

Intimate Strangers: Connecting Fiction and Ethnography

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to demonstrate how connecting fiction and ethnography can help bring out the perspectives of those neglected by mainstream scholarship. I illustrated my argument of fiction and ethnography as intimate strangers with *Married but Available* (Nyamnjoh 2009), a novel based on a dataset I used in scholarly journal articles (for example, Nyamnjoh 2005). Here I reproduce excerpts from several chapters of *Intimate Strangers* (Nyamnjoh 2010), an ethnographic novel constructed from the same dataset that contributed to the writing of the scholarly book, *Insiders and Outsiders: Citizenship and Xenophobia in Contemporary Southern Africa* (Nyamnjoh 2006). This argument builds on my discussion (Nyamnjoh 2011) of the negotiation of identity and belonging in fiction and ethnography. African fiction provides alternative and complementary ethnography of the everyday realities and experiences of Africans and their societies in a world of interconnecting local and global hierarchies, not often adequately captured in its complexities and nuances by ‘the ethnographic present’ (Wolfe 1999) and its propensity for frozen and stereotypical perceptions such as those Chimamanda Adichie criticises in ‘the danger of a single story’. In addition, the paper draws attention to the intricacies of being an intra-African migrant, perplexingly not often considered diasporas in their own right (Bakewell 2008; Zeleza 2011).

Keywords: fiction, ethnography, *makwerekwere*, connectivity, mobility, intra-African migrant

Introduction

Scholarship influenced by politics of exclusion has presented intra-African migrants – in search of a productive and meaningful existence – as an unbearable burden to those fortunate enough to be recognized and represented as locals, nationals or citizens (Peberdy 2009; Neocosmos 2010). Locals feel resentment toward African ‘Others’, whose presence is perceived as a threat, a danger or an infection needing urgent attention. Almost invariably, African migrants in African cities are perceived as epitomizing backwardness and the limits of humanity, which must be contained if civilization and modernity are to carry the day. Citizens are almost instinctively expected to rally ranks and fight off this ‘attack’ – by an influx of barbarians who do not quite belong and who must be ‘exorcised’ so ‘insiders’ do not lose out to this particular breed of ‘strangers’, ‘outsiders’ or ‘demons’, perceived to have little but inconvenience and inhumanity to contribute (Landau 2011). This attitude is in contrast to fairer skinned migrants from within and outside the continent, believed to be higher up in the hierarchy of ‘purity’ of humanity that often takes the form of belonging to racial, cultural, geographical, class, gender and generational categories (Gupta & Ferguson 1992; Stolcke 1995; Geschiere 2009).

The perspectives and experiences of migrants themselves are absent. Studies reflecting them would require getting to know them as human beings, spending time with them in intimate circles, and developing research questions not of a slash and burn or rapid appraisal nature, but of an ethnographic type, with a focus on the complexities and contradictions of what it means to claim and deny belonging. The predicaments of migrants ‘complexify’ once they arrive in their host country or community. Their reality is not as simple and straightforward as often suggested in the catalogue of stereotypes with which they are portrayed.

The aim of this paper is to demonstrate how connecting fiction and ethnography can help bring out the perspectives of those neglected by mainstream scholarship. I illustrated my argument of fiction and ethnography as intimate strangers with *Married but Available* (Nyamnjoh 2009), a novel based on a dataset I used in scholarly journal articles (for example, Nyamnjoh 2005). Here I reproduce excerpts from several chapters of *Intimate Strangers* (Nyamnjoh 2010), an ethnographic novel constructed from the same dataset that contributed to the writing of the scholarly book,

Insiders and Outsiders: Citizenship and Xenophobia in Contemporary Southern Africa (Nyamnjoh 2006). This argument builds on my discussion (Nyamnjoh 2011) of the negotiation of identity and belonging in fiction and ethnography. African fiction provides alternative and complementary ethnography of the everyday realities and experiences of Africans and their societies in a world of interconnecting local and global hierarchies, not often adequately captured in its complexities and nuances by ‘the ethnographic present’ (Wolfe 1999) and its propensity for frozen and stereotypical perceptions such as those Chimamanda Adichie criticises in ‘the danger of a single story’. In addition, the paper draws attention to the intricacies of being an intra-African migrant, perplexingly not often considered diasporas in their own right (Bakewell 2008; Zeleza 2011).

In opting to contribute excerpts from several chapters of *Intimate Strangers* to the current volume of collected essays on global and local connections and interconnections, I am demonstrating that fiction has its place in social science scholarship. Additionally, I use these chapters to argue that mobility, connectivity and connections by individuals are best understood as emotional, relational and social phenomena captured in the complexities, contradictions and messiness of the everyday realities of those we study. In conventional scholarly writing, even when such dimensions are recognised, the standard expectations of what constitutes a scholarly text do little justice to the multilayered, multivocal and multifocal dimensions of everyday negotiation and navigation of myriad identity margins. I suggest that fiction as a genre is adapted to exploring such realities and complementary to scholarly ethnographic writing.

My study of connections is a study of insiders and outsiders not as essences, birthmarks or permanences frozen in time and space, but as ‘intimate strangers’ or as ‘frontier realities’ (Kopytoff 1987). Being insider or outsider is permanent work in progress, always subject to renegotiation, and is best understood as relational and situational. Hence the need to understand the interconnecting global and local hierarchies – be these informed by race, place, class, culture, gender, age or otherwise – that shape connections and disconnections, and that produce and reproduce insiders and outsiders as political and ideological categories that defy empirical reality. To substantiate this point, my study documents the interconnection, interdependence, tensions and conviviality among people with competing

claims to places and spaces in contexts of accelerated and flexible mobility. I argue that fiction and ethnography are also intimate strangers. They complement each other in their flexibility, interdependence and conviviality. The social scientist should be married to science but available to read and be informed by – and write – ethnographic fiction.

