

Essay

The Press as Witness

On June 17, Matthew Boyi Manyana, an African reporter for the *Rand Daily Mail*,¹ was assigned with Zwelake Sisulu to cover events in Soweto, especially at the Orlando Police Station there. Manyana was driving along the Soweto highway about 15 kilometers from town when they were stopped by a group of people who, he later inferred, were "thugs" accosting motorists returning home:

Well, at the time it was predominantly African people, motorists who had formed this convoy way back home and these various groups carried all sorts of weapons ranging from knives, broken bottles as well as stones. As we were moving along we were forced to make this Black Power sign as a passport to safety, I will put it that way, because those who failed to do as ordered would be stoned, that goes for the vehicles as well.

[...]

That was about 6 o'clock.

[...]

From time to time motorists would be stopped during which money would be demanded by these various gangs. I happened to be the victim of this robbery when two youths walked up to our car, while others stood in front of it. One placed this knife against my chest while the other thrust it against my throat. While I was busy going through my wallet which contained R1 notes as well as R5 notes, trying to find out if I could come across some silver, the one man nearest to me snatched the wallet. I saw other people being robbed at the time and as we moved along the whole experience became more frightening because various groups would come to us, with what they called donations for the kids who had died.

[...]

Well, it went on like that and sometimes travelling along was virtually impossible for some people lay in the middle of the street to make sure that motorists were unable to drive on.¹

Questioned as to whether or not these "kids who were demanding the money, were scholars," Manyana answered, "obviously not ... judging by the manner in which they were dressed. And I would like to point out it was not only them alone, there were grownups as well. The ages could range between 21 to 26."

Were it not for Manyana's chilling description of the treatment of black youths at the hands of the police that same night (See: Chapter 2 "The Aftermath,") one would likely assume that he might be trying, in his testimony, to discredit the uprising. But his account sounded painfully true. "I cannot do the thinking for the

policemen," he said after recounting how four to six policemen, wielding batons, assaulted the children they had arrested on this cold winter night and forced them to jump up and down. But the policemen who "seemed to carry out this operation severely, these were the Black cops."²

Mervin Rees, chief crime reporter for the *Rand Daily Mail*, was one of the white 5 journalists who, together with another reporter, obtained permits to enter the area and arrived there between 11 and 12 P.M. on June 16, 1976. Rees did not know his way around the townships and, directed by Mr Emdan, drove toward some smoke that they saw coming from a hill. He was questioned by Advocate van Graan.

[We] got to an area within a block of where the students were moving down the hill and at that point these Black people who stopped us, urged us not to go ahead and said we would be killed, so we then turned to the left and doubled back and found ourselves coming across that bridge towards the police. So that was the furthest in fact that I got.³

He explained to the Commission that "we did in fact have African reporters who were present at the scene on the other side" but that white reporters "could get no closer to the school" or any other scene of the uprising. It was the job of the white reporters to find out from the police what was happening:

These policemen were surprised to see us coming from that direction and said we would have been killed had we gone any further. The police told me that they had withdrawn from the area where apparently some people had been killed, two men, one of them a White man and apparently these bodies were still in a vehicle and they said the police had been attacked at the scene and had been forced to pull back because they did not have enough men.

[...]

I later went to the Orlando Police Station and spent the next few hours interviewing senior police officers at the police station as to what had happened and they told me—General Kotze told me that the police—in fact I think it was Brigadier Le Roux initially and he was later joined by General Kotze, told me that police had been stoned and that Whites had been killed and that there were approximately 20,000 students involved in this demonstration.⁴

Because things were happening everywhere at once, it was often difficult for one person to get a complete picture. This led to discrepancies in the accounts that first the state's advocate and later Judge Cillié sought to exploit. Rees himself had no chance to speak with anyone who had actually taken part in the march, and he found it impossible to get any details as to what had actually precipitated the clash between the police and the students. In his own account he had to rely heavily on information provided by others:

The people I was speaking to, was for example one Black policeman who did not want to give me his name, who was in plain clothes and he was apparently off duty and he gave me a brief summary *as he understood it*, of the fact that there had been a demonstration and that there had been stones thrown, there had been shots fired and apparently two people had been killed, one of them a White man and apparently members of the West Rand Bantu Board and they had been travelling in a vehicle when they were apparently attacked. That was the sort of impression that I got.[Emphasis added.]⁵

Rees stayed in Soweto until the following evening, basing himself in a house opposite the police station where there was a telephone enabling him to phone his reports through to his newspaper:

During all of this time we had African reporters and photographers moving about the townships and we hoped obviously that they would be able to present that side of it. I returned to the office on Thursday night and wrote an article highlighting what I understood to be the background and problems of the police in dealing with the riots.⁶

Were it not for the slightly pernicious aspect of the following escapade and the frightening and disturbing context in which it took place, attempts by Leonora Steyn, a crime reporter for *Die Beeld*, to get the story and overcome the boundaries imposed on her by her color would have been funny. Steyn had been reporting on the brewing unrest at Soweto schools for quite a while.⁷ On the afternoon of June 16, at about 2 P.M., she left for Orlando Police Station in Soweto, in the company of David Sithole, a black messenger who also worked at the newspaper.

