

SADE—‘BY YOUR SIDE’

I arrived in Muizenberg in July 2004, unaccustomed to a stormy, petulant sea and dark-grey sky. The Muizenberg of my childhood was always filled with sun, sand, sunburn, laughter and family. Yet at the start of the 21st century as a ‘native’, coloured, South African woman¹ I embarked on research to understand the ‘African other’—documented and undocumented migrants and/or immigrants from the African continent. Sitting in an internet café owned by a Congolese man from Brazzaville, 100 metres away from the churning ocean, Sade’s *Lovers Rock* played on repeat. Updating my supervisor at the time, via email, I commented on this, noting how ‘unAfrican’ it was. My ignorance was soon erased when he responded that Sade was ‘a Brit of west African origin: and thus highly appropriate!’ as a backdrop to typing fingers in a Congolese internet cafe. Spanning a five-year period, my misrecognition and incomprehension of Sade’s roots found expression in other ways during fieldwork. Yet these faux pas would be mitigated by my kinship with my three primary interlocutors, giving meaning literally and figuratively to one particular track off the album, ‘By your side’.

Sequestered from the driving sand on the beach I launched into what my supervisor referred to as ‘oppositional fieldwork’² in the hot, black-tarred little streets of Muizenberg. Fieldwork proved complex and jarring. My training had not prepared me emotionally and psychologically for the *life* of doctoral research. Malinowski’s lascivious machinations regarding ‘the savage’ were far removed from the deep emotional and psychological attachments I co-created with my primary Congolese

interlocutors, all of them male. During 15 research months, I tried to make sense of the ‘Congolese other’; an other relatively ‘new’ to South African shores, yet settled in Cape Town since the 1980s. I was aided and abetted in this endeavour by three Congolese men from the Democratic Republic of Congo (‘the guys’) who themselves were assisted by a local, white South African man, Robert—their patron.

The guys and I shared an awareness of the space we inhabited when we were in Robert’s home. As their South African patron he had a number of rules, arcane in nature to my mind, but representative of his rigid Christian beliefs and attitude. The son of a prominent priest, he was clear that I could not visit the guys beyond 10pm at night or visit with them in their rooms. This rule was an absolute no-no, throw you out of the house rule, *not* to be broken. I was encouraged to sit in the lounge where everyone had access to the plenitude of our conversations.

My sex and gender, and perhaps my dubious religious affiliation, othered me in Robert’s home; a space that was carefully constructed around the sanctity and inviolate nature of the Christian God. My regular attendance at Wednesday Bible Study was not only a means to enter a space ‘controlled’ by Robert, implying obeisance to his rules; Robert also hoped that I would turn to God. A lapsed Christian, I questioned the truth of the Bible, the ‘word of God’. I debated the representation and interpretation of Bible verses loudly in the Bible Study sessions. I harassed the easy narrative that Robert and his priest provided—a narrative that underscored God’s ability to restore, forgive and provide for those who believed in him. For African asylum seekers,

refugees and economic migrants, the word of God and the food provided by Robert every Wednesday offered respite from the harshness of a xenophobic state and the demands of hustling, if but for a moment. Still, Zakia, Guylain and Lyon perceived themselves as distinct from Robert's other clients.

I too was different. Often the only woman at Bible Study, I was aware of my form—my gender, my voice, and the words that issued forth from me. I recognised that I cut a solitary figure there, even as a South African on South African soil. I held the tenuous and questionable positions of 'native', citizen, single, female and researcher (not believer). Yet I felt deeply connected to the guys in our otherness.

A few months into our acquaintance, seated next to each other at the table in the kitchen, Lyon and I shared a meal of rolls, chicken and coca-cola. As I advanced question after question, Lyon became contemplative and said, 'You know Joy, you're like this coke bottle. Closed. But I can see the contents of the bottle inside. You don't let people in easily.' My questioning came to a screeching halt, and slightly bemused, I encouraged him to ask questions too. Over the next few hours we talked about family, life, struggles and loves. Discomforted by the change in the power dynamics of our encounter, I left before Guylain and Zakia returned from college. I needed to think-feel.³

The perception of the anthropologist as a lone, white male at sea in the midst of 'the natives' intent on apprehending native culture and customs was muted, but ever present. This lone, white male with the ability to objectify and disassociate from African others was perhaps similar to Marlow in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*? In essence, a rational mind with no extraneous or superfluous feeling. So, as my mind tried to maintain decorum, and rigidity, my heart softened towards the young men with

whom I was working: young men trying to carve out a future, even as their histories were geographically distant. Their strangeness became familiar, and their outsider status of no concern to me. We offered each other connection, celebration, familiarity and strength in times of despair.