What do we gain in connecting ethnography and fiction? Deeper social science for one thing. The lived lives of those who are not of the dominant race, place, culture, class, place or age are often swept to the side lines of scholarship – and given voice in alternative spaces, such as music and literature (see Nyamnjoh 2011 for further development of this argument). Thus relying on ethnographic fiction as a legitimate source to inform investigations of social phenomena allows the researcher to embrace a wider variety of perspectives and provide more nuanced and most often more accurate accounts and explanations – instead of uncritically reproducing dominant social constructs. As historian James Giblin (1999) – who has his history students read novels by African authors – explains:

Historians ‘realized that many of the European writings which they use to reconstruct the African past – such as accounts by nineteenth-century missionaries and travellers, for example – are... tainted by ... notions of African inferiority This realization ... led historians to seek out alternative sources of information less influenced by European preoccupation with racial difference. These alternative sources include writings by Africans ... oral tradition ..., the vocabularies and structures of African languages themselves ... physical artifacts [sic] uncovered by archaeologists. African art ... [l]ike the other alternative sources ... helps us ... understand African history not from the standpoint of Europeans, but from the perspective of Africans themselves’.

For sociologists and anthropologists, dipping into fiction can bring voice to silenced spaces and help science bridge rather than reinforce socially constructed difference. Poverty stricken, flat and linear scientific explanations can become more multidimensional, more reflective of the complicities, contradictions, and compromises of everyday life.

Relating the results of ethnographic research in the form of fiction can make the work – in which society at large has certainly invested in various forms – available to readers beyond scholarly circles. I have found that even scholars, when they read research results delivered in a novel as opposed to a scholarly paper, relate to the results in a more visceral way. Realities that might be difficult to explain in scholarly logic are felt and understood – through the lived experiences of characters in the novel. Intertwining these two different ways of writing is a way of bringing together worlds and worldviews often keep apart by ‘scholarship’ and its gatekeepers.

The ethnographic novel, parts of which I share below to demonstrate the above points, is set in Botswana in southern Africa. In the 1990s and early 2000s, when I did my ethnographic research, Botswana was widely regarded as an island of prosperity in a continent of economic and political upheavals and uncertainties (Nyamnjoh 2006). Like neighbouring South Africa following the end of apartheid, Botswana provided place and space for mobile Africans, big and small, marginal and otherwise, seeking fulfilment (Nyamnjoh 2006, 2010; Neocosmos 2010; Landau 2011). Such migrants encounter and compete, for the attention of employers, resources and other opportunities, with those at local mobile margins who feel more entitled as nationals and citizens. Animated with the burning desire to survive and succeed, however, border-crossing migrants from Zimbabwe, Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, Cameroon, and a host of other African countries seem more desperate and willing to be used and abused for much less than their local counterparts. This situation plays into the hands of employers quick to recognise the advantages of playing marginal insiders against migrant marginal outsiders, and both against the possibilities and limitations of the law and the state. These relationships are simultaneously distant and intimate, rewarding and alienating, material and immaterial, and enhanced and contested by technologies. Connecting methodologies of fiction and ethnography enhances the possibilities for investigating, comprehending and reflecting these interconnections with greater complexity and nuance.

The thrills and tensions, possibilities and dangers, rewards and frustrations of social, cultural and physical boundary-making and boundary-crossing are narrated in *Intimate Strangers* through the experiences of

Immaculate, an outsider, a stranger or '*makwerekwere*'¹ from a fictional African country – fictional because I stress the universal in the particular, and the particular in the universal. Immaculate follows her fiancé to Botswana, only to find him off in the United States of America and refusing to marry her. Immaculate however is determined to outwit victimhood. Operating from the margins of society, through her own ingenuity and an encounter with transnational researcher Dr Winter-Bottom Nanny, she is able to earn some money as a research assistant. Immaculate learns how maids struggle to make ends meet and madams wrestle to keep them in their employ as intimate strangers. Resolved to make disappointments blessings, she perseveres until she can take no more repeated efforts by others to define and confine her. Through the relationships she forges with insiders, locals or citizens, and with other outsiders within, the reader is introduced to the realities of what it means to be an intimate stranger in a foreign land, competing with nationals and citizens and compounding their predicaments. Hers is the story of the everyday tensions of being and belonging in ways that bring together different worlds and explore various dimensions of servitude, mobility and marginality.

The story provides an ethnographic entry point to understanding mobility, identity and belonging from the perspective of migrants struggling at the margins of their host communities to exist comfortably. It invites the reader to experience some of the challenges Immaculate faced living in Botswana, from acknowledging and questioning herself as *makwerekwere*, finding work, love relationships, and troublesome existence to missing home and wanting to reconnect physically without necessarily disconnecting from her new – however precarious or tenuous – home.

¹ The term *makwerekwere* is generally employed in a derogatory manner to refer to African immigrants from countries suffering economic downturns. Stereotypically, the more dark-skinned a local is, the more likely s/he is to pass for *makwerekwere*, especially if s/he is in articulation Setswana. BaKalanga, who tend to be more dark-skinned than the rest, are also more at risk of being labelled *makwerekwere*. In general, the *le-/ma-* (sing./pl.) prefix in Setswana usually designates someone as foreign, different or outside the community. It is not used just for ethnic groups but for any group or profession that seems to be set apart from average folks.

