

# **The ethnographic blind spot: intimacy, violence, and sociality in South Africa**

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## **Summary**

The premise of ethnography is that intimate and trustworthy social relationships are key to knowledge. The dependency on our interlocutors, particularly in violent and hostile social environments, can lead to an ethnographic ‘blind spot’, i.e. to relegate aggressive and violent acts by the people we depend on outside of the ethnography. The reflexive exploration of the dependencies on my research assistants in the townships and squatter camps of Cape Town, South Africa, reveals why dependencies cause this ‘blind spot’ and suggests that it as a result of it intimate realms tend to be portrayed too harmonious.

## **Introduction: violence and sociality**

Conversations about South Africa tend to be charged with urgency about the future. Probably the most frequently asked question I get about South Africa is: ‘Is the country now going to collapse?’ The 1994 elections, the first democratic elections of the country, were surrounded by fears that the eruption of violence would lead to catastrophic scenes; Violence against African migrants; violent fights over development or public transport; or the horrors envisioned after Jacob Zuma became president in 2009. South Africa appears to be at the brink of disaster, right at the edge of the cliff, all the time. Notwithstanding the severe conflicts and violence in South Africa, the image of dystopia proves to be wrong but nonetheless prevails. One cannot help being surprised about South Africa’s brittle stability.

The reason that the dystopia never materializes is that violence, at least in South Africa, is part of sociality. Instead of drawing a distinction between on the one hand violence and on the other hand social cohesion and solidarity, I will point out that violence is intrinsically part of sociality. Sociality is generally understood as a constructive process that is harmonious, ties atomized people together in wider social configurations, and is key to social cohesion and solidarity (see for example Santos-Granero 2007 and particularly Slavin 2004).

This positive stance towards sociality has a longer tradition in anthropology. Narotzky (2007: 406), for example demonstrates the political and moral ambition of Mauss and Malinowski to show ‘that reciprocity, the mix of exchange and moral obligation, an endless chain of transfers that produces solidarity and cooperation, is the kernel of social cohesion in general’. Yet this ‘endless chain of transfers’ can also be destructive, which Mauss (1922) points out when he examines the aggressive potlatch.<sup>1</sup>

A romantic notion of sociality and intimacy is particularly salient in Sahlins’ (1972) definition of reciprocity. According to Sahlins, evolution of human societies started with harmonious kinship relations based on the principle of generalized reciprocity. A more intimate, harmonious, generous and loving image than the maternal suckling of a child (Sahlins 1972: 194) can hardly be thought of.<sup>2</sup> Over time, weaker, more distant, less trustworthy and more aggressive relationships, i.e. balanced and negative reciprocity. Sahlins’ interpretations of sociality might very well be examples of what Herzfeld (2005) defined as structural nostalgia, i.e. ‘cultural ideologies [that] ... seek to reconstitute perfect archaic forms out of modern cultural idioms and genetic phenotypes’ (Herzfeld 2005: 95).

If we take this romantic image on sociality and intimacy for granted, it indeed becomes a pertinent question if South Africa is going to collapse. This concern is captured by the concern that so many South Africans have about ‘becoming a statistic’. ‘I do not want to become a statistic’ is a common way to address the unspeakable anxieties that underlie South Africa’s statistics on fatal car crashes, car hijackings, murder, HIV infection, assault, rape, violent burglaries, and other horrible inflictions by fellow human beings.<sup>3</sup> South Africa has the world’s highest murder and homicide rates, the world’s highest assault rate, the highest rate of reported rapes<sup>4</sup>, and one of the highest levels of inequality. In South Africa it is all too easy to become a statistic. In most of the Cape Town townships where I did my research, shootings and assaults occurred almost daily. In several townships, brutal mafia style leaderships thrive on development projects (Bähre 2005). Luckily<sup>5</sup>, I did not become a statistic and my exposure to violence has been limited to being an eye witness to murder and assault, listening to accounts of brutal attacks and murder, the occasional death threat, being uncomfortably close to shootings, and the constant and tiring low-level anxiety that eventually is ingrained in one’s habitus (see Green 1995).

