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Brief excursions into reflexive writing as a method

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This article is an attempt at locating my research practices as a westernised scholar in the field of decolonising research with indigenous people. It makes use of less conventional 'new paradigm' (Guba and Lincoln 2005) styles of analysing and presenting social science research in which the theory and analyses are not always explicitly expressed or applied, but it is there because you and I have it, or will have it at a later reading. Such an unorthodox concept of research practice is possible when one accepts the merits of a critical methodology which favours creative adaptations of methods over mechanical applications of them. (Yanchar, Gantt and Clay 2005) A critical methodology sees the concepts of research as similar to elements of an argument in that they are situated in values and contexts that are alterable and therefore methods should also be subject to change. Thus, with a more sociological as opposed to

anthropological understanding of my research practice, I examine my and others' lived experiences of interaction and collaborative efforts between western and indigenous people with the broader view of exploring the possibilities offered by reflexive ethnographic approaches to this arena. By scrutinising some of the methodological tools I have employed, I hope to instigate further reflection about the assumptions that western researchers in general make about the way in which research with indigenous people can be approached. Personalising the research and reflexive practices as I have tried to do does, however, give rise to some tensions, especially in light of my overall goal of trying to counter ways in which western knowledge still tends to undermine indigenous ways of knowing. On the one hand, the positivist legacy of objective science which denies that which is personal and subjective continues to penetrate social scientific research, marginalising other ways of knowing. On the other hand, in academia postcolonial and postmodernist attempts that *oversubjectivise* and *individualise* these experiences of marginalisation tend to focus attention away from collective struggles and to neutralise and fragment their potential *counterhegemonic*, anti-colonial stance. (Dei 2000)

So as not to downplay the influence of power relations and diverging assumptions existing between indigenous and western knowledge systems, I will foreground their epistemological variance in order to explore some of the ways in which this variance manifests in research procedures and the products and representations of western academic activity.

I believe the most appropriate way for me to try to balance the tensions of subjectivity is to personalise this western research activity while

simultaneously being reflexive at a more general and theoretical level. However, as Fine, Weis, Weseen and Wong (2000:109) warn, 'Simply briefly inserting autobiographical or personal information often serves to establish and assert the researcher's authority', while a preoccupation with the self can further silence other participants. Bearing this in mind, I hope to write myself into the text in the way that Tomaselli, Dyll and Francis (2008) suggest, so as to counteract the depersonalising agenda of dominating positivistic approaches which generally run contrary to the values espoused by indigenous ways of knowing. Allow me to therefore start by introducing myself – I am a male South African labelled by the apartheid government as "Coloured", an identity, which continues to have significance, not least in the contexts in which I am doing my research. I identify myself as black, though, in accordance with the South African black consciousness movement's interpretation of that term as a political identification. (see for example, Gerhart 1978) I have looked to education as a vital resource in the ongoing struggle against inequality and marginalisation in its many forms. In this article it is as a scholar from a typical modern western educational tradition that I intend to engage this struggle, using my experiences and interpretations as I attempted an ethnographic fieldwork in a fairly traditional rural community in the Eastern Cape of South Africa.

From traditional ethnography..

In trying to make use of my experiences as part of an analytical strategy, I occasionally go through my research diary or old documents and papers. The following excerpt from my original research proposal reminds me the conventional approach I started out with:

I hope to do an ethnographic study, living and working in a rural Xhosa community. This part of the research entails gathering information about indigenous knowledge and principles through observations, in-depth interviews and conversations to develop what Geertz (1973) calls 'thick description' of local knowledge and practices.

Following that proposal I engaged in seven months of fieldwork in South Africa, , accompanied by my wife, Go Eun. Of these, five months were spent living in a small rural village in the Eastern Cape in the area once known as Pondoland, close to the present day town of Port St Johns. According to Mcetywa (1998) this area has been the home of the Mpondo[1] since 1620, where they have been pastoralist and cultivators, sharing their resources with the San, KhoiKhoi and occasional shipwrecked Europeans as owners of the land until 1894 when it was annexed by the British (Hunter1979).