Immaculate makes friends, draws on social networks past and present, and finds good but tedious jobs which allow her to make ends meet at the margins. As an outsider, however, she is forced to acknowledge her own negative identity as a devalued foreigner and others like her realizing that their being different is an unfortunate cause for them to be treated differently. Finding herself in a stressful and at times horrifying love affair makes her long for her native Mimboland despite her extended stay in Botswana. The ambivalence with which she carries 'home' is evident as she considers herself a stranger to her supposed homeland of Mimboland, having spent time and invested significantly socially and even economically in Botswana to be considered an insider as well, however tenuously. But she does not feel wholly like a human being in Botswana. Dealing with one challenge after another, as a lowly regarded foreigner and a woman, builds character but also takes a toll. Despite her ambivalence Immaculate eventually decides to go 'home' to Mimboland. Just how naïve is it to expect to reconnect effortlessly? Does one underestimate how much one has changed through prolonged stay away from home? These are open questions that question many a simplistic indicator of being (human) and belonging.

We can also think of anthropologists venturing out, as did Immaculate, to a new land, say of fiction. The Anthropologist becomes more of a stranger to anthropology and more intimate with fiction. After thrilling and troublesome encounters, the Anthropologist returns 'home' changed and connected to new realities and enriched. But she feels like a 'stranger' to her home discipline. Should she expect to reconnect? These are open questions that question many a simplistic indicator of being (a scientist) and belonging.

Excerpts

Chapter 3: Being Makwerekwere

I don't know how it started, but a few days after losing my job, I was talking with Angel, when the word Makwerekwere became the centre of our talk.

'The term Makwerekwere leaves a bitter taste in my mouth', I told her, adding how often I had been reduced to tears by Batswana who called me this. 'Could you tell me why Batswana tend to use this word in ways that stab and hurt?'

‘One is Mokwerekwere, two or more Makwerekwere’. Angel started in her soothing voice. She spoke like a Reverend Sister leading the Prayers of the Faithful.

She continued, ‘It is a shame we use the word the way we do, to refer to a particular type of foreigner from distant parts of Africa. Our neighbours from South Africa, Lesotho, Swaziland, they are not Batswana, but they are not called Makwerekwere either’.

‘Why not’, I asked, bubbling with curiosity.

‘Batswana seem to feel more comfortable with them than with other people from farther north – Zambia, Malawi, central, east or West Africa’, Angel replied, searching the floor with her eyes.

‘And so, if ever there’s a Nigerian and someone from Lesotho, I’ll find a Mosotho to be more like a cousin, more like family than I would the Nigerian’, she went on.

‘I think the whole thing goes back to this issue where we think you are here to take our jobs. We just tell ourselves, ‘Oh! They are here to take our jobs’. We think these people are here because where they come from, things are bad. They came here because of our money, the Pula, and now they live more comfortable lives than we do, and so that’s why conflicts erupt’. Angel had an apologetic look.

‘What about Zimbabweans, your immediate neighbours to the north? Are they Makwerekwere too?’ I pretended not to notice the guilt in her eyes.

‘With Zimbabweans, it touches my heart because I thought Zimbabweans are more of our sisters and brothers’, confessed Angel.

‘But Batswana, the way they treat them is like they are outcasts’, she sighed.

‘It touches my heart because Zimbabweans, we know why they come here illegally. They come here because of the situation in Zimbabwe. You can’t stay in a place where there is no food while you know on the other side you could find food’.

I nodded.

‘The way I look at our border with Zimbabwe and other neighbours, there is something we can do about that because borders are man-made’.

I again nodded, repeatedly, like a lizard.

‘Take a look at the water sources for example. They used to unite us. But now, we say that side of the river is Zimbabwe, this side is Botswana,

and so we shouldn't even share food and the water we drink', Angel shook her head in shame.

'Yet most of them come here not because they want to stay. They come here to do piece jobs and go back home. So why can't we allow them to do odd jobs that we often think are beneath us as locals?' I could see her face glowing with compassion.

'You tell me', I said, 'Why can't you Batswana?' I wanted her to go on, as I found her words soothing, peaceful and promising of the world without borders I have always dreamt about. 'Borders are our greatest killer,' my uncle used to say, going down memory lane and detailing example after example of border conflicts that had eaten up sons and daughters of the soil.

Angel threw up her hands in resignation, before adding, 'Normally in June, I think it's twice a year – June and December –, the Immigration Police do what they call 'Clean-Up-Campaign'',

She could see I was surprised by the expression. Telling me with her eyes that this was not what I thought, she proceeded to explain.

'This does not mean they collect litter like plastic bags, papers and tins. Oh no. They move from house-to-house, from workplace to workplace, to check all these Zimbabweans whom they see as litter. They deport them back to their country the way a person disposes of litter blown over the fence by wind'. Angel covered her face with her hands, as if she was even then hearing the sound of human litter drop at the Zimbabwean side of the border.

I encouraged her to continue. It wasn't often to come across a local who was sympathetic and supportive, and when she told me she too was Catholic, I felt proud of my religion.

'Last year, the person who was supposed to supervise the teams doing the cleanup campaign was not in and my boss, the deputy director, called me in and said, 'Madam, the person who is supposed to do this and this is not in'. I said, 'What is this and this?' He replied, 'You know there is a cleanup campaign, we send all Zimbabweans back to Zimbabwe'.

'I said, 'What do you clean up?' I knew what he was talking about but I just said, 'What do you do? Am I to understand that all the litter we see in the streets is because of Zimbabweans, so we should dispose of it?'

'He explained, 'No, we move from house to house collecting all Zimbabweans everywhere – maids, garden boys and the like –, and sending them back where they belong'.