Statistics tend to hide the intimacy and the sociality of violence. Statistics on violence and the romantic view on sociality are the result of externalization of the pain that Hastrup (1993) draws our attention to. In order to acknowledge that violence is part of sociality and not its antipode we need to turn towards reflexive ethnography. The harmonious image on sociality

and intimacy might very well be structural nostalgia that is produced within our discipline, partly because of the anthropologists precarious dependency on its interlocutors, particularly in violent circumstances.

### **Participant objectivation and the ethnographic blind spot**

Bourdieu (2003, see also Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, Blackman 2007, Burawoy 2003, Heilbron 1999, Narotzky 2007, Wacquant 1989) approaches the ethnographic encounter from the vantage point of ‘participant objectivation’.<sup>6</sup> Participant objectivation critically examines how the researchers experiences, memories, and unconscious processes impede on scientific objectivity. Based on research in Algeria and his French hometown, Bourdieu argues for ‘the *objectivation of the subject of objectivation*, of the analysing subject – in short, of the researcher herself’ (Bourdieu 2003: 282, italic original):

‘[S]cientific objectivation is not complete unless it includes the point of view of the objectivizer and the interests he may have in objectivation (especially when he objectivizes his own universe) but also the historical unconscious that he inevitably engages in his work’ (Bourdieu 2003: 284-285).

Although this is a formidable requirement that Bourdieu does not meet himself, it nonetheless needs to be integrated more centrally in ethnographic theory and methodology. Bourdieu defines scientific reflexivity as a careful analysis of interpersonal relations and the intimacies between the researcher and his or her subjects. In order to gain insight into these dynamics, Bourdieu (2003) briefly draws on psychoanalytical theory and the effect of the unconsciousness on the collection and interpretation of data.

Bourdieu’s argument on reflexivity resembles that of Devereux (1967), a similarity that has been pointed out before by Heilbron (1999). It is striking that Bourdieu does not explicitly engage with the anthropologist and psychoanalyst Devereux. In ‘from anxiety to method in the behavioural sciences’ Devereux (1967) extensively examined the role of psychoanalytic processes for the collection and interpretation of data. Detailed cases show the psychoanalytic process of countertransference and its influence on the collection and interpretation of data. Devereux argues that our methods are geared towards the management of anxieties that research data can bring about. In order to manage or limit anxieties, the social sciences have developed professional defense mechanisms that help researchers to cope with anxiety arousing phenomena. Unfortunately, these professional mechanisms

severely distort our scientific understanding: ‘The scientist who studies this kind of [anxiety arousing] material usually seeks to protect himself against anxiety by the omission, soft-pedaling, non-exploitation, misunderstanding, ambiguous description, over exploitation or rearrangement of certain parts of his material’ (Devereux 1967: 44). The reflexive turn in Devereux’s work – here too the resemblance with Bourdieu is apparent – is that these anxieties and disturbances are not mere obstacles:

‘Fortunately, so called ‘disturbances’ created by the observer’s existence and activities when properly exploited, are the cornerstones of a scientific behavioral science, and not – as is currently believed – deplorable *contretemps*, best disposed of by hurriedly sweeping them under the rug’ (Devereux 1967: 6-7).<sup>7</sup>

Bourdieu’s plea for participant objectivation further substantiates Devereux’s argument. While Narotzky (2007) drew on reflexivity in order to show us how definitions of sociality are part of historical and political processes, here I will depart from ethnography as a method of research. How can scientific reflexivity contribute to our understanding of the nexus of violence, intimacy and sociality in South Africa?

First, the premise of ethnography is engagement and identification with the people we work *and* a sense of embarrassment that our academic careers are built on the of their suffering. It is uncomfortable to convey anything negative or compromising about people that we owe so much to and to whom we are in so many ways regarded as superior. More often than not it will be that the researcher has more social, economic, and cultural capital, and a taste, a lifestyle, as well as identities that embody superiority. Any expression of unease about the research subjects is potentially compromising and embarrassing for the ethnographer. The study of sociality tends to leave these embarrassing and compromising positions outside of the analysis.

Second, the dependency of ethnographers on others, particularly research assistants, particularly in volatile circumstances, complicates the analysis of those aspects of people’s lives that are not so pleasant. The overtones of trust, generosity, and mutual care in intimate realms might be a consequence of mutual dependencies among researchers and their interlocutors. Here, I examining the relationships with three research assistants to demonstrate that intimacy and trust make it difficult to objectify more aggressive and violent forms of sociality among the people we so heavily depend on while doing fieldwork.

