording levels, background noise, battery life, tape space, and whether my windshield was strong enough to deter the prevailing winds from confusing the microphone. In the period that I would cast as the most productive in terms of generating insights into processes and ideas, I abandoned the tape recorder, and concentrated instead on thorough note-taking as soon as I could after conversations.

### **The writing**

While 'the media' have proved themselves capable of many of the same errors as anthropologists - generalisation, essentialism, lack of reflexivity, failure to be aware of the structuring power of narrative, failure to account for the power dynamics implicit in researcher-subject relationships - it is also true that much media scholarship replicates these errors. The concepts 'the media', 'journalists', 'the press' are subject to essentialising, generalising, and homogenising practices by anthropologists, politicians, media theorists, and often by journalists themselves.

A key aim in this writing, then, is to highlight dialogues within the newsroom about shifts in journalism, and to note the range and variety of opinions on the subject. Nonetheless I was amazed to discover how easy it is as a researcher to generalise, homogenise and essentialise: a first draft of a chapter came back to me from the newsroom, in September 1995, with the comment that I had done just that. Somewhat taken aback by the obviousness of my error, I reworked the chapter.

I believe that anthropologists are ethically bound to make their work accessible to the subjects of their study. This work is written for scholars and for journalists, and with that audience in mind I have attempted throughout to write in accessible terms while dealing with key concepts in the contemporary humanities. To write in fashionable obfuscations would be a disservice to the journalists with whom I worked, and to the scholars whose concepts I use as tools in the study. There is increasing pressure on scholars in the humanities to demonstrate the worth of their work in broader society. I believe the first step is to write in ways that are readily understood.

## **An overview: Part One**

The first chapter of the study is *The Big Debate: The cultural politics of news*. It sets out key issues in journalism, in media scholarship, narrative studies and anthropology that inform the rest of the dissertation. I argue that debates over freedom of speech have taken on a misplaced importance. While I believe that freedom of the press is a cornerstone of democracy, at the same time I believe that the debate can be a red herring when the larger questions of media diversity are overlooked, when responsibility is ignored, and when it is not conceded that news is a cultural product, constructed in terms of cultural politics that shape the very naming of events as news.

The vital and overlooked element of news is that news reports constitute a narrative of events and a metanarrative of meaning and identity. The process of transforming social acts or events into story is a productive field of enquiry. Narrative offers patterning, and as such accommodates the inchoate and senseless into prevailing notions of order (cf. Thornton 1994).

I suggest that this has several implications for our understanding of the functioning of media in society. If we begin to conceptualise journalists as narrators, or storytellers, we can understand the articulation between personal identity (life story) and the kinds of stories a journalist is able to create with particular events and people; in this light the discussion on

journalists' subjectivity within the field of power finds new possibilities. Similarly, exploration of identity as narrative in nature has many possibilities for the way we understand the creation of audiences and groups within society. If media trades in narratives, it is possible to understand that media trades in both information and identity. Thirdly, once one conceptualises news as a cultural product, one gains insight into the processes through which audiences accept or resist news narratives that herald social transformation.

Chapter two - *Pangas and Propaganda on the East Rand: Apartheid discourse and journalism, August 1990* - develops the concept of news as narrative and explores the narration of events at a critical moment in the constitution of the nation. A sudden and shocking spree of violence - apparently motivated by ethnic differences - overtook townships east of Johannesburg. At Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) hearings in 1997 it emerged that the violence had been instigated by government agents who sought to generate anarchy so that the outgoing regime would be seen as a civilising presence; an impartial mediator. Grappling to make sense of apparently motiveless violence, journalists shifted metanarratives rapidly; in the first four weeks of fighting four massive shifts of explanation are evident. The dominant one, however, was that the violence was an eruption of a long-brewing Zulu-Xhosa war. These narratives, I argue, entrenched ethnicity in the public imagination, and by sheer force of repetition became powerful enough to drown out the views of opposition journalists. And, I suggest, by casting the causal narrative so wide as to directly implicate all Zulus and Xhosas, as well as residents and hostel dwellers in East Rand townships, the state attempted to make it impossible for black South Africans not to choose sides. It was a savage divide-and-rule policy, ably extended in the violence of narrative. The state's efforts to manipulate narrative, described here, inscribe the legacy of South African newsrooms as sites of struggle.

Against this background of nation and narrative, the study moves to the *Natal Witness*, based in Pietermaritzburg, near Durban, in the province of KwaZulu-Natal.

## **Overview: Part Two**

A hitching post stands on the pavement outside the main entrance of the *Natal Witness*. Dating back to the last century when correspondents would come flying in on horseback and the company employed staff to tend the horses, the post is now surrounded by parking meters that journalists pay receptionists to feed when up against a deadline.

I passed the post every day, going in and out of the newsroom, and over time it became symbolic of the history of the paper, of the extent to which technologies of news have changed, and the extent to which the stories told by the paper's horseback correspondents differed from the stories that come to the paper by car, cell-phone and modem. Or did they?

There are several histories to tell of this institution that still occupies the building it moved into in 1879. The official history (see Haw 1998) is a proud one, and there are many good reasons for pride. The country's only remaining independent daily newspaper, it became known by international correspondents as a reliable source during the war in Natal. It has a proud legal history: during the State of Emergency, its editor and journalists took great risks, and fought many legal battles.

The history of ownership is an interesting one. Founded by the Buchanan family in 1846, the *Witness* is a family-run paper, presently owned by the Craib family of Pietermaritzburg. At the time of fieldwork, the Managing Director of the company was Stuart Craib, son of the elderly Chairman of the Board, Desmond Craib.

*Mr Craib: All my father's time, and all my time, and I'm sure all Stuart's time we've been very proud of the Natal Witness, and it means a lot to the family to retain that ownership. Of course it's quite diversified now - there are many branches of the family now - my wife and I had six children, and they're each shareholders, and then there's the representative of the Davis family - she married a Francis - and her sister who lives in England: they're also shareholders - it's not all Craib family, but we have the majority of the shares. And none of the shareholders have any leaning towards disposing of it because we're very proud of it. We're proud of our independent tradition, and we think that Pietermaritzburg and the Midlands of Natal would be the losers if we lost that independence.*

*Lesley: Was [founder] David Dale Buchanan one of your grandparents?*

*Mr Craib: No, no. No relation: he founded the newspaper, and after that the Davis family took over and they ran it for many years. And many, at least two if not three generations of their family managed it. And then my father came into the picture - he was an accountant in Pietermaritzburg, he came into the picture somewhere in the 1920s, I think as the external secretary of the company. He didn't work in this building, he ran his accountancy practice, but the organisation was very small then and he was the secretary of this company way back in the 1920s. Well then later on*

*when he retired he retained one job which was at the Natal Witness which he did more or less until his death in 1963. Then I took over and now Stuart's taken over from me. And I can't tell you what's going to happen next! (chuckles).*

Then there's the history of the *Natal Witness Echo*, a free-sheet pullout designed for the black market, that was founded in 1978. Distributed every Thursday in the *Witness* and separately, *Echo* had a circulation approaching 60 000 at the time of my research, almost double that of the *Witness* which moved 27000 copies regularly. Though a profitable paper, *Echo* was staffed by a small number of mostly young, black recruits to the profession who occupied a small corner of the *Witness* newsroom and vied with *Witness* journalists to get a breaking story.

*Mr Craib: Well Echo started - it's called a free-sheet, we don't have subscription for it, it's given away free, but many more are printed than are printed for the Natal Witness - but we print - I forget what the figure is now - maybe 30, 40 000 - over 30 000 maybe 40 or 50 000 Echos I don't know and they're snapped up by people. We didn't charge for Echo initially, because we knew black people couldn't afford it, and we wanted to get a paper which was of interest to black people. And it had two functions, in our mind, and I believe it still performs those functions. We wanted it to be of interest to blacks but to contain what blacks wanted and publish it is a way that whites would also be able to read it - those whites who were interested in what blacks' problems were. And we believed that it certainly fulfilled that function and it continues to. There was a lot of opposition to it in the white community when we first started to publish Echo because people thought we were 'going black' and it was before its time and all that sort of thing. But we persevered and I believe it's achieved that: I think a lot of white people in Pietermaritzburg who'd never understood - of course many more understand now, and will, increasingly, under the new government - but lots of white people had no interest in blacks: they acted as their servants - they said good night to them when they knocked off but they didn't mind where they went or what their problems were, or even where their home was. I think Echo started to interest quite a few white people in those matters. Blacks were talking about what they were interested in, how keen they are on sport, and that sort of thing. And that's where it is today; we wonder now whether we shouldn't charge for it, but as an independent paper, not part*

*of the Natal Witness. But what happened on the advertising side of it was that initially we struggled like anything to get any kind of advertising in it; now it's self-supporting, on its own advertising. It has sufficient advertising to be an independent newspaper, but we haven't decided to make any change yet.*

A business history could be written: the company has profitably turned to textbook printing on its presses. Ownership of its presses is probably the main reason that the company has been able to survive as an independent. Elsewhere in South Africa, the cost of newspaper printing has broken many of the small independents.

One could write an architectural history too. Though the building is the original one made of the red brick for which Maritzburg and surrounds are famed, the building has been extended several times and has an eighties-facade with curved iron sheets to provide shade, and tinted windows.

On the walls of the newsroom reception are huge block-mounted reproductions of the earliest surviving copies of the *Witness* from the 1870s - and the *Witness* of those three days in April 1994 that marked the country's first non-racial elections. The difference between them is startling. The older newspaper has as its lead story (if one might even call it a lead: stories were not significantly differentiated) the arrival of a ship from England in Durban's waters. News and advertisement were not distinct: the list of goods on board runs over several columns, and includes prices. By contrast, the 1994 newspapers announce the arrival of the rainbow nation. Juxtaposed, the layout, narrative, and content are a vivid illustration of the reality that which journalism is a cultural product that is thoroughly imbricated in the culture and politics of the moment. Yet the professional ideology of journalism remains founded on the belief that news texts are shaped by the goals of objectivity and neutrality within a broad framework of liberal belief. Cultural politics are elusive, implicit and difficult to articulate. I asked Desmond Craib about whether the owners of the paper have devised an editorial policy. His answer was no.

*Mr Craib: We don't have a laid down editorial policy, er, when an editor is appointed here we try to appoint an editor who, from what we know of him, is a man who's roughly in line with the political thoughts of the family, which of course one knows and understands even if they don't all agree, there is usually a common denominator about how our family feels, and we've never had a split in the family, or even in the*

*shareholders. Perhaps the real answer to your question is that we are small enough for it to have been possible to retain family control over it.*

Thus, while there is no explicit editorial policy, there is a very specific structure of feeling, in institutional practices, and in ways of speaking, that guides the selection and promotion of policymakers. The discursive framework is established by implicit agreements within a family, and within that framework, editors are able to make decisions. I do not want to suggest that that framework is prescriptive: the editorial decisions of editor Richard Steyn during the State of Emergency in the late 1980s were more brave than many of his peers elsewhere in the country. Nonetheless, editorial possibilities are shaped within a very particular institutional commitment. In a feature article on the *Natal Witness*, published in November 1994 to mark his new editorship, John Conyngham writes of change, and the need for a newspaper to reflect a changing society; and the particular challenges of producing a newspaper for an extremely diverse constituency. Writing of the need for change, he underscores the newspaper's commitment to objectivity; the need to play a watchdog role guided by the ethics of constructive engagement; the need to seek truth and minimise harm. He concludes,

But in essence the *Witness* is a humanitarian paper, placing above everything else the dignity and sanctity of human life. It is not party-politically aligned but champions generosity, tolerance, freedom, the rule of law, and opposes authoritarianism of any sort. These ideals may be called liberal, but liberal is too narrow a definition. They are the essentials for civilised life. And they are worth defending because without them there would be no society as we know it. (*Natal Witness*, November 1 1994, p.9)

It is true that without social morality there is anarchy. Yet it is precisely in the last phrase - 'society as we know it' - in which the problem lies. For the meaning of the words, and the nature of their outworking, is established by social consensus, and the practices that they purport to define are heavily contested. For example: the rule of law. As a principle, it is unquestionable. But as a farm worker who has been evicted (legally) after working on a farm for forty years, what is the rule of law? Similarly, who will tolerate and who will be tolerated? I am not making an argument for a naive ethical relativism in which 'anything goes', but rather I am arguing that what appear to be sound principles on which to base news, will of necessity be heavily contested in their interpretation. Writing on social constructions of war, Elaine Scarry notes that while human beings take pride in being the single species that relentlessly recreates the world, generates fictions and builds culture, our fictions 'may be

unselfconsciously entered into as though [they] were a naturally occurring given of the world' (Scarry 1985:128), and notes that for most, the undoing of these cultural fictions as a result of war or personal crisis, is a 'devastating and self-repudiating process' that is resisted fiercely.

The contest over the right to moral authority in South Africa played itself out in news pages and newsrooms, every day, and continues to do so. Lakela Kaunda was one of seven assistant editors of the newspaper in 1995, and had covered violence in the region for a decade. She was often vociferous in arguing for news to be covered differently, she spoke, in one interview, about the complexities of structuring news stories:

*Lakela: [Writing news] becomes very difficult because you know that you are representing this 'voice' of the black community, but you have to present it in such a way that it is understandable to the white majority and that you feel you are alienated from the message you want to put across. You long for a situation where you would still be representing the same voice but you are writing for what would be a non-racial audience. Which doesn't happen at the moment. You're still writing for roughly middle-aged, white subscribers. Predominantly males. So you never forget that. I think that's one thing that makes us not forget that we are black journalists. Because we are always - the minute you walk in - okay - your community expects that of you and so does the newspaper, even if they don't say it explicitly but you know that they expect you to feel that gap. [...]*

*Lesley: What is the story you tell most often in your writing?*

*Lakela: Hmmm - the story that I tell most often - I wonder - I think the running theme in all my stories has been to proclaim to the world what happens in my world; what happens to my people. Explaining the intricacies of oppression, its effects on people, but most of all something which I think I haven't done as much as I would have wanted - to - to try and explain the violence, its effects on them, and how helpless and powerless they have felt, and how useless the security forces were and their involvement as well in perpetuating people's miseries. Fanning violence and so on. I think that is the main story.*

The chapters in Part Two focus on the cultural politics of resistance and transformation within the newsroom, that is, the efforts of members of the news team to transform routine texts and practices, and make sense of different frameworks of consensus. Discussion focuses on

narratives and practices of journalism, and material is drawn largely, though not completely, from the *Natal Witness*.

The first chapter in this section, chapter three, is *Journalism and body-counting in KwaZulu-Natal*. The discussion follows the emergence of what came to be known as body count reporting in the KwaZulu-Natal war from 1987 to 1996, arguing that constraints placed on media during the State of Emergency years created structures of practice that took on a life of their own. The political reporter of the *Witness*, Fred Kockett, who reported some of the most intense battles in the area in the late eighties, took an approach that was lauded (and relied on) by many international correspondents. Despite his relative successes, he resigned from the profession, tired of the intensity of the struggle to change the practices that so relentlessly configured stories in ways that he found offensive. I argue that 'the body count story' constitutes a genre of news and, drawing from the work of Tsvetan Todorov, suggest genre is rooted in discursive structures.

In the chapter I pursue attempts to destabilise the body count narrative in early 1995. The efforts of several journalists were laudable, but innovations were unable to be sustained for long. In fact, some senior journalists were quite cynical about change. 'Change only ever lasts two weeks,' one commented. Nonetheless, much effort was put into developing innovative news practices in early 1995, and some interesting texts were produced in the course of the experiment - though they too were unsustainable.

Alternative perspectives did emerge in the paper, and found ways to sustain themselves over time. This is most particularly apparent in the work of journalist Khaba Mkhize, whose innovative approaches and unorthodoxies form the subject of chapter four.

*Khaba Mkhize: Narrative and journalism in a public space* is the fourth chapter, and it explores Mkhize's approach to the coverage of a massacre of thirteen young villagers, after a weekend editorial writer had constructed the incident as the fault of parents. The chapter includes much of his reflection on the structuring conditions of journalism and the function of narratives in the public sphere, and explores patterns in his narratives. He introduces debates about the power of narrative to shape perception, and the power of the journalist to play a role in escalation or de-escalation of conflict. These themes are the focus of the next two chapters.

Chapter five, *The course of true narrative never did run smooth: The storying of the crisis in Matatiele*, focuses on the reportage of a conflict over the transformation of a small town called Matatiele on the borders of the Eastern Cape, KwaZulu-Natal and Lesotho. The

chapter explores the way in which media narratives of the event were shaped by news gathering practices that privileged the ideas of those who were resisting change - and who had named the events a national crisis when it was nothing of the sort. Thus, journalistic practices made reportage a tool of one set of players in a conflict. But, when the situation began to be understood by journalists, the glitz of a conspiracy narrative became as dull as the streets of Las Vegas in daylight - and in consequence the story disappeared from headlines. One enterprising journalist at the *Witness* had figured out the situation earlier than her colleagues in Johannesburg, yet her story had no impact on the crisis as it had gathered a certain media momentum. The 'smooth' narrative sold papers; the rough details of daily life and its complexity - and closer approximation to truth - was not headline material.

The dynamics of pack journalism, which creates what Bourdieu calls the circular circulation of news (1998:25), made it impossible for an innovative story to gain ground. The crisis, therefore, continued in the media until it wore itself out, and the dry and dusty details of ordinariness brought the narrative to closure.

The Matatiele story raises questions about the role of journalists in times of transition and conflict, and the possibilities that innovative practice might generate a creative and constructive articulation between media and democratic processes. Chapter six, *Presence and absence: Journalists as facilitators of change* develops these themes, focusing on journalists whose presence helped to pre-empt, mediate or defuse conflicts associated with change and transformation. In three cases under study, journalists acted as change agents, facilitating or mediating conflicts that accompanied changes in the arrangement of power. The studies suggest that journalists frequently develop a deeply personal involvement in the lives of the people whose stories they write. Yet such practices are often frowned upon in the media as 'non-objective'. Drawing from the work of media anthropologist Mark Pedelty (1995) I suggest that the ideology of objectivity encourages an approach to people and events that is premised in the idea of absence - that is, the idea that a journalist ought to eliminate any feelings of personal commitment to or responsibility for the people and events she or he writes about.

The journalists whose work forms the subject of discussion were at some level flouting the conventions of non-involvement. One journalist - Denzyl Janneker - facilitated change out of a desire to be helpful; another, Donna Hornby, did so as a mother relating to mothers and out of a passion for change and a belief that the practices of journalism ought to change; the

third, Khaba Mkhize, had long ago made up his own rules for journalism and acted as a mediator out of a conviction that an injustice had been committed and that he was in a position to right it. The nature of journalists' ethics, then, are shaped by the political architecture of the moment. When discourses change, practices are challenged. Because journalists work with conflicts and change almost constantly, they can be valuable resources to people who are grappling with new consciousness and changing subjectivities.

My seventh and final chapter returns to the question of narrative structures in a context of change, this time focusing on assumptions and value-judgements implicit in tales of Tokoloshes and other monsters in regional folklore, like the Mamlambo, which is a magical and dangerous snake that can bring great riches. The chapter is titled *Knots in the Tokoloshe Tale: Epistemology, news and hegemony* and through the discussion I aim to draw together a number of ideas on the cultural location of journalistic epistemology, as expressed in practice and narrative.

Stories of folktales and folk panics have traditionally fallen into the joke space at the base of the front page, but in 1994-5 they began to be elevated to the status of true crime stories, with consequent epistemological dilemmas that were not easily resolved. Folktales and folk-panics bring into sharp focus the cultural politics of objectivist news narratives, and present one of the greatest challenges for journalists who grapple with change.

**Part I**

# **Reporting South Africa in the 1990s**

# **The Big Debate: The Cultural Politics of News**

*It's not a matter of emancipating truth from every system of power (which would be a chimera, for truth is already power) but of detaching the power of truth from the forms of hegemony, social, economic and cultural, within which it operates at the present time.*

*Michel Foucault 1980:133*

## **South Africa, 1993: The Symposium on Political Tolerance and the Media**

As South Africa prepared for its first democratic election, a high-powered conference on the role of the media in a time of transition was held in Somerset West, near Cape Town. Called *The Symposium on Political Tolerance: The role of opinion-makers and the media*, it was organised by Idasa<sup>1</sup> and the Institute for Multi-Party Democracy, sponsored by the United Nations Committee Against Apartheid, and attended by a who's who of media, media scholars, and peace and development activists. The aim was to engage members of the media on how reportage could be tailored to the imperatives of the moment: voter education, and building peace by fostering tolerance. The violence that accompanied preparations for national transformation formed a grim backdrop to proceedings: at the opening session on the last day, chairman Alex Boraine announced in low

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<sup>1</sup> Idasa was then the Institute for a Democratic Alternative in South Africa. After the 1994 elections the name was changed to the Institute for Democracy in South Africa.

tones the first sketchy details of the massacre at Boipatong.

The tone of exchanges was more tetchy than dialogic. Media representatives made it clear they were resentful of the efforts of anyone to create new rules for their turf. Such a response was to have been expected: South Africa's awesomely restrictive media laws had been repealed only months beforehand. Any suggestion that the notion of free expression required interrogation was repudiated by media managers and editors as an attempt to initiate a new and insidious form of censorship. Several journalists argued that the debates represented an attempt by the ANC to initiate new controls on the media.

The first salvo came at the opening session from then-General Secretary of the South African Union of Journalists Karen Stander, who had been invited to speak on 'The role of media reporting in fostering political tolerance and a democratic political culture'. An excerpt from her remarks:

The underlying assumption of the title [I was given] ... seems to be that journalists have a duty to foster political tolerance and a democratic political culture. This premise makes me very nervous. In the past we had 'reporting to get rid of apartheid', or advocacy journalism. Now, laudable as that aim might have been, I believe it was misplaced. ... [A]s journalists our only aim can be to expose the facts. This might seem a petty distinction, but it is crucial to the image of ourselves as journalists ... [A] political agenda - and by this I include a developmental agenda - should not, under any circumstances, be imposed from outside by politicians or even by society. ... Although I seem to be absolving journalists from all responsibility, this is not my intention. I'm not implying that journalists don't have a duty to foster political tolerance or in the past didn't have a responsibility to rid our society of apartheid. They do. But the responsibility is that of any individual citizen and it does not exist because we're journalists. ... Marks on a sheet of paper cannot be held responsible for a person who picks up a weapon and uses that weapon to harm another. ... I would like to suggest that the proper role of the media should be to test political tolerance rather than to foster it. (Idasa 1993:4-6)

Her words were a radical statement of a commitment to a modernist realism, in which text and language are divorced from social processes. For much of the rest of the Symposium, free expression appeared to be a zero-sum; all or nothing. A few points were conceded by either side that media might or might not have certain specific effects at certain times, but these were incorporated into an otherwise intact paradigm where journalism had to be solely the free expression of information purveyors who had no reason to take responsibility for the consequences of any of their free expressions. The capacity of reportage to influence events destructively was flatly denied (unless it was by 'bad journalists', none of whom appeared to be represented). The converse - the capacity of media to be a constructive influence - was conceded in only one tightly defined territory: voter education. Inherent contradictions - such as the capacity of the media to educate when it chose to

but have no influence when it didn't - remained unexplored. It seemed that 'press freedom' was to the Fourth Estate<sup>2</sup> what the Hippocratic Oath is to the medical profession. A rare display of professional solidarity resulted between media unionists and management, leftists and centrist-liberals.<sup>3</sup>

Significantly, two small groups - most vocal during tea breaks - felt their interests to be increasingly sidelined by the focus on principles of free speech. Said Lester Venter - then in a senior editorial position on the SABC Agenda team - 'this debate is all very interesting, but at the coalface where you've got to meet deadlines and make sure you're not offending Tant Sannie, you simply don't have the time to work in any other way.' It was an admission that practice was deeply embedded in cultural politics, and very specific but unwritten codes of moral authority. News narratives of the public broadcaster were expected to be constructed in such a way as to affirm - rather than challenge - the political identity and social standing of Tant Sannies. What was more interesting was that it went unchallenged. The consensus was a matter of 'Yes, of course journalists ought not to offend Tant Sannie'. Unformed were the questions 'Why should the Tant Sannies of Johannesburg have such moral authority?' or 'Why should Mam' Lindiwe of Guguletu not carry the same clout?'

'Paradoxically, when subjects believe themselves to be acting as 'free agents' and to be motivated only by what they see as obvious 'common sense', it is precisely at that time that they are most powerfully motivated by ideology,' observe Keyan Tomaselli and others in *Hegemony and the South African Press* (1987:8). In a country undergoing massive political shifts, the cultural politics of knowledge, common sense, perspective, silence and memory emerge gradually. Lester Venter spoke for many working journalists when he asserted that the time-frame of the job closed the possibility of choices to a narrow space defined by cultural politics rather than free thinking.

Significantly, the other group that coalesced in annoyed huddles over tea breaks were those who felt most keenly the weight of newsroom hegemony. Chief among them was then-Capital Radio

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<sup>2</sup> The phrase 'the Fourth Estate' originated in Britain. The 'Estates of the Realm' were those spheres that had a recognised share in the body politic: the Lords Temporal (Peers), Lords Spiritual (Bishops), and the Commoners. Originally the 'Fourth Estate' was the landowners but over time it came to be associated with the media.

<sup>3</sup> Siding with Stander were people who had been in the industry for a while, who had come to assume a key position in a media-related institution, and who interpreted the views of the former to be essentially subversive of press freedom. Among them were Allister Sparks, head of the Institute for the Advancement of Journalism and former editor of the Rand Daily Mail; then-Sunday Times editor Ken Owen; head of the Freedom of Expression Institute (and soon-to-be chair of the Independent Broadcasting Authority) Raymond Louw; former editor of the Vrye Weekblad Max du Preez; Karen Stander, then-South African Union of Journalists (SAUJ) General Secretary, and then-SAUJ President Yvonne Grimbeek, among others.

talk show presenter Nomavenda Mathiane, who argued furiously that the issues facing black journalists - township dangers, and newsroom dynamics - were completely marginalised by the tone and focus of proceedings.

My impression was that the three groups - media moguls; pragmatic journalists; black activist journalists - spoke completely past one another. The moguls were concerned with defining and preserving an essence of journalism as a watchdog over the outgoing regime and incoming government. The 'just do it' brigade of Lester Venter reminded everyone that deadlines and staffing ratios in the trade were such that getting the job done virtually required one not to think about what one was doing; that in the trade, intellectual reflection really is an indulgence best left to editors and owners. For their part, editors and owners seemed happy to leave that assertion unexplored. And while media activists could see that a cultural hegemony dominated practice, they did not have the discursive space to explore the construction of the world according to the newsroom. They could voice their comments - and they did - but their remarks were not pursued. The group was not joined by enquiring newcomers over tea.

Four years later at the ANC Conference in Mafikeng, Mandela launched a tirade against the media.

[T]he bulk of the mass media in our country has set itself up as force opposed to the ANC. ...

In a manner akin to what the National Party is doing in its sphere, this media exploits the dominant positions it achieved as a result of the apartheid system, to campaign against both real change and the real agents of change, as represented by our movement, led by the ANC.

In this context, it also takes advantage of the fact that [the] ... majority has no choice but to rely for information and communication on a media representing the privileged minority.

To protect its own privileged positions, which are a continuation of the apartheid legacy, it does not hesitate to denounce all efforts to ensure its own transformation, consistent with the objectives of a non-racial democracy, as an attack on press freedom.

When it speaks against us, this represents freedom of thought, speech and the press - which the world must applaud!

When we exercise our own right to freedom of thought and speech to criticise it for its failings, this represents an attempt to suppress the freedom of the press - for which the world must punish us!

Thus the media uses the democratic order, brought about by the enormous sacrifices of our own people, as an instrument to protect the legacy of racism, graphically described by its own patterns of ownership, editorial control, value system and advertiser influence.

At the same time, and in many respects, it has shown a stubborn refusal to discharge its responsibility to inform the public.

Consistent with the political posture it has assumed, it has been most vigorous in disseminating such information as it believes serves to discredit and weaken our movement. By this means, despite its professions of support for democracy, it limits the possibility to

expand the frontiers of democracy, which would derive from the empowerment of the citizen to participate meaningfully in the process of governance through timeous access to reliable information.

I know that these comments will be received with a tirade of denunciation, with claims that what we are calling for is a media that acts as a 'lapdog' rather than a 'watchdog'.

We must reiterate the positions of our movement that we ask for no favours from the media and we expect none. We make no apology for making the demand that the media has a responsibility to society to inform. ...

Conference will have to consider what measures we have to take. In addition to what we are doing already, to improve our communication with our population at large.

In part, this must address the objective of enabling the still-disadvantaged millions of our people, who are being deliberately disadvantaged even in the area of access to information, to know what is really happening in and to their country and their future.

Again, this would enable these masses, who sacrificed everything for democracy, including the freedom of the press, to take informed decisions about what they have to do to influence the process of the reconstruction of their own country, including the critical objective of its deracialisation. ...

At the same time as we consider these matters, we must also reaffirm our commitment to the freedom of the press and demonstrate this in all our practical activities (Mandela, 1997).

Mandela's analysis of the causes of his discomfort with the media is problematic. He speaks of journalists' 'stubborn refusal'; of a media that 'exploits the dominant positions it achieved ... to campaign against both real change and the agents of change'. Certainly, practices of journalism operate in terms of an idea of truth that is embedded in forms of hegemony, social, economic and cultural (cf. Foucault 1980:133, cited atop this chapter). Mandela's phrases are in the language of conspiracy in which human action is entirely attributable to rational and considered defence of economic interest. The approach is well described by Pierre Bourdieu:

The 'rational actor' theory, which seeks the 'origin' of acts, strictly economic or not, in an 'intention of consciousness', is often associated with a narrow conception of the 'rationality' of practices, an economism which regards as rational (or, which amounts to the same thing in this logic, as economic) those practices that are consciously oriented by the pursuit of maximum (economic) profit at minimum (economic) cost. Finalist economism explains practices by relating them directly and exclusively to economic interests, treated as consciously posited ends; mechanistic economism relates them no less directly and exclusively to economic interests, defined just as narrowly but treated as causes. Both are unaware that practices can have other principles than mechanical causes or conscious ends and can obey an economic logic without obeying narrowly economic interests. (Bourdieu 1992:50)

Of journalists, Mandela spoke in generalities, drawing no distinction between media houses as diverse as *Sowetan* (now owned by Johnnic with Cyril Ramaphosa at the helm), the SABC news team, and the *Mail and Guardian*. He also fails to mention the work of senior black journalists, such as Dennis Cruywagen (now deputy editor at the *Pretoria News*); Moegsien Williams (former editor of the *Cape Times*; now editor of the *Cape Argus*); Zubeida Jaffer (Group Editor of Parliamentary News for the Independent Group of Newspapers); Kaiser Nyatumba (rising fast through the ranks in the Independent Group); Khaba Mkhize (now Managing Director of the SABC in KwaZulu-Natal); Mandla Langa (former head of Comtask; at the time of the speech, editor-at-large of *Leadership*; now head of programming at SABC Television).<sup>4</sup> His lack of differentiation echoes a major gap in media scholarship. In so many works, media scholars represent journalists as subjects without agency; akin to computers programmed by their owners to maximise company profits.

If Mandela's diagnostics of the ailing local news media is based on ills that the patient (editors) do not perceive, it is not surprising that the patient is refusing the medicine. If the therapeutic approach were different, editors would be less threatened and more open to debates on the cultural politics of their news values. For it is true that, in the manner of any ordinary neurosis, the South African news media defends itself alternately with contradictory propositions. On the one hand it protects itself in the name of service to democracy; on the other it defends its actions in terms of market practice. Indeed, the assumption that market forces and democracy might be coterminous is a dangerous one, particularly so in the news industry - as Herman and Chomsky demonstrate in *Manufacturing Consent* (1988).

In his speech Mandela touches on issues that are critical to media enterprise anywhere in the world. If the media is seriously committed to building democracy, and knowledge is power, then surely communication should be a priority? Should information not be targeted at a broader sector of the populace than the moneyed classes? Is the domain of news a free marketplace of ideas in which the most-supported opinions survive, or are news media resources for mediation, communication, transformation and development? Has the media indeed become, as Habermas memorably suggested (1989), a feudal domain? But he presents a critique of the structuring dispositions of news in polemic; tying his objections to a binary in which media production is divisible: apartheid v. apartheid's opponents; privilege and under-privilege; opposition to the new government v. support

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<sup>4</sup> Mandela here overlooks the fact that in its first years of office, the incoming ANC government absorbed many of the best black journalists into bureaucratic or administrative positions: for example, Joe Mjwara (ex-Radio Freedom); Ismael Lagerdien (ex-Sowetan); Lakela Kaunda (ex-Natal Witness).

for transformation.

As predicted by Mandela, his comments were met with alarmed editorials about media, state, and freedom of speech, constructed within the dominant binary of the media profession: watchdogs, free speech and democracy, v. oppressive government; truth v. the corrupted truths of the powerful. In doing so, editorial writers lost the opportunity to widen the terms of the debate, and provided more material to illustrate Mandela's analysis. The more journalists continue to propound a polemic of truth v. power, the more Government retreats into a narrow economic analysis of media ailments, and yearns for news guidelines in the name of free speech and democracy. Yet the issues are far broader than economic determinism and intentionality; going to the heart of the politics of cultural production: the structuring principles and contradictions within the news industry; the complex relationship between representation of reality in media and the production of subjectivities in the late twentieth century.

A comment by John Keane in *The media and democracy* crystallises the issue. 'The growing centrality of the media in technologised societies must impact on media praxis,' he says, 'Simple conceptions of the liberty of the press need to be abandoned in favour of a more complex and differentiated notion of freedom of communication' (1991:43).

While Keane argues for a broadening of the terms of media ethics and notions of good practice, the point raises questions about the 'flow' of communication in societies - questions such as: What evidence do we have that the ideology of media actually does have particular effects in society? Does it matter that media reflects the cultural politics of a particular sector?

## **Models of news media effects in society**

There have been a number of attempts to conceptualise the articulation of news media and change in society. Many works that have been written on the effects of media in society are constrained by a narrow empiricist approach that seeks to demonstrate the power of media to shape behaviour and choices, such as whether an image of a cocaine addict shooting up is likely to generate a groundswell of similar choices. There are many works that review such studies (see McQuail 1994; Lowery and De Fleur 1988) and it is not my intention to debate empiricist media-effects studies here.

Models that have a particular relevance to questions of culture and practice, are those of agenda-setting theory; and cultivation analysis.

**Agenda-setting theory** is outlined by David Protess and Maxwell McCombs in *Agenda setting: Readings on media, public opinion and policy-making* (1991). Agenda-setting 'claims that

the media rank-order news issues, which the public takes to be of significance as a result of this highlighting' (Downing 1996:180). The problem is that verifiable evidence for the hypothesis is rather thin on the ground. While headlines on issues like the famine may hugely increase the level of donations to NGOs working in a crisis, it cannot be said that the media sets agendas in society *per se*. In Downing's words, 'It is rather like a theory of pack journalism ... with no space ... for the boy in the crowd who first shouts out 'He's naked!' (1996:180).

Associated with agenda-setting theory, is what has been called 'gatekeeper theory'. In *Inside Prime Time*, Todd Gitlin (1985) identifies 'gatekeepers' in media as those who define what is of interest and what isn't. Similarly, Herman and Chomsky (1988) describe 'filters' in the media: those processes in the political and economic power structure that prevent certain issues from gaining impetus in the free marketplace of ideas. Says Downing, 'The merit of the approach is that it does directly address the question of power in media ... [it is not] however, credible that media executives themselves should wield so much untrammelled power. ... There is an inappropriate fixation on one level of power in gatekeeper theory' (1996:186). Globalvision producer Danny Schechter would disagree: the U.S. media, he says, is fixated on business, not on news. In *The more you watch the less you know* (Schechter 1997) he makes a sustained case that gatekeepers in the television play very powerful roles, and are increasingly creating out of news a meaningless infotainment that forms an agenda for inaction, not action.

**Cultivation analysis** takes a longer view of media effects over time than many media effects studies which take one issue at one time (e.g. drug use or suicide) and seek copycat behaviour. The core idea is that media bends opinions, over time, in the direction of the dominant polity as shared by media owners and capital - 'The great strength of the cultivation analysis approach lies in its longitudinal method and in its implicit involvement of social memory in the media communication process,' says Downing (1996:184).

Denis McQuail's overview of approaches to media effects in *Mass communication theory* (McQuail 1994) is particularly useful because he interrogates efforts to give these models a quantitative backbone. He writes of cultivation theory: 'Implied in this is the view that identities are drawn from the systematic and widely shared messages of the mass media ... [T]elevision is responsible for a major 'cultivating' and 'acculturating' process, according to which people are exposed systematically to a selective view of society on almost every aspect of life, a view which tends to shape their beliefs and values accordingly' (McQuail, 1994:111). Later in the same volume he notes that 'However plausible the theory, it is almost impossible to deal convincingly with the

complexity of posited relationships, between symbolic structures, audience behaviour, and audience views, given the many intervening variables. Despite all this, it appears the line of enquiry represented by ... cultivation research is not a spent force ...' (McQuail 1994:366).

While cultivation analysis and agenda-setting theory provide important insights into the functioning of media within society they do not offer a model of how journalistic practice becomes embedded in particular social formations. The models cover the *who*, *what*, *where*, and *when* reasonably well. But I find their analysis of *how* and *why* to be weak. This is partly because these approaches tend to segment media and society; producers and audiences. The models presented here are dominated by the notion that mass media functions as a transmitter - sending ideology to society - rather than an institution that is embedded in society. Moreover, 'the media' tends to be represented as a monolithic entity; as a hegemony that is not subject to internal challenge, or decay.

Latin American scholar Jesús Martín-Barbero offers an insightful (if acerbic) account of broad movements in media studies over the past three decades, arguing that there is a need for a reformulation of key concepts in media studies. The transmitter paradigm, he says, is flawed because its core concepts - ideology and information - are flawed.

In Latin America, there have been two stages in the formation of the [dominant] mode of communication. The first stage came at the end of the 1960s when Lasswell's model from an epistemological background of psychological behaviourism was poured into the theoretical mould of structuralist semiology, making possible its 'conversion', that is, its encounter with critical research. I call this stage 'ideologist' because its objective was centred on descriptive discovery and denunciation. It used epistemological matrices from a politically critical position to discover the strategies of the dominant ideology for penetrating communication, or, in its words, for permeating the message and producing specific effects. The omnipotence ... attributed to the media was switched over to ideology, making ideology both the object and subject of research and the all-encompassing influence in the discourses of media analysis. ...

The amalgam of communication and denunciation ... turned into an instrumentalist conception of media, depriving the media of any cultural depth or institutional structure and making the media mere tools of ideological action. ... [O]nce reduced to an instrumental role, a moral value was attributed to media according to the direction of their use. They were bad in the hands of reactionary oligarchies and good in the hands of the proletariat. ... [T]he media, because of their original sin of birth under capitalism, were seen as condemned forever to serve their masters. ... In the end, the 'ideologisation' made it impossible for the study of communication to be anything other than the study of the 'tracks of the dominator'. ... [T]here was no suggestion of seduction or resistance, only the passivity of consumption and the alienation detected as immanent within the message-text.

In the mid-1970s another line of thought began to appear, with a discourse that might be summed up with the slogan, 'Enough ideology and denunciation! Let's get serious and be scientists'. ... The dominant paradigm was reformed on the basis of an information model, and a positivist revival prohibited calling anything a problem to be studied if it did not have a specific method. (Barbero 1993:204-205)

Barbero describes informationalism as wedded to a transmitter model of media communications, and notes that the information model was as impoverished as the ideological model of media because it left out not just questions of meaning but also of power: 'By excluding from its analysis the social conditions of the production of meaning, the information model eliminates the study of the struggle for hegemony, that is, the struggle to define the discourses that 'articulate' the cultural meanings of a society' (Barbero 1993:206).

To return to the models of media effects described earlier: While each of these models bears on the relationship between media and society, I believe - along with Barbero - that their overall usefulness in understanding the articulation of media, culture and society is impaired by a focus alternately on media as ideology or media as purveyor of information. It is not sufficient to critique the models in terms of one another because they are bound by similar epistemological constraints. I want to suggest that media scholarship is most handicapped by a failure to begin by observing what it is that media *does*.

In recent years, scholarship focusing on narrative in news has gained much favour. Some examples include Michael Cornfield's paper (1992), 'The press and political controversy: the case for narrative analysis'; Tom Koch's *The news as myth: Fact and context in journalism* (1990) and a volume edited by James Carey in 1988, titled *Media, myths and narratives*. These narrative approaches to news offer a productive route of enquiry into the articulation of news media and society, precisely because they are concerned with the cultural processes of mythology and identity in societies and in nationhood. In the remainder of this chapter I want to explore aspects of the study of news narrative that may be helpful in conceptualising the articulation of news and events. In doing so I am setting out ideas that drive the studies in the chapters that follow.

## **Towards a narrative model of news media in society**

As a freelance writer and later as a radio producer working on the series *Africa: Search for Common Ground*, I discovered at length that when writing news, you're always telling at least two stories. The most obvious is the story of the events themselves. But you're also, always, drawing on a much bigger source for the story: the narrative pool that will link the reader or listener to the events. What was interesting was the realisation that metanarrative could be both consciously thought through, or it could be quite an unconscious performance. Either way, metanarrative links a day's events with deeply rooted archetypes and myth pools. The sinking of a ship, for example, may be of

consequence to local readers if a person from the town was on board; and its potential to be an archetypal story may be developed to compare it with the Titanic, which is an archetypal story of human folly in the battle between 'man' and nature - and of interest to audiences who had recently seen the movie *Titanic*, or heard Celine Dion's *My heart will go on* which was the anthem of the film.

Robert Manoff, professor of journalism at New York University and head of the Centre for War, Peace and the News Media (CWPNM), is persuasive:

Journalists know they write 'stories,' and we know that we watch 'stories' and read them, but we are not sufficiently attentive to the consequences of these acts. For 'news' occurs where texts and events come together, at that place where the reporter puts a name to things, tells a story about them, and thereby gives them a structure. Narrative conventions bring order to events by making them something that can be told about; by organising experience, they exert a powerful pull on journalists and public alike. ... [W]e tell the stories we need to hear to make sense of the world. Reality appears to us, but we grasp it through the tales we choose to tell ourselves, our way. (Manoff 1989:59)

While I agree emphatically with Manoff, I understand narrative to have far broader social function the organisation of experience.

The heart of the news business is not to purvey information, but to package information in stories in such a way as to create audiences whose attention can be sold to advertisers. In many respects news does purvey information. But to be palatable, information is presented in narrative form that imbricates local readers in the meaning of the events. This narrative process is far more than verbal mimesis: it is a process of affirming subjectivity, identity, notions of a reader's 'own' community and 'other' communities. I am not suggesting that news media produce those audiences in the sense that they shape their desires, identities and needs, but I am arguing that narrative implies the assumption of an audience, and it is that assumption that advertisers buy. Audiences may take on the performatives embedded in these narratives; they are likely to adapt them by reading them within a specific cultural frame of reference; at times they may resist narrative interpretations of events entirely.

Caryl Rivers explores the articulation of myth and news in her book *Slick spins and fractured facts* (1996): 'Decisions about what is - or what is not - 'news' grow out of a lifetime of experiences. Class, race, sex - all these have a profound influence. So does the tangle of myth that makes up the collective tapestry of what kind of a people we think we are. Cultural mythology has a power and logic all its own. In time it becomes impossible to separate it from truth' (1996:xiii).

Journalist and producer Danny Schechter echoes this in his invention of the term 'mythinformation' (1997:76).

The cultural mythology embedded in news via tropes, metaphors, narrative blocs, morphemes - these are the imagined interface between journalist and reader; they are what makes the story meaningful to the assumed audience; the reason why they do or don't buy your paper. They embody the structures of feeling that are germane to particular subjectivities; particular ideas about truth and morality. Through these, the identity of readership (or audience) is inscribed in the narrative.

An example: When the Cape Times building caught fire in July 1996, the front page lead on the event developed the archetypal story of the heroism and dedication of journalists producing news at all costs, and indeed the news pieces are far more a tale of 'classic journalists' than they are of the fire in a building (actually, 'smoulderings in the basement print room' is more accurate a description - but then, 'fire in a building' is a much more compelling story). The banality of daily news gathering had a brief, safe, and almost wistful moment of glory under fire. The story provoked a number of glowing reader responses that embraced the Cape Times in a moment of imagined community; a collective sentiment that responded to the heroism of the local journalists and asked 'where would we be without you over breakfast?'

Writing on historical narratives, Roland Barthes takes a radical view:

Claims concerning the 'realism' of narrative are therefore to be discounted. ... The function of narrative is not to 'represent', it is to constitute a spectacle. ... Narrative does not show, does not imitate. ... 'What takes place' in a narrative is from the referential (reality) point of view literally nothing; 'what happens' is language alone, the adventure of language (Barthes 1977:123-124).

The idea of news narratives creating a spectacle rather than representing reality is a compelling one, as is the observation that narratives may become an adventure in language. Most journalists who have been instructed by a news editor to 'sex up the story' would agree. While holding on to that observation it is important to observe that Barthes creates a dichotomy between the narrated and the real (see Kerby 1991:94). Language and narrative - indeed, any representational activity - are mediative acts that constitute a reality of their own, but there is nonetheless a world that exists prior to language. 'To deny the power to describe reality is not to deny reality' says Richard Rorty (1979:375). Thus, I would disagree with Barthes that there can be no confluence between reality and narrative, while agreeing emphatically that the nature of the narrative process may at times be closer to metamorphosis than mimesis - for fictions can be built into language itself. In a chapter titled

'Politics and the death of language', Berel Lang, philosopher and writer on language and genocide, expresses it this way:

Like people, language too could be honest, sincere and courageous; and so also it could be deceitful, hypocritical, corrupt - not only when it was explicitly telling lies (which in a way, after all, is a form of truth), but even more so as lies can be built into the fabric of language itself, into vocabulary, into expression, even into grammar (1991:108).

This chapter is not the place to go down the road of the epistemological and representational questions that beset the humanities and sciences. The question I wish to pursue here is not 'is news true or not'. Rather, noting that audiences can and do read news texts differentially, I wish to explore why realist news narratives, with built-in fictions, have been sustained as a form of communication in the late twentieth century. My argument begins with the observation that narrative is a basic cultural process.

### **Narrative as a cultural process: Constructing identity and nationhood**

Central to anthropologist Allen Feldman's work in Northern Ireland is the life stories of activists fighting a hegemony. Key to his argument is the textual condition of self and society. Some focal points, drawn from the introduction to *Formations of violence: Narratives of the body and terror in Northern Ireland* (1991):

- 'The self is always the artefact of prior received and newly constructed narratives. It is engendered through narration and fulfills a syntactical function in the life history' (1991:13).
- 'Narrativity is the condition for the identification of events, agents and mediating sequence. Event, agency and narration form [what Lyotard calls] a 'narrative bloc' defined as the achronic engenderment of narrative, agency (narration), and event. Narrative blocs are plastic organisations involving language, material artefacts and relations. The narrative bloc of violence puts into play a constellation of events, and discourses about events, as an Event' (1991:13).
- 'Social actors inhabit their performances as narrative continua and as units within overarching stories of historical magnitude. This is not a passive process but the active injection of cultural form that situates agency at the moment of enactment' (1991:15).
- '... [T]he concept of the event, like the concept of the self, cannot be detached from the effects of narration with its assumption of causality and agency. ... In a political culture [I assume he means a polarised environment] the self that narrates speaks from a position of having been narrated and edited by others - by political institutions, by concepts of historical

causality, and possibly by violence. The narrator speaks because this agent is already the recipient of narratives in which he or she has been inserted as a political subject. The narrator writes himself into an oral history because the narrator has already been written and subjected to powerful inscriptions.' (Feldman 1991:13-14, emphases mine)

Social actors, then, inhabit a sense of self and social identity that is narrative. Canadian philosopher of hermeneutics Anthony Paul Kerby (1991) develops the hypotheses that 'the self is given content, is delineated and embodied, primarily in narrative constructions or stories' and that the self 'arises out of signifying practices rather than existing prior to them as an autonomous or Cartesian agent' (1991:1). 'If language cannot be separated from the world as we know it ... we surely cannot extricate ourselves from language' (1991:3). The self, he suggests, is 'essentially a being of reflexivity, coming to itself in its own narrational acts' (1991:41).

*Narrative and the self* is remarkable in that Kerby weaves together ideas drawn from Hayden White, Charles Taylor, Roland Barthes, Paul Ricoeur, and Julia Kristeva among others. However, Kerby's argument is tarnished by a tendency to essentialise 'other' societies; that is, to read uncritically the narrative claims of structuralist ethnographers about the societies they studied. And while Kerby notes in the conclusion that 'the human subject is a self-interpreting animal that is of necessity prey to its own fictions' (1991:114), he does not account for changes in narratives of self and society. At this juncture the work of anthropologist Michael Gilson, on narratives of self and society in Lebanon in the 1970s, is indispensable.

### **Narrative as misrecognition and self-deception**

Researching practices of power in a rural village in Lebanon, Gilson confronts social structure in a period of change, ambiguity, contradiction; a time of increasing divisions of class, wealth, political ideology and patterns of consumption (1996:xv). He notes that in village life, narratives 'contextualised and partially constituted relations of contest and dominance in the everyday world' (1996:xii). Narratives of actions and events, as told by villagers vying for power, became a space in which contests for dominance were played out:

Narrative was a battleground of histories, reputations and identities. Being 'heard of' and 'spoken of' were crucial qualities in the operations of domination. But narratives were also liable to variation, being turned into comedy or parody of claims to honourable behaviour. Instability of apparently fixed meanings and the reversing of styles of telling from serious to comic ... became an 'ordinary' experience (1996:xiv).

Gilshan draws much from Alisdair MacIntyre's work on narrative. MacIntyre argues that narration is 'as integral to the nature of social action as the deeds themselves' (cited by Gilshan 1996:57). The value of Gilshan's work is that he demonstrates the telling of stories to not simply be 'a mode of representations set in context of social relations, but a key constitutive element of those relations. Enacted stories motivate and animate the social processes of which they are an integral part' he writes, continuing: '... they are part of the unending work of creating and sustaining identities' (1996:57).