‘I said, ‘I don’t think I’ll be able to do that’.

‘He said, ‘Why?’

‘I said, ‘It’s not because I want them to be here illegally. It’s the way you people are handling this issue. And the people I’m supposed to go and supervise and work with, I’m going to have problems with them before I have conflicts with the law itself’.

‘He said, ‘Why?’

‘I said, ‘You can’t talk of these people as if they are trash. We know they are here illegally and we know why. Maybe the best thing is just to say let’s go out there and not clean up. Let’s just check people who are here illegally and try to send them back home, and those who we know it’s possible for them to have jobs here, we advise their employers to help them obtain papers to stay legally’.

‘And the guy said, ‘Are you Zimbabwean?’

‘I said, ‘Why do you ask? If I look at myself and you, you are more of a Zimbabwean than me’.

‘He said, ‘Why?’

‘I said, ‘Because you are a Kalanga’.

‘He said, ‘What are you talking about?’

‘I said, ‘I’m not going to lead this operation’.

‘He said, ‘You are going to do this job today. When you leave this office, you are going out into the field to supervise those people’.

‘I didn’t like the menacing tone of his voice. I told him, ‘I’m not going. I’m going back to my office to do my day-to-day job. I can’t imagine pushing people around and piling them into one congested lorry as if they are water melons’.

‘He threatened sanctions, but I didn’t budge. He could sanction me to hell. I didn’t care. I just didn’t care ...’.

After her moving story, I stayed with the good Angel for a year. She taught me Setswana and initiated me to the ways and values of her land. She made me feel proud to be human, and living with her was like a year-long schooling in the dream that being different was no cause to be treated differently. I saw in her the embodiment of the gospel I had drunk all my life, of how we, regardless of race, place, creed or sex, are all children of the

world, called upon to reflect the goodness of the Lord in the ways we live our lives.

If we had more people like Angel, I think the world would be a better place for us all.

Chapter 17: Madam and Maids as Intimate Strangers

Miss Amy Candlestick wore jean trousers and a blue T-shirt on which figured prominently 'If Everything Was Everything'. Following her after she opened the office door for us, I saw on her back, 'HIV/AIDS: Save Africa'.

...

'Have you ever employed a Motswana?'

'As maid, yeah'.

'A Motswana or a Zimbabwean?'

'I think she is Motswana. She is the cleaning lady. She comes once a week. We don't have a live in maid, and we don't have a gardener'.

'What's her name?'

'Priscilla'.

'And what's her surname?'

'I don't know'.

'It's not unusual. Most people don't know the second name of their maid'.

'She doesn't know my name either. She came to us through another Canadian woman'.

'How do you find her?'

'She is wonderful. She is a wonderful little girl. She is a young woman'.

'And what is that?'

'I guess I am just comparing her. We've had two and the first one took advantage and made several hundred telephone calls when we went home, to the tune of P400. So I am just comparing her. She is friendly, she is trustworthy and she is hard working. She is just very pleasant'.

'The first one, if you recall, was she Motswana or Zimbabwean?'

'I think she may have been Zimbabwean, but I'm not sure. She was miserable and not happy'.

‘But she was hardworking’.

‘Yeah, until she figured out she could just make phone calls all morning’, Miss Amy Candlestick said laughing. ‘And that’s how we figured out that we couldn’t just trust her. I had never figured somebody would do something like that’.

‘So what did you do when you found out?’

‘Well, I confronted her and I said, ‘I can’t trust you anymore, and I am afraid I will have to ask you to please pack and that will be the end of our relationship’. I’m such a soft touch and she begged me to stay, promising she would deduct P50 a month until she had paid me back, and bla, bla, bla. We just paid the phone bill and were very careful not to leave money or our valuables lying around. You don’t also want to tempt people by leaving money around. And then she found another job’.

‘It’s interesting this issue of phones. It comes up repeatedly when I interview people’.

‘It never dawned on me because in Canada you don’t pay for local phone calls. So it never occurred to me that it’s a big deal, that you have to prevent people from using the phone. And I never figured that once they use it, they will want to use it ten times’.

‘Did you notice other things missing?’

‘Well, we don’t have a lot, and I never paid particular attention. But we have friends who employed her as well. And they noticed things like clothes going missing and her using things like cosmetics when she was there. Instead of working, she just took advantage of her work. In my circles if you employ people like that, we try to follow the Labour laws – try and make sure I pay Priscilla over Christmas and give her a Christmas bonus, make sure I give her sick leave – and she only works once a week –, which is pretty generous. I find when people don’t work in that situation, when they aren’t familiar with that situation where they have those rights, they will take advantage of the employer. They will think you are a soft touch’.

‘You just mentioned a while ago that Priscilla is young and you live with your boyfriend or your husband. Doesn’t it bother you that eventually the maid could become very comfortable and begin to look for ways of ousting you and taking over the ultimate object of your desire and love – your boyfriend or husband? Maids come in, they appropriate the kitchen, they appropriate the house and they clean everything and sometimes they

even cook, and so they take everything from you except your husband, and even the bed they make it up and they lie on it and have their imaginations. They imagine themselves ultimate owners of what you hired them to take care of. Does it not occur to you as a woman who hires and fires the maid to watch out against losing the ultimate object of your attention and love? Does it worry you? Does it worry any people you know? If not, why not?’