Since 1995, most of my research has taken place in the townships and squatter camps of Cape Town, South Africa and for most of the research visits –varying in length from a few weeks to a year – I worked together with a few research assistants, among them Godfrey, Edith, and Mandisa. They translated Xhosa for me, helped me to meet people, helped me to interpret conversations and events, and we became companions in the course of the research.

A constant methodological issue when conducting research in South Africa, particularly in the Cape Flats, was violence. The close cooperation with trustworthy and reliable research assistants was crucial for my research. Violence could form a problem for meeting people, interviewing them, and all other aspects of ethnographic research. My research assistants were excellent in protecting me against violence: I could not have wished better guidance and help. They were pivotal to my safety and continuously accompanied me, a responsibility that they took with utmost consideration. Therefore, I relied heavily on my research assistants.

### **A militant assistant**

A good example of this reliance and its consequence for data collection occurred during my first fieldwork period in 1995. I had been in Cape Town for almost four months and still had been unable to conduct an interview in one of the townships of Cape Town. It was eventually a colleague at the University of the Western Cape who sympathised with my inability to cross racial and class divides and asked me to follow him in his car. I nearly lost him as my small Renault five could hardly match his fast BMW as we drove to Langa, one of the oldest and more established African townships of Cape Town. There I met Godfrey who had just returned from exile and from the few stories of his past it became clear that he was part of the Azanian People's Liberation Army (APLA), the military wing of the Pan African Congress (PAC), also known as *poqo*, the Xhosa word for 'pure' or 'alone'.<sup>8</sup> Godfrey told me that he had to leave South Africa in the 1960s after he participated in protest marches against the brutal apartheid state. During his thirty years of exile he lived among others in Botswana, the Soviet Union, and Kenya. He was also stationed in a military training camp in the Libyan dessert where he taught combat techniques. Godfrey did not tell me who he trained, and only mentioned that it had to do with the struggle against apartheid.

Godfrey returned to Langa in 1994, the year of the first democratic elections. He could not find a job but desperately needed an income to support himself and his two small children with whom he lived at the back of a small store. For this reason, Godfrey helped me with my research and set up meetings, translated Xhosa, and ensured that I could safely move around in Langa. The result was that I became part of his social network.

For example, while Godfrey and I were having a beer in a tavern in Langa, a friend of his joined us. It soon became apparent that Godfrey's friend also belonged to APLA. He first threatened to kill me and told me that he had killed whites before, possibly to convince me that he was not joking. After some more beers he became much more amicable and invited us to his house for beers to show me some photographs. He told me that he had fought in the Angolan Civil War and showed us photos of him dressed in combat gear and carrying a firearm. He knew how to kill people, but also assured me: I was his friend now and I should not worry, surely because I was introduced via Godfrey.

In the course of the research it became apparent that the people I spoke to were not random residents of Langa. I noticed that during the interviews Godfrey and the person that I was interviewing talked a lot about politics, particularly about the dominant position of the African National Congress (ANC) in Langa. Due to these casual conversations – largely carried out in Xhosa that I did not master at all at the time – I eventually asked Godfrey about the political affiliation of the people we met. Almost none of them belonged to the ANC and almost all were sympathetic towards the PAC or a member of the PAC. After thirty years of exile, Godfrey's network was restricted to (former) PAC activists.

Godfrey complained that all the NGOs in Langa were dominated by the ANC and that they refused him access to their services and resources. He complained about one NGO in particular. This NGO had a workshop with tools to make leather belts and bags. Godfrey had been very interested to use these facilities and sell his handmade leather bags on the local market. Because of his membership of the PAC, Godfrey told me, the NGO refused to help him. They only asked him once to come and visit them and use their facilities and they even offered a small sum of money to him to be present on that particular day. The reason for this unexpected hospitality was that the Swedish donor had come to visit. In order to impress the donors the NGO wanted to have as many people as possible working with their tools. Godfrey refused the money as well as the invitation to attend the workshop.