### **From narrative to news**

If the self is constituted through narrative, as Kerby (1991), Feldman (1991) and Gilshan (1996) argue, then perhaps 'news' is as vitally related to the ongoing project of constructing the self in the world as it is a matter of public dialogue on events and policies. These twin functions of news cannot be separated; the one is integral to the other. The theme emerges in Benedict Anderson's *Imagined communities* (1983), a work that deals with the rise of print capitalism and the construction of identities:

[T]he newspaper is merely an 'extreme form' of the book, a book sold on a colossal scale, but of ephemeral popularity. Might we say: one-day best-sellers? The obsolescence of the newspaper on the morrow of its printing ... creates this extraordinary mass ceremony: the almost precisely simultaneous consumption ('imagining') of the newspaper-as-fiction. We know that particular morning and evening editions will be consumed between this hour and that, only on this day and not that. The significance of this mass ceremony - Hegel observed that newspapers serve modern man as a substitute for morning prayer - is paradoxical. It is performed in silent privacy - in the lair of the skull. Yet each communicant is well aware that the ceremony he performs is being replicated simultaneously by thousands (or millions) of others. ... The newspaper reader is continually reassured that the imagined world is visibly rooted in everyday life. ... [F]iction seeps quietly and continuously into reality, creating that remarkable confidence and community in anonymity, which is the hallmark of modern nations. (Anderson, 1983:35-36)

Media, then, provided the conditions for the emergence of national consciousnesses; an idea which has been widely taken up in cultural studies. Edward Said notes in *Culture and Imperialism* that

the power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming and emerging, is very important to culture and imperialism, and constitutes one of the main connections between them. Most important, the grand narratives of emancipation and enlightenment mobilised people in the colonial world to rise up and throw off imperial subjection ... (Said 1993:xiii).

While this is an important point, Said assumes that representation produces and reproduces forms of subjectivity, and that by promoting different representations of subjects, they will be empowered to

develop subjectivities alternative to the social positioning offered by a dominant discourse. Critiquing Said, Mark Bracher argues that he attributes far too much power to institutions that select and reproduce particular narratives, and in doing so 'ignores important elements of subjectivity (ideals, values, fantasy, desire, drives, and jouissance) that are just as essential in determining a subject position as knowledge is, [a]nd ... it overlooks important interpellative forces of the text or discourse that cannot be reduced to a function of representation / misrepresentation' (Bracher 1993:10).

While it is entirely conceivable that narratives of nationhood constitute an imagined community, in my view far too much power is attributed to the media to create and maintain such a thing. In *Media, state and nation: Political violence and collective identities*, Philip Schlesinger questions Anderson's notion of 'communicative community'. 'The boundedness of a given national imagery is one thing; homogeneity within these boundaries is quite another. ... We should better look to a process of continual reconstruction than to an accomplished fact' (Schlesinger 1991:165).

The comment returns us to the question of audiences, and how people receive news texts.

Barbero's is an invigorating reassessment of media consumption:

Our reflection on consumption is located in daily practices in so far as these are an area of silent interiorisation of social inequality. ... This is the area of each person's relationship to his or her body, use of time, habitat and awareness of the potentialities in his or her life. It is also an area of rejection of limits to what can legitimately be hoped for, an area for the expansion of desires, a realm where one can subvert the codes and express pleasures. Consumption is not just the reproduction of forces. It is a production of meanings and the site of a struggle that does not end with the possession of the object but extends to the uses, giving objects a social form in which are registered the demands and forms of action of different cultural competencies. (Barbero 1993:214)

While much of the power of the media derives from the framing of its metanarratives in a discourse of realism, at the same time, the same metanarratives are often readily recognised by audiences and rejected on those terms (recall Lester Venter's 'Tant Sannie' and the moral universe of subject positions that accompanies her).

An example: Former *Sowetan* editor Aggrey Klaaste, on reading the line 'the senseless savagery must not be allowed to continue another day' in a report covering the first weeks of the war on the East Rand in 1990, reflected that this was 'the almost happy confirmation from whites about the stereotypes they have of blacks in general. ... 'We told you about what we must expect from THEM. We told you that what has happened in other parts of Africa must happen here' ' (*Sunday Star*, 19.8.90).

The power of the realist news media is to provide a 'political cosmology'; a map of the social

and political universe and subjects within it, and to present this as the given, sustained and accepted norm. Speaking of the 'reality effect' of narrative - a phrase used by researchers to describe the phenomenon in which people believe fictive dramas like soap operas to be real - Pierre Bourdieu argues in *On Television* that reality effects have effects in reality (1998:21). However, while the media has tremendous power; audiences are not completely powerless. In an era where Hollywood produces narratives about the media like *Wag the Dog*, *The Truman Show*, *Tomorrow Never Dies*, and a weekly television comedy on spin doctoring called *Spin City*, audiences as far apart as Washington, Moscow and Baghdad have waved posters with the phrase 'Wag the Dog'. It may be that in the late twentieth century, new narratives are entering the public domain: narratives of a media that has the power to manipulate the public. Whether this is the beginning of a public challenge to the claims of realism, has yet to be seen. †

Having argued for a narrative understanding of media and society, I want to turn now to two particular areas where I believe such an approach to be helpful.

### **Narrative and spin-doctoring**

In a paper titled 'The press and political controversy: The case for narrative analysis' (1991), Michael Cornfield explores the emplotment of political controversies around one single politician at different points of his career, in different newspapers in the U.S. He argues that 'a news story takes a political controversy and turns it into an internally coherent, externally correspondent, personally motivated and naturally consequential account of the world its readers inhabit' (1991:56). His argument is based on a series of profiles of James Baker, Secretary of State under George Bush; his tools are the vocabulary of literary criticism - most especially, genre. He cites the work of Richard Campbell who 'identified three story types that the weekly news program '60 Minutes' relies on as formulas to 'secure a middle ground,' - that is, to make the world seem comfortable and concrete to a Middle-America audience.' Turning to his own project, he continues, 'With a framework that projects a plurality of culturally and rhetorically legitimate news narratives, we can study the options for storytelling available to cover a controversy. It becomes possible to see how politicians have played to different literary conventions in different circumstances, and how journalists casting a politician as a character have, too' (1991:49).

Cornfield posits that story is not only the province of journalists but that character archetypes (celebrity, crusader, enigma) offer guidelines for politicians. In other words, narratives (or plots) not only function, in the news, as ways of making sense of the flow of time; they also function as texts -

as scripts - that may guide action. This point leads me to the issue of self as narrative; and the articulation of narratives of self with hegemonic discourses.

### Structure and agency in the newsroom

In the same way that news consumption does not imply that the audiences will reproduce news narratives, being a journalist does not necessarily make one narrate in the manner of one's employer.

In an interview during the Falklands War, sociologist Stuart Hall remarked:

When a journalist is socialised into an institution he or she is socialised into a certain way of telling stories. And although individual journalists may perform operations (or what is called originality) on top of that, they are working within a given language or within a given framework, and they are making those adjustments which make the old and trite appear to be new. But they are not breaking the codes. Indeed, if they constantly broke the codes, people outside wouldn't understand them at all. ... I think that journalists learn them very habitually, rather unconsciously, and they are not aware that the mode in which you construct a story alters the meaning of the story itself. They think it is just a set of techniques. ... The stories are already largely written for them before the journalists take fingers to typewriters or pen to paper (Hall, interview with John O'Hara 1984:11)

Hall's picture of newsroom dynamics is sharply at odds with the professional myth (that few in the profession actually believe completely) of the journalist as the heroic free thinker, crusading against the injustices of power. While radical individualism is itself an ideological creation that benefits any prevailing status quo, its resilience as a founding philosophy in the trade as much to do with the epistemological roots of the profession in liberal philosophy that poses a radical opposition between individual and state. Even if the picture is a romantic and heroic professional ideology, it remains true that there are journalists whose views take a measure of courage to sustain, and whose stories and arguments stand in contrast to those held inviolable within dominant discourses - including those discourses held to by media owners.

Nonetheless, Hall is working with two valuable insights: (1) experience and social commitments shape narrative logic, and (2) modes of narrative - such as the body-count story - shape the meaning of events. His thinking, however, is simplistic in two respects. First: he posits a naive relationship between journalists and discursive power - attributing to them a level of determinism that would be absurd in another context. Such a view is rooted, I believe, in a flawed notion of power as solely *power over*, rather than being *power to* (see Dyrberg 1997:4). Second, he assumes that the only discursive framework journalists work within is that of the institution they work for. Such an assertion is naive: journalists, like all people, are members of multiple communities.

In an interview, *Witness* news editor Yves Vandehaegen commented:

*I have often felt that journalism thrives on prejudice and finds it incredibly difficult to think about the world without it. I think that is why it is so important that [our] writers ... are sufficiently complex individuals to be able to always see or sense that 'there is more to this than I can see'. ... (Interview, January 1995).*

Key to the successful execution of Yves' job was the matching of individuals with stories.

Recognising the personal resources that a writer would bring to bear on a particular situation was critical to the successful running of the newsroom. And the best writers were the more complex individuals: those for whom identities and identification were not simply given.

Thinking of journalists as narrators - storytellers - within society opens up a different set of possibilities for conceptualising agency within newsrooms. It becomes possible to move away from a conception of proprietor's power as 'power over' journalists (to impose the use of a specific discursive framework), to an understanding of how journalists use the power they have to negotiate the political and simultaneously constitute their own identity. Thus bias, 'noses for news' and frames of identification are not matters that can be adjudicated by the assertion of editorial control in the newsroom; rather, news narratives (with the traces of identification they contain) are products of relations of power that extend both into and far beyond newsrooms. I would argue that as a journalist, one constitutes one's public persona through generating narratives of events and in the course of that activity one has the potential to wield a great deal of power through identification with or challenging prior narratives in society.

Developing the idea of the field of power with reference to literary writing, Pierre Bourdieu notes in a chapter in *The field of cultural production* (1988) that in trying to understand the writer, one should not ask 'how a writer comes to be what he is, in a sort of genetic-psychology, but rather *'how the position or 'post' he occupies - that of a writer of a particular type - became constituted'* (1988:162, my emphasis).

Writers and artists, says Bourdieu, have all the characteristics of the dominant classes minus one: money (1988:165). While Bourdieu tends here to essentialise the idea of a writer (some writers earn a fortune) it is nonetheless true that most journalists would find familiar his description of a writer's experience as a 'precarious position', dominated among the dominant. To understand a writer, Bourdieu argues, you have to *understand the field of power and reconstruct their response to their liminality* (1988:172).

Bourdieu's notion of a 'writer' is culturally located. So too is his perception that 'the writer or intellectual is enjoined to a double status: that of an orator, charged with 'saying the true and the good, with consecrating or condemning by speech' and that of a fool, 'a character freed from convention and conformities to whom is accorded transgression without consequences, inspired by the pure pleasure of breaking the rule or shocking' (1988:164-5). Such a continuum of possible responses is germane to particular cultural contexts. A second criticism: discursive and cultural power constitute a terrain that is occupied by other kinds of power than capitalists and governments. It is incorrect to imagine that only the politically and the economically dominant enjoin journalists to play specific roles.

That noted, what is valuable here is the observation that fields of power create incentives for writers to instrumentalise themselves in particular ways; to perform and set out particular subjectivities. And these subjectivities, as Bourdieu observes, are frequently contradictory.

Some would say, as Nadine Gordimer suggests in *Writing and being* (1995:35), that the best writers are those who internalise the political struggle such that the quarrel between groups becomes a quarrel within the self. I suspect that when journalists search for stories, many seek testimonies that affirm their deeply-rooted struggles with structures in society and media; that are consonant with the consciously and unconsciously narrated texts of self and meaning.

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I suggest that a narrative model offers a way of conceptualising the processes by which social and cultural politics are embedded in media texts, without invalidating journalists' agency within the news process. Moreover, if news media is understood to be an industry that, via narrative, is in the business of entrenching and affirming identities in society to the same extent as it provides information, it becomes possible to understand why commercial media has appeared to be exceptionally slow in taking up the challenges of transformation. For the pool of archetypal stories within which news is made meaningful to audiences is slow to acquire new forms.

Ricoeur comments:

... ideology has a conservative function in both the good and the bad senses of that word. Ideology preserves identity, but it also wants to conserve what exists and is therefore already a resistance. Something becomes ideological - in the negative meaning of the term - when the integrative function becomes frozen, when it becomes rhetorical in the bad sense, when schematisation and rationalisation prevail. Ideology operates at the turning point between the integrative function and resistance (Ricoeur in Valdes (ed) 1991:194).

I would argue that mass-circulation news media is inherently conservative (in the sense of being resistant to change) precisely because it is an industry where schematisation and rationalisation of identities prevails; for this reason, introducing change is extraordinarily difficult to do without turning the bottom line from black to red unless one has secured the support of a major funder to underwrite the process. The transformation of Radio South Africa to SAfm is a case in point: listenership figures plummeted after the initial shake-up; the station has survived only because the public broadcaster was determined to establish a flagship station that reflected change. My point is that commercial news media can affirm and strengthen social movements; media may even create images and myths that become iconic to the process of change - but it cannot lead change. In matters of shifts in social power, media houses can challenge their audiences only minimally. Though challenge, they can.

## **Pangas and Propaganda on the East Rand: Apartheid discourse and journalism, August 1990**

*We invented a non-existent Plan, and They not only believed it was real but convinced themselves that They had been part of it for ages, or, rather, They identified the fragments of their muddled mythology as moments of our Plan, moments joined in a logical, irrefutable web of analogy, semblance, suspicion. ... [I]f you invent a plan and others carry it out, it's as if the Plan exists.*

*At that point it does exist.*

*- Umberto Eco, in Foucault's Pendulum*

*The human subject is a self-interpreting animal that, via narration, is of necessity prey to its own 'fictions'.*

*- Anthony Paul Kerby, 1994:114*

The transformation of apartheid discourse was not begun without a fight.

Six months after President FW de Klerk announced the release of Nelson Mandela and the unbanning of resistance organisations, townships on the East Rand exploded in violence that took 500 lives in a week and continued on, in shocking episodes, for months.<sup>1</sup>

In 1994, Judge Richard Goldstone found after a lengthy investigation that the nation's mythic 'third force' had been far more than a trope of media imagining. State operatives who had been part of Colonel Eugene de Kock's notorious Vlakplaas (Unit C10 of the South African Police) had been

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<sup>1</sup> 'Bloody 500 mark' Sowetan 23.8.90 p.1.

redeployed in branches of the Security Police, mostly around Johannesburg, after the disbanding of the unit in July 1990. According to an unnamed source who testified under a witness protection programme, Unit C10 had played a key role in fomenting the violence and sustaining it in both the East Rand and in KwaZulu-Natal (Sparks 1995:176). Among other activities, C10 had established a plant on the East Rand for manufacturing homemade guns, and for cleaning AK47 rifles and other military hardware that had been used by Koevoet in the Namibian bush war. These weapons were then distributed to Inkatha via two of its Transvaal leaders, Themba Khoza and Victor Ndlovu, and also distributed in Natal by C10 agents. The unnamed source - known in the press at the time as 'Q' - also alleged that members of the C10 unit were involved in the train massacres that took place around Johannesburg in September 1990. Writes Allister Sparks (1995:176), Q 'named an East Rand Security Branch officer as the organiser, saying he used C10 operatives, black policemen, *askaris* [ANC turncoats] and IFP members employed as security officers at a Johannesburg bank to carry out the vicious attacks on hapless commuters.'

Such bitter truths about racial politics in South Africa continued to emerge in the amnesty confessional of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and in the trial and subsequent writings of Col. Eugene de Kock.

At the time, however, the ruling National Party denied that secret agents were orchestrating violence, despite the publically-voiced suspicions of ANC leaders Walter Sisulu and Nelson Mandela, and other respected 'Struggle' leaders in 1990. Police liaison officers simply denied allegations, by many eye-witnesses, of whites in black face being involved in third force activities. And, at least in the white newspapers, they were for the most part accredited with the power to know the truth.

While English and Afrikaans media adopted the Third Force as a new anonymous national scapegoat, black journalists were not so subtle: the Zulu word for Third Force, created by journalists on Radio Zulu, is *ingal'enoboya* - a hairy arm. 'They have black hands but when you pull up the sleeve you see it's a hairy arm,' says journalist S'khumbuzo Miya, laughing.

At the time journalists on both black and white newspapers battled to make sense of the violence, and the general bafflement at the reasons for the violence is reflected in four major shifts of explanatory narratives in newspapers in the course of the first three weeks of fighting. This chapter is a study of that period as a key moment in South African journalism: a moment in which narratives of the nation were tested, found wanting, and began to be replaced. It is clear from the testimonies of Eugene de Kock and others that their undercover activities were intended to have the effect of establishing the ruling party as the sole arbiter of peace in the region while negotiating a new

dispensation with resistance movements. As such the interpretation of acts of violence was vital, and a great deal of effort - and funding - went into ensuring that public impressions of the violence would strengthen the perception of the National Party as a peacekeeper. The factory on the East Rand that manufactured homemade weapons, for example, provided grist for a narrative of desperately violent township youth. And a network of 'spooks' (media spies - journalists earning a second, secret salary from the state) helped to popularise the State Security Council's version of events.

In the first few weeks of violence in August 1990, apartheid myths of ethnicity flourished, aided and abetted by the work of a journalist who was also, a paid police agent. It is clear from the testimony of state operatives at the time that violence was instigated in order to divide black politics and perpetuate white rule. Media narratives supplied by one 'spook', Craig Kotze, reflected apartheid discourse very clearly. His explanation of the violence was one of absolute certainty that a Zulu-Xhosa war had begun, and that the two 'tribes' could only be kept apart by the mediating actions of police. The myth is ably deconstructed by Rupert Taylor (1991).

For several days, news narratives were based on the assumption that Zulu and Xhosa were discrete groups whose history had fated them to a final, cataclysmic battle as South Africa prepared for black rule. But after a week, the more discerning among journalists found less and less evidence of raw tribalism, and a more sophisticated narrative of ideology and party manoeuvring emerged. News narratives began to suggest that the violence was created by turf-wars between Inkatha and the ANC, and the stories suggested that the police were in cahoots with Inkatha. The notion of a Zulu-Xhosa war remained a dominant theme, albeit somewhat a secondary one.

The massacres and random killings continued into a second week, providing one of the most shocking series of front pages in the history of journalism in South Africa. Violence appeared to have no pattern; it was frightening, and apparently senseless. Indeed, the trope of 'motiveless killing' found ready resonance in white South African racial mythology, in which blacks as a race were held as able to kill for no reason. Journalists took on the task of trying to find motives for the killings, seeking rational explanations. In the process, narratives of violence sought to explain the abnormal and the horrific in terms of the familiar and the rational. The second week of press coverage was dominated by the stories of the appalling conditions in migrant workers' hostels, and blamed apartheid for having created monsters out of people by forcing them to live in inhumane conditions. But while living conditions in hostels were clearly conducive to engendering frustration and anger of the sort that inspired vandalism and, on occasion, murder, it was a sympathetic racism of the worst kind to suggest that hostel dwellers were so dehumanised that they would collectively butcher 500 in

nine days. Journalists focused on the most bloody and savage form of killing: death by panga, rather than bullet, despite evidence that more were dying from bullet wounds than gashes. Who was supplying the bullets and the guns to fire them? Few asked.

Later that week, a third story was introduced: that of individuals caught up in the war not of their own making. Stories indicated that the violent activities of migrant workers in hostels were being orchestrated in such a way that those living there had had the choice of fighting and staying alive, or not participating and being killed. On the other side of the lines, stories of comrades made it clear that many were responding to rumours and perceptions rather than to party leadership; moreover, many had not even considered themselves party members until the fighting began. So the IFP-ANC binary, too, began to fall apart. But instead of seizing upon these stories as indicative of the orchestration of violence, many journalists who took up this angle simply represented the fighters as anachronisms, as deluded victims of war-mongers; as soldiers in a war not of their making.

The story died down, not so much for the end of atrocities but because journalists believed the public had had too much blood. At about this time, random shootings of commuters began, followed by attacks on trains; prompting massive "Massacre" headlines. At that point nothing made any sense. A political scientist suggested that the train massacres were textbook-guerilla operations, calculated to sow maximum panic and secure maximum media attention. Eye-witnesses reported that attackers had not said a word, and some suggested that they were foreign. Was a Renamo-style force at work in South Africa? asked some, referring to the involvement of ex-Rhodesian soldiers in the formation of a counter-resistance movement in neighbouring Mozambique. Increasingly there were reports of whites being involved in attacks - reports repeatedly denied by police, all too quickly in some instances. But such was the reliance on police as official and expert sources that few journalists probed deeper. Some did. Thus began the story of the Third Force, in the first week of September 1990.

This chapter begins with a tabulated overview of the major shifts in metanarratives through reports from major newspapers across the country. That done, I move on to explore more deeply these metanarratives and their cultural sources - beginning with the reports of the Crime Reporter for *The Star* Craig Kotze and his subsequent submission, in 1997, to the Media Hearings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. To begin, an analysis of press reports follows.

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<sup>2</sup> See 'Textbook terror' by Frans Esterhuysen in the *Argus*, 22.9.90. Du Plessis had made a study of Carlos Marighella's 'Mini-manual of the urban guerilla' which was banned in South Africa.

Date	Paper & Byline	Title	Themes	Origin / cause of violence	Comment
7.8.90	<i>Daily Mail</i> - Mondli Makhanya	Kagiso tense after 15 killed in hostel violence	Migrant workers who are not affiliated to Inkatha were violently chased out of Lewisham hostel. Allegations that commuters were randomly attacked	'worst incident since violence between Inkatha and pro-ANC groupings spread to the Transvaal from Natal last month'	
14.8.90	<i>Star</i> - 'Crime Reporter' (Kotze)	Police move into township battleground		'Tokoza has now become the latest flashpoint in the escalating ANC/Inkatha power struggle in the Transvaal. ... The Tokoza flare-up comes after nineteen men were shot dead and at least 10 wounded in an AK-47 attack on a Sebokeng hostel on Saturday night.'	<i>Here the crime reporter quite clearly identifies the violence as ideological in origin. But the next day his report is solidly tribalist.</i>
15.8.90	<i>Sowetan</i> - Matshube Mfoloe	13 die in hostel carnage	numbers of dead and injured; efforts to explain violence; eyewitness accounts of events	'the fighting started on Sunday night after the killing of a Xhosa hostel dweller by alleged Inkatha supporters at Khalanyoni hostel. The incident occurred after an Inkatha meeting when hostels rented by non-Zulu dwellers were burnt. ... However, a police spokesman, ... said the fighting was between a group of Zulus and Xhosas at the hostel.'	<i>Note attempt to reject simplistic police explanation</i>
15.8.90	<i>Star</i> - Kotze, Mabelane, Mapisa, Jepson	Troops move in to stop the slaughter	running battles between Zulus and Xhosas	Zulu-Xhosa ethnic hatred; 'continuation of the 'hostel trend' in violence recently' Zulus attacked a hostel early that morning in Vosloorus	<i>See detailed analysis in the text</i>
15.8.90	<i>Argus</i> - Kotze	Haunted by terror in eyes of children	story of child refugees	'rampaging Zulu impis attacked Xhosas'	
15.8.90	<i>Daily Mail</i> - Tshokolo Molakeng and JoAnne Collinge	More hostel violence - and twelve people die	describes clashes and deaths	'savage fighting between rival groups of heavily armed migrant workers at hostels in the township of Tokoza yesterday.' 'clashes between Zulu migrants said to be loyal to Inkatha and Xhosa workers who do not belong to the organisation' 'a mixture of political/ethnic conflict involving migrant workers on the PWV in the last month'	<i>Note efforts to resist labeling the conflict in ethnic terms - could not have a stronger contrast with Kotze's analysis</i>

e	Paper & Byline	Title	Themes	Origin / cause of violence	Comment
.90	<i>Star</i> (Craig Kotze)	Pangas flash amid cries of dying men	reporter's eyewitness accounts plus story of child refugees	fighting attributed to Zulu-Xhosa ethnic hatred; no specific details given	<i>See detailed analysis in the text</i>
.90	<i>Argus - Argus</i> Correspondent	Clashes at railway stations: More killed	Violence spreads Body counts from station clashes in Johannesburg and Soweto 'On the East Rand the situation was stabilised by security force action after two days of savage fighting' 'Walter Sisulu is trying to set up an urgent meeting with Minister Vlok to discuss the violence and the role of the police,' said an ANC source	states that Zulu and Xhosa factions attacked each other	<i>Note disease metaphor of violence - 'violence spreads'</i>  <i>Note the writer's conviction that police play a constructive role</i>  <i>ANC questions about the role of police are noted but not pursued.</i>
.90	<i>Sowetan</i> - Matshube Mfолоe	130 die in ER war - Impis launch blitzkrieg		'the squatter area which housed more than 800 Xhosa-speaking families was a pre-dawn target of armed Zulu warriors yesterday'	<i>Note Xhosa-Zulu tribalist narrative is published in Sowetan</i>
.90	<i>Daily Mail</i> - Cassandra Moodley, Wally Mbhele and Mark Gevisser	A town at war with itself: Hundreds flee a small East Rand town as the most savage battle in years erupts	death toll rose to 140 police appear to be even-handedly disarming both sides - but residents asking why they had not done so earlier	Zulu-speakers v. Xhosa speakers at war in Tokoza 250 Xhosas attacked Zulu-speakers at a Tokoza hostel	<i>Xhosa-Zulu narrative now in Daily Mail although (see following report) -</i>
.90	<i>Daily Mail</i> - JoAnne Collinge and Drew Forrest	The terror: Inkatha and police are blamed	cites various leaders and spokespersons asserting that police are complicit	'it was a mere smokescreen to label the conflict 'Zulu-Xhosa ethnic violence' 'allegations that Inkatha was exporting Natal-style violence to the Transvaal'	<i>- the ethnic analysis is undermined on the same day in another report by different journalists and - (see following report) -</i>

Paper & Byline	Title	Themes	Origin / cause of violence	Comment
<i>Daily Mail</i> - John Perlman	Why do scenes such as this take place in SA? (with photo of man brandishing a panga running past a police casset, as police hold their shotguns passively)	Cites the Dangerous Weapons Act and asks why police are not disarming people who brandish weapons in East Rand townships, when they have wasted no time in disarming people in other contexts  Raises question of right to carry 'traditional weapons'.	suggests police complicity with Inkatha	<i>- and an additional report points to police complicity with Inkatha in the violence.</i>
<i>Argus</i> - John Viljoen	'Fighting over the political pie' /	'In the early years of last century the military machine of the Zulu king Shaka sowed death and destruction, crushing tribes far and wide ... but academics say it is simplistic to describe this week's bloodbaths as 'Zulu on Xhosa''	Dr Patrick Harries ... says the analysis of the conflict in ethnic terms is simplistic; notes that 'ANC adherents ... are not exclusively Xhosas.'  Dr Phil Bonner agrees that the Zulu on Xhosa analysis was simplistic. 'Inkatha may be attempting to develop the organisation on a national level - this may be a factor. But I don't believe that Inkatha central structures would advocate violence for this end. It must come from somewhere else - perhaps lower down.'	<i>Note that interviewees reject an ethnic analysis but the metanarrative in the article remains 'explaining the Zulu-Xhosa violence', and appeals to tradition to bolster such an analysis</i>
<i>Star</i> - no byline	Walkout ends Tokoza peace rally	about half of a crowd walked out of a peace rally after the suggestion that police help be sought to retrieve belongings of hostel dwellers who fled the fighting. 'We cannot be led like sacrificial lambs, by the police, into the hands of armed men in the hostels,' a hostel dweller said.	not specified	<i>The event constitutes a display of conviction among residents that police are involved - yet their opinion is not taken up in other reports - in contrast to the use of residents' voices that assert violence is ethnic in origin</i>

	Paper & Byline	Title	Themes	Origin / cause of violence	Comment
.90	<i>Sowetan</i> - Kenosi Modisane and Dan Seokane	Soweto erupts	Body counts in different places	'... fighting between alleged Inkatha members and non-Zulu residents ...'	<i>Sowetan appears to have rejected the Zulu-Xhosa analysis but their opinion is not taken up in white papers in the group. Reports flow from white to black papers in the group, not vice versa</i>
.90	<i>Weekend Argus</i> - Michael Shafto	Abandoned bodies litter streets - Children lose the luxury of innocence	'life is as cheap as dirt these days' 'For the children of Tokoza the luxury of innocence ... has been blasted to smithereens, the way a grenade might blow a shack apart'	'Contrary to earlier reports it appears that both Zulus and Xhosas lived together in the squatter camp. Men of both tribes also lived in the hostels.  The initial fighting ... broke out over gambling among the many unemployed. The Zulus accused a Xhosa man of cheating. One of the Zulus pulled a gun. It was the match that lit the fuse leading to the powderkeg of violence.'	<i>Zulu-Xhosa analysis begins to wobble</i>
.90	<i>City Press</i> - Nat Diseno	Face to face with rampaging 'red' menace	violence moves to Soweto	'Early on Thursday morning, people on their way to work were set upon by vicious hordes of Zulu-speaking migrant workers who live in hostels in the townships. The attackers wore red headbands and other red clothing.'	<i>Beginning of hostel causal narrative.</i>
.90	<i>Daily Mail</i> - DM Reporters	Safeguard us and lock the hostels, Sisulu tells Vlok	Sisulu calls on government to lock the hostels as they are the source of most attacks	'Sisulu made it clear that he did not believe that the conflict was a straightforward battle between Inkatha and its political opponents. 'Right wing extremists and other reactionary forces are certainly part of what is taking place. The aim is to undermine the ANC and the forward-looking programme.'	<i>At this point the Daily Mail is one of the very few white papers willing to consider ANC leadership as an expert source. Other papers tend to treat their opinion as biased, while police are treated as experts.</i>

Date	Paper & Byline	Title	Themes	Origin / cause of violence	Comment
20.8.90	<i>Sowetan</i> - Sy Makaringe	The hostel factor - Verwoerd's ghastly legacy cause of township carnage	details of hostel life; 'the common denominator in all these clashes is the hostel factor'	anger against the migrant labour system has allowed violence to get this bad	<i>Sowetan takes up the hostels-narrative</i>
20.8.90	<i>Natal Witness</i> - Bryan Pearson	Township 'soldiers' describe their war	stories of teenage boys caught up in the fighting. they bemoan their 'abandonment' by the leaders of their groups	<p>'Both sides blame each other for sparking the hostilities. They have also both embraced political banners - Zulu speakers the Inkatha party, and youths the African National Congress (ANC). ...</p> <p>'David Rawana (15) complained that 'since this whole thing began we haven't seen a single ANC official ... we've been abandoned - we're just cannon-fodder,' he said. 'Where is Umkhonto when we need them most?' ... 'If our leaders are so concerned about peace why aren't they here right now?' asked David.</p> <p>'His views were shared, to some extent, by Zulu-speakers ... [who were] all migrant workers from Natal who have had to leave their families behind. [They] denied that they were all Inkatha members.</p> <p>'It's just because we live in the hostels that we're labeled Inkatha. I'm politically neutral,' said a man wearing a balaclava.</p>	<i>An unusual report offering a selection of accounts that subvert the dominant narrative framing the conflict as between Xhosa/ANC - Zulu-IFP. Yet these are presented in the context of that narrative frame, as the conundrum and the absurdity, rather than the reality. Inductive reasoning rules.</i>

Date	Paper & Byline	Title	Themes	Origin / cause of violence	Comment
21.8.90	<i>Star</i> Craig Kotze	East Rand violence shows no signs of ceasing	'... another eight bodies were found in Tembisa, pushing the toll in eight days of tribal fighting in the area to 280, police said'  total to date = 392	'Xhosas and Zulus were stopping traffic and searching vehicles, police said'  '...in Tembisa ... the death toll for eight days of fighting between Xhosas and Zulus stood at 31, said Lieutenant van Zweel'  'Peace talks in Tembisa between Zulus and Xhosas, arbitrated by police, broke down yesterday evening ...'  '...in KwaThema, where 28 people died yesterday, a peace accord between Zulus and Xhosas, once again initiated by police, was reached ...'	<i>Zulu-Xhosa analysis and police mediatory role reasserted with vigour. Kotze seems to have been sidelined at this point: he does not play a major role in covering the violence.</i>
21.8.90	<i>Daily Mail</i> - no byline	Police broker peace after 56 die in new hostel war	police broker a peace meeting  horrific eyewitness accounts of killings on basis of summary mob judgements about a person's ethnicity	ethnic conflict rooted in Inkatha recruitment drives at hostels	<i>The headline was probably hastily written by a sub-editor who had not read the whole story, as the peace treaty is mentioned only in the first paragraph. Police mediation is not mentioned again in the story.</i>
21.8.90	<i>Daily Mail</i> - editorial	Hostel life: A formula for disaster	describes conditions in hostels	'It [hostel life] is also the most obvious explanation for the outburst of vicious violence that grips Rand townships'  'Migrant labour is an abomination that will give rise to an endless cycle of violence if the working and living conditions of the migrants are not addressed.'	<i>The report leaves many questions unanswered. Why should hostels be the cause of such savagery? Why should blacks suddenly turn on blacks in the moment that the end of apartheid becomes visible. The approach fails to make sense of the timing of the violence</i>

Date	Paper & Byline	Title	Themes	Origin / cause of violence	Comment
22.8.90	<i>Star</i> - Musa Mapisa	Victims of violence: We are innocent	victims of the fighting interviewed in hospital say that 'they are innocent people who have mistakenly been identified with political organisations to which they do not belong' - several cases cited where there was no apparent reason for the assaults / attempted murders except for symbols that may have been interpreted as signs of being Zulu	'the war between Inkatha and ANC supporters' 'common thugs' taking advantage of fighting	<i>The Star presents the conflict as an ideological one, between the IFP and ANC.</i>
23.8.90	<i>Sowetan</i> - Sowetan Reporters and Sapa	Bloody 500 mark - Baby dies as Reef toll soars	eyewitness accounts; body counts; flashpoints.	faction fighting	<i>Here Sowetan makes not a single mention of any Zulu-Xhosa tribal factor. Details of alleged 'faction fighting' are not specified.</i>
23.8.90	<i>Star</i> - Stan Hlope and Herbert Mabuza	Inside the dismal hostels of death	asks who are the hostel inmates; catalogues hostel living conditions	'These are the township hostels where tribal clashes have left more than 450 dead in the past week'	<i>The Star takes on the hostels narrative.</i>
24.8.90	<i>Daily Mail</i> - Mondli Makhanya	Soweto's killing fields	Reporter spends a night behind the barricades in Soweto	residents/comrades v. Zulu hostel dwellers. Report dwells on the fact that by now everyone has had to choose sides regardless of prior political allegiances.	<i>Daily Mail is seeks to explain what motivates individuals in the fighting - the report is inconclusive. No single metanarrative seems to make any sense. However, on the same day - (see next row)</i>

Date	Paper & Byline	Title	Themes	Origin / cause of violence	Comment
24.8.90	<i>Daily Mail</i> - no byline	A frightened voice from the centre of the violence	Story of one man (pseudonym John) who is a migrant worker from Natal, 'caught in the middle of something that threatens to destroy his already desolate life' 'John joined Inkatha because it is his only way to avoid death or a life on the run. Since clashes on the Reef broke out he has worn a red headband while in the hostel.'	ANC-Inkatha violence spurred on by Inkatha resistance to an ANC recruitment drive 'John says Inkatha is being aided by white policemen and while this continues the fighting will never stop.'	<i>- this report offers tentative evidence that State-sponsored forces were setting up the conflicts - and points to people instrumentalising their own ethnicity in order to survive - and points again to police complicity in the violence. However, also on the same day - (see next row)</i>
24.8.90	<i>Daily Mail</i> - Mondli Makhanya	Running battle - then peace comes to Kagiso	peace accord in Kagiso: parties to disarm; Inkatha to evacuate a hotel from which many attacks launched women's march for peace	Inkatha-ANC violence	<i>- this report of the day's events continues to use a narrative framework in which the violence is constructed as an ANC-IFP struggle.</i>
28.8.90	<i>Daily Mail</i> - Mark Gevisser, Glenda Daniels	Soweto: A city mourns its dead	describes a funeral for eight victims, attended by approx. 15000, organised by the ANC to rally for peace, 'a way for people to respond to the incomprehensibility of the past two weeks in the way that was learnt during earlier violence: the political funeral.'	'It was an event intended to reiterate the ANC position on the current violence by having speaker after speaker stand up and declare that the dead were not victims of black-on-black violence, but of apartheid, state repression, the security forces, the police.' cites Tutu: 'Tribalism? It is a lie, a lie, a lie - in Soweto we have lived together for years.' Sisulu: 'Who dares to say the ANC is fighting Zulus? The ANC fights the enemy - the apartheid regime!'	<i>The report underscores the general confusion about what was going on, and identifies the rejection, by key 'Struggle' leaders, of metanarratives of tribalism and ideological struggle.</i>
28.8.90	<i>Argus</i> - Philippa Fletcher	The horrors of single-sex hostels	conditions in hostels	people dehumanised by hostels; isolates them from community. The breakdown foments violence	<i>Hostel narrative again.</i>

Date	Paper & Byline	Title	Themes	Origin / cause of violence	Comment
30.8.90	<i>Star</i> - Helen Grange	Fierce debate over role of hostels	calls to do away with hostels	Hostels blamed for creating conditions that foment ethnic movements	<i>Hostel narrative again.</i>
6.9.90	<i>Argus</i> - Correspondent	'Armed whites in pre-dawn raid on hostel'	<p>'Sebokeng residents claim armed whites took part in a pre-dawn attack on a Sebokeng hostel where the SADF later shot dead 11 people'</p> <p>Hostel residents claim they saw:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>●armed whites on a roof sniping at fleeing men</li> <li>●a white man standing on the shoulders of another to climb onto a dormitory roof</li> <li>●baladava-clad men with white hands clasping rifles crouching among a group of blacks who launched an attack on two hostel blocks</li> <li>●white men driving three vans that dropped a large group of black men at the hostel entrance several hours before trouble erupted.</li> </ul>	possibility of a conspiracy behind the violence	<i>Further published evidence of a hidden hand behind the violence. The report makes no mention of ethnicity as a possible cause.</i>
8.9.90	<i>Evening Post</i> - Weekend Post correspondent	'Mystery force' behind violence	eyewitness accounts that whites were assisting in violence  speculation	'Police are investigating a 'mysterious force' believed to be fanning township unrest and black-on-black violence in South Africa  Cites Walter Sisulu: 'A mysterious force not necessarily Inkatha' seemed to be at work in South Africa.	<i>More evidence of a hidden hand.</i>

Date	Paper & Byline	Title	Themes	Origin / cause of violence	Comment
10.9.90	<i>Star</i> - Staff Reporters	50 more slaughtered in township violence - Squatters hacked and shot, shacks demolished	Bodycount; accounts of bodily damage and places where bodies found	Ethnicity not offered as cause Frank Chikane quoted as saying that he had enough evidence to 'show police are killing us'	<i>Significant that police involvement is suggested; ethnicity is clearly rejected as a causal narrative.</i>
11.9.90	<i>Sowetan</i> - Kenosi Modisane	White link is probed - Cops look into claims of white vigilantes	'Police said yesterday they were investigating allegations that whites were involved in the violence in the townships'	allegations of a sinister force	<i>Hidden hand. narrative</i>
14.9.90	<i>Weekly Mail</i> - Eddie Koch	Who are these whites behind the rooidoeke?	Evidence to back suggestions that whites and security forces are involved in the attacks, as well as in training Inkatha operatives in guerilla tactics and the use of Eastern-bloc weaponry : body of a white man removed from Phola Park after fighting IFP man arrested after handing out AK47 rifles before an attack on a Sebokeng hostel white men in a minibus killed six in a random drive-by shooting white men in blackface allegedly involved in a Sebokeng attack	'fears are mounting that clandestine units or rogue elements of the security forces are involving themselves in the fighting to scupper peace talks between the government and the African National Congress.'	<i>Hidden hand. narrative</i>

Date	Paper & Byline	Title	Themes	Origin / cause of violence	Comment
15.9.90	<i>Pretoria News</i> No byline.	FW sees 'hidden hand' in violence	More attacks. Mandela announces that FW de Klerk had conceded the existence of a sinister 'third force' manipulating the Reef violence	'Mandela said the ANC was convinced the latest spate of indiscriminate and unprovoked attacks on commuters and citizens was the work of highly professional and well-trained killers. ... What we have here are the beginnings of a Renamo movement.'	<i>Mandela and ANC figures move centre-stage and begin to be represented as expert sources rather than ideologues in this mainstream newspaper. Usage of phrase 'third force' still new; used in quotation marks.</i>
15.9.90	<i>Cape Times</i> Anthony Johnson	'Hidden hand'	as above	'Sapa reports that Mr Mandela said after the meeting with Mr de Klerk, '... the government no longer believed the clashes were between black and black, Inkatha and the ANC, or Zulu and Xhosa, but that some hidden hand was behind it.'	<i>Hidden hand / 'third force'</i>
22.9.90	<i>Argus</i> - Frans Esterhuysen	Textbook terror	fears of a Renamo-style group behind violence notion of a third force is gaining credence examination of Renamo-style atrocities in Mozambique	indiscriminate attacks on trains and taxis is a sophisticated strategy to sow terror, according to a political consultant, Jan du Plessis, who has studied the banned <del>terror</del> manual, <i>Mini-manual of the urban guerilla</i> by Latin-American Carlos Marighella.	<i>Notion of a third force takes centre stage.</i>

## Narrative 1: Zulu v. Xhosa Tribalism

Until August 15 1990, township violence had generally been reported by major media as 'black-on-black violence'. As early as July, *Sowetan* and the *Daily Mail* had carried reports of rumours that there would be violence, as well as accounts of fighting between supporters of Inkatha and those of the ANC.

Of significance is the report carried by *The Star* on August 14. Headlined 'Police move in to township battleground' and by-lined 'Crime Reporter' (Craig Kotze held the position) the report defines the violence as a power-struggle between the ANC and Inkatha. But in the report by Craig Kotze and others on August 15, *The Star* led with the following story that boasted an absolute certainty that the violence was ethnic in origin. From one day to the next, then, a reporter undergoes a complete paradigm shift as to the origins of the violence. The paradigm of his conversion happened to be the tribalist one pushed by the police at every press briefing; the journalist happened to be an undercover intelligence agent paid by the South African Police.

### *The Star*, August 15 1990

#### Troops move in to stop the slaughter

*Zulus and Xhosas in East Rand battles*

Troops were rushed to violence-racked East Rand townships today after continuing running battles between Zulus and Xhosas left at least 39 dead and 65 injured in Thokoza, Katlehong and Vosloorus.

[...]

Unofficial estimates are that up to 55 people may have been killed in the spreading violence, but police could not confirm this.

Much of the fighting has been characterised by clashes between Zulus and Xhosas.

Fighting erupted early today at Vosloorus hostels when Inkatha members allegedly attacked residents.

The East Rand violence started in Thokoza on Sunday when a hostel dweller was killed. The incident escalated into full-blown clashes between hostel dwellers and squatters in nearby Phola Park.

Last night, violence spread to nearby Katlehong and Vosloorus, leaving a Thokoza peace pact in tatters as Zulus from various townships joined forces to attack Xhosas, putting them to flight.

### Comments

Note the certainty of ethnic hatred.

Report doesn't state what has characterised the rest of the violence.

Who says they were Zulus?

Who says they were Xhosas?

The fighting has primarily been centred at hostels and squatter camps and is a continuation of the 'hostel trend' in Transvaal township fighting recently. Sebokeng in the Vaal triangle and Kagiso on the West Rand experienced the same pattern.

Vosloorus hostel dwellers said a large impi of Zulus attacked their hostel early today. 'They came with sticks and assegais,' hostel dweller Themba Mahlangu (22) told *The Star* this morning.

[continues]

With a failure to identify the alleged Zulus in any terms other than an assumed ethnicity, the report relies on mythic wars between Zulus and Xhosas to make sense.

the time I was an intern of the Mediation Project for Journalists and studying narratives of violence in the press. In staff seminars we had noted that stories with Kotze's byline were likely to be what we considered inflammatory, and structured in very rigid, unqualified binaries, as was this report. Seven years later, at the Media Hearings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, he spoke about his work.

CRAIG KOTZE (INTRODUCING HIS SUBMISSION): Did I spy on my journalistic colleagues? Did I deliberately manipulate my reports or suppress news? The answer to both is no. This was simply not my mission and was also at no stage required of me by either the SAP or the SADF. [...]

The guiding principles were that truth is the best communication or propaganda. And that one would be caught out if lies or distortions were disseminated. [...]

Throughout I continued to rely on and extend my extensive contact networks in the SAP, traffic, ambulance and fire departments, etc. As well as in the community at large. At all times it was my mission to balance in so far possible, what I came to perceive as an inherent media bias in the English liberal media against the police. [...]

It was never required of me ever to tell a lie or to distort information. But it was expected of me to effectively market the viewpoint of the Ministry at all times. [...]

Indeed, it was exactly the strength and power of the SAP and SADF that made a negotiated settlement and democratic elections possible. This created a power balance in which neither side could be violently overthrown and made negotiation the only viable alternative.

During both the conflict-torn 1980s and the subsequent negotiation years in the 1990s I was never ideologically or politically motivated. I did not wake up every day and say good morning South Africa, another fine day to defend Apartheid.

I realised even in the early 1980s that Apartheid was dead and the only question remaining was how it would be dismantled. By revolutionary violence costing untold lives or by negotiated settlement of some kind or another. In the 1980s no one could say how Apartheid would be ended. [...]

Normal conditions and considerations simply could not and did not apply. This resulted in a distorted working environment for especially the media, where duty, truth and what was considered right and just, were extremely subjective concepts and very much in the eye of the beholder.

This affected everybody regardless of political, ideological or other affiliations. To put it bluntly, everybody was forced to choose sides in an ever-growing conflict. [...]

Anybody, even ANC supporters, became a victim of indiscriminate necklacing, car bombs, petrol bombs, limpet mines, AK-47 hand grenade attacks. This contrasted with the more targeted approach of the Security Forces, which tried not to alienate the masses by concentrating on persons falling under the broad definition of activists, albeit sometimes in a brutal and murderous fashion.

Of the thousands of people who died in the political conflict during the 1980's and the negotiation years, I believe that only a relative handful can be attributed to the action of the SAP and the SADF. However much individual Security Force atrocities are highlighted and publicised.

These views cannot simply be dismissed as the view of a white person clinging to the unnecessary privilege of pigmentocracy. [...]

The media was turned into a battle-ground because it failed or was inherently incapable of comprehensively covering the full story on both sides. The result was that the media itself was turned from being an impartial observer to an active participant in the struggle. [...]

The fundamental issue for me personally was how would we replace the old order, through revolution with its accompanying violence and I had plenty of examples that I saw with my own eyes about how that revolution would proceed if it were allowed to proceed or through a negotiated settlement. So quite frankly, I see myself as a soldier/policeman in that process, using journalistic skills to achieve that objective.

He does not make a connection between truth and power, and justice and injustice. He says that truth is in the eye of the beholder, but that it is the best propaganda. He says that he was a journalist using propaganda for a weapon but that he marketed the viewpoint of the Ministry of Defence. He says he took the side of the police but represents the police as neutral peacemakers who kept the parties apart and made a settlement possible.<sup>3</sup> He says that the police targeted political leaders but that the ANC killed the masses indiscriminately in train massacres. What was he when Goldstone reported on C10 in 1994, suggesting that that police unit had been involved in the attacks?

The question is pertinent. Kotze had negotiated a contract as liaison officer in the Department of Police, an appointment that continued into the new dispensation. When testifying, he must have known what Goldstone found.

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On August 16 1990 *The Star* ran a report without a byline, titled 'Pangas flash amid the cries

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Peter Sparks theorises that under the regime of PW Botha the State Security Council was structured as an inner world, operating on a need-to-know basis, able to operate independently and pursue its own agenda. In the Klerk years, he says, 'that agenda was to derail the transition. Instead, it alarmed the fractious negotiators into reaching agreement.' (Sparks 1995:158)

dying men. The same report - with a few alterations - appeared in that day's *Argus* in Cape Town, credited to Craig Kotze.

## *The Star*, August 16 1990

### **Pangas flash amid the cries of dying men**

The *Star*, 16.8.90

It was total war yesterday in the East Rand townships of Tokoza, Katlehong and Vosloorus - and the residents paid the price in blood, fear and grief.

Zulu impis swooped. Spears and pangas flashed and the dead, mostly Xhosas, piled up amid the cries of wounded and dying men.

Terrified women and children fled from razed squatter shacks and burning homes as police reported the finding of bodies with almost monotonous frequency:

'Tokoza, 7.45 am - six blacks found with stab wounds, taken to Tokaza [sic] Hospital. Katlehong, 7.59 am - the bodies of two men found with hackwounds.' And so it went on all day.

Huge groups of armed men gathered to launch attacks and counter-attacks, leaving behind bodies. Soldiers and police moved to intervene, forming barriers between warring groups. Children, caught in the middle, ran.

Squatter shacks were torched in Crossroads, near Katlehong, burning many residents to death.

A man was set alight by youths in front of journalists in Tokaza [sic]. He had been hunted down, stoned, doused with petrol and set alight. He lay bleeding and writhing on the ground before the journalists, and later police, arrived to help him.

'If there is no peace between us and the Zulus, they will kill us,' a young blanket-clad Xhosa man told his friend as they walked with sharpened sticks towards open land on the verge of Phola Park squatter camp.

Moments later, they and hundreds of other squatters were being body-searched and disarmed by police as part of an attempt by the army and police to defuse continuing fighting.

## **Comments**

The headline evokes motifs of tribal wars in colonial times.

Note pathos.

Notion of tribal war is unquestioned.

Binary narrative unquestioned.

Report introduces police perspective.

Motif: the ghastly spectacle; the consequences of tribalism.

Use of '7.59 am' is a rhetorical strategy. Provides illusion of a precise murder investigation, a la Agatha Christie.

Motif: irrationality. No attempt to identify a motive for attack, other than rampant tribalism. Note police and soldiers constructed entirely as peacemakers standing in the gap.

