

## ARTICLES

# ETHNOGRAPHY'S BLIND SPOT

## Intimacy, Violence, and Fieldwork Relations in South Africa

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**Abstract:** It is conventional to point out the disintegrative and dysfunctional effects of violence and relegate it to processes outside the social realm. Yet this study argues that a reflexive approach to ethnography can reveal the integrative potential of violence. It examines the theoretical importance of the ethnographer's anxieties about (a) violence, (b) the precarious dependencies during fieldwork in a violent setting, and (c) concerns about representing violence in academic work. Such a reflexive approach shows why these anxieties can both conceal and reveal the sociality of violence. The study draws on personal fieldwork experiences to show how violence became central to the relationships the author developed with his assistants during research in South Africa.

**Keywords:** Cape Town, ethnography, fieldwork, intimacy, reflexivity, research assistants, South Africa, violence

Violence is a tremendous problem in South Africa, not least in the townships of Cape Town where I carried out most of my ethnographic research. Because of the threat of violence, I depended heavily on my research assistants, Joseph, Edith, and Mandisa.<sup>1</sup> Over a period of nearly 20 years, they translated Xhosa for me, took care of my safety, and helped me understand the complex and volatile relations in the townships. Not only were they fundamental to my safety, a responsibility they took very seriously, but I could not have wished for better guidance and help.

During our intensive collaboration, it became painfully clear that Joseph, Edith, and Mandisa were victims of the everyday violence of poverty, racism, and economic marginality. Violence quickly became a horrific yet pivotal aspect of the relationships that made up our ethnographic encounter. However, in retrospect I have come to realize that they were not only victims of violence. They



also showed signs suggesting that they could be violent, that they had friendly relations with extremely violent people, and that in some instances they also enjoyed violence, or at least enjoyed talking about it (see Bähre 2007: 51–84).

This article analyzes the relationships that I developed with my three research assistants in the hope of shedding light on the intricacies of ethnographic research on violence. I argue that the ethnographer's dependency on others, which is particularly strong when carrying out research in violent areas, influences the analysis of violence. It is worth exploring how these relations might obscure as well as reveal the sociality of violence. A reflexive approach to these relations will contribute to our methodological and theoretical awareness. My suggestion is that these fieldwork dependencies could lead us to argue that violence is caused by circumstances that are *outside* the personal and intimate relations that make up our fieldwork. Such dependencies might cause us to misinterpret violence that occurs within intimate relations and explain our attention to impersonal and abstract causes of violence that take place 'elsewhere', for example, when it is argued that violence is a result of neo-liberalism, (post-)colonialism, the state, or discourse. Theoretical interests in relatively impersonal explanations of violence might underrate how violence feels at home within sociality and might even contribute to it. This theoretical maneuver could be a result of the anxieties experienced by ethnographers when they are confronted with violence in personal relations. A reflexive examination of these anxieties and how they might lead us to downplay certain dimensions of violence can offer vital insights.

## **Situating Violence within Sociality**

By engaging with the work of Habermas and Durkheim, Das (1995) problematizes the position of pain in the analysis of society. Das points out that anthropologists have the tendency to see pain and suffering as an expression of something else; for example, one can examine pain as an expression of a wide range of inequalities, such as relations with the state or global capitalist markets. By rethinking ritual, Das suggests another approach. Pain in initiation rituals needs to be understood "not as a somatized form of social criticism but rather as the means by which society integrates its members into a single moral community" (ibid.: 178). Because pain can be communicated and shared with others, it can be central to the formation of moral communities. Das offers a very insightful perspective on the nexus of violence, economy, and sociality.

Mauss saw in the gift opportunities for a more humane economy, one based on mutuality and solidarity rather than driven by violence and exploitation. Mauss hoped to find an alternative to the suffering that he associated with a monetary economy by turning to gift economies, which he expected to revolve around solidarity and mutuality. But he found that these gift economies are not always harmonious and can actually be quite violent.<sup>2</sup> In the conclusion of his seminal *The Gift*, Mauss ([1922] 1954) offers a revealing case of the sociality of violence when discussing Thurnwald's work. It is worth quoting in full: "Buleau,

a chief, had invited Bobal, another chief, and his people to a feast which was probably to be the first of a long series ... By morning everyone was excited by the sleepless night of song and dance. On a remark made by Buleau one of Bobal's men killed him; and the troop of men massacred and pillaged and ran off with the women of the village. 'Buleau and Bobal were more friends than rivals' they said to Thurnwald. *We all have experiences of events like this*" (ibid.: 80; italics added). Mauss concluded that violence and sociality go hand in hand, even in economies that are based on gifts and reciprocity.