The ideal of anthropology is fairly liberal: You should talk to everyone in order to gain insight into people's experiences and views and how particular practices are entangled with socio-economic and political positions. This freedom to talk to everyone was far from realistic. I depended on Godfrey for translating Xhosa for me, introducing me to people and for my safety. Godfrey was an excellent research assistant with whom it was a pleasure to work and the people we talked to were very helpful, supportive, and shared valuable insights with me. At the same time, my dependency on Godfrey limited my freedom to talk to everyone. This should not simply be understood as a methodological shortcoming of

ethnographic research as it are exactly these methodological peculiarities that reveal socio-political dynamics. Scientific insights are not necessarily achieved by positioning oneself as a free agent who can talk to everyone about everything. Participant objectivation reveals that such a position is a false one as participant observation and the ethnographic encounter is about establishing close and intimate ties with some people and thus inevitably excluding others, particularly when doing research in politically charged or violent situations. The free moving ethnographer, the anthropologist or sociologist who appears to be befriended with everyone and accepted by 'the community' and who conveys an image of not being embedded in particular socio-political constellations is a contradiction in terms.

When I returned to South Africa in 1997 as well as later visits, I tried to get in touch with Godfrey again. I was wondering how he was doing and hoped that his life had improved somewhat. I had also questions about his life in Langa and how it related to his political orientation and involvement in the struggle against apartheid. I was also interested to know more about his reasons for leaving South Africa and his APLA membership. Did he indeed leave the country in the 1960s because he took part in protest marches against the apartheid state or were there other more violent reasons for leaving the country? Or were there more controversial circumstances?

In the early 1960s, APLA, at the time known as *poqo*, was established as the military wing of the banned PAC. The Truth and Reconciliation established that *poqo* militants, particularly in Langa, formed a 'reign of terror' as they formed a house-to-house membership drive.<sup>9</sup> *Poqo*, was *de facto* a vigilante organisation that 'protected' the residents of Langa. In the early 1960s they 'patrolled the streets of Langa after 8 pm and had the explicit order to eliminate any policemen they might encounter and *poqo* did kill two Langa police officers. The PAC also instructed *poqo* to 'collect and manufacture weapons and explosives, and in the event of the uprising, undertake the initial attacks' (Lodge 1986: 190)' (Maaba 2004: 263). The PAC had also sent several of its Langa based *poqo* members for military training abroad, among others to Ethiopia and Egypt (Maaba 2004: 286; Plaatjie 2004: 677).

Could it be that Godfrey did more than just take part in protest marches? How deep had he been involved in the organisation that later became known for its slogan 'one settler, one bullet'? I had not dared to ask too many questions about these sensitive and uncomfortable issues at the time, partly because at the time I was not very well informed about the struggles that took place in Langa in the early 1960s. I was also concerned that I would portray Godfrey in an unsympathetic way that did not do justice to his tremendous struggle to set up a life again in Langa. Moreover, I was worried that such questions would damage our

relationship that was so vital for my research. The horrific acts carried out by poqo members was at odds with how Godfrey helped me to do my study.

I visited the store where Godfrey used to live but he had left. The neighbours did not know where he was either. I visited some of his PAC comrades but they could not tell me anything either. I also visited the house of Godfrey's relatives in the nearby township Guguletu. The family had left and the neighbours did not know where they were. Who was this supportive, considered, and friendly research assistant who had been part of this violent and militant organisation? While doing research with Godfrey these questions did linger in the background, but they only featured more prominent after our association ended.

### **Dependency on the blind spot**

In 1997, I returned to Cape Town to do research on financial mutuals among Xhosa migrants (Bähre 2007). Indawo Yoxolo seemed to be a good research location. It was partly a squatter camp and partly developed with government aid and it had the reputation of being relatively safe and quiet. With the aid of UMAC, an NGO on conflict prevention, I met Mr. Mabeqa and other residents of Indawo Yoxolo, among them Edith who became my research assistant. Although Indawo Yoxolo had the reputation of being a relatively quiet area, within days of my fieldwork people told me how a local mafia-style leadership, jokingly called the Big Five after South Africa's most dangerous animals, were in control of the area. In the months that followed, it became clear that Mr. Mabeqa, as well as Edith and a few other residents of Indawo Yoxolo, belonged to a loosely organized opposition against the Big Five. They publically, yet unsuccessfully, challenged the Big Five who used the development funds that were pouring into the area for corrupt practices. In order to get access to housing for the poor, jobs, plots, or anything else that was part of the development project, one had to pay bribes to the Big Five. Residents that challenged these corrupt practices were intimidated, assaulted, and several residents, among them Mr. Mabeqa were murdered by the Big Five (see Bähre 2005). The morning after Mr. Mabeqa was killed, one of the Big Five members visited Edith at her home and told her that Mr. Mabeqa was not anymore on the top of their list: It could very well be that she was now on the top of their list. Edith, as well as some other residents of Indawo Yoxolo, had to flee Indawo Yoxolo. For a few days she took refuge in the house of my girlfriend and me and later moved to other places, only to return to Indawo Yoxolo a few months later.