Miss Candlestick was categorical. ‘No! It never actually crossed my mind and for a number of reasons. I feel my relationship is very solid, that it would never even cross my partner’s mind. But he also has never really had much contact with her. She comes once a week for half the day. She often comes when we are at work. For the longest time, Wobble’d never met her. He leaves for work earlier than I do. And she is not an aggressive woman. Not that I have seen, but I think she just comes in, does her cleaning and hasn’t been eyeing around and setting her imagination on fire. There’s little we do that we would feel embarrassed about if a maid found out about it. We do our own laundry, we cook, all those things. If we hire someone, it is not like we fight over the house. We hire someone to do the mopping, the sweeping and that is it. I don’t like the colonial attitude of coming in with a servant who appeals to me, but I do like the idea of having someone to mop’.

‘You say that she is not aggressive, but you know that the stereotypical presentation of the secretary is someone who is not aggressive, until the day the employer has a domestic problem and she offers him a shoulder to cry on’.

‘It never crossed my mind’.

‘I interviewed a maid recently who lived with a British family in a similar situation, where the husband did everything to have her’.

‘I think that has a lot to do with him rather than her and I think in my situation Wobble would never do anything like that because I believe he is not that kind of man. I’ve always gone for guys who are more interested in football and family than in playing hanky panky behind my back. It’s a different kind of man who wants to exploit that kind of situation, who would take advantage of someone who works for him. The kind of man who sits with the secretary, this is the same kind of man who sleeps with his maid. I would be very surprised if I had that kind of situation from Wobble’.

‘What about you and say Batswana men? If you were to really find one who is decent in his approach, to what degree would you be tempted to pursue your fantasies?’

‘I think the commitment that I have made in my relationship is such that the likelihood is virtually nil. It doesn’t matter whether it is a Motswana, or a Ugandan or an American. It is not something I would do at this point’.

‘So not having a relationship with a Motswana would have nothing to do with the fact that Batswana are unfriendly?’

‘No, I just wouldn’t’.

‘What about with a Namibian?’

Amy Candlestick hesitated. ‘I wouldn’t’.

‘And do you think there are other people here, in the Canadian community, who are interested in having relationships with Batswana?’

‘I think the ones that I know are disinterested. They are yet to find the man who will make them interested’.

‘Of all of these dimensions, I think the greatest test of attitude towards people is the extent to which we go in creating and sustaining relationships with them’.

‘Just romantic relationships or ... ?’ Amy Candlestick wanted clarification.

‘Relationships in general, but the greatest test are romantic relationships for any community. The test of the relationship pudding is in the eating’, Dr Nanny explained.

‘But I think for anything that came to me in that direction, it would have to be on a personality basis and not solely on their approach, the feelings you got and the culture they come from. No, I don’t think I would have a problem. But knowing the HIV/AIDS rates here can be a deterrent.

‘And if we go back to your previous questions, about husbands becoming not just comfortable but even close with maids, I wouldn’t say those kinds of relationships represent necessarily open attitudes about how far one would go in venturing into another culture, because the husbands may just be seeing the maid as a sexual object and stopping at the bed ... hmmm just like the maid might go after a husband just because of the size of his pocketbook’.

...

‘Are you looking forward to leaving Botswana? Or are you looking forward to coming back?’

‘No, I am not looking forward to leaving. But I am looking forward to being home in Canada. I am looking forward to travelling. It is nice to have a change. I just switched to this job in September and I really wish I had more time here with Aidswatch Network. I did not enjoy my time with WAP [Women Against Patriarchy]. It was a struggle from day one and I stayed longer than I should have. That tainted a bit my perceptions of work. I am not really anxious to leave, but I am looking forward to get home’.

...

Dr Nanny desperately wanted to interview Miss Amy Candlestick’s boss, especially as, like Johanna Salmon, Mrs Birgit Rattlesburg was married to a Motswana. But she also didn’t want the interview to take place the same day, partly because she was tired, partly because she wanted to take time off to digest the material she had gathered for the day, and more importantly, because she didn’t want Miss Amy Candlestick to sit in and follow the interview with her boss next door. So she took an appointment with Mrs Birgit Rattlesburg for The Queen’s Arm, a popular bar with a touch of working class Englishness, for Saturday at 6 pm.

Chapter 36: Making Ends Meet as a Research Assistant

Dr Winter-Bottom Nanny was away for a long time. I had fulfilled my contract with her, by transcribing and sending via email the interviews, just as I had promised before she left. Satisfied with the work, she had paid me handsomely via the Western Union electronic money transfer service. It was the biggest amount of money I had ever handled. I proceeded to see how best I could invest it, only to run into difficulties, with my Zimbabwean boyfriend, Noway, and with a Motswana guy. I’m too scared to mention his name.

Exactly four years and six months after she left, I got a surprise phone call from Dr Nanny, saying she was in Gaborone on a restitution visit. She had an autographed copy of her book for me, and could I meet her at the Gaborone Cactus Hotel at 6 pm? ‘Of course,’ I screamed with excitement. I wanted to see her new baby, the one I had helped to midwife.

Indeed, I was overjoyed to receive a signed copy of *Burdens of Womanhood: Being an Underling at the Margins*, which I couldn't wait to read, curious as I was, to see what she had made of my and the other accounts I had dutifully helped her gather and painfully transcribed verbatim. Although Dr Nanny had told me that repetitive questioning was 'the soul of ethnography,' I was dying to know what she had been able to make of material collected through the boring practice of having everybody reply to the same set of questions.

Dr Nanny could see excitement inscribed on my face when she handed me 2000USD as my share of what she termed 'the generous royalties' she had been paid in advance for her book by her publishers. I didn't understand much about royalties, but I was pleased with the doors of possibilities that the money instantly opened up for me.

'With this money, I'm heading straight for Mimboland', I told her, amid hugs of appreciation.