The community in which we lived and collected most of the data was called Izolo. Predominantly Mpondo in cultural orientation, this village comprises of about 40 families, many of whom are related. Also resident here are a few white people, some on a more or less permanent basis, and many seasonal visitors. The seasonal residents are the owners of holiday cottages along the coastal fringe of the village. Their presence provides most of the local economic activity in the form of domestic work or tourism related projects, goods and services that make Izolo wealthier than most of its neighbours. The fieldwork, which also included taking photographs, collected data with the original intention of comparing traditional indigenous and modern western systems of knowledge production and application, looking more specifically at how they compare in terms of their respective ethos. In this respect it was very much what O'Bryne (2007) calls a 'traditional ethnography', where someone

from a majority culture, in my case the culture of western research, investigates a marginalised culture like that of the indigenous Mpondo community which formed the basis of my study.

During the course of the fieldwork I was exposed to situations such as initiation celebrations, funerals, and ritual slaughtering which provided excellent opportunities for photographic documentation and visual ethnographic analysis. Through interviews and conversations I gained some understanding of people's daily lives and concerns, and my recorded observations heightened my awareness of my surroundings and the people with whom I had contact. This traditional ethnographic research therefore afforded some understanding of and insight into the everyday realities of the indigenous community in which we lived for those months. However, it was while reflexively analysing the data, especially during the transcribing and *thematising* processes that I realised how significant the emotional and relational elements of my connection with the people from the community had become. My desire to get to know individuals and the community from more than an academic perspective, pushed me to critically evaluate my methods and my position as a researcher. Fortunately critical methodology embraces such an evolutionary approach to methods, advocating for the application as an extension of the theoretical insights and research focus. (Yanchar et al. 2005) Thus, although this did not happen in a linear way, I eventually adopted more reflexive methods to try and make sense of my experiences as a researcher.

.. toward a reflexive ethnography

Writing "from within" is not an option here, but writing and researching as a westerner allows me to perceive exactly that aspect of relations which I am

interested in, namely, how the western ideas meet the
traditional and non-western knowledge concepts and
ways of living within a local (rural)
context/community. It highlights aspects such as
assumptions, thought processes, procedures, priorities,
etcetera, that are unique to the area or in some other
way comparable to what I am familiar with. (Field
diary, 8 June 2007)

I had not been familiar with the method at the
time that I wrote the above entry, but I believe that
by being open and actively searching for a way to
acknowledge and express the experiences of the
research, my reading and writing lead me to
reflexive ethnography. Reflexivity, according to
Guba and Lincoln (2005:210) 'is the process of
reflecting critically on the self as researcher, "the
human instrument"'. It involves critically assessing
the multiple identities with which we engage our
research contexts, using the very methods whereby
we create these selves and the relations around
them.

As Denzin (2003) shows, reflexivity may be of
different types, of which he identifies three, namely,
confessional, theoretical and deconstructive
reflexivity. Nevertheless, the common thread that
binds ethnographic reflection would be the use of
personal experience for making insights into cultural
phenomena, although the ways in which the self and
its individuality is recognised in this process may
vary.

Chiu (2006) identifies the roots of the reflection
she associates with action research as originating
with Schon's concepts of reflection-inaction and
reflection-on-action which are tacit and cognitive
modes of learning, respectively. Thus, 'reflection
can be seen as a necessary component of knowledge
production through experience with different
aspects: cognitive, emotive and dialogic.' (Chiu

2006:186) Building on Heron and Reason's (1997) notion of an 'extended epistemology' that recognises experiential, presentational, propositional and practical forms of knowing, Chiu calls for a multi-dimensional reflexivity that incorporates first, second and third person perspectives in the generation of knowledge through participatory action research. While her model usefully combines the theory and practice of reflection at personal, interpersonal and socio-political levels, my impression is that her understanding locates too much of the initiative, direction and outcomes of the research with the researcher. Nicholls'(2009) application of this three dimensional reflexivity, however, is framed in a counter-colonial 'paradigm of relationships' (121) which is much more attentive to renegotiating researcher-other relations within a collaborative research project. I therefore find it useful to present the reflections of my research using primarily these critical reflective concepts.