A young Sapa journalist and photographer had extinguished the flames with handfuls of sand.

A rather unlikely but useful quote, unattributed. Fiction? It's certainly a useful dramatic device.

The writer uses every possible opportunity to identify people as tribal - cf. use of 'blanket-clad Xhosa'. It was August and cold.

Surrounded by at least 20 police and army vehicles, the group sat a while in the dust before they moved, one by one, towards the policemen. Dropping their sticks, they raised their hands to be searched.

Resentment surfaced as the Casspirs moved off towards the Zulu-dominated Tokoza hostels. Left without a means of defence, the men shouted from the roadside towards the yellow vehicles: 'Inkatha, you are with Inkatha.'

A deadly silence at the hostels met the police contingent as they arrived to disarm the hostel dwellers. Doors were locked and no-one appeared.

[article moves into a sub-story on refugees in white suburbs, concluding with:] About 300 women and children, mostly Xhosas, who escaped from Crossroads camped next to the N3 highway with their belongings yesterday afternoon. They had nowhere to go.

They said the Zulus had vowed to track them down and 'destroy them' wherever they went.

Many people would have worn blankets to keep warm. That doesn't necessarily mean tribal - it may mean cold and poor.

I can't believe the disarming would have been quite as disarming - free of even harsh words:

Not stated what happened behind closed hostel doors. Were weapons redistributed, or seized?

'Mostly Xhosas' tribalises the fighting again.

No attempt to reinterpret / refigure this statement; which is taken as golden truth. Reinforces tribal / ethnic interpretation of conflict.

South African novelist Wilbur Smith might import the paragraphs directly into one of his novels of the romance, glory, dust and blood of tribal life in colonial Africa. Kotze seizes his moment of glory in the war zone. The adventure of language (to use Barthes' phrase cited earlier) allows Kotze to reinvent himself as an international war-zone reporter; - in his words evoking scenes previously confined to television coverage of the West Bank, Vietnam and other far-off trouble-spots' (*Star* 16.8.90). He is the man of the moment - literally. As Crime reporter of *The Star*, Johannesburg's largest daily paper, his reports are syndicated nationally, appearing in whole or in part in the *Pretoria News*, in *Sowetan* (the reports are identical but the headline is the more *Sowetan*-friendly 'From our correspondent'), in Cape Town's *Argus* and *Cape Times*, and picked up by the wire service - SAPA - for distribution to other newspapers outside Times Media Ltd and the Argus Group.

Craig Kotze played a vital role in the National Party's efforts to secure its continued position as mediator and its claim to be the best governance for South Africa. He suggests that his function, along with other 'spooks', was to persuade the rest of South Africa that black

governance would be a step backwards into the world of violent tribalism. As Crime Reporter Kotze was in pole position in the race among journalists to explain the violence as tribal in origin, and in turn entrench the need for white police and governance. Because his reports were syndicated nationally the apparent wave of consensus drowned out the opposition. Narrative logic is a powerful rhetoric; after widespread consensus was established, alternative press reporters who were schooled in identifying apartheid discourse<sup>4</sup> and who had been suspicious of glib ethnic explanations, began to look a little silly.

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It is surprising that Kotze's news editors published his narratives. Much evidence was led at the Media Hearings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission that the State Security Council actively pursued strategies to obtain the collaboration of senior journalists and editors. The subject demands further investigation, but that is not my purpose here. As Kotze says himself, truth is the best propaganda; moreover, few readers objected to his ethnic analysis. The hegemony of the time offered a fiction: ethnic differences, ethnic infighting; ethnic rivalry. Repeated often enough, taken seriously enough, and with enough resources (like newspaper column inches and police efforts) committed to it, a fiction is constituted as real (Thornton 1993:6).

In 'The myth of ethnic division: Township conflict on the Reef' sociologist Rupert Taylor asks why, if the ethnic interpretation was so flawed, was it so widely accepted?

The answer lies in recognising that the use of terms like Zulu and Xhosa is more than purely descriptive, that such terms articulate with the ideology and practice of apartheid and the way in which it has manipulated and given meaning to ethnicity in South Africa. For apartheid, drawing on organic notions of 'national' communities derived from German Romanticism, has created and given popular credence ... to the view that South Africa is a multi-national country comprised of discrete ethnic groups, such as Zulu and Xhosa, each having a common unity stemming from common origin, each possessing immutable cultural and psychological attributes. Thus many, especially white South Africans, have come to accept that ethnic groups have an immanent reality and exclusivity that [constitute] ... an independent causal factor ... constituting the essence of the Reef conflict. Such claims cannot, however, be supported (Taylor 1991:5).

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<sup>4</sup> At the time, *South African Keywords* (ed. Sharp and Boonzaaier, 1989) had recently been published and had raised awareness of the language of apartheid.

<sup>5</sup> See the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, vol. 4 chapter 6, 'Institutional hearing: The media', paragraphs 67-92. URL: <http://www.truth.org.za/final/4chap6.htm>

Although ethnic identity was not the primordial motivation for the conflict that it was claimed to be, it is clear that identity was a factor instrumentalised by those fomenting the conflicts; this added to the confusion. 'Cultural mythology has a power and logic all its own,' writes Caryl Rivers (1996:xiii), 'in time it becomes impossible to separate it from truth.'

While tension between Zulu migrants and non-Zulu-speakers had been a problem in township conflicts since 1976 (there were many allegations that Zulu migrant workers were set up by police to terrorize the community), this had not been the major source of Rand conflicts in the first six months of 1990. Until late July, the major causes of conflict had almost monotonously occurred in cycles of violence from protests against Town Council corruption to tear-gassings and shootings by police; squatter shack demolitions and conflicts with police; protests against rent, water and electricity tariffs and conflicts with police; rivalry between the PAC, Inkatha and the ANC, and gang and taxi 'wars' and revenge killings which littered township streets with killed people. Of Xhosa-Zulu dispute there was little evidence, but for sporadic rumours that 'the Zulus are coming' which in one instance sent hundreds of Katlehong residents to seek shelter at the local police station for the night. Serious violence - that is, multiple killings over a few days - had been between free-market and unionised taxi federations,<sup>6</sup> these were conflicts over routes and ethics and legitimate control rather than ethnicity.

### **Grappling with ethnicity**

Since the *Mail* (both *Weekly Mail* and *Daily Mail*) was reasonably familiar with political happenings in townships, the idea that this was a Zulu-Xhosa war did not go down well with its reporters. 'War talk' was first reported in the *Daily Mail* on July 30 under the headline: 'Hostel tense as Inkatha men take up arms 'for war'.' The report described a situation in Nancefield Hostel, Soweto, where Inkatha members had met to discuss 'defensive' strategies should they be attacked by ANC cadres in a 'false recruitment drive'.

Thereafter, two brief reports on hostel violence appeared on August 7 and 9, headlined 'Kagiso tense after 15 killed in hostel violence' and 'Kagiso hostel violence over as enemies sign a peace pact'. Both reports tell of protracted conflict between Inkatha and UDF/ANC supporters and assume that all migrant workers fall in to one or the other

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<sup>6</sup> In Katlehong for example a taxi dispute had flared several times between February and June 1990.

category. The three reports constitute variations on a theme in which each side accuses the other of 'recruitment drives' and of attacking those who refused affiliation.

On August 15, the *Daily Mail* ran the following report that offers four definitions of the fighting. The number of definitions, and the different texture of each, is a clue to the extent of the confusion over exactly what was going on.

**More hostel violence--and twelve people die**

*Daily Mail*, 15.8.1990

At least 12 people died in savage fighting between rival groups of heavily armed migrant workers at hostels in the township of Thokoza yesterday. ... The battles in the township near Alberton are part of an upsurge of violence involving Inkatha supporters and other township residents in the Transvaal. ... [E]ight migrants died in overnight clashes between Zulu migrants said to be loyal to Inkatha and Xhosa workers who do not belong to the organisation. ... The Thokoza conflict brings to...66 the deaths caused by a mixture of political/ethnic conflict involving migrant workers on the PWV in the last month.

[continues; emphases mine]

Although the writers of the report are careful with the terms they use to define the parties in conflict, the spread produced by the paste-up artist is unambiguous: for alongside, the main photograph depicts a Zulu brandishing a panga at the camera with a Casspir behind him and below that, an armed Zulu 'impi' jog unhindered between SAP riot control vehicles.

The following day, between photographs of refugees, teargas and soldiers, the lead story was 'A town at war with itself - Hundreds flee a small East Rand town as the most savage battle in years erupts'. Like their colleagues in other media, *Daily Mail* journalists too began, albeit tentatively, to define the conflict as binary in structure: Inkatha or Zulu vs non-Zulu and ANC and especially the Xhosa. Inside, another report, next to yet another picture of a Casspir with what seems to be the same man from the previous day's spread, is headlined '[w]hy do scenes such as this take place in SA?'

The report argues that police were siding with the Inkatha and/or Zulu against their opposition, the non-racial alliance: a point since supported in testimony before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

At this point, *Sowetan* is suspicious of the tribalist explanation, couching its use of ethnic identifications, and marking a tribalist view very clearly as that of the police. But the next day (August 16) in a report by the same reporter, the performance of a Zulu impi is

sufficient to convince reporter Matshube Mfoloe that these are 'Zulu warriors' determined to attack 'Xhosa-speaking families'. The categories are not quite as stark as Kotze's - they are qualified, albeit marginally.

On August 16 the confusion over explanations of the violence is stark in the *Daily Mail* which ran three reports. The news report of the day's events relies on the categories 'Zulu-speakers' and 'Xhosa speakers', resisting tribalism in favour of the less loaded function of language. A second story cites leaders, seeking an explanation in party battles for turf on the Rand. And a third story, a feature by John Perlman, studies a photograph of a man running past a police Casspir brandishing a panga while police look on sheepishly. He warns of police complicity with Inkatha.

On August 17 the tribal narrative begins to break down in the *Argus* and the *Star*. Reports no longer use tribal categories uncritically. But the habit is hard to break: in a feature, two leading academics are interviewed. Both reject ethnicity as a sole cause of the violence. Yet the report begins with images of Zulu King Shaka 'crushing tribes far and wide'. In a similar vein, evidence that fighters on the ground are not affiliated to the tribe or the party they are supposed to be (in terms of media narratives) are reported as interesting 'man bites dog' exceptions. There is very little deductive thinking. Cultural myths shape truths.

*New Nation* reported (August 17) that no arrests had been made in connection with any of the 156 deaths that week, suggesting that police were unwilling to intervene and stall the violence.

## **The story of the hostels**

When it became apparent, after fighting pushed the death toll to over 500 by August 23, that no political leaders were able to restore order, press narratives began to focus on the system of apartheid. On August 19, a new theme entered the news: conditions in the hostels.

Within two days, hostels had become a national issue and the focus of the second week's press explanations of the violence. From a *Daily Mail* editorial:

Here's a formula for conflict: take a large number of men, mostly illiterate, unskilled and desperate for work. Put them in the worst possible living conditions, say a single-sex hostel where they are isolated from life outside and there is little entertainment or relief from the drudgery of their day-to-day labour. Group them according to language. Finally, pay them little and allow them to visit home only once or twice a year. It sounds like a recipe as South African as bobotie. It is also the most

obvious explanation for the outburst of vicious violence that grips Rand townships (*Daily Mail* 21.8.90).

Rich Mkhondo, a South African correspondent for Reuters, wrote in *Reporting South Africa*:

Those who blamed the carnage on apartheid argued that ... the children of apartheid were discriminated against, denied their dignity, treated like foreigners in the country of their birth and taught to despise other cultures. Anger and frustration boiled over. Therefore, they said, it was apartheid that caused the carnage. ... But then one was tempted to ask: at such a late hour in the history of the country, did apartheid or suffering really account for the brutality of power struggles? ... Like many people, my family and friends refused to believe that the sudden eruption of violence was sheer coincidence or fate. ... Whenever peace hovered, carnage erupted (Mkhondo 1993:54-56).

The narrative that hostels were responsible for fomenting ethnic hatred took on much salience, and many newspapers ran in-depth features on the appalling conditions of hostel life. Narratives blamed the violence on the victims of apartheid, and introduced the idea of the lost generation. The implication was that apartheid had been so ghastly that most blacks had been so damaged that they had become monsters - and *voilà!* a return to the myth of blacks as violent monsters. In the search for monocausal narratives, the door was effectively closed to analyses that could account for rumours of white involvement, or the intentions of apartheid's ideologues.

### **The narrative becomes an ANC v. IFP war**

Pierre Bourdieu, discussing the structures of the journalistic industry, comments that the competition for news consumers takes the form of competition for the 'newest news':

Imprinted in the field's structure and operating mechanisms, this competition for priority calls for and favours professionals inclined to place the whole practice of journalism under the sign of speed (or haste) and permanent renewal. ... This pace favours a sort of permanent amnesia, the negative obverse of the exaltation of the new ... (Bourdieu 1998:72).

Media amnesia was a feature of the coverage of the war on the East Rand. Explanation of the conflict took on a third explanation, this time as a fight between two political parties.

Although journalists had already switched narrative once without explanation, and although the conflict was obviously complex, the search for a single news angle continued to derail truth and a violence began to be represented as a single conflict between two political parties engaged in a struggle for turf. The industry's silence on its obvious fumbings is indicative of a state of denial that

leading the pack to bark up not one or two but several wrong trees in quick succession. Every journalist covering the story must have been aware of the radical shifts in the explanation of the violence, but no-one found the space or the voice to consider that in the onward and progressive search for truth, each day's accounts were necessarily partial and situated. There is nothing wrong with partial and situated accounts - unless they are presented as complete and omniscient, yet that is what the industry demanded of its writers. The assumption here is that news consumers expect nothing less. But I suspect that journalists' reputations would be far better if there were a willingness to deal with the impossibility of packaging absolute truth each day. That debate has its place elsewhere.

Ironically, in most reports that represented the East Rand's battles as a two-party conflict, a theme was the very absurdity of casting it thus. In many reports of bodily hackings, chaos, horror, burning and death there are stories of people who had nothing to do with any of Zulu-or Xhosa-ness, Inkatha or the ANC, but just had the wrong symbols on them. One story tells of a Zulu taxi driver who thought the men at a road barricade were Xhosa, so he answered them in that tongue and was killed: they were Zulu.<sup>7</sup> Another story tells of a youth on a train had a T-shirt with a mealie advertisement on, which happened to have some green on it. He was beaten up by assailants who couldn't read, but thought he was advertising the ANC.<sup>8</sup> Another youth who, having just necklaced a hostel dweller whose smouldering corpse lay nearby, told a reporter, 'I don't belong to any political organisation. I belong to Soweto. I am a resident. But I was provoked by Inkatha ... just to protect the residents, that's all.'<sup>9</sup> His words suggest that there was a great deal of confusion on the ground as to why the fighting was so intense. That confusion, however, was narrated as the helplessness of the individual on the ground rather than a clue that the escalation of the conflict had reached a stage where people did not know why they were fighting, and were not, therefore, following party leaders into battle. That this man did not belong to a political party was narrated as an anachronism and an absurdity ('they know not what they do') rather than a clue to a bigger picture of state complicity in fomenting chaos. Despite many similar stories, newspapers began to assert confidently that the violence split fairly and evenly into ideological camps:

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<sup>7</sup> 'A frightened voice from the centre'. *Daily Mail* 24.8.90.

<sup>8</sup> 'Battle for Supremacy'. *Star* 19.8.90

<sup>9</sup> 'Inside the mind of a necklace killer' *Daily Mail* 20.8.90

Spokesmen for both Inkatha and the ANC have said different things about the violence, but those closest to the fighting - including victims - have repeatedly stated the fighting is deeply rooted in the two organisations' different ideological viewpoints. (*Star*, August 19)

Writing on journalism in El Salvador, anthropologist Mark Pedelty notes that the imperative to objectivity in journalism generates a narrative that is structured by the idea of balance: attributing equal blame to the conflicting parties. The journalists he interviews speak of 'balanced structure' and 'the equalisation tactic' as a strategy of survival in the front line (Pedelty 1995:174). Yet this rigid formula of activity gives the lie as much prominence as it does the truth (1995:173).

Ten days into the violence, the translation of the conflict into equal and opposite ethnic groups was complete: mainstream newspapers confidently asserted that the battle was Zulu/Inkatha v. Xhosa/ANC.<sup>10</sup> At that time, the left-leaning *Daily Mail* published 'Soweto's killing fields,' a report filed by Mondli Makhanya after he spent a night in Soweto, which attributes the fighting to a conflict between Inkatha and the Comrades. The violence was at this point firmly established as a conflict between two sides. This frame dominated news coverage until early September.

I am not seeking to heap opprobrium on journalists who worked to make sense of the violence under very dangerous conditions. What is of significance here is it is unrealistic to expect that a journalist can go into a complex and terrifying situation for a night and come back with a complete grasp of the origins and nature of the conflict. The expectation forces journalists to be overly reliant on the rhetoric and techniques of narrative to create coherence in a situation that may be anything but congruous. Journalists thus become maximally exposed to the rift between narrative and reality because their work is reliant on narrative grammar - the adventure of language - to create the appearance of sense, reality, and rationality. The professional imperative to create logical, coherent stories that order time and impute motive is a flawed one. Those flaws become critical when news is written to deadline, because fast-thinking is dependent on prior ideas and inductive logic. 'Les fast thinkers' produce what Bourdieu calls 'cultural fast food' (1998:29). Moreover, such inductive analysis constitutes narrative violence in situations where it purports to explain a rapidly escalating conflict, because it can pour the fuel from prior (and often unrelated) social tensions onto a small spark.

Says Pierre Bourdieu in *On Television*:

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<sup>10</sup> See 'Game of dice sparked the violence' *City Press* 17.8.90; 'Fighting over the political pie' *Argus* 17.8.90; 'The battle for supremacy' *Star* 19.8.90; 'Vooruitsig op vrede lyk skaal' *Rapport* 19.8.90.

dangers inherent in the ordinary use of television have to do with the fact that the images have the peculiar capacity to produce what literary critics call a *reality effect*. They show things and make people believe in what they show. This power to show is also a power to mobilise. It can give a life to ideas or images, but also to groups. The news, the incidents and accidents of everyday life, can be loaded with political or ethnic significance liable to unleash strong, often negative feelings, such as racism, chauvinism, the fear - hatred of the foreigner, or xenophobia. The simple report, the very fact of putting on record as a reporter, always implies a social construction of reality that can mobilise (or demobilise) individuals or groups. ... [J]ournalists acting in all good faith and in complete innocence - merely letting themselves be guided by their interests (meaning what interests them), presuppositions, categories of perception and evaluation, and unconscious expectations - still produce reality effects and effects in reality. Nobody wants these effects which, in certain situations, can be catastrophic (Bourdieu 1998:21).

### **The Third Force: Binary breakdown?**

Mandela said it was 'the National Intelligence Service, the CCB and Military Intelligence with groups such as Koevoet and Askari.'<sup>11</sup> Then-Minister of Police Adriaan Vlok said it was 'a dissident force within the ANC.'<sup>12</sup> *Sowetan* said whites were linked to it,<sup>13</sup> and Democratic Party stalwart Helen Suzman said the Third Force was the right wing<sup>14</sup> but senior AWB spokesman Kays Smit said it was faction fighting.<sup>15</sup> Umkhonto we Sizwe head Joe Modise said it consisted of elements of the police, the army and Inkatha.<sup>16</sup> The Institute for Contextual Theology said in the New Kairos Document that only the South African Defence Force could 'mount a national operation ... so sophisticated, so professional, so well co-ordinated and so invisible.'<sup>17</sup> But the Deputy Minister of Defence, Wynand Breytenbach, said suggestions that the SADF was involved with the Third Force were 'laughable', since 'the SADF served the whole population.'<sup>18</sup>

The speakers' subject: the Third Force; the 'invisible hand' behind the senseless violence.

The speakers had two points in common: in each case, the speaker exonerated his or her

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<sup>11</sup> Mandela cited in the *Star* 7.10.90

<sup>12</sup> Vlok cited in the *Natal Witness* 22.9.90

<sup>13</sup> Editorial in *Sowetan*, 21.9.90

<sup>14</sup> Suzman cited in *City Press*, 23.9.90

<sup>15</sup> Smit cited in *The Leader* 12.10.90

<sup>16</sup> Modise cited in the *Star* 23.9.90

<sup>17</sup> ICT document cited in *South*, 11.10.90

<sup>18</sup> Breytenbach cited in *The Citizen* 14.9.90

constituency from responsibility for the violence, accusing instead that constituency's most vilified rival. Second, each accusation appeared in a media narrative of events or an editorial argument.

Quite apart from the historical fact that a secret group of senior police were implicated in the violence on the East Rand, years later, the notion of the 'Third Force' makes a fascinating subject for a student of narrative. As a structural category within a binary narrative, the Third Force constitutes a mediating myth that enables a writer using a binary structure to acknowledge that there is something else going on besides the two-party conflict, without doing damage to the binary structure - or the writer's reputation. It enables a writer to give form to the idea of 'senselessness'; it offers a monocausal explanation for a story that will not fit a monocausal frame. It offers the illusion of complexity without having to explain it. As a catch-all for everyone's worst fears, the Third Force offers an anonymous scapegoat without giving offence. It is a subject without an identity; and functions as a conflict resolver in a situation where narrative has reached an impasse. White complicity in savagery in order to retain power is about to be exposed, but there is neither the political will nor the cultural courage to directly attribute responsibility for savagery. Identity and hegemony keep the cat in the bag.<sup>19</sup>

The Third Force quickly became a mythic category in the nation's need for a scapegoat, invoked in some of the most unlikely quarters; explaining the country's ills and divisions in a single combination of noun and adjective. To a student of the functions of myths in society the Third Force becomes a reconciling agent in a hung narrative. Writes Antjie Krog:

A myth is a unit of imagination which makes it possible for a human being to accommodate two worlds. It reconciles the contradictions of these two worlds in a workable fashion and opens the way between them. ... Myth makes it possible to live with what you cannot endure. And if the myth has been learnt well it becomes a word - a single word that switches on the whole system of comforting delusions. ... The function of a myth is to provide a logical model capable of overcoming a contradiction. The myth proves that things have always been like this, that things will never change (Krog 1998:190).

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<sup>19</sup> As a white journalist what made the Third Force story impossible to accept was that it implicated me and my people, the whites of South Africa, in evils on an incomprehensible scale. I did not believe it then because it simply could not be so. Such is the power of hegemony. Linked to identity, 'truth' becomes the best propaganda.

Violent events destabilise visions of order and civility in society. Violence creates moments of abnormality that rely on a cultural process to restore the idea of order in society. One of the primary ways in which humans do that is to tell stories, and in a media age, journalists are most often the ones to whom the lot falls to 'make sense' of violence - which is to tell of it in such a way as to restore the order that has been violated (see Thornton, 1994). Narrative is a particularly fitting tool for the job because of what narrative theorist Wallace Martin calls its 'retrodictive' quality. Whereas most sciences involve *prediction*, he says, narrative involves 'retrodition', because they concern the past:

It is the end of the temporal series - how things eventually turned out - that determines which event began it: we know it was a beginning because of the end. If a chance meeting ... comes to nothing, it was not a beginning, in fiction or fact. Thus history, fiction, and biography are based on cause-effect relations. Knowing an effect, we go back in time to find its causes; the effect 'causes' us to find 'causes' (which are effects of our search). The present moment is teeming with causes and beginnings, but we cannot recognise them; at some end we will say, 'Now I understand' (Martin 1986:74)

I have argued that the violence was intended to shape the narrative of the nation in such a way as to establish in public discourse the idea that the National Party was the much-needed mediator between the IFP and the ANC, and therefore essential to talks on the form of the new dispensation in South Africa. The aim of the attacks was the shaping of public perception, and the means, I suggest, was the narrative.

The story of the East Rand conflict, and the efforts of government to shape its reportage, suggests that there are many who believe there may be a vital relationship between media narratives, belief, and behaviour. The truths of propaganda are the mythemes of identity, and that in the chaos of conflict, the mobilisation of mythemes creates enduring frames of perception: enduring precisely because they are fleeting, partial and elusive, and in glimpsing them we believe that we have evidence, now, of what we have always suspected to be true. The contradictions of journalism and narrative were easily exploited.

**Part II**

**Innovative journalism at the *Natal Witness*  
in the New South Africa**

## **Journalism and Body-counting in KwaZulu-Natal**

*'If it bleeds it leads'*  
- Newsroom cliché

*Police report 25 murders*  
*POLICE in KwaZulu-Natal said yesterday that 25 people were murdered in the province at the weekend. Three elderly men, aged between 75 and 80, were killed near Nongoma on Sunday while six people were killed in Umlazi. -Sapa - Natal Witness, 6.12.94*

*'What we see blocks our sight.'*  
- Natal Witness Assistant Editor Khaba Mkhize

Much post-colonial anthropology offers evidence of the irrepressible creativity of human beings in situations of unequal power. In *Domination and the arts of resistance* James C Scott (1990)<sup>1</sup> explores patterns of resistance, subversion, and dissidence, and assembles the case that wherever power is exercised, strategies of resistance are pursued.

At the *Natal Witness* there were several journalists whose approach to their work was an innovative, imaginative response to the constraints of apartheid discourse and the nature of journalistic practices that had been formed in terms of race and inequality. The innovators and

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<sup>1</sup> *Domination and the arts of resistance* has been the subject of critique, particularly with reference to its notions of the nature of hegemony and the use of language (see Gal 1995 and Mitchell 1990). The work does, however, offer many useful insights into strategies of resistance and for that reason deserves attention.

resisters among journalists are able to imagine life and power relationships differently, and their stories were often - although not always - different to those that one was accustomed to reading in the South African press.

While there is much critique of South African news journalism, too little attention has been paid to the conditions that have encouraged imagination and innovation in newsrooms. I believe that a more helpful set of questions in a time of transformation are those that ask how and when do journalists think outside of given news frames? What issues are they raising? How are the innovators storying their news? When do their experiments succeed and endure, and when do they fail to do so?

This chapter and the next focus on journalists whose work was in some respect resistant to dominant practices and frames of perception. My interest at all times remains on narrative, and the connections between text and practice. Within that framework of interest, I want to explore how some journalists attempted to resist apartheid discourse; what practices they invented, what contradictions emerged in the process, and how and why experiments that promised so much were subsumed.

The debate begins with a discussion of several journalists' coverage of the war in KwaZulu-Natal between 1987 and 1994.

## **The war in Natal**

Between 1985 and 1997, KwaZulu-Natal became host to the most sustained and intense violence in South Africa's history: a conflict that, in 1998, showed signs of resuming a frightening intensity in the region around the town of Richmond, south of Pietermaritzburg. The conflict is broadly held to have been a struggle between Inkatha and the African National Congress for political control over the province, although as in every conflict, local variations of causes were numerous. Almost 12000 died in the fighting (Jeffery 1997:1-2). The *Natal Witness* was well-placed to cover the conflict, as most of the massacres occurred in the region known as the Natal Midlands, to which Pietermaritzburg, the home ground of the newspaper, was the closest city.

During the eighties and early nineties there were lengthy debates over the origin and

nature of the violence in the province.<sup>2</sup> Efforts to explain the war (cf. Aitchison 1992:3; Leroke 1994:32; Jeffery 1997:7) constituted variations on four themes: that the violence was solely or jointly caused by the following:

- a conspiracy on the part of government and Inkatha to destabilise the ANC and associated structures, or alternately a conspiracy on the part of ANC-aligned structures to create a radical ungovernability in the province
- faction fighting between competing clans and chiefs
- alienation produced by socio-economic deprivation
- efforts to redefine Zuluness in terms of an aggressive cultural-political agenda pursued by Inkatha that was resisted by the UDF/ANC.

It is not my intention to debate the competing perspectives here.<sup>3</sup> In the period from 1994 to the present, revelations at the Goldstone Commission on Security Force gun-running to Inkatha and SADF training of Inkatha operatives have caused the recent history of the province to be rewritten. Similarly, the trials of Col. Eugene de Kock, Romeo Mbambo, and the testimony of Captain Johan Opperman at the trial of the Generals, among them former Minister of Defence General Magnus Malan (see Jeffery 1997:737-771), have given tremendous weight to the argument that the apartheid state backed Inkatha through training and gun-running, charges that have remained strenuously denied by IFP and NP strongmen. During the course of 1998, amnesty applications to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission continued to reshape perceptions of realities in the province. As in every war, the conditions of violent conflict eliminated sainthood on all sides (although it is truly remarkable that some retain pretensions to beatification). Nonetheless, the picture that has emerged is one in which Inkatha sought to topple the ANC's power in the region through a vigorous programme of cultural-political action via sympathetic chiefs, with considerable help from the South Africa military.

The press was criticised heavily for its coverage of the war, and many of the criticisms.

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<sup>2</sup> Key works include those of historian Shula Marks (1995), HSRC researcher Anthony Minnaar (1990); Mare and Hamilton (1987); Mare (1992), and several papers by John Aitchison (1990, 1992) who monitored the violence over a period of several years.

<sup>3</sup> The most comprehensive effort to cover the viewpoints of the ANC and IFP on the causes of the violence is offered by Anthea Jeffery in *The Natal Story: Sixteen years of conflict* (1997). The work details shifts in ANC and IFP perspectives on the conflict, from the eighties through to late 1996.

leveled at it are rooted in the cultural politics of journalism in South Africa. My aim in focusing on this reportage is to analyse the practices of press coverage that emerged to cover the massacres that constituted the war, and examine a key moment when strenuous efforts to change those practices were attempted, but abandoned.

### **Criticisms of media coverage of the KwaZulu-Natal war**

Clive Emdon (1990) reflects on the news practices and values of the Natal press during the war years and the State of Emergency. He offers a useful analysis of the opinions of Natal journalists and editors, as well as representatives of Inkatha and the UDF-alliance, on the press in the region. There are seven themes in his twenty-one points of criticism:

- the notion of 'black-on-black violence' was being used uncritically
- simplistic narratives of the war underplayed complexities, among them: suggestions of covert state action by police and military in cahoots with vigilantes; the background of low-intensity violence for several years; and factors that were fueling the conflict such as poverty, tribalism, criminal activities, propaganda and disinformation
- catering to a predominantly white readership, the violence was seen as remote and an old story
- the belief in 'the grand ethic of the press' - the independent watchdog motif - obscured the fact that objectivity was defined and situated in the discourse of white suburbia, while black journalists found themselves accused of bias
- editors did not seem to regard the press as the main social agency for providing society with details of local conflicts
- institutional structures and practices worked against journalists trying to cover the story in depth
- journalists could not escape being positioned - by comrades, Inkatha, and police - and the notion of journalistic liminality to events made their work acutely difficult (Emdon 1990:46-47).

A second critic is former *Natal Witness* journalist Fred Kockott, who in 1990 resigned out of frustration at the constraints imposed on his reports of the war.

Kockott published, in the first edition of *Rhodes Journalism Review* (1990), a scathing attack on the *Witness* and the three main Durban papers - the *Tribune*, the *Mercury* and the

*Daily News* - for failing to expose the roots of the violence, for dehumanising the dead, and for racist values. His reflections give weight to many of Emdon's observations:

Three words could summarise what I have to say on the media coverage of the Natal violence. It has failed.

... readers outside the townships ... have been lulled into a false sense of security and become bored with faceless, body-count journalism. In all that time law and order has broken down. ... People believe we teeter on the edge of anarchy.

... Violence, violence, violence. **Everyday, violence. Four dead here. Five dead there. That's what most reporting amounted to.**

... **The name of the game was body-count journalism. And, as records at Edendale Hospital illustrated, the media was even failing at that. ...**

**I believed the violence could end. I believed the press had a role. I still do.**

...  
I think what best epitomises the failure of the media is the issue of names, names of the people killed. There have been more than 4000 people killed in Natal, yet fewer than 5% have received the posthumous privilege of their names appearing in print. Perhaps that's all that needs to be said about editorial perceptions of the violence. Khumalos and Ndlovus were not important enough to have their names published. ...

On occasion I would battle for two days to get the names of victims [from police].<sup>4</sup> I believed it was a fundamental duty, but again space constraints dictated - names were sometimes subbed out of the story. ... Unrest monitors ... obtained and recorded more than 65% of the victims' names. It's a pity the press was not as motivated.' (1990:21, emphases mine)

Kockett's record provides snapshots of the newspaper's philosophical and structural contradictions amid the intense violence of 1990. Kockett is strenuously critical of the practices of the newsroom that reproduced the racial divides in society. According to the wallmaps of Pietermaritzburg, he said, townships might as well not exist; the newsroom phone list included white Maritzburg school principals and city councillors but not township principals and activists; and the library had a file on Bjorn Borg, but not on a local warlord.

He criticises the newspaper for not living up to the ideals of journalism, 'making it impossible for me to do my job properly.' His decision to quit, he implies, was a matter of preserving his personal and professional integrity.

His criticism was significant, since the *Natal Witness* had developed an enviable

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<sup>4</sup> In late 1988 when the State of Emergency was at its height, the South African Police (SAP) stopped giving to the media the names of people who had been killed or injured in political conflict. If a name was supplied, however, the SAP claimed that they would investigate and confirm whether such a person being killed or injured. Names became more than information and a basic affirmation of the humanity of the dead: they became a symbol of press resistance to State of Emergency censorship.

reputation among local and international correspondents for the quality and reliability of its information. As the conflict was primary among Kockett's duties from 1985 to 1990, such accolades were in large measure due to his courage and determination.

A report that epitomises what Kockett hated about the work he had to do as a journalist was published during a series of battles around Pietermaritzburg that later became known as 'the Seven Days' War' of March 1990.

### **Thousands displaced as killing continues**

by Fred Kockett. *Natal Witness* 30.3.90, front page

Thousands of people continued to swarm to Edendale community halls and schools yesterday as at least another 10 people were killed and 25 houses razed in the continued fighting in Pietermaritzburg townships.

Last night reports were received that communities of Ashdown and Mpumalanga were embroiled in conflict, and that shootings had broken out in Imbali, with three members of the Imbali Support Group also under fire.

Speaking from Caluza, a man reported that sporadic shooting could be heard between residents and a group of people on a nearby hill. Comrades in the area had assembled.

Yesterday's known deaths brought the preliminary death count to more than 30. Most deaths occurred when huge warring parties from outlying rural areas rampaged through Henley and kwaShange areas.

On Wednesday 120 homes were burned in kwaShange and 10 people killed. Yesterday reporters arrived in neighbouring Henley shortly after an Inkatha group had invaded the area, looting and burning at least 25 homes and stealing cattle.

In the space of an hour at least eight bodies were discovered within a 2 km radius, including those of three women, two of whom had been shot in the back of the head as they fled from attackers. *[The report continues with scenes of conflicts and reports from police, together with a statement on the fighting drawn up by UDF-aligned organisations based on eyewitness accounts, alleging Inkatha was fomenting violence. Inkatha warlord David Ntombela issues a denial.]*

Two days later Kockett wrote a report that attempted to describe what it had been like to report on the battles he was seeing daily.

### **Trying to capture the conflict in words**

by Fred Kockett. *Natal Witness* 2.4.90, page 2

Every day telephones have rung constantly in the *Natal Witness* newsroom as terrified people in Edendale and outlying areas have called to tell of impending attacks - some materialising, others not.

Foreign TV crews and journalists have flown in from around the country to capture on film the realities and background to the conflict, most of which still remains untold.

Contrary to impressions that may have been created in news reports, I have been scared out there, sometimes wondering if I will make it back.

In some ways it is invigorating knowing one's life is on the line.

But the frustration is immense. Back in the newsroom, the sheer volume of copy and limitations on space mean that a day's events have to be condensed into a short story.

There are also threatening telephone calls and complaints from readers. The paranoia one experiences about the reaction to the news stories is based on real fear. There is a war out there and journalists cannot take sides.

As the war psychosis gathers momentum, thousands of teenage boys have joined the defence groups, many of them reluctantly. We saw one of the confrontations developing as we were driving

down into the Edendale valley from Henley last week.

A policeman stood alongside crowds on the side of the road, looking through binoculars at a group gathered at the top of a hill.

'That's the Inkatha group from Sweetwaters,' he explained. 'That's the comrades moving up to the middle.'

Hundreds of men and youths - some of them as young as 14 - were running from all directions to join the combatants. They came from Smeru, Esigodeni, Georgetown and Caluza.

A minibus carrying more combatants sped ahead of us.

'Don't drive too close to them. They've probably got guns and might think we are policemen,' a colleague remarked.

A police van approached at high speed, not daring to stop and disarm the crowds. We followed. [...]

Approaching the summit, we went ahead of the police. As we came within sight of the combatants, we waved our notebooks in the air, hoping that no-one would open fire. [... continues to describe an ambush of police, ending:]

Reporters were stuck. There was no other route out of the area. [ends]

The report is structured by principles that are familiar in his copy - and stand in clear contrast to the writing principles that guided Craig Kotze's reporting as described in the previous chapter. A characteristic of Kockett's reportage is his attention to the complexities that undercut stereotypes - here evident in the observation that many joined the fighting corps reluctantly. He is not afraid of details that disarm rhetoric, or that run counter to the current of extant narratives.

Two days later, fighting erupted in the Table Mountain area east of Pietermaritzburg. A detailed report (the day's headline) by Kockett is run alongside a body-counter.

#### **14 killed as fighting hits Table Mountain**

*by Fred Kockett. Natal Witness, 4.4.90:1*

Table Mountain has been overrun by Inkatha supporters from KwaManyavu who ransacked the area at the weekend, allegedly leaving 14 people dead and numerous homesteads destroyed.

'Yes! We are Manyavus,' two armed young men told reporters in Maqongqo yesterday. 'We will kill the comrades if we find them here. We are going to take over the chieftainship.'

The police unrest report listed five people killed 'in a clash' on Saturday and the discovery of two more bodies on Sunday.

The area falls under the rule of the president of the Congress of Traditional Leaders of South Africa (Contralesa), Chief Mhlabunzima Maphumulo, who is in Europe with advocate Mr R.S. Douglas, delivering an interim report from an independent commission of inquiry into the Natal violence.

Mr Maphumulo's tribal home was destroyed when a raiding Manyavu party laid waste to his area in February, causing an exodus of hundreds of his subjects, many of whom are still at Mason's Hill, near Edendale.

After weeks of relative calm, unconfirmed reports were received yesterday that women and children had been dragged from homes and killed.

A police patrol yesterday stopped the *Natal Witness* news team and told them it was too dangerous to go into the area. A policeman said the area had been overrun by a warring faction from kwaManyavu and that many armed men were gathered near a store. He said 14 people had been killed.

'We picked up nine bodies on Saturday, three on Sunday and one today.'

'They (the Manyavus) have taken over. Most houses have been burned. They say they are

going to kill Chief Maphumulo when he returns. It is even dangerous for us. They want to kill us because we occasionally escorted Maphumulo to his place last week.

He said the riot unit had not attempted to stop people from kwaManyavu moving into Maqongqo.

'It's never going to be safe for Mhlabunzima to come back again,' he said. *[The report continues with descriptions of what was seen and quotes from people in the area, among them two Inkatha members who pointed out the body of a comrade (UDF supporter, or qabane) that they had killed.]*

Asked whether Chief Maphumulo would be in danger of being killed when he returned, one youth said: 'No'. The other replied: 'Yes. If he's still a qabane.'

They said the latest fighting occurred when the comrades arrived in the valley. 'They just wanted to kill us. They did not say anything. They had guns and they began to shoot. They ran away. We found them near the police station at Bishopstowe. We chased them. Then they came back.'

Police spokesman Major Pieter Kitching said Table Mountain was quiet yesterday. He said it had not been reported that Manyavus had overrun the area. *[ends]*

In the report alongside, a list of killings occurs.

#### **Policeman beheaded, 9 other deaths**

*Witness Reporter. Natal Witness, 4.4.90 page 1*

The discovery of a decapitated policeman and at least nine more reported deaths yesterday, brought the estimated death count in Pietermaritzburg's townships since Tuesday last week to more than 100.

The following deaths were reported yesterday:

- The discovery of two bodies in the veld, one at Mapumuza and another at Taylor's Halt.
- Four deaths in Imbali. Two people were killed overnight and two others in the afternoon.
- The discovery of a decapitated 22-year-old special constable in Sweetwaters.
- Two deaths in Table Mountain on Sunday.

In other areas of Natal, the charred bodies of two men were found near Murchison on the coast. At Mehlomyama, also near Port Shepstone, police found the bodies of two men.

Police also reported three men killed at Cliffdale industrial area, near Hammarsdale.

Another man was stabbed to death at kwaMakutha near Amanzimtoti.

Near Tongaat, three men were injured when police used shotgun fire to disperse a crowd which had set fire to about 30 huts. *[ends]*

The report is a standard body-count story, a shorthand of conflicts in the province, based solely on police reports. Dependence on police reports increased alarmingly during the state of emergency years, when censorship was intense and vigorously pursued by the state through the courts. Violence and censorship played a major role in reshaping the practices of journalism.

Matthew Kentridge cites the 'ironic code of practice' developed by a former deputy editor of the *Natal Witness*, David Robbins, on journalism in the late 1980s:

... [T]he rules that govern reporters' activities under normal conditions are simple.

They are:

- get there if possible
- double-check the facts
- quote the opinions of the relevant parties.

However, the rules under which newspapers are obliged to operate [in] reporting on so-called unrest are, thanks to the emergency regulations, another matter altogether.

They are:

- under no circumstances get there, and if by chance you happen to be there anyway, leave immediately
- try to check facts afterwards but don't expect verification from the authorities, especially the police, of facts they don't want published
- quote the opinions of people involved, but not if their opinions contravene the emergency regulations, and especially not if they are restricted from expressing opinions
- under no circumstances describe security force action (cited by Kentridge, 1990:138).

Robbins' cynicism was not breezy: at one point in 1989 the *Natal Witness* faced seventeen charges in terms of media regulations attached to the State of Emergency, according to media historian Gordon Jackson (1993:149). The tally bears testimony to a certain tenacity in the paper's editorial policy, despite massive odds. Jackson chronicles the extent of such action nationally - citing multiple arrests of journalists, expulsion of foreign news crews, closures of newspapers, temporary bannings, harassments, law suits, and extensive censorship designed by the then-Minister of Home Affairs, Stoffel Botha.

During the State of Emergency, front pages of the *Natal Witness* carried the message:

**CENSORED - News about politics,  
unrest and labour activity  
is seriously affected  
by the emergency regulations.**

When the State of Emergency ended and notices like these fell away from front pages of newspapers, the practices of journalism that had been generated by the social and discursive constraints of the State of Emergency did not die. Commenting on this at a media workshop held in the House of Commons in London in 1993, *Natal Witness* assistant editor Khaba Mkhize observed:

The police have actually hijacked the media in South Africa. That became clear during the State of Emergency. You could not write a report without referring to the police. Our young journalists know that a story on violence must have the police angle: 'according to police ...' They do not put the question, why? Why is this happening? We don't have that. **What we see blocks our sight.** We hear this **equation kind of journalism**, that if it is an Inkatha victim, therefore he has been killed by the ANC. It is stuck in our mentalities. (Mkhize in Balch and Roskam 1994:14, emphases mine)

Reports of massacres among the peasantry of KwaZulu-Natal continued to shrink into the realm of algebra, as the following report in the *Natal Witness* illustrates in December 1994:

**Police report 25 murders / 6.12.94 page 2**

POLICE in KwaZulu-Natal said yesterday that 25 people were murdered in the province at the weekend.

Three elderly men, aged between 75 and 80, were killed near Nongoma on Sunday while six people were killed in Umlazi. -Sapa [ends]

Nine in twenty-five are geographically located; the other are afforded no shade of significance that might make the details worth printing. Implicit is their blackness; if twenty-five whites had been murdered, the police would have made more of the issue and so, in turn, would the newspaper. The message of the story is one of meaninglessness: the ages of the men function as a symbol of the meaninglessness of the conflict. Places are important as referents: Nongoma is the area in which the Zulu king resides; Umlazi is close to Durban and therefore of relevance to readers. In this 37-word report that offers an illusion of objectivity and facticity, the discursive structures and practices of race-based journalism have run wild.

Why, in late 1994, was a report that epitomises the critiques of respected professionals like Emdon, Mkhize and Kockett published?

In the sections that follow I seek clues to the tenacity of the professional habit that is the body-count narrative through an examination of its form and content. That done, I will move on to explore a period in which journalists experimented with new ways of reporting massacres at the *Witness* in early 1995. The experiment is particularly fascinating because it failed. I contend that the experiment failed because the discursive structures and practices that constitute the body-count narrative had not changed, and identifying those structures and practices makes it possible to see how future experiments might be made to succeed.

### **Some observations on the body-count narrative**

The body-count narrative in KwaZulu-Natal is a genre rooted in the language of power that relies on the reader's imagination and prior knowledge of context to make sense of its algebra. This language of power gives shape and structure to the story form in such a way as to repel the audience from participation in problem-solving, partly because the story is focused almost exclusively on what narrative theorist Vladimir Propp describes as 'the moment of

degradation' in a sequence of narrated events. As such, it is a story form that reflects the communicative need of a non-township audience: to be told about violent events, but to avoid any sense of responsibility for them or their resolution.

In the above statement there are several assertions that need teasing out.

**Assertion 1: That the body-count story is a genre**

What is a genre, and how may one usefully employ the term? What does it mean in the context of journalism of violence?

In *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* the word 'genre' is defined as 'a type, species, or class of composition ... a recognisable and established category of written work ... defined according to several different criteria including formal structure, length, intention, effect, origin and subject matter' (Baldick 1990:90-91).

To most South African newspaper readers the form is a familiar one from State of Emergency reports. Below are three reports, fairly typical of the form, that appeared in the *Natal Witness* in September 1988 during the State of Emergency.

Report	Comments
<p><b>Youth shot dead, two injured in Natal political violence</b>  <i>Witness Reporter 1.9.88 page 2</i></p> <p>Political violence was again confined to Natal on Tuesday when a youth was shot and killed and a woman and youth injured in two separate incidents.</p> <p>The youth was killed while walking with a girlfriend in Mpumuza, Edendale.</p> <p>In connection with the shooting, a police unrest report said: 'At Mpumalanga a group of blacks shot and killed a black man. Police arrested a black man in connection with the incident.'</p> <p>Meanwhile at Mpumalanga, Hammarsdale, a group of men attacked a private dwelling and shot and injured a woman and a youth.</p> <p>The only other incident on the unrest report occurred near Pinetown. Police said: 'At Unghelozhi (near Pinetown) arsonists caused extensive damage to five houses. Four black men were arrested.'</p> <p>Meanwhile the <i>Natal Witness</i> has received reports of other deaths in the Edendale valley not yet reported by police. These include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>the abduction and killing of a man, known only as Shange,</li> </ul>	<p>The words 'political' and 'youth' establish the subjects as black.</p> <p>Emphasis on irruption of normal life; violence is represented as senseless and arbitrary.</p> <p>Note that the text is structured to distinguish between the police report and the journalist's point of view. Within a few months, that distinction falls away.</p> <p>The report uses sources other than police. Later Emergency</p>

from Vulindlela. The man was reportedly abducted in Zayeke on Friday;

- the killing of a 60-year old man, Mr M. Zulu, in Ganda-Ganda, Sweetwaters;
- the murder of Mr Bongani Mazibuko after an incident in Piet Retief Street.

Police spokesman Captain Pieter Kitching said the reports would be investigated. He expressed doubt that they were related to political violence. [ends]

Media Regulations would attempt to prohibit reports on 'unrest' other than those supplied by police.

Police are afforded the chance to define the violence, but in the context of the report the given definition is destabilised.

## Report

### UDF man killed by 'Inkatha members'

*I saw killers - mother*

*Witness Reporter 19.9.88 page 3*

Scores of youths are continuing to flee Sweetwaters where another two UDF members were killed at the weekend.

The men who killed the two youths are understood to be Inkatha supporters.

The mother of one of the youths, Mrs M Madondo, said she saw the killers - four of whom she could identify - shortly after her son was stabbed to death.

'They still had blood on their hands and knives,' Mrs Madondo said.

She said she was approaching her home in Sweetwaters when a group of about eight men came to her and told her they had just killed her son and that she must go and fetch 'the dog's body'.

She named four men and said they were well-known Inkatha supporters.

The Madondo family had fled their home in Sweetwaters about three weeks ago out of fear of being attacked by local vigilantes. On Saturday Mrs Madondo and her late son Nono had gone ... to collect a few extra belongings from their deserted home. [story switches to another murder]

Meanwhile two other unrest incidents in the Pietermaritzburg area were reported by police.

In Mpumalanga, Hammarsdale, 'a mob' stabbed and killed a man, while in Sinathang a man was seriously injured in a clash 'between two groups', the police said.

## Comments

At this early stage of intense conflict there is some temerity in naming sides.

The story offers details of one family's tragedy - establishing a master narrative in terms of which the shorthand that follows (drawn from police reports) is made meaningful.

Note quotation marks used with 'slight damage' - suggesting an ironic tone;

And in the Durban area - Inanda and Ndumuzu - two homes were damaged by arsonists, while in Soweto two limpet mines exploded, causing 'slight damage' to a power station. [ends]

reminding the reader that s/he is reliant on police analysis which is likely to be partial at best.

## Report

### Unrest: police withhold names

*Witness Reporter 28.9.88 page 5*

The South African Police yesterday refused to disclose the names of people who have been killed or injured in political violence in Natal in the past few days.

Since Sunday at least eight people have been killed and eight people injured in political violence in Durban and Pietermaritzburg's strife-torn townships.

[...] Local police spokesman Captain Pieter Kitching said he was not authorised to give out the names of people killed, but would be able to confirm the deaths of people if their names were supplied to him.

A man was killed and two people injured in continuing violence in the Hammarsdale area yesterday, the police unrest report said.

The report only said: 'At Mpumalanga one black man was injured and another fatally wounded after being stabbed by unknown persons. At Hammarsdale a group of blacks attacked and injured black woman with bottles.'

And in neighbouring Inchanga, six 'unknown persons' were arrested after 'a number of shots were fired at a group of blacks', the police said.

The only other incidents reported by police were:

- the discovery of the body of a man who appeared to have been stabbed to death in Mbekweni, Pinetown;
- the petrol-bombing of a home in Botshabelo, Bloemfontein. Police said a man and two women sustained burn wounds.