In contrast with Mauss, Sahlins's historical analysis of reciprocity seems to imply that violence is not at home within intimate relations. Sahlins (1972) argues that generalized reciprocity is based on trust, intimacy, and even self-sacrifice, as epitomized by the mother who breastfeeds her child. He implies that the intimate world of generalized reciprocity is not a space for competition or rivalry, let alone violence. The malicious aspects of human life are, according to Sahlins, central features of negative reciprocity, which takes place within more distant and fragile relations. Negative reciprocity integrates people in a wider world charged with distrust, selfishness, and violence. Yet if this were so, why is it possible for the intimate realm of the family to be pervaded with conflict and economic exploitation, particularly along the hierarchies created by age and gender? Ethnographies have recognized that intimate relations, including those between mothers and children, can be infused with distrust, conflict, and even violence.

One of the most controversial studies on conflicts within the intimate realm is Turnbull's (1972) ethnography on disloyalty among the Ik of Uganda (see also Heine 1985; Knight 1994). Turnbull's study does not suffer from the idealized reciprocity and solidarity found in Engels's concept of 'primitive communism', from Gluckman's (1955) 'peace in the feud' (see also Herzfeld 2005: 150), or from Sahlins's (1972) historical approach to reciprocity. Perhaps we must acknowledge that violence is very much at home within the intimate realm and that, as Herzfeld (2005: 132) argues, embarrassing and compromising situations reveal cultural intimacy, which is "the sharing of known and recognizable traits that not only define insiderhood but are also felt to be disapproved by powerful outsiders."

A dominant theoretical position in contemporary anthropology is to examine how violence destroys communities, mutualities, and sociality. Such a perspective carefully explores the moral and ideological foundations that legitimize particular forms of violence and reveals how violence in everyday life is connected to wider political economies. Insightful anthropological studies have revealed how neo-liberalism has marginalized people politically and economically, destroyed communal life, and shattered mutualities. But if we consider Das's perspective on the significance of pain in forming moral communities, we must question to what extent we should attribute violence and pain to outside forces.

When pain and violence are attributed to forces outside personal relations, and when violence and pain within personal relations are understood as a social criticism of the wider world, intimacy is implicitly preserved as a harmonious space. When studies state that violence originates outside the social, it becomes associated with impersonal and distant ideologies and powers.

## Anxiety in Ethnography

In order to recognize how violence can be at home within intimate relations and to understand how it can lead to the establishment of mutuality and sociality, it is crucial to reflect on the anxieties that are part of fieldwork. These anxieties are aroused when we are confronted with pain, suffering, and insecurity caused by violence. As ethnographers, we usually have little control over these anxieties that are part of fieldwork dependencies, although they are of tremendous importance to our personal well-being as well as to the research itself. Anxieties can also be related to our professional status, which is particularly precarious when representing violence in our writing, knowing “that violence is a different kind of representational object” (Donham 2006: 24).

Researchers experiencing anxieties can develop ‘blind spots’ in their research as a way of protection. In *From Anxiety to Method in the Behavioral Sciences*, Devereux (1967) argues that social sciences have developed professional defense mechanisms to help researchers cope with anxiety-arousing phenomena. These mechanisms include, among others, “omission, soft-pedaling, non-exploitation, misunderstanding, ambiguous description, overexploitation or rearrangement of certain parts of his material” (ibid.: 44; see also Robben 1996). Bourdieu (2003) makes similar arguments in his call for ‘participant objectivation’ (cf. Heilbron 1999).<sup>3</sup> Participant objectivation is a plea to critically examine how the researcher’s experiences, memories, and unconscious processes impede scientific objectivity. Based on his fieldwork experiences in Algeria and in his French hometown, Bourdieu (2003: 282; italics in original) makes an appeal for “the *objectivation of the subject of objectivation*, of the analyzing subject—in short, of the researcher herself.” The emotional disturbances of the researcher as well as the disturbances caused by the researcher’s presence among the people being studied are part of the process of transference and counter-transference, dynamics that are central to psychoanalytical processes (ibid.: 284–285; Devereux 1967: 6–7; see also Robben 1996).