Violence severely restricted my ability to move freely and talk to everyone. I had to do research with a reliable, trustworthy, and committed research assistant, which I was most



fortunate to have. The methodological constraints of my dependency on Edith was that it was impossible to talk freely with the Big Five or its supporters. Because of ethnographic research I became part of socio-economic and political configurations, although in a different way than I had envisioned and with consequences that I had not foreseen.

The mutual dependencies between researchers and their interlocutors, particularly research assistants, is that violence and corrupt practices are too readily located outside of one's intimate realm. Ethnographic studies tend to speak in defense of the subaltern. Particularly the vast inequalities between the lives of academics and that of the people we study makes it difficult to write anything compromising about the individuals we meet. Ortner (1995: 179) demonstrated that '[t]he impulse to sanitize the internal politics of the dominated must be understood as fundamentally romantic'.

The discomfort towards the poor people we study and our strong dependency on their information, insights, and social networks, contribute to a romantic perspective on conflict and violence. Consequently, the origin of violence, corruption, and other evils are too readily situated outside of the mutual dependencies and the sociality that makes up our ethnographic encounter. The destructive aspects of the social configurations of which one has become part are then contributed to far away and fairly impersonal relations. Bonno Thoden van Velzen, with whom I had many conversations and e-mail exchanges, once or twice carefully suggested that Edith's position vis-à-vis the Big Five was possibly more ambiguous. I initially rejected that possibility. After all, the Big Five threatened to kill her and I witnessed some of her actions against the Big Five. In 2006, it became apparent that the dynamics of violence and financial problems were indeed more complex. Almost ten years after I started working with Edith, a more complex perspective emerged. By then, Edith did not anymore live in Indawo Yoxolo and she had a relatively secure income. Although her life was not without its concerns, the circumstances were not nearly as desperate as they were when she lived in Indawo Yoxolo. I had prompted Edith before to say some more about her relationship with the Big Five but she never did. This time, however, Edith told me that the Big Five had not only threatened her, but that they had also tried 'to recruit' her, as she called it.

When Edith lived in a shack she had heard that one could apply for a serviced plot with a water tap, a prepaid electricity meter, and a toilet in Indawo Yoxolo. She had found out that the Big Five were in charge of the waiting list and if you wanted to be on their list you had to pay a R1400 bribe. When she approached one of the Big Five members, Patrick, he told her to pay R800 instead of R1400. In return, she received a plot that was nearly twice as big as most plots. Its location also made it suitable for the small shop that Edith wanted to set up

some day. She wanted to earn some money selling packages of frozen meat, a plan that she did not carry out. When Edith moved to Indawo Yoxolo, she needed building materials for her shack. She had rented a shack and therefore had no building materials that she could take with her. The Big Five stole building material from a building site in Indawo Yoxolo. They took several corrugated iron sheets that were meant for the local school and gave them to Edith.

Edith told me that she was very happy with the support from the Big Five. She argued that although they did ask bribes they at least used it to help the community. After some time, however, the relationship with the Big Five became more problematic. One reason, Edith told me, was that the Big Five became violent. On numerous occasions members of the Big Five intimidated people that could not pay a bribe and even assaulted and murdered several residents in Indawo Yoxolo. She did not want to be part of the violence nor give residents the impression that she supported it. Therefore, she had joined the opposition to the Big Five and was part of their activities to undermine them (see Bähre 2007).