[ends]

## Comments

Note reporter's sense of outrage at police intransigence.

The word 'only' conveys the curtailment of newsgathering activities.

Doublespeak of the times: note again the use of the word 'only'. Here it has an ambiguous appellation: it could refer to 'only incidents' or 'only reports'.

The State of Emergency ended on February 2, 1990, when De Klerk announced the unbanning

of resistance organisations and the release of political prisoners of the stature of Mandela. A month later, during the Seven Day's War, reports such as 'Policeman beheaded, 9 other deaths' (cited above) it is apparent that the practice of basing news texts on SAP Unrest Reports had become a habit that would be hard to break. Two years later, several State of Emergency practices persist:

Report	Comments
<p><b>More killings in Richmond</b>  <i>by Charles Leftwich. Natal Witness 2.12.91 page 1</i></p> <p>Killing and the burning of homes continued in townships near Richmond throughout the weekend.</p> <p>At 10 am on Saturday Mnikwa Jama (36) was found shot and stabbed in Spepisini township, while at dawn yesterday a group of about 100 armed men attacked residents of the predominantly Inkatha-affiliated Mkhobeni township, killing three and setting twelve homes alight, police spokesman Captain Henry Budhram said. The dead are a 16-year old girl, Bamgxanile Nsindane, and two men, Gabangane Phagati (40) and Nynnsa Dlamini (68).</p> <p>Police and the South African Defence Force went to the scene. After an exchange of fire, police arrested 12 people.</p> <p>On Thursday a gang of 35 gunmen attacked ANC homes in the Zakhiweni area, killing three people and burning down some 11 homes.</p> <p>Witnesses claim that Ku Klux Klan methods were used last week by white gunmen who reportedly joined in the raid. Police are investigating the allegations.</p> <p>ANC supporters in the area have accused white farmers of organising 'revenge attacks' for the ANC's consumer boycott.</p> <p>Meanwhile, city police received a report yesterday evening that a group of gunmen, presumed to be carrying AK47 rifles, entered Imbali Stage Two. Budhram said a police van was dispatched and while travelling along Willowfontain Road, the patrol heard about 30 shots being fired in their direction. They did not return fire. While patrolling the area they saw an injured man being loaded into a minibus. He had been shot in the abdomen, and was taken to hospital where he is in a serious condition. [ends]</p>	<p>The report depends on police accounts: no reporter eyewitness accounts are offered.</p> <p>Implicit assumption: if the ANC was attacked it must have been an Inkatha raiding party.</p> <p>It is extraordinary that 3 people can be killed and 11 homes destroyed in a raid by black and white and no reporter is sent to ask questions. Who were the white gunmen? The reporter doesn't ask; and evades the issue by offering the platitude that 'police are investigating' - implying that police are in control of the situation; justice will be done. What was going on?</p> <p>An ANC assertion that white farmers were involved is not pursued. The metanarrative</p>

remains one of ANC v. IFP without white involvement. The report tails out with an exciting police account of action, of which there is no independent verification.

That reports of conflict had shrunk into algebra is further evident in a story which forms the caption to a front-page photograph of smoke hanging like mist over a green valley where, on closer inspection, huts are ablaze:

*Caption to untitled photograph, front page, Natal Witness 9.12.91*

At least 10 houses were burnt down in this settlement on the main road to Bulwer yesterday. A large group of men carrying sticks and other weapons (including a rifle) was seen in the vicinity of the houses, but police were unable to provide details of the incident at the time of going to press. Several other violent incidents have occurred in the Natal midlands region in recent days. A Mooi River hostel dweller was killed and three of his companions wounded on Saturday night. According to Midlands IFP leader David Ntombela, Mooitex mill workers were returning from work to the Bruntville hostel when they were attacked and Joseph Mayaba (50) was killed. In Bruntville 17 township residents were killed by hostel dwellers last week. In Greytown police reported that a 24-year-old man, Siphon Mwandla Dlamini, was killed outside his home in Enhlalakahle township. Meanwhile, in Soweto two people were killed in violence after an IFP rally yesterday. According to a police spokesman trouble started as 12000 IFP supporters walked back to their hostels after the rally addressed by IFP president Mangosuthu Buthelezi.

Here an ANC-IFP metanarrative drives the explanation and meaning of every one of these one-sentence accounts of violent deaths. It appears that an independent source supplied the photograph and the account of the destruction at Bulwer but a journalist was not sent to the scene, and the reason offered for the absence of further information is that 'police were unable to provide details.'

When the ongoing violence began to intensify in 1988, reporters offered details of events and actors; they sought to be eyewitnesses of as much as possible and sought out eyewitnesses when they couldn't; and narratives were constructed around complexities. When the violence became a familiarity, effort was put into one or two key stories, with police unrest reports providing the basis of a summary of violence that had taken place elsewhere. During the State of Emergency journalists were forced to rely on SAP Unrest Reports, prohibited from being on site during violent events, and severely restricted in the printing of detailed accounts supplied by independent sources. Complexities were eliminated from stories, and a

master narrative - black-on-black violence - that suited the agenda of the apartheid state was entrenched. When the State of Emergency ended that master narrative was not identified as problematic, and details that contradicted it continued to be dismissed or ignored. There was not a sense of a new story belonging to a new era: the cynic's 'same old story' dragged on even when the details (or content) no longer fitted, as occurred in 'More killings in Richmond' cited above, dated 2.12.91.

Stories of violence in KwaZulu-Natal had taken on a form that was immune to variations in content. The composition of the story had become 'a recognisable and established category of written work' (Baldick 1990:90-91). It had become a genre in its own right.

### **Assertion 2: Genre emerges from relationships of power**

That narrative form is an expression of discursive structures and practices is ably demonstrated in Michael Gilsean's work on change in narrative in a Lebanese village (1996), cited in chapter one. However, a closer study of the notion of genre is critical to further argument on genre in news media. Studies of genre and narrative structure drawn from a very different ethnographic context provide a useful set of tools that is helpful in the exploration of the body-count narrative.

The debate on genre begins with the question - vigorously debated by Vladimir Propp and Claude Levi-Strauss - of whether genre is best defined by sequences of actions, or symbolic elements.

Embarking on his study of Russian folktales in 1928, Vladimir Propp writes: 'In the broad sense of the word, a genre is a group of monuments united by a common poetic system. ... Poetics refers to devices used for expressing artistic goals and reflecting the emotional and intellectual world; it is form in connection with a specific content (the plot and the message that goes with it)' (Propp 1984:40 [1928]). Propp writes of poetics as 'the laws of people's creative processes' (Propp 1984:40), asserting that 'unity of form results in unity of content' (1984:41).

Propp's formalist position is problematic for Levi-Strauss, who distinguishes between Propp's formalism and his own approach to narrative: structuralism. Propp, he notes, is concerned with sequences of actions, rather than content. By contrast, Levi-Strauss proposes that ethnologists should study the characteristics of elements in tales (characters / symbols), rather than just the steps in the plot. The universe of the tale, says Levi-Strauss, is 'analysable

in pairs of oppositions interlocked within each character who ... forms a bundle of distinctive features' (1984:182). Thus narratives (myths and folktales) are primarily constructed not in terms of sequences but are assembled 'according to the binary and ternary rules of opposition and correlation' (1984:187). Levi-Strauss searches for the 'laws which impose a kind of grid upon the real and upon the mythical vision. ... [I]t only remains to discover the permissible arrangements of the pieces of the mosaic whose number, meaning and shapes have been determined beforehand' (1984:188).

Problematically, Levi-Strauss insists that a text or element has a fixed meaning that is accessible to the ethnographer. For this reason variations of interpretation in audiences do not constitute a significant element in his thinking, and the assumption that cultures have firm borderlines sits prominently in his vision.

Both Propp's and Levi-Strauss' approaches have value. In studying news texts, it is useful to be able to observe journalists predicating familiar sequences of actions, and, as I suggested in the Introduction, to be able to interpret the basic meaning structures in a media narrative by appreciating the oppositions (or cosmology) embodied in it. But both bodies of work lack an appreciation of power and context. In his studies of genre, narrative scholar Tzvetan Todorov offers a way forward.

Todorov (1990) argues that the form and nature of a genre is emerges from practices set up by discourse. He studies transformations of genre over time as discourses shift, and does not assume, as does Levi-Strauss, that the meaning of a tale is fixed in a prior symbolic universe. Thus the range of meanings of a text have much to do with the context inhabited by the reader, and the possibilities for the plot are contoured by the politics of meaning.

Genres, according to Todorov, are governed by certain conventions which are structured by discourse. 'In a given society, the recurrence of certain discursive properties is institutionalised and individual texts are produced and perceived in relation to the norm constituted by that codification,' Todorov writes (1990:18-19). 'Because genres exist as an institution ... they function as 'horizons of expectation' for readers and as 'models of writing' for authors' (1990:18), adding that authors write in terms of (but not necessarily in agreement with) an existing generic system, and in doing so, 'bear witness to it'. Similarly, he says, readers read in terms of the generic system which they become familiar with through a wide range of communications in society, even though they may not necessarily be conscious of the system. Thus, when 'all the character's actions can be presented as the product of some very

simple and abstract rules, these rules in turn refer to the organising ideology of the work as a whole' (Todorov 1990:36).

Carolyn Miller (1984) goes further than Todorov to link genre to social action, and social morality. In this respect her work echoes that of Alisdair MacIntyre (1984) who makes explicit links between narratives and ethical charters. Miller sees genre as 'recurring rhetorical responses to recurring exigencies' (Freedman & Medway 1994:9), arguing that action and interpretation are inseparable processes. Thus, 'genres themselves become part of the context and so in turn constitute part of the exigence eliciting future responses. They not only express social motives but show us what motives we may have' (Freedman & Medway 1994:10).

Miller's views need to be moderated by the recognition that audiences may choose to resist or sustain given narratives, and in this respect Giddens work on the duality of structure (1984) is helpful. Structures make actions meaningful; action produces structure; agency may be constrained but remains a possibility - particularly, I believe, for those whose wrestling with narratives of self (practical consciousness) and society (discursive consciousness), generates a creative space in which meanings, and texts, are re-formed.

**Assertion 3: The genre makes the conflict comprehensible by structuring the narrative in binary coding**

Khaba Mkhize speaks of an 'equation journalism' (cited earlier). In doing so he refers to the sophisticated set of codes that indicated who was who, in journalism about the KwaZulu-Natal conflict in the 1980s and 1990s:

ANC	IFP
AK47 rifles	G3 rifles & 'traditional weapons'
UDF / comrades	Zulu loyalists
non-traditional	traditional, tribalist
youth	elders
disrespectful of the King	loyal to the King
communist	capitalist / free market
<i>them<sub>1</sub></i>	<i>them<sub>2</sub></i>

It is important to bear in mind that narrative structures change over time, and that the structure

described here emerged in a very particular context.

As a genre, the form of the body-count narrative legitimates and entrenches political identities in terms of which the conflict is constructed. These stories structure and position people into political identities that are not necessarily real. Violence monitor John Aitchison cites a rural Zulu woman: 'They just give you names and then they kill you,' she said (Aitchison 1992:1).

**Assertion 4: The binary narrative implies a ternary metanarrative, that responds to the needs of a spectating audience rather than a participating one**

While the content of the body-count narrative is shaped in terms of binaries (ANC/UDF v. Inkatha-IFP), I suggest that a metanarrative provides a ternary structure. The news-reading community constitutes a third construct: 'us' - while the opponents constitute 'them<sub>1</sub>' and 'them<sub>2</sub>.'

Fowler *et al* suggest that 'linguistic structures are used to explore, systematise, transform and often obscure analyses of reality; to regulate the ideas and behaviour of others; to classify and rank people, ideas and objects; to assert institutional or personal status' (Fowler 1979:3). The body-count narrative constructs reality into a unitary white universe and a divided black universe, in which black fight black and white-dominated institutions are the voice of expertise and authority that keep warring blacks apart (see Fair and Astroff 1991:58). The distinction between us and them is implicit in the body-count narrative structure. Not every story uses every pair listed below, but I think it is fair to suggest, on a reading of hundreds of such stories, that these impressions cluster together:

Us	Them, & Them,
passive	violent
<b>English, Afrikaans</b>	<b>Zulu</b>
white	black
<b>uninvolved</b>	<b>involved</b>
spectating subjects	object of gaze
<b>invisible</b>	<b>recorded, photographed</b>
governing	ungoverned
<b>society</b>	<b>community</b>
Known	Other
<b>cultured</b>	<b>anarchic/savage</b>
objective	immutably biased
<b>immune</b>	<b>susceptible</b>
undamaged	damaged
<b>alive</b>	<b>dead</b>
<i>Newsreading community</i>	<i>Subject community</i>

In contrast to accounts of war described by Elaine Scarry in *The body in pain* (1985), the body-count story is not a narrative of war as told by an audience with empathetic bonds to those involved in the fighting. Rather, it bespeaks a jaded, even cynical spectatorship that exists at a remove, in a space where the compulsion to understand the reasons and events that led to the attack does not exist. Journalism's famed '5W&1H' story formula (who, what, when, where, why, and how) is reduced to a '3W' fact-piece about what, where and when. Who, why and how become irrelevant because the story is about Others.

**Assertion 5: The body-count story functions as 'proof' of a master-narrative**

'To explain an episode of violence is simply to show that it is a necessary consequence of events and structures that preceded it,' says Thornton (1990b:3). Body-count algebra relies on the reader's familiarity with context and genre to produce associations with prior events and causes. Thus, the body-count narrative is principally a retrodictive narrative, comprised of traces of prior narratives. For interpretation, it is reliant on a shared 'language' of traces,

derived from a knowledge of the master-narrative. In its nature the body-count story excludes variant narratives and untidy facts. In its familiarity, the form offers the illusion of truth and authority, asserting the clinical expertise and objectivity of journalism.

Thornton argues that although the popular method of interpreting violence is to show its consequential nature, 'that is not enough. To understand it, we must look at how violence itself comes to constitute social forms and meanings. ... I take the view that [so-called *political*] violence ... is not just the consequence of politics but is integral to the social processes which generate the symbols and values that provision the political process' (Thornton 1990b:3). I suggest that body-count narratives of the sort described here provide a kind of symbolic capital that provisions the political process, because they are authoritative accounts that continuously reinforce the symbols and values in terms of which political 'reality' is structured. In so doing the genre asserts order and control at the very moment when the chaos of low-intensity warfare reveals that there is no order and control.

The common denominator of humanity, the body is a powerful tool of empathy, or its converse, opprobrium. Bodies embody political identities; bodies are evidence of master-narratives. If history is being told as a conflict between groups, and the product of the narrative is the corpse, dead bodies become proof of whatever tale is dominant in the minds of tellers and hearers.

In the same way that the body-count narrative operates at both a binary and a ternary level, I want to suggest that there different metanarratives operate at the different levels in the stories. As suggested in the tabulation of the ternary narrative (see Assertion 4), one of the dualisms implicit in that level of narrative is the familiar trope of culture v. anarchy. In contrast to the high culture on the arts pages, and the olympism on the sports pages, the body-count news section reflects an ongoing morbid fascination with one central theme: that the Enlightenment is not working; that in the race between culture and anarchy, culture is not winning. 'Anarchy' and violence are 'their' province; 'our province' is that of 'culture' and 'peace'. Yet culture (as the word in the binary) *is* violent. Power is attained and maintained through violence and violation. Euphemism - the language of 'culture' - stalls acknowledgement of violation.

'The viewpoint chosen by the observer reconfigures and redefines his object' says Todorov (1990:16). The structuring of culture and anarchy into binary opposites legitimated the colonial project. It is a construct that eliminates the possibility of valid dissent.

**Assertion 6: A characteristic of the genre is an almost exclusive focus on the moment of degradation of a situation.**

The difference between narrative and proposition is that narrative is a progressive sequence of actions.

As described by Propp the elements of a folktale are:

- 1 opening equilibrium
- 2 preparatory stage; foreshadowing
- 3 degradation of the situation
- 4 arrival of donors, helpers, villains
- 5 search for solutions - with complications re. donors, helpers, villains  
(cycles of the above stages 3 - 5)
- 6 recovery of lost person / object / value; transformation of protagonist
- 7 return to equilibrium (Propp 1928).

The body-count story eliminates narrative progression, focusing on that moment described by Vladimir Propp as the moment of degradation.

In citing Propp I am not suggesting that journalism ought to be modelled on Russian folktales, although Propp's folktale form is widely used in Hollywood and, because of its familiarity and cultural resonances, offers a self-certifying picture of the way life is (or ought to be).<sup>5</sup> My use of Propp's work here is confined to demonstrating that the body-count narrative is a genre that focuses exclusively on a moment of degradation - that is, a moment in which the (assumed) normality of life is disrupted by violence. Of course, to irrupt normality is part of the nature of violence (as Thornton argued in a 1994 paper), and part of the compulsion to narrate violence comes from the imperative to reassure ourselves of the inviolability and legitimacy of the political culture that has been challenged by violence.

This brings us to an interesting observation. Propp's formula is so widely used in entertainment media, yet news media focuses almost exclusively on moments of degradation. In Hollywood-style cinema, scriptwriters are compelled to bring narratives to closure by restoring the order that has been disrupted. Yet the body-count algebra in news items about the war in Natal evidences very little of the compulsion to narrate the restoration of order in those

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<sup>5</sup> Many feature journalists and documentary makers (even at National Geographic) use Propp's model as a narrative template, as does much of Hollywood, most especially Walt Disney.

communities that have been disrupted by violence. Few events in the war received follow-up coverage - for example, in villages where there had been a massacre, it was rare indeed to find a story of how a family was supported. More likely was a story in which the family was suffering and unable to deal with the consequences of deaths.<sup>6</sup> Accounts of donors, helpers, or villains (I use Propp's terms) may make secondary news or a feature, and on occasion a front page story. Moments of recovery may make a headline depending on the degree of empathy with the victims / heroes: a funeral service, for example, might be covered if the event, or the dead, were deemed exceptionally newsworthy. Return, to equilibrium, after a massacre, barely makes a news story at all.<sup>7</sup>

I believe the pattern is a dominant one throughout news. Two effects are noteworthy. First, as demonstrated above, the body-count narrative implicitly affirms the existing structures of power and order in 'our society', and downplays the disruption of 'their community'. Second, by focusing only on moments of degradation in conflicts, public participation in processes of resolution is minimised, for spectatorship becomes the only possible subjectivity. Politics, then, is left to the politicians.

#### **Assertion 7: The silence of death unexplained compels the noise of public narratives**

A curious observation: At the time when the public spectacle of punishment, hanging, and torture is outlawed, a core activity of popular narrative (i.e. news media) is to make public the spectacle of the human body in pain and death. One Cape Argus roadside news bill proclaimed: ROLLERSKATER KILLED UNDER BUS - PICTURE. An unusual form of gruesome death; a lead news story. If it's a different bleed, it's a definite lead. The body becomes the embodiment of violation of order, norms, and the expected.

Any edition of *Newsweek* or the *Cape Times* is testimony to the peculiar fascination of news gatherers with damage to bodies, whether the origin be criminal, political, sexual, military, or accidental. In addition to this 'hard news' many other news divisions deal equally directly with the body: the body sporting; the body doctored (medicine/health); the body

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<sup>6</sup> One editor I heard of (not in Natal) called these 'stories of blacks sitting in the rain'; the context was an instruction to journalists to bring him different kinds of 'black stories'.

<sup>7</sup> To reiterate a point made earlier, I use these categories heuristically in order to illustrate the range of human experience that is silenced in KwaZulu-Natal reportage; I do not want to suggest that violent events ought to be reported in sequences that offer happy endings, nor that narratives ought to be in any way mimetic of the folktale genre.

sexual; the body fed (cuisine), clothed (fashion), and extended (technology). Taken together, these suggest that news reflects a fascination with stories of the risks and pleasures of bodiliness.

These observations raise a question: What makes the compulsion to narrate violence persist in news production to the point where news consumption figures dip? Why has violent news become such a pervasive feature of media culture?

Part of the power of death is the certainty of the silence of the dead. The dead body incarnates ultimate silence; in death, the body becomes an Other who was - perhaps, or potentially - an I. As a fruit of violence, the corpse is testimony to safe and unsafe spaces in the terrain of power.<sup>8</sup>

Ultimate silencing is connected to powerlessness: and ultimate powerlessness (unless the victim was martyred, in which case the body is imbued with symbolism of transcendent power) is one of the morbid fascinations of modernity - a persistent trope of which has been subjects caught up in deliberately created, totalising discourses - conspiracies. As the focus of individualist fascination with the possibility of powerlessness, a dead body is a symbol of ultimate power conferred by mortality on the gods, time, the weather, and, ineluctably, politicians.

### **Challenging the genre: The *Natal Witness* newsroom, 1994-5**

In 1994, the year of South Africa's changeover to democracy, official figures recorded that 1464 KwaZulu-Natalians died in violence that was deemed to have been political.

Figures had peaked in 1990 (1811 deaths), dropped marginally in 1991 (1684 deaths), and leveled off at about 1450 per year from 1992 to 1994. The scale of the violence is apparent when one calculates that in those three years approximately four people were killed per day - and that this was an improvement from almost six per day in 1990.

Towards the end of 1994 and the beginning of 1995, I noted an increasing discomfort, among *Natal Witness* journalists, with the body-count narrative. Such discomfort was reflected in a conversation between two journalists, Helen Walne and Vusi Ngema, whom I accompanied on a 3-hour journey to cover the murder of a farmer and his wife:

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<sup>8</sup> Several of these ideas have their genesis in a conversation with Robert Thornton in 1996.

*Helen: On the South Coast people get killed ... and you read those crime stories about a woman with a child sitting on her lap and 5 gunmen burst into their house and killed them. But we don't send cars down there to go and check it out.*

*Vusi: Well black communities don't have that kind of readership who phones and say [doing a falsetto version of the airy accent of a white female socialite] - 'I think it was TERRIBLE' -*

*Helen: - but still, it's just a basic human right.*

*Vusi: But I mean I'm looking at it from the point of view of a news editor. If you get about six phone calls in a row [saying] 'did you hear that such and such happened?'*

*Helen: Did you get phone calls? I thought we picked it up from the cops.*

*Vusi: That's what I heard.*

*Helen: I thought we picked it up from the cops.*

*Vusi: And calls as well - I mean the farming community are very diligent when it comes to [informing the media of attacks].*

*Helen: But even so you shouldn't be swayed by that though, hey? ... but [when there are attacks on blacks] no-one ever tells us! ... It's unfair - I mean, if two whiteys get stabbed, there's a huge big outcry. Don't you agree?*

*Vusi: It's a fairly reliable assumption, that most of the readership is white.*

*Helen: So then who covers black people who die?*

*Vusi: The onus is on [the crime reporter]. That's what I was saying earlier: there is no built-in mechanism to make sure that those areas are catered for.*

During my first visit to the paper in February 1994, I spoke to Witness news editor Yves Vandehaegen about professional integrity and press freedom in the region, and was astonished by the complexity of the picture he painted:

*Yves: Last year we had a massacre out Table Mountain way, six people, children, were killed, they were shot as they were coming round a corner on a hill, they were on their way to school, and were just wiped - I think, all but one and the driver - out.*

*Our reporter went out and came back with a story -she'd interviewed the driver and a couple of other people who were around, and it seemed that one of the targets was an IFP warlord in the area, and it was suspected that whoever the attackers were - they've subsequently been tried and found guilty, but at the time we didn't know who*

they were, what the dynamics were, what the nature of the hit was, where it had come from - it was out of the blue - but the suggestions were very strong that it was an actual foul-up; the actual target wasn't there, it wasn't aimed at the children; so that was suggested, on the basis of the interviews in our news report.

That report was criticised by the editor and other managers at the time as allocating blame. So the reporter is faced with the situation: that is what they've heard; they can't not run it, because it is the truth to the extent that they've been able to identify the truth. They know it's not the whole truth, but you can't not print it because it's not the whole truth: because if that is your attitude, you'll never be able to print anything, and you hope that there will be a kind of incremental development in one's assessment of the truth.

So you've got to start somewhere; so you got to say it. You're saying there: ok, it was very clear it was an ANC hit, and the intended target was an IFP warlord. Now that would have been fine, if that had been the intention, and that had been the [result], I think that would have been fine [as a narrative].

But because children were involved, the tendency was to say, it was a horrific thing, it was deliberate, the children were targeted, but they were targeted to get to somebody else. So there was a kind of consequential approach to looking at why children would have suffered.

I don't actually know what the truth is, but it does look as if the IFP bloke was the target and they fouled up.

There was a revenge attack a week later. Our reporters were on the scene within half an hour - and what people were saying - it was a minibus, on its way back from Durban, taking people to the same area; and what they were saying was that it was an IFP attack. And again, the reporter was criticised for accepting at face value what people were saying.

You're caught; you can't win. You can't not write it; because that is the perception of the people who've been intimately involved in it; you can't assume [that] because we live in a politicised society that the first thing that someone is going to say [is a conspired lie]. Like you interview a minibus passenger after someone has raked it with gunfire, [and think] 'in their head they're thinking, how am I going to get the most political capital out of this, let's blame the bastards who are the other

party. ' If that's the way that it happens, that's just so alien to the way that I experience people, and [to] my view of the world - so I think I have my own prejudice there - I think that if somebody walks onto the scene within half an hour, what you're going to say is what's closest to your heart, it's going to be raw, it's going to be unfiltered, and it's probably going to be true, within a particular frame of reference.

So, ok, freedom of speech there: I don't really know what it boils down to. I think you can be descriptive, you can say so many people were shot, bla de bla de bla, but you [have to] contextualise it. [And] if everybody involved in it thinks it was a political hit, the report has to take the form of a political hit. It can't simply be described. Though by and large, if we can't isolate a motive, with any degree of certainty - not that you're going to get certainty but to establish that there was a political overtone to the thing - then we'll play it straight, say so and so's shot, this is what happened, so and so said it was a political motivation, it's an ANC area therefore it was an IFP hit or vice versa or what ever. So there are a lot of stories that we play straight, but we just don't know. And when we don't know, we don't ignore but we leave the issue of motive hanging. But when people on the scene are saying it, that's what we run.

But you know, the general criticism of that approach is that you get caught in a kind of cycle of blame and counter-blame, and eventually the whole thing gets out of hand, and you're still none the wiser, really.

And I don't know where press freedom fits in there. Because I think that if the object of a newspaper is to disseminate information, your information has to be accurate. And if you can't ascertain - and if you're never likely to be able to ascertain - truth or any approximation of truth, then the argument is too skewed to be able to take it in its pure academic form.

Every newspaper person will tell you they believe in press freedom. That they believe they have the right to publish. Now the right to publish is different from what you do publish. That doesn't mean you're being censored or that you're censoring yourself. But if you're confused, as the disseminator of that information, you have to either pare the thing down to its most innocuous neutral form, or else you've just got to leave it.

Yves' account provides several insights to the practices that contribute to the formation of the body-count narrative:

- *Formulaic narrative blocs:* Finding and forming an independent narrative is an extraordinarily complex task when the 'narrative blocs' (Feldman's term) provided by informants are embedded, configured, emplotted and prefigured in the master-narrative reverberating in the region. Where the narrative formula is 'attack = conspiracy'; the only available variables are ANC and IFP, and every piece of information is formulated in terms of this equation, journalists find it nigh impossible to construct the story from different narrative blocs. From evidence presented in the reports themselves, and interviews with journalists, it is clear that many KwaZulu-Natal massacres comprise elements that fall outside of the binary formula: criminal gangs, inter-generational feuding, the politics of accession to chieftaincy, among others. But these details - in which a greater measure of truth resides - fall outside the dominant narratives, and hence outside the story constructed as that of the public's imagination.
- *Public secrets:* Investigative journalism is extremely difficult in a time when secret organisations run guns and officialdom is trained to deny, dismiss or investigate and find out nothing. The massive gaps in publically available knowledge are evidenced in the absence of insider contacts who could, even anonymously, be sourced by reporters. Everyone knows but no-one's talking. Thus, information remains at the level of rumours and seldom verifiable comment, making it extraordinarily difficult to print what you know, and what others know. The body-count form 'makes sense' as a pragmatic choice to 'play it straight'. But as has been observed in the opening chapter: ideology is at its most powerful in the realm of common sense, for it is there that discursive structures have taken on the mantle of immanence.
- *Awareness of media effects:* The body-count form was held to be a neutral form that might pre-empt a cycle of blame and counter-blame. Implicitly, then, there is an awareness that there are consequences to constructing the story in a particular way. However, the binary is so entrenched in the public imagination that sides are distinguished by symbols - places, names, types of weapons; thus blame is structured into language itself, and the narrative form has a built-in contradiction.
- *The imperative to be objective:* compels the idea of balance and impartiality. However, the idea of professional objectivity has an interesting history. It was first developed as a

contractual obligation of a writer to an owner-publisher in the 1920s and 30s, as the ownership base of newspapers was transformed (Rosen 1993b:48) from writer-proprietor to owners who employed writers. Objectivity as a news-rule began as a contract between editors and owners of the first newspapers once circulations began to get high enough to support employees. This imperative to 'balance,' says Rosen, has a little-noticed effect: in pursuit of balance, journalists tend to see the world in terms of polarised extremes. 'The easiest way to produce the impression of balance is to take those two extremes and run them together' (1993b:50; see also Pedelty 1995: 173; 182). A second effect of objectivity, Rosen observes, is that it produces the illusion of an authoritative middle-ground; a rhetoric that is a technique of persuasion. But the most problematic of all the effects of the 'balanced' approach, he says, is that it enables journalists to discount critics as non-objective. Objectivity, he says, 'is a way of living without criticism' (Rosen 1993b:50). The body-count story is a job-keeper, a litigation-sparer, a defence against criticism, and an authority-claimer, at once.

#### **A newsroom experiment: December 1994 - February 1995**

In January 1995, Yves began encouraging journalists to explore a different approach: to allow people to define issues in their own terms; and to move away from the idea that there could be one dominant narrative in which all events and their meanings could be cast - as the Matatiele story illustrated in early January (see chapter 5).

It would be an error to assume that all journalists at the *Witness* and *Echo* agreed with the approach. Nonetheless, several journalists were trying to grapple with the issue at the same time, and this was apparent in morning conferences, and in tea-room conversations.

The Wednesday before Christmas of 1994, for example, Anthea Garman (then supplements editor, later an assistant editor), and Khaba Mkhize and I happened to be in the tea-room together. Talk turned to the press and violence in KwaZulu-Natal. Anthea was contrasting the number of column centimetres allocated to the 30 violent deaths in the province at the weekend (according to police statistics), and a familiar phrase - 'the failure of journalism in Natal' - was dotting the conversation. Her argument was that there should have been in-depth features that week, interrogating the statistics, and exploring the geographically separate attacks to seek commonalities and connections that might explain this 'senseless violence'.

Reportage that had appeared suffered the 'tyranny of immediacy,' argued Anthea;

preconceived ideas were being replicated. 'Journalists go there with preconceptions,' she was saying, 'the only way to get away from that is to throw yourself into the experience and allow that to shape what you write.' I ask what she means. Her response: that what journalism often tries to do is break a conflict down to two sides, and then report on both, evenhandedly, in the name of objectivity, and let the reader decide what's true. 'But the idea that there's an intelligent audience out there that can analyse and select from those two sides is a load of bull. The reality is that issues are made up of horrific complexities, and an incredible array of vested interests. You cannot present two [interpretive] options - there hardly ever are two to start with. Responsible journalism is about telling people about the complexity of situations; about the fact that you have to make choices that are difficult, that don't get first prize, that are compromises.' I took notes furiously; Khaba added a low rumble to the conversation, flicking ash onto the table with a cigarette that beat the air for emphasis. 'Mmm, er, vox pops, they are based on that idea. That the conflict should go one way or the other. But all they get are thin opinions: people haven't made up their minds on an issue.'

'It's surface journalism, with no depth,' says Anthea. 'Like this discussion on the ANC and nationalisation: it's not being understood; the problem is that the journalist sitting at the ANC Congress in Bloemfontein doesn't ask questions that translate into ordinary language, something really understandable. Why? Because to get those answers you have to stick your neck out and look like an unintelligent fool. So journalists won't do that. But until then, we'll read all the papers and watch *Agenda* and still not know what the politicians are talking about.'

The dialogue moves onto the contradictions inhering in the pressure of the moment to be politically correct, and the professional requirement to be critical of power - to be a watchdog; a moral guardian. Anthea interjects bluntly: 'The history of journalism in this country doesn't qualify journalists to play the role of moral guardian; our job is to equip others to become watchdogs, to enable other people to be watchdogs in their own societies.'

It was an intriguing response: an off-the-cuff observation that the notion of journalism as an arbiter of civil liberties was a fading one; that journalists' work is embedded in discursive structures.

Similar arguments on journalism and media ethics infused conversations in lunch breaks, tea breaks, the morning news meetings, and in cars en route to news events. Early in the new year, at a morning news conference, news editor Yves Vandehaegen spoke of Denis Beckett's new magazine *Sidelines*, and motivated that journalists research cultural aspects of

stories. The meeting impacted on the reportage of folklore (see chapter 7) - and on the manner in which ongoing conflicts were covered. More resources - time and vehicles - would be put at the disposal of journalists covering conflicts. Reporters ought to go for greater depth. That day, reporter Vusi Ngema was sent back to Pomeroy (a far distance) for an unheard of second day to try to get to the heart of the story on the fighting in the hills of the region.

## **Pomeroy**

The Pomeroy story was first written about by the crime reporter, since the news was communicated by the Police Liaison Officer. It appeared in a narrative about one night's killings, was printed on the front page, and allocated far more space than habit had allowed. Note also the compassionate tone, present in the details. These generate, at least in this reader, an empathy quite alien to the (an)aesthetics of 'Police report 25 murdered' cited earlier.

### **Family killed while praying / 4.1.95 page 1**

*by Jeffrey Cele, Crime Reporter*

Eleven people were shot and killed in two massacres in the KwaZulu-Natal midlands on Monday night. In the first incident, at the Noukenor area in Kranskop, five people, including two children, a teenager and their mother, were shot dead during a prayer service at 'Ngubane's Kraal', police said.

The incident took place at about 9pm when unknown gunmen smashed open the door of the hut and fired shots at the occupants. The victims were Khumbuzile Ngubane (54), Fikephi Ngubane (46), Phetheni Eslinah Makhanya (17), Hlaleleni Nana Makhanya (9) and Mbukeni Makhanya (5). The three Makhanya children were with their mother Fikephi Ngubane. They were all visiting their aunt, Khumbuzile.

According to police there were three other people in the hut, one of whom was injured. Their names were not available. Police found 17 spent AK47 cartridges and eight bullet heads at the scene. The motive for the attack is unknown and police are investigating.

In the second massacre, six men were shot and killed while sitting at a homestead in the Gqushaneni area near Pomeroy on Monday.

The deceased were Mhlonipheni Ndlovu (26), Mzothini Majozi (23), Mcasheni Mbatha (50), Myekeni Buthelezi (20), Mthwaleni Majozi (25) and Siphso Dladla (40).

Police said the men were attacked by members of the Ngeni tribe using AK47 rifles and 9mm pistols, and it is part of ongoing faction fighting. A number of attacks have been reported to the Pomeroy police station since the beginning of December. [ends]

Two violent events: one unexplained; the other described by police as a faction fight. Nowhere in this report is mention made directly of either the ANC or the IFP, though their presence is everywhere in the details.

The feature written principally by Vusi Ngema followed three days later.

### **Aftermath of a massacre / 7.1.95 page 5**

*Vusi Ngema, Jeffrey Cele and Michael Zondi report on the tangled story behind Monday's massacre of six people in Pomeroy in central KwaZulu-Natal.*

A SAD circle of women stands around a cluster of neatly thatched huts in the veld around Pomeroy. Up in the mountains the men keep watch of the enemy's every movement. Only in the town does life appear normal as people hunt for New Year bargains.

By day the peaks which dominate the landscape look picturesque, but by night they become forbidding buttresses which protect the men who take refuge there. Most of these refugees are from the Gxushaneni section of Pomeroy, and are involved in running battles with residents in another section, Mngeni, in an upsurge of faction fighting that has left more than 16 people dead since it started in May last year.

The fighting started when a certain Mseleku family settled at Gxushaneni village in April last year after they were accused of unspecified theft by their neighbours, a Cebekhulu family in Mngeni. Despite protests from his *[sic]* former neighbours who wanted him *[sic]* moved right out of Pomeroy, the chief, Velaphi Majozi, allowed him *[sic]* to settle at Gxushaneni.

In attempts to wipe out the Mseleku family, some people from Mngeni, allegedly led by the Cebekhulu family, have left a trail of rape, robbery, stock thefts, murders, injuries and one girl from the village disabled. In the latest incident, seven people died on Monday when attackers from Mngeni surrounded a homestead in Gxushaneni where a traditional feast was being held. Mseleku, around whom the battle centres, was one of the first casualties of this self-perpetuating war. ... *[continues for six paragraphs]*

The fear gripping the community was palpable at the preparations for the funeral of Mcasheni Mbatha (50), a casualty of the recent massacre. 'We cannot do anything but flee and hope they will leave the women and children alone,' one elderly man said. Not only fear but a sense of repressed anger. 'We have never retaliated, but this [the latest attack] is the last straw and whenever they come back we will be waiting for them,' says Andreas Mkhwanazi, one of the youths.

The fear is worsened by the proliferation of guns in the area ...

Perhaps most poignant is the experience of Mdlinzo Sithole (70) who is not even from Gxushaneni. He comes from Abahluzi, which is also engaged in an all-out war with the Mngeni section. He does not even know the reasons of the skirmishes in his area but they caused him to flee and live with the Gxushaneni people in the mountains two years ago. 'It's been two years since I had a proper Christmas,' he said. *[ends]*

The story is a radical departure from the body-count formula. Yet the complexities are tough to follow, even by this reader who has more reason to read it than most. In the absence of a clear metanarrative the story is, quite simply, hard to digest. This was disheartening to the reporters involved who worked so hard to produce something that was so hard to comprehend, and therefore by journalistic standards not a great report.

### **Loskop**

Two weeks later, an attack at an area known as Loskop was reported on the basis of visits to the scene of the crime. Yet, after a whole day's trip, 15 cm of copy was printed, and no photographs were included. It is hard to speculate why the story has so little detail. Perhaps the story seemed, to reporters and sub-editors, another IFP-ANC battle, therefore not-new(s), and not worth - in news-hole logic - more space.

When, two days later, a second attack produced a further three bodies in the same area, the report assumed the old equation - despite the resident's suggestion (in the first report) that 'faction-fighting' was turning into an ANC-IFP conflict. The later report is of the body-count

type, based on police reports and, again, comments from key figures in KZN politics who had little contact with people on the ground other than those with their own vested interests. No feature followed.

The Loskop reports:

**Three killed in attacks at Loskop / 17.1.95 page 1**

*by Jeffrey Cele, Crime Reporter*

THREE people were killed and four homesteads were badly damaged when a group of men attacked the residents at Nkomokazini area in Loskop on Sunday morning.

Mcushwa Mazibuko (20), Msolwa Mfundisi Hadebe (70) and Msweli Sithole (31) were shot and killed by a group of men who were going from house to house, police said.

According to the residents, the homesteads were about 100 to 200 metres away from each other. The attackers were walking from house to house and were armed with rifles.

The attackers used the same method at each homestead. They started at the Mazibuko house at about 5am, where they fired shots at the house. Mazibuko ran out of the house and was shot while fleeing. The attackers did likewise with Hadebe and Sithole.

A resident who did not want to be named said the attacks were both politically and faction related. He alleged Chief Sipiwe Mazibuko is the perpetrator of the conflict between the ANC and IFP in the area. He has been at loggerheads with the residents of the Mnyangweni area.

'The chief's guards are walking around with automatic rifles which they are supposed to use to protect him. Instead they are attacking innocent people at Nkomokazini area,' said a resident.

Chief Mazibuko could not be reached for a comment.

Sithole has been one of the taxi operators in the area and his death has affected the transportation of residents. Taxi operators have been up in arms and yesterday no taxis were running. A number of police and SANDF members have been deployed in the area and the situation is described as tense.

No arrests have been made as yet. *[ends]*

Two days later, the following report appeared in the same area of the front page:

**Five more die in Loskop clashes / 19.1.95 page 1**

*by Jeffrey Cele and Lindelwa Madlingozi*

THE conflict in the Loskop area between the IFP and the ANC has claimed another five lives, raising the death toll since Sunday to eight.

Four unidentified bodies were found yesterday by police in the Makekeni area after four huts were set alight. Two of the bodies were women, and the other two, a youth and a man. The women and youth were burnt to death in the huts, and the man was shot outside.

In another incident [...]

IFP Senator Phillip Powell has called for an urgent strengthening of the police force in Loskop. The party has expressed concern about the safety of its members in the area and fears conflict could arise between the ANC and IFP at funerals to be held this weekend.

Powell has condemned the presence of the SANDF in the area. He said the IFP delegation met 10 young men who had been subjected to severe assault by the defence force on Sunday.

Powell said a group of SANDF soldiers arrested the young men for allegedly being in possession of two unlicensed firearms. The soldiers allegedly beat the men in front of witnesses outside Gorton General Dealer.

The SANDF has blamed a breakdown in communication between the parties for the killing in the area. *[ends]*

In many respects this report represents a disillusionment with what a different style of reportage could actually produce. The costs - in terms of staff time and the allocation of a

vehicle - of the first Loskop story did not accord with the product that measured fifteen column-centimetres. When disappointment sets in, the easiest thing is to return to rote.

## Izingolweni

A day later, the following report appeared, filed by the Durban Bureau of the *Witness*:

### **Twelve children slain / 20.1.95 page 5**

DURBAN - Twelve children aged between two months and 17 years were slain in two massacres south of Durban late on Wednesday night.

At Izingolweni, near Port Shepstone, four unknown assassins opened fire on a sleeping family of ten, killing eight before setting the house alight. At the troubled Glebelands Hostel in Umlazi, three gunmen burst into a room and fired randomly at seven people playing cards, killing four. ...

The Izingolweni family of ten had settled in for the night when four gunmen surrounded the house and fired indiscriminately on the occupants, said [police spokesman Lt. Col. Bala] Naidoo. They fled in a car after setting the dwelling alight. ...

A community worker, Selven Chetty, said the area has been plagued by political rivalry but could not speculate whether the latest killings were politically motivated. He said a possible explanation was a power struggle following the vacuum left by Chief Everson Xolo, who left under duress in December 1993.

The massacre at Glebelands was, ironically, a breakthrough for police, said Naidoo. The attack triggered a dramatic change of heart within the hostel community.

Instead of displaying the customary animosity usually directed towards police, the hostel community offered overwhelming cooperation that has been sought for two years through the policing campaign.

In another incident, the mother of the ANC's northern KwaZulu-Natal chairman, Bheki Ntuli, and another family member, were fatally wounded at Mtubatuba. Police said Grace Ntuli (65) and Thulani Mbatha (18) were shot at 5am. A third family member is in a critical condition in a local hospital. - Durban Bureau [ends]

The report was cited separately, without my prompting, by four *Witness* journalists who felt the lack of investigation attending the report was morally and ethically wrong. Criticism was leveled at its placing in the paper - on page five; and additionally, that a *Witness* news team had not gone to the scene to investigate; that a family of ten could be killed and the story given two paragraphs in a daily crime round-up; and that the mother of a senior official could be murdered and the event not receive more than passing mention.

The report - body-count plus expert comment - is based entirely on police information, both in content and angle. For example, the angle on the Glebelands Hostel killing - that of the community's response to police - is indeed ironic, but the comment is surely of more relevance to the police than the township or suburban reader. The information attributed to the community worker is but the reporter's leading question. The respondent's suggestion that the violence is related to a fight over succession is not followed up. Thus, the story is rendered as *either* another 'faction fight' narrative, *or* another ANC/IFP battle; the sub-text suggesting the

details are either unknown, unknowable or unimportant. Again, the issue is reduced to yet another equation, more of the same 'old story' that rates so low in the news-hole stakes.

### **Is it possible to decentre the body-count genre?**

The body-count story is a journalistic genre that is deeply embedded in the discursive structures and processes that constitute and reconstitute socio-political formations in KwaZulu-Natal. 'Like any other institution,' Todorov says, 'genres bring to light the constitutive features of the society to which they belong. ... A society chooses and codifies the acts that correspond most closely to its ideology' (1990:19).

What is clear in the described sequence of reports is the difficulty of changing corporate practice, routines, and the habits of people who are 'doing a good job' in terms of long-established procedures. What produces a news report is not a reporter and a sub-editor. An event is constituted as a report in the culture of the organisation; in the degree of competition for news space on a particular day (in turn dependent on the wire service and the space for news that has been generated by advertising); it is constituted in dialogue; mitigated by the routines and structures; shaped by multiple individuals' senses of what the corporate culture is and how their job description is adequately filled; its detail is influenced by how energetic they might be feeling on that particular day (in summertime Maritzburg, humidity is a significant factor); whether a newsroom car is available; whether journalists who have both driver's licenses and an ability to speak Zulu (few have both) are available; and whether the journalist is inspired to attempt an interrogation of discursive consciousness on the basis of observations and practical consciousness. Each of these factors emerges as a product of the field of power that defines the news industry.

'Where do genres come from?' Todorov asks. 'Quite simply, from other genres. A new genre is always the transformation of an earlier one, or of several: by inversion, by displacement, by combination' (Todorov 1990:15).

The body-count form emerged from the interplay of notions of journalistic professionalism, of objectivity, the power of the press, awareness of the litigious leanings of KwaZulu politicians, the level of training of journalists, reliance on police (whose own structures of narrative production are notoriously inconsistent), the difficulty of doing investigative reportage, in a corporate culture that is geared towards serving its construction of the interests of a middle class of predominantly white readers, in the structures of feeling

generated by semantic density (Hastrup 1990:51) of experiences of townsfolk and suburbanites and consumers, and semantic gaps (silences) in township and rural issues and experience. And it is reconstituted in speech acts, in the way ordinary citizens communicate with stranger-journalists who may or may not speak Zulu.

For all these reasons, and in all likelihood many more, the body-counter is a hard habit to break. 'If it bleeds, it leads,' goes the newsroom cliché. Not always.

## **Khaba Mkhize: Narrative and journalism in a public space**

*It is easy to forget how mysterious and mighty stories are. They do their work in silence, invisibly. They work with all the internal materials of the mind and self. They become part of you while changing you. Beware the stories you read or tell: subtly, at night, beneath the waters of consciousness, they are altering your world.*

- Ben Okri, 1996: 34

### **The massacre at Creighton: February 1994**

At about midnight on Friday February 18 1994, thirteen children and two adults were reported massacred by unknown rifle-bearers in a deserted mud hut outside a village called Mahehle, near the town of Creighton, about 200 km south west of Pietermaritzburg.

News of the massacre of fifteen ANC voter-educators in rural Natal was all over the radio on Saturday morning, adding a stark oppressiveness to the muggy heat. The election was two months away; once again, it seemed the ANC-IFP conflict in Natal was going to drag democracy out of reach.

On Monday 21, the *Witness* ran a brief report and a small editorial on the massacre, based on information received from the wire service, police and the local ANC branch. The front-page report - alongside the lead story reading 'Attacks mar IFP rally' is from SAPA, the South African Press Association, a newswire service subscribed to by almost every major news organisation in the country. The story was a major one around the country, probably because of the proximity to the elections, and because of the number of journalists (especially the foreign press corps) waiting for the breaking of the 'anarchy in South Africa' story. For *Natal Witness* journalists, it was just another massacre in a long line, as an editorial of the day (see next page) suggests.

The report reads as follows:

**Massacre blamed on 'fear of election'**

*Natal Witness*, Saturday February 19 1994, page 1

BLAME for Saturday morning's massacre near Creighton in southern Natal has been leveled at 'those who are opposed to the election.'

ANC Midlands Chairman Harry Gwala said killings should have been expected as the ANC planned to have an election workshop in the area on Saturday. 'The young people who had volunteered to put up posters for the workshop were killed by people who are frightened of the elections,' he said.

ANC spokesman John Jeffrey, who went to the area shortly after the shooting, said there has been no political tension in that area.

'One can only assume it is a campaign by people who are opposed to the elections,' Jeffrey said.

In the incident four gunmen opened fire on a group of mainly teenagers preparing for an African National Congress voter education workshop in rural Mahehle.

Police said 11 people were killed inside a hut while three died trying to flee their attackers.

Another man died in hospital later.

ANC leader Nelson Mandela yesterday blamed IFP leader Mangosuthu Buthelezi for the deaths and said Buthelezi is fanning violence with his opposition to the election. ...

Buthelezi yesterday condemned Saturday's massacre, saying such violence could further polarise South African society.

'We are never going to have peace and prosperity in South Africa by eliminating each other through such terrible acts of violence,' he said.

No-one had been arrested by last night and police are offering a substantial reward for information leading to arrests and convictions of those responsible.

A senior police officer from Port Shepstone has been appointed to investigate the killings. ...

Reacting to suggestions that [IFP paramilitary] trainees were involved in the violence, [KwaZulu government paramilitary training camp] commander Philip Powell said ... that as far as he knew none of the suspects arrested for [the previous] weekend's massacre were graduates of the Mlaba training camp in Zululand.

