

# Black South African finds U.S. visit 'A Revelation'

By Khaba Mkhize

**When I landed at J.F. Kennedy Airport in New York, I expected to explore the vast continent of North America but I should have known better. The United States of America explored me.**

I found the States extraordinarily huge. Everything there was big. States, cities, cars, educational institutions, people, meals, hamburgers; you name it, it's big. Life there is also damn fast. As an ad in a New York subway train puts it: "If you're not fast, you can't make it here."

Once through immigration I met two of my fellow guests who were to tour the United States with me. One was a writer and lecturer at the University of Malawi. The other, astute and bubbling with self-confidence, came from Kenya, he was a novelist who owns a publishing house. The third companion arrived the following day from Nigeria. He was a novelist and codirector of a Nigerian television station.

## Felt overawed

As a South African black, I felt overawed in their presence. To understand this kind of feeling you must let me explain. The Malawian had spent something like five years studying in Britain. The Nigerian novelist has an Austrian wife, and the Kenyan publisher was married to a German woman. These men had had exposure to an open society that I had never seen. As we crisscrossed the United States together I discovered how ingrained race discrimination was within me. I tried hard to shed this state of mind; at times I succeeded, but, oh, what a struggle it was.

There were instances when we were checking in and out of hotels and airports, placing orders in restaurants and in pubs. Each time my colleagues addressed people in charge there I felt cramps in my inside. I instinctively felt they were ignorant of their "places."

## Too arrogant

The Kenyan was the first to set the alarm buzzing in my head. Leaning over a bar counter he called to a white barmain: "Love, what is your special drink in the way of vodkas." We have an expression in my language when one is confronted by an embarrassing situation: "I was desperately in need of a hold to hide myself in." This was too arrogant of him, I thought to myself silently.

To my greatest surprise, the lady answered in a friendly fashion, throwing a lot of "honeys" around. Gradually

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I relaxed. But the habit of calling white women familiar names never ceased to worry me. I thought all the time that my colleagues would land in trouble.

Another experience which shook me out of my South African cocoon (which promptly reminded me of Prime Minister Pieter Botha's advice to South Africans to get out of their tunnel and see the world around them) was in Los Angeles. In my mind I had known I might see white men with picks and shovels digging roads. But I tell you, when I actually came face to face with the spectacle for the first time I had a feeling that one of our sacred laws had been broken. Later, this was transformed into a revelation — a white man can dig roads.

## Indoctrination

Call it a sick feeling of years of indoctrination about my "inferiority" and the South African norm that all menial jobs are for blacks, but what I will say is what I felt. My first thought was that I ought to take that pick from that sweating baas and help him out because it wasn't his rightful job. I couldn't reconcile a white man digging a road in broad daylight.

Then there was the freedom of speech. I was startled to hear somebody on television accuse President Carter of talking "rubbish," and then to watch a demonstration which started peacefully and ended that way because the police's role was that of protector of a black group against counter-demonstrators. The demonstrators were protesting against "job discrimination" in Jacksonville, Florida.

Again in Memphis, Tennessee, I saw blacks and whites, adults and children protesting against the "arms race." The police were there following them quietly to see that nothing happened to them.

## Flexible muscle

Television was also a revelation.

Although irritating for its commercialism and the bullet-stories which are its staple diet, I was still able to feel its muscle of flexibility and its freedom to give the viewers what it was all about in the political climate affecting U.S. citizens.

There was a long program highlighting the black's struggle for human and civil rights during the turbulent 60s. Documentaries were shown where the most critical black leaders expressed their views. Martin Luther King was there saying his piece, Stokely Carmichael spat his fire, Elijah Muhammed reverberated audiences with sermons on black excelsiveness, Malcolm X was raising his black power fist to punctuate his blazing speeches about white America's avarice.

Remember, this is TV I'm talking about; lest you forget. There were also vivid films depicting police brutality during the riots — blood-curdling scenes of violence by the lawmen — and the cameras did not miss the hatred-in-motion by that terrorist movement of chronic racists, the notorious Klu Klux Klan.

In Chicago there is a black-owned radio station which operates a highly political phone-in program that is never edited or censored by anybody. Our group of writers was asked to appear. Previously I had done some interviews, but I pulled out of the Chicago one.

## Volatile public

The Malawian writer did the same. Reasons obvious. We could not stand up to that amount of exposure from a cross-section of the sometimes volatile public. We thought about the repercussions back home should our tongues slip. For me it was the undoubted fact I know about my country. South Africa has a long ear. The motto is "Don't say anything overseas which you cannot repeat at home!"

There is one thing which the Yanks hold sacred. That is their flag, the Stars and Stripes. Everybody rallies behind it, be they black or white.

In San Antonio, Texas, I saw black people waving miniature flags in merri-ment. The question arose in my mind: Would I wave my country's flag in a township street at home and stay in one piece? If so, then I would certainly afterwards wear a couple of names won for the episode. "Sellout!" "Mpimpi" ("Collaborator") and the like. 