On a Saturday evening the shadows of a warm day played across the walls of a rather small room. I lay squeezed in between Lyon, Zakia and Guylain on a three-quarter bed. Zakia sat upright to my left. Lyon lay supine on my right, with his right leg off the bed, and Guylain sat at the foot of the bed. Protected and enclosed from all sides I listened to their chatter. Here and there they punctuated their discussion in Swahili and French with English. At one point Zakia stopped and said, 'Why do you always seem to know what we are saying?' He was slightly confused as I had commented on their conversation. After a few months with them, I managed to pick up bits of their conversations, especially if they spoke in French. But I was loath to tell him though that I was also cross-referencing conversations they had had with me, searching for patterns, and putting their narratives 'together'. Almost knowingly, Lyon commented, 'She's been observing us, remember?' Quick as a shot, Guylain responded, 'But remember you are under our control.' The guys laughed as my face contorted with horror and indignation.

Our back and forth exemplified the relationship we built over sporadic months of intense engagement. Slowly, I was allowed to 'see, smell, taste, and hear' how they lived, and experienced migration in South Africa as Congolese men in their late twenties. In the hurly-burly of our conversation, Zakia talked animatedly about his impending request for Andrea's hand in marriage. He beamed with the thrill of it all. Guylain interjected talking about

Michelle. Lyon and I shared a conspiratorial look as we did not ‘approve’ of Guylain’s choice of partner. As midnight drew near I was eager to leave. But Zakia and Lyon encouraged me to stay a while longer. Soon Guylain interrupted our banter when he accepted a phone call, and I attempted to head out. Lyon restrained me slightly, and Zakia said, ‘Sleep here, if you’re tired.’ The warmth of their bodies created a womblike feeling of safety and nurturance, and I settled into being there. Not as men and woman. But as friends. Family. Secure, dreamless sleep came easily. Waking an hour later, Zakia was also sleeping, but Lyon stirred. We talked a little in hushed tones, before I left. Finally.

I never left though. We remain a part of each other’s lives, responding to the tugs of the others across the distance, providing solace in moments of despair. Lyon called to tell me of Guylain’s illness, urging me to contact him. With his mobile number in hand, I called from the office, nervous. Two to three rings later, Guylain answered. In a few short minutes he chided me for thinking that he couldn’t recall who I was. I was concerned that his brain tumour had affected his memory, but, as per usual, he reminded me of our shenanigans in Muizenberg and his love for people. A few short weeks later Guylain was gone. We convulsed, bordering on a loss of connection.

Designated as the messenger of Guylain’s death, Lyon called me on a Friday evening. He was struggling. The line crackled, confirming the physical distance between us. I sensed his head bowed, his shoulders drooping. We were quiet with each other, holding the space. I knew he was devastated. I tasted it in the back of my throat. So I wept silently for our collective loss. The photographs on Facebook of Lyon and Zakia taking their leave of Guylain—brothers to the very end—were revealing. Zakia’s face was lined with anguish. He remained silent

about his loss for a long time. He internalised it, and busied himself with the work of living when he returned to Andrea. Across the oceans, we sensed and felt each other in ways that defied logic; the fabric of our togetherness had been torn, but not destroyed.

From my initial misreading of Sade’s roots, through the process of fieldwork (life) Zakia, Lyon, Guylain and myself morphed into an ‘us’. Divested of all pretensions attached to the dyad of researcher-researched, my data was co-constructed. The data, unadulterated, messy and non-linear, was our lives. We wove a collective narrative of love and support, falsifying the learned fact of emotional distance (and otherwise) between researcher and researched. My initial inability to recognise a fellow African—Sade—pointed to the myopic lenses given to me through training. In an attempt to do ‘proper’ fieldwork, and to provide an analysis worthy of recognition, I locked my feelings away. Initially. But as the months and years wore on, the façade disintegrated as my brothers and I struggled to live in a world that had collectively othered us through race, gender, and nationality. We were matter out of place. This commonality birthed ways to belong, to become insiders rather than outsiders, and to harbour each other’s hearts and thoughts in times of turmoil and despair. In retrospect, Sade’s song was a profound harbinger of the intricate and delicate ways we would become ‘us’.⁴

Years later, in 2016, during a three month visit to Germany I spent happy days with Zakia and Andrea and their two children; and then with Lyon and Zakia in the Netherlands. As expected, we set off into the early evening. Dusk was fast approaching to my untrained eye, but Lyon was adamant—we must walk. As we ambled, they teased me about my inability to stay on the inside edge of the pavement, with

their bodies protecting me. Vexed, I retorted, 'You know me, I feel caged walking on the inside.' In unison they responded, 'You're under our control!' The quiet streets quaked with our unrestrained laughter. Like Sade, Africans in Europe. Three friends. Brothers and sister. Side by side. Missing one.

NOTES

- 1 My external identity assumes importance here, as my body was anomalous to the normative white, male body of the anthropologist in the South African academy.
- 2 My supervisor was never very particular about the concept, but I took it to mean fieldwork in which the researcher is authentic, and very direct with her research participants, ignoring the 'urge' to build rapport superficially.
- 3 Wikan (2013) notes that her Balinese interlocutors use 'think-feel' to denote the unity of thought and feeling.
- 4 I explore our bond's trajectory, in more recent years, in a chapter entitled 'Humanising the Congolese 'Other'.

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