He said it was more likely that the graduates would be found in direct conflict with members of the ANC's Mkhonto weSizwe than involved in massacres. -SAPA [ends]

The report conforms to standard principles of journalism, which are assumed to guarantee a level of objectivity. 'Balance' is attained through the identification of 'both sides' of the conflict, and sourcing of comments from each of them. Selections from their various spokespersons' comments are made on the basis of defining positions. That both parties had condemned the massacre, albeit for differing reasons - is overlooked. Powell's ambiguous denial is not explored - perhaps a leftover from reporting styles developed during the State of Emergency<sup>1</sup> when subtlety and ambiguity became a matter of survival. Probing questions are not asked; names of the dead are not given; a reporter did not visit the scene; there is a heavy reliance on police information, and on comments obtained by telephone and fax - a work

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<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of State of Emergency styles of reportage see chapter 3.

routine that by definition precludes the insights of the villagers. The construction of the sequence of events, and the suggestion of motivation for the killing is taken directly from politicians in Pretoria. The journalist is not thinking independently. The analysis of Khaba Mkhize, assistant editor of the *Witness*:

*Today's story is a typical bang-bang journalism: how many people died; what the police said. It's a habit from State of Emergency days when you were not allowed to write what you saw, but to write what the police told you. Which developed into lazy journalism. That's where we're stuck now.*

The editorial was about 150 words long, and the third and shortest of three editorials for the day. The full text of the editorial:

#### **Massacre**

Editorial, *Natal Witness*, Saturday February 19 1994

Another rural massacre; more pictures of bodies being carried away; more shocked and grieving relatives; another notch up in the awful statistics of violence; a further legacy of hate. But this latest incident near Creighton seems a little different. The victims were reportedly gathered at an ANC-sponsored voter education camp. But 12 of the 15 deceased were teenagers, too young to vote. What were they doing there? Why should they be thus 'educated' when there are so many eligible to vote for whom the electoral process is a mystery wrapped in an enigma? And why were they all sleeping in a roofless hut when they were gunned down? Was it a set-up? Was it a massacre of the innocents? Who were the midnight assassins?

We do not know the answers to any of these questions. We hope that answers will be found.

The piece makes several assumptions: note that the gathering has become 'an ANC-sponsored voter education camp', and the implied suggestions that (a) responsibility might belong to the ANC who might have set it up in order to gain 'martyr votes'; and (b) parents had been careless in allowing the youngsters to be in the hut at that time.

'This will burn down this building!' fumed Khaba when I asked him about it..

The morning news conference was attended by most of the paper's writers. The massacre was high on the discussion agenda, but quickly fell off the list of assignments. Journalists present were reluctant to cover 'more bullet holes and empty shells of houses'; a Friday event would be old news in a Tuesday paper; the shooting was likely to be appropriated to the ANC's election road show. Logistics also worked against the story: because the region was then intensely violent, journalists were rule-bound to work in twos. The village is two hours from the city; thus eight staff-hours would be spent in travel alone for five- or six-

hundred words of old news. With the odds stacked like this, the story would not survive on Tuesday's lineup.

Khaba had in the mean time taken up the issue in the editors' 9:30 a.m. meeting, arguing that the editorial effectively put the blame for the massacre on the parents of the dead, and that damage-control was an urgent necessity. The person-power problem was resolved by his suggestion that I accompany him to the village.

By 11:30 a.m. we were on the main highway heading south from Maritzburg; tape recorder rolling.

*Lesley: How did you persuade [those at the editors' conference] to let you cover the story?*

*Khaba: I was angry. And there was little opposition. And the opposition that was there, was squashed by those who look at it not intellectually but emotionally. It's an emotional issue. This building will burn with this type of inquest writing! And I explained the dynamics of culture. That for every comrade that exists in South Africa there's not a single one who's not a concern of a parent. And that question, you may think it's being referred to the politician - no - it refers to the parent. Who has lost a son. And Derek Alberts said when they asked him as Echo editor now. What's his feeling. He said Khaba is right. It's the same business of a white imposing his own standards on a situation he does not understand. Then I made no bones about stating that we are playing right into the hands of loonies in the ANC. They do not defend it. So they said, can you do another piece to atone for what has been done. Go there and get the facts. Because the editorial has been written on the basis of rhetoric. By the police, and by politicians.*

*Lesley: So what are you going to do now when you go there?*

*Khaba: Get the story from the people. Not from leaders. Not from the police. That story - this morning's story's from the police and from the ANC.*

*Our story is not correct. That's number one. Number two, the correct ages of those boys, and the venue where they were. I want to see the venue. Because they say it's a hut. And the time. When did it happen? Because there's a story flying they were sleeping there. Were they really sleeping there? Some things don't gel.*

*And again there's always that surprise angle. Who knows. There might be an intra-ANC feud. I mean, you can't rule out the possibility. You see, until you come to the*

scene, it's difficult to comment about an incident. I mean the Mboyi massacre in Richmond last year. We went out there knowing Inkatha kids were killed by ANC guys. We found that the story - these guys were previously Inkatha guys, but they were kicked out because they did not go along with the killing of people. [...] They were Inkatha. Inkatha turned ANC. So now you actually get a picture of the community conflicts. Because it is community conflicts.

We went out to Estcourt. There was another massacre there. They [the SAP] said: 'Massacre of IFP guys.' [Implying it was the work of ANC people.] We found that it was a massacre of IFP guys, by IFP guys. Why? They'd changed their minds about IFP. It was a punishment to discourage others. The lack of freedom of operation. That's the reason. And we asked the people who did not deny that 'we killed' - they said, 'we killed because they decided to become ANC. We as fathers are not ANC.'

Then I asked them, 'what's wrong if your son decides to become ANC?'

They said, 'look, what's your church denomination?'

I said it's American Board.<sup>2</sup> I was baptised in the American Board church.

They said 'yes, because your father was American Board. It's the same principle. If I'm Inkatha, my son must be Inkatha.'

You see, these are the stories, you've got to dig deep down and find out. Here, the ANC has come out saying [the killers are] the people who do not want the elections [i.e. the IFP]. But still ... it goes further. There must have been threats made before. This is the story we are going to get. But the policemen, instead of being policemen - investigators - they have abdicated from their job, they are reporters. There's no investigation that has been made. Statements taken, but no investigation.

Lesley: Who did you negotiate with to get this story?

Khaba: I did not negotiate. I simply put the cards on the table, and said, this is embarrassing and shameful that we can report the story from the police and from Harry Gwala [the leader of the ANC in the Natal Midlands]. What has happened to our pride and dignity, people, that we are a Midlands paper? And when they said, 'but now who can go, you know, no staff,' I said, 'I'll go.'

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<sup>2</sup> American Board of Missions.

*And in actual fact I feel satisfied if someone like Lakela Kaunda or myself go out and do these sensitive stories. Because when the violence started, we didn't have the experience. We learnt about responsible journalism on the job, without being trained. So probably there wouldn't have been such violence if it started when we were what we are now. But nobody really knew how to do it.*

*Our [journalistic] mistakes are not visible, like the doctor's mistakes that get buried; the lawyer's mistakes that end up behind cells. And we, we end up with a blurb, 'For The Record'. But in actual fact our mistakes start wars and civil wars.*

Khaba's starting point for analysis is not the positions of political parties, but in the nature of cultural ties, and the dynamics of conflicts within and around these: such as kin and generational conflicts. In speeches and conversation Khaba frequently invokes this analogy: that in the morning a person is born; by noon, that person is a member of a political party; at night, when he or she is killed, the one who dies is neither a member of a party nor the party itself, but a breadwinner; a contributor to a community. This framework of ties and networks within communities gives shape to many of his columns and reports. Therefore, 'the story' is seldom one of turf wars between political parties, but of schisms, connections, ties, and conflicts of interests in geographical communities. Embedded in this reflection on journalism is a belief that the media, by reporting on a conflict, is ineluctably a part of the conflict itself.

Somewhat happenstance in his manner of investigation, Khaba met two detectives working on the case at a café; nearer Mahehle five eight-year-olds told us their version of events and showed us the way to the village; as we drove over the last hill we met the village *induna* (chief), Ephraim Nxasana, talking with representatives of the Goldstone Commission who were inspecting the hut where the massacre had taken place. After the Commission members left, Khaba spent about an hour talking with Nxasana, who said he had lost two grandsons to the attackers, and went with him to pay respects on a quiet west-facing hillside, reserved as a graveyard for those who died violently<sup>3</sup>. Creighton is close to the town of Donnybrooke where Alan Paton located the novel *Cry the beloved country*, which was to be filmed in the region, starring James Earl Jones, later in the year. Some graves were marked with stone masonry - gifts from the International Red Cross. Others were but a cairn and a

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<sup>3</sup> Zulu tradition holds that those who die violently are not ready for death and make a more complex crossing to the next life.

hump protected with barbed wire from passing cattle. The children would be buried there on Sunday. Nxasana pointed out the graves of a son and a daughter who were the last to have been buried there, in 1985. After their deaths, he said, the village had outlawed party politics.

Nxasana's narrative of events and motivations had different emphases to the story that had been on the wire service: he spoke not of voter educators, but of teenage enthusiasm for the first election in which blacks could vote. The thirteen - some as young as twelve - had put up four or five ANC posters and were keen to get voter education going in Mahehle, but in his view their main interest was spending a warm summer Friday night in a hut without a roof away from their parents. Someone in the village, he alleged, had called members of the IFP in a nearby town of Ixopo to say the ANC was having a voter education meeting in the hut. The recipient of the call, he said, must have sent the attackers.

The pink and blue rectangular mud hut stands in a place where two roads join at an acute angle. Nxasana said the attackers had fired from both roads at once while the teenagers were braaiing mielies over a fire in a barrel. All the cliches about the smell of death seemed true: a grotesque sweetness emanated from the deep bloodstains in the mud floor. Nxasana told us the two adults who had been killed were men in their twenties. With a feeling that something bad was about to happen, they had gone to the hut to tell the teenagers to come home. Their bodies were found at first light by a herdboyc, about 20 m away from the hut.

When we arrived back in Maritzburg at about 6:30 p.m., both of us were drained, and were finding it a tall order to create a centre-page feature that could convey the dimension that Nxasana was communicating. Not only was the story we had heard from him substantially different from the prevalent narrative of rural massacres, but the sense of such a great loss - fifteen young people - in such a small village was a painful experience. 'Hunger, violence and evil are all brutal facts of social life ... there is no way of transferring non-linguistic brutality to 'facts', or the truth of sentences,' says Hastrup (1993:735). Nxasana's story had significantly changed the meaning of the event for us, from being primarily a political event to something far more chaotic in origin and implication. A political interpretation (and response) seemed to track only one thread in a large tangle. The tradition of a centre-page feature would insist we offer a narrative structure that 'made sense' of the senseless. Khaba sweet-talked the chief-sub, and negotiated a nights rest before we made the narrative decisions. The chief sub gave an ok: the features page was already full.

The story was written on Tuesday. Khaba focused on the tragedy of misinterpretations about the primary purpose of the gathering. It was due for publication on Wednesday 23 which was the day of the ANC Memorial Service for the massacred. However, the paper's 'language q.c.' (quality controller, a senior sub-editor) was not happy with its structure or idiom, so it was held over until Thursday 24. The published copy:

**Killing of 15 a 'tragedy of errors'**

*Natal Witness*, Thursday 24 February 1994

The shooting of 15 youths in a hut at Mahehle near Creighton early on Saturday morning was a 'tragedy of mixed errors.'

This impression was conveyed to *The Natal Witness* by several members of the community.

Although the area has not had much violence, it is tense as it borders on the Ixopo district where ANC-IFP feuding has resulted in killings.

The unseen occupants of the hut were apparently braaiing mielies on a fire. This caused some people to panic, believing that an attack was being planned.

According to Sidwell Khuboni: 'a known figure who does not like the idea of the ANC recruiting here, phoned an office of the ANC's opposition ... and announced that the ANC was camping for trouble.'

At about 9 p.m. a hastily gathered 'hit squad' went to the hut not knowing it was occupied by 14 boys and one girl, between 12 and 20 years, who had camped overnight with the idea of putting up posters for an ANC voter-education meeting set for the next day.

Detectives in Ixopo said: 'It appears the attackers were not aware of who was occupying the house. Judging by the long-range shots that hit the (mud) walls, it is safe to deduce that they later stormed the house because there was no return of fire.'

Ephraim Nxasane (76), who lost two grandsons in the attack, said the youths occupied the abandoned mud house out of 'youthful excitement'.

'They knew the name Mandela as a legend and the fact that on Saturday they would witness a presence of what had become a myth<sup>4</sup> drove them to the idea of a vigil wait,' said Nxasana.

He added that two men in their twenties had a premonition that something bad was about to happen, so they went to order the teenagers to call off the camping. They arrived at the same time as the killers and they too were shot dead.

The *Natal Witness* visited the scene this week. Members of the Goldstone Commission were also there. The house stands well away from others in the village and is close to four telephone poles that carry ANC posters. One is torn. Only shreds of yellow, green and white remain.

Gaping holes in the clay walls made by G3 and AK47 bullets are now home to a few lizards that scuttle away at the sound of human feet. ... Bits of clothing and small-sized shoes are everywhere. A gumboot has red streaks on its yellow lining. Blood is on the windowsill where some tried to escape.

The grandfather, Ephraim Nxasane, who owns a 400-acre farm on which all of the victims lived, said Mahehle village has been free of political involvement since 1987 when they withdrew their affiliation from Inkatha.

Many people fear that these killings will now develop an ethos of violence. [ends]

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<sup>4</sup> A reference to the possibility of voting in a democratic election.

In this piece, blame is balanced in the mention of both AK47 and G3 bullets - automatic weapons respectively associated with the ANC and IFP and KwaZulu Police (KZP). Details of people's relatives and possessions change the story from a narrative of political conquest to a narrative in which human community is shattered by violence. The conspiracy angle is muted in favour of an angle of misunderstanding and tragedy, and the players in the story are not national politicians but villagers. Emphasis is placed on the value of peace to the people in the area.

Publication came too late to forestall a scathing verbal attack on the newspaper and its 'ignorant white editor' (the words of Harry Gwala) at an exceptionally tense ANC memorial service. Gwala told the crowd the *Natal Witness* editorial implied the ANC killed its own people. Having traveled to the Memorial Service in a car with the newspaper's logo on the back window, the assigned journalist Jeff Cele, photographer Elaine Anderson and I felt uneasy about the rolling mutterings his speech was evoking, and left as soon as possible.

Not knowing this, the photographer, journalist and I felt unsafe. The first law of journalism at the time was, 'if you think you're in danger, go home.' Back at the office, my recording of Gwala's comments on the newspaper - the only part of his speech delivered in English - created a buzz at the office. Media unionists, among them the then-President of the South African Union of Journalists Yvonne Grimbeek, debated how free management's speech should be when it threatened job safety. The idea that a balance of 'the official' sides of a story alone is a volatile prescription gained some credence. Then-editor David Willers related the attack to the acrimonious debate between the paper and the Pietermaritzburg ANC about freedom of speech - an episode of which was at that moment before the Press Council of South Africa - and requested that Gwala be cited in full in the lead story. I began to realise that in that context, free speech could not actualise the ideals held out for it, yet there were sufficient strongly formed opinions for it not to disappear altogether. Still, perhaps we had Gwala all wrong. Months later, I learned from political reporter Lakela Kaunda that Gwala often taunted the paper at public meetings.

*Lesley: At Creighton Gwala said some things about the Natal Witness there that really made us feel very nervous.*

*Lakela: You know how many times he's done that to me!? There was a time [...] everyday he would say something about the Witness and everyone - you know how they will all look - and I would get so angry! And he would also turn, look at me, and smile.*

*[...] And then there were times when he would shout my name and say 'I am looking at you and there's 20 000 of you but tomorrow morning, buy the Natal Witness, Lakela Kaunda will say there were 300 people!' [breaks into peals of laughter]*

*Lesley: - but how could he say that; he was your friend!*

*Lakela: - yes he was my friend but he would say it. I was terrible at counting [more peals of laughter].*

Part of the media appeal of Natal is the predictability of massacres that make human extremes part of ordinary life. After the whine of automatic bullets, the whirr of autowound film is not far away. In Mahehle, that complex of horror, pain and terror mutated into kitsch with startling ease. At the Memorial Service, I saw one photographer from a Durban paper shoot a grieving woman, knuckle in eye, through a dusty broken window with a flickering candle in the background. Unable to speak Zulu, he demonstrated with his own knuckle and eye how she was to pose. During the prayers and party rhetoric, the same woman's silent grief was like a private earthquake, and other women moved to hold her. The son she had lost was 28 years old; she could barely walk and was, I understood, widowed. Fifteen hours later, her image was on the front page, framed with green stripes that matched her blanket. Susan Sontag's words seem appropriate:

The camera/gun does not kill... Still, there is something predatory in the act of taking a picture. To photograph people is to violate them, by seeing people as they can never see themselves, by having knowledge of them they can never have; it turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed. ... Though an event has come to mean, precisely, something worth photographing, it is still ideology (in the broadest sense) that determines what constitutes an event. There can be no evidence, photographic or otherwise, of an event until the event itself has been named and characterised. ... Images transfix. Images anaesthetise (1979:14,18,20).

The following Sunday, all the world's press gathered for the funeral; to a cynic's eye, party bureaucrats gathered for the harvest of microphones. The scene was like something out of a Marquez novel: hundreds of peace monitors, journalists, first aid officials, soldiers and party bureaucrats gathered around the vast red-and-yellow striped marquee, with a phalanx of expensive automobiles covering the hill that had been cleared of cows for the occasion. The village induna, Ephraim Nxasana (in suit and tie) was not among the Party (in Afro-chic) at the long table on the platform, who'd flown in from Johannesburg. Press people scurried along the line of coffins, using them as tables for spare cameras; tripping over neon cables, fishing for

sound. Later, at the grave site, away from the high mound of red earth and cameras vying for perfect perspective atop it, a band of mothers formed a tight, bewildered circle of support; reviving those who were faint from heat.

Some months later, three IFP officials and one IFP member were tried and acquitted in the Pietermaritzburg Supreme Court for participating in the so-called 'Creighton Massacre'. Two were identified by the survivor of the massacre who had been declared dead and placed on a witness protection programme. He told the court that one of the attackers had been his childhood friend. The others were identified by a KwaZulu Police constable who had been ordered to accompany the four accused and another two as far as a nearby town on the night of the massacre. He said that at the town, the six were joined by up to twelve others carrying automatic rifles and pangas. He was told they were on a 'secret mission, and was not allowed to accompany them further, but was left behind to guard a local IFP leader.

It is believed that this group constituted a hit-squad that was responsible for a number of attacks on ANC members and gatherings in the region. The rest of the group remained at large during the course of the trial. The accused were acquitted for lack of evidence: too few witnesses had been willing to come forward. Several journalists I spoke to believed political horse-trading between the ANC and the IFP to have been behind the acquittal.

## **Narrative mediations**

Most of Khaba Mkhize's ideas about journalism were formed while he was the editor of the *Natal Witness Echo*, a weekly tabloid supplement to the *Witness* aimed at black readership. In 1994-5, fifty-thousand copies of *Echo* circulated every Thursday in Maritzburg and the rural Natal Midlands region - a vast area incorporating much of KwaZulu, the political stronghold of Mangosuthu Buthelezi's Zulu nationalist Inkatha Freedom Party.

As a journalist, Khaba is noted for his often controversial ideas on the impact of the media in violent contexts. His editorship of *Echo* (1985 - 1991) coincided with a period of intense violence in the region, and he vigorously pursued the resolution of the conflict through the medium of the newspaper. Towards the end of 1988 the newspaper believed his life to be in danger after he was publicly denounced at an Inkatha rally, and he was sent to Canada for several months. In his absence, *Echo* was edited by Fred Kockett, whose 'Fleet Street' style of journalism (as Khaba calls it) stood in stark contrast to his own style of mediative or

communitarian journalism. To Fred, guffaws Khaba, he owes his life: after a few months of 'Fleet Street' reportage, he says, Inkatha welcomed him back.

Khaba was born into a Zulu family in a Durban township called Clermont. For most of the 70s he worked as a site clerk for a building contractor, but wrote sufficient letters to various local newspapers for the *Witness* to offer him a job in 1978 when it was decided to employ a black journalist. He was instrumental in founding *Echo* in 1979, and became its editor in 1985, forty-four days before PW Botha imposed the State of Emergency that lasted for six years. In 1991 he was appointed assistant editor of the *Witness* and in 1996 he was appointed General Manager of the South African Broadcasting Corporation in the province of KwaZulu-Natal.

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'The key is to apply inclusive journalism,' Khaba declared at a London meeting on media and transition. 'We must tell ourselves that we are part of the human race. And once you feel that you are part of the human race you are able to identify with the pain. You are not aloof, you are not on a different planet. When you write about what happens, it also involves you' (Mkhize in Balch and Roskam 1994:17).

The theme is a strong one in his copy files housed at the library of the *Natal Witness*. The stories that Khaba chose to tell in the last two decades of apartheid are a study in the arts of cultural resistance. Not only do his narrative strategies constantly play with subversion and inversions of the binaries of the great South African narrative: they challenge the practices of journalism that reproduce formations of power and the texts that accompany them. As his statement on inclusive journalism indicates, he believes implicitly that with different practices of journalism comes the ability to tell different kinds of stories. His journalism, then, constitutes a direct yet carefully-played challenge to the rules of the game. He inhabits a space on the interstices of journalism, the non-racial movement and a very particular invocation of 'ubuntu', an African philosophy of humanness.

Drawing from these sources he constructs himself as a journalist-raconteur with responsibility towards justice in the public sphere. In a profession that constructs excellence in cultural and ideological terms, Khaba learned the wits of the subaltern and published stories that would seldom have found a place on the news pages. He seemed to have an extraordinary

capacity to speak his mind with Tutu-esque inoffensiveness. In many morning newsroom meetings I was amused to observe his characteristic style of puffing on a cigarette, pursing his lips and dropping a low rumble of a thought into a conversation in a way that it would be taken up, without giving a hint of challenge to prevailing ideas. An air of harmlessness was a tactical weapon in the art of being taken seriously. Humour was another: he could regale the news staff with observations of the absurdities of South African social categories. When he wanted to insist on an angle or a perspective, he would - as he had done in getting coverage of the Creighton massacre rectified - but he chose his moments carefully. As a result, people tended to not take him seriously. Playing the raconteur was part of asserting an alternative social cosmology - but it meant that at times some journalists considered him something of a bumbling affirmative middle-weight. Having won the Commonwealth Fellowship for Journalists in 1995 and having been appointed to the SABC Board of Directors in 1994, he was not promoted from assistant to deputy editor when the opportunity arose; nor was he honoured by the South Africa media community on being awarded the Fellowship, which in Britain was considered prestigious enough to land him a place at the high tea table at Buckingham Palace, to converse with Queen Elizabeth II. He was, however, invited to apply for the position of General Manager of the SABC in KwaZulu-Natal in late 1995 - a position that he still holds at the time of writing.

Khaba is also a playwright. He has written a number of plays, one of which, *Pity Maritzburg!* (1989) won a prestigious AA Vita Award. His plays, like his journalism, are an extension of his desire to put into the public sphere narratives that function as social resources. I think Khaba believes, as does Ben Okri, that 'stories are the secret reservoir of values: change the stories individuals and nations live by and tell themselves, and you change the individuals and nations' (Okri 1997:112).

Three story forms dominated his copy files at the Witness. There are carnivalesque stories aplenty: tales of the absurdity of racism and stereotypes of any kind. Such tales compel readers to identify constructs that govern behaviour.

A second dominant narrative finds expression in stories of courage and heroism, particularly tales of ordinary people who do ordinary but unexpected things in the face of racism. Khaba actively sought out such people, excavating the ordinary and the humdrum to find the unusual and the innovative.

The third story that Khaba tells in myriad forms is a tale of subjectivity - not 'parties, soccer and crime' but stories that mediate the world of a self-respecting black community to the newspaper's predominantly white readership.

**1 Carnavalesque stories** subverted dominant mythologies. In them Khaba displays an eye for the absurdities that accompany power, and for that which breaks the codes of binary social analysis. These stories are 'characterised by wordplay, humour, delight in language and metaphor, and break boundaries of sound and meaning, of history and personal perception, of norms and the assumptions that lie behind them -sometimes in ways unforeseen by the writers themselves' (Montenegro 1991:4).

His plays, like the columns he wrote for *Echo* (initially) and later the *Witness*, routinely lampoon stereotypes and political constructs. A random run through his copy files turns up surprises like 'Liberating the white breast'; and a piece on the slaughter of a cow in the heart of white Maritzburg suburbia to celebrate a black businessman's purchase of a house. Running themes in his columns have, at various times, included pleas for the preservation of a troop of monkeys that periodically invade some of the upmarket suburbs of the city; questions about tradition, gender and authority explored through the story of the village chief who instituted virginity testing for women between 13 and 19; the use and abuse of Zulu ethnicity; and reflections on the ethics of journalism. A noticeable characteristic of his bi-weekly column is the subversion of binaries and hierarchies. Once, for example, he described, in delicate terms, his first meeting with then-State-President FW de Klerk - during a 'biological break' in the men's room. In a back room of a distinguished gathering, the last white president meets a black journalist; the urinal becomes a carnival; racial protocol suffers a sustained guffaw. Such reportage embodies Bakhtin's observation that the 'plane of comic representation ... is the zone of maximally familiar and crude contact ... laughter is a vital factor in laying down that prerequisite for fearlessness without which it would be impossible to approach the world realistically' (Bakhtin 1981:23).

In offering a typology of his stories I do not wish to imply that he could only tell three kinds of stories, nor that stories are easily 'classifiable'. My interest is to identify patterns in his narrative strategies.

One tale that exemplifies his technique of using laughter to approach the unapproachable - and develop a different perspective - appears as part of a column in the

Witness of November 19, 1993, on the subject of a far-right Afrikaaner Weerstandsbeweging (AWB) meeting:

I can't tell you about the AWB outside Natal but I can tell you about our AWB in Pietermaritzburg [who were] waiting for Mandela at Howick on Monday. ...

I took my chances to get the feel of the AWB at close quarters. I decided that they would not further flatten my already flat black nose in front of crowds. I found that this AWB crowd is a different kettle of fish. ... I got the impression that they were ordinary fathers and sons who happen to wear the image of a demonised name. ...

Of course they were heavily armed. Some were carrying leather cases which looked like guitar bags, but their faces did not match their fire-power. I still wonder how many media people who took the 'spectacular' pictures actually wrote about the polite behaviour displayed by the AWB. ...

Probably irritated by their presence, the comrades decided to toyi-toyi towards the group ... carrying a very big red SACP banner. The AWB refused to be agitated. ...

When I'm overseas again, I will tell them that in Pietermaritzburg we have a different AWB. I hope they stay like that.

**2 Stories of human courage** focus on human agency in situations where most would be expected to be passive and helpless. Visiting a violence-stricken area of a township one day, Khaba saw a small black pig being tormented by a large dog. All of a sudden, over the crest of the hill came a small dog that chased the tormenter away. The event became a focus of Khaba's column, as a parable, this time: that if a small dog could side with a pig to chase away a big bad dog, how about humans overcoming racial and ethnic divides in everyday life? In a media environment where most journalists are fascinated by the unjust exercise of power over the powerless, Khaba seems to be fascinated with the possibility of the apparently powerless to resist power that was exerted over them.

Khaba's stories of courage are not tales of loud but of quiet heroism. A feature story focuses on the father of a white teenage pizza deliverer who had been shot dead as he delivered the order. Khaba's story focuses on the man's struggle to overcome his desire for revenge, and his realisation that if he were to forgive his son's killer, he would be free within himself.

Heroes, in Khaba's stories, are ordinary people who choose to cross lines of power and prejudice. An example:

**SAP vs ANC, IFP - on a football field!**

*Natal Witness*, 9.10.93

**The mass media can play a leading role in a 'Peace Unleashing Movement', reports Khaba Mkhize**

The invisible was made visible recently, thanks to the alert eye and sharp nose of journalist Fred Khumalo who writes for *City Press*. He recorded a tolerance-generating event in the violence-

ravaged Malukazi shack township near Durban whereby the ANC first thrashed the IFP and then the international peace observers, in collaboration with the South African Police, succeeded in beating the hell out of both the IFP and ANC.

This event is hardly known in the country and certainly not by the overseas community. Even the police press releases didn't contain this scoop. But I do not blame the mass media and the police. It was obviously invisible and unimportant. The winner at the end of the day on that battle field was the 'Peace Trophy'.

The first soccer match was between the IFP and ANC. The IFP was walloped by three goals to one in a tournament organised as a peace gesture. Then an integrated team of IFP and ANC wore one jersey and played against a combined team between the international observers and the SAP who scored a slender 1-0 victory.

Echoing local Inandi Chief Sondelani Zondi's sentiments, the IFP and ANC then set up a Malukazi development forum. They also agreed to form a joint dispute resolution and a joint disciplinary action committee to investigate criminal cases.

The leadership of both organisations agreed to free political activity and to make schools and halls available to both for meetings. Although the South African mass media and police belittled or simply ignored the violence-shattering episode, this is no reason why we should ignore the hope-building process.

Massacres (very visible) are easy to capture on the box and paper - hope and peace (easily invisible) are journalistic geometry.

During and after the 1994 elections, Khaba seemed to have made it a mission to write as many 'RDP' or development stories as he could find. I went with him one Friday afternoon to a children's gardening club in a nearby township: he was delighted to be able to marvel with them that they had grown food. He seemed to have cultivated the habit of identifying hope. On the way to the junior gardeners' meeting, we passed an old rusted wreck of a car standing on bricks, with weeds growing wild underneath it. 'See,' he said, 'there is a sign that someone is living in hope - that one day they'll have the money to fix it up, and be able to drive around.' Khaba was quick to pick up on stories of people and communities who had the imagination and initiative to start development in their areas. Such stories tales have an obvious moral, focusing on the consequences of good relationships and responsible choices.

**3 Mediating blackness** - the conundrum for black print-journalists in South Africa is that unless you write for *City Press* or *Sowetan*, you are inevitably writing for a predominantly white readership. Khaba appeared to regard it as something of a mission to write about black life 'not just as parties, soccer and crime'. The story 'The day the fish came out' appeared in early January, 1995 at the bottom of the front page and received several enthusiastic reader responses.

### The day the fish came out

by Khaba Mkhize. *Natal Witness* 7.1.95 page 1. bottom centre

All eleven languages in the country are at one in describing the scorching weather and all use the symbolism of animals.

South Africa is so hot even Euro-languages have thawed to gauge our temperatures. And they, too, use animal symbolism, like the English saying: only mad dogs and Englishmen go out in the midday sun.

The Afrikaners say: *Dis so warm dat die kraaie gaap* (it's so hot the crows yawn).

IsiZulu, siSwati, and siTsonga use fish: *Lishisa likhipha inhlanzi emanzini* - it's so hot the fish are expelled from the water. In siTswana and seSotho a crocodile replaces fish. *Ligqatsha ubhobhoyi* goes the isiXhosa saying, meaning the sun ejects *ubhobhoyi* (a type of bird) from rocky cliffs. And isiPedi says: it's so hot it melts fat from the pigs (*La go tolosa kulube makhura*).

Says Sekola Sello of *City Press*, 'As South Africans, we have gone a long way; we're surely normalising as a country. That we can all talk about a single common topic, the weather, shows civic growth. And to imagine that the media freaks would treat the weather as a running story tells volumes about our transformation.'

Typically, Pietermaritzburg - a city of extremes in floods and violence - was beaten in the heat stakes only by Windhoek - by one degree.

However, the unifying heat waves are felt from virtually coast to *platteland* as if to underline another Zulu saying: *Libalele nasebukhweni bezinja* - it is so hot, even at the in-laws of dogs - wherever the in-laws of dogs are. It's hot everywhere!

True to the writer's belief in 'ubuntu<sup>5</sup> journalism,' the piece has a one-nation meta-text: 'all eleven languages are at one in describing ...'. In writing the story he has a specific and consciously intended civic function in mind: to ride outside the binary ruts of black/white, Zulu/Xhosa and remind people that to be human is to be embodied; that colour does not alter people's experience of heat.

As a writer, Khaba's interest was not in differences between conflicting parties, ideological or otherwise, but in the ties between them that subverted the rationalisation of their enmities. Indeed, as the 'Fish' story above suggests, even bodiliness and shared experiences of the weather could stimulate interest across social divides.

While at the *Witness* I recorded some six hours of conversation with him. Edited highlights follow.

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<sup>5</sup> *Ubuntu*: African philosophy of community - in the words of Desmond Tutu, 'our sense of connectedness, our sense that my humanity is bound up in your humanity'. (*South* newspaper, April 4 1991)

## On media values: Fleet Street v. Ubuntu journalism

*Lesley: Your journalism is obviously very different from what you call 'Fleet Street' journalism, or 'tell it as it is' journalism. How did that develop?*

*Khaba: With the fact that the community we are serving is not well versed about journalism. They think anything is according to the taste of the editor. Or the reporters. It started with the letters page. Youngsters were angry, and they wanted to take it all out in pen and bullets. Those who couldn't use bullets, used their pens. The fight was out there - bullets - there was another fight in the paper, expressing themselves. And, er, denouncing and detesting 'System' politicians,<sup>6</sup> which was Inkatha. And then we'd publish the letters; Inkatha would say - 'You are against us!' The fact that these letters are not written by the editor didn't matter.*

*During the State of Emergency, when the violence was at its peak, I took the paper myself to shops, public places, and I went to shebeens,<sup>7</sup> and they would grab it 'oven fresh', this was the slogan, and whatever misconceptions we'd have, they'd tell me straight - but there I was gambling on human psychology that if I'm there, they will never channel their anger through the barrel of a gun, they will tell me straight: 'Khaba this is rubbish.' Then I'm in a position to explain why we did it, if we had missed the point somewhere, I would apologise. I was an immediate target, they didn't have to phone or plot, it became a spontaneous reaction or anger. They had the person to take out their anger on in the shebeens and shopping centres.*

*Lesley: -so you were available*

*Khaba: -I was available.*

*Lesley: -Right there-*

*Khaba: -right there. Because I consider it - that's protection, to create instant bridges. If they want to piss on me, let them do it. As long as they don't kill me. But then they would tell me - look, this whole page, it's comrades.<sup>8</sup> Then I would plead with them, 'Do me a favour. Spread out the message, at your meetings, that your people must respond.' By so doing I was involving the entire community in*

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<sup>6</sup> 'System' politicians implies collaboration with the apartheid government. While Inkatha leader Mangosuthu Buthelezi did not accept the offer of the apartheid state to make KwaZulu into an 'independent homeland for Zulus', the left considered Inkatha to be in cahoots with the State.

<sup>7</sup> Shebeens: township pubs.

<sup>8</sup> Comrades: UDF / ANC supporters

communications, and I also learnt that to have a whole page from one side, was dangerous. I used to count letters - Echo's letter pages would take about eight letters. I'd take four from Inkatha, four from the other side. In order to serve the community on an equal basis. The community became the objective for my job and for my existence. It ceased to be Ulundi<sup>9</sup> or Pretoria or Security Branch. I became preoccupied with the community. Hence I was very excited to learn of communitarian journalism, because this is what I was practising.

Lesley: Now if you were explain communitarian journalism very very simply -

Khaba: It's to apply inclusive journalism on the part of the community. You imagine - how would I feel if I was a member of the IFP? Reading this? The UDF - reading this?

There are basic things; all communities have these in common, and the newspaper must also be treated from that perspective that we are all common, as human beings, that we belong to the human race, we journalists are not sitting on a planet giving judgemental theses on humanity, we are part of community, but we tend to have this egoistic profile that we are writing for the people - [but] we are writing for ourselves. If I write a story which will make Imbali burn - why should I write it? Even if it is true, telling it as it is does not justify me to cause suffering.

There are three categories of journalists - you have the writers, or opinion makers, who are thinkers, ok, but they will have experience to do that. Then you have your reporter who reports about what happened yesterday. And who'll announce what has been announced by a particular group. Then you have the explorer - the explorer is a person who writes about what happened yesterday, why it happened; you go back three years; if it still doesn't make sense, you go back four, five, six years. Then you explore the future, how will these trends influence the future of the community - you are exploring backwards and forwards. I cast myself in the mold of explorer journalist - I explore the future; what will happen after the massacre, and what does happen too - the 'follow-up culture'. When people make peace we don't care; we don't care about miracles; when those people were killing each other last week [have stopped fighting, but this week] we haven't heard anything about the continuation of the conflict. How; why; you explore, you don't report.

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<sup>9</sup> Ulundi: a town that became the capital of KwaZulu and the headquarters of Inkatha.

*I call it [communitarian journalism] the greening of journalism. It's a very difficult concept to sell overnight to people, especially --- [a senior colleague], he thinks I'm 'off' [crazy] because this is just a myth, an unattainable myth, [they speak of me in the same way that] they describe the born-again. Good news is no news, they've got a lot of guys they quote, they quote some Fleet Street experts who actually crush the concept of good journalism. Some people don't even bother to argue with me, I sense that, [they think] 'pvt, it's a waste of time'. But again it is because people are always scared of new things, things which have never been endorsed by the so-called gurus of the field. Talking seriously with some of the people, they say 'ja we agree with you but good news is boring'. I disagree. You don't have to report in a greyish style, you can do it in an exciting style - did you read that one on the refugee pigs and dogs?*

*Lesley: - the column?*

*Khaba: Ja, that column. Many people still talk about that story, you see, because it's story telling, it's a narration which carries symbolic analogies and metaphors, and people identify with analogies and metaphors.*

*Another thing - many journalists are by-products of an apartheid era where everybody was hammering apartheid - you didn't need skills. See, I consider the tools for our industry, the media, to be language and words. With apartheid you needed only three tools in your toolbox: a bulldozer, a fourteen-pound hammer, or a four pound hammer. Because you were just doing demolition. Bha! Bha! Bha! Bha! This era now demands very effective tools: tools of precision. Your level, your tape, your drill; you need a power drill, a pneumatic tool -bwwrrht-. We haven't learnt that art of selecting the right tools, because we are not demolishing now, we are building. That whole baggage of demonising people, demonising institutions and organisations, it's a closed chapter. Mediative journalism in my establishment - it's a taboo cause; I only get away with it because it's me, in what I write, I've got a 'mentally-related exemption'. Okay. And with the younger journalists, some actually believe in this, but then news editors and subs, they don't.*

*And I think what actually militates against communitarian journalism is that people have been conditioned to flashpoints, violent flashpoints.*

*Lesley: - Explain?*

*Khaba: The mass media is thriving on violent episodes; television and people's deaths. Not that I disagree with it but they get the headline news - those referring to deaths and violence. A truck that doesn't overturn but gets off the road and probably overturns and nobody dies - it's not considered news, but to me, the news is the driver - how did he pilot the truck to 'save passengers or homes which are next to the road, or probably here are these ramps, steel barriers, or maybe it was the presence of these steel barriers that helped to prevent an accidental massacre. But no, [in terms of] the death principle: no-one was killed - so it's out. But we would be helping the community by identifying those things that protect the community so that the local authority would be encouraged to erect those things that save the community. We don't see that story. To us that story is no story.' So the culture of how many died has got to be readjusted.*

## **The changing paradigm of journalism**

'Readjusting the culture of journalism' was a theme in many of our conversations. While on a long road journey to the village where the 'Creighton massacre' had taken place, he spoke in greater depth on the subject.

*Khaba: 'Tell it as it is. Bugger the consequences.' That's the criterion for being a good journalist. To me, it's an 18th century norm of journalism. You see, paradigms have shifted. And when paradigms have shifted, we also have to shift our ethics.*

*When you do a sensitive story, what I used to do and I still do, is to come back to the person reading the story, and say, 'Do you agree?' and when he objects to point abc, xyz, discuss it again, until he convinces me that it's wrong, or I convince him that it's right to let it stick like that. Then a person respects you for that. Doesn't get a shock the next morning when he gets the paper. And when you are wrong, never hesitate, take it as virtue, to say, 'I'm sorry, I made a mistake.'*

*Approaching journalism in a violence-stricken situation, according to the book, it tends to be reckless. For instance, that youngster [who gave us information about the Creighton massacre], I can quote him, but what do I want to achieve? If I publish his name, people will come back and shoot him. They shoot kids. If I publish his name, do I have a responsibility? People are behaving like animals. Nothing is*

*stopping them from killing children. I am putting that boy on death row, just because Journalism says, 'Get their name.' I can change the name and say this is Bafana. The name does not matter in the story. It's not a court case. [The aim of the story] is to give out information, not kill the sources of information. Preserve life while presenting the facts. This dogmatic approach of sources, you know, they'll do it, then fly back to London. Get the story in the Daily Telegraph [an international weekly version of which is distributed in South Africa]. They don't care about what is happening to the people they've left behind. But for me to come back again here, I must protect the identities of people of this area. The next time I come, I get that boy's name in the paper, and they kill him - the next time I come they either kill me or reject me. Short-term journalism. Ignoring the consequences. And not knowing what you want to achieve.*

*Les, some journalists cannot live with the fact that sometimes you drive 500 km and you come back with no story. That's where dishonesty starts. Your newspaper or your news editor must know that not every trip produces a story. Then the fabrication of stories, thumb-sucking of stories will stop.*

*They want to justify expenses. Nothing else. The guys came here in 1987; overseas TV crews. They said Khaba, we have been told that you are the man of the moment in this area. We need your help. What's happening? I say we are enjoying calm, peace, right now. Nothing is happening, it's peaceful. They say come on, come on, come o-o-on. Then they look at each other and say, the other one, 'Look here Khaba, organise some action. Make a plan. We'll see you right.' Unbelievable. I was so embarrassed on their behalf. How d-a-r-e these guys suggest that I script violence, you know?*

*And er, in 1989, January, I had a tip-off about an attack which would have been like a massacre on Ashdown township. It was coded Operation Doom. Doom, like they Doom the cockroaches, Operation Doom. Which was planned for the 19th of January 1989. So the only way to pre-empt such a disaster was to expose it, so I decided to expose it. Of course I knew Inkatha would deny it, I phoned Ulundi [the headquarters of the IFP]; they said they would treat the thing with the contempt it deserves. 'We can't plan such a thing.' OK, the story was fit for publication because Ulundi had responded, and we published the story that Ulundi denies Operation*

*Doom. Right? But then journalists from abroad and from Johannesburg started arriving in Pietermaritzburg to cover Operation Doom. Huhha. They came to me to find out directions - where's this township, bla bla bla. On the 18th the office was hounded by the media moguls. OK. On the 19th I did not bother myself to dispatch any reporter or for me personally go out and watch for Operation Doom. Because I knew Inkatha is not stupid. They would not do the thing on the day which was quoted. But all these guys went there. And at about 2:30, they came there, in a bad temper, accusing me of sending them on a wild goose chase. I said what do you mean? They said, 'Where's the violence, there's nothing coming from there.'*

*I've never hated journalism like I hated it at that moment. I looked at the guys faces. I mean vultures are good looking. I don't know how to describe their faces. I felt so-o-o sad. Not angry - so sad that some of our guys have stooped to such base levels, and I opened up my drawer in my desk and said 'look here guys, if at all I had violence I'd be giving it to you free of charge. Thank you, sorry. I don't manufacture violence. I wrote a story, you have got nothing to do with the story, you can't question me, I'm not accountable to you. I wasn't writing the story to you.'*

*The first guys who had come in '87 and said I must make a plan, organise some action, they explained their type of journalism to the fact that we have got to account for expenses. 'We are flying from New York to Johannesburg, from Johannesburg to Maritzburg, we are staying at the Capital Towers Hotel. They need film back at work.' I don't know how much they would have paid me.*

*You know, I've told the story in America, in Canada, in Germany, in England, Uganda all over, but to my surprise the people who I've told the story are not surprised. No-one queries it like 'no-o-o, you are not telling the truth.' That alone tells me ... you get what I am trying to say.*

*Journalism has not moved. Today we have conflict management - but journalism is conflict-propellant. ... We need to learn skills of violence-extinguishing. ... You need that to be incorporated into our journalism.*

*Lesley: You said earlier that journalism in this country is digging its own grave. That sounded to me like a thought that's been developing for a while.*

*Khaba: Exactly. Recklessness. Not thinking about the consequences of a story. You run an editorial like that one [on the Mahehle massacre], you can see the person who*

wrote the story that he lives in comfort. He's an academic theoretician. He doesn't understand the cultural dynamics of the environment he is writing for and he is writing in. And then the name of journalism gets tainted. And then we even convert simple questions into statements attributed to radical activists. Like the PAC thing - 'Kill a journalist'. It sounds a nice slogan, if you see a journalist - [yell] 'Kill a journalist!' - that's the way we are now gonna be intimidated - this is how they are going to intimidate us. 'Kill a journalist! Kill a journalist!'

But then if you go back to the origins of the slogan, you find that they did not compose the slogan, it was composed by a sub-editor, who probably changed the story - [thinking] the headline will read well, like 'kill a farmer, kill a boer'<sup>10</sup>. There are many slogans now. Based on that - kill one. In this play *When honey turns sour*, the slogan from 'kill a boer, kill a farmer' was 'one Adam, one Eve'. Many people are catching on that. It's catchy.

Lesley: - *When honey turns sour* - that's your play on Aids?

Khaba: - Ja. The problem with slogans - they read well, they sound well. Who knows next week they will have transmuted it into 'kill a journalist, kill a story', something like that.

## Violence and news

Khaba: Violence is like a virus. If it is in Guguletu [a Cape Town township], it is soon in Clermont [a Durban township] ... it flies, it's a bug, and so, I said the media are labeling violence as 'black-on-black,' it is actually trivialising violence, as if it's third-rate problem, but nobody's safe. Well today it's history - 'kill a boer kill a farmer' - the case of Amy Biehl,<sup>11</sup> it's because you play into the hands of the culpability of the human condition, you repeat something, they feel it's an assent, even a stamp of approval. Those tendencies actually cause violence before it happens.

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<sup>10</sup> A PAC member had a few weeks before asked in a speech - 'must we kill a journalist to get media coverage?' A sub-editor on an Eastern Cape paper had turned it into a slogan - 'Kill a journalist' in a headline, which provoked howling outrage against the PAC - and of course, much media coverage.

<sup>11</sup> The killing of Amy Biehl, a U.S. Fulbright scholar, in a Cape Town township, came at a time when anti-white slogans constituted a furore in the media.

*Bodies alone - this has become the recipe for news. But the question is - Why did they fight? We must go and see whether they must go to a sanatorium - there are mad people out there. Most cases, they are not mad, they are people with families, people who don't want to fight. What makes them fight? This is therapeutic journalism. You heal, you heal communities, and when they vent out their problems, they feel satisfied somehow. It's like the phone-in programmes. They've done a lot to de-escalate the violence. People are able to shout at each other. And it's good for them. It's a healing process.*

*I used to be angry about the violence, but now I am angry about the media. For actually caressing violence.*

*I use tomato as an analogy for our journalism. For most housewives, cooking begins with a tomato to spice food. And South African journalism uses violence. To spice its news. Violence must always be page one.*

*Development journalism is not a priority, to write a good [news] story and make it a lead - it's not a news fashion. It's the fashion to lead on earthquake-like story - that's news, that's the definition of news in contemporary South Africa. How many people died? Not natural death. I mean this psyche is feeding into something. And feeble minds think that that's the way life should be. Ja. I'll be very happy if you could put a stress on the greening of journalism. The greening of journalism is the beginning - it's the first step to the greening of humanity. We need the greening of humanity, and the greening of journalism.*

## **Journalists are storytelling cockroaches**

Khaba had created far-flung fame with the analogy that journalists are like storytelling cockroaches. He spoke about the cockroaches one day as we were discussing the idea that stories are resources in the public sphere.

*Khaba: We are living in the end of the twentieth century, with all the work that has been done from centuries before the work of Christ, but we are not getting it right, because we don't read the teachings of people who advocate 'truth force' philosophies, philosophies like ubuntu. [...] News by its own, it's no source for the*

*refinement of human standards. Information. I don't like news reporting, I like story-telling. I don't like events-telling. Because events are not conclusive for a morale, or for a moral lesson. They are inconclusive. But a story is rounded. You get a story, of you, Les, for example, but it can never be news, because you did not do an extraordinary thing, out of the normal. News is something out of the normal. And something out of the normal does not really recreate or reconstruct the human order, it's a record, it's not a moral. You are asking me for my story - I haven't killed anybody; it's not news - Khaba Mkhize hasn't killed anybody, it's not news. This is the difference. If it's a debacle, if it's a catastrophe, it's bad - that's news. I like to tell good stories, like the old man who had two children, or old grandmother who had children around her in the fireplace, telling stories. Kwasuka sukela.<sup>12</sup>*

*The power of analogy and metaphor, I think to me, is the most efficient wheels for story telling. Metaphor and analogy. The metaphor of the cockroach I know has actually sharpened the consciousness for cleanliness in many a kitchen. Because in Pity Maritzburg! it was used from a jail scene, a guy defending a cockroach when somebody wanted to kill it, they said he is mad, he started lecturing them about the importance of the cockroach, that the cockroach is a health inspector sent from heaven to come and monitor our hygiene. 'You know, if you ain't clean, there'll be a health inspector coming there. Because the inspector has detected some dirt.' They laughed! Every time all the audiences, of all colours, of all ages, they burst out laughing, and that laughter to me assures me that the nail has been hit. They'll remember it. You must not leave unwashed dishes. Take it to it's rightful place, clean. And I know I am undermining the business of the manufacturers of pesticides, the Dooms and the Dyroaches, because I just go for it. I mean - that's not the way. It's to be clean. That's the answer. And I've influenced a lot of people. They tell their children or their wives or themselves - mustn't leave a dish. And this is the purpose of theatre, this is the purpose of writing. It's to try and work out good society, good communities. And that's the goal. And I've had people coming back to me and say thank you very much, what you wrote has actually helped us.*

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<sup>12</sup> Kwasuka sukela (Zulu) is similar to 'once upon a time' - a phrase used when someone starts to tell a story.