Briefly, first person or self-reflexivity requires that researchers examine components of their identity and choices that influence the research. These may include theories, professional experiences, cultural frame of reference, expectations, and a host of other hidden assumptions that affect how the research is carried out and presented. I have only hinted at my anti-colonial stance and non-indigenous identity here, but I have attempted to leave further clues about my personal orientations in the hope that readers will be invited into this process of reflexive construction.

At the level of intersecting identities is the second layer which is 'relational –reflexivity (second person), which calls for an evaluation of interpersonal encounters and the researcher's ability to collaborate with others.' (Nicholls 2009:122) The researchers' critical gaze is directed at the way in

which their social political position impacts upon the dynamics of collaboration. Nicholls contends that the co-inquirers in her research 'communicated the idea of positionality as a fine balance of commitment to relationships and self-checking.' (Nicholls 2009:122) My own position has been toward committing to relationships and an ongoing struggle against the exploitation of marginalised people. In this respect I take a slightly different view to the one that contends that research is not about social activism (Tuhiwai Smith 2005).since I interpret the message from people I worked with as indicating a desire to engage the resources of my profession for mutually beneficial gain. As Tuhiwai Smith (1999) herself points out, indigenous people, like other marginalised people, have extensive experience with research and researchers. What our self-checking and collaboration and shifts of *positionality* have denied them, however, is a researcher that is prepared to share more than the research problem.

This is addressed to a large extent by the third layer of reflexivity which examines the overall structure of the research design and process with the view of assessing how effectively participation was organised in instigating social change. At this level there is a greater potential for negotiating the entire scope of the research process, but ultimately the research and the researcher hold their status. That is, relations are seldom negotiated to the extent where the researchers hand over the baton and simply get their hands dirty in the community's daily life. We research and represent our way beyond the lived life without professional analysis to one where, ultimately, the community's activity, whatever it may be, revolves around our research. The autoethnographic approaches from which I am occasionally borrowing in this article illustrates quite informatively this capacity for researchers to

insinuate themselves. However, in addition to "juggling" reflexively around the hyphen (Nichols 2009) to maintain various researcher positions, the new ethnographic practices also enable innovative research and relationships to develop according to local and individual commitments.

Autoethnography

> The shift from an objectifying methodology to an intersubjective methodology entails a representational transformation. (Tedlock 2000:471)

As implied earlier, during the process of my research I began to question my researcher position in greater depth, and hence also epistemological and methodological issues. By revisiting the lived experiences and the processes and products of my fieldwork, and filtering those experiences through my professional academic and personal emotional selves, I began to critically evaluate the limitations of being a westernised researcher engaging with issues of indigenous knowledge making. In this article I draw attention to this positionality and the relationship between western and indigenous knowledges by sometimes using my experiences during fieldwork in an autoethnographic manner. According to Ellis and Bochner (2000:739):

> Autoethnography is a biographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural. Back and forth autoethnographers gaze, first through the ethnographic wide angle lens, focusing outward on social and cultural aspects of their personal experience; then, they look inward, exposing their vulnerable self that is moved by and may move through refract, and resist cultural interpretation...