The reflexive turn in both Devereux’s and Bourdieu’s work is that anxieties and disturbances are not merely obstacles. Anxieties can contribute to our analysis of social phenomena once we examine them thoroughly. Reflecting on these anxieties is particularly salient when violence is part of fieldwork. The communication of pain is difficult and emotionally disturbing. It is unsettling to see violence, to hear about the pain that violence causes, to deal with personal threats of violence, and to depend on others for safety. My encounters with violence have involved witnessing murder and assault; being uncomfortably nearby during shootings; having innumerable conversations on rape, assault, and murder; knowing that people I care about are not only victims but also perpetrators of violence; and occasionally receiving a disturbing, albeit not alarming, death threat. These are the ingredients of fieldwork that produce the tiring and insidious low-level anxieties that Green (1995) brought to our attention.

Studying and writing about violence inevitably lead to ethical and representational dilemmas, for instance, it could give the impression that the ethnographer embraces violence. Relying on violent interlocutors might compromise the

ethnographer's work, while some readers might interpret the ethnographic text as a distasteful "pornography of violence" (Bourgois 2004: 427).<sup>4</sup>

The premise of ethnography is to engage and identify with the people we study, yet we must also be aware that our academic careers are built on conveying their suffering. Hence, it becomes uncomfortable to present anything that could compromise the people to whom we owe so much and who, in so many ways, regard us as superior. Typically, the researcher has more social, economic, and cultural capital, as well as a sense of taste, lifestyle, and identity that embodies superiority, whether conscious or not. Our dedication to the people we study makes it particularly hard to reconcile accounts of abuse committed by those same people. Consequently, when analyzing violence, the researcher might be in danger of leaving embarrassments and compromising situations aside, despite knowing better. This is especially true when engagement is based on a shared embarrassment about the pivotal place occupied by violence in the social world being examined. Yet intimate relations with our interlocutors can actually depend on the recognition of this shocking fact (see Herzfeld 2005).

The ideal of anthropology is fairly liberal: in order to gain insight into people's social worlds, we are expected to talk to everyone. Anyone with research experience knows that the freedom to talk to everyone is far from realistic. At the same time, it is awkward to reveal the chaotic practices encountered in fieldwork, let alone the compromising situations that we find ourselves in, even though the serendipitous nature of fieldwork is generally acknowledged. Below I share some examples of how I initially underexplored violence in some of my own fieldwork and of how ethnographic encounters can create particular blind spots. At the same time, I explore what can be gained—methodologically as well as theoretically—when including these initial blind spots in the analysis.

## **A Militant Assistant?**

During my first fieldwork visit to Cape Town in 1995, I was interested in how civic associations that had played a pivotal role in the resistance against apartheid were affected by democratization. Joseph, who had recently returned from exile, assisted me in the research. I soon learned that he had left South Africa in 1960, after participating in a protest march. The protest had been organized by the Pan African Congress (PAC), one of the crucial political organizations in the resistance against apartheid. During more than 30 years of exile, Joseph lived in Botswana, the Soviet Union, and Kenya, and he had been stationed in a military training camp in the Libyan desert to teach combat techniques. Joseph returned to South Africa only in 1994 when the first democratic elections were held. Together with his two small children, he lived in the back of a small abandoned store. Joseph helped me set up meetings and made sure that I was able to conduct my research safely.

After his years in exile, Joseph's network consisted mainly of fellow PAC members. He complained that after the African National Congress won the first democratic elections, they refused to share government resources with people

who had supported other political parties. For example, in order to earn some money, Joseph wanted to make leather bags and belts, for which he could use the services of an NGO. But the NGO refused to help, and Joseph was certain that this was because of his PAC association. Only when officials of the NGO wanted to impress some Scandinavian donors who had arrived in Cape Town did they invite Joseph to take part in their workshop. Joseph refused angrily, even though he urgently needed the money.