*I once wrote a story. About how one of my friends [Jake] previously interpreted Mothers' Day. He said 'I ain't buying anything for my mother, my mother is in the cemetery.' I spiced this story. I spiced it, kwasuka sukela ... [Jake read the story, drove to town and bought his wife a bunch of flowers.] He said 'Khaba has taught me the meaning of Mother's Day'. That's the reward of a writer, to spice the life of communities. And by spicing the life of communities, you are reducing conflict. A person who is happy at home, he's not inclined to go and cause unhappiness outside home, because the person is self-contented, and he is able to understand actions, and he will react accordingly.*

*Kwasuka sukela. Then you tell your story. It's your story. You can take a simple folklore and change it - or not folklore, fairy tale, and change it serve to their society. Our discussion at Kampala [a shebeen] last night escalated with wisdom until I said to them, because there was some fighting when we talk about women's rights. But I said women are powerful. But the thing is that women fail to pick up some analogies based on animal life, and use them to their favour, like the bee. The bee is so powerful. The queen bee. The bee kingdom is ruled by women. We started talking about the bee, its organised life. And I found myself needing to go and study bees in order to carry on the women's struggle. Because it's all a matter of words - the power of language. To convince men, and to convince women - women need to be empowered, and there isn't anything with which you can empower women except powerful words. And powerful words need to push the goal by using something that no-one can argue against, like bee life, or the lions, the lioness being the provider. From there you have the reality, something that is conclusive, something that is self-evident, above what is evident now about the capabilities and achievement of women. Not as a romantic journey - this is the difference between man and animal, is that man can reason - humankind sorry - humankind can reason and communicate; animals cannot. Animals cannot improve their lot. Animals cannot enter into conventional contracts - they are what they are. A bee of today is a bee that was before the birth of Christ. So why should journalism behave like animals and not change? Why? An animal is trapped to that animal which was there in the Garden of Eden. Journalism must not be there where it was when journalism was established as an art form of communication; it must progress. [...]*

*Lesley: Something puzzles me about this cockroach thing. It seems so central to you and to your thinking, and yet it is such an ugly thing. I mean, why choose cockroaches?*

*Khaba: You say they are ugly. [He grins.]*

*Lesley: Absolutely.*

*Khaba: But I don't look at them as ugly. They are like traffic cops. They are ugly, but really when you look at it objectively, a traffic cop, when he tickets you, is not ugly, he is protecting you from your own - what - from your own recklessness. Yet there is nothing ugly about a traffic cop, yet we hate traffic cops. But they are helping us. Cockroaches to me are like health inspectors sent from heaven to come and check against our hygiene. Because you'd never find a cockroach in clean environments. Cockroaches thrive where there's filth. That's why I like a cockroach. The cockroach taught me cleanliness. And a cockroach is a symbol of physical, concrete inspection. It's an Inspectorate of Neatness. And who doesn't like neatness? Have I answered you why?*

*Lesley: So journalists are cockroaches?*

*Khaba: Good journalists!*

*Lesley: That's enough to put anybody off.*

*Khaba: Huhhah, good journalists. But everybody loves the cockroach concept. I've tested it in many an audience. You get them rolling with laughter. But then it's a good analogy. The metaphor of a cockroach. Nobody forgets it, because they see the cockroach all the time and then they think about the metaphor. This is what I like about metaphors.*

*The cockroach knows the basic rules of survival. When to emerge from the kitchen. First of all the venue, the habitat. He mustn't be far from what makes you tick. So the cockroach will keep itself in the kitchen - not in the bedroom, it's too far, but in the kitchen.*

*And then your cockroach - if you don't switch off the lights, then the cockroach will know instinctively, that they're all asleep now. And then it will emerge. When there's a sound or a human appears, the cockroach knows, I must stop now, and if it is attacked, it even knows how to fly. Natal cockroaches fly. And then, millions of dollars are spent all over the world to save certain species which are endangered. But*

*hundredfold millions of dollars are spent the world over to exterminate the cockroach ever since the animal kingdom was founded. But the cockroach is still there. It knows - it even adapts to these pesticides. It knows the basic rules. And those are survival rules. If things go bad for me, I fly to Cape Town. And if they are very desperate I fly to Canada. And come back and survive again. That's timing. I used to call it cockroach technique. But now I'm calling it cockroach timing.*

*OK. Now this brings me to my origins - my preoccupation with cockroaches. You know, I used to hate cockroaches. I grew up in a township called Clermont in Durban. Whereby a good house was made out of wattle and daub, and plastered nicely, you know? Probably you have a make-do ceiling, and you have a coal stove, and you used to use containers for lamps, a vaseline bottle - you punch in a hole, and you stick in a wick, and there's paraffin inside, they use that for light. Or if things go better financially, you buy a lamp with a glass. And I used not to sleep, wanting to exterminate these cockroaches which were mainly in my home, and I would wake up. You know they know now that everybody's asleep, and I would come with this glass, hunt them, scoop them, nothing gave me kicks as to see this cockroach trying to run out of this heat, and the cockroach would be roasted until it was like dry wood. And my murder ego was boosted by the number of cockroaches I killed last night when I used to count them the next morning, my conquest. So then I came across a book titled Spiritual liberation - a fantastic book, it converted me to vegetarianism<sup>13</sup> and then the first time I came across the meaning of killing. That book liberated me from my one-man extermination mission of cockroaches.*

*Now you understand. I spent time killing cockroaches by fire. And I knew, no cockroach escaped because there was this circle, running circle, getting nowhere. And I mean probably I could have ended up being a serial killer or a mass murderer, I don't know, but that experience taught me something when I came across Spiritual liberation. I still want to read that book again. So Les, you have got me, you have got real me. This bit of it you wouldn't have got had you not asked me about my obsession with cockroaches, because you know, old enemies make superb friends. I was Enemy No. 1 of cockroaches, at Lot 1292, 24th Ave, Clermont. They knew, in my family, 'when that one pitches up, he's a butcher of Auschwitz.' My home was called Mount*

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<sup>13</sup> His conversion to vegetarianism was of short duration.

*Pleasant Cottage. I was the Butcher of Mount Pleasant Cottage. That's my story, about my current concepts and philosophy. I was running my own Auschwitz, my own concentration camp. But I failed. I wasn't able to exterminate cockroaches in that old house. When we left, they were still there. And the people who took over, they still have cockroaches. Up to now. It's a losing battle, it's a losing fight.*

*A cockroach is not poisonous, a cockroach is harmless. I had advocated to my wife that if we fail to curb the cockroach population, there's no need for us to kill them. I was prepared to take a saucepan and put scrap food there, centre of the floor, feed them rather than kill them ...*

*Lesley: -how did your wife feel about that?*

*Khaba: Oh she thought I was joking. But fortunately my wife is ridiculously clean. So cockroaches cannot survive in my place like the Brits wouldn't survive in Nigeria because of malaria and the mosquito.*

## **Plays, news and public culture**

*Lesley: Let's move on to your plays - what was the first play you wrote?*

*Khaba: The first play I wrote was 'Behold the black sheep'. It was about a youngster who was angry, who was messed up by Bantu Education, and he wanted the world to be aware of this. It was a psychoanalytical piece of work, and he ended up being a crime boss. I won't talk about all the plays I've written, but I'll talk about those which have made an impact.*

*The building trade - all my observations and high points were told in this play Hhay' Hhash';<sup>14</sup> I gave [the paper's] management some tickets, the next day [then-editor] Richard Steyn called me and said 'Khaba, thank you very much for the experience. What I saw really riveted me, I couldn't imagine that in this country such things happen, but the story was well told - you gave us a glimpse through your window last night of how the other half lives, and I would ask you to continue writing the story by writing a weekly column.'*

*Lesley: When was this?*

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<sup>14</sup> The title *Hhay' hhash'* alludes to a customary Zulu phrase meaning 'it ain't horse-meat'. It is usually said to invite passers-by or unexpected guests to join a meal that has been prepared.

*Khaba: - this was September 1979, I joined the paper in October 1978. Before the end of the year I was invited by Americans to a high-profile conference of African-American writers in Florida, USA, [with] Chinua Achebe, James Baldwin, some other high profile writers - because of the column. I got the column because of the play 'Hhay' Hhash''; had I not written 'Hhay' Hhash'' I wouldn't have got the column at that early stage - the way I wrote it with honesty and robustness, it was a courageous statement and stand to take, they knew in this establishment [the Witness] that the play worked; it opened up the column; the column worked; it introduced me into international levels. When I came back from the States, I was empowered, I had confidence, I believed in myself - I started walking tall with my pen.*

*And then the amount of stories I used to churn out for the Witness could not actually make it in the papers because of the news editors, because of their Eurocentric approach, tended to cut them, chop them to oblivion. And then an idea grew up that there must be a special paper, that could accommodate my stories. We held meetings, that Echo must be formed, but for a different reason, management wanted a paper that would reflect on the social life of black people, they wanted wedding pictures, parties, soccer, crime. I said OK. I had my own agenda. When the paper started I said black life is not parties, soccer and crime; there is the other side - which is their hopes, their aspirations, their failures and their victories; it's a community, it must address the needs of the community. I think communitarian journalism started there, now when I look back. I said it must serve the community, if it reports only on the [soccer] goals that we scored last week, it's not serving the community. Let the paper work to achieve the goals and lubricate and service the hopes, then we are onto the bottom line of Echo as infrastructure. The paper did a lot of things in improving the quality of life out in the townships.*

*Lesley: How?*

*Khaba: We got robots [traffic lights] ... I was a pain in officials' necks, I was a pain. Because I wouldn't deal with semi-officials, I went to the top to get results. I introduced the culture of accountability to the positions they were serving. I became very unpopular in this city, I was called a shit-stirrer in this city. My stories which were crusading for a better deal, and when people saw me they were completely*

*disarmed - 'you and your name'<sup>15</sup> don't match', I said yes, I am doing my job, and if you are doing your job you've got to fight by using the communicative tools. I'm accountable to that community. The media is a very strong tool to make things happen. And the idea of using the paper as a light-hearted sheet to make the people happy, I changed all that, I said the paper must serve to realise the dreams to create a better life and to educate this city. Because before I joined the Witness, black people were [represented by the paper as] maids and labourers. When I entered the scene, they became people, they had needs.*

*In 1982 the ANC organised a culture and resistance festival in Botswana, [my play] 'Hobo the Man' was asked to represent Natal. It's a two-man play; it evolved from my encounter with a person in Durban in 1978. I heard a voice in a polished cultural English accent, stiff-lipped, saying 'Excuse me Sir'; I looked around, I mean Sir? My mind - went round, I'm called Sir, in this accent? I looked round, it was a hobo, 'Can I have ten cents please?' I was so impressed I gave him twenty cents. I was still in the building trade, I used to drive the van to collect the building materials, my mind was stuck on that sentence. Then I asked myself, must it take such degradation for a person to give me respect? So it was the inspiration to write 'Hobo the Man'. It was dealing with stereotypes. I did not imagine, I did not leave room for that experience. At the time there were these stereotypes: white is right, black is bad. Or inferior. And then the play took head-on the 'stereotypedness' of society, in such a way as I made people [in the audience] to drink mahewu [traditional maize porridge] from a chamber pot - managing directors, everyone ... I made people to eat dog food from tins. 'What we see blocks our sight ...' there is nothing wrong with dog food - you cannot die from eating dog food. The chamber pot had never been used for it's official capacity, and the hobo was valuing it as his trophy ... the whole point was to break the stereotype. In fact, I'm so in love with that play that I'm redoing it, phase 2: 'Hobo in a new South Africa'. Hopefully it will be in Grahamstown Festival this year. It's just a journey exploring - it's going nowhere, but it's exploring the situation - where are we come from, where are we going to, it's sort of an experimental type of play.*

*Then in 1985 the Brits approached [then-editor] Richard Steyn and said Khaba deserves a break and to get exposed to the British media. And I came back very*

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<sup>15</sup> In Zulu, 'khaba' means 'to kick'.

*excited about the way Fleet Street write their papers, very concise, you know, crisp. While I was away I was promoted to take over Echo. [When I came back] I was able to do more sensitive things, more unimagined things, getting the paper sued - I defied this 'contempt of court' and the Secrets Act, exposing prison conditions in Virginia.<sup>16</sup> But one thing all officials of the government knew: that bastard Mkhize has his facts right. This is the thing. They hated me but they respected me. When I came back I was Acting Editor ... I started in May and in June, forty-four days after I took over as editor, we were given volumes of the Emergency Regulations. I was still wet. I said to myself - hmm - I've got to read all this? I said to myself, I will gamble, I will play it according to my gut feeling. If I see it's wrong, I will restrain myself, but if I believe that this has got to be told, I will tell it. That was the birth of the cockroach. Forty-four days. The forty-four days' experience landed me on the cockroach technique, on the cockroach timing.*

*Lesley: How have plays and audiences impacted on your journalism?*

*Khaba: Very much, because when I put up a play and put up all these cynical ideas, people catch up with them and discuss them, and actually compliment me for thinking in an unorthodox way. To me, that becomes a vote of confidence, which I use in my journalism - that no idea will shunt me to Fort Napier -*

*Lesley: which is - ?*

*Khaba: - a sanatorium, for mad people, it's in this area [lights another cigarette].*

*Lesley: Now what about 'Pity Maritzburg!' - where did the idea come from?*

*Khaba: [Explains that a group of musicians in the nearby township of Sobantu asked him to write a script for them.] For years I promised them a script, but then the violence came, before I could put a script together. I wanted to integrate their musical talents with drama, but - in 1989, I said, 'let me force myself'; I said, 'what kind of play can I write?' I'm inclined to believe that a writer must reflect the community picture - what is, or what should be, or what was - but then, you have got to prioritise which is the pressing issue at the moment; it's to mediate the violence. So I have got to write about the violence, but write about it in an interpretive and in a - how can I put it - in a 'boom-boon' fashion; we must, I must write in a fashion that would throw the light - use heat for light, because violence is very hot, it was the heat of the moment;*

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<sup>16</sup> Virginia is a small town in the Free State province.

*but extract light from the violence - this was the bottom line of 'Pity Maritzburg!', as the name suggests. So I took all the incidents that could not be published because of the nature of the newspaper - we've got to distill news - you don't write everything, we couldn't write about everything that we saw and heard in Bhambayi [a squatter camp near Durban which experiences intense violence] yesterday, and certain things, they are like trivial, it's not for the newspaper ... or you would be pouring petrol in an already inflammatory situation. I used those snippets, put them together, and 'Pity Maritzburg!' was written by the events, not me. It was like a fruit salad. You take the apple, slice it, put it there, you take paw-paw, y'know.*

*Lesley: What was 'Pity Maritzburg!' trying to say?*

*Khaba: It was trying to say that it's futile to kill each other. Tolerance. If you are Inkatha; if you are ANC; if you are Azapo; we are just one community. It was based on the community premise. [...] We are a community. Before we became political followers, we were a community, and we must go back to communitarianism. That's what's the message.*

*Lesley: How many people saw the play?*

*Khaba: Hey, thousands. When it opened in Maritzburg, about 40 per cent each night were people who came back to see it. It was a magic thing, really, it was magic. Many people were persuading me to take it full time, but I thought no I have a more important role in the media.*

## **Kampala**

News gathering in the Midlands was always a day-long affair, hours of which were on the road. At the end of a day Khaba's watering hole was a tiny shebeen with an old rusty fridge standing off-centre on a bare cement floor, surrounded by assorted plastic chairs and a few upturned crates for tables. Outside, chickens had the run of the weeds under the fence. On the front wall, next to a peeling coca-cola sign was a peeling name: Kampala.

I was privileged to spend some time there with people whose ways of earning a living ranged from selling shoes to running a medical practice to the sort of work that was describable only in euphemism and knowing nods. In one interview I asked Khaba to tell me more about the place.

*Lesley: You said you were at Kampala last night ... I was intrigued by the place - you said it's your 'ear to the ground'?*

*Khaba: Ja, I learn what was going on and that's where I test interpretations, and where I do my analytical work. Kampala - that's where I have my Sophocles and Confuciuses and the rest. No topic is too little to discuss. We don't have an agenda, we just pick on something that somebody says ... They like to argue. Ja. In fact, I picked this up - somebody was saying [he swipes at his arm] 'HEY! this mosquito!' And he's a fat guy, huge. I said to him, look here man, you are very ungenerous. You kill, I mean, you are the Land of Plenty - your size, it's like Muden - a place here that specialises in oranges, Muden Farm, orchards and orchards of oranges - I said it's like you kill a person for plucking just three oranges. You have got two million oranges. He-e-ey, it was a big laugh. And that's where it started - analysing the mosquito: the mosquito is invading my physical property, you know, like farmers [with signs that say]: 'Dogs And Kaffirs Will Be Shot On Sight.' The thing built up, it came on to women's issues - it was such a moving chat. Until we parted. That's Kampala. No topic is too little. We build on anything.*

*And I guess, my wife hasn't got a rival, in the form of a woman, but she hates Kampala. That's her rival. 'That Kampala! That Kampala!' Then I try to appease my wife. I abstain from Kampala. Then I get telephone calls. 'No man: what is it? You got transport problems? We'll fetch you. We'll deliver you back home. You don't have money? No we'll buy for you. We bought R50 meat, to braai, please come.' I say WHY must I come, they say, no, we need you. So you see, I'm also contributing something to the moulding and refinement of those guys. And I go all over [the world], and I come back and I tell these guys, and their habits get changed; they quote me, they say 'Khakhaza said, when he was in such and such a place, this was the trend.' So I'm a little - what? - chief out there. You can call it that. But those guys, they also read. They are lawyers, doctors, priests, labourers, teachers, salesmen, businessmen, unemployed, criminals, politicians - a broad spectrum of society. So this is why there is no topic that is not tackled. If it's medical, Bra Jake; if it's legal, Jazzman; if it's religious, Bheki, if it is criminal, D--- you know, who dissects the psychology of killing like you have never read it anywhere in the world. He's a killer. Even*

yesterday, he was saying, you guys I told you this approach of collar and tie to things - it's not workable: the answer is Kimberley. Kimble. Kimble. It's a word they've used to aromatise killing in the townships. [...] He says Kimberley is the answer - it sorts out things. He says 'If I stab a person or shoot a person, I make it a point that I kill him. Because I've had a lot of - hassles with people who survive.' [...] You know? That's Kampala. It's a seedy place.

Lesley: No wonder your wife hates it.

Khaba: Ja but I tell her - 'Kampala is no venue for women. So you must be happy, be free' - the women they like fancy places.

You may find there is contradiction in what I've told you. Which is good. If there are contradictions, then you have the right philosophies. Because the world ticks through contradictions. Contradictions are the heartbeat of human nature. In order to have your cabbage thrive well, you have got to have weed next to it. It's nature's pre-arranged conditions for the cabbage to survive. Because ... [the weed's] purpose ... [is] striking the nutritional balance. Otherwise it would just grow over-luxuriantly, and make leaves like spinach, and it does not produce the product, because [it gets] too much nutrition.

If you have contradictions you are on the right track. Contradictions are the base for unpredictability. Which is very healthy. Because life would be very boring.

# **The course of true narrative never did run smooth:**

## **The storying of the crisis in Matatiele**

*We can understand the social impact of ... new networks of communication and information only if we put aside the intuitively plausible idea that communication media serve to transmit information and symbolic content to individuals whose relations to others remain fundamentally unchanged.*

*- John B Thompson, 1995:4*

*The logic to which narrative refers is nothing other than a logic of the already read: the stereotype (proceeding from a culture many centuries old) is the veritable ground of the narrative world, built ... on the traces which experience ... has left in ... memory. Hence we can say that the perfect sequence [of actions], the one which affords the reader the strongest logical certainty, is the most 'cultural' sequence, in which are immediately recognised a whole summa of readings and conversations. ... Narrative logic ... is common opinion, not scientific proof.*

*- Roland Barthes, 1988:144*

Stories about conflicts are the core of news.

Previous chapters have explored aspects of the complex articulation between conflicts in society, perceptions of social fissures, and media narratives. It has been argued (after Todorov) that genres are constituted in discourse, and that narrative constitutes subjectivity - a dynamic which can be both oppressive and transformative. Khaba Mkhize has suggested that stories have the power to make people imagine links and possibilities across social fault-lines: a point supported, in the main, by Ben Okri (1997) and Edward Said (1994). It has also been

suggested that the converse is true - that the dynamics attendant to narratives of violence imbue the act of narration with the potential for violence, and violation.

Drawing from Thornton (1994; 1990b) I have suggested that narratives of violence have the social effect of restoring the order that has been interrupted, and that therefore the cultural functions of narrative are immense. And I have suggested that ways of talking about conflicts are embedded in social structures, which is to say that narratives of conflict constitute and reconstitute the social structures that give definition and meaning to conflicts in society.

I am interested too in the course of narratives over time once they enter the field of power that constitutes the media industry. Bourdieu's idea that the newness of news is reliant on amnesia is provocative. For it seems that stories lose their newsworthiness when ordinariness of life begins to emerge. News, then, is constrained by the quest for the shocking, the unnerving, the disturbing, the intensity of the 'something must be done' factor, which so often generates a helpless, handwringing response ('what are we to do?') - the rejection of which is the focus of Jay Rosen's work at Project on Public Life and the Press: an institute at the forefront of a movement known as civic journalism (see Rosen 1993 a,b,c; Charity 1995; Rosen and Merritt 1994).

That the ordinariness and banality of daily life seldom make the front page leads to immense forces being placed on narrative structure. Bourdieu suggests that it is not coincidental that the massive rise in ethnic conflict, internationally, is related to the overwhelming presence of a news industry that seeks to simplify issues and coalitions into simple formations that can easily be digested. When one realises that the processes of conflict escalation - most particularly, the loss of the middle ground; the cutting of ties across social schisms - are paralleled in simplified narrative, Bourdieu's argument gains gravitas.

This chapter studies a series of events in which reportage became an extension of a conflict. In the course of the study I aim to raise questions about the dynamic relationship between journalistic practices and texts by following the work of a young and talented *Witness* journalist, Ranjeni Munusamy, who 'cottoned on' to what was happening in the first three days of the crisis. Her version of events ('this is' not a crisis') was not picked up by newspapers elsewhere in the country, although several other journalists arrived with much fanfare at very similar conclusions two weeks later. I hope to demonstrate that:

- news narratives ground actors in a particular political cosmology

- the practices and routines of news gathering do more than shape information, but inevitably shape narrative
- the 'circular circulation' of news between newspapers (see Bourdieu 1998:25) - the compulsions among journalists to have what other newspaper have - severely hampers innovation and insight.

The story begins on January 3 1995 when a dispute erupted in the small town of Matatiele on the border of KwaZulu-Natal, the Eastern Cape, and Lesotho, a borderland region known by the name of East Griqualand. Apparently the provincial government of the Eastern Cape was invading the southern border of KwaZulu-Natal, intent on annexing a parcel of land that had been the source of long-standing disputes. Like all borderlands with scarce resources, a great many people were putting much effort into drawing borderlines, and it is in the history and legitimacy of these borderlines that the conflict found its source.

In any year, the first week of January is traditionally a season of 'slow news days' when there is little to generate the sort of attention that sells newspapers, and it is likely that the story assumed the proportions it did out of lack of competition from other pressing issues. But there was more to journalists' mistaken representations than a desire to sell newspapers. The journalists who were tasked with covering the conflict were genuinely trying to understand what on earth was going on. For several reasons, they missed the boat rather badly.

Invented, reported and believed, 'Matat' became for a while the national crisis that a handful had imagined it to be. Media narratives, then, became an extension of the conflict, reporting it as a national crisis, and eventually the Deputy President was rushed in to broker a truce.

### **The 1995 Matatiele palaver**

January 3, 1995: the *Witness* led with a story on a burgeoning crisis in the contested provincial border town of Matatiele was the lead of the day, headlined 'Move to stop Matatiele squatters' . Durban' s morning paper, the *Natal Mercury*, gave it less prominence on the front page, headlining a smaller story, 'Mbeki to mediate on EG [East Griqualand] land invasion.' That afternoon the Durban-based *Daily News* ran with the headline: 'Matatiele acts to bar 'settlers' - Bogus officials may face fraud charges' .

The stories were perplexing. The mayor of the town, Libby Sorour, had pressed for a court interdict to evict 2000 squatters who, he alleged, began occupying municipal land the previous Saturday. From the *Witness*:

### **Moves to stop Matatiele squatters**

By Ranjeni Munusamy. *Natal Witness*, January 5 1995 page 1

[...] Sorour alleges that announcements were broadcast on Radio Transkei last week urging people in the Eastern Cape to invade land in Matatiele.

He said this was a political ploy by the Eastern Cape in the fight for control of the town. Sorour said all members of the Transitional Local Council in the town have condemned the occupation of the land and he hoped to have the court order before the council meeting at 10 am today.

Sorour said he found people registering the squatters when he visited the land, which lies about one kilometre west of the town, yesterday afternoon. ...

KwaZulu-Natal MEC for Housing and Local Government, Peter Miller, said the activities of the land invaders cannot be tolerated and charges of trespassing will be laid.

'It must be considered a provocation and will be raised with Deputy President Thabo Mbeki when we meet on January 16. ... As far as the KwaZulu-Natal government is concerned, we cannot negotiate with the Eastern Cape on the future of East Griqualand and Mzimkulu while they continue to orchestrate land invasion.

He said he is fully behind the request by the mayor to have police reinforcements sent to the area.

Miller said it is 'totally unacceptable' in a democratic South Africa for a public broadcaster such as Radio Transkei to broadcast messages urging people to invade land.

'It is also up to the Eastern Cape government to make sure that provocative messages of this kind are not allowed on its provincial public broadcaster.

A spokesman in the Radio Transkei news department said no such messages were broadcast on any of the news bulletins last week. 'We have a responsibility as a public broadcaster to report on events and not to incite them,' he said. [...continues]

The report provided inaccurate information on the causes of the situation and framed the incident in the terms of one side, only. It was also pitted with untested assumptions:

- that there had been an invasion of people from the Eastern Cape
- that the Eastern Cape government was involved
- that Transkei Radio had urged the 'invasion'
- that Sorour and Miller were unbiased sources
- that the Matatiele Transitional Local Council gave full support to Mayor Sorour's actions and opinions.

Key to all the initial reports are faxes and telephones. Neither the *Witness* reporter nor reporters from other papers had yet visited Matatiele - a move which would have enabled them to talk to squatter leaders and find a very different rendition of antecedents to the squatters actions. Secondary source Peter Miller is himself dependent on the information of Libby Sorour. Access to telecommunications, therefore, conferred 'plumblineline status' on the version

of the bureaucrats. The result: when Radio Transkei's spokesman is afforded a denial, the narrative die is already cast: the denial signifies that the spokesman is lying and a cover-up is in progress. The logistics of the situation made the story appear to be multiply-sourced - when in fact the report is mono-vocal. Perhaps the slogan of community media should not be 'giving voice to the voiceless' but 'getting facts from the faxless'.

Peter Bruck, an Austrian communications specialist, argues that

[c]rises do not exist in the world. They exist in discourse. Crises ... are evaluations of the significance of what is happening. Crises are special knowledges based on perceptions of disruptions of existing states of affairs which construct the changes as sudden, unforeseen, and difficult to cope with. ... In other words, crises are specific forms of discourse which build on specific codes of significance ... [that] include normative dimensions related towards actions of resolution, thus allowing the exercise of authority, the establishment of failures and the attribution of guilt and responsibility with ensuing sanctions (1992:108).

I am not convinced that crises never exist in the world - when 300 people are without water, there is a crisis no matter how language is applied to describe the situation. Nonetheless, Bruck's point that discourses constitute crises in particular ways is a valid one. 'Three sets of roles are available and necessary to the reportorial staging in order to achieve a crisis,' writes Bruck, 'the human community needs to be split into perpetrators or transgressors, objects or victims, and authorities and responsables' (1992:115). Note that these processes of conflict escalation are narrative processes: as conceptions of groups change in response to a crisis, the emerging arrangements of power are named, characterised and given form and motivation in stories, anecdotes, and news narratives. In the Matatiele story as told by Mayor Sorour, the perpetrators are Eastern Cape invaders, the victims are the town and democracy, and the mediating authorities are the Transitional Local Council and the police.

Bruck notes that 'crises are not just reported. They provide the material for a description of a world in turmoil. The use of strongly evaluative and richly connotative characterisations is a key technique employed to increase the sense of disruption, the severity of the crisis, and the overall significance of the event' (1992:113). In this tale of breach of normalcy, Sorour is characterised as the voice of reason and the arbiter of democratic action amid outrageous behaviour on all sides - the Eastern Cape government; the squatters, and Transkei Radio. The story is suspended between culture and anarchy, setting up the dramatic question - which one will prevail? - that will sustain the stories of the days to follow.

Crisis established, the story ran for two weeks.

## Headlines of the Matatiele story

Date	<i>Natal Witness</i> (am)	<i>Natal Mercury</i> (pm)	<i>Daily News</i> (pm)	National weekend papers
Tu Jan 3	Move to stop Matatiele squatters - Ranjeni Munusamy	Mbeki to mediate on EG 'land invasion' - <i>Mercury Reporter</i>	boycott continue - KR	
We Jan 4	Police deployed to move squatters - RM	**Invaders to be evicted - MRs	'Settlers' vanish from Matatiele - <i>Daily News Reporters</i>	
Th Jan 5	p.1: Squatters go overnight -RM p.9: Why did they come? - RM	Natal town wins victory over invaders - Squatters quit after eviction ordered - Political reporter Leader: Stormtroops		
Fr Jan 6	Matatiele hit by shop boycott - RM			
Sa Jan 7	p.3: Matatiele business protest - Sapa			
Mo Jan 9	New Matatiele invaders arrested - <i>Witness</i> reporters / Sapa	91 held in 'invasion' - Mbeki calls for calm in Matatiele dispute - Political reporter	Matatiele squatters coming in by Mercedes and BMW - <i>Daily News Reporters</i>	
Tu Jan 10	Matatiele land: leaders meet today - WR / Ecna	R1 million losses as boycott bites -East Cape minister intervenes -Kevin o'Grady Leader: Time for cool heads. Cartoon: Two black	Matatiele blockade 'a time bomb' -Keith Ross, Chief Reporter	

Date	<i>Natal Witness</i> (am)	<i>Natal Mercury</i> (pm)	<i>Daily News</i> (pm)	National weekend papers
		arms wrestling, with an East Qriqualand ensign and a squatter family behind the arms		
We Jan 11	ANC's Matatiele rift healed -WRs	Matatiele crisis resolved - Agreement to settle border dispute - KoG	Trade ban drags on - Matatiele businessmen desperate to end boycott - KR	
Th Jan 12	Shopkeepers block roads out of Matat - WR/Sapa p	p.1: Battle for Matatiele flares again - KoG p.7: Tug-o'-war over little town in the middle of nowhere - KoG Leader: Border crisis	Matatiele closes in protest against boycott - KR	
Fr Jan 13	Matat blockade is intensified - WR	Phone breakdown causes Matatiele news blackout - MR	'Settlers' agree to negotiate -Matatiele roadblocks stay in place as discussions on trade	
Sa Jan 14	Talks end Matat hassles - Sapa	NATAL ON SATURDAY It's back to business again in Matatiele - Saturday Reporter		
Su Jan 13				<i>Sunday Times</i> , Jan 15: The little border war - A century-old land dispute between Natal and the Cape has erupted again. The parties in dispute are the same two provinces, but this time the ANC is divided on the issue.

Date	<i>Natal Witness</i> (am)	<i>Natal Mercury</i> (pm)	<i>Daily News</i> (pm)	National weekend papers
				Cyril Madlala reports from Matatiele
Mo Jan 16	Back-to-business hopes as Matatiele sides settle -MR	p1: Matatiele boycott over - KR p6: Matatiele muddle -boundary mess could take years to sort out - KR		
Tu Jan 17	East Griqualand meeting put off - Sapa			

#### Attributions

Ecna East Cape News Agency

KoG Kevin o'Grady

KR Keith Ross

MR Mercury Reporter

RM Ranjeni Munusamy

Sapa South African Press Association

WR *Witness* Reporter

## **Background to the conflict**

The conflict had a long history, long enough to be usefully accommodated to a range of narrative emplotments. Known in the 1800s as 'Nomansland' the area around Matatiele was allocated to the Griquas in 1860 by British Governor, Sir George Grey, after feuding between the followers of one Nehemiah Mosheshwe and the Griqua clans led by Philippolis Griqua. According to historian TRH Davenport, Nehemiah was tried and convicted for rebellion in 1877. In 1879 a Griqua rebellion erupted, in part over land claims. In response to these troubles and in order to preempt the development of a Greater Natal, the British annexed the land in 1879 to the Cape Province (Davenport 1987:138).

Eighty years later in the 1960s, fearful that their land might become part of the new Transkei bantustan, local farmers voted overwhelmingly in favour of secession from the Cape. They received repeated assurances from Verwoerd and later PW Botha that Matatiele would always be white. In 1978 an official commission of enquiry declared the area part of Natal.

In 1994, then-Premier of the Eastern Cape Raymond Mhlaba announced that the area, including Kokstad, would return to his province.

Given the differing economic circumstances of the two provinces, residents of the region were outraged. But in the mean-time, a curious political oddity emerged: the instrumentalisation of history to write class lines on the map. By calling certain sections of the town and surrounds Eastern Cape and others Natal, the wealthy Natalian section of Matatiele could profit from the business of black Eastern Capers but not have to allocate rates and taxes to their well-being. That was at the core of the January siege.

### **Matat becomes a crisis**

On Wednesday January 4, *Radio Today* kept listeners breathless with reports of an expected police raid. The 7 a.m. newsreader informed listeners that the police 'had begun enforcing the court interdict at 7 a.m.'; the 8 a.m. newscast said 8 a.m.

The rush of the breaking story was intense. Like media houses in Durban and Johannesburg, the *Witness* despatched a reporter, Ranjeni Munusamy, and a photographer, Mike Mathews, first thing in the morning. I hopped into their red corolla and headed south with them.

'Seize the opportunities, avoid the pitfalls and be home by 6 o'clock,' Woody Allen once said; we raced out of Maritzburg, hoping to catch a piece of the action and get back to Kokstad by the 3:30 pm deadline for colour processing. The road via Ixopo took us over the multiple borders of the two provinces: now Eastern Cape, now KwaZulu-Natal, now Eastern Cape, again KwaZulu-Natal, and so on; borders marked only by signboards bidding *Welcome to Natal* or *Welcome to the Eastern Cape*. After a while I began to associate Eastern Cape territory with a neglected look. The KwaZulu sections seemed less overgrazed, better supplied with infrastructure.

When we arrived at the town nothing significant appeared to be happening, apart from the presence of the riot squad (a.k.a. the Internal Stability Unit) implied by the presence of a few avocado-coloured hippos and yellow canary vans. They were still, bar a few policemen doing battle with dripping ice-creams. A duty sergeant offered to call the captain on the radio, and eventually we were received by a smiling Captain behind a vast desk in an office with an equally vast carpet and a deprived potplant. No raid had taken place, he announced with enthusiasm. The squatters had dispersed before the police reinforcements had arrived from Durban.

Mayor Sorour arrived: rotund, feisty, perspiring in a royal blue shirt with flying ducks on the chest pocket: a promotional shirt for a beverage. He owned a bottle store called the Waterfall - the name a reference, perhaps, to the huge blue-painted waterfall that welcomes visitors at the outskirts of the dusty town.

The Captain vacated his seat (and office) in deference to the mayor. An SABC journalist who had arrived from Durban in the meantime, set off the first question. 'So Mr Mayor, your problem is solved?'

Sorour laughed a guttural laugh. 'Well if you call a possible boycott a solution, then yes.'

'Last night I had a phonecall,' he said, warming to the tale, 'from Wilson Mokoatle the squatter leader, saying if I didn't stop the removal of squatters there'd be a confrontation. I said to him if he wished to receive a confrontation that was his prerogative. The Town Council met the Squatters Association three weeks ago and told them that this town council had 110 serviced sites that would be made available later this month under the transitional local council, and a further 500 sites earmarked for development but not serviced because of the amount of money it will cost.

'This is a small municipality. We need two million to service those sites; two million Rand is not easily available in a small municipality. So the 110 serviced sites will be allocated in the next few weeks. Workers of the town will get those sites, because workers are the backbone of the town.'

He cited evidence for his case: 'there is a teacher from Mount Fletcher (an Eastern Cape town about 60 km from Matatiele). He lives on a site with a number on it - site 121. So he has a home in Mount Fletcher; he teaches in Mount Fletcher, but they expect us to provide housing for them.'

At that point the invocation of the border dispute began to look somewhat instrumentalist; influx control disguised as political history. Why should the man not move to Matatiele, especially if he had been subject to the same arbitrary borderlines all his life? If he was a teacher, why should he be squatting? Why should he not want to improve his circumstances? Somewhere in the town there stood a Berlin Wall, and the town council was not yet selling pieces of it.

Besides that, the timing of the squatters' actions - relative to the mayoral Christmas message about land allocation - was interesting. It seemed to indicate that the matter had been ripe for contention.

When the press conference was over Sorour escorted us to the contested site - open grassland with a view of Lesotho's Maluti Mountains and a deep donga suffering discarded exhaust pipes and other scrap metal. The only activity was the munchings of a small herd of sheep and about fifty riot police, who were sweating over a curry lunch. Their dozen hippos were crammed into a pool of shade cast by the few trees in sight; the only evidence of the squatters' presence was freshly flattened grass, piles of cooldrink cans, beer bottles, and a few champagne empties. I herded sheep until Mike could get a shot of the mayor sitting on a waterpump with the animals in the background.

We said our thanks and got directions to the ANC Matat Office, where distorted afropop flooded down the stairwell and invaded every office, blaring from a small tape deck at max volume. The music disappeared with a resounding thunk when our presence was announced. Branch chairperson, Mandla Galo, met us in an office decorated with a Year Planner scrawled across a whiteboard, a poster of Mandela, and a notice: 'Forward to a freedom of smoking outside.' He speaks in the slow-paced cadences of Mandela. 'We as the ANC of Matatiele, we do not approve of illegal occupations.' His words are careful, suggesting that he was exercising skills learned in a training workshop on handling the press.

Ranjeni is the classic journalist, firing questions in a 'make my day' tone.

Galo gives us the pragmatic lowdown on the crisis: the reason for the occupation is that rentals are too high. There are two magisterial districts: Maluti, which belongs to the Eastern Cape, and Matatiele, which will give housing only to 'Matat' people. Like every other town in the country, it is historically divided into black sections and white sections; the difference here is that most of the black sections belong to the Eastern Cape.

The picture began to make more sense; these were the details being glossed in the stories we had heard. An 'Eastern Cape invasion' amounted to local blacks claiming the right to property development in the town. The council was using 'Eastern Cape' as a gloss for 'black' and a provincial border as a reason for continued separation of resources.

Galo tells us where to find Matatiele Squatters Workers Association leader: Wilson Mokoatle, who works at the local branch of Morkels as a furniture salesman.

A Transkei Broadcasting Corporation Corolla rolls by; the journalist stops to ask Ranjeni about her interview with Sorour. 'Did he repeat the allegations about the Station?' he asks sharply.

Ranjeni and I discuss the story we have heard at the ANC branch, on the way to Morkels. The pragmatic narrative makes a lot more sense than the conspiracy version. I argue

that the mayor needs a conspiracy because he had to legitimise his exclusionary policies, and because defining the conflict as a provincial invasion gave him a national profile, and the job of mediator and peace-keeper. She pointed out that the pragmatic narrative wasn't hard news. It would only be hard news (that is, a front page story) if something dramatic had happened. A different explanation of the conflict would only run on the features page, deep inside the newspaper. Thus, for different reasons, mayor and media had latched onto a conspiracy. He to resist change; the media hungry for a magnificent tale of polarisation and cabals.

We meet Mokoatle at Morkels, a skinny man in his thirties who carries himself with a gracious stoop. He seems nervous and fidgety because his boss is unimpressed with his private involvements, and he doesn't want to be seen talking to the press on company time. He ushers us out under the baleful eye of the store manager. We don't speak. He has no telephone. He promises to be at a certain phone number at 8 p.m. He isn't. The irony: the real newsmaker has never had training in how to use the press to his advantage; the routines of journalism have become more attuned to those who have.

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So: what is 'hard news'? I ask Ranjeni on the way home. 'Hard news, she says, 'is things that happen. Features are where you investigate why it happened. The only thing that's news here is that the squatters have moved. Or if someone says to us, 'this is why it happened' - that's hard news, instead of us putting the pieces together.'

She says it was a wasted trip. I disagreed, saying we'd got insight into the wider dynamics influencing the issue; that the border dispute was not the only thing going on. It seemed more and more like a comedy of errors and urban myths.

Like most small towns in South Africa, the economy of Matatiele was dependent on black business. Sorour's fear of a black consumer boycott was a real one - some months before a crippling boycott had been resolved after an extended period. Sorour himself was a businessman. Earlier in the day, we had been to his Waterfall Bottle Store to look for him. The place reeked of fermentation. Twenty-three rows of beer crates - four deep and five across - filled with empty bottles were lined up like a backbone in the centre, waiting for collection; the dregs rotting in the heat. 460 crates of 12 bottles made 5520 bottles. The bottles were not dumpies, but quarts: the kind that sells not in pubs, but shebeens. Much of his market had to be black, and, by his own definition of the correct borderlines, in the Eastern Cape.

In the newsroom we talk to Yves, the news editor. Our version - that the core of the event was an attempt to maintain race division - sounds plausible, he says. Quote what you can from Mokoatle, anonymously if you have to.' One thing bothers him: 'What about the numbers,' he asks, 'how did the number of squatters get so big?' It's a good question. Was it good organisation on the part of the Matatiele Squatters Association, or did a Transkei Radio announcer urge people to settle in the town?

We didn't know: the mayor said two junior policemen had said they'd heard it said on air. When Ranjeni called the station a staffer initially confirmed the question, then checked with his superior, and came back stammering a vehement denial. Curious. The people who could answer were the squatters. But not even their leader was available on the phone, much less a fax.

The problem was in the articulation of facts and narrative. What we considered facts enabled us to create a coherent narrative; the narrative itself legitimised our choices and closed off uncertainties. The one narrative that was not available for use in the newspaper was one of unknowing and uncertainty. Saying 'I don't know' or 'we are confused' was a professional no-no: If we - journalists - didn't know, we were not good journalists, and why should people buy our product? Knowing, then, is a professional illusion maintained by organisational dynamics at every level. But that meant that the organisation adopted whichever narrative was most available. The only context in which a narrative could be presented as destabilised was when the journalist already had a good idea of what really happened but was not getting any answers from the powers that were. In that case the questions could be rhetorical, and serve to elucidate another narrative on which the journalist could claim authority.

The *Daily News*' lead, that afternoon, was 'Settlers vanish from Matatiele'. The report read: 'This is the latest incident in the fight between the Eastern Cape and KwaZulu-Natal for ownership of East Griqualand.'

On the wires was a report from wire service of the East Cape News Agency (Ecna), which had a reputation for being dependable in content if plodding in style. True to form, the report avoided sensationalism, and contrasted the narratives of Mokoatle and Sorour. It illuminated the clash of narratives; and showed how easy it is to construct a running tale of conspiracy where there is none.

Ranjeni's feature-page story was headlined 'Matat squatters were 'locals'' and drew some of its information from the Ecna report, challenging the conspiracy theory. Her feature on the inside pages explored the questions further.

### Why did they come?

By Ranjeni Munusamy. *Natal Witness*, January 5 1995 page 9

Why did over 3000 'professional, well-dressed' people leave their homes in the Eastern Cape and travel to Matatiele on New Year's Eve to squat on a vacant piece of land? ...

Town mayor Libby Sorour is convinced that the occupation was part of the Eastern Cape government's master plan to seize the territory from KwaZulu-Natal, but there may be a different explanation.

The town of Matatiele lies about five kilometres from the Eastern Cape border. Mandla Galo, local branch chairperson of the ANC, says the area is divided into two magisterial districts - Matatiele and the surrounding rural area, called the Maluti district.

Galo added that the people in the Maluti district, most of whom are employed in the town, are opposed to this division. 'The people don't mind if the town belongs to the Eastern Cape or KwaZulu-Natal. They want to do away with these artificial borders to make it their town.' ...

According to a report from the East Cape News Agency, [Squatter] Association chairman Mokoatle said there is no political motive behind the occupation.

He said many of the squatters came from Transkei rural areas, but the majority work in and see themselves as residents of greater Matatiele. 'They are simply the people of Matatiele, they are not politically motivated. Like we said when we went to the municipality, we are not a political organisation, we are only looking for a place to stay.'

He said that after more than five years of talks with the municipality, it has not built one house or allocated any land for more than 5000 homeless people, some of whom live in caves in nearby mountains and travel to town to work. Mokoatle added that his organisation has no stance on whether East Griqualand and Matatiele should remain part of KwaZulu-Natal or become part of the Eastern Cape.

However, some people travelled from the Eastern Cape to Matatiele, some from as far afield as Mount Fletcher, 60 km away, and that they were expecting houses to be built for them. [...]

Even though the banal realities of the conflict were available in the history of the town and on the wire service from Ecna, the media at large persisted with a tale of provincial conspiracy; and the term 'invaders' remained the currency of reports covering the crisis.

The next day - Thursday - shops in the town were very quiet. Sorour alleged that the Squatters Association was intimidating people into staying away. The ANC called on the Association not to boycott - 'their problem is with the municipality, not the businessmen,' said Mandla Galo. He said he had tried to convene a meeting of the ANC, Cosatu and Sanco to discuss the situation, but the Squatters Association had not turned up. Given the desire of the Squatters Association to not be seen as political, this was not surprising.

On Friday shopowners retaliated, closing down their shops in protest against the boycott. Sorour received a letter from the Eastern Cape ANC 'demanding,' according to the *Witness* report, 'that he retract the statement that the invasion was a political ploy ... However, he refused to give in to the demands, he said'. Again, the mayor was able to define the situation: his word 'invasion' is accepted where 'squatting' would have been a more appropriate

choice; he is presented in terms of his own sense of place in the scheme of things: a hero who refuses to give in to demands.

The word 'demands' has a particular spin on it: representing blackness and a concomitant set of threats to 'culture' in the town. Describing himself as one who refuses to give in to demands, Sorour sets himself up as a defender of civility and democracy.

Tensions spiralled, and, not surprisingly given the range of differing agenda, the story became more complex. Once four or five reporters from media houses around the country had been installed in the area in the second week of the dispute, the narrative took on a tone of confusion, though the conspiracy theory remained the brightest thread in the tangle of narratives. The issues that emerged:

- Apartheid divides in the border town allocated 'black' areas to the Eastern Cape and 'white' areas to Natal
- A strong ANC branch in the town was conflicted. It was supported by Basotho and Xhosa population. Some wanted the area to go to the Eastern Cape for fear of being sidelined by the IFP-dominated KwaZulu-Natal provincial powers; others wanted to stay in KwaZulu-Natal as services and infrastructure in the province were far superior to those in Eastern Cape territory.
- From the ANC National Executive there there was pressure on the branch to stay in KwaZulu-Natal to boost the ANC's vote-catching in the province; locally, members feared being martyred to the cause of provincial politicking
- The feeling that the name KwaZulu did not represent them, as they are not Zulu.

There was no evidence of an East Cape government conspiracy (their flat denials continued to be reported as cover-ups); and no hard evidence was ever found that confirmed the allegation that Transkei Radio had urged an invasion. The question then became one of where the conspiracy narrative had originated.

Some weeks later the Matatiele Council returned to the Supreme Court to confirm the interim court order granted earlier in the month that barred settlement on the land. At the hearing, the Sheriff of the Court testified that when he had tried to serve the court interdict on the squatters on January 3, his loudspeaker had been taken over by a man who told the crowd that KwaZulu-Natal law did not apply there. Thereafter, he said that whenever he had tried to speak the crowd had taken up the chant 'Eastern Cape.' Given the peculiar political geography

of the area, and the fact that blacks in the area were sick of being excluded from the resources of the town on the grounds that their area constituted 'Eastern Cape' territory, it is quite feasible to tell a different story; to argue that the crowd's behaviour did not reflect a cabinet-ordered intervention, but a display of some of the finest among the arts of resistance: an inversion - a subversion - of the rules of the game as defined and used by the powerful. For a change, an historical form of domination could be used to benefit the people who had always been nicely told that because their land belonged to another province they had no access to the fruits of the oasis. In this sense the chant, 'Eastern Cape! Eastern Cape!' is the euphoric slogan of people using the terms of their disempowerment to gain power.

To quote from *Foucault's Pendulum*, Umberto Eco's novel on conspiracy theory:

But if you invent a plan and others carry it out, it's as if the Plan exists. At that point it does exist. ...

We offered a map to people who were trying to overcome a deep, private frustration. ... There can be no failure if there really is a Plan. Defeated you may be, but never through any fault of your own. To bow to a cosmic will is no shame. You are not a coward, you are a martyr.

... If you feel guilty, you invent a plot, many plots. And to counter them, you have to organise your own plot. But the more you invent enemy plots, to exonerate your own lack of understanding, the more you fall in love with them, and you pattern your own on their model. ... Of course you attribute to the others what you're doing yourself, and since what you're doing yourself is hateful, the others become hateful. ... They collaborate with you, hinting that, yes, what you attribute to them is actually what they have always desired. God blinds those He wishes to destroy; you just have to lend Him a helping hand (Eco 1988:619-620).

## Some afterthoughts on Matatiele's reportage

The conspiracy tale made headlines for several days. Some days after it died down, the banal details surfaced in the *Daily News* and the *Sunday Times*. Here is the *Sunday Times* report.

### The Little Border War

Cyril Madlala, *Sunday Times*, January 15 1995 page 17

As dusk fell on Thursday, a small town in the foothills of the Drakensberg prepared to cut its throat for the sake of its survival.

Matatiele, on the border of KwaZulu-Natal and the Eastern Cape but officially part of KwaZulu-Natal, was ready to play its part in the century-old wrangle over boundaries between the two provinces.

On the one side are land-hungry squatters from the Eastern Cape who have moved onto land in the town. On the other side are the town's residents, who sought a court order to stop the invasion. The squatters retaliated with a selective boycott of the town's shops. The residents retaliated with a blockade.

The escalating conflict this week has also divided the ANC on provincial lines as both sides are loath to surrender any claim to land and thousands of potential votes.

This week's fires were lit as the town's white and Indian businessmen braced themselves for a night out in the cold. They threatened to turn Matatiele into a ghost town if the selective boycott against them did not end soon.

Amid shouts of 'Viva roadblock!' they blockaded roads leading to Maluti and Mount Fletcher in the Eastern Cape.

Like the revolutionaries of the black townships in the 80s, they were bent on making the squatters' consumer boycott 'unworkable' and Matatiele 'ungovernable' to squatters who sought to impose their desire to incorporate the small town into the Eastern Cape.

[...]

After losing R10-million, the traders set up a blockade. They turned back traders who had bought goods at the one Matatiele wholesaler and supermarket exempted from the boycott.

When squatters re-occupied their targeted land on Sunday in defiance of the court order, Matatiele mayor Libby Sorour insisted they be removed and 91 were arrested and later released.

This week, about 2km from the blockade, Mr Sorour again met the squatters, and convinced them that the land they wanted was not available as it had been leased to farmers for grazing.

'We want that land and we are going to get it. We are not interested whether it is in the Eastern Cape or KwaZulu-Natal,' said a spokesman for the squatters, Dillo Mashale.