Through this type of reflexive ethnography cultural experiences are examined from both a broader structural perspective as well as through personal, relational and emotional understanding. Something of a 'when–the-student-is-ready-the-master-will-appear' approach, it is intended to acknowledge and engage the roles that we as researchers play in the presentation and interpretation of social research. Apparently it has been around since the seventies in various forms and under a variety of labels like personal narratives, complete member research, personal ethnography, self-ethnography, evocative narratives, reflexive ethnography, narrative ethnography and many others (Ellis and Bochner 2000). As should be apparent from the above-mentioned nomenclature, these ethnographic approaches involve a combination of personal and reflexive elements engaged in the understanding of broader social and cultural phenomena. In this article the introspective elements of autoethnography are directed at my understanding of the relationship between western research and indigenous communities. Thus, in addition to the subjectivity connected to my professional practice, my personal life, personal feelings and interpersonal relationships became another site for gathering data about collaborative research.

When using autoethnography to try and make sense of and extract value from experiences in the field, I am continuously exploring the reflections and representations being produced in the process of this research. The observations, photographs and responses of myself and of Go Eun, who acted as my research assistant and the main photographer during our stay, form the basis of the stories and the reflexive process generated by the meeting of local or indigenous perspectives and experiences, and those originating from a more westernized worldview. The story of our encounter with Makhosi

is one such reflexive analysis intended to tease out some of the westerner-indigene aspects of my, and hopefully broader, research relations.

Interview with Makhosi, the traditional healer

I must admit I was more than a bit apprehensive as we approached Makhosi's homestead, even though we were there by appointment. The sense of formality that cloaks a pre-arranged interview can be intimidating somehow, with the sense of expectation hanging over the meeting like a chemical test – ready to turn blue or green in disappointment or approval., Moreover, my researcher's training tells me that in this kind of interview situation I have to prioritise getting information over politeness and discretion. I have in mind Charmaz (2006:28): 'What might be rude to ask or be glossed over in friendly agreement in ordinary conversation – even with intimates – becomes grist for exploration.' This approach makes me uncomfortable. Already I have noticed that the seemingly carefree and raucous young men I interviewed become remarkably subdued in the interview situation and reacted with embarrassment at some questions, which I thought quite straightforward.

Also disquieting was that this would be my first meeting with a practicing traditional healer and my

initial reading from Hunter (1979), Hirst (2005), and other such anthropological texts gave me the distinct impression that there were strict and complex protocols involved in meetings with such a spiritual person.

Nevertheless, fortified with my research diary, interview questions and digital voice recorder, but mostly the more relaxed presence of my camera-wielding wife, we wait in the midday heat for the healer to finish with a client. I try to establish some confidence and authority by noting down some observations in my diary and occasionally directing Go Eun's attention and camera toward what I think is a culturally interesting artifact. Eventually the traditional healer appears, a slim woman in dusty, well-worn clothes and a scarf on her head.

I believe it would be fair to say that a test result of that initial meeting would probably have been a disappointing blue. Makhosi could not have been very impressed with me and I was a little disheartened at first, as well. I do not wish to speculate further about her expectations, but I realise now that my own misgivings about being taken advantage of must have immediately raised my guard and impeded any significant connection we might have made at that stage. After several weeks of being bombarded by villagers selling all

kinds of goods and services, and asking for money or favours, I had become quite cynical about any transaction here, imagining that I was being viewed as little more than an easy target. So it's not hard to imagine that our first exchanges are a bit strained:

"Okay..Can I try some questions?" I ask once we are settled in the hut.

"First I must ask what are you going to give the ancestors?" she replies. "Because now I'm wasting my time, and my ancestors want to work." I have since come to the conclusion that as a sangoma, trained to "smell out" the physical and psychosocial conditions of her patient through keen observation and intuition, Makhosi sensed my apprehension and perhaps resigned herself to getting paid or getting our meeting over with. I, on the other hand, still naively imagining that she attaches the same value to my academic research as I do, try to impress her with noble intentions.

"Well..I don't know in terms of material things," I say. "What we want to do is promote the traditions..so that young people can appreciate the ancestors more.."

Makhosi emits a loud shout from deep inside herself. We are taken by surprise. "Yes, as I just say now I'm working now. The ancestors want me to work…."