'With Noway, I hope', said Dr Nanny, hungry for news.

'Noway is history'.

She took a seat. 'Tell', she said, like a master gossip.

'Story long, and time short', I tried to wriggle out.

But Dr Nanny was her old stubborn self. 'I'm in a hurry to go nowhere', she said, with a concrete look of you-seem-to-have-forgotten-the-patient-researcher-that-I-am on her face.

I gave in. 'Then be ready to stay up all night', I told her.

She asked me to come with her to the poolside, where she ordered drinks, switched off her cell phone, and asked me to do the same.

'Now tell', she said, switching on her tape recorder.

'No taping this one', I warned.

She switched off the recorder.

And I began...

As I remember telling you several years ago, I met Noway on my way to Zambia. And the reason I was going to Zambia was to look for second-hand clothes to sell in Gaborone. But I didn't know that in Botswana, foreigners are not allowed to do that line of business. On going to Zambia, I forgot my residence permit, and at the border I had problems with the immigration authorities. I tried to phone some of my friends to copy my permit and fax it to me, but I couldn't reach them in time to continue my

journey. One of the Immigration Officers took me to a lodge where I could stay the night. I hadn't a budget for that, so I had to use the money I brought for buying things from Zambia.

I was looking for somebody to phone back to Gaborone, when I met Noway. I asked him where I could phone, and he offered to take me there. I phoned Paul who faxed me the papers.

I was supposed to report to the Immigration Office in the morning at 8 o'clock. But Noway said, 'No, don't go back because those people there are going to give you hell, better just avoid them'. And I followed his advice.

The next day Noway came with a young boy, and they invited me for braai, but I said I was too tired to eat. They came again the following day. He asked me to sleep to be in a state to return to Gaborone, having advised me against continuing to Zambia, and against going back to the Immigration Office.

Anyway, that's how I came to know Noway. We travelled back to Gaborone together, in the company car they were using, and they dropped me off and we exchanged phone numbers.

From time to time he was coming to check on me, and eventually this led to a relationship.

In the beginning, he was a nice person, but he was staying with another lady I didn't know about, but we will come to that. He would come and check on me. I was staying with Christians, and they would not allow me to see him, so we usually talked over the fence where I was staying.

After some time, Paul advised, 'Why can't you just talk to him and just try to see?'

So I tried to see, and from the beginning he was fine. Relationship-wise he was ok, but his problem was financial management. He was also married, which he didn't disclose to me. Instead, he told me, 'I was married but I am divorced'. He let me know about his kids. We used to visit them in Zimbabwe. And I didn't know he was communicating with the wife all the time, although they were not living together.

...

Then I said, 'Papers or no papers, if you want to be with me, divorce and marry me. If you want to be with your wife, then go out of my life'.

He kept on saying, 'I will, I will, I will'.

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One day he told me, all of a sudden, 'I am quitting my job'.

I said, 'Why quit your job? That job is so secure. Why do you want to leave the job?'

What he said did not make sense to me. But he didn't listen. He went ahead and put in a resignation letter and resigned and they gave him a package of twenty three thousand Pula. The cheque came to me and we went and cashed it together.

I told him, 'You keep this money because houses are cheap in Zimbabwe. You can buy a house for five thousand and then with the rest of the money you can do business, since you don't want to work'.

So I left him with the money, but it didn't take long before the money was finished. He didn't buy the house when he went home to Zimbabwe. All he returned with was a van of mangoes.

I asked him, 'You bought mangoes for twenty three thousand Pula?'

He was tongue tied. 'I don't know what happened to the money,' he said, expecting me to believe him.

I let it go.

He kept saying we were still together, but there was nothing in his behaviour to show it. I would go to an auction and buy things, and he would take the things and sell them. I told him I didn't like the lifestyle where he sells house things. 'It's not my way'.

He did little to change.

...

The next day in the morning he said he was going to Zimbabwe. He went to Zimbabwe with the ten thousand Pula. He didn't give me a Thebe.

He was in Zimbabwe for a full month and when he came back, the ten thousand was finished. I told him I was moving out. Everything we had in the house – two fridges, beds, wardrobes, a stove, and you name it. I said, 'Ok, I don't mind, I will give you all those things. I will start life afresh'. And I just took my clothes and my shoes, and left.

'Good riddance', interrupted Dr. Nanny.

It's not finished. My O and A Level certificates, he took them and threw them away and I didn't realise it until much later.

I went to the house where I was going to stay on my own, feeling bitter but relieved. After a week, one girl from near where Noway lived saw

me and said, ‘Eh Miss, ah how come you throw your certificates away? I saw them in pieces’.

I couldn’t believe it. Certificates are not things to handle carelessly – even mad people know that.

The girl said Noway was seen throwing my certificates, and some kids took the plastic paper and were playing with it, and she only saw them after they had been torn.

I had taken time to laminate my certificates as the best way of protecting them, having grown up where it was all too common for one to lose years of hard earned qualifications to rats and white ants. I went there and everything was in pieces, all gone. No problem, I told myself, there is nothing I can do about it. I phoned Noway and said, ‘Noway, you decided to destroy my certificates. Why?’ ‘To hell with you,’ was what I got in reply, and he hung up on me.

...

And that is the end of my story with Noway.

There is no doubt he wanted me, but he was somebody who suffered from indecision. He didn’t know how to put things together. He was a genuine person, though his financial management was not good. He was somebody who can really assist you well, but I couldn’t forgive him for hiding from me the fact that he was married, and for not deciding whether he wanted a future with me or with his wife.

I told myself, ‘I am not going to have another man. I am not going to have a relationship because it is too depressing’.

