Ethnography

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Ethnography on an awkward scale

Postcolonial anthropology and the violence of abstraction

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ABSTRACT ■ In what ways has the movement of anthropology off the reservation, and off the island, challenged the ethnographic practice that has historically been its raison d'être? How has the increasing historicization of the discipline, and its encounters with the variegated effects of globalization, altered its methodological orientations and strategies? How should those orientations and strategies change in proportion to transformations in the social and cultural geographies of the worlds inhabited by our 'natives'? Is it possible to 'do' ethnography on an awkward scale in multiple dimensions? What are the epistemic implications of these questions for the anthropology of the future? Taking as its point of departure current debates over (i) the relationship between evidence and explanation in the social sciences, and (ii) the relative demands of the local and the global in focusing the ethnographic gaze, this article explores the premises and promises of contemporary ethnography. It invokes recent research on the rise of an 'occult economy' in the South African postcolony to argue for a radical expansion of the horizons of ethnographic methodology, for a method simultaneously inductive and deductive, empirical and imaginative.

KEY WORDS ■ ethnography, theory, history, local/global, occult economy, postcoloniality, modernity, South Africa

> . . . talking to the natives is evidently a dangerous experiment.
>
> (Lee, 1998 [1890]: 407)

More than 30 years ago we met a madman in Mafeking, now the hyphenated capital of the North West Province in the 'new' South Africa.[1] Or, to be more precise, we met a prophet in polythene robes who had been incarcerated in a mental asylum by the apartheid state. We spoke of him in a scholarly essay (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1987): outside of his extravagantly colored costume, what had marked his presence on the local scene before his 'admission' to hospital was a fondness for standing, hour after hour, as a silent witness near the local railway depot. It was from here that generations of black men were transported nightly to the cities of *Makgoweng*, the Place of Whites, to toil in its mines and factories. It was from here, too, that the capillaries of racial capitalism, South Africa-style, became visible to anybody who cared to gaze upon the twilight movement of migrating males across a cloven landscape. Anybody troubled enough. Or mad enough.

Three decades on, after the demise of the *ancien régime*, we passed the very spot, in Station Road, where the mute madman used to linger. He had died, anonymously, some years before. It was early afternoon on a Saturday, a sparkling winter day in July. As we crossed the street on our way to the local police station we noticed a small knot of men-in-blue nearby. They had surrounded a decidedly strange figure: an adult male, nude except for a pair of threadbare boxers, covered in white paste. Emaciated, his eyes showed no animation whatsoever. With a measure of gentleness not usually associated with the law here, he was taken to the Mafikeng Community Service Center – police stations are now 'community service centers,' just as the old South African Police *Force* has become the South African Police *Service*s – where he was fed and allowed to wander around unhindered. Which he did, every now and again climbing on a chair or a desk, every now and again curling up in fetal repose. All the while, like the madman of earlier vintage, he uttered not a word. We asked the officers on desk duty who, or what, the figure was.

'A zombie,' we were told.

'What is to become of him?' we asked.

'We hope that his people, maybe a maternal uncle (*malome)*, will come for him,' said one officer.

'How did he come to be wandering in Station Road?'

'Who knows? Perhaps his owner lost him or let him go by mistake.'

As we have noted (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1999c; cf Ralushai et al., 1996: 5), there are a fair number of living-dead about these days. Termed *dithotsela* or *dipoko* (sing. *sepoko;* from the Afrikaans *spook*, 'ghost'), they are thought to be the creatures of witches who, by nefarious means, have

sucked away their human essence and turned them into brute labor power; this to make them toil away at night in the fields. Indeed, the (then) acting Vice Chancellor of the local University of the North West, himself a scholar of the white Afrikaans occult, casually promised to introduce us to one about whom he had long known.

He did not have to. We encountered many more in the course of our own research.[2] Some of them appeared in circumstances much less benign, much more violent and troubled, than those that brought the frail phantom to the attention of the Mafikeng police. One such circumstance ended in the murder of a well-known personage in the province, 'Ten-Ten' Motlhabane Makolomakwa. Sometime middle-level state employee, owner of a local football team, successful farmer, and the chairman of the tribal council of Matlonyane village, he was set alight by five youths who insisted that he had killed their fathers and turned them into spectral field hands.[3] Another, in 1995, involved striking workers at a coffee plantation in nearby Mpumalanga Province: they refused to work for three supervisors whom they accused of killing employees and turning them into zombies for their private enrichment.[4] A third case – immortalized in a play, *Ipizombi*, well-known in local cultural circles and beyond – was sparked by a taxi accident in Kokstad in which 12 schoolboys were killed. Much discussed all over South Africa at the time, it involved the murder of two elderly 'witches' who were said to have stolen the corpses and conjured them into living-dead.[5]

Cases like this are often reported in matter-of-fact terms by the national media (cf. Fordred, 1998) and – along with Hollywood horror movies, local *telenovelas* of witch killings, and other iterations of spectral death-and-dread – are widely consumed. Significantly, they are sometimes invoked, either before the fact or in the act, by those who perpetrate occult-related violence in the South African countryside. On occasion they have also become the stuff of cybertalk, not least among southern Africans abroad, whose anxious Internet exchanges, intermittently filtered through Euro-American urban legends, have flowed back onto local soil, there to be fabricated into new kinds of fact. Thus it is that reality and its representations become confounded in one another, at once both cause and effect, each inseparably a part of the phenomenology of everyday life in the post-colony. Thus do imported and domestic spirits infuse each other; all being signs of both the local and the translocal, here and elsewhere, now and then, the concrete and the virtual. Thus it is that the national population of living-dead is thought, in some parts of South Africa, to have been joined by trans-national zombies, entering the country from Mozambique and other places (see note 2), just as they did in earlier times (Harries, 1994). Thus it is, too, that home-grown phantoms bear more than passing, if culturally inflected, resemblance to images originating in Haitian Voodoo, to the celluloid freaks that haunt such films as *Night of the Living Dead* (dir. George Romero,

1968) or *The Serpent and the Rainbow* (dir. Wes Craven, 1988), and to ghouls that rise to the rhythms of various popular musics.

These specters, in turn, evoke others: most obviously, a trade in human beings and body parts at once local and transnational, real and imagined, legitimate and illicit, more or less coerced. It is a trade, as we all now know, that stretches from the import and export of sex-workers, domestic workers, and mail order brides (these often being hard to tell apart); through the sale and adoption of babies (also difficult to distinguish, the latter often being an ethicized, affectively acceptable euphemism for the former); to transactions in blood, genes, eyes, hearts, kidneys, and the like, transactions in which the medical may run into the magical (Ehrenreich and Hochschild, 2003; Scheper-Hughes and Wacquant, 2002). Some of this trade, when it entails fully sentient persons, evokes the horrors of slavery; where less than whole persons are involved, it extends the logic of commodity exchange to ever more divisible components of *homo sapiens*. Almost everywhere it is regarded, by those whose populations are being harvested, as a new form of *Empire* erected under the increasingly contested sign of global free trade and its highly inequitable flows of wealth; a curious footnote, this, to Hardt and Negri (2000).[6] Elsewhere, we argue that these phenomena are all interrelated features of an 'occult economy,' itself spawned by a brand of neoliberal capitalism that attributes to the free market an ineluctably salvific, redemptive, even messianic quality. By 'occult economy' (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1999a) we intend a set of practices involving the (again, real or imagined) resort to magical means for material ends; or, more expansively, the conjuring of wealth by inherently mysterious techniques. Of course, what counts as 'magic' varies, although it is always set apart from habitual, more transparent forms of production. This arcane economy has other, well-known manifestations: among them, an alleged rise in many parts of the world of witchcraft and satanism (Comaroff, 1997; Geschiere, 1977; La Fontaine, 1997), of 'fee for service' faiths (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2002; Weller, 2000; cf Kramer, 1999), of enchanted financial practices that, like pyramid schemes and lotteries, promise fabulous wealth without work.