It quickly became clear that my dependency on Joseph resulted in most of my interviewees being either members of the PAC or sympathetic toward it. This dependency also prevented me from asking some uncomfortable questions about Joseph's political biography.<sup>5</sup> One incident in particular should have encouraged me to ask Joseph about his past. After a long day of interviewing, Joseph and I went to a nearby tavern for some beers. We sat with a few of Joseph's friends, and as the evening progressed one of his drunken friends confronted me with a mixture of hostility and camaraderie. He disclosed that he had been active in *poqo*, which in Xhosa means 'pure' or 'alone' and was used to refer to the military wing of the PAC. *Poqo* later evolved into the Azanian People's Liberation Army (APLA).<sup>6</sup> The man repeatedly stated that he would kill me and that he had killed whites before—South African soldiers in the Angolan Civil War. Simultaneously, he tried to put me at ease, stating in slurred speech that I should not worry: although he could, he would not kill me because I was his great friend. After the tavern closed, he urged Joseph and me to visit his nearby home for another beer so he could show me photographs from the Angolan war. We joined him, and sitting on the side of his bed he went through the pictures that portrayed him and his friends carrying weapons, pointing out which of his friends had been killed in combat and relating how he had successfully killed people. The photographs seemed to make him nostalgic about what South Africans sometimes refer to as 'the bad old days'. I also noticed a combination of aggressiveness and warm-heartedness toward me.

When I met Joseph again the next day, we laughed about the strange evening, joking about having had too much to drink ourselves. I would like to think that the events of that evening made us closer and helped to bridge the many differences between us. Possibly for that reason, I did not query Joseph about how he had met this friend. By then, I had started wondering what Joseph had been involved in just before he left South Africa, but I avoided asking questions about his possible violent past in the township of Langa. These questions would have been justifiable in light of the nature of my study, the encounters with Joseph's friends, and Joseph's relationship with people and organizations aligned with the PAC. But would not my questioning harm the rapport that we had just established? Was it not likely that any inquiries about Joseph's political biography would damage our precarious relationship? In retrospect, it seems that my dependency on Joseph at the time, as well as the way in which narratives of violence shaped cultural intimacy, prevented me from asking these questions.

A few years later, during subsequent visits to Cape Town, I tried to contact Joseph again but could not find him. I wanted to know how he was doing and

to ask him about the events that had led to his exile. In the meantime, the findings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), set up after 1995 and headed by Desmond Tutu, established that Langa-based *poqo* militants had conducted a 'reign of terror' that functioned as a house-to-house membership drive.<sup>7</sup> It also became known that *poqo* had been a de facto vigilante organization that 'protected' the residents of Langa. When Joseph was still in Langa, the *poqo* patrolled the streets with explicit orders to eliminate any police officers they encountered. *Poqo* militants killed two Langa police officers and were instructed to "collect and manufacture weapons and explosives, and in the event of [an] uprising, undertake the initial attacks" (Tom Lodge, cited in Maaba 2004: 263). Later, it also became clear that the PAC had sent several of its Langa-based *poqo* militants abroad for military training in the early 1960s (Maaba 2004: 286; Plaatjie 2004: 677). This coincided with when Joseph went into exile. Could Joseph have taken part in more than a protest march? How deeply had he been involved in the organization that later became known for its slogan "one settler, one bullet"?

Ethnographers do not necessarily believe that the people they depend on for their research are righteous, but ethical considerations complicate exploring this issue. I was concerned that uncomfortable inquiries would put a strain on my relationship with Joseph, on whom I depended so heavily, or that I might portray Joseph in an unsympathetic manner that would not do justice to his tremendous struggle to establish himself once again in South Africa. I failed to ask relevant yet uncomfortable questions about his political biography at the risk of keeping tensions in fieldwork relations underexplored.