The relationship with the Big Five became also more problematic after Edith's husband expressed his concern about her relationship with the Big Five member Patrick. He wondered why Patrick and the other Big Five members did Edith so many favors. The relatively small bribe, the large plot on a very good location, free building materials, made him wonder whether his wife had had an affair with Patrick. Patrick's fellow Big Five members, in turn, accused Patrick of not sharing the bribe with them. They thought that Patrick did receive R1400 but that he lied about it in order to pocket R700 himself. These three developments – the increased violence by the Big Five, Edith's husband's allegations, as well as distrust among the Big Five – made the relationship with the Big Five more complex. Eventually, Edith, together with Mr. Mabeqa and a few other residents, started to oppose the Big Five.<sup>10</sup> The Big Five responded to this opposition with violence, eventually leading to the murder of Mr. Mabeqa, several other residents, and death threats against Edith. After the murder of Mr. Mabeqa, the Big Five threatened and intimidated Edith *and* asked her again to join them. One Big Five member (not Patrick) explained to Edith that they could use her skills. She was one of the few residents of Indawo Yoxolo who had completed secondary education. He told her that she could work at the local school, even though she did not have any teaching qualifications. On another occasion, also within days after the death of Mr. Mabeqa, Edith ran into Mr. Mabeqa's murderer at the local taxi rank. He approached Edith and gave her R100 and also asked her to join them. She accepted the money but, Edith explained to me, did not

want to have anything to do with them. She spent the R100 as quick as possible as she was worried it was tainted with witchcraft poison.

My concern with my own safety in this violent situation, the way in which Edith was confronted with violence by the Big Five, as well as other accounts of violence and aggression, such as the way in which Edith was kidnapped by her in-laws (see Bähre 2007) were complex enough already. Violence in Indawo Yoxolo only strengthened our mutual dependencies and obligations. This dependency, however, might be the reason why I found it initially inconceivable that the relationship between Edith and the Big Five was not merely hostile. In order to work in Indawo Yoxolo and rely on Edith, who after all was an excellent research assistant, I depended on the blind spot that made it initially impossible for me to see the complexities of the relationship that Edith had with the Big Five. The low bribes Edith paid, the nice plot and building materials, the R100 she received at the taxi rank, and the big five's request to work for them all reveal that the relationship between Edith and the Big Five was not simply hostile. Instead of recognizing these complexities, it is tempting to consign violent acts only to people with whom one did not establish rapport, or with whom one did not establish close ties.

### **A violent victim**

In 2004, Edith had too little time to work with me. Her cleaning business was doing quite well and demanded a lot of attention. Edith had arranged for me to meet Mandisa who might be interested in being my research assistant. I followed Edith in her car to Khayelitsha where Edith introduced us to each other and where I could explain more about my research on insurance policies. After we agreed on how to work together, I gave Mandisa a lift to Cape Town. We had just past the infamous 'hospital bend' – the name refers to the nearby hospital 'Groote Schuur' and to the many road accidents that happen on this part on the N2, when Mandisa suddenly burst in tears. She told me that her husband had again raped her. While she kept crying she told me how violent and horrible he was to her, that she saw no future with him but as he earned an income and she did not she could not leave him.

I had only just met Mandisa and during our first conversation she started to talk about such intimate and violent experiences. This shocked and puzzled me. During the years that we worked together there were numerous similar accounts of abuse by her husband, as well as the financial pressures she suffered from her in-laws in particular. In order to escape some of these financial pressures she secretly saved some money with me. Instead of giving her all the salary that she was entitled to, she would ask me to keep a part of the money. This made it

possible for her to keep some money away from her husband and in-laws. It also strengthened our relationship: I literally remained indebted to her.

During one conversation Mandisa told me how glad she was that she could talk to me about her problems, particularly the violence that she endured from her husband and her in-laws. When I said goodbye to her as to return to The Netherlands, she told me that she felt that I was like a father to her because I had been so supportive. This came as a great shock to me, even though I did feel somewhat responsible for her wellbeing as I helped her overcome some of the problems she encountered.

Over the years Mandisa and I kept working together. Mandisa eventually had a steady administrative job at the department of transport and her husband had left her for a girlfriend and job in Johannesburg. In 2008, Mandisa and I had a very different conversation. We were driving to meet someone who could tell us more about insurance policies when Mandisa asked me whether she ever told me about the burglary she experienced when she still lived in Khayelitsha site C. I told her that I did not remember her talking about that. We had many conversations in the car. The car guaranteed more privacy but it could also be that our position in the car allowed for a more open conversation. You do not have to face each other as we both watch at what happens outside of the car. Confessions are easier when you do not have to look at each other.