All this enchantment, tellingly, is making itself felt at just the moment when the global triumph of modernity was supposed to put an end, once and for all, to such putatively premodern things. The iron cage, so feared by Max Weber, turns out to have been a cage of ironies. To be sure, if ever there was a figure that typified the magical production of wealth without work, of the occult grounding of neoliberal capitalism *tout court*, it is the zombie: all surplus value, no costly, irrational, troublesome human needs. This kaleidoscopic figure, the ultimate embodiment of flexible, 'non-standard,' asocial labor, comes to us in a range of ethnographic, historical, and literary accounts that point both to subtle differences and to noncoincidental similarities. Zombies appear, simultaneously, as antemodern and

postmodern, simultaneously supralocal, translocal, and local, simultaneously planetary and, refracted through the shards of vernacular cultural practices, profoundly parochial. Which is why the living-dead now regularly cross international borders; why, say, a South African doctor of Indian origins could claim to have been turned into a ghostly automaton by a Nigerian satanist.[7] And why zombification, the stuff of much urban legend across the world right now, has become an allegorical touchstone for describing the ostensible alienation, loss of individuality, and corporate mastery of an epoch, as yet in its infancy, already being described as Post-Human (Halberstam and Livingston, 1995; Fukuyama, 2002). As it did, albeit in somewhat different guise, with the rise of Fordism and the mode of human abstraction (dis)embodied in its production lines[8] – and, before that, on the plantations and in the mines of far-flung colonies.

Our concerns here, we stress, are *not* theoretical or conceptual.[9] We came across zombies, recall, through an *empirical* conjuncture: it was by force of historical fact, rather than by way of abstract analytical interest, that we found ourselves compelled to make sense of them in situ. Consequently, what detains us here is much more immediate, much more modest, much more, well, methodological. By what ethnographic means does one capture the commodification of human beings in part or in whole, the occult economy of which it is part, the material and moral conditions that animate such an economy, the new religious and social movements it spawns, the modes of producing wealth which it privileges, and so on? Inherently awkward of scale, none of these phenomena are easily captured by the ethnographer's lens. Should each of them nonetheless be interrogated purely in their own particularity, their own locality? Or should we try to recognize where, in the particularity of the local, lurk social forces of larger scale, forces whose sociology demands attention if we are to make sense of the worlds we study without parochializing and, worse yet, exoticizing them. Geertz (1973), for whom ethnography defined the generic *practice* of anthropology, once remarked famously that we do not study villages, that we study *in* villages. The point was well-taken. But how – given that the objects of our gaze commonly elude, embrace, attenuate, transcend, transform, consume, and construct the local – do we arrive at a praxis for an age that seems . . . post-anthropological? Of an age in which we are called upon not to study *in* places at all, indeed not to trust 'anthropological locations' (Gupta and Ferguson, 1997), but rather to study the *production* of place (Appadurai, 1996)? If we are not sure where or what 'the field' is, or how to circumscribe the things in which we interest ourselves, wherein lie the ways and means by which we are to make the knowledges with which we vex ourselves?

Of course, the question of Method, in the upper case, is not new. It has been with us throughout the life of the discipline, if in different forms and

formulations. Nor, right now, are we alone in this. Postcolonial historians, for example, seem to be anguishing a lot these days about the death of history. Not *The End of History* as proclaimed a decade ago, somewhat infamously, by Francis Fukuyama (1992), but an altogether new kind of death: death by diffusion into memory, biography, testimony, heritage tourism, and other expressions of history-as-lived rather than history-as-learned (Minkley et al., n.d.; cf. Comaroff, forthcoming). In times past we anthropologists plagued ourselves over the epistemic, ethical, and political dimensions of what we do: over whether ours was not an endemically colonizing enterprise – a preemptive seizure of authority, of voice, of the right to represent and, incidentally, to profit – or, worse yet, an activity founded, voyeuristically, on the violation of 'the' other. Now, like those postcolonial historians, we worry whether our subject matter is ours at all or whether it has forever dispersed itself beyond our privileged dominion. Once we were told that we would be out of business just as soon as our natives were no longer authentically native (a.k.a. primitive, colonized). Today we are undermined by the fact that those very 'natives' have seized the terms of our trade, terms in which we once described *them*, terms that seem not to work very well any more as analytic constructs, terms that, now essentialized and commodified by 'others' one and all, return to haunt us. Add to this two other considerations, themselves intimately connected: first, the aforementioned fact that almost everything which falls within the discursive purview of contemporary anthropology exists, in the phenomenal world, on a scale that does not yield easily to received anthropological theories or methods; and second, that our 'subjects' no longer inhabit social contexts for which we have a persuasive lexicon, not least because abstract nouns like society, community, culture, and class have all been called into question in this ever more neoliberal age (cf. Stoller, 1997: 82), this age of the scare quote-around-everything, this age of ironic, iconic detachment. What, in the upshot, are we left with? A very stark question: Has ethnography become an impossibility? Have we finally reached its end?

Ethnography and its global distractions

> . . . what actually happened, the facts of the case, who said what . . . all that is incidental. The real truth is behind all that. The real truth may be swimming in a completely different direction . . . And that's what you have to get to . . . Forget the appearances.
>
> (*The Great Ourdoors*, dir. Neil McCarthy)[10]

Not surprisingly, in light of this Big Question, there has been a fair bit of debate, over the past few years, about the fate of ethnography in the age

of globalization. We have addressed the matter ourselves, most pointedly in our Max Gluckman Memorial Lecture of 1998 (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1999a). Its title, 'Occult Economies and the Violence of Abstraction,' sought to invoke the stark dislocations wrought on the everyday lives of ordinary citizens in the northerly provinces of South Africa by material forces of ever more planetary scale, dislocations about which many of them spoke with both anxiety and passion. We also meant to underscore the challenge involved in grasping, ethnographically, the processes by which those world-historical forces were being made meaningful and tractable by the human beings in question: how they labored to condense and personalize values and relations in conditions which *they* presumed to be labile, difficult to understand, inherently mysterious in their effects. Among our objectives, in sum, was an effort to reflect on the interplay of theory and method in the treatment of an anthropological location of changing proportions. Although of pressing concern at the moment, this is a problem as old as the discipline itself. Our essay, after all, was written to commemorate a scholar who tried long ago to subject the broad sweep of the colonial encounter to the ethnographic gaze.

In the post-Marxist age, the strongest suit of anthropology, in the eyes of most of its practitioners, remains its 'ability to get inside and understand small-scale communities, to comprehend local loyalties and systems of knowledge' (Graeber, 2002: 1222). Our disciplinary concerns may alter, our genres may blur, our theories may come and go, but ethnography remains 'the anthropologist's muse' (Lewis, 1973), the source of solace to which we turn in the face of epistemic or political doubt. An extended spell of 'participant-observation' is still the irreducible minimum of professional credentials required in the discipline, Sherry Ortner (1997: 61) notes. This in spite of the ambiguity that attaches to each of the two terms, not to mention the oxymoron built into their hyphenation. This in spite, also, of the fact – illustrated by Ortner's own account of studying the 'postcommunity' – that contemporary anthropological practice deviates, as it probably always has done, from the foundational fiction of fieldwork: the conceit, now long criticized (cf. Gupta and Ferguson, 1997), that it is possible to access 'the totality of relations' of a 'society,' or the essential workings of 'a culture,' in any one place.[11]

And yet the axiom that lies behind this fiction, that *any* knowledge derived at first-hand by proximity to natives has an a priori privilege, continues to shape the analytical vision of the discipline. 'Ethnography,' says George Marcus (1994: 44), 'functions well and creatively without a sense that it needs a positive theoretical paradigm – that is, conventional social theory – to guide it. Instead, it breeds off the critique of its own rhetoric.' As a result, anthropology has, for the most part, remained unrelentingly positivist in spirit. Much of its shared wisdom consists in generalizations

about the particular that are also particularizations of the general; empirical aggregates, in short, not abstract propositions or explanatory schemata. The role of this species of knowledge, like its politics (Graeber, 2002), has been to show that, even in the act of accommodating to ineluctable macrocosmic forces, different peoples do things differently, be it because of their distinctive cultures, their social situations, or their will to resist (cf. Marcus, 1994). The epistemic consequences that follow are plain enough: a committed realism, and a form of relativism that sits uneasily with 'general' theory grounded in history, philosophy, political economy, or whatever. True, there have always been counter tendencies: those who have espoused evolutionary, Marxist, sociobiological, or psychoanalytic approaches, for instance, have been more partial to higher-order abstraction, generalization, explanation. But this minority has tended to be the exception that proves the rule.