'This is a political problem and the ANC has glossed over it,' Mr Sorour said after the meeting.

But both the boycott and the blockade were lifted on Friday following another meeting between representatives of the local chamber of commerce, businessmen, the transitional local council and the squatters' association.

Agreement was reached to form a joint committee to investigate development of the land in dispute.

They achieved what Mr Zuma and his Eastern Cape counterpart, Dumisani Mafu, were unable to earlier in the week. At this meeting, chaired by Provincial Affairs and Constitutional Development Deputy Minister Valli Moosa, an attempt was made to resolve the dispute over which ANC branch should represent Matatiele. Unable to get consensus, the meeting decided that a panel of experts would look into the issue.

But the squatters are not interested in boundaries between the town of Matatiele and the old district of Matatiele, part of which is in the Eastern Cape.

'Anyone who was born in the Matatiele district is entitled to land in this town, whether it is in the Eastern Cape or KwaZulu-Natal,' said one speaker at the meeting.

Responded Mr Sorour: 'That is the problem. Most of these people will be bused back to the Eastern Cape after a meeting. Only about 20 live in this town.'

[continues for 4 paragraphs to end].

Keith Ross, chief reporter for the *Daily News*, followed up on Monday January 16 with a report called 'Matatiele muddle'. Some excerpts:

The politicians who carelessly drew lines across southern KwaZulu-Natal and carved up the area to suit political whims are now long gone, but the mess they left behind could yet take years to repair.

Their handiwork has left many victims and one of them is Matatiele, a small town now riddled with uncertainties about where its future lies.

And in those uncertainties lie the causes of the series of crises that have troubled the town in recent weeks. The Matatiele area has a history of being manipulated by outsiders, first by the colonial powers and then by the architects of apartheid. ...

In the text, the town is personified as a victim, and the architects of apartheid have become the outsiders, the *buitelanders*. The report continues:

The government put the 'white' farming areas - including the town of Matatiele, Cedarville and Kokstad - into Natal and nearby 'black' areas into the soon-to-be independent Transkei.

Those divisions still remain intact today - largely unaffected by the new political order - and are seen by many blacks in that area as a continuation of apartheid.

Many of Matatiele's workers live a few kilometres away from the town in the townships and villages of Maluti, which is part of Transkei.

They have to cross a provincial border to go to work and feel they have been turned into strangers in their 'own home town'.

Many Maluti people were among the 600 to 700 people who recently took matters into their own hands and went to settle as squatters on municipal land inside Matatiele's boundaries. [continues for 25 paragraphs to end]

Five days before, the same reporter had asserted that 'the boycott is ostensibly over the plight of squatters in Matatiele but it is also linked to political moves to have East Griqualand excised from KwaZulu-Natal and included in Eastern Cape' ('Trade ban drags on' *Daily News* 11.1.95, p.3).

The issues at hand were not dissimilar to those faced in every town and city in South Africa's new dispensation. The problem, therefore, was not the events themselves - those were manageable - but that the council's conspiracy narrative was not interrogated by the media as an ideological form that sought to legitimise resistance to apartheid-style distribution of municipal rates and power. The conspiracy narrative was part of the structures shaping the conflict in the first place; indeed, it effectively became *part of the conflict itself*. By conveying events in a conspiracy narrative, the media both extended and legitimated the conflict; strengthening the stronger party - giving them a national audience - and weakening the weaker because they were not fax- and phone-compatible. As journalists adopted the conspiracy narrative and no-one contested it, the story stayed on the front page as a conspiracy, then died down, and at length, in-depth features (notably Cyril Madlala's report in the *Sunday Times*, and Keith Ross' in the *Natal Mercury*) put the matter to rest in the eyes of news editors.

A relatively junior journalist at the *Witness* - Ranjeni Munusamy - had been able to access the pragmatics of the situation early on, and the *Witness* had run her 'pragmatic reality' feature on the third day of the breaking story. She was encouraged to do so by the news editor who refrained from asking for a spicier story. But since the newsroom culture defined conspiracy as hard news and pragmatics as soft, the story did not make a front page headline. Hidden in the middle pages of the *Witness*, the story did not have the impact it could have had on other journalists' constructions of events. Bigger newsgroups had more power to define crises.

When the conspiracy narrative disintegrated and the social faultlines undergirding the conflict emerged, the media lost interest in running the story as a headline. In this instance news journalists failed to identify communications practices as consonant with the structures that shaped the conflict. Thus it was that a tiny transitional local council could imagine being at the centre of a national crisis, the news media reproduced its narratives, and the crisis became, for a moment, real.



## Presence and absence: Journalists as facilitators of change

*Journalism is a specific social practice that has a history, and this history is one of unending social invention ... It is important not to fall prey to an ahistorical essentialism that presumes that today's form of journalism is, or ought to be, tomorrow's.*

- Rob Manoff, 1998:14

There is an old saying in anthropology: what people say they do, think they do, and actually do, can be very different. Giddens (1984) would formulate this differently: that practical consciousness (knowing how to do something) differs from discursive consciousness (the knowledge of how things are usually done). I suggested earlier that the effort to resolve the difference between the two constitutes a source of innovation, agency, and creativity.

Previous chapters, while focusing on narrative, have constantly touched on practice. In this chapter, I want to broaden the area of attention to innovative journalistic practices. I hope to demonstrate that narratives of journalism within the profession may be at odds with the nature of the job; I hope to suggest a new way of telling a story of the role of journalists in the public space that moves beyond the stale objectivity/subjectivity debate.

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The film *Welcome to Sarajevo*<sup>1</sup> is based on the real-life story of British journalist Michael Nicholson who, while covering the war in Bosnia, adopted a young Bosnian girl (see Nicholson 1997). One main source of dramatic tension in the film is the difference between

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<sup>1</sup> *Welcome to Sarajevo* (1997) directed by Michael Winterbottom.

the ideals and ethics of journalism, and the madness of war reporting. In the film, war reporters are presented as somewhere on a continuum of heartlessness. But the protagonist finds himself unable and unwilling to do nothing. He cannot be neutral and objective. Circumstances force him not to choose sides, but to choose whether or not he will be fully present - which is to be responsive and empathic. He chooses against being a spectator, and rescues and adopts the girl.

One of the key ideals of journalism is the insistence that journalists not get involved in the events on which they report. But as discussion in previous chapters has suggested, practices, routines and habits of journalism are not and cannot be neutral. Indeed, as the process of transforming power relations in South Africa gathered momentum, journalists became increasingly aware that habits of newsgathering were imbricated in power relations in society. And several journalists - such as Fred Kockett, and Khaba Mkhize - experimented with different routines of work, which showed in the quality and richness of their reports. Eventually the pressures of swimming upstream became too much for Fred, hence his public decision to quit (Kockett 1990).

What I found very interesting in the time that I spent at the *Witness* was that because many journalists were spending most of their working days grappling with conflicts and change, their knowledge, experience and contacts became resources for the subjects of their stories. Journalists often brought fresh insight into situations, and, when asked to, were able to make suggestions as to what people might do to bring various crises to a resolution. In doing so, journalists played roles akin to those that mediators might play in conflict resolutions. In practice this might mean something as simple as suggesting how a group that felt itself to be besieged might go about contacting the other group. At other times, in the manner of consumer journalism, a journalist might use her or his public clout to pressure a powerful group into resolving a situation which they would otherwise have no need to address. Or it might occur when contacting people for comment, as Vusi Ngema suggested in an interview:

*Vusi: This thing of 'present both sides' - I find it happening when I've got to jump from one to the other during most of the day: I interview this guy, he says this; and then I say, but he said this, and he answers to that and then I go back to him, and then say I've been talking to this guy and he's - ja, going back and forth about 5 or 6 times. You find that everyone emerges with new knowledge of what the other guy thinks.*

While accompanying journalists on newsgathering trips it became very apparent that in a time of social change in South Africa journalists were frequently acting as brokers of a new discourse, and a new social order. Journalists were personally involved in the events that they might report on, committed to change in a surprisingly personal way, and often became involved in the lives of people in deeper ways than they would easily admit. Indeed, few spoke of the personal involvements in the community that came with the job, perhaps out of a sense that journalists oughtn't do these things. Working for a large newspaper like the *Witness* in a small city like Pietermaritzburg, such commitments seemed far less avoidable than they might be in the big cities.

I noticed a similar dynamic when researching health education programming on community radio stations in the Western Cape (Lloyd and Fordred 1998). Several journalists and management at community radio stations commented - sometimes wryly, sometimes shyly - that they were as much community workers as they were journalists. One station manager told me that the local high school had shut down in panic, he said, after a student was accused of involvement in Satanism. He had been in his office until midnight the night before our meeting, counselling her family, and opening the way for the school to be reopened.

This chapter is a study of three events reported on by *Witness* journalists in which the journalists helped people to find ways of resolving difficult and conflicted situations. In those moments they became agents of change, mediating change much as one might expect a community worker to do; and they became brokers of the resources that were needed to expedite social transformation.

### **Case #1: The Mooibank story**

In the second half of 1994, some elderly villagers from a dispersed village called Mooibank in the far northern KwaZulu-Natal won a Supreme Court battle over land rights against a giant paper manufacturer called Mondi.

Mondi had covered the surrounding hills with bluegums, quite literally growing the nation's toilet paper, and had impounded the villagers' cattle after several altercations because the beasts had trampled the bluegum seedlings. Besides the cultural insult of stripping Zulu villagers of cattle, the action had serious immediate socio-economic side-effects. Several infants developed kwashiorkor for lack of milk; to get the cash to buy milk, mothers had had to harvest potatoes for a neighbouring farmer who paid them R7.00 (at the time, roughly US\$2.00)

for an entire day's work. This particular farmer was extraordinarily wealthy. A section of his land adjoined the Itala Game Reserve and a guest house hosted foreign tourists for part of the year. The unusual climate of the region provided him with an annual crop of potatoes at exactly the season when potatoes are scarce and prices peak. He maintained a large house and a garden with exotic plants; and besides farm trucks, tractors and a bakkie, ran another three upmarket family cars for himself, his wife, and his mother.

For want of cash the villagers were unable to work their own fields by day, and for want of work their fields were not producing good harvests. Cash-dependence was extending beyond milk to everyday basics.

There were other hardships too. Trees had been planted so close to the stream that the flow had thinned considerably. Thatching reeds no longer grew in abundance, and there was a very real concern that their sole water supply would dry up in a drought.

The men of Mooibank attempted to storm the pound one night to retrieve their cattle. In the ensuing fight, one man, Zakhela Sithole, was so badly injured that he was left for dead, found to be alive in the morning, and taken to a Durban hospital from where he emerged three months later with the use of only one hand.

A decision was taken by the community to take Mondi to court over land and grazing rights. The villagers were supported by several development organisations, and a favourable settlement was reached.

Donna Hornby, the *Witness*' agriculture reporter, found something quite magical in a story in which old men who signed legal papers with their thumbprints could take on corporate Johannesburg and win. After much background research and communication through NGOs involved in the case, she arranged to spend a month - most of October 1994 - at Mooibank, living at the homestead of Zakhela and Alinoh Sithole and their eight children and one grandchild.

That month, relations between the company and the village reached an all-time low. Plantations blazed - apparently the result of arson - and a strike at the saw mill did little to ease tensions. Villagers swore that the then-manager of the plant was starting the fires himself.

At the end of the month, close ties had developed between Donna, the Sitholes, and neighbouring families. Returning to Maritzburg, she produced a series of six features on the village and its dispute with Mondi. The stories were exceptionally well received by *Witness* readers, many of whom phoned in to comment on new insights into rural life.

The impact of this experience on Hornby was such that at the end of January 1995 she resigned from the *Witness* to freelance as an in-depth feature writer, and planned a similar period of participant research for the month of February in Cato Crest, a squatter camp in the flight path of jumbos landing at Durban International Airport. Before she left the *Witness*, however, she took a three-day trip back to Mooibank to write a follow-up story, and invited me to accompany her.

Most of the rural populace of KwaZulu-Natal lives in traditional mud huts, dotted all over the round hills of the province. We set off early in the morning of January 25. I wanted to forget, for a while, that I was observing the processes going on around me, and wanted just to immerse myself in experience and think about it afterwards. With this in mind, I chose to leave my tape recorder behind. I regretted this much, later, as conversation along the five hours' worth of road journey was inspiring, yielding insights about organisational dynamics, poverty and journalism, and the complexities of being white and doing journalism. Still, the absence of a tape recorder kept the conversation a conversation, not an interview, and I preferred it that way.

We arrived at a farmhouse at 1 p.m. for lunch, as arranged, and were graciously offered coffee: some days later, the farmer told us he had rescinded his offer of lunch as we were not welcome. By contrast, at the village we found a huge welcome: the entire family came out, and neighbours walked up the hill to come and greet us.

The Sithole homestead consists of five mud huts: two round ones and three rectangular ones reflecting a shift to urban architectural aesthetics. The round huts were the kitchen, in which a fire burned most of the time; and 'Gogo's hut',<sup>2</sup> in which Alinoh Sithole and six of her nine children slept on grass mats. Zakhela Sithole's hut is rectangular; he slept in Alinoh's hut during our stay. Fires and candles provide heat and light, and a small stream next to the homestead provides fresh water. The stream has been an abundant one: even in the recent seven-year drought, it had not dried up. But as Mondi's trees grew, they took up more and more water, and the family's water source could well dry up in the next drought, even though Mondi had already removed the trees from the hill directly above it.

Fourteen similar homesteads make up the community known as Mooibank. It is rich in good soil, fresh water, kinship ties, cows and chickens, though there was an obvious lack of

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<sup>2</sup>Gogo - Zulu for Grandmother.

cash. Wealth and poverty were delicately balanced; any infrastructural development would have to be self-sustaining. Solar power, for example, would be preferable to an Eskom connection, since anything that would require an outflow of capital from Mooibank would force monetarization, and introduce poverty to the cattle-and-mealies economy.

Zakhela Sithole is warm and welcoming, but seems lethargic. Donna tells me he cannot do the kinds of work that men are supposed to do - fix the fence of the chicken coop, for example. It seemed he had not yet come to terms with the lameness in his hand.

Dinner is an enormous chicken. We talk late into the night.

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In the morning Donna and I meet with Colin Lurcelle, the new manager of the plantation. He says the previous manager was sacked after the October debacle. Much of the latter's work needed to be undone: sections of land that could not support trees needed to be restored, and relations with the Mooibank community needed to be mended.

Lurcelle has a plan: if the villagers decreased the number of cattle; began growing vegetables for the market and shared a truck to take the vegetables to town, they could generate significant monetary benefits. As part of the settlement, Mondi had ceded a sizable portion of land to Mooibank inhabitants. The deal was that the villagers tend the trees; when they were sold (probably after ten years) the money would go to them. Lurcelle reckons the likely value of the trees to be in the region of R300 000.

His problem, he said, was that he would never be listened to if he spoke the words 'reduce cattle' - partly because he is white and whites don't see cattle as wealth; and because given the recent cattle disputes with the company, he would be perceived as having a hidden agenda. In the course of the conversation, he began to realise that the journalist in front of him had the credibility he lacked. Similarly, while she was initially sceptical, in the course of the interview she was increasingly drawn to his ideas and his genuine concern for Mooibankers' well-being. After about 45 minutes, Lurcelle asked if she would be interested in working for Mondi in a community liaison position. Donna said later she would have given serious consideration to the offer if she had no children. Though she refused the offer, it underscored the reality that both sides felt hers was a mediating presence.

After an extensive tour of the plantation in Lurcelle's 4x4, we went back to the Sithole

homestead for a quick snack before a meeting with the farmers in the afternoon on a neighbouring farm.

Three farmers were present: Jan Steenkamp, Johan Kriek, and Colin MacDonald. Jan was chair of the community forum and of the Louwsberg Farmer's Association. Colin was on the Farmer's Association Committee.

The meeting began with an airing of suspicion: one said he had questions on why Donna had come back; what she was after. They were feeling slightly defensive, and were keen to find a way to publicise a land-buying project they had initiated eight years before in the area after recognising that there were too many displaced people and landless chiefs - and that farmers needed somewhere to send people they wanted to evict. Their scheme was, in Donna's words, a very creative solution to tensions around evictions, and she did, in fact, write an article on it when we returned.

The farmers proceeded to take Donna to task for the series of articles she had written - which they hadn't read - but they objected strongly to the use of a photograph of strikers. 'Photos like that will never calm people down,' said Kriek; 'there were only about four people behind the strike. The rest were intimidated. That's the truth.'

'Is that what your workers tell you?' asked Donna, alluding to the complexity of relationships between powerful and powerless.

'Ja' came Johan Kriek's response, 'that's why you should ask the white people here.'

'I'm trying, I'm trying!'

Macdonald spoke up. 'Many workers, especially the older guys, have a paternal feeling for the farmer. They come to us for advice and help. Am I right guys?'

'Sometimes I wonder if there is a truth for every audience.'

Macdonald again: 'There are things in the past that nobody's proud of ... this is one community that has sincerely tried to change things.'

'That's why we're having trouble with the boys,' said Johan Steenkamp. Election promises had raised expectations, he said, and two rival parties were both trying to put a foot in. Macdonald: 'The paternal side of our farming makes us participate in politics whether we like it or not.' Jan: 'But there's no politics in the Committee. We are here to find peace.'

Their lack of awareness of power dynamics was startling, but arguing the point would have achieved nothing. Seamlessly Donna moved the conversation onto salaries.

'The story that I've heard about the project is more than I could have hoped for, but

the one thing I find everywhere is that salaries are so low that people can't live off them.'

Colin: 'We'd love to pay people R1000 a month if we could afford it. But we don't get the subsidies; we understand he's got to buy shoes, school kit and so on but it's no use throwing all the toys at us, we simply can't do it. We've had years of drought but there are no thin, starving people on any farm here.' 'And they graze their cattle too,' added Kriek. A farm, he explained, can only support so many cattle. He told a story of a black farmer who had bought a struggling 200 hectare property in the region - a property that had such erosion that a conservation notice was about to be served on it. It could only support about 50 head of cattle, but the eight workers who lived on the property had 170 between them and there was no way the new farm owner could get them to sell their cattle, or move. He was, they said, in a position where he couldn't farm his own farm. And as far as supplying electricity to the workers was concerned, Eskom's rate was R40 000 per kilometre of powerline and they expected the farmer to pay.' And on that you can quote me in capital letters,' said Colin. '*Ek is bedonnerd*' (I am flaming mad).

The conversation made little head-way on the salaries question and moved back to Donna's articles. Colin again takes exception to the strike picture, but with the rest of the articles he had no quarrel. Responds Donna, 'I'd ask your advice if I needed to farm, but I am a journalist: I need to look at the problems. I can do that empathetically, but I can't make it pretty.'

Back on the land question, Donna puts Mondi manager's Colin Lurcelle's point of view. 'He says he thinks people say they want land, but in fact what they are wanting is security, a source of income, a pension. That's the need. It's not so much land that's needed: land is seen as a way to those things. What do you think?'

Their answers seemed vague and unformulated ('they all just think they're going to get land for free') but Donna succeeded in making the point that people were trying to meet needs and had taken a position on how they thought those needs might be met. There were perhaps other creative options to meet needs that underlay tensions. And she made the farmers realise that the plantation was also a player in the conflict.

All through the meeting Johan Kriek stared at Donna, shaking his head slightly as if he was trying to puzzle her out. I don't think he could understand why two educated white women could possibly want to stay in a 'kraal'. They certainly seemed to think 'kraals' unsafe places, and I doubted if their wives ever went to the homesteads. We must have seemed the

extreme among *links-liberale vroumense* (lefty women).

As the conversation came to a close, Colin articulated the unspoken. 'There's some very fine writing here, he said, paging through the articles. 'Hats off to you for staying in a kraal. You're either very brave or very foolish, but hats off to you.'

Back at the Sithole's that evening, Donna started a conversation after supper. She conveys Lurcelle's suggestions on land use, and the ideas of the farmers on land-buying to Zakela and Alinoh. She is trusted, and listened to intently. Every now and then, in the dim candlelight, she translates for me; I keep notes for our mutual reference later. From these:

*'I [Donna] told them that I put to Lurcelle the problems that the community were experiencing: cattle, thatching, water, timber, firewood. Lurcelle is aware of some of these problems: his idea is to plant a specific kind of tree that would solve the building and firewood problem. He said he can see that when big business moves in, problems are caused - that it displaces people, and people are damaged in the process. His opinion is that the number of cattle need to be reduced: there is a need to judge the amount of cattle that the land can sustain in winter. If the community will agree to reduce the number of their cattle, he would help set up a gravity irrigation system to enable people to grow vegetables, which could be sold in town, and be a cash injection into the community. And I said that it's hard to judge, but I think Lurcelle means well, he seems to have the welfare of this community at heart.*

*Baba [Zakela] then said that what Lurcelle is suggesting is what the men themselves would like; that the cattle are important to them. They are saying they need to 'look to their cattle' (that's a direct translation) but they also need to look to their soil, with the awareness that the soil is what will generate a cash injection. He said there's an awareness, too, that cattle can be sold for money, and that if nobody sold cattle, there would be no meat in the cities.*

*Then I [Donna] said what is the problem then? And he [Zakela] said the important thing is for their side [Mondi] and the community side to 'not come in with bluffs': they need to be straight with each other. He says the main problem is a lack of trust: that as much as Mondri is concerned about this area's welfare, he too is concerned about Mondri's area. He sees Mondri's trees as not belonging exclusively to Mondri, but also to him in that he can take care of them. So basically, the men are saying pretty much what Lurcelle is saying.'*

Donna proceeded to tell them about the second meeting with the farmers - Kriek, MacDonald, Steenkamp - and the Nongotsha Accord. Again from my notebook, based on dictations by Donna as we drove home the next day:

*I said that Kriek [who owns the closest farm] didn't say much: the main speakers were Colin MacDonald and Jan Steenkamp. We started with the Nongotsha Accord - and that from that accord it was clear that the main problems affecting black men being evicted, and the need for land, that they approached government and though government liked the idea, there was no money for it until December, when they got the go-ahead for six farms which will be held in trust by the chief. And that in addition there are ten isolated farms that farmers are willing to sell, and that they're hoping to get money from the government for buying those. I said that there's a land committee that has been set up that has representatives from both farmers and the community - I pointed out that farmers here are not just whites - there's this other farmer who is black - and that the committee will try to deal with issues such as evictions and that it's busy constructing a list of landless people. Then I told him about the RDP committee - that its job is to try and find out what people's problems are and to find ways together of solving them with government assistance.*

*I said that the impression I got was that farmers are aware they have done terrible things in the past, but they're also aware that for as long as they're threatened by workers, they can't continue farming - so they're trying to find ways to solve problems so they can move ahead. And that by 'moving ahead' what they mean is that you don't any more have a white community and a black community but a community that includes everybody.*

*Baba's reply was that this attempt to bring everybody into a single community is - what? - hopeful: that if farmers can meet with their own workers and talk about their respective problems and try 'without bluff' to solve those problems, then it is possible to create a community - or goodwill, whatever. For example, if he's a farmer and I'm the worker and we have a problem with each other then there'll be a great distance between us - that when I approach him he will think I'm a skebenga<sup>3</sup> and it*

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<sup>3</sup> Skebenga: a person of malicious intent.

*will be the same the other way around. But that if we sat down together and talked together about our problems and solved them, then I as a worker - the Zulu translation is 'I should then love my work as though it is my own business'. [To me:] Which means that if the farmer wants to go away for two months and go overseas or something, he'll know the cattle are as well taken care of as well as when he's there.*

*I [Donna] asked him to clarify what it amounts to; he said if you solve the major problem - which is wages - if a person is paid a decent wage you can trust them to do the work as though its their own business. If you don't solve the problem, then even if you are present as a farmer your workers will sabotage or undermine your operation: they'll steal cattle, for example.*

*Then I asked him what he thought of the option of farms as a place for people who've been evicted, whether it will work or not: he said it may or may not work. The reason he thinks there's a risk of it not working is that whenever a relationship ends because of ill will, you risk the person coming back in disguise or disguising his path back to the place, secretly coming back and causing trouble. He said it'd work best if people left of their own free will, then they'd have no need to come back and cause trouble.*

Before we left the next morning, most of the men from neighbouring homesteads came by for a pre-arranged meeting with Donna, to discuss the stories. It was a morning of mediation in the shade of one of the huts. My notes from her rendering of the discussion:

*They wanted to know what was the outcome of my stay. I gave them a description of each article and what it was about, and told of the response there's been from readers in Pietermaritzburg, especially from whites. I told them they'd also be published overseas this week. They wanted to know if there were going to be any benefits for them from the articles.<sup>4</sup> I told them one NGO that works with matric pupils phoned and asked if matric pupils would be interested in doing courses in things like building and sewing ... so the men wouldn't benefit directly. I was quite specific about why I'm*

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<sup>4</sup> Donna donated to the village the full payment she had received from the Gemini Foundation sponsorship of the six features, and brought many second hand clothes for adults and children. Gift giving was not one-way by any means: we returned to Pietermaritzburg with two clucking chickens, fresh mealies, and some beautifully woven mats.

*saying that there was another side to the story that wasn't in the articles I wrote.*

*I said to them it appeared to me that Mondi had become very aware of the need to work together with them, here. One man said they were still having problems with Mondi, and were already being told to reduce the number of cattle, and that the problem is not going to be resolved unless they get more land. I told them to talk to Baba about what I'd said yesterday.*

*It's interesting to be held accountable like that: I've never had that kind of responsibility as a journalist before - people wanting to know what I'd written and if there were any benefits coming from it. But I suppose other people can read ...*

Donna's experience at Mooibank was a career-changing one. Her decision to freelance in order to be able to do more in-depth feature writing caused her to leave the *Witness* - which was reluctant to let her go, but also reluctant to let her be absent for such long periods as was required by her now-preferred method of in-depth research. After her first freelance assignment, in the poverty of a shack settlement at Cato Crest near Durban International Airport, she resigned from journalism completely and registered for a year-long Masters degree programme in development studies. Presently she works for a rural development organisation in KwaZulu-Natal. A conversation shortly before our trip to Mooibank provided clues as to why she left.

We were talking about objectivity. 'Objectivity is only possible if you're an object,' she said, 'the whole objectivity thing is a myth. You affect your story as you research it.' She described an interaction with a man who had come to her for help - effectively asking her to be a broker.

*A man came to see me and said his three children all had kwashiorkor; could I help him? I had to try to explain that I'm a journalist. I said to him, do you know what I do? He said no. So I tried to explain journalism. I had a newspaper with me, and I said I write for a newspaper; I can't help you directly. What I do helps change policy, puts pressure on government - but it may take years ... and by that time his children might be dead.*

Perhaps an approach like that of civic journalism is better able to mobilise public participation

in problem-solving, and in so doing address the man's plight in more simple and effective ways than by putting pressure on government policy.

The structures and strategies and policies of contemporary forms of newswriting are shaped by the expectation that journalists provide an aloof gaze on situations. Mark Pedelty makes a similar observation in his study of American foreign correspondents in El Salvador:

The US correspondent sees his primary duty as that of not becoming located and not having an ideological perspective - objectivity as absence. This apparent paradox - self-conscious non-reflexivity - is made possible by a set of paradigms and practices which have come to define what is, and what is not, objective practice. ... [T]he paradigmatic regimes of liberal capitalism ... have become synonymous with objective reality (Pedelty 1995:172).

By inhibiting the involvement of a reporter, the narrative is inevitably detached, and sets up the spectacle gaze that disempowers public participation in the improvement of society. Steeped as it is in a paradigm of separation and detachment, the practices of journalism construct journalists as spectators rather than people with agency. By limiting journalists' job descriptions to writing, media management was unable to offer support to writers, to help them make the links that they were asked to make by subjects of stories. I am not suggesting that journalists ought to become social workers, or that they should abandon the primary task of reporting. But the reality is that journalists do have the capacity and the knowledge to make links in society. If 'good practice' was redefined in terms of ethical imperatives rather than absence and detachment, and if journalism was constructed as a communicative resource rather than an information transmitter, perhaps Donna Hornby would still be generating among the finest series of features in South African newspapers. For her practices - staying in a community for several weeks - were unprecedented, and she is one of those rare journalists who wrestles internally with the play of powers in the field of the media.

## **Case #2: Farmers and Evictions**

December 1994: About an hour's drive west of Pietermaritzburg is the small town of Estcourt in which, behind a farming supply store that smelled of fertiliser, wellingtons, and hooves, an urgent meeting of the Estcourt Agricultural Society (EAS) Executive Committee was in progress. In a small room where wood panels bore the gilded names of former EAS chairmen, the topic of discussion was the fraught matter of evictions. Farmers had long had the right to evict farmworkers as they saw fit. Now, under the seven-month old government of Nelson

far greater security of tenure. The meeting was presided over by a chairman and secretary at the front table, and nine EAS members scattered around five rows of chairs.

The 'eviction victim' story is a familiar one in South African journalism, and this meeting was part of a series of events involving evictions in the area. *Witness* reporter Denzyl Janneker had been to a meeting of evictees from the area that Monday, and had phoned the chair of this meeting for comment. The man had been reluctant to talk on the telephone. He gave three reasons: it was the first he'd heard of the evictees meeting and the farmers needed to discuss the matter; the issue was complex, and he felt he could not speak for all the farmers on the matter. Instead, he said, he would call this meeting and invite Janneker to it.

Many farmers sat inside; most dressed in neatly pressed khakhi farming fatigues. Several members addressed the issue, most citing anecdotes; some wrestling with legal philosophy. The longest speaker was Martin Winter who, clearly a pragmatist, was committed to finding a solution that would be acceptable to all sides. He spoke at length, arguing, persuading, seeking change.

The chair asked for comments. One man stood up and, referring to an article in the local Estcourt paper on the evictees' meeting, commented bitterly that 'We always read about evictions in the press from the blacks' side. But we are being used as dormitories to accommodate people without a *quid pro quo*.' He cited several misdemeanours ranging from theft to overgrazing and drunkenness, and continued, 'Despite these things it's not as though they are not being paid. Then they refuse to leave your farm when you tell them they must go.'

The chair asked Denzyl about the meeting of evictees that Monday, specifically asking him what was said. Within minutes, Denzyl became an intermediary; an integral part of the meeting - communicating what had been said at the evictees' meeting. ANC Member of Parliament Ina Cronje had suggested a committee be formed; evictees had said the committee needed to be representative and include farmers; it was noted that there were no representatives of white farmers at the meeting.

The chair made some unfavourable comments about the story in the local paper, saying that it put the farmers in a really bad light. Denzyl defended that reporter, saying he had been there longer than Denzyl had, and added that some of the evictees had said their shacks were bulldozed by the SADF. The farmers contested the veracity of the story. Rumours, they said, were the area's biggest headache.

Whether the bulldozings story was truth or rural legend was unclear. What was clear was that gradually the meeting came to focus on Denzyl, who was asked more questions about the committee. Martin Winter, the pragmatist, listened intently and then addressed the chair, 'Mr Chairman, we shouldn't be afraid to talk to anybody - we should investigate this committee' and continued to ask Denzyl about who the members of the committee were, what the ANC MP's line of argument was, whether certain Indian landowners had been present.

We left the meeting with a sense of achievement: we had a great deal of information and a significantly improved relationship with the farmers; they had found a way forward and would set up a working relationship with the evictees' committee. A reporter's questions to an affected party had alerted them to an issue; sought a constructive response from them by giving them time to consider the issue before commenting; and created the possibility of dialogue between two opposing parties who had not begun communicating.

That the reporter had taken up the issue had, in a small way, changed the way the story unfolded. The establishment of a committee of evictees was a massive step forward in the empowerment of farmworkers, and under the new political dispensation farmers were feeling insecure. Janneker had enabled the farmers to regard their opponents with the equanimity needed to begin communication. In this very small step, he became a change agent. Though he may not have changed their regard for one another he made it possible for them to begin to communicate on terms more equal than they had been before, more quickly than they would otherwise have been able to do.

### **Case #3: Mediations at a Supermarket**

January 1995: One morning Khaba Mkhize asked me to go with him to a supermarket. He was unusually hurried. His story began in the crossing of Longmarket Street towards a waiting radio taxi. The characters in the tale were three nurses and a supermarket manager; the events comprised accusations of shoplifting and racism, and several faxes between the store and Khaba Mkhize on behalf of the nurses. In the taxi, the garnering of detail was frustrated by Khaba's chatting to Steve, the taxi driver. They asked after each others' families almost all the way to the store. 'Good relationships always have a comeback,' Khaba muttered as we waved goodbye to Steve.

Walking into the supermarket, he began to explain the big picture. Three nurses whom he knew vaguely, he said, had arrived at his house on the last Saturday before Christmas. Two

noticed the same man in almost every aisle. They went to the till, paid the eighty-nine Rand they owed for their purchases, and as they left the man - who identified himself as the store manager - grabbed their shopping trolley, accused them of being thieves, pointed to the 'Right of Admission Reserved' sign and told them they were not welcome to return. The shop, they said, had been packed with Christmas shoppers and they felt utterly humiliated. On their way home they decided to go and see Khaba, whom they knew only by reputation as a journalist. He asked them what they wanted to do. Their response, he said, was simply: 'We are going to shop there again and again and again, and take all our friends and our family there, so that we can prove to this man that we are not thieves.'

Khaba was impressed with the response and decided to take up the story. That particular store manager had acquired a reputation, he said, for racist behaviour, so it was time that the chain in question dealt with the issue. He called the man in question for comment and got 'a rude and insulting' response. Both angered and entitled to publish a story now that he had a response, he wrote an article and faxed it to the provincial manager of the chain together with a cover letter saying he would publish the article but wanted comment from senior management since he knew the company was committed to good relations with its customers.

Thirty days later - two days ago to be precise - there was no response, so he called the national head office and faxed the story to the CEO. Within a day, the provincial manager had set up a meeting with Khaba, the three nurses, and the store manager. This was the meeting we were attending.

The first of the three nurses arrived - professional, assertive, offended - and the meeting began. The store manager (call him Sydney) looked tense; the regional manager (call him Rodney) concerned but adamantly defending his junior.

Rodney began, talking about the tapes that run through everyone's heads. 'The training tapes running through Sydney's head are, I am sure, New South Africa tapes, not pre-apartheid [!] tapes.' He reminded me of an executive I'd once worked with whose philosophy was 'support your staff all the way in public and give them the rocket in private.' Still, he was sincere, though I got the impression he thought the meeting was a waste of time and/or a personal favour for the CEO.

The tapes in provincial manager Rodney's head ran at full volume. 'The customer is always right ... there is an office poster that says 'You never win with a customer' ... why do

we get singled out so much - maybe because people know we'd rather keep a customer happy than go to court ... I've said to my deputy that enough is enough, if we have to we'll take things to court.'

Khaba clarified his intentions: 'we are not here for money or to sue,' he said, 'and I am not here to create a scoop. My intention is to help the process of healing relationships in the community. These nurses are professionals who have been wrongly accused and humiliated. I was impressed by their determination to shop here again and again and again until you, sir, recognise they are not thieves.'

Phindi - in a uniform with full three-barred epaulettes - took the chance to speak. She gave Sydney a verbal beating; I had a sense that if there'd been an audience of women, they'd have been ululating. The 25 year old store manager pursed his lips, shook his head and put his chin in his hands and his elbows on his knees.

The other two nurses arrived - Lindiwe in her 30s, Nomhlanhla in her 40s. Nomhlanhla was quiet; kindly in her manner. 'You know, we women, our husbands can beat us and we will not feel hurt inside. But you, you called us thieves. The pain of that stays with me till today.' She produced the till slip. 'We paid for our shopping.'

Khaba spoke touching on ubuntu as a value in society, explaining the philosophy that a person is a person through other people; reiterating that what they wanted was an apology; that the manager needed to acknowledge he was wrong.

Sydney denied calling them thieves; didn't remember grabbing their trolley and telling them never to come back. The events were retraced several times. It was clear that the nurses' version was consistent, while the gaps varied in his. Eventually he said something that represented a small acknowledgement of a part of their accusation. Immediately, Rodney requested a caucus. The two went outside for ten minutes, and came back with Sydney prepared to offer an apology - and a request for understanding of the pressure of the Christmas rush. As he spoke, he looked shaken, angry, contrite.

While Rodney wrapped up the meeting, Khaba lost his cool. Sydney, he said, was eyeing him out; his body language was threatening; a young man should not look at his elder like that. I was astonished; Sydney seemed to have been modelling Carl Rogers himself. He seemed to make a concerted effort to keep eye-contact with everyone, and maintained an open body-posture. Rodney defended him; Sydney was taken aback, if not disgustedly angry. It seemed to me a matter of Zulu v. corporate body posture, and I thought Khaba was being

unreasonable. But Khaba insisted: 'in my culture, he said, a young man does not stare at an elder.' Sydney seemed to think him irrational, and, quietly snapping in the frame of himself, deferred, saying 'ok, ok, if you want me to I'll sit differently.' And the meeting concluded a few moments later.

Khaba and the nurses were jubilant, in the mall, and in the bakkie on the way back to town. Khaba said the aim had been to teach the guy a lesson about respect; he had been forced to encounter ubuntu; he would not easily forget what he had been taught that day. For Phindi, Lindiwe and Nomhlanhla the record had been set straight - but again, there was a sense that something more than an apology had been achieved.

It was the part about body language that was key to understanding exactly what had been brokered here: the apology was only a part of what had been requested. The incident at the till had modelled *baaskap*<sup>5</sup>; the confrontation had been about not just upturning *baaskap* but replacing it with a version of *ubuntu*. For the first time these three black women had taken on the public sphere, and won compensation for shabby treatment - not money but the simple affirmation that they had been badly treated. The apology acknowledged that the framework of consensus guiding performances of power in the public sphere, had shifted. It conferred upon them a public acknowledgement of their humanity in a shopping mall. The mutual affirmation that they experienced in a home-space - the township - had been extended to town.

The women's solidarity against an abusive man, and the presence of an elder (Khaba) to supervise the censure of the younger man had very deep and rich resonances with traditional forms of conflict resolution. Tangibly, African values had claimed space in the shopping mall.

In mediating the nurses' grievance, Khaba had mediated shifts in cultural power to a supermarket manager with a good corporate record. It was an acknowledgement of the importance of people like supermarket managers in the building of non-racialism.

Nothing of this story was ever published. But the incident highlighted the power of a journalist to use the power of media as leverage to broker equality, without doing damage to people, or to institutions.

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<sup>5</sup>*baaskap* - literally 'boss-ship', an Afrikaans word for a style of power relations between masters and servants, characterised by the requirement of servility. Applies almost exclusively to white-black relationships, particularly in the domestic sphere and on farms.

## **To mediate or not to mediate? To broker or not to broker?**

The question of the nature of journalists' involvement in society goes to the heart of the media enterprise, and to the journalist's job description. The debate is not rare in commercial journalism, as an exchange illustrated at a workshop on media and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission organised by the Media Peace Centre in Cape Town, January 1997.

Journalist A noted that a village called Trust Feeds, that had been attacked by a squad of policemen, had not been informed by the Truth Commission that their attacker's application for amnesty would be heard. A second journalist remarked that the *Natal Witness* had intervened, which provoked an exchange:

*Journalist A: I know the reporter who actually went out to Trust Feed and told them it was happening. And they got out there and there had been absolutely no knowledge [of the application]. ... And I think with the - kind of mediation of the Natal Witness, the TRC agreed to postpone the hearing by 24 hours, or two days, so that those people could actually be in court, and they could get to the hearing. ... The people in Trust Feed would have had no knowledge - they wouldn't have got a newspaper, or whatever. They wouldn't have known about it. So it actually was a reporter who told them.*

*Lesley Fordred (Media Peace Centre): A's example is, I think, quite a succinct example of just how much of a role a journalist can play with just a simple piece of information. Going to a community and saying there is a Hearing - did you know about it? - finding that they didn't - and then being that link. I think that is an excellent example of something very small that media can do that has a massive impact down the road in terms of possibilities for reconciliation.*

*Journalist B: The journalist that went there didn't go there to facilitate reconciliation. She went for a good story.*

*Lesley Fordred: Yes, but in doing so, she got a piece of information which she could then feed back to the TRC, and then the TRC did something about it.*

*Journalist B: But you get an even better story if you don't pass it back to the TRC. ... I think one of the problems that we have is that as journalists we have too many other roles as well, and are expected to fulfill those roles. ... There would be much rougher*

*times if we did what journalists do around the world, which is break stories and finished.*

At the heart of the debate was the question of the role that news journalists play in the events they report. Are news journalists essentially authors of strong narratives about society, or are they facilitators of communication in the societies they serve? The questions may equally be applied to news texts. Is good journalism a strong story that exposes the binaries, polemics and oppositions created by social fissures? Or is good journalism the ability to facilitate communication across social fissures, so that people are able to improve the quality of societal life? Is news separate from society, or a part of it; transmitter, or participant?

These are not simple matters to be rhetorically answered; indeed, they do not form ready binaries. The issues are easily set out in polemic; nonetheless, the debate will not be settled on either one pole or the other. As I suggested at the outset of this chapter, the discursive debate about journalism as objectivity or subjectivity is at odds with journalists' practical experience of the choices in the field.

Narrative that exposes raw social injustice may be a powerful impetus for social change. Novelist Ben Okri is firmly committed to the idea that when nations can face themselves truthfully 'they free themselves for future flowerings' (Okri 1997:112). Nonetheless, 'telling the news is not enough' says Jay Rosen (1994:3), 'there's also the job of improving the community's capacity to act on the news, of caring for the quality of public dialogue, of helping people engage in a search for solutions, of showing the community how to grapple with - and not only read about - its problems.'

Speaking about journalism, Khaba Mkhize argues that 'a person is a person through other people' - not through a profession. 'We must tell ourselves that we are part of the human race. ... You are not aloof, you are not on a different planet. When you write about what happens, it also involves you' he says (in Balch and Roskam 1994:17, cited earlier in chapter 4), he was referring to the professional ideology in terms of which journalists are somehow set apart from society. Mkhize's observations emerge from a twenty years of writing as a black writer for a white newspaper; twenty years of resisting the expectation that he write as a spectator on his own community. His is the voice of one who resists the subjectivity imposed on him by sets of agreements about the nature of good journalism.

Similarly when journalist Donna Hornby exclaimed that 'objectivity is only possible if you're an object' she too was objecting to the idea that when one has a pen and notebook in hand, one is expected to excise every allegiance to human community other than the news community.

In an ethnographic study of American foreign correspondents in El Salvador, Mark Pedelty observes, 'The US correspondent sees his primary duty as that of not becoming located and not having an ideological perspective - objectivity as absence. This apparent paradox - self-conscious non-reflexivity - is made possible by a set of paradigms and practices which have come to define what is, and what is not, objective practice. ... [T]he paradigmatic regimes of liberal capitalism ... have become synonymous with objective reality' (Pedelty 1995:172).

Steeped as it is in a paradigm of separation and detachment, the practices of journalism construct journalists as spectators rather than people with the ability to effect change.

'Telling the news is not enough' argues Jay Rosen, professor of journalism at New York University (Rosen 1994:3). 'There's also the job of improving the community's capacity to act on the news, of caring for the quality of public dialogue, of helping people engage in a search for solutions, of showing the community how to grapple with - and not only read about - its problems.'

In the instances outlined here, quite independent of one another, Donna Hornby, Denzyl Janneker and Khaba Mkhize tested the limits of accepted practices of journalism, in the knowledge that as communicative agents they could be of help to people who were grappling with change, and could step outside the routines of absence required by the paradigm of objectivity. In so doing, the watchdog role took second place. Journalists became facilitators of change; participants in communication rather than spectators on moments of crisis.

## **Knots in the Tokoloshe tale: epistemology, news and hegemony**

### ***The Thing from Magoda***

*The Magoda area of Richmond has been visited by a bizarre birth which has caused consternation among residents.*

*Last Thursday a goat reportedly gave birth to an animal that is part goat and part baboon. The 'Thing' as some residents in the area call the creature, died this week, but not before causing pandemonium. 'I took one look at it and ran for my life. I could only bear to look at it when it was dead,' a resident said.*

- Natal Witness, Friday December 9 1994

*[Ritual] is a site of 'experimental practice, of subversive poetics, of creative tension and transformative action [in which] individual and collective aspirations weave a thread of imaginative possibilities from which may emerge, wittingly or not, new signs and meanings, conventions and intentions'*

- Jean and John Comaroff, 1993:xxix.

*'... irony, springing from a perceived and unbridgeable gap between seeming and being, threatened to become the dominant mode, animating narrative and historical consciousness as a whole'*

- Michael Gilson, 1996:59)

When the grounds of consensus in society are shifting, the cultural politics of agreements about news are, for a brief moment, rendered bare. Awareness of multiculturalism yields an awareness of multiple perspectives. Conventions of believability - the grounds upon which a story is rendered believable - shift. The nature of wit changes too. Stories that had been confined to the comedy slot at the base of page one begin to be coded differently.

In South Africa in 1994-1997, for a brief period, shifts in the cultural politics of news allowed tales of tokoloshes and monsters to shift genre, and gain an epistemological respectability accorded 'hard news'. Traditionally, reports of the activities of African ancestors and spirits were relegated to the laugh-of-the-day story anchoring the front page. But in a time of transition, not only were the spirit stories no longer the laugh-of-the-day, but they lost their ontological moorings at the bottom of the page and wandered mysteriously into hard-news spots on pages one and three.

In this chapter, two case studies follow. The second focuses on the reports about a Transkei river monster, published in the Independent group of newspapers, in April and May of 1997. The first focuses on a brief experiment, at the *Natal Witness* in January 1995, in reporting mythological events.

## **I The tale of the Wandering Tokoloshe**

Thursday January 5: At the morning news conference at the Witness, news editor Yves Vandehaegen held up issue #1 of Dennis Beckett's brand new magazine, *Sidelines*, and introduced an article on a tornado in a rural KwaZulu village called Impendle. The writer had included, said Yves, 'the folkloric point of view' - the villagers' interpretations of the unhappy experience. Many people caught up in the tornado had believed it to be a big snake. Khaba added that the word for tornado is *inkanyamba*, Zulu for a big snake that lives in deep water.

Yves motivates that Witness journalists begin to research the experiential in a story. 'Get beyond the 'ten people killed, twenty houses burned' sort of story, and aspire to this kind of journalism'; 'get a sense of what is at the core of people's existence.'

Donna Hornby notes that the Impendle story - even though it was a village relatively close to Maritzburg, and a certain amount of 'cultural knowledge' was known to staff - had not been written that way. 'Hmmm,' says Khaba, 'it's rejected as superstition.' But how are things written off? asks Yves. It was important to identify the framework in terms of which 'good journalism' is being defined, he says; if 'official policy' on journalism clashes with how things are understood in a situation, then it needed to be rethought.

Donna points out that tribal conflicts tend to be reported as NIBs (in the News In Brief sections), that urban readers can accept a political conflict, but a cultural conflict is dismissed as

superstition. She argues strongly that even if superstition is at the heart of something, it's still a 'why', and needs to be part of the story.

Khaba offers an anecdote. A writer had picked up on a Zulu phrase in the trial of a multiple murderer, and used it to write an article explaining why he had killed so many. Donna responds. 'It would have been interesting,' she says, 'to go to the trial to see how the murderer's testimony was translated, and packaged, for the judge, by the translator.' And the conversation takes another sideways leap: with an ironic gleam in his eye, Yves quips 'what we do everyday is package things in ways that people can recognise - so they've got their favourite biscuit ...' The meeting gets onto the assigning of the day's stories, and adjourns.

In the weeks after the meeting, several stories appeared that experimented with the more 'folkloric' style.

### Experiments in folklore news, Natal Witness, January-February 1995

Author	Headline	Publication date, page
Khaba Mkhize	The day the fish came out	7.1.95:1
Vusi Ngema	Unemployed and desperate go to traditional healers for help	24.1.95:7
Khaba Mkhize & Lakela Kaunda	Virginitiy rite helps keep women chaste	25.1.95:13
Jeff Cele and Roy McKenzie	Nose and lips bitten off baby	26.1.95:1
Elaine Anderson	Panic at Woodlands school after pupils see 'tokoloshe'	11.2.95:1

The discussion echoed several prior and ongoing conversations among staff. Donna Hornby had spent almost a month living in a village in KwaZulu-Natal. Vusi Ngema, a journalist of extraordinary narrative talent, had a month before filed 'The Thing from Magoda', published bottom centre of page one, on Friday December 9 1994.

### **The Thing from Magoda**

by Vusi Ngema, *Natal Witness*, 9.12.1994

The Magoda area of Richmond has been visited by a bizarre birth which has caused consternation among residents.

Last Thursday a goat reportedly gave birth to an animal that is part goat and part baboon. The 'Thing' as some residents in the area call the creature, died this week, but not before causing pandemonium. 'I took one look at it and ran for my life. I could only bear to look at it when it was dead,' a resident said. It is not known how the creature died as the Nhlangulela family, who own the goat, could not be reached for comment.

The birth of the animal is reported to have taken place on the road near the local shop known as Nkabinde Fresh Produce, which is owned by the family of ANC member of the provincial legislature Sifiso Nkabinde. Nkabinde said the story has been circulating widely in Richmond but said he did not personally witness the incident as he was away at the time it is supposed to have happened.

Residents say a large part of the creature's body was that of a goat. 'Only the head and legs are puzzling. The head is so small it looks like it has been squashed, but is shaped like that of a baboon. The large glassy eye in the middle reminds one of a cyclops. The mouth is at an odd angle but is sharply upturned so that the mother had to be milked and the baby had to be fed by humans,' said a woman who lived next to the Nhlangulelas.

The legs, the woman said, were almost as long as those of a cow, but the animal could not walk and had to be carried by the owner who went around showing it to neighbours. 'But it just sat there when the owner put it down, bewildered by the attention it was getting,' a young boy from the area said.

There is only one exception to the excitement that gripped the area: the mother of the creature. 'She remained unperturbed throughout the whole thing and since she lost her child she has just continued her life as a normal goat, indifferent to the star status the birth has catapulted her into,' a resident said. [ends]

The story embodies the crossing of conventionally accepted boundaries between entities: a goat and a baboon; journalist and tale-teller; Greek cyclops and Zulu-owned kid.

