

FEATURES this week

Apartheid: Will it Really End?

by Sisonke Msimang

I was reminded this week, of a poem by Mongane Serote called *A Dry White Season*:

it is a dry white season
dark leaves don't last, their brief lives'
dry out
and with a broken heart they dive down
gently headed
for the earth
not even bleeding.
It is a dry white season brother,
only the trees know the pain as they still
stand
erect
dry like steel, their branches dry like wire
Indeed it is a dry white season
but seasons come to pass.

I have always loved this poem, and it once expressed the way I felt about South-Africa. Since I arrived in America and started going to Mac, however, I have had some serious doubts about whether the dry white season--apartheid--will truly ever pass.

I have grown up knowing I will one day go home to help in "the struggle." Apartheid has always been the enemy, but I never saw it as unconquerable. In every discussion, argument, denunciation; in every conversation I ever heard amongst the proud Africans I was surrounded by, there was always hope. There was always a sense that; "things may be tough now, and we may have to fight to get independence, but eventually things will be alright." And I believed it.

Parallels between South-Africa and America have been made before, but in reference to the US, the past tense is always employed. Before the civil rights movement the US was like South-Africa. Was? The sad truth is that it still is very much like South-Africa.

If you think segregation is over, drive through St. Paul or Minneapolis and look at who lives where. Or, a little closer to home, look in Kagin at lunch one day. Most of the African and African-American students sit at various tables in one corner of the room. After thirty years people are still not communicating with each other enough to truly feel comfortable sitting together to have lunch.

For the past few years black South-Africa has been dying. We have been shot, beaten, and maimed, we have become drug addicts and alcoholics, thieves and murderers. We have become what we have been told we are for the last three hundred years.

Steve Biko said something to the effect that if you are black in South-Africa, "smart or dumb you are born into apartheid, and smart or dumb, you die in it." We die at the hands of apartheid every single day.

Some would argue that we are beating and maiming and killing each other, that we are doing this to ourselves. They would point to the supposed "tribal warfare" that has pitted "black against black." At a first glance I might be tempted to agree with them. But South-Africa deserves more than a wandering, apathetic glance. For a while it seemed that international opinion was in our favor. People were chatting over dinner about atrocities of apartheid and concerts were being held for political prisoners. Then something else came into vogue. Some new cause to lament over for a while; something else to ease guilt from, while South-Africa was forgotten.

So we turned on ourselves. You see we are dying because too many of us have begun to believe that our lives are worthless. Too many of us have internalized the hatred. Too many of us see the futility of fighting a system deliberately designed to keep us down.

They killed us in 1838, they sacrificed us for the World Wars, shot us in 1976, and gunned us down in front of cameras in 1985. They jailed Nelson Mandela and Walter Sisulu and killed Steve Biko. The number of bruised black bodies in mortuaries all over the country is ample evidence of our impotence and their omniscience.

And in America we are dying too. As steadily and as brutally as in South-Africa. African-Americans are as addicted and as "dangerous" as black South-Africans. The community is imploding. Crime, drug addiction, murder. It's the same story and it is made all the more difficult to deal with because America promised equality. It promised African-Americans basic human rights, and it lied.

If the United States of America, claimant to all that is Just and Good in this world can lie, and get away with it, what is to stop South-Africa from doing the same thing? The sixties did not create a new America and the nineties

will not create a new South-Africa. Not, at least, without a veritable revolution in thinking in both countries.

That is one of the most important issues at stake here. The way people think. You can abolish and create all the laws you want but the way people think is going to determine how much really changes. And the people to worry about are not necessarily the rampant racists.

The people to watch out for are the "liberals," because they will condemn and denounce others as frequently as possible, but only in the shelter of their own homes. They will disagree morally but keep their mouths shut. And if, perchance, they happen to utter a few words, they will be very faint.

In South-Africa white liberals supposedly hated the system, but they didn't hate themselves. Perhaps they didn't make a connection between themselves and the system. This is particularly ironic.

A white South-African poet received a literary award at a ceremony attended by five hundred Boers. In accepting the award the poet "said he could not breathe in South-Africa for the stench of hypertrophy. The word "Afrikaner," he added, had become synonymous with spiritual backwardness, ethical decay,

cruelty, dehumanization, armed baboon bandits, and the stigma of brutal violence. The Afrikaner establishment rewarded this tirade with ...standing ovation."

Instead of being ashamed and bowing their heads in silence, they clapped, overjoyed at this attack on the system. They completely denied their complicity in the system. They didn't even see it.

In my opinion, the equivalent of these Afrikaner liberals in America is the PC college crowd. These students readily pounce upon anything that is *white-male-middle-class-American* with a zeal that is almost violent. They are the first to pipe up in class and list the crimes of this particular segment of America. And often they are extremely correct. It seems however that they have forsaken political consciousness for correctness. In other words, they simply do not think about the real implications of what they are saying.

Quite a few students seem to be content to condemn and not really digest what they are saying. It's often done in a manner that is far too flip-pant. A little introspection is definitely needed to question how much a part of the system they really are. Without a serious look at themselves in relation to the system,

some Mac students will be as guilty of perpetuation as Boer liberals are responsible for the perpetuation of apartheid.

Living in this country has made me more cynical and bitter about South-Africa; I'm beginning to doubt the poem. I'm beginning to wonder if this season will truly pass, or if racism and hatred are inherently human.

I am slowly learning to lose faith in what I have been raised to believe and it's a sad and painful experience. I'm afraid I will become mean and hateful and that's the last thing I want but if the truth is ugly enough I suppose that is what you become.

So I'm reading and thinking and trying to find places, stories people who symbolize hope, both here and at home. On this campus I think we really need to think about change. How responsible we are and how meaningful we want it to be.

Apartheid is not over, and will take a long time to die. Likewise the racism that was written into the laws of this country is not over and will not be over for a long time UNLESS people start examining their own attitudes instead of condemning those of others.

All quotations from Rian Malan's book *My Traitor's Heart*, 1990, Longman Press

Lindiwe Mabuza

Washington D.C. Representative of the
African National Congress

will speak on

"Apartheid in the 1990s"

Tonight

7:30 p.m.

at

Weyerhaeuser Chapel

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