## Dependency on the Blind Spot

In 1997, Indawo Yoxolo was a squatter camp that the government had developed into a housing area for the poor. It was reputed to be safe and quiet and seemed like a good place to study financial mutuals among Xhosa migrants. With the aid of a friend working for an NGO that dealt with conflict prevention, I met Mr. Mabeqa and other residents of Indawo Yoxolo, including Edith, who became my research assistant (for more details about this and the following section, see Bähre 2007: 51–84). Within days of starting my fieldwork, it was made clear that Indawo Yoxolo was the home of a local Mafia-style gang called the Big Five, after South Africa's five most dangerous animals. In the following months, I became aware that Mr. Mabeqa, Edith, and several other residents had formed a loosely organized opposition to the Big Five. They publicly accused the gang of embezzling development funds, bribery, intimidation, and violence. The Big Five responded with intimidation, assault, and the murder of several residents, including Mr. Mabeqa. One of the Big Five members warned Edith that, with Mr. Mabeqa's death, she was now at the top of their hit list. Together with others who had spoken out against the Big Five, Edith fled Indawo Yoxolo to seek refuge elsewhere. Approximately two months later, she returned, and we commenced our research in the area.

The violent and antagonistic politics in Indawo Yoxolo, coupled with my dependency on Edith, made it nearly impossible to talk with the Big Five or their supporters. My ethnographic research enabled me to participate in socio-economic and political configurations, although differently than I had envisioned and with consequences that I had not foreseen. There was ample evidence that the relationship between Edith and the Big Five was hostile, considering that Edith opposed their practices openly and that one of them had threatened to kill her, and I explored these hostilities elaborately in my monograph. At the same time, I had some indications that the relationship between the Big Five and Edith might have been friendlier at some point, but I did not explore this sufficiently. What were the signs that I initially ignored, or at least did not develop thoroughly in my writing?

In the course of the fieldwork, Edith told me how she had come to live in Indawo Yoxolo. She had been renting a shack in Guguletu when she heard about the development project in Indawo Yoxolo and, like so many others, applied for a serviced plot, with a faucet, prepaid electricity meter, and toilet. In order to be registered on the waiting list, she, like everybody else, had to pay the Big Five a R1500 bribe, which at the time was equivalent to a month and a half's wage. What was not clear to me, and what I initially failed to ask, was why the Big Five guaranteed her a plot that was nearly twice the usual size. Not only that, the plot was at a convenient location for the shop that Edith wanted to eventually set up. I did not ask Edith why the Big Five provided her with these advantages that clearly contradicted the hostility of their relationship. The result was that I portrayed Indawo Yoxolo as two separate rival camps with bystanders, thus failing to demonstrate how they were connected through reciprocal relations.

Edith also informed me that soon after the Big Five murdered Mr. Mabeqa and then threatened to kill her, they had asked her to join them. Only a few days after Mr. Mabeqa was shot, Edith ran into his murderer at the local taxi stand. He came up to her with a R100 note and asked her to join them. On another occasion, she told me that one of the Big Five members had approached her when she was walking in Indawo Yoxolo to offer her a job. She was told Indawo Yoxolo would soon get a proper school, and, if she was interested, the Big Five could secure her a job as a teacher. Given Edith's delicate financial situation, this was a very attractive offer that she nevertheless did not accept. These conversations could have opened the door for me to ask less comfortable questions about Edith's association with the Big Five.

It was not until 10 years later, in 2006, that I asked Edith about her relationship with the Big Five. I would argue that this had become possible because my relationship with Edith had changed. By 2006, Edith's life circumstances were not nearly as depressing as they had been 10 years earlier, although she still had many concerns. She had moved to a better neighborhood and had a reasonable and stable income. A crucial difference between 1997 and 2006 was that I was less dependent on Edith for my research, since I also worked with another research assistant, Mandisa. Only within the safety of these new circumstances did I prompt Edith to say more about her relationship with the Big Five.



That is when it became clear to me that the relationship between Edith and the Big Five had been fairly friendly at times. Edith told me that when she applied for her plot and a place on the waiting list, she paid Vincent, one of the Big Five members, only R800 in bribe money rather than the usual R1500. Not only did she pay less, but Vincent also made sure that she obtained a bigger and better-located plot. The relationship was friendly enough for Edith to ask if they could help her with building materials. She wanted to build a shack on the plot and needed corrugated iron sheets for the roof. Without requiring her to pay additional bribes, the Big Five stole corrugated iron sheets from a nearby building site and delivered them to Edith's place.