Ek het my gesig swart gesmeer
en ek het 'n groot donkerbril op
my gesig gesit omdat ek ligte
oë het. Ek het 'n Afro (soos
hulle dit noem) pruik op my kop
gesit en my hande ook
gedeeltelik swart gesmeer en
die res van my liggaam wat nie
swart gesmeer was nie, bedek.

I smeared my face black and I
put a large pair of dark glasses
on my face because I have light
eyes. I put an Afro (as they call
it) wig on my head and also
partly smeared my hands black
and covered the rest of my
body that is not black.⁸

At Phefeni school she encountered a large group of several hundred "Swartes" (Blacks) "milling around aimlessly and screaming." Ironically, her disguise was incomplete because, like so many white South Africans, she could not understand what they were saying "*aangesien ek nie 'n Bantoe taal kan praat nie*," (since I cannot speak a Bantu language). She was therefore unsuccessful in getting her story from the participants, as her inability to speak the language would have given her away. The young people, "*jeugdiges tussen die ouderdom van 18 en 28*" (youth between the ages of 18 and 28), congregated on the street corners and pelted cars and buildings with stones.⁹ Hers was an account that, in its description of delinquency and drunkenness, provided the evidence that Cillié would have been looking for to discount the student movement. 15

Die groot vragmotor van die Wesrandse Bantoe-Administrasieraad is voorgekeer. Dit was 'n Swart man wat die vragmotor bestuur het en hy het gestop toe hy die groot groep kinders—jeugdige—voor hom in die pad sien en hulle het hom by die deur uitgeruk en daar was agter op die vragmotor was daar Bantoe bier en hulle het die Bantoe bier afgehaal en dit gedrink en die vragmotor aan die brand gesteek.

The large truck of the West Rand Bantu Administration was stopped. It was a Black man who drove the truck and he stopped when he saw the large group of children—youths—in front of him in the street and they dragged him out of the door and there was Bantu beer in the back of the truck and they got the Bantu beer down and drank it and set the truck alight.¹⁰

She also testified that Africans were turning against their own.

Ek onthou spesifiek van een groot vragmotor wat vol Swart mense—dit was 'n oop bak gewees en dit was vol Swart mense agterop en hulle is verskriklik gegooi, die Swart mense het almal platgeval op die agterkant van die bak en die ruite van daardie vragmotor is ook stukkend gegooi.

I specifically remember one large lorry that was full of Black people—it was an open pickup and it was full of blacks in the back and they were terribly pelted, the black people all fell flat on the back of the pickup and the windows of that truck were also shattered.¹¹

Her testimony could not have been more perfect for the purpose of showing the methods by which the people spread the word and incited newcomers to partake in unlawful behavior, tying Black Power irreversibly to looting and liquor, a connection that the authorities would later ruthlessly exploit to discredit the goals and targets of the student movement.

Hulle het die drankwinkel se vensters stukkend gegooi en ek het gesien dat hulle met kaste drank by die deure uitkom. Baie van hulle het met drank bottels in hulle hande gehardloop en 'n groot groep, dit was meestal ouer mense wat van die drank by hulle gehad het, het op die straathoeke, dit is 'n kruising waar daar omtrent 8 hoeke is, het hulle gaan sit en die motors wat verby gekom het (dit is 'n dubbelpad) het hulle gestop en dan die drank vir die insittendes gegee en dan met die insittendes gepraat en nadat hulle met die insittendes gepraat het, het die insittendes die Swart Mag teken gegee en verder gery. Maar ek wil net op hierdie stadium sê dat dit vir Nee, daar was baie klein

They shattered the windows of the bottle [liquor] store and I saw that they came out of the door with cases of liquor. Many of them ran with liquor bottles in their hands and a large group, it was mostly older people who had the liquor with them, went to sit on the street corners, this was a crossing where there are about 8 corners, they went to sit and the cars that came by (this is a dual-lane road) they stopped and then gave the liquor to those inside and then spoke to those inside the car and after they talked to the passengers, the passengers gave the Black Power sign and rode on. But I want to say at this point that it was very apparent to me that

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my baie duidelik was dat meeste van die mense wat in daardie motors aangekom het, het nie geweet wat aan die gang is nie, hulle het baie nuuskierig gelyk. Totdat daar met hulle gepraat is en die drank aan hulle oorhandig is, was hulle redelik ongelig, kan ek sê, maar daarna het hulle die Swart Mag teken gegee. Dit het gelyk asof hulle ingelig word van wat aan die gang was.

most of the people that arrived in those cars did not know what was happening, they looked very curious. Until they were spoken to and the alcohol was given to them, they were relatively uninformed, I can say, but after that they gave the Black Power sign. It looked as if they were being informed of what was going on.

kindertjies wat ook met drank bottels rondgehoop het. Ek sou sê omtrent 5-6 jaar.