The epistemic foundations of anthropological empiricism received somewhat less scrutiny than they might have done during the 'reflexive moment' of the 1980s. But in practice, ethnography was already undergoing a metamorphosis. The discipline was coming face to face with the consequences of what had begun to make itself felt in the 1960s: that 'local' systems – or, to be more precise, the signs and practices observable within any given social world, however it was constituted – could no longer be studied, or accounted for, with reference to conventional geographies; that the fiction of sovereign cultures, however deftly described or ethnographically authenticated, could no longer be sustained; that established modes of representation were no longer sufficient unto the political and ethical demands of 'writing culture' (Clifford and Marcus, 1986). Yet, in the absence of 'an explicit paradigm for experimentation' (Marcus, 1994: 46), the methodological revolution one might have expected to flow from these shifts of perspective – themselves sharpened with every passing year by the complex, uneven effects of processes of planetary integration – has not been forthcoming. *Per contra*, notwithstanding some creative efforts to author new kinds of anthropology, the reaction in many quarters, in Europe as well as in North America, has been conservative. There has been a tendency to batten down the hatches in fervid defense of the particular, the local, and the parochial against the onslaught of 'the global' (e.g. Englund, 1996; Rutherford, 1999; Sahlins, 1999; Kapferer, 2000, 2001), the latter, in anthropology-talk, having become a generalized, under-motivated sign of the changing universe in which we live and work.

Why? One consequence of globalization for the human sciences, argues Appadurai (1997: 115), has been to instill an anxiety that the 'space of intimacy in social life' will be lost; the very space of intimacy that has always been the ethnographer's stock-in-trade. Whether or not this is a sufficient

explanation for the anthropological *angst* of the present moment, it certainly *is* the case that our latest 'crisis of representation' has been transposed into a methodological key – as if the survival of the discipline depended entirely on preserving its established modes of producing knowledge. Note how, in some quarters, ethnography is being depicted as an endangered species. Englund and Leach (2000: 238), for instance, appear to believe that 'it' is engaged in a mortal struggle with 'generalizing perspectives' whose powerful, if unnamed, proponents have allegedly decreed that 'localized fieldwork has had its day.' For Englund and Leach, the enemy is the 'meta-narrative of modernity,' a somewhat ill-defined construct which, despite their protestations to the contrary, seems suspiciously like a synonym for 'Theory' in the upper case.[12] And for an ensemble of 'familiar sociological abstractions,' among them commodification, space-time compression, individualization, disenchantment. This 'metropolitan' meta-narrative, they argue, 'undermine(s) . . . what is unique in the ethnographic method – its reflexivity, which gives subjects authority in determining the context of their beliefs and practices' (Englund and Leach, 2000: 225). The apprehensiveness about the future of fieldwork palpable here seems to stem, above all, from a crisis of identity, from sacred boundaries breached, and, concomitantly, from the desire to preserve a unique scholarly patrimony from the encroachment of an ever more generic social science. It cannot have gone unnoticed, in this regard, that *other* disciplines have lately laid claim to ethnographic methods. Thus Englund and Leach (2000: 238) insist that '[t]he uniqueness of the ethnographic method is at stake in the current fascination with multiple modernities . . . Sociocultural anthropology merges into cultural studies and cultural sociology, and ethnographic analyses become illustrations consumed by metropolitan theorists.' How unlike an earlier, brilliantly iconoclastic Leach (1961), who encouraged anthropologists to move, by 'inspired guesswork,' beyond hidebound empiricism.

There are serious political issues at stake in arguments like this. In the effort to privilege 'the local,' however worthy it may be, we risk slighting or misrecognizing the global forces that – increasingly, if with varying degrees of visibility – are besetting 'little guys' (Graeber, 2002: 1223) all over the map. Many of those among whom we work, apparently unlike Englund and Leach's 'natives,'[13] are *very* anxious about the effect of those forces, which, *they* tell us, are putting their social and material survival at risk. In the *faux* egalitarianism of these neoliberal times, it is easy to become mired in trivial arguments over whether 'meta-narratives of modernity,' or 'Theory,' removes from 'others' the capacity to represent themselves or to determine their own futures. All this while the masters of the market, and powerful political pragmatists, fashion new modes of extraction, abstraction, and explanation. We would do well to ponder, in this respect, why it

is that so many 'native' intellectuals have been distrustful of even the most sensitive, ostensibly other-centered knowledge produced by our discipline, why they believe that this knowledge is *intrinsically* inimical to their own authority and interests (cf. Asad, 1973; Banaji, 1970; Magubane, 1971). Mafeje (1998: 67; cf. Sharp, 1998), for one, holds that ethnography, to be true to itself, needs to be liberated entirely from anthropology, thus to become – without even the most reflexive of ethnographers – a source 'of social texts authored [solely] by the people themselves'. The logical end point of reducing our practice to the elicitation of narratives of local experience is not a unique anthropology at all. Nor is it a politics of positive engagement. Quite the opposite. In a postcolonial age in which 'natives' everywhere speak for themselves, it is, simply, redundancy. The alternative, patently, is to argue for a theoretically and politically principled social science.

For our own part, we continue to have confidence in ethnography and the forms of insight – both reflective and reflexive, both imaginative and empirical – to which it gives access. There is a proviso, however: that, instead of fetishizing method, instead of romancing the idea that it might itself yield up naked truths, we face up to the epistemic challenge of what it takes to 'commit social science' in the postcolonial world: in a world in which 'globalization' is an increasingly contested, troubling reality, in which 'modernity' is an increasingly contested, troubling ideological formation (Knauft, 1997). Those anthropologists who have chosen to take on this challenge have tended *not* to decry 'localized' ethnography, but to insist on its unique value in plumbing the nature and effects of large-scale social, economic, and political processes (e.g. Appadurai, 1996, 1997; Geschiere, 1997; Meyer, 1999; Weiss, 1996). Their work points to the fact that our modes of producing knowledge demand critical review – even 'redesign' (Marcus, 1994: 46) – in the face of history; especially the history of a time such as this, when popular discourses across the planet posit that the world is undergoing changes of major proportions. This perception, after all, does not exist only in the imagination of anthropologists afflicted with 'the meta-narrative of modernity'. What is more, we need to concede that our craft is not, and never has been, analytically self-sufficient. Part of a shifting division of labor within the human sciences, it is engaged in dialogue with other ways of making sense of the present in both its macro- and micro-cosmic dimensions (Sharp, 1998; Stoller, 1997). This is all to the good, since it is only by broadening our frames of reference that we may address some of the awkward questions that have come to confront us about our methodology: can we be sure, for example, that 'the particular' we seek to study, or the cultural worlds we presume to exist, may actually be *empirically* bounded? Is 'the local' not the constantly refashioned *product* of forces well beyond itself (Appadurai, 1996; also 1997)? Does it not exist only as part

of a sociopolitical geography of multiple scales and coordinates (Ortner, 1997)? Is it not true that the singularity of places, just like the singularity of 'traditions,' 'customs,' and 'cultures,' is being fashioned ever more in response to the market? Surely, neat antinomies between the local and the global, between field and context, between ethnography and metanarrative, beg the very questions that we should be asking.