Ten years later, Edith told me that she had initially been pleased with the Big Five and felt that it was legitimate to pay them bribes as long as they helped the community. But over time, her relationship with the Big Five had become more ambiguous as the gang became more violent, intimidating people who refused to pay bribes and assaulting and murdering several residents of Indawo Yoxolo. Edith wanted no part of that, and she did not want to give the impression that she supported their practices. She began opposing the Big Five's corrupt, violent practices, which eventually led to the death threats against her.

Their relationship also changed due to Edith's husband. He was distressed by his wife's relationship with Vincent and could not help but wonder why Edith received these favors. He was suspicious of the smaller bribe, the good location, the larger size of the plot, and the stolen corrugated sheets to the point that he eventually accused Edith of having an affair with Vincent. The members of the Big Five, in turn, were suspicious of Vincent. Because he could only show an R800 bribe, they accused Vincent of keeping the remaining R700 to himself.

Another possible reason for not asking more about Edith's relationship with the Big Five had to do with the social relations that made up the fieldwork. At the time, I depended on Edith for conducting my research, particularly because of the volatility of the political situation in Indawo Yoxolo and the fact that violence was a constant threat. The only other white person I had seen in Indawo Yoxolo was a supervisor overseeing construction work, and he was later killed, supposedly by one of his employees. The violence in Indawo Yoxolo only strengthened my dependency on Edith, which might explain why I ignored signs suggesting that the relationship between Edith and the Big Five was anything other than hostile. Moreover, Edith was in a constant battle involving a wide range of problems, such as fights with her husband, unemployment, lack of income, health issues, and many other dimensions that are intimately connected with poverty, inequality, and violence. I was concerned about Edith's well-being, and I witnessed on a daily basis how violence disrupted her life. This made it difficult to think of Edith as having a rather friendly relationship with the exploitative and violent Big Five.

Avoiding questions about the relationship between Edith and the Big Five seems to be a result of what Robben (1996: 99) identifies as ethnographic seduction, where "the ethnographer may ... be seduced into accepting the surface discourse because of his or her unrecognized immersion in a transferential relationship." In order to do fieldwork, I possibly depended on an ethnographer's

blind spot that initially prevented me from seeing the complexity of Edith's relationship with the Big Five. The result was that I did not ask why Edith had such a nice plot, or why the Big Five had on several occasions tried to recruit her, or why Mr. Mabeqa's murderer gave Edith R100 at the taxi stand. Only after my dependency had lessened could I recognize that her relationship with the Big Five was ambivalent, which added an important dimension to my analysis of violence, for example, by allowing me to consider its integrative potential.

## **A Violent Victim**

In 2004, Edith had less time to work with me and so arranged for me to meet Mandisa. I followed Edith as she drove to Mandisa's home in Khayelitsha, one of Cape Town's biggest townships. After we had agreed on how we would work together, I gave Mandisa a lift to the City Bowl. As we drove along the N2 highway, Mandisa suddenly burst into tears. She told me that her husband Themba had raped her again. She tearfully related how violent and horrible Themba was to her. She saw no future with him but felt that she could not leave him. The situation shocked and puzzled me, especially because Mandisa was sharing such intimate and painful experiences despite the fact that we had only just met.

During subsequent meetings, Mandisa and I often talked about the abuse she suffered, mostly from her husband. Once Mandisa told me how glad she was that she could talk to me about her problems. I was taken by surprise when she told me that I was like a father to her because I was so supportive. Although Mandisa's admission was a great compliment, it made me feel somewhat uncomfortable. It is ethically compromising to display the persistent authority of the ethnographer, especially since gender and race differences, along with the combination of care and hierarchy that Mandisa alluded to, are central to well-established paternalistic relations.