"We don't know what is the right thing to give. If it is money.." I'm a little embarrassed now. Trying to cover up my reluctance to pay. Also, my western researcher's sensibilities are offended and vaguely concerned about paying for an interview. Clearly Makhosi has other priorities.

"Money. You must put...", she says, indicating to a bowl on the floor, "… then I can start."

"We first put some money, and then some more money..in the beginning and in the end? Is that how it works?" I ask, recalling Hunter's (1979) anthropological explanations of similar transaction. But Makhosi just laughs.

"And the questions must not be big..just a little bit," she says, eyeing the meager sum we have deposited in the bowl.

Toward the end of the brief interview the traditional healer becomes distracted, searching among her things until she finds a photograph.

"I would like to make this picture big. I like this one. I'd like to put it on the wall." Some of the five or six children whom we later discover are cared for by Makhosi, now make their way into the hut and gather around to look at the photograph.

> *"When you are dressed, we can take another picture." Go Eun offers in response to the traditional healer's earlier request that she not be photographed at this time when she was not prepared.*
>
> *"Yes, then you can get your picture," Makhosi smiles.*
>
> *We bid her farewell and promise to have the enlargements when we return from our trip to Johannesburg.*

Writing and reading this initial encounter, even now, offers me several insights, some of which I share simply as an illustration, and in the hope that it does not delimit the reader's own interpretations of the above account since autoethnography prefers being 'used rather than analysed.' (Ellis and Bochner 2000:744)

Firstly, the set up of the interview situation does not conform to interactions that occur naturally for the traditional healer. Earlier Makhosi had tried to organize the situation into a more familiar and profitable arrangement by offering a divining session, but I had resisted, as I did her subsequent efforts when she asked that we recognize and reward the presence of her ancestors. I see myself as trying to impose an interview structure on our meeting despite the difficulties I have with this kind of exchange, mostly because I believe in the authority of my western research methods. The voice recorder, camera and research diary belong to an empirical tradition of knowledge making that does not wish to recognize the ancestors and their role in this potential knowledge-making encounter. While I

acknowledge the possibility of spiritual and intuitive forces in this situation, perhaps I am intimidated by them. I am also aware of the authority and respect owing a traditional healer, and my awe of such a person's knowledge together with my uncertainty about appropriate protocols makes the prospect of the meeting all the more intimidating. I resort to symbols of power such as my research diary and voice recorder, as cultural artifacts from an imperious western power/knowledge to try to re-establish the researcher-researched, westerner-indigene relations I am more familiar with.

Furthermore, coming into this encounter, I bring with me a history of engagements with people from the area, which has been predicated on my status as an outsider with some financial means. In these beginning stages of our stay I had been solicited on an almost daily basis by people wishing to sell, borrow or beg, and my attitude had not been improved by remarks from the residents, both black and white, that such entreaties were to be expected. Knowing that Makhosi performed paid ceremonies for visitors, I felt anxious about being perceived as just another economic opportunity. I believe that, in the anxiety of not wanting to associate my research with the traditional healer's more commercial activities, I made several normative assumptions from a privileged western stance, which precluded any fruitful exchange, both financial and cultural, between myself and Makhosi.

Fortunately the traditional healer takes the initiative of shifting negotiation to the photographs proposed by Go Eun. Perhaps noticing that we are too stingy she makes, in Engestrom's knotworking terms, a sideways move, and presents an alternative exchange – the opportunity to photograph her in exchange for an enlargement of one of her photographs. This trade is more appealing as it

allows us to break out of the visitor-with-money mold that we dislike, and contribute in a manner that we feel is more meaningful. Go Eun and I understand Makhosi's suggested trade as recognition of us as individuals with some useful and interesting skills and resources.

I have tried to make explicit one or two reflections, which go into and are developed by the construction of such a text as the one about this interview. However, as anecdotes, which ultimately wish to emulate the functions of indigenous narratives, engagement with such text should ideally be a spiritual, emotional and intuitive process.