These questions have also been at the core of a friendly exchange we have had with Sally Falk Moore (1999) over the susceptibility of large-scale analytic claims to ethnographic proof. Her critique of our Gluckman lecture hinges on a methodological point: the unverifiability of its central thesis, namely, that the rapid expansion of an occult economy in postcolonial South Africa has been a by-product of the material *and* experiential impact on rural populations of the cumulative effects of a globalizing capitalism – specifically, of the processes of abstraction and alienation built into it. The 'imaginative sociology' by means of which we arrive at this thesis may be illuminating, concedes Moore. But it does not offer sufficient evidence either to substantiate or to falsify a claim of cause-and-effect. Moreover, by ascribing the growth of a local occult economy to world-historical forces, we 'turn general context into particular explanation' (1999: 306). We also *confuse* the general and the particular. How so? At times, she suggests, we deny that resort to the magical, and to its associated forms of violence, is unique to South Africa; at other times we imply that there is something special about its deployment here.

Allow us to recall what the disagreement is about. Our objectives in the Gluckman lecture were twofold. One was to make sense of some highly visible, much discussed, old-yet-new practices in postcolonial South Africa. Taken together, these practices, themselves rooted in variously defined 'localities,' appeared to constitute a discernible phenomenon: an occult *economy*. As we have implied, this term describes an empirically-grounded abstraction, an abstraction derived from, but not reducible to, the narrated experience and social activities of a large number of diversely positioned human beings. In short, it is an analytic concept based in the concrete. Located between the global and the local, subsuming them in a four-dimensional geography,[14] that concept is mobilized to arrive at 'thick,' moving portraits of people's lives and labors; also *to elucidate the motivation, the meaning, and the consequences* of their actions. It is a tool that enables the dialectic of deduction and induction on which, in our view, all principled social science ought to be founded.

The other objective of our analysis of 'occult economies' was to explain why that enchanted economy should manifest itself so palpably now, when conventional wisdom would have us expect otherwise; why it calls forth received cultural practices, yet transmutes them into virulently altered forms; why, while clearly a domestic product, it bears close resemblance to

similar economies in other places, most of all in post-totalitarian contexts, where neoliberal reform has suddenly and simultaneously liberated and disempowered, enriched and impoverished. These parallels are striking and yet hard to pin down. They bear witness to the play of large forces: (i) that, although volatile and only partly visible, are not random; (ii) whose existence may be inferred only through their effects; (iii) whose workings vary across the axes of the planetary map, making them impossible to grasp at only one site; and (iv) which, because they have not yet fully run their course, elude proof by ordinary means. The problem that we set ourselves, then, was to account for the workings of a metamorphosing capitalism that is *both* global in its reach and localized in its protean manifestations. Built into that problem is an effort to engage at once with the general and the particular, with variance and similarity, with continuity and rupture. Far from being a confusion yielded by our method, it is a necessary requirement thereof. Respectful of the empirical without being empiricist, we sought to open up new angles on a world-historical process of awkward, shifting scale.

At issue here, then, are alternative ideologies-of-method, alternative epistemes. The differences that flow from them, not least over what it takes to prove an argument or to verify a theory, are substantial. Which is why we stand accused, in this exchange, of not having provided enough evidentiary support for claims about some very general transformations in South African economy and society; even more, about their location in the broad sweep of the history of capital. Even if we agree that we ought to render as 'provable propositions' our analysis of these transformations – or of the ways in which they are locally inhabited, experienced, narrated, acted upon – we find it hard to see *how* to do so without resorting to reduction *ad absurdum*. But we do *not* believe that this is what we should be doing; indeed, we resist the positivist reflex that would encourage us to do so. After all, if they were held to the demands of empiricist validation, or subjected to the blinding lights of western science, some of the most enduring insights of modernist social thought would not pass muster. We have in mind, inter alia, Marx's analysis of the commodity, Weber's elective affinity between Protestantism and the rise of capitalism, and Durkheim's theory of the elementary forms of religious life.

Marx, Weber, and Durkheim, of course, all argued against both ungrounded historical conjecture and theory deduced purely from philosophical first principles; although each of them indulged in these things on occasion. More to the point here, each sought to take the measure of the difficult relation between the *experience* of social phenomena and the forces and facts, the rhymes and reasons, that lay behind it. Each exercised a fertile sociological imagination, seeking, in the Great Outdoors of their changing worlds, to 'forget the appearances,' the better to discern the 'real truths'

swimming behind them (McCarthy, cited above). Each knew that social action, like the fabrication of social meaning, is not pursued by human beings just as they please; that its determinations have to be explained; that the job of the social scientist is to construe the *processes* by which realities are realized, objects objectified, classes of persons and things classified, and so forth. All of which returns us to the dialectics of deduction and induction – to the co-production of fact and sociological imagining – implicated in 'doing ethnography.'

It also returns us to a very basic question: precisely what kinds of methodological operations are entailed in 'doing ethnography' as we envision it? That question is not, we suggest, best answered in the abstract. Just as method is always profoundly theoretical in its provenance, so its substance ought always to be practice-based and context-sensitive.

Confronting the great outdoors

Our time: 1989, near the end of apartheid.
Our place: the North West Province of South Africa where, long ago, we did doctoral research.
We returned to the Mafikeng District after an enforced absence of some 20 years; our research, in the interim, had crossed over into Botswana and into the colonial past. Driving in from across the veld, we crested the foothill to the south of the Tshidi-Rolong capital to behold a strikingly discordant landscape. The contours of the old Tswana town – weathered red-clay walls, desiccated thatch roofs, giant boulders, cattle-trodden trails, spry camelthorns – had been dwarfed by a skyline of altogether different scale. The precocious, postmodern outlines of a new city, its architecture a bold pastiche of various international styles of the 1970s and 1980s, proclaimed an assertive, upstart governmentality. History and Hubris, both capitalized, had consummated a brazen, quick and dirty *affaire* on this arid terrain: on it, one of apartheid's most elaborate ethnic 'homelands' (*bantus tans*) had been put in place. The illegitimate insta-polity of Bophuthatswana, and the simulacra of its bastard sovereignty, had been erected on land long owned and inhabited by the Tshidi, subjecting them and scores of other Tswana chiefdoms across the northwest to the violent authority of a puppet-state empowered by the material, military, and ideological might of the apartheid regime.

What met our astonished gaze, in sum, was the enactment, in concrete, of that regime's version of indirect rule: the tight, closely-policed integration of local polities, under their 'traditional' rulers, into an ostensibly independent ethno-nation. Herein lay the completion of the process, endemic to colonialism, by which those polities – now designated 'tribal authorities' – were relegated to the peripheries of a nation-state predicated on difference.

The running together of humble adobe and soaring plate glass made visible another juxtaposition: the affirmation, on one hand, of a sense of Tshidi cultural particularity, and, on the other, its encompassment within a wider, multi-ethnic state that was itself a maelstrom of powerful economic, social, and moral currents. It hardly seemed accidental that the independent-minded Tshidi chief, Kebalepile, had died in Mafikeng in the early 1970s, allegedly as a result of witchcraft at the hands of the recently-installed president of Bophuthatswana, Lucas Mangope.[15] Mangope, a subaltern sovereign if there ever was one, was seen by the citizenry of Mafikeng as the new colonizing cuckoo in their nest. By blaming him for the occult killing of their traditional leader, Tshidi sought to name the spirit of a spiritless age, the *Zeitgeist* of late-colonial history.