In a lighthearted and joking manner that created some emotional distance and made it easier to converse about horrors, so aptly described by Goldstein's (2003) study of violence in the *favelas* of Rio de Janeiro, Mandisa unexpectedly talked about the burglary:<sup>11</sup>

'It was late at night, we were both asleep, when noise in the house woke us up. Someone had entered our house. He must have thought that nobody was at home. Usually we park our car behind the gate but this time it was not there but for repairs in the garage. The burglar must have thought that we were away with the car and that the house was empty, so he had climbed the fence and entered our house. We woke up and jumped out of bed. The burglar heard us and ran out of the house and climbed back over the fence. He ran out on the street but we ran right after him. Themba [Mandisa's husband] and I were sleeping naked because it was so hot, but we did not care about that. I thought, by the time we are dressed the guy will be gone. So we ran after him, naked, into the street. We did not care, haha. You should have seen us.' I joined her laughter, it indeed sounded hilarious.

‘We caught him, he was young and he was really afraid. I looked at Themba: what should we do now? Let’s take him back into the house to the bathroom.’ Mandisa and I both burst out laughing. We both knew why and I could not help but feel shocked that I had immediately understood their decision. ‘Because of the tiles’, I said. ‘Yes’, Mandisa replied and we both laughed again. ‘We took him to the bathroom, but this burglar’, Mandisa continued, ‘he was so nasty. He caused such a mess. We beat him up really bad with our fists and kicking with our feet. I thought he was going to die right there. We thought we could easily clean it up, but it was really a lot of work, cleaning up the mess in the middle of the night. This horrible burglar started to bleed so badly. His blood splattered too high, you know how high the tiles are, but even the area above the tiles were stained with blood. You see what a horrible burglar this was, causing these problems, destroying our bathroom, ha, ha!’ Again we both burst out laughing. Mandisa continued her gruesome and hilarious account: ‘Afterwards I had to clean the bathroom and I really had to scrub and use a lot of cleaning detergent. But I could not get all the stains away and eventually I had to repaint the bathroom walls, the whole area above the tiles. Of course I did not want anybody to see the mess. This burglar created so many problems for us, ha, ha. 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 said that she would make a statement and write down that 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 very worried. We thought that they will ask us for compensation. We will have to pay, or maybe even worse, they come to threaten us. We had to let them into our house and 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 came to thank us. Ha ha. Erik, can you believe it?! He said that this was their son’s first burglary and we beat him up so badly that he would never try it again. He told us that we were right to teach him a lesson and that he deserved the punishment. He was there to thank us for ensuring that their son would not do something like that ever in his life again!’ Mandisa and I again burst out laughing.

The response of the burglar’s father was not at all what one might expect. Instead of revenge, he came to thank them for almost killing his son. Possibly, he was indeed relieved that his son was still alive and glad that he would never again endanger his life or be killed during

another burglary. More likely, he was scared of Mandisa and Themba. Themba's brother was involved in a gang that operated among others in Khayelitsha site C. This gang was notorious for its violence and Themba's brother was known to have murdered several people. It is likely that the burglar's father was afraid of Mandisa and Themba because of Themba's notoriously violent brother. He might be worried that they would kill his son once he was released from hospital, or possibly also kill other people of his family in order to retaliate the burglary. I could not help but feel that the burglar's father wanted to diminish these threats by supporting the assault on his son.

It was alarming to realize that Mandisa could be violent in a way that Lacan referred to as *jouissance* (Lacan 1979: 183-185)<sup>12</sup>. Mandisa and I worked together for more than four years and she was always very caring and helpful. Due to our social relationship and my dependency on her support, these more aggressive and violent dimensions that are part of the reproduction of violence tended to escape interpretation. Once the blind spot diminished, new perspectives on the nexus of violence, intimacy, and sociality emerged.

## **Conclusion**

Participant objectivation – in these cases of the relationship between researcher and research assistants in a very violent and volatile situation – suggest that the nexus of intimacy and violence is worthy of further consideration. The image of a dystopian South Africa which is at the edge of the cliff might very well be a consequence of a distortion of the nexus of intimacy, sociality, and violence. This distortion is brought about by the thread of violence which makes it difficult to recognize violence as part of intimacy and sociality.