However, there were indications that Mandisa not only was a victim of violence but also participated in it herself. For example, Mandisa once told me with great excitement how she had been part of a crowd that had apprehended a thief and killed him by setting him on fire. The loyalty and trust on which fieldwork relations are built possibly prevented me from exploring these encounters. It is less problematic to acknowledge that the people you care about are victims of violence than to admit that they, too, rely on violence and sometimes even enjoy it. Only four years later, we had a very different conversation about violence. We were in the car on our way to meet someone for an interview when Mandisa asked whether she had ever told me about the burglary in Khayelitsha. "No," I replied, whereupon, in the light-hearted, joking manner that creates emotional distance and makes it easier to talk of horrors,<sup>8</sup> Mandisa told me her story of the burglary:<sup>9</sup>

Late one night, Themba and I were both asleep when a noise woke us up. Someone had entered our house thinking there was nobody at home. Usually, we park our car behind the gate, but this time it was away for repairs. The burglar must

have thought that we were out in the car, so he climbed the fence and entered our house. We jumped out of bed. The burglar heard us, ran out of the house, and climbed back over the fence. He ran into the street, but we ran right after him. Themba and I were sleeping naked because it was so hot, but we did not care about that. I thought that by the time we got dressed the guy would be gone. So we ran naked into the street. We did not care, bwahaha. You should have seen us!

I joined in with her laughter, as it did indeed sound hilarious. Mandisa went on:

We caught him. He was young and really scared. I looked at Themba. "What do we do now?" "Let's take him back to the house and into the bathroom."

I could not help feeling shocked that I immediately understood their decision to take him into the bathroom. "Because of the tiles," I said. "Yes," Mandisa confirmed, and we laughed. She continued:

We took him to the bathroom, but this burglar, he was so nasty. He made such a mess. We beat him up really badly with our fists and kicked him too. I thought he was going to die right there. We thought it would be easy to clean up, but it was a lot of work, cleaning up the mess in the middle of the night. The burglar was bleeding badly. His blood splattered too high, you know how high the tiles are, and even the space above the tiles was stained with his blood. You see what a horrible burglar this was, causing us problems, destroying our bathroom, haha!

Mandisa continued her gruesome, surrealistic, and admittedly hilarious account:

Afterwards I had to clean the bathroom and scrub really hard, using lots of detergent. But I could not get all the stains out, and eventually I had to repaint the bathroom walls above the tiles. Of course I did not want anybody to see the mess. This burglar created so many problems for us. He was hospitalized for more than two weeks. He almost died. Of course, we were worried about the police. But one of our neighbors was a police officer, and she told us not to worry. She wrote a statement saying it was self-defense.

After a few weeks we had an unexpected visit from the burglar's relatives: his father and some other family members. Erik, we were so worried. We thought that they were going to ask us for compensation. We would have to pay, or worse ... We had to let them into our house, so we asked them to sit down and made tea for them. Then the father started to speak, and he told us not to worry because he had come to thank us. Bwahaha. Erik, can you believe it? He said that it was his son's first burglary, and because we beat him up so badly, he would never try it again. We were right to teach him a lesson. He deserved the punishment. Would you believe the father came to thank us for making sure his son would never do something like that again in his whole life?

The response of the burglar's father is not at all what one might expect. Possibly, the father was relieved that his son was still alive and glad that he would never try burglary again. However, it is more likely that he was scared that Mandisa's brother would kill his son once he was released from the hospital. I could

not help but feel that the burglar's father tried to avert this danger by explicitly supporting the assault on his son.

Mandisa and I had worked together for many years. She had always been caring and helpful with me, so it was alarming to realize that she could enjoy violence in a way best characterized by Lacan (1979: 183–185) as *jouissance*, an extreme or orgasmic pleasure.<sup>10</sup> Our light-hearted chat in the car disclosed that violence could be central to sociality. It revealed how violence, or at least talking about violence in a particular way, could create a sense of mutuality and intimacy. This conversation may have revealed as much about Mandisa's social world as our first meeting when she told me about her abusive husband. Revelations of cultural intimacy—mutual embarrassment at the (for me) unexpected display of violence—can easily be concealed in ethnographic writing, a suppression that contributes to an idealistic representation of the ethnographer's engagement and of sociality in general. Such repressions can lead us to think that violence is caused by events that take place outside social relations and thus, as Das pointed out, to analyze these events as social criticisms instead of seeing them as constitutive of sociality.