This magical murder, refracted through the local moral imaginary, might have opened a new chapter in the unfolding confrontation between the late Tshidi world and the wider universe that embraced it. But the history of which it was part went back a long way. As we have noted before (e.g. Comaroff and Comaroff, 1991, 1997), *setswana*, the more-or-less open, more-or-less labile ensemble of signs and practices taken locally to constitute vernacular 'culture' – the term is used as freely by black South Africans these days as it is by others – was itself the offspring of a protracted colonial encounter. Mafikeng bore all the scars of that encounter, of earlier struggles, of earlier conjunctures. In the mid-1800s, for example, it was at the nub of a frontier along which white settlers and African chiefdoms fought over land, labor, and sovereignty; along which, too, evangelists fought for souls and civilization. Later, at the turn of the 20th century, during the South African War, it became an imperial battleground on which heroes and villains of all races vied for national gains and personal glory. More recently, it has been branded as a commodity, a heritage site on the newly-wrought tourist map of the postcolony. And for all this time it has lain at the crossroads of an intricate web of exchange relations: relations among the various Tswana polities of the region, relations between them and diverse 'strangers,' relations that fan out, today, across the globe. The embarrassment of historical traces we found here stubbornly resist the foreshortened lens of the ethnographic here-and-now.

Consequently, in order to account for the social archaeology of the place, and for the ebullient memories of its people, we were forced from the first to historicize our methods; this, in the early 1970s, at a time when there was a great deal of antipathy within anthropology toward history. We had no alternative *but* to develop an ethnography of the archives to discern the processes by which the past and the present had constructed each other; an ethnography that, among other things, entailed scouring the records – images, inventories, accounts, material shards, documents, linguistic residues, even silences and absences – for the constellation of ordinary

practices, the passions and interests, that produced and reproduced this site as an empirical fact, a named-and-known locale (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1992). Often this meant trawling texts for what they were *not*, putting into conversation pieces of paper that, in the cold storage of the archives, languish as solitary objects. It also necessitated our transposing inert verbs and nouns into depictions of living things, of vibrant ritual activities, of expressions of collective affect, effort, effect.

If the ethnography of the archives proved anything, it was that Mafikeng, 'Place of Stones,' had, from the start, been situated between a rock and a hard place. The town was established by the ruling Tshidi chief, in the 1850s, with two ends in mind: to ward off the seizure of his land by white settlers and to quarantine the rise of Christianity, along with its Eurocentric forms of civility. In time, and for complicated historical reasons, Mafikeng would become the capital of the chiefdom. It was here that Tshidi asserted their autonomy as fully as they could from the colonial state, the settler economy, and the British missions; here that they fashioned an ethnically-marked localism – referred to, explicitly, as *setswana*, 'Tswana ways and means' – that quietly fused into itself the cultural practices of various others. For their part, the Protestant converts, original residents of the place, were also to make common cause with a national black petite bourgeoisie anxious to proclaim its modernity.

We hardly need insist here that, to be read ethnographically, these economies of signs and practices have to be situated in the intimacy of the local contexts that gave them life. At the same time, they require to be inserted into the translocal processes of which they were part *ab initio*: processes – commodification, colonization, proletarianization, and the like – composed of a plethora of acts, facts, and utterances whose very description demands that we frame them in the terms of one or other Theory of History. The emerging substance of Tshidi religious, legal, literary culture, their styles of costume and senses of self, all deployed images and materials at once fresh and familiar, autochthonous and imported. Each, in its own idiom, replayed, and sought to redress, the imagined, imaginative antimonies of the colonial world: in marking the contrast between magic and faith, custom and reason, folk dress and fashion, the living forms of *setswana* recycled, remade, and unravelled the contrast between the culturally particular and the universal, between ethnic subjects and modern persons. Between Africa and Europe.[16]

For much of its modern existence, anthropology has been trapped inside this set of antinomies. Its ethnographic habitat has, conventionally if not always, been the first term of each: the particular, ethnic subjects, Africa. Conventionally, too, these terms have been taken to signify analytic domains that may be treated as self-sufficient unto themselves. And, for heuristic purposes at least, as hermetically, hermeneutically closed. This was certainly

the orientation that framed our first fieldwork among '*the* Tshidi-Rolong' of Mafikeng in the late 1960s, when the proclivities of a British structural-functionalist training seemed perfectly reflected in the ethnology of African tribes invoked by high apartheid. Yet our fieldsite – chosen because it gave us an alternative vantage across the Bostwana border if we were expelled by a regime hostile to research on the 'wrong' side of the color bar – proved stubbornly intractable to this perspective. Whether in respect of political, legal, or religious processes, of kinship relations or healing rites, there simply were no 'customary' practices that did not bear the imprint of long-standing engagement with various elsewheres, with (often coercive) embodied social and material forces beyond themselves. The production of the local here was always also entailed in the effort to fabricate some measure of existential coherence and closure against the cross-currents of history, a history of overrule and economic expropriation, of colonial evangelism, of apartheid, of the ravages of deliberately exploitative labor markets. Of prophets and profiteers, madmen and migrants.

For all their discordant hyper-modernity, then, the built-forms of the *bantustan* were but an increment in a drawn-out dialogue between the local and the translocal, here and elsewhere – these tropes being understood *not* as antonyms but as imaginative axes on maps of shifting scale. As it turned out, for all its concrete confidence, this edifice of apartheid was in its death throes. The long colonial history that had spawned it was coming to an abrupt end, swept away by the changes that marked the close of the Cold War and the realignment of the old international order. So, too, was the national economy that underpinned the *ancien régime*, its industrial infrastructure and its sovereign autonomy recalibrated by the cumulative effects of neoliberal capitalism. By the time we next visited Mafikeng, two years after South Africa's first free democratic elections, its civic structures had been inhabited by functionaries of a new provincial government. The old white town, once set off from its black counterpart by the railway line and by equally caste-iron cultural and legal barriers, had been significantly integrated.

Other auguries also suggested that Mafikeng had entered a new era – or, rather, that the proportionate relationship between rupture and continuity had, for the moment, tilted somewhat toward the former; history, in our view, is *never* all one or the other, *always* a complex analytic equation-to-be-resolved. Unfamiliar forces, emanating less from the old international order than from the global economy, were making themselves felt as never before. Some of them promised the infusion of cargo that black South Africans had expected with their liberation: an army of NGOs, of 'universal' Neoprotestant churches, of distance-learning corporations, of Internet services had opened up around town. Almost immediately, locals tried to capture the bounty promised by these technicians of 21st century

'development.' Not only did satellite dishes mushroom across the veld. One mud-brick building, nestling beneath a thorn tree on an otherwise barren stretch of land, sported a rough, hand-painted sign: 'We teach in English, in step with the global age.'

At the same time, less sanguine signs gave Tswana cause for anxiety. Many pointed out – to us, in letters to newspapers, on local TV – that the old migrant labor system had collapsed and that this collapse, along with a severe recession, had made jobs extremely scarce, especially for young black males. An unusual number of people appeared to be dying in accidents, to be committing suicide, to be victimized by brutal crime, to be ill, to be depressed. Public facilities and welfare services were receding by the month. There was a growing population of 'black people' on the streets, immigrants from elsewhere in Africa who were drawing much suspicious and scandalized talk: having eluded state regulation, it was said, they were plying their wares noisily on once pristine sidewalks, thus usurping the trade of South African merchants. Not only that: they had brought drugs and AIDS with them, and had taken the few available jobs on the surrounding farms. And yet, despite all this pessimism, notwithstanding all this apocalyptic talk, in the midst of this economy of genuine hardship, some locals seemed, mysteriously, to be prospering. As we note elsewhere (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1999a), it is this that has fed the raw underside of the occult economy: the killing of alleged witches and zombie-conjurers.