As a news story - albeit the joke tale of the day at the base of page one - the piece reports the villagers' experiential reality on its own terms, posing an opposition between folk-life and modernist 'urban reality'. The writer avoids the great South African tale of the trajectory from primitive to modern and back again by invoking continuities. He knows that he writes for a majority white readership, and reminds them that in European mythological tradition there is a similar creature: the cyclops. Zulu village legend is crossed with the cyclops of Mediterranea, at once connecting Darkest Africa with white South Africa's roots in ancient Greece. Similarly, continuity between this world of folklore and the urbane agnostic is created by establishing the story in a set of conceivable coordinates: the Fresh Produce Store; the road that governs the trajectory of white journeys through the area, and the person of Nkabinde as a political leader with a seat in the Provincial Legislature. Indeed, it is the political standing of Nkabinde in the new hegemony that links the story directly to the world of white South Africa. Through the

association with his person and status, the notion of a singular reality governing the fields of power is destabilised. All these factors make the story of significance to white readership; Ngema is skilled in the art of connecting his reader to his tale.

The writer revels in the opportunity for dalliance in the arts of tale-telling. Details of the beast's bodily abnormalities (legs, eyes, mouth) celebrate a moment in which freedom of reporting speeches is extended to the freedom of reporting folktale. Gentle humour is in the personification of mother and beast. The mother is said to be cool, unperturbed, and unfazed by stardom - like most goats on a normal day. Her para-normal offspring is said to have been 'bewildered'.

Unstated are local Zulu cultural resonances. A dominant witches' familiar is a hairy, baboon-like *tikoloshe* (alternately tokoloshe, or thikolose), common in Zulu, Sotho and Xhosa legend. In her study, Eileen Krige notes how *uTikoloshe* was described to her in the 1930s, in a discussion of fabulous animals in Zulu folklore:

From the Xhosa the Zulu have learned to believe in *uTikoloshe*, a wicked little dwarf who lives in deep pools or in the reeds. He is short and hairy, and very fond of women. At night he lets out the cows and steals their milk, and he is often guilty of cohabiting with women (Krige 1936:354).

In *Reaction to conquest*, Monica Wilson's 1936 study of Pondo Xhosa life in a time of change, Thikoloshe is described as

the familiar most widely believed in, and most commonly adduced as the means of witchcraft ... Thikoloshe is a small hairy being, having the form of a man, but so small that he only reaches to a man's knee. He has hair all over his face and coming out of his ears, and *his face is squashed up like a baboon*. The penis of the male is so long that he carries it over his shoulder, and he has only one buttock (Wilson 1936:275, emphasis mine).

Additional characters in Zulu myth whose form has resonance in the tale of the Magoda Thing are the *Isitshakamana* and the *umNyama*. These two creatures have lessened in prominence over the decades as tales of Mamlambo and Tokoloshe have predominated.

The Thing from Magoda is said to have an extraordinary eye. Krige describes a mythological animal that has extraordinary eyes, and knows the names of one's ancestors: the *isitshakamana* (Krige 1936:354). If a person looks into its eyes, it causes that person to call out all the names of her or his ancestors, and then die.

The Thing is said to be a goat-like creature; Krige describes *umNyama* as a mysterious animal much like a sheep, the skin of which is used by diviners as protection against lightning. It

lives in pools where the rainbow enters the earth; if the rainbow rests on someone he or she will become ill or suffer some disaster (Krige 1936:354).

Whether or not a poor old goat bore the offspring of a baboon, the Thing from Magoda appears to be a tale that could communicate local fears of disasters portending. Indeed, some months later local ANC leader Sifiso Nkabinde made national news with a tale of inverted binaries, only this time it was an inversion associated with betrayal. He had, he confessed, been a paid informer for the South African Police in the apartheid state. He was forced out of the ANC. Subsequent leadership struggles in the Richmond area led to the killing of several people; at the time of writing, the area remains one of the more politically unstable in the region.

In the newspaper, however, the imagined universe of the Magoda Thing opens up a space outside the dominant cultural order (Jackson 1981:42,43) - for its form disrupts the monological consciousness of the news form, dominated as it is by a secular vision. Writing in *Fantasy: the literature of subversion*, Rosemary Jackson draws from Bakhtin's study of the articulation of narrative forms with social structures, writing, 'subverting this unitary vision, the fantastic introduces confusion and alternatives ... [and provides] an opposition to bourgeois ideology upheld through the realistic novel' (1981:35). 'Unlike the marvelous or the mimetic, the fantastic is a mode of writing which enters a dialogue with the 'real' and incorporates that dialogue as part of its essential structure ... [F]antasy is 'dialogical', interrogating single or unitary ways of seeing' (Jackson, 1981:36).

I would like to suggest that Ngema's report embodied a subversive poetics that sought to disturb notions of truth that were embedded in the narrative code of journalistic realism. For here the fantastic disturbs the claim of the newsroom to reproduce the real; it undermines the 'witness'. 'The fantastic serves ... not in the positive embodiment of the truth, but in the search after the truth, its provocation and, most importantly, its testing' wrote Bakhtin (1973:94).

It is important to distinguish this article from more familiar kinds of anecdotal journalism which invert binaries to achieve humour - the sort that radio stations like to end off a five-minute news bulletin, like these that I recorded while monitoring media prior to the 1994 elections:

- baboons on farm near Ladismith raid veggie patch at sound of lunch gong every day (Radio Good Hope, 28.03.94, 12h30 bulletin);
- panic in the shower after cat deposits snake in farmer's laundry (RGH, 11.02.94 12h30);
- a Danish rape victim turns the tables on her attacker (RGH 02.02.94, 07h30)

- and New Yorkers warned to keep the lid on their loos shut as serpents on the loose in the sewer - pet snake lost in NY sewer (RGH 21.01.94, 12h30 ).

All of these stories have in common a violation of the expected, which is at once a violation of social norms. They are considered witty because they invert categories; in the telling, even the 'Danish rape victim' story is presented as humorous, despite the manifest misogyny in presenting the tale thus. But in their telling these stories re-assert the order of 'normal' social binaries, precisely because they draw attention to that which is considered normal, and contrasts the absurd with the rational.

By contrast, 'The Thing from Magoda' destabilises the very notion of rationality. The writer takes on a role that is analogous to the court jester, poking uncomfortably at accepted notions of reason.

Some weeks later, a story appeared of a snake that had killed a baby.

#### **Nose and lips bitten off baby**

by Jeffrey Cele and Roy McKenzie. Thursday January 26 1995

Mystery surrounds the death of a six-week-old baby whose nose and lips were bitten off while he slept with his parents in their hut in Cedara on Sunday night.

When his mother Rose Majola woke up at dawn on Monday, the baby, Zamani Mncube, was already dead with no trace of an intruder. Consultations with a sangoma have now convinced her that a snake is responsible for the death of her baby, and the incident has struck terror into other residents in the area. Majola said that the baby was fine when he went to sleep on Sunday evening. When she awoke at dawn to go to the toilet, she did not notice anything wrong. When she came back into the hut the baby's father, Simon Mncube, told her that the child was dead. She said: 'I became hysterical. I picked the baby up and saw that the nose and lips were gone. I was surprised because there were no bloodstains, even on my clothes. I didn't know what to do and searched around the room to check and see if I could find anything.'

There were no signs of forced entry, and there was unexplained dampness, which was not blood, on their blankets. She said they were not disturbed in the night because 'normally the baby cries often. But this time he did not cry at all,' she said.

They reported the matter to the police on Monday morning. The results of the autopsy are not yet available.

Majola said that neither she, not the father of the child nor a fourth occupant of the hut heard any disturbances during the night.

She said according to the sangoma, the previous occupant of their rondavel kept a snake which they used to feed.

Since they moved there two months ago, they have not fed the snake and it apparently 'bit off' the baby's nose and lips. The sangoma also believes that it 'sucked the brain out through the nose'.

Majola says she believes this because when she tried to resuscitate the baby she found a 'type of foam where the nose was'.

They have made a hole in the roof of the hut to drive the snake out and Majola said she saw the snake with her 'own eyes'. She described it as 'brown with white spots' with a body resembling a 'fish shape'.

Majola said that she will never again sleep in the room where her son died. [ends]

Unlike the Magoda piece at the base of page one, the snake story was printed on the lower centre of the front page, according to its greater newsworthiness and believability. On several levels the telling of the story focuses the epistemological dilemmas associated with the Magoda piece.

Consider sources. Journalist Jeff Cele was at the time a crime reporter who, every day, attended the morning crime briefing and kept in close contact with police sources. (McKenzie was then a student on assignment from journalism school). Yet the snake story cites neither police nor expert sources. The mother is the sole source of comment - a deliberate choice not to challenge the explanation offered by a rural black woman. The woman's tale is represented as real not just to herself but as something that is potentially, if not narrowly within the borders of the epistemological requirements of a news story on crime or natural disaster.

This is an extraordinary moment in the history of the *Natal Witness* which regards itself as a serious purveyor of news and prides itself on having won national awards for journalistic excellence. The usual positioning of a rural woman as the unenlightened subject gives way to a presentation of Mrs Majola as shocked and frightened, even hysterical, but valid *because her experience is real to herself as a subject in the new cultural-political landscape*. In the Magoda piece the writer retains a humouring distance on his subjects. In this story, Mrs Majola is not humoured. The tragedy, of course, would not sustain humour. Instead of dropping the story a decision is taken to relay the story in her terms. The result is a piece in which the divinations of a sangoma take on a similar value to the findings of a detective. Challenges to the word of the bereaved mother are considered inappropriate. For those who knew the folklore, the 'unexplained dampness' on the bed suggests the foul play of a tokoloshe in the night.

As a story form, the article is an artefact of a cultural politics in transition, an exemplar of destabilised regimes of truth, and part of a search for a news practice whose epistemological foundations are not anchored in European notions of reality.

Police, however, were suspicious. Subsequent investigations and the official autopsy concluded that the child had died of a respiratory complaint. It was speculated that the parents had drunk heavily on the night; that therefore they had not noticed the baby's distress; that rats had discovered his death first. Indicative of an inability to work with two regimes of truth at once, the paper never ran an in-depth piece that sought to represent both the woman's experience and

the police findings. The overall impression was that a mistake had been made; folklore and 'real' reality were re-established as incommensurable, and the new, tentative subjectivity of the protagonist gave way to a polite ignoring of one who had been drunk and was female, black, and a liar.

Two weeks later, a report detailing the appearance of a tokoloshe graced the front page of a Saturday edition of the *Witness*.

**Panic at Woodlands school after pupils see 'tokoloshe'**

by Elaine Anderson. *Natal Witness*, Saturday February 11 1995

Pandemonium broke out at the Woodlands Primary on Wednesday as word spread that there was a 'tokoloshe' at the school.

A six-year-old described the apparition as being 'like a ghost ... an evil spirit, you know. It was a short thing with a hat on its big head and was wearing a red sweater.'

As rumour of the sighting spread, pupils ran out of their classrooms, screaming. A Standard Five girl said the pupils were 'uncontrollable'. 'I saw children running to the fence near the stadium. A boy came back with a bleeding hand. He got cut on the fence.

'Everyone in our class started running out. When we came back there was blood outside our class and three fingerprints on the window. I have never been so scared,' she said.

A teacher advised the children that if they saw the 'tokoloshe' they should shout 'Jesus' and they would come to no harm.

Not all the children were frightened of the apparition. 'I don't believe in such things. I felt nothing,' said one pupil.

The headmaster, Lawrence Stevens, was also not convinced. He was at a workshop in Durban at the time but is adamant that the sighting stems from very vivid imaginations. 'There are lots of different descriptions,' he said, 'Some boys said it was dressed in a red jacket on Wednesday. When asked on Thursday what they saw, they said it was covered in hair.

'If this was an evil spirit would it not have harmed some children,' he said.

'My fear is that this will be sensationalised. Children will start staying away from school and then how do we handle this,' he said. [ends]

The report was placed on the upper right quarter of front page, one of two secondary lead stories of the day - taking on an even higher status of newsworthiness than the snake and baby story. It was accompanied by a large line-drawing of the tokoloshe as 'seen' by a young student. Sources for the report are a six-year old, a standard five pupil, possibly another pupil, and the headmaster. There is no point to the story other than that children said they had seen a tokoloshe, and that pupils at the school might therefore stay away. There are no details as to who first saw the tokoloshe. The report seems to assume that if there was panic something real must have happened. The headmaster is given the role of the refuter and skeptic - the weaker role in the narrative logic of newspapering, opposing the dominant, monologic angle.

In keeping with a great deal of tokoloshe tradition, this tokoloshe appeared only to children. But this particular children's folk-panic at a coloured school occurred at the start of a school year when for the first time a single non-racial Department of Education had come into being. Anthropological studies of supernatural phenomena argue that they mediate social tensions (see Niehaus 1995 in particular); it is entirely conceivable that the screaming exodus of pupils was manifesting their deeply rooted fears that black pupils had brought Zulu spirits with them.

A curious commitment to the sense of sight is also in evidence. Sight and spectacle remain the supremely trusted senses in a paper that takes its name from the capacity to see - *The Natal Witness*. Hearing, smell, feeling and taste are less indubitable; less verifiable. The children's visions of the tokoloshe undermine the paradigm of sight as truth.

Although the writer and news editors are trying to listen to other voices and cultural logics, a commitment to the idea that narrative is immanent in reality, remains. Narratives that appear internally coherent are accorded the status of 'possible truth', as if the only options are truth, lies, or madness. A realist approach to narrative has here confounded news journalists, who regard narrative as truth or an approximation of it, rather than a set of rhetorical strategies that people everywhere use to make the ordinary and the extraordinary, meaningful. As a 'bastion of empiricism', in media scholar Jay Rosen's words (1993), the newsroom is embarrassed. The cultural politics of its narrative realism have been exposed, but there was nothing with which to replace it other than another kind of narrative realism, which is just as problematic, with which most journalists felt uncomfortable, and which probably left not a few readers thinking that their morning paper was heading for the green slopes of tabloidism.

Some months after my stay at the *Witness*, I spoke to senior journalist Anthea Garman by telephone about the problems of the epistemology of news when reporting folktales and folk-panics.

*Anthea: You know, multi-culturalism is not just a kind of a theory like it was in the days before the election, it is actually real now and it is also real on all sorts of levels - it is real, like I am very interested in watching the religious sort of thing. How we stopped being a totally Christian society and admitting that there are Hindus, there are Moslems, especially in Natal. [...] We have actually got to admit that different people in our society see things in different ways [...]*

*I think that is one of the areas where we have experimented, strangely enough in this kind of religion, quasi-mystical - in that sort of area, I've seen that we have begun to*

*take people very much more seriously about what they think and what they believe, without any kind of like critical western overlap.*

*Lesley: Ja, now that is really interesting.*

*Anthea: We ran a story just the other day about some school kids who were absolutely convinced that they had seen a ghost, I think. You know, but it wasn't white kids it was Indian kids.*

*Lesley: That's interesting because in February there was that story about the Tokoloshe at the school. Do you remember?*

*Anthea: Yes, yes. [...] There has been since then a sort of continuing debate on those kind of stories, when they have cropped up again, you know, about how critical are you. [...] I do think - well the journalists I know who are kind of out there, find it - maybe they are not formulating it, maybe they are not sort of saying 'you know I find this old construct of news difficult to deal with' - maybe they are not putting it in those sort of words. They certainly are struggling with what they encounter and how it doesn't fit.*

In a discussion of fairy tales as a means of communication in the book *Narrative as communication*, narratologist Didier Coste (1989) notes that 'the marvelous frame of reading does not involve complete logical anarchy or a necessary inversion of all the rules that are supposed to help us 'make sense of our world' in common sense or scientific discourses, for any of the parties concerned: implied author, narrator, character, narratee, and implied reader' (1989:183-184). His approach to fictionality (in his use, the term includes narrative) would, I believe, be of great help to journalists who encounter the fabulous. Fictionality, he says, 'concerns a semiotic level that is not that of the the relation of signification proper (signifier - signified), but that of reference (signified - referent)' (1989:107). Without such a conceptual tool, tokoloshe tales must appear as madness, lies, or an extremity of Otherness.

'Perhaps it is at once ironic and eminently sensible that positivist notions of truth and authoritative narrative should have lost their validity just when their inheritors have agreed to listen to Other voices,' comments Coplan drily (1994:245). In the Tokoloshe tales of January 1995 however, positivist notions of truth had not lost their validity. Journalists were in trouble. The trouble reared its head again in 1997 when another witch's familiar raised its head: the *mamlambo*.

## II: The *Cape Argus* and the Transkei Monster

In late April 1997 Reuters picked up on a comment in the Eastern Cape parliament, and put the story on the wires. Here is the *Argus*' version:

### River monster terrifies villagers

*Cape Argus* 30/4/1997

Bisho - Villagers near here are living in fear of a man-eating river monster said to be a cross between a fish and a horse - and to have claimed several victims.

Ezra Sigwela, agriculture minister in the Eastern Cape region, told an astonished legislature yesterday that the monster had gobbled up seven victims in the Umzimhlava River in the north of the former Transkei.

'I'm told it looks like a fish, but that it also has the features of a horse,' said Mr Sigwela, promising to send officials to hunt down the monster.

His remarks drew only a few titters, amid calls of 'mamlambo' - a reference to a beast from Xhosa tribal mythology that is said to live in rivers and, if caught, provides great wealth.

But one sceptic, Eddie Trent of the Democratic Party, likened the monster to the myths surrounding Scotland's Loch Ness.

'But as far as I know, Nessie has not eaten anybody,' said Mr Trent. - Reuter

*Mamlambo* is, along with the Tokoloshe, a common witch familiar. Writes anthropologist Isak Niehaus in a paper on witchcraft in the Lowveld:

All witches are imagined to own familiars - snakes, owls, hyenas, baboons and wild cats - which they send to steal from victims, injure and kill them. Witches themselves can assume the shape of their familiar. Since the 1960s the tokoloshe and *mamlambo* became the most prominent familiars in the Lowveld. ... Witches acquire the *mamlambo* as a root which seems to be alive and to glow at night. The *mamlambo* transforms into a large snake which brings the witch wealth, and also into a white lover. However, the hedonistic pleasures derived from keeping a *mamlambo* have great costs. The *mamlambo* is exceptionally greedy and demands regular sacrifices of human blood (Niehaus 1997:3).

Reuters is an international agency. Its pieces are styled for the international pages of foreign papers; the report here is perfectly structured within the metanarrative of a historical trajectory of European progress from the primitive to the cultured, and embodies the familiar culture-anarchy motif: the fear that that the new South Africa will seed a return to the primitive. The choice to give the final word to a white Parliamentarian drawing from Scottish mythology put the piece firmly in the escapist files.

The South African Press Association (Sapa) offered a follow-up story on its wire service the next day.

### **Police 'have to probe river monster claims'**

*Cape Argus 1/5/1997*

Umtata - Police have said they are duty bound to investigate claims by Transkei villagers that a half-horse, half-fish river monster sucked the blood and brains of seven human victims.

Terrified Mount Ayliff villagers have claimed the monster killed seven people as they tried to cross a nearby river.

Safety and Security MEC Dennis Neer said the Eastern Cape's intelligence agency would gather more information on the alleged monster before sending security force members to deal with it. -Sapa

The narrative bears the signs of a reporter who was playing the rules of the game against the gameshow hosts. The opening line sounds like an SAPS press liaison response, in which the police have no choice but to affirm the principle of investigating all reported crimes. It does not give the impression that there has been a prior and enthusiastic commitment of resources to the case.

A follow-up story appeared the next day in the *Natal Mercury*.

### **'Monster' may be serial killer**

*Natal Mercury 2/5/1997*

UMTATA: While police in Transkei probe reports that a 'river monster' has killed at least seven people in the Mount Ayliff area in the last few weeks, there are growing fears that a serial killer is actually on the loose and is being mistaken for the 'monster'.

At the same time the monster story has been dismissed in other quarters as a myth. Others, however, feel the seriousness of the matter is highlighted by the fact the monster mystery has aroused concern even among those handling 'weighty matters of state' inside the Eastern Cape provincial legislature.

Police spokesman Insp. Maphelo Ngame confirmed that police were investigating the possible existence of the 'half-fish, half-horse' monster said to have savaged people crossing the Mzintlava river to Rubaleko village.

'The matter has been reported to the police by several people in Mount Ayliff and while the monster is said to have struck on different occasions, the affected families have given similar accounts of how the victims were attacked.

'So we have no reason to dismiss the monster story as a myth and we are duty bound to investigate,' Insp. Ngame said.

But a businesswoman in Mount Ayliff, Thozama Fikeni, said while she did not want to dismiss the story as a myth, she had a feeling a serial killer was on the loose and that the so-called monster was actually some maniac in disguise.

Ms Fikeni said what made her sceptical about the monster story was that the Eastern Pondoland region in general and Mount Ayliff in particular were rich in myths.

There was a time, she said, when the mountain range in the Mount Ayliff area was believed to be rich in mineral resources but a giant snake was believed to be lurking there to scare prospective miners. [ends]

'Growing fears' seem to be the fears of one source as shared by the journalist. The source links the idea of the horse-fish with the *mamlambo* that guards the great wealth immanent in the region,

prior to the revisionist tale (still to come) of the horse-fish in fact being a fish. As is often the case, the revisionist tale was never accounted for. But of course as every local would know, *mamlambo* can take whatever form she chooses.

Of significance is the journalist's observation that since those handling matters of state appeared to believe in the monster, it had to have more substance. The Eastern Cape Legislature had been challenged to show the colours of its cultural authority, and the media had laughed. As the saying goes, 'he who laughs first laughs last'.

**'Blood-sucking monster' has village in state of terror**

*Saturday Argus* 3/5/1997

Aakash Bramdeo and Bekizulu Mpofo, Own Correspondents

Umtata -Nine year-old Mthokozisi Sigcobeka wants to avenge his father's grisly death at the clutches of what he believes is a 'half-fish, half-horse monster'. But not just yet.

'I'm just a little boy now and I'm too scared of this monster,' says the youngster from the Lubaleko village in Mount Ayliff, Umtata. 'But when I grow up I will definitely get it.'

At least seven villagers have died mysteriously in recent months, including Mthokozisi's father, Khangelani, 32, who is the latest victim.

Mthokozisi's grandmother, Norah Sigcobeka, says her son was crossing the Umzimhlaba river when his friend saw him being pulled underwater, kicking and screaming. Three days later, his mutilated body was found further down the river.

One of the only locals who claims to have seen the monster, Princess Mpalulo, described it as 'a big and fat brown creature'.

She says the top half resembles a horse with a mane while the bottom half looks like a fish. However, others claim the lower half resembles a horse and the upper half a fish.

Police are taking the reports seriously and are planning to hunt the killer. An Umtata police spokesman has warned people in the area to stay clear of the river.

'We have received reports that the monster has killed seven people. It apparently sucks the blood and brains of its victims.

'It is reported to be extremely dangerous and anyone who comes into direct eye contact with it is killed.'

Village elders claim they have known about the creature's existence since their childhood.

They claim it previously attacked mainly livestock, but since the end of last year it has attacked locals crossing the river.

Village headman Felix Jojo says the monster keeps the bodies for several days before leaving them on the river bank.

'A few weeks ago, one of my people reported the monster had taken a man. When we found his body two days later the eyes, nose and mouth were missing. The neck was also cut from ear to ear.

'My people are living in fear. They can't wash clothes or bathe in the river.

'Our only hope is that somebody will come and help us by killing the monster,' he says.

However, townsfolk in neighbouring Kokstad dismiss the 'monster' account. Some claim a crocodile could be responsible for the deaths while others believe the victims drowned.

River monsters have a rich and honoured history in southern African folklore. Monica Wilson noted many similar myths in her work in Pondoland in the 1930s. Of particular interest is the tale of the Gqoloma. She cites a tale as told her by an informant:

The Gqoloma is a great snake with markings like a puff-adder, very beautiful. One kind lives in rivers, another in rocky clefts. It has a stone in its head which shines like a candle at night. It is about six feet thick. A fearful snake! One was shot by Mr. - (a European) of Ngqamakwe (in the Transkei) in 1913, and it took four horses to drag it away. ... People saw the dead snake but no Bantu was shown the stone in its head. The stone is used by Europeans as a charm. All Europeans of high position have it and use it, washing with it in their bath. -- (a well known Bantu) once picked one up and sold it to a European. He (the Bantu) is now very rich and owns a big farm in the Transkei. I, when I was working in Cape Town, found one left in my employer's bath water. ... I sold it to a herbalist. Later others told me I was a fool, for it was the stone of Gqoloma. If a man has this stone and goes to town to find work, he will certainly get it. Someone will even be dismissed to make him a place. The stone is brighter than a diamond, and yellowish. The man who shot Gqoloma left Ngqamakwe very rich (Wilson 1936:496).

To this tale Wilson adds, 'This was the account of a middle-aged man who I am sure believed all he told me' (Wilson 1936:496). What is fascinating in this rendering of the myth is that in the 1920s and 1930 it was adapted to mediate the social divisions of colonialism.

The horse-fish that had so scared Ezra Sigwela's constituents has much in common with the Gqoloma. Yet when he tells the story, in 1997, other members of the Legislature should have been heckling him with snickering calls of 'mamlambo'. This is curious, and of significance.

In *Reaction to conquest* Wilson recounts several *mamlambo* tales told over sixty years before the heckling of Sigwela. The common theme in Wilson's recorded tales is that the *mamlambo* is related to items bought in the towns, and brought home to villages. One informant told Wilson that 'a charm is bought by men from foreigners ... in towns, which turns into a beautiful girl, with whom the owner has sexual relations, but who will cause the death of his relatives. The *Mamlambo* may appear as a looking glass, a chair, a hat pin, a belt pin, but if anyone picks up one of those things it may turn into *Mamlambo* who will come into their homes and kill people there' (Wilson 1936:540). The link to whites is strengthened in the words of another informant who told Wilson that the *Mamlambo* girl always appears in European dress. Again, the wife and children of a man who has *Mamlambo* will die (Wilson 1936:287). As with the tale of Gqoloma recorded by Wilson and discussed above, a mythical creature is adapted, in this narrative of the 1930s, to the tensions of the colonial social environment. The world of commodities is a treacherous one; even its trifles will overpower one. Entry into its domain is a transgression, and will bring death to the household.

In his research on witchcraft accusations in the 1990s Niehaus observes that the *mamlambo* and the tokoloshe symbolically represent people's desire for money and sex (Niehaus 1995). He argues that witchcraft does not simply reflect strains in social or political structures, but that in many cases witchcraft accusations are produced by strains in the structure of belief systems themselves (1995a:2). His assertion echoes the arguments of the Comaroffs in *Modernity and its malcontents* (1993), who suggest that ritual does not simply reflect social structures but is frequently an experimental series of practices in response to the contradictions engendered by social, material and political transformation (see Comaroff 1993:xxx). I suggest that the beliefs reported in the Eastern Cape Legislature in 1997 attend to much the same problematic. It is likely that the members of the Legislature were teasing Sigwela with sexual innuendo - suggesting that a *mamlambo* in the shape of a pretty white girl was doing the rounds of his constituents. The association of great wealth with *mamlambo* makes it a mythical figure very likely to appear and cause consternation in a time of great expectations and little delivery.

The story written by Bramdeo and Mpofo brings to the boil the challenge to the high-modernist epistemologies of journalism in South Africa. Their story has none of the escapism of the initial Reuters article, and none of the subversive playfulness that attends Vusi Ngema's tale of the Thing from Magoda.

The reporters desire to accord an equivalent respect to monster witnesses as any other crime witness, but they run into trouble. The villagers' visions are not easily assimilated into standard notions of reportable truth, but in this report nobody is willing to impose the sort of skeptical cross-questioning for which journalists are infamous onto the new subjectivity attributed to rural people with folk beliefs. Indeed, narrative realism appears helpless when confronted with more than one version of reality. The notion that positivistic reportage is the sum of human communication everywhere, creates an epistemological quagmire.

The report constituted a challenge to self-respecting journalists across South Africa: if Parliamentary privilege was to be extended to the realm of the spiritual, how could journalism follow suit, maintain its integrity, and not offend the powerful? The report stood frighteningly close to the edge of the *National Enquirer* cliff - on the front page of almost every major newspaper in the Independent Group.

Unusually for a big and unresolved story, news of the monster and its trackers died down after that: testimony, perhaps, to a belief among editors that the story had cost too much in the symbolic capital that constituted professional integrity. Much as the article on the Majola baby in

the *Witness* was eclipsed by expert testimony, the monster story was eclipsed by a focus on more rational matters.

But the story had become too big for journalists to ignore, and silence was not going quell the epistemological challenges that had been raised. Ten days later the *Cape Argus*, under the editorship of Shaun Johnson, announced that it was sending veteran columnist David 'The Wanderer' Biggs - a wag if ever there was - on the trail of the river monster.

### **The wheel monster story**

*Cape Argus* 13/5/1997

David Biggs / On The Trail Of The River Monster

Umtata - When I asked the car-hire receptionist in East London whether she had heard of the dreaded Mount Ayliff River Monster with the head of a horse and body of a fish that sucks the brains and blood of its victims, she nodded.

'Oh, you'll find plenty of monsters where you're going,' she assured me. 'Most of them are behind the steering wheels of vehicles.'

She was right.

No sooner had I passed the abandoned border post into what used to be the Transkei than I had to stop for a large crowd of people standing along the road and pointing excitedly down into a deep ravine.

'The monster?' I wondered.

'No,' said a bystander, 'just a lorry gone over the edge.'

I peered down. There were about a dozen wrecked vehicles down there, some obviously recent arrivals.

'Which one was it?' I asked.

'Probably the blue one. It looks new.'

One thing about the dreaded monster is that everybody knows somebody who knows somebody who - if not actually eaten by the monster - has seen it personally. Or has seen somebody who's seen it.

My cousin, who teaches at an Umtata school, knows the principal of the school at Mount Ayliff, near the monster's lair in the Umzimhlava River.

Tomorrow I go to the school in Mount Ayliff.

Wish me luck. Given the state of the roads around here, I shall need it. Some of the pot-holes would comfortably accommodate a whole family of monsters.

In a world where dreaded bloodsucking monsters lurk in pot-holes and oncoming vehicles, the carnivorous becomes the carnivalesque. And at the same time an obscure inside humour column is able to shape-shift and become front page serial news.

Biggs is the master of tale-telling, casting himself as the bumbling fool seeking enlightenment.

## Biggs takes bumpy new turn on trail of luminous green, snake-headed monster

*Cape Argus* 14/5/1997

David Biggs / *The Wanderer* - on *The Trail Of The River Monster*

Umtata - Two exciting new facts about the dreaded Mount Ayliff monster have emerged after an extensive day's tracking on roads that simply defy description.

One: the monster has a head like a snake, not a horse as was originally reported. And two: it glows pale green in the dark.

These facts were provided by a group of teachers I met on the bumpy track to Labuleko Village on the banks of the Umzimhlava River during my special assignment to track down the man-eating creature terrorising the Transkei.

I stopped to ask them the way to the home of Chief Churchill Jojo and was told he had gone off on official business concerning 'the snake'. 'Is this the snake that kills people in the river?' I asked.

'That's it!' they shouted in unison.

'I thought it was half fish and half horse,' I said.

'No, stupid! It has a snake's head and long neck and body like a horse.

'And it shines at night,' added one voice. The others agreed.

The teachers were walking home together for mutual support and taking a 6km detour across the bridge lower down the river rather than cross at the place where the monster lurked.

'How long will you continue to use the bridge?' I asked.

'Until they kill the snake,' said some.

'Until they build a bridge where the snake is,' said others.

An ancient man hunting with his pack of bony dogs told me he had heard of the 'snake' but had not seen it himself.

The man, who said his name was Matshungu, told me a white man had had many snakes on his farm years ago and they had escaped during a flood and one giant snake was making its way up the Umzimhlava River to Kokstad, growing bigger all the time.

Some whites living in this area say they think the monster could be a crocodile.

A report in the *Daily Dispatch* refers to several baby crocs that escaped from a crocodile farm recently.

At the Mount Ayliff police station, Captain G Mkuzo said he thought it was all 'superstitious nonsense'. 'I believe these people drowned and were mutilated by crabs before being washed ashore.'

Umtata police, however, take a different view, and Inspector M N Ngame has warned people to stay away from the area.

'We appeal to any persons who might want to visit the area and surrounding areas to be cautious or to use alternative routes as they may fall easy prey to the monster,' the official statement reads.

The police say they will call in the help of the Department of Nature Conservation 'to assist in the hunting of this mystery monster'.

The fish-horse is now a snake - and it 'shines at night' - echoing the tale of *Gqoloma* as told to Monica Wilson, cited earlier in the chapter. Rosemary Jackson's work on the literature of fantasy is helpful in making sense of Bigg's narrative strategies, and the attendant efforts of journalism to re-establish a single monological truth:

From a rational, 'monological' world, otherness cannot be known or represented except as foreign, irrational, 'mad', 'bad'. It is either rejected altogether, or polemically refuted, or assimilated into a 'meaningful' narrative structure, re-written or written out as romance or

as fable. Otherness is transmuted into idealism by romance writers and is muted, made silent and invisible by 'realistic' works, only to return in strange, expressive forms in many texts. The 'other' expressed through fantasy has been categorised as a negative black area - as evil, demonic, barbaric - until its recognition in the modern fantastic as culture's 'unseen' (Jackson, 1981:173).

Biggs' tale is by turns comic, fabled and absurd.

The fantasy that is the subject is, however, real in its consequences: it has the police active; the Department of Nature Conservation on the alert, and schoolteachers are walking an extra six kilometres to get to a bridge. The writer is all too aware that the tale has real consequences for himself, and represents himself as the greater fool for doing so. The search for enlightenment is more earnest in the next day's story.

#### **Land where pet theories roam wild**

*Cape Argus* 15/5/1997

David Biggs / The Wanderer on the Trail of the River Monster

King William's Town - When it comes to river monsters, everybody has a theory.

'It was probably a piece of grotesquely shaped driftwood seen in the twilight,' suggested a reporter of a local newspaper.

But from the safety of King William's Town, pensioner Pangi Glastone Gaya claims he saw the monster when he was a boy and will go and kill it if the Government provides the equipment he needs. This includes an automatic rifle.

The crocodile theory has gained strong support since the Daily Dispatch reported that 12 young crocs had disappeared from a farm in the East London area.

'I think it's a hippo,' said a high school teacher in Umtata. 'I'm sure there are still hippos in some of those rivers.'

John Schenk, principal of Umtata Primary School, grew up in the monster's area and is convinced the deaths were not caused by a monster with the head of a horse and body of a fish, but by drowning. 'The river flows very fast when it rains in Lesotho and the villagers have to cross it to get to the trading store. After being washed away over the rocks, of course they look mutilated.'

Official opinion is divided. 'It's nonsense,' says Geoffrey Doidge, MP for the area. 'These people were washed away and drowned. What is needed is a bridge across the river there.'

But Ezra Sigwela, the MEC for Agriculture and Land Affairs, raised the matter of the monster in the Legislative Assembly in Bisho recently and said he would ask the Department of Nature Conservation to track the monster down.

Some of the policemen I spoke to were firmly convinced the monster existed, others pooh-pooed the idea.

A visit to the area makes it easy to see how a monster legend could grow. The villages are remote and there are few telephones.

The rivers run in deep, shadowy ravines where the thick mist rolls out in an eerie blanket every night. The silence at night is broken only by the murmur of the water and the distant bleat of a restless goat.

This is perfect monster territory.

This article moves to the task of finding alternative explanations which is, after all, the purpose of the trip in the first place. Driftwood, opportunism, crocodiles, drowning, and the landscape and its lack of communication with a rational world - all of these seed the reassertion of rationalism: a motif continued the next day.

### **Our own Nessie... only meaner**

*Cape Argus* 16/5/1997

Intrepid Wanderer's back - with some scary tales

David Biggs / The Wanderer On the Trail of the River Monster

One of the differences between the famous monster of Loch Ness and the monster of the Mzintlava River in the former Transkei is that the people of Lubaleko village are genuinely terrified of their 'snake'.

It's not a figure of gently affectionate fun like Nessie.

It kills people in a most horrible way. Everybody in the area knows somebody who was killed by the monster. They have no doubts about the cause of these deaths.

The reasons for this terror are not hard to find. Travel to Lubaleko, if you dare, speak to the people of the village and you'll end up half believing in the thing yourself.

It's not easy to get there. The road is so deeply rutted that astonished pigs pop out of the pot-holes at the approach of the very occasional vehicle.

Like so many rural villages in what used to be the Transkei, Lubaleko is scattered over several square kilometres of undulating hillside country. The houses, some made of brick and others of mud, are far apart and linked only by winding footpaths. There is no electricity or piped water.

The children fetch water from the river after school, carrying the heavy buckets home, balanced on their heads. The river is the lifeblood of the village. Goats and chickens wander among the houses and pigs root about in the vegetable patches.

It all seems very peaceful.

In the evening, the thick mist rolls up the river, filling the valley and muffling the sounds of village life. Shapes loom out of the fog and a rock or gnarled tree trunk easily becomes an awesome beast.

Oh yes, many people have seen the monster for themselves. When the rains in Lesotho swell the river it flows fast between the stepping stones, sometimes covering them completely.

A false step can have anybody plunging into the swift water where the monster lies waiting.

'I have seen some of the bodies of the so-called monster's victims,' Captain G Mkuzo of the Mount Ayliff Police told me. 'They had all been in the water for some time and, as is often the case, river crabs had eaten away the soft parts of the faces and throats. In one case, the crabs were still clinging to the body when it was brought in. As far as we are concerned, these were cases of drowning, plain and simple.'

But to the people of the village, the mutilation just proves the monster's existence. 'It eats their faces off and sucks out the people's brains,' said an elderly Mr Matshunga, walking the lonely track with his dogs. 'It is a big snake and I have seen what it does.'

A group of women returning from a meeting at the village school assured me the monster was real.

'We are not just ignorant, superstitious people,' they told me. 'We are teachers. Educated. And we know that the monster is there. That is why we do not cross the river any more.'

'We walk all the way to the bridge. We need a new bridge where the monster is, because it is no longer safe to cross there.'

One of the group said she had seen the monster but, later, when I questioned her about it, she admitted she hadn't actually seen it herself, but knew somebody who had seen it with her own eyes.

'It has the head and neck of a snake and it shines at night with a green light,' she informed me.

The monster was accorded official status when a group of villagers attending a Freedom Day rally at Mount Ayliff lodged a complaint about it to the MEC for Agriculture and Land, Ezra Sigwela, who mentioned the matter in the legislative assembly in Bisho.

One cannot disregard the obviously real fears of one's constituents.

Following this, an official police warning was issued by detective inspector M N Ngame, advising people to stay clear of the area 'as they may fall easy prey to the monster.' Having been accorded official status, it is unlikely the monster of Mount Ayliff will disappear for many years.

But unlike the Loch Ness Monster, it's not likely to become a major tourist attraction. It takes real dedication and a sturdy vehicle to reach the village where this monster lurks.

Just as the very first report filed by Reuters had ended with the tale of the Loch Ness Monster, the Biggs series ends with the Scottish myth that embodies the acceptable limits of fantasy in white South Africa. The monster at Mount Ayliff has been accorded official status because its witnesses are voters whose representative is in Parliament. The possibility that the Honorable MEC for Land and Agriculture might also believe in its existence is made acceptable by association because it is conceivable to white readership that a Paliaméntarian - and a journalist - might credibly believe in the Loch Ness Monster.

Journalistic anarchy is vanquished. Political order, rationality and a high-culture epistemology are here restored, in Proppian formality, along with the self-respect of news editors.

In a pot-hole in the river of news, *Gqoloma* still lies, waiting for another journalist, another day.

# Conclusions

*'... find out who and what is not inferno;  
make them endure, and give them space'*

*-- Italo Calvino, Invisible Cities (1986)*

This study of cultural power and change demonstrates that media is a field of cultural production in which journalists have the power to imagine new ways of seeing and responding to society; to resist, to challenge and to change media strategies that mask and reproduce social injustices. As such it is a study that explores borderlands in the media profession, and in cross-disciplinary research. Methodologically, it combines ethnographic research methods with textual analysis. It focuses on journalists who are by definition innovators, on the margins of their own profession. And it draws attention to regions of South Africa that are not readily considered central to national identity or political economy.

I began with the observation that the cultural politics of journalism has been excluded from local debates about the media: a debate framed by a narrow political economism and constrained by polemic. I argued that there was a need to conceptualise news as an arena in which social meaning and identities are sustained, thus making the cultural politics of the industry a focus rather than attempting to speculate on its motives and political intentions. The locus of the cultural power of media, I have suggested, is in the use of narrative as a form of communication, and in its reliance on a realist approach to the narratives of subjects. I believe that the study demonstrates several aspects of narrative that are a useful and important contribution to the debates about the articulation of media and conflicts, such as race.

Each chapter demonstrates particular aspects of a thesis that news narrative is a form of communication that takes shape and structure and makes connections between elements from cultural matrices; further, that news-gathering practices are embedded in a 'common sense' of the moment that is radically shaped by prevailing currents of power.

Chapter one, 'The Big Debate', sets out the idea that news is imbricated in the cultural matrices of narrative and identity. Arguing that a narrow political economism produces a school of red herrings about the nature of the media, the chapter draws from a range of scholarship on narrative, and delineates an argument in which identity is a narrative construction; experience is radically shaped by prior received narratives; and narrative is in no way immanent in reality, but is a cultural process of making meaning.

I suggest that an understanding of the nature of narrative enables a deeper understanding of the articulation of media and society. Narratives shape notions of the nation and the subject, I argue; Pierre Bourdieu's recent work on the media (1998) suggests that a free media is not guaranteed by the absence of censorship, but by the willingness of journalists and editors to publish stories that do not accord with existing narrative formulae. Thus, the will-to-narrate need not be cast as a source of oppression. I argue that the human need to construct coherence via narratives constitutes agency where actors (journalists; readers) sense a dissonance between the discursive consciousness expounded by news, and a practical consciousness of the conditions and processes that shape everyday life.

The second chapter, 'Pangas and propaganda', describes news narratives that were generated by a journalist who worked secretly for the apartheid state. His news stories sought to explain the apparently 'senseless' violence that was being fostered by agents of the outgoing regime in August 1990: a critical moment in negotiations about the shape of the democratic South Africa. The material demonstrates that narrative elements (such as the characterisation of 'Zulu' and 'Xhosa' as homogeneous opponents) mirror a social landscape in which a narrative device - in this case a white authority - becomes necessary to mediate the opposed categories. While it is not possible, given the intervening years, to demonstrate quantitatively the extent to which 'reality effects had effects in reality' in August 1990, this study is significant because it appears that the outgoing regime specifically chose to work at ground level, sowing chaos, and at the interpretive level, reviving a narrative in which Africans cause anarchy and require the constraining influence of the 'civilised' of European descent.

The chapter also demonstrates some pitfalls of the rhetoric of authority in news; indeed, the material suggests that it is precisely the imperative, in the media industry, to be authoritative that enables propagandists to work so effectively. For in three weeks, the framing narrative explanation of the violence changed four times, each time without reference to the superceded narrative, and without attempting to accommodate previous explanations in the

narrative favoured for the day. Authoritative rhetoric in news requires amnesia on the part of audiences. The point is made by Bourdieu (1998), and is amply demonstrated in this study.

At length, the crisis of 'senseless violence' was resolved by the invention of a narrative category called the Third Force, which I suggest was a 'fabulous' resolution in the sense that it created a mythical creature that enabled all parties to project blame on their political foe. In the public space, then, an apparently coherent narrative was able to flourish, that purported to explain the violence, allowing journalists to switch explanation without switching master-narrative. The need for explanatory narrative in the public sphere was resolved; journalists saved face; politics was left to politicians; and the Third Force entered into the narrative of the New South Africa: a cosmological entity that continues to be used from time to time by various players. None of this makes inconsequential the subsequent revelations that a secret police unit instigated the violence; my point is that a national myth came into being that had and continues to have specific social uses and effects that are quite separate from the activities of its primary referent.

In chapter three I develop the theme of the functions of narratives of violence, exploring the gradual reduction of narratives of the war in KwaZulu-Natal to equations and body-counts. A form of communication about conflict that assumes a non-involved readership, these narratives assume a ternary structure that establishes the reader as a non-involved subject; a 'civilising spectator on anarchy'. The narrative structure was much resented, I contend, by working journalists in the 1990s, yet such is the power of language and narrative that it proved extremely difficult to destabilise and replace. An exploration of a vigorous effort in the *Natal Witness* newsroom to generate new ways of reporting conflict in the region bore very little fruit, and the relative failure highlights the extent to which practices - within and without the newsroom - shape narrative products. Of all these practices, two stand out as key. First: familiarity. Conflicts in the region were so easy to reduce to equations that it became extraordinarily difficult to communicate them in any terms other than the established set of categories and consequences. A second and related vital issue is that subjects whom journalists interview tend to reproduce the discursive consciousness of the moment, because, to use Allen Feldman's words, 'social actors inhabit their performances as narrative continua and as units within overarching stories of historical magnitude' (1991:15). Once a dominant narrative has achieved a level of general acceptability, people, as social actors, tend to frame and situate their experience within an overarching story.

This material sets out some of the conundrums facing journalists whose stock in trade is narratives of conflict. Narrative is not immanent in reality - yet metanarratives frequently set into play a constellation of events that, because they are interpreted in a particular way, set up patterns of consequences. And although narrative has little in common with reality - being very often an adventure in language and morality - people make sense of self and experience in narrative units, thus communicating narrative units to journalists. It takes a new set of political conditions, and / or the courage to question the apparent accord between real life and discursive structures, before new narratives of events will begin to appear in news media. I believe the ethnographic material demonstrates that there are such journalists, and that a changing political landscape offers optimum conditions for the rethinking of given explanations that appear to contain so much common sense.

The fourth chapter develops the theme of journalistic agency. I focus on the work of one professional dissident, Khaba Mkhize. His copy files indicate a range of alternative narrative strategies; moreover, the written products are based on alternative news gathering practices. Clearly a creative thinker, Mkhize's style of work and storytelling is closest to that of the bumbling jester who collapses the accepted categories of thought, and focuses attention on the absurdities of power. His innovations are sourced in a will to wrestle with the contradictions between practical experience and dominant narratives; a dynamic that is exemplified in his favourite saying: 'what we see blocks our sight'. Behind the trickster/jester, however, is a resolve to promote equity that is virtually unstoppable, coupled with a determination to do journalism in a way that involves, rather than expels, the public. I believe the value of his work in his current position as General Manager of the SABC in KwaZulu-Natal has yet to be grasped. The relative calm, post-1996, has afforded him the opportunity to turn attention to issues other than violence, such as road safety, Aids prevention, entrepreneurs in development, and celebrating fifty years of a relative truce between Indians and Zulus in the region, after the Indian-Zulu riots of 1949.

'The course of true narrative never did run smooth' continues the theme of the articulation of narrative structures and formations of conflict, in which I demonstrate that journalists' delight in the adventure of conspiracy narrative, empowered the powerful. By failing to distinguish between events and narratives of them, journalists accorded the power of truth to a town council that had laundered their justifications for racial exclusivity. In the course of reporting the apparent crisis - which I contend was never a crisis but was only

narrated as one - journalists became cohorts of the council. The material suggests that this was not a wilful compliance, but one that was generated by practices that catered to those with access to telecommunications, and by the newsroom-generated desire for thrilling narratives of conspiracy and intrigue.

The sixth chapter focuses exclusively on journalists whose manner of interacting with people in the field demonstrated an ethic of participation, rather than spectatorship. This chapter does not focus on narrative because it demonstrates that to some journalists, the narrative product is not the sum of their work. Donna Hornby's innovation - to live in a rural village for a month - demonstrates the intensity of her felt need to develop a practice that could access a level of reality that journalism was not yet able to narrate. Khaba Mkhize's intervention at the supermarket demonstrates the intensity of his belief that the function of news media is to promote justice and social equity, to the point when achieving that goal may require that no story is published. On this issue, many journalists would feel that he crosses a critical line: the line of free speech. His counter: that responsibility and ethics are the framing guidelines of free speech, not the reverse (see Mkhize 1993:2). The debate is not resolved, and requires further research and analysis, as it touches the ethical nerve of the news media.

'Knots in the tokoloshe tale' seeks to bring to a close my observations of the problems in the approach of the news industry to narrative. Comedy with serious implications, news reports of tokoloshes and other mythical creatures highlight the inability of most journalists to work within a multicultural universe. The material suggests that journalists need to learn to deal with narrative as a cultural product rather than verbalised reality the structure of which is somehow immanent in the course of events. Working with contemporary anthropological theory and narratology, I have suggested that such narratives communicate social tensions, and frequently reconcile or mediate cognitive structures that appear unbridgeable. Folklore narratives are part of the social process of making meaning; in this sense they are of the same value as any other narrative produced by participants in events. I return to Feldman's comments cited in chapter 1:

*'Narrativity is the condition for the identification of events, agents and mediating sequence. Event, agency and narration form [what Lyotard calls] a 'narrative bloc' defined as the achronic engenderment of narrative, agency (narration), and event. Narrative blocs are plastic organisations involving language, material artefacts and relations. The narrative bloc of violence puts into play a constellation of events, and discourses about events, as an Event' (Feldman, 1991:13).*

There is a critical need for debates about the media to move beyond the tired critique of objectivity, and the inadequate critiques of political economism. An understanding of narrative and practice as social and cultural processes will begin to end the mudslinging about racism in newsrooms, and enable the news industry to generate a product that is not founded on an uneasy mix of old dispensation and new.

It is vital, in media of the new South Africa, for journalists to be cognizant of the lineage of metanarratives about nation and regions, and to be able to write against established discursive structures. Taken together, the material in this study demonstrates the dynamic articulation of narrative and practice with ideological structures, and illustrates how vital it is for journalists to be conversant with the notion that narrative is a process of making identity and events meaningful, rather than signifying reality itself. By recognising that humans narrate in order to make sense of experience, I believe journalists would be far better equipped to write about a multicultural society, in a conflictive universe. Realism, I believe, is necessary ethic, but possible only to the extent that journalists are able to work with the narrative blocs within which humans structur  self and experience.

*January 1999*

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