Devereux (1967) and later Bourdieu (2003) drew our attention to the blind spot: events that fall outside of our interpretation because of the discomfort that they bring about in the researcher. Here, I drew attention to ethnographic research in violent circumstances, particularly the relationship with research assistants, and how this affected the analysis of intimacy.

The blind spot appeared to be a result of dependency on research assistants, which was to a large extent a result of violence and my inability to move around freely because of the threat of violence. In this violent world, my research assistants had to take care of my safety and help me to meet people. In addition, it could be that my discomfort about the vast discrepancies between my socio-economic position and that of my research subject, as well as the fact that I was accumulating academic capital by witnessing impoverishment and destitution, that contributed to the urge to sanitize the image that I portrayed. When it came to

the relationships with my research assistants this urge was more difficult to overcome (see for example Bähre 2007).

Departing from Devereux's analysis of anxiety, participant objectivation and scientific reflexivity help to examine the effects that mutual dependencies have on the collection and interpretation of data. Ethnography is about participation and insights that only intimate and trustworthy relationships offer. Therefore, ethnography is particularly vulnerable to relegating the less benevolent characteristics of one's interlocutors. Ethnography, after all, sets itself the task to establish rapport – having meaningful and trustworthy relationships. Ethnographers are expected to put their prejudices and dislikes aside and establish empathetic relations with the people we study. More often than not our interlocutors live in miserable circumstances, which makes it even more difficult for ethnographers write about social processes that seem compromising to the interlocutors as well as the ethnographer.<sup>13</sup> It appears that the unintentional effect of these otherwise valid requirements for ethnographic research is that the less admirable aspects of the people we try to understand are left unexamined. The intimacy on which ethnography rests can have the effect that we can only see our interlocutors as victims of exterior economic forces which threaten bonds of trust and mutual solidarity, that damage sociality, and violate long-lasting communities.

The result is a harmonious representation of intimacy that is best captured by Sahlins' example of the maternal suckling of a child. By scrutinizing the mutual dependencies that are at the core of ethnographic knowledge one can begin to identify the blind spots on intimacy and sociality. Participant objectivation reveals that violence, at least in South Africa, is more central to intimacy and sociality than a non-reflexive approach would have acknowledged.

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<sup>1</sup> On the Potlatch and violence, see also Wolf (1999), Bataille (1991).

<sup>2</sup> Gudeman (2001: 85) rightly points out that '[t]his equation of female + sharing + community = none-economy reproduces the standard view that "economy" is the realm of males'

<sup>3</sup> Even explaining here what it means to become a statistic makes me feel very uncomfortable. As if the risks are aggravated by explaining which fears lie behind this statistical, abstract and impersonal representation of horror.

<sup>4</sup> See <http://www.nationmaster.com>. Colombia rates first with 'intentional murders'. South Africa ranks first on all the other kinds of murders and homicides.

<sup>5</sup> 'Luck' does not do justice to the structured distribution of violence that is perceived to be completely at random.

<sup>6</sup> The distinction that Bourdieu makes between narcissistic reflexivity and objective reflexivity is difficult to apply, which might explain why there is the tendency to leave the debate methodological and conceptual.

<sup>7</sup> Disturbances here, have two aspects, i.e. the emotional disturbances of the researcher, as well as the disturbances that the researcher's presence brings about among the people he studies. However, drawing on psychoanalytical theory, Devereux sees these as belonging to one and the same process of transference and counter-transference.

<sup>8</sup> On the APLA, see Lodge (1995) and Mashike (2004).

<sup>9</sup> TRC report, Volume 2, chapter 4, 182-191.

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<sup>10</sup> There appears to be a missing step here in the information that I received. The disruption of the relationship with the Big Five, I would argue, does not clearly explain why one would join an opposition against them.

<sup>11</sup> I am here paraphrasing the conversation, needless to say I could not take notes while driving around.

<sup>12</sup> For an Ethnographic approach to *jouissance* see Thoden van Velzen (1995).

<sup>13</sup> Sometimes these discomforts are published separately, such as Malinowski's (1967) diary. Possibly the most controversial exceptions is Turnbull's (1972) *The Mountain People*.

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