Zombie-conjurers. This brings us back full circle to where we began. To the strangely dissociated man in the police station, to the youths who killed because they believed their fathers to have been turned into phantom laborers, to popular representations of the violent abstraction entailed in witchcraft. Recall what we said at the outset: that the zombie is a figure metonymic of the playing out of world-historical forces in the northerly reaches of South Africa right now; also of the domestication of a form of neoliberal capitalism thought to enable the production of wealth without work. Recall, too, the question that followed: how are we to make sense *methodologically* of this figure, of those forces, of their determinations, of the unfolding connections between them? That the question demands a sociological imagination at once local and translocal, empirical and analytic, was brought into sharp relief for us in a context part pedagogic, part ethnographic. During a history class at the University of the North West, a graduate student broke suddenly across the discussion: 'Do Americans believe in *diphoko,* in magical medicines?' he asked. 'Is it like here? Is there also trouble with zombies in America?'

By what methodological means, then, *did* we actually address the question of the living-dead in the late Tswana world?

Discursive flows and the dialectics of discovery

> [Writing a novel is] like playing chess in three dimensions. (David Lodge, 1999: 52)

So, too, is doing ethnography. Four dimensions, actually, if one includes the terrain of the virtual: the electronic commons, that is, that has interpellated itself – as a medium of translocal communication, as a vehicle for the flow of money and other kinds of capital, as a mechanism of the market, as an instrument for the establishment of public spheres of different scales – into even quite remote social worlds.

Unlike chess, however, ethnography-as-practice has, in the first instance, to construct its own field of play, its own heuristic landscape. Strategically, it has always seemed logical to us to locate the center of that field around one or more focal points to which the anthropological senses are drawn *because they are the crucibles in which contemporary vernacular concerns – whatever they may be, whatever their phenomenal scale – are construed, enacted, played out, socially contextualized.* Given that our anthropology seeks to be empirically-grounded without being empiricist, our objects of research have invariably been defined with reference to the prevailing preoccupations of the times and places in which we have worked, whether they be the politics of chiefship or ecstatic religious movements, agrarian development and its undersides, the colonial encounter, occult economies, or, most recently, crime, policing, and the metaphysics of disorder. In the dialectic of the concept and the concrete, it is the latter that sets methodology in motion, serving as the *fons et origo* of the operations by which we set out to apprehend the existential processes of everyday life. Our ethnography, in other words, takes off *not* from theory or from a meta-narrative, but from the situated effects of seeing and listening. Of course, the *way* in which we see, *what* we pay attention to, and *how*, is not empirically ordained; that, ineluctably, depends on a prior conceptual scaffolding, which, once the dialectic of discovery is set in motion, is open to reconstruction.

In the late 1990s, the zombie, and the enchanted economy of which it was part, provided just such a focal point at which the preoccupations of the period had taken tangible shape. How did we know this? It came at us, insistently, from a number of diverse sources, some of them already alluded to: in such episodes as the encounter with the almost-naked man on Station Road, in what followed at the police station, and in the sheer ordinariness of the whole thing to the men in blue; in the murder of alleged corpse-conjurer, Motlhabane Makolomakwa, in its avidly-consumed press coverage (see Figure 1), in its courtroom arguments, and in the conversations to which it gave rise, many of them about the 'epidemic' of occult

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THE MAIL

Bizarre zombie claim in court

Figure 1

violence afflicting the northerly provinces; in ‘mob’ attacks, committed by local youths in the name of their communities, against those suspected of practicing the arcane arts; in personal stories of the sort told to us by the scion of a ruling dynasty – a man with a first-class graduate degree in development studies, an excellent job in government, and a large following as a DJ in a large city nearby – who had lost a beloved sibling, snatched away secretly by a witch for whom he worked until rescued many months later; in a remarkable incident in which police tried to save a young boy from the persistent attacks of a vicious *tokoloshe*, a translocal witch familiar,[17] first by calling in the local television channel in the hope that its cameras might immobilize the creature and then by eliciting the help of several technicians of the sacred (see Figure 2); in the reactions of the state to outbreaks of witchcraft killings, which included tough law enforcement, high-level conferences on the topic, and the appointment of a commission of enquiry; in discussions on the Internet, in national and regional TV dramas, documentaries, news broadcasts, and talk shows, in local genres of cultural production (see Figure 3); and, most of all, in our everyday exchanges in homes and schools, stores and shebeens, taxi ranks and churches across the length and breadth of the Mafikeng district.

This was not all, not by any means. But it gives a sense of the way in which a flow of narratives, incidents, activities, dramas, material exchanges, conversations, and representations embedded in the ‘natural’ discourse of different and complementary public spheres may come to organize the ethnographic gaze – and, thereby, to set method in motion. Discursive flows, although having focal centers, are inherently open, flexible in scope, and shifting in both their content and their constituents. Determining what, exactly, falls within the purview of any such flow is itself a product in part

Dreaded tokoloshe haunts small boy

Figure 2

of paying careful attention, in part of inspired guesswork, in part of theoretical and philosophical predilection; making sense of its substance depends on what, previously, we have spoken of as an 'imaginative sociology.' We use 'imaginative' here in two senses. It refers to: (i) doing ethnography by plumbing – through whatever resources of the *analytic imagination* are available to us within the political and ethical imperatives of our practice – the phenomenal worlds in which we situate ourselves; this by (ii) seeking to grasp the manner in which those worlds are *indigenously imagined* and inhabited by people variously positioned within them. Note all the plurals. They point to an anthropological cliché, albeit an important one: that most of the signs and practices with which we concern ourselves are either contested or, if not, are the object of a polyphony of perceptions, valuations, means and ends.

To the extent that doing ethnography necessitates, in the first instance, tapping into focal discursive flows – and, lest we be misunderstood, we reiterate that this includes not 'just' talk or texts but *practices* as well, not 'just' the meaningful but also the material – it demands three critical methodological operations. Each is a condition of the others' productivity.

The first is the pursuit, in respect of any given discursive flow, of points of articulation among the various spheres in which it manifests itself; this by tracing the co-presence of persons, texts, images, or arguments (and especially arguments of images) across them. Thus, for example, the

THE Mail

BOP REACHES OUT

MISS S.A. CROWNED

NEW 'ZOMBIE' CLAIMS - BUT NOW ABOUT WOMAN

DONDOLO RE-APPEARS

WHAT IS THIS DOG DOING?

Figure 3

imaginative sociology that we were able to construct surrounding the figure of the zombie – and that was to sediment into our ethnographically-rooted abstraction, the 'occult economy' – took shape when we began to hear similar words and see similar pictures over and over: when, among many

other things, the accused youths in the Makolomakwa murder trial claimed that the deceased had 'killed their fathers and put them to work'; when stories about zombification kept returning to the 'fact' that the witches in question, invariably sexual 'perverts,' had 'turned people into tools,' thereby preventing ordinary citizens from earning a living or starting a family; when an old woman, said to have amassed 'mysterious' wealth, was told, as she was set on fire by the 'boys' of her village, that they had no income because of her; when so much local opinion, from the most intellectual to the most humble, blamed the living-dead for the absence of employment, for denying young black males the opportunity to graduate to adulthood, for the despoliation of community. This is not to say that all representations of, or explanations for, the postcolonial (re-)appearance of zombies are the same. Nor that they are ascribed the same social salience by everyone. However, where there *is* argument about the matter – be it in courts of law or over quarts of beer, on soccer fields or in the maize fields, around backyard fires or among fired workers, in university classrooms, church meetings, or the electronic media – it usually turns back to the connection of witchcraft to the dearth of work and the impossibility of securing the future; the last being what we, in theory-speak, might refer to as a crisis of social reproduction. This, in short, is the animating vernacular around which the discursive flow is organized. It turns out to be crucial in the dialectic of the concept and the concrete, of theory and ethnography.