## Rethinking Violence and Intimacy

Das (2010) has made it clear that pain can be communicated and that it is important for anthropology to do so. Devereux (1967) and later Bourdieu (2003) have drawn our attention to events that fall outside of our interpretation because of the anxieties they cause. Our reluctance to communicate pain might be partly due to the anxieties that it provokes. Ethnography is susceptible to keeping certain aspects of pain and suffering out of the picture, or to introduce them only from a theoretical basis that attributes pain to events that take place outside the immediate social world being studied. However, a reflexive approach to ethnography and anxiety offers insight into how violence can be at home within personal relations and reveals how violence can be ingrained in the establishment of sociality.

If we are to understand the brittle stability in South Africa and the continuously high levels of violence that permeate its society, we must consider that care, reciprocity, and mutual dependency are charged with conflict and violence. There is a danger in overlooking the sociality of violence, as well as in relegating violence to forces outside of the realm of the social. We must recognize the possibility that “violence becomes so embedded into the fabric of the social that it becomes indistinguishable from the social” (Das 2010: 303).

Ethnographers have shown that emotional and professional efforts are required to acknowledge that the same people who care about you, who have been extremely helpful during your research, who suffer destitution and abuse, are also capable of horrifying acts of violence. Ethnographers are confronted with the ethical predicament of whether to portray these acts and, if so, how. They know that they accumulate symbolic capital by witnessing and reporting destitution, thus making it precarious to include less favorable interactions

and events. The loyalty that is fundamental to fieldwork relations makes it hard to reveal any discomfort at its actual ambiguity. Deeply ingrained ethical considerations make it difficult for ethnographers to write about these ambiguities, or they encourage us to place the causes of violence beyond our personal fieldwork relations.

At the same time, shared discomfort and embarrassment at violence—for example, when I immediately knew why Mandisa and her husband wanted to take the burglar into the bathroom—reveal what Herzfeld (2005) so appropriately calls ‘cultural intimacy’. In such situations, shared embarrassment and laughter at violence reveal a common understanding of the less commendable expressions of human sociality and suggest the integrative potential of violence. By reflecting on our anxieties, we can construe a more nuanced and comprehensive, possibly even more objective understanding of the relationship between violence and sociality.

The social intimacy between ethnographers and interlocutors does not require suppressing less favorable experiences or designating the origin of violence as ‘elsewhere’. A reflexive approach to ethnographic research—what Bourdieu defined as ‘participant objectivation’, precisely because ethnographic encounters are so personal, precarious, and fraught with tension—can define violence and help us understand its integrative potential.

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## Notes

1. Only Joseph and Mandisa are pseudonyms. This study refers to earlier publications in which the contributions of my research assistants are acknowledged, making it impossible to anonymize Edith.
2. Carrier (1995), Narotzky (2007), and Herzfeld (2005: 150) show that Mauss's approach to solidarity tends to emphasize the harmonious, but one has to note his inclusion of the destructive dimensions of solidarity. These tensions have been developed further by Bähre (2007), Bailey (1971), Bataille (1991), and Wolf (1999), among others.
3. On reflexivity and objectivation, see also Blackman (2007), Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992), Burawoy (2003), Narotzky (2007), and Wacquant (1989). The distinction that Bourdieu (2003) makes between narcissistic and objective reflexivity is difficult to apply, which might explain why there is a tendency to limit the debate to methodological and conceptual issues.
4. This point has also been raised by, among others, Daniel (1996: 4), Donham (2006: 22–26), Lindegaard (2009), Niehaus (2005: 83), and Port (1998).
5. South African anthropology had set itself the task of exposing abuse by the apartheid regime, which might have been another reason for my reluctance. On the anthropological stance toward apartheid, see Boonzaier and Sharp (1988), Gordon and Spiegel (1993), Hammond-Tooke (1997), James (1997), and Spiegel (2005: 133).
6. For more on the APLA, see Lodge (1996) and Mashike (2004).
7. TRC Report, vol. 2, chap. 4, 182–191. See <http://www.justice.gov.za/trc/report/finalreport/Volume%202.pdf>.
8. On this way of dealing with such horrors, see also Goldstein's (2003) study of violence in the *favelas* of Rio de Janeiro.
9. Here I am paraphrasing our conversation since I could not take notes while driving.
10. See Thoden van Velzen (1995) for an ethnographic approach to *jouissance*.

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