...

My money was disappearing. My will was weakened. Yet I grew in determination.

Chapter 38: Unbearable Comforts of Love

One day, I realised I slept but without sleeping. All my heart was about this guy. But it wasn’t at all natural infatuation. No, it was not like that.

...

I still have the message on my cell phone, and it still gives me goose pimples when I read it. I store every SMS he sends me. I value my cell phone. I appreciate it, I love it, and I want to have it nearby at all times. I don't want to stay for one hour away from my cell phone. Even in church where we are forced to switch off, I will put my phone on vibration mode and place it somewhere sensitive enough to feel it.

My cell phone is my greatest companion, but it is also my greatest terror. The pain, the bad words, they come through my cell phone. When somebody feels like saying something and he can't face me, he will say it through the cell phone. It has made me experience too much abuse. Without my cell phone, I think I would have suffered less. All the messages, all those things he has been telling me, they are there in that place, in that phone.

When he said that, I told myself, 'This is where my life is going to end. If I take this thing hot, hot, I'm a dead person. I will go to Mimboland as a corpse'.

I said I must change my attitude. So I changed to save my life.

His anger was very abnormal.

I don't think he can stay with a woman, and I remember there was a day the sister said, 'Immaculate, I don't know how your relationship with my brother is, but I have come to realise you are the bravest woman I have ever seen, because even we cannot stay with him'.

Even in their house he stays in the room most of the time. If you see him going inside the mother's house, he is going to bathe or to take food from the kitchen.

There are times he will come to my house and tell me, 'The day you misbehave you are a finished'.

I went to talk to Evodia Skatta. I told her what I was going through, and how I needed to protect myself. 'I don't want to die here. I don't have a boyfriend. I don't eat anybody's money. I don't see somebody's husband. But this is what I am going through'. Evodia Skatta said, 'What?'

As long as he kept using whatever he was using to charm me, he got my money if he wanted it. I never refused. If I didn't have any, I looked for it. I could even borrow and give to him. He was always saying he was borrowing the money, but he would never pay me back.

He doesn't take me around in his car, but when he took the car to the garage and it cost two thousand and thirty nine Pula, he took the money from

me, and I don't think I'll ever get it refunded. He drives from work to check on me and see whether I am working with a person, but he never picks me up after work. He is there only to make sure I am not with somebody.

He uses that charm when he wants something from me. If he wants something with me, he can use it the whole night before he comes the next day to ask for it. And I won't refuse. He owes me nearly six thousand Pula.

...

When he came the first time to have sex with me, I said, 'I want a condom. If you don't use a condom, I'm going to make shout and make so much noise. We are really going to fight'.

I think he used that condom because he was scared of the mother. He doesn't come to me when the sisters or the mother can see him. He is so scared of the mother. If it wasn't the fear of his mother, he could have raped me and slept with me without a condom.

If I haven't moved from where I am staying, it is because I know that if I go and stay on my own, he is going to come there and do anything. Even now, I will be sleeping and I won't know that this guy is coming. He has never come to my house me knowing. If he says I want to come there he is already at the door, making me startle.

...

After we have sex, he can go for three months without talking to me. If we meet, if I meet him face to face, he will just say, 'Dumela'. Now I understand what it means to say Botswana men can use women. How can he sleep with me yet treat me like shit?

Not once would he give me a lift in his car. He wouldn't even buy me Fanta or give me water to drink, yet he borrows all my money and refuses to pay back, and gets drunk on Chibuku every day.

I have never eaten anything from him for almost two years. The only thing he sent to me was one day at work when he most surprisingly sent me units for P100, only to turn around and say it was a mistake, and that I should pay him back.

Botswana men can really make a woman feel cheap.

When the mother discovered that Philip was interested in me, she started with her own medicine, but I didn't know.

...

I decided to talk to Angel, the generous friend of mine we used to visit, whom you interviewed at length.

Angel was pleased to see me after so many years. I had lots of explaining to do, about why I had kept away for so many years. How I could have been in Gaborone all this while and not passed by to say hello. I was a wicked person, she said, half jokingly, refusing to accept what she termed my 'flimsy excuse' that I had dumped my problems enough on her doorstep.

When I accepted my mistake and apologised, she opened the door of her generous heart to the problem that had brought me back to her.

I told her everything, from A to Z, from Noway to Philip. 'I don't know what to do,' I concluded.

She said she didn't know anyone who could help. She used to know a Sangoma from Malawi, but that was years ago, and the man had since moved on.

I had come full circle, to be contemplating visiting the very Sangomas I used to reject when I first came to Botswana.

Even without a Sangoma, Angel was a great help. Listening and doing her best to console me was soothing. I could buy units for a hundred Pula for my cell phone, and I would talk to Angel and cry until the money finished. Every day I spoke with her, but I didn't share my troubles with any Mimbolander, apart from Evodia Skatta and Paul Mufon. Nobody else knew what I was going through.

Every morning I was crying, daytime I am crying, even my workers at times would say, 'Are you sick? What is wrong?'

I said, 'No, I'm just missing home'.

How did I come to know for sure they were using medicine on me? Although Angel said she couldn't help me when I took my story to her, she couldn't bear me crying the way I did when I was on the phone. So she remembered this other lady she had heard about from someone at work. Upon finding out, she got this woman's number.

The lady was an herbalist. Angel explained to her what I was going through, and the woman said she would check and get back to Angel with her findings.

Intimate Strangers: Connecting Fiction and Ethnography

After a couple of days, the woman came back to her. 'I can see this guy's mother doesn't want that girl, but the guy wants her bad,' she told Angel. 'He is using medicine to make sure she doesn't go to another man. Why I don't know. I can see the guy is not really a serious person, so why he is doing this, I can't say.'