The first methodological operation, then, is to *map the substance of the phenomenal landscape* on which any discursive flow is grounded, thus to identify its animating vernaculars and to chart the object world in which it interpolates itself. The second is to follow the traces of that discursive flow, of its various signs and images, tracking the migration of the latter from their densest intersections to wherever else they may lead.

Let us give a couple of instances from the situation with which we were concerned here. One is the allusion to the sexual perversion of witches, a submerged theme in many zombie narratives. At face value, this allusion seems, in itself, to have little to do with the workings of the occult economy or the figure of the zombie, more with the figuration of the witch as 'standardized nightmare' (Wilson, 1951), the epitome of anti-sociality and immorality. But in pursuing the allusion, in posing questions about it, in seeing where else it turned up, we found ourselves drawn into a meaning-maze that took in AIDS, the sexualization of death, bad blood, compromised masculinity, and drought – and culminated, by fusing all of these things, in the clear and present threat to the future of communities everywhere attendant on the fact that young men cannot find work or make families. As sexual pervert, the witch, in short, embodies social destruction, fertility abused, social reproduction violated.

The other instance also arose out of a recurrent theme in zombie

narratives: what precisely is the reach of the occult economy? What is the reach of the modern witch? Is corpse-conjuring, or the arcane fabrication of wealth without work, purely a parochial matter? Or does it somehow extend beyond? One night, the local TV channel held a phone-in talk show in which the special guests were a pair of young 'reformed' satanists, each with his spiritual advisor. Asked about the difference between witchcraft and satanism, one answered, in a fluent mix of Setswana and English: 'Satanism is high-octane witchcraft. It is more international' (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1999a). This comment called forth a flood of responses from the virtual community constructed by the program. The station switchboard was overrun. Audiences across the province were fascinated. Satanists were said, by and large, to be youthful, male, and black, just the social category most under threat of joblessness, most likely to dabble in nefarious new technologies. Witches, by contrast, were held to be motivated, more often, by local conflicts, framed in long-standing idioms of kinship and community; although they, too, appear to be widening their horizons and their range of techniques. As the 'high octane' petrochemical image suggests, what 'satanic' youth bring to the occult economy is a capacity to 'ride the tiger' – actually, in these parts, a leopard – 'of time-space compression' (Harvey, 1990: 351): to move across vast distances instantly, thus to accumulate riches, without visible effort, by means unknowable to ordinary persons. The symbolic references in this are too dense to unravel here: they extend from the 'fast' wealth being produced in the postcolony by control over the transportation of people, signs, and things to the changing salience of borders and transnational elsewheres in neoliberal South Africa. Above all, however, what became plain, listening both to the participants in the show and to those with whom we watched it, was the fact that the occult economy is understood to link the most local of concerns, activities, and relations – understood in the most local of terms – to inscrutable forces arising out of an equally inscrutable world beyond, a world ever more 'global.' This last, we stress again, is not our gloss. Recall that sign on the mud-brick school, the one that promised an education 'in step with the global age' (p. 307).

In short, the second methodological operation involves *mapping the extensions of the phenomenal landscape*, the four-dimensional geography (see note 14) with reference to which any discursive flow constitutes itself. Self-evidently, this, like mapping its substance, demands more than 'multi-sited' ethnography. It demands an ethnography that, once orientated to particular sites and grounded issues, is pursued on multiple dimensions and scales: an ethnography as attentive, say, to processes occurring in virtual space as to those visible in 'real' places-under-production; to the transnational mass-mediation of images as to ritual mediations between human beings and their ancestors; to the workings of state bureaucracies or

international courts as to the politics of 'traditional' chiefship and customary moots; to the flow of commodities across the planet as to marriage payments between lineages; and so on and on. Often it turns out that there are intimate, if invisible, connections across dimensions and scales: just as planetary commodity flows may, these days, determine bridewealth in an African village, so bridewealth in an African village may have an impact on the planetary flow of labor, cash, and goods; similarly, just as the purview of local chiefs and their 'traditional' courts may be decided by global human rights jurisprudence, global human rights jurisprudence is being challenged by demands for the recognition of 'traditional' cultural imperatives.

The third methodological operation is to trace the passage of a discursive flow over time; this to establish what, precisely, is new about it and what is not, what are the relative proportions of rupture and continuity to which it speaks, what is unique and what is merely a local instance of a wider phenomenon. How? By means of a counterpoint: by (i) eliciting a *local* genealogy of cultural precursors and (ii) running it up against a *comparative* archaeology of similar signs and practices to ascertain where else, and in what circumstances, parallel discourses might be found. In respect of the zombies of the North West Province, and the occult economy of which they are part, local genealogies make it clear that they have *not* been around for much more than a decade; regarded thus, they signal a rupture. But there did exist a foreshadowing: *sefifi*, observed by missionaries in the 19th century (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1991: 143), a condition – in which 'manhood is dead, though the body still lives' (Brown, 1926: 137) – brought about by the eclipse of a person by another, more powerful than s/he. This condition, it seems, provided a semantic frame within which the zombie has been accommodated. As to a comparative archaeology, there is evidence of at least two broadly parallel historical situations in Africa – in Mozambique and Cameroon earlier this century – in which living-dead have appeared (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1999c). In both instances, their presence was intimately tied to radical changes in colonial labor conditions, to the disruption of received connections between persons, production, and place, to the precariousness of wage employment, and to the alienation attendant on new forms of work. Put all this together and the point becomes clear: once historicized and interpellated into its local cultural context, the discursive flow surrounding the figure of the zombie has most immediately to do with labor history, with a burgeoning fear of the eclipse and commodification of people and social relations, with a sense of lost control over the means of producing value, with threats to the survival of local worlds under the impact of enigmatic forces from outside, with the unmooring of horizons and expectations occasioned by shifts in the workings of capital.

Conclusion

This brings us back, one last time, to the dialectic of induction and deduction, of theory and ethnography, of the concept and the concrete.

When we resumed our work in post-apartheid South Africa in the 1990s, as we have said, we had no idea that we would run into a fully fledged occult economy; or, to be more precise, into the phenomena captured in this ethnographically-grounded abstraction. Nor could we have known how that economy had become a public preoccupation. The appearance of a new breed of witches and zombies, and the anxieties they heralded, might have been interpreted purely as an expression of parochial conflicts and relations gone bad. What is more, in the hands of a cultural anthropologist with only the pristine horizons of the particular in view, a case could no doubt have been made for the idea that the living-dead of the present are a transformation of the *sefifi* of old; that the mystical evil of the here-and-now is an extension of 'traditional' notions of witchcraft and sorcery. However, once we had traced out the discursive flow in which zombification is caught up – made manifest, methodologically, by charting the landscape on which it had taken shape, rendered decipherable by recourse to local genealogies and comparative archaeologies, mediated by our own conceptual categories and commitments – it became obvious that this kind of explanation would have been woefully incomplete. For one thing, it would have left unaccountable the fact that similar phenomena have appeared in very different cultural contexts at roughly the same time and in response to the same broader historical conditions. For another, it would also have paid scant respect to the real-world concerns of Tswana living in the North West: to *their* arguments about the impossibility of social reproduction, about arcane means of producing wealth, about new forms of labor, commodification, and alienation, about witchcraft, satanism and globalization.