Writing as method

While constructing the above account, and again when writing my reflections about it, my understanding of what happened during that encounter with Makhosi deepened considerably and I gained further insights into other relations and aspects of my research experiences. As Richardson (2000) explains, in trying to creatively represent my interactions with the traditional healer and others I am employing a method of discovery and analysis that sheds light on both my topic and me. Like Richardson (2000:924): 'I write because I want to find something out. I write in order to learn something that I did not know before I wrote.'

The above anecdote is one of many written in the hope of learning more about the way that I interacted with the people of the community, how we perceived each other, and related to each other. When writing such texts, I make use of recorded interviews, photographs, recollections and reflections. How these combine to produce a particular understanding may be the result of what has happened before, after or during the composition of the text, or perhaps just good fortune. I therefore

try to be open to the mental and emotional stimuli that I receive from repeatedly revisiting interviews and photographs. As I weave these into a story that is more colourful than the "scientific" and "objective" register of the usual academic texts of social science a particular version of events may emerge, such as in the case of the above text where an interpretation that highlights my fallibility has developed. Through my choice of emotive words tone, register, plot, descriptions, and so forth I colour and carve character into the account, setting up one or other aspect for examination. For example, by portraying me, the researcher, as uncomfortable and intimidated in the interview situation I am impelled to explain why I am nervous and how I have responded. In this way the text pushes descriptions and explanations, of the flawed character, for instance, as far as I am willing to go in the public context of this text, thereby provoking deeper reflection and revelations, which may be enlightening. I do this so that I may critique my interactions at a personal and sociological level. As Richardson (2001:35) puts it: '*Writing is a method of discovery*, a way of finding out about yourself and your world.' In this instance it means that I can explore the possible outcomes of my actions from those or similar situations, as well as evaluate my constructions of those situations. How honest and critical can reflective non-fictional representations of myself be in this space? (Convery 1993) Yet, if I want these accounts to be credible and have some impact I have to be willing to expose myself honestly so that other researchers connect with the experiences I portray. For Ellis (2000) a story can be appraised by its ability to engage at an emotional and cognitive level. She asks: 'Do I continue thinking about and/ or experiencing the story or does my consciousness easily flow to something else – the mail, the newspaper, a phone call I need to

make?' (Ellis 2000:273)

Assigning academic merit to this kind of work in such a manner, and using writing as a method of inquiry, in general, means one has ventured to the edge of what is accepted as knowledge and representation by conventional academic research. At these borders the ways of knowing of conventional science are supplemented by creative arts (Richardson 2000), bringing about alternative ethnographic practices and ways of valuing them. Evaluating the anecdotes I have constructed for the purpose of learning from my research experiences, I use Richardsons four criteria of 1) *substantive contribution*, which asks if the text has enhanced our understanding of social life; 2) *aesthetic merit*, an additional measure of the capacity to add value to and incite engagement with the ethnographic work; 3) *reflexivity*, the author's awareness of herself or himself in relation to the representations of the text; 4) *impact*, which gauges the text in terms of how it moves the reader (Richardson and St. Pierre 2005).

Including the above elements in an ethnographic research underscores the creative component to knowledge making that foregrounds its narrative nature. Realising that the writing process relies upon such elements as trust, respect and interest to make its claims, I try to use writing as a method of inquiry to connect with others, 'making communion – community – possible.' (Richardson 2001:37) The relationships that I seek are ones of openness, that allow emotions and ideas to flow honestly and intuitively, the way Heshusius (1994) and Bishop (2005) propose in their understanding and application of the concept of participatory consciousness. Considering how Elisabeth St. Pierre collects 'dream data, sensual data, emotional data, response data ... and memory data' (Richardson and St. Pierre 2005:970) through writing, and relies on