No, there were many small children that also walked around with liquor bottles. I should say about 5 to 6 years old.

[...]

[...]

hulle was definitief onder die invloed en die kinders het in die strate, in daardie besige strate rond geloop en niemand het eintlik aandag aan hulle gegee nie.

[T]hey were definitely under the influence and the children ran around in the streets, in those busy streets and no one really paid them any attention.¹²

Her testimony was not a complete indictment of the youth though, and she attempted to explain the reasons why they had turned both on the West Rand Bantu Administration (WRAB) and on the liquor outlets in the township. Although she herself could not speak to the people, she asked them through David Sithole why they were so angry, why they were setting everything on fire, and why they were attacking the WRAB buildings and the liquor stores. She assumed that the anger was no longer simply about the schools. They told her they were very discontented with the West Rand Administration Board (WRAB). Since the Board had taken over the administration of the township, conditions had deteriorated. Roads had gotten worse and refuse removal had stopped because workers had gone on strike when the Board reduced their wages from R22 to R16 per week. In addition to this general criticism, a rumor making the rounds was that certain Board members had reached an agreement with liquor-store owners in the (white) city to keep prices high, so that black people would be forced to buy their alcohol from the WRAB's liquor outlets. For this reason, the liquor stores of the Board had been looted. (See essay: Beer Halls and Bottle Stores.)

Steyn returned to Soweto a second time, on August 4, 1976, again in blackface. This time she was not so lucky. Her car was stoned and her windshield shattered, although she was waved on by black students who did not recognize her for a white person. When she subsequently posted herself at a roadblock the authorities had set up to stop buses from entering the township, she had opportunity to observe the West Rand Administration officials at their worst and

most confrontational.

Ek het die dag by die pad-blokkade gesien dat van die Wesrand Bantoeadministrasieraad se mense het baie onvriendelik opgetree teenoor die Swart mense wat daar verby geloop het. Daar het brood lorries en lorries wat kos daar afgelaai het en daar verkoop het, gestaan en van die Swart mense wat daar beweeg het, is deur die Bantoe-Administrasieraad as "kaffers" aangespreek en ek het ook gesien dat twee van hulle in 'n vragmotor, 'n klein bakkie geklim het en hulle wou by die ingang van die stasie in ry.

[...]

Daar was Swart mense wat voor die hek verby geloop het en in plaas van om net 'n bietjie te wag vir die Swart mense wat nie vinnig kon geepad nie, het hulle het [net?] vinniger gery en die Swart mense moes verskriklik uit mekaar uit spring om voor die bakkie weg te kom.

That day at the road block I saw that some of the West Rand Bantu Administration people conducted themselves in a very unfriendly manner toward the black people that walked past there. There were bread trucks and trucks offloading food standing there and selling it there, and some of the black people that moved there were addressed by the Bantu Administration as "kaffirs"¹³ and I also saw that two of them climbed into a truck, a small pickup, and they wanted to drive into the entrance of the station.

[...]

There were black people walking by the gate and instead of waiting a little bit for the black people who could not get out of the way fast, they just drove faster and the black people had to disperse terribly to get out of the way of the pickup.¹⁴

Notes:

Note 1: Matthew Boyi Manyana, testimony, SAB K345, vol. 140, file 2/3, part 3, Commission Testimony vol. 14.

Note 2: Ibid.

Note 3: Kenneth Rees, testimony, SAB K345, vol. 140, file 2/3, part 3, Commission Testimony vol. 14.

Note 4: Ibid.

Note 5: Ibid.

Note 6: Ibid.

Note 7: *Die Beeld*, "Moenie Afrikaans aan Swart skole opdwing nie" [Don't impose Afrikaans on Black schools], "Afvaardiging dalk na Minister—Afrikaans beveg in Soweto" [Delegation possibly (to see) minister—Afrikaans fought in Soweto), and "Kinders sal geskors word" (Children will be suspended), May 1976.

Note 8: Leonora Steyn, testimony, SAB K345, vol. 140, file 2/3, part 3, Commission Testimony vol. 14.

Note 9: Ibid.

Note 10: Ibid.

Note 11: Ibid.

Note 12: Ibid.

Note 13: *Kaffirs*: It is an extremely derogatory term, similar to *nigger* in American English.

Note 14: Leonora Steyn, testimony, SAB K345, vol. 140, file 2/3, part 3, Commission Testimony vol. 14.