In seeking to take account of those arguments and their social motivation, and to grasp the phenomenology of the lived, material world out of which they arose, we brought to bear an explicit theoretical orientation; it is one about which we had written a fair amount over the decade before, one which contained within it a particular understanding of the contemporary history of capital. That orientation primed our early readings – and misreadings – of the 'new' South Africa. But it did not take long for its insufficiencies to make themselves plain. Apart from all else, our take on the workings of modern industrial capitalism and its colonial extensions did not prepare us for the postcolony, for its postmodern zombies and unemployment-related witch killings, for its 'crisis' of masculinity and generation, for the complex absent-presence of the state. It was, in other words, the *incompleteness* of our theoretical scaffolding – incomplete, that is, in the face of the concrete world which we were encountering – that set the dialectic in

motion anew, altering our conceptual repertoire just as that repertoire was being mobilized to make sense of the unexpected landscape on which we found ourselves.

Ethnography is like much else in the social sciences; indeed, more so than anthropologists often acknowledge. It is a multi-dimensional exercise, a co-production of social fact and sociological imagining, a delicate engagement of the inductive with the deductive, of the real with the virtual, of the already-known with the surprising, of verbs with nouns, processes with products, of the phenomenological with the political. Robert Foster (2002: 247) has recently remarked, as we have ourselves (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1999a), that the key problem of doing ethnography 'is ultimately a question of scale.' For him, that question boils down to the avoidance of 'dissolving local particularities in the uniform sameness of global conditions without treating the radical distinctiveness of the local as if it stood against or apart from the global.' For us, the challenge goes yet further. It is to establish an anthropology-for-the-present on an ethnographic base that dissolves the a priori breach between theory and method: an anthropology, of multiple dimensions, that seeks to explain the manner in which the local and the translocal construct each other, producing at once difference and sameness, conjuncture and disjuncture. An anthropology that takes, as its mandate, the need to make sense of the intersecting destinies of human lives, wherever they may happen to be lived out.

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Notes

1 In the apartheid years, Mafeking was divided: the 'white' town was separated by a railway line from *Mafikeng*, 'The Place of Stones,' the Tshidi-Rolong capital. When the ethnic 'homeland' of Bophuthatswana was created in the 1970s, its center, Mmabatho, was built alongside Mafikeng/Mafeking. The conurbation is referred to these days, rather

awkwardly, as Mafikeng-Mmabatho. The old Mafeking, as exclusive white enclave and as a spelling for the place, has disappeared.

2 Since we first wrote about zombies in the North West Province (1999c), we have been regaled with stories, from scholars and non-scholars alike, of their presence elsewhere in South Africa. Recently, for example, Ilana van Wyk (University of Pretoria) – who is conducting research in northern KwaZulu-Natal – told us that, according to local people, a large number are crossing the border from Mozambique. These spectral figures, who are said 'not to speak,' appear strikingly similar to those that we encountered on the other side of the country.

3 The youths were sentenced to 20 years each for the murder by the Supreme Court of Bophuthatswana. For accounts of the case, see 'Bizarre Zombie Claim in Court,' Nat Molomo, *The Mail*, 31 March 1995, p. 2; 'Petrol Murder Denial,' *The Mail*, 2 June 1995, p. 2; 'Five Men Jailed for 100 Years,' *The Mail*, 22 September 1995, p. 23. We are grateful to the primary (eye)witness in the case, Thaisi Medupe, the Registrar of the High Court in Mmabatho, Reggie Mpame, the headman of Matlonyane, Abraham Maeco, and several associates of the victim for retelling the events in question.

4 This case was reported in the South African media; see e.g. 'Spirits Strike at Labour Relations,' *Mail & Guardian*, 27 September 1995.

5 The play, by Brett Bailey, featured at the Standard Bank National Arts Festival in July 1996; it was later televised. A TV documentary series, *Issues of Faith*, also dealt with the topic on 12 July 1998 on SABC2; for one of many newspaper accounts, see 'Disturbing Insight into Kokstad Zombie Killings,' Ntokozo Gwamanda, *Sowetan*, 15 July 1998, p. 17.

6 Even where the trade occurs entirely within a national economy, it is often seen as a means by which the new rich, stereotypically portrayed as global in their operations and orientations, extract the essence of the poor and/or the racially marked for their own nefarious ends. This is so in South Africa, where there is an active market in body parts for medicines – and a lively local discourse about it. So much so, that prices for hearts, eyes, and other organs have been quoted in the media (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1999a) and, recently, in fiction (see e.g. Williams, 2002: 46).

7 'I Was Turned Into a Zombie,' Mzilikazi Wa Afrika, *Sunday Times* [Extra], 11 July 1999, p. 1.

8 Thus, for example, a significant number of films featuring zombies were made in the 1930s and 1940s. So were several in which zombification on the production line was a central motif, even if the figure of the zombie itself was absent; perhaps the most celebrated was Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times* (1936).

9 We address some of the theoretical and conceptual issues raised by the figure of the zombie, and by occult economies, in a series of loosely interrelated essays (see e.g. 1999a, 1999c, 2000, 2002).

10 *The Great Outdoors* premiered at the Standard Bank National Arts Festival on 30 June 2000. We thank Neil McCarthy, who made the unpublished script available to us.
11 This conceit was already called into question in the 1930s in, among other things, the works of Isaac Schapera (see Comaroff and Comaroff, 1988), in Monica (Wilson) Hunter's *Reaction to Conquest* (1936), in Godfrey Wilson's *Economics of Detribalization* (1942), and in the writings of the Manchester School in Central Africa.
12 As Sangren (2000: 244) notes, Englund and Leach claim that they are not against meta-narratives in general, only *this* meta-narrative. However, their claim seems empty in light of (i) their silence on their own theoretical orientations and (ii) the promiscuity with which they represent anthropological writings on modernity, many of which – including our own – treat the term *not* as a theoretical construct at all but as a problem for anthropological theory. In this and other respects, the critiques of the essay by Gupta (2000) and by Meyer (2000), under the *Current Anthropology* format, are instructive.
13 In their discussion of colonialism in Papua, for example, Englund and Leach (2000: 233) eschew accounts that dwell upon exploitation and violence; this because local narratives do not stress these things. In this, they confuse native *experience* and its *narration*, the importance of which few would deny, with an adequate *analysis* of the workings of colonial overrule.
14 The fourth dimension – the conventional three, of course, being length, breadth, and depth – is located in the virtual reaches of cyberspace, in which the constitutive connections between the local and the global are constantly remapped.
15 Strictly speaking, Mangope was not yet President of Bophuthatswana. He was Chief Minister of the Tswana Territorial Authority (TTA), a position to which he acceded when the TTA was created, in 1969, as the first step in the establishment of the 'independent' ethno-nation. Bophuthatswana only came formally into being a couple of years later. In Tshidi historical consciousness, however, the brief existence of the TTA has been obliterated: local knowledge has it that Bophuthatswana was founded, under President Mangope, at the end of the 1960s.
16 Elsewhere (e.g. Comaroff and Comaroff, 1997: 25) we have explained *why* these antimonies tend to be reproduced over the long run, despite the fact that the sociology of the worlds to which they refer constantly vitiate easy dualisms. We have also taken care to make the point that, however insistently they may be invoked in vernacular discourse, such oppositions can never be deployed as viable analytic or conceptual terms.
17 The *tokoloshe* – a small, hairy figure with exaggerated sexual organs – has long been associated with the Nguni-speaking peoples of the east coast of South Africa; until recently, it was not part of the cultural landscape of the

North West or the Sotho-speaking regions. But, in this age of translocality, it, like many things 'traditional,' has migrated and is now found across much of the subcontinent.

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