'accidental and fortuitous connections' (ibid) of the writing process for analysing these data, it is not difficult to see how this form of writing as a method of inquiry can be associated with the spiritual and ethical values of indigenous methodologies which are characterised by knowledge that 'is said to be personal, oral, experiential, holistic, and conveyed in narrative and metaphorical language.' (Castellano 2000:25)

Further reflections on representation

Interview with Makhosi, the traditional healer. *(continued)*

> **The next time we visit Makhosi I am a little more relaxed and she is perhaps also a bit more excited, both of our attitudes improved by the large white envelope and its contents that Go Eun holds in her hands. Friendly greetings soon turn to squeals of delight, hugs and animated exchanges as the traditional healer unveils the enlargement of the photograph she had given us some weeks earlier. As curious and amused members of her household gather around the proud sangoma, I notice and share Go Eun's enjoyment of their lively and sincere display of appreciation. Then the inspired Makhosi makes her way into her hut to change into her traditional healer's outfit and prepare for a photo session.**

Looking back at our second meeting with Makhosi it is not difficult to see how those gratifying moments and the friendly relationship that developed from them, inspired a change in the way that I approached my fieldwork. I wanted more

people to respond as Makhosi had – to find some joy and benefit from our activity in their village.

The contrast between our first and second encounter highlights how huge the distance between researchers and research participants can be in contexts such as this. With limited access to libraries, internets, political networks and so forth, people in Makhosi's situation see little practical value in research activity, and very seldom see it translated into benefit for themselves and their communities. However, by mobilising our resources in a minor way where she saw immediate results, by making good on a small commitment, a different relationship between researcher and participant was initiated. It is my hope that this practical, everyday benefit she got out of our research relationship will be just a start to a more meaningful one that has mutual value for all involved.

The successes of our experience with Makhosi alerted me to the possibilities of modifying my rigid ideas about researcher-participant interactions. For example, when we thought it desired, we photographed individuals and families, and through the seemingly trivial act of presenting people with photographs of themselves, I felt that we had acquired some value and a modest platform from which to build relationships with individuals and to some extent the village. In this way, the photographs from the fieldwork portray a change in my approach to research in addition to relationships established in that context, while also forming the basis for further reflexive analysis on western representation of a marginalised "other". Consider, for example, the photograph of Makhosi, taken when she eventually emerges from her hut that day.

Photograph 1: Makhosi , traditional healer.

Some of my reflections about the above photograph relate to Wong's assessment of the early ethnographic photographic images of anthropologist Torii Ryuso: 'Its significance lies as much in the

social relations behind the picture – the intent of its creator, the historical circumstance in which it was produced and the interpretation of it by viewers – as in its subjects.' (Wong 2004:284) In the case of the photograph of Makhosi, and others, I ask to what extent does the representation reflect a definition of indigenous people which situates them in the past? How much of the scientific-realist illusions about capturing an objective piece of data on film remain? Were our ways of being respectful and negotiating with the individuals we photographed sufficiently reflexive and ethically sensitive practices of research and representation?

Makhosi 's photograph was taken primarily according to her wishes. When my wife offered to photograph her, she immediately understood that there was benefit in this for both parties. She set out the conditions specifying when and how she would like to be photographed. However, as Nicholls (2009:122), drawing on Hersusius (1994), warns, reflecting in a self-centred manner about such a collaboration creates the mistaken impression that one knows how to deal with self-other relations in research. Thus, without deeper layered reflexivity there is an inherent danger of presenting this collaboration as a consensus, thereby disguising deeper structural forces that have conditioned the parameters within which the negotiation of this image could occur. Pointing out that the represented reality is a product of the relationship between the researcher and informants, Pink warns:

> In relation to this, researchers should maintain an awareness of how different elements of their identities become significant during research. For example, gender, age, ethnicity, class and race are important to how researchers are situated and situate themselves in ethnographic contexts. (Pink 2007:24)

At face value the above photograph may appear to be the iconic image that Makhosi wants to display of herself, quite literally as well, but how is this image shaped by her perception of us. What kind of "other" am I to Makhosi and how does she respond to that identity? For example, how does the "Coloured" identity assigned to me by apartheid affect the way the *sangoma* and other people relate to me in this traditional, rural community where few people would subscribe to the idea that I share their struggles? To most I am not an indigenous African, I do not share that cultural heritage or world view, and I do not share their daily economic hardships. In general, relations between "Coloureds" and indigenous black people (labelled "African" under apartheid) are still characterised by suspicion, jealously, disrespect, and a host of other apartheid-induced and individually reinforced attitudes and emotions. In a close community like Makhosi's, she may not want to be seen as too readily dancing to this outsider's fiddle. Pink (2007:24) further points out with reference to researchers' identities:

> In some fieldwork locations where photography and video are prohibitively costly for most local people, their use in research needs to be situated in terms of the wider economic context as well as questions of how the ethnographer's own identity as a researcher is constructed by her or his informants.

A more critical reflection would therefore have to ask to what extent Makhosi, as a struggling head of a household of about seven, was actually able to negotiate the terms of her being photographed. How can she ensure that we have lived up to our end of the bargain? Does she have control over the less flattering images we have of her? In order to obtain the photographs she wanted, she had to surrender herself to some extend to our goodwill. That is not to say that she was without agency in this situation

or that the need for trust and good will is not mutual - bear in mind she is also a traditional healer, after all, with significant influence in the community and perhaps also the spiritual realm. Ultimately though, it is considerations such as the way in which we as researchers and participants conduct ourselves, the mutuality of our satisfaction, the relationship that this establishes between us, and so forth, that determines how I evaluate such representations in my research.

Concluding remarks

The portraits taken with various individuals in the village may have started as an attempt at 'giving something back', but they have gradually become more of a continuous flow of objects and ideas that nurture the 'interlinkages between the researcher's personal autobiographical narrative and the research narrative.' (Pink (2007:59) More and more I am viewing the collaboration evidenced in photographs and stories such as those of Makhosi in terms of the promises we made, the fulfillment of those promises and the relationships that are being established. The images, along with the short passages about the fieldwork, are increasingly being used to expose my researcher self and critique the relationships that we as researchers build with the people that we research and represent.

Looking at Patience's photograph, I am warmed and become fiercely loyal again as I construct stories in which she features from diary entries like the following:

> Met Patience the mat-maker at the *spaza*. She came for her photo and was very pleased. "Now my children will have something to remember me when I'm gone."

As I continue to engage with narratives like this

I become hopeful that some day we may move beyond *telling* stories and *taking* pictures and learn the art of *making* them.

Biographical note

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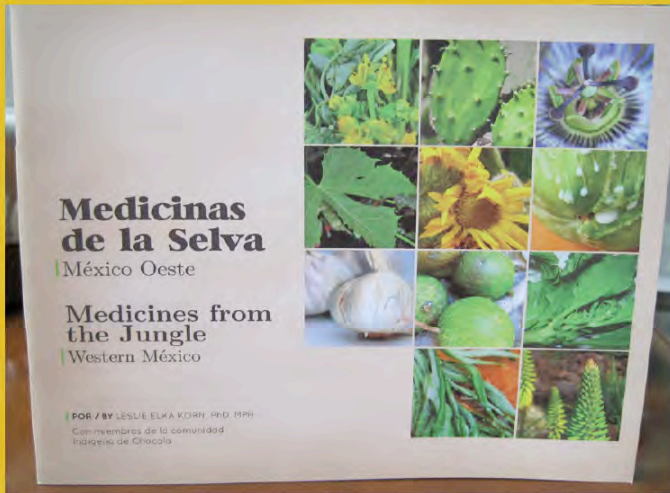Tuhiwai Smith, L. (1999). *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and indigenous peoples.* London: Zed Books Ltd.

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[1] Although differences between the amaXhosa and the amaMpondo are not insignificant, they may be considered negligible in the context of this research.