'But unfortunately I can't help. I am just an herbalist. I can't help'. She can see, but she doesn't throw bones. She can dream something, but she can't cure beyond her herbs. She said, 'I won't lie to you. I can't help that girl. Her problem is a big problem'.

...

One day Angel called me to share something positive. The woman herbalist had called to say a patient had come her way who needed a serious traditional doctor and was ready to pay for her to invite somebody from Mozambique. The man had come and was treating that person and others. If Angel liked, she could ask her friend to come and meet this powerful traditional doctor who could heal what was beyond herbs. So Angel called to let me know.

I went to see this doctor, who asked for the details of the guy using this thing on me. I wrote down the names, phone number and residential area of Philip, everything, and described his build and workplace and handed all this to the doctor, who asked me to go and wait for him.

As luck would have it, word went around Gaborone about this important medicine man in town, and people flooded there seeking his cure, magic and blessings. Amongst them, Philip. When he came, the medicine man was able to identify him from the details he gave of himself.

He was coming to fortify his grip on me.

The doctor asked him to go and bring his mum.

The mother came.

The doctor consulted his bones, looked at them and said, 'I can see you are bewitching a foreigner in your yard. Why are you sending your daughters to be throwing poisonous things in her house? They go there and pretend they love her but they are eating with her only to eat her up. Why are you bewitching her?'

The mother said, 'I didn't want to kill her. I was just trying to separate her from my son'.

The doctor said, 'Why are you trying to separate her? If your son doesn't want the girl he will leave her, but your son too is using something on her. The same person you are using things on to get her away, your son is using things to keep a hold on her, and she can't do anything. She can't go to any other person. Your son makes that girl sit there the whole day, even weekends. She can't go anywhere. She goes to work and comes back or to the shops, but nothing more. Is that the life a human being should live? Why are you being wicked to this foreign girl? What has she done to deserve a fate worse than death?'

Then the doctor tried to talk to Philip to stop using this thing he was using on me. 'Why are you using this thing? You are not ready for marriage the way we see you. You are not even a friendly man. You are not a jovial person. You don't want to sit with that girl your mother doesn't want, why can't you leave her to go her way in peace?'

That, my sister, is what I have been going through. I have never had a good life. I don't know the cause of this curse.

Maybe it's my weakness that when I am with you I feel I should treat you the way I want myself to be treated. I don't know whether it is because of that, that men tend to take advantage of me or what.

Angel and the herbalist have been a great support. Last week I told them I would love to go home for a while to renew communion with family, friends and the land of my birth.

I told them I needed a breath of fresh air, a sign of life from this strange and stifling condition of living like a dead girl walking.

They encouraged me and prayed for the means to come my way to make this journey possible. 'Greet your parents and eat lots of herbs from the tropical rainforest,' the herbalist told me, smiling her satisfaction with knowledge of the charming natural environment of my country. 'You'll need all the energy you can muster to overcome the forces that hinder the good life for you'.

Now that you've surprised me so delightfully when I least expected, I am going right after this to book a flight and buy a ticket to Mimboland.

After thirteen years of a life tortured by worries, I want to rediscover what it means to socialise without having to look behind my back. I want to

be able to talk freely and feel like a human being again. At 33, I feel the joys of womanhood passing me by.

Ordinarily, I wouldn't be wishing this, given the brutal pride of power gone wild back home, but my traumas here have drained me. I have gone through too much. As my mother would say, if you see a rat running towards fire, know it is being chased by something even more terrifying.

I need time to regain my dignity, even if it means my hands and legs are going to be broken by the blows of excited rifles and batons. I need family, friends. I need people and places I knew. I need to reconnect to feel human again.

Conclusion

Migration is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon, involving various dimensions of human mobility in claiming and negotiating inclusion and belonging. It challenges rigid and bounded distinctions between insiders and outsiders, in favour of more flexible understanding of belonging in tune with the frontier reality of Africans as bridging intimacy and distance. Immaculate's story highlights the thrills and challenges of forging relationships in host countries, host communities and beyond, in the pursuit of success and self-fulfilment. The story addresses the perplexing question of what it means to be a person of African descent living as a stranger in another African country. Life away from a place called home is informed by memories of home and by social networks and relationships at home and away. While a single perspective is neither desired nor sufficient, Immaculate's story emphasizes the significance of sociality and relationships in how being and belonging are translated from abstract claims into everyday practice. Mobility, connections and, interconnections are emotional, relational and social phenomena best understood as complex, contradictory and messy realities that defy prescriptiveness, predictability, insensitivities and caricature. Through Immaculate we are introduced to the predicaments of being mobile, but also to the inadequacy of the legal mechanisms elaborated and employed by states to regulate inclusion and exclusion in a world of accelerated and flexible mobility. Hers is a complex story that calls for complex approaches.

Immaculate and her story invite us to focus on the lived experiences and web of relationships that shape and are shaped by intra-African migrants in and beyond their host states and communities. Personal and collective success is critical to migrants, as are their social networks and cultures of interdependence and conviviality. Choice and chance are good bedfellows in the construction and management of social networks and relationships (Owen 2011). This is hardly surprising in a world where agency and contingency are like Siamese twins. By choice or chance, Immaculate successfully draws on her relationships with others and on the cultures of interdependence and conviviality that have shaped her from childhood, to maximise her opportunities as a young, mobile African woman. Her story takes us through the relationships she forges in her efforts to navigate, negotiate and contest various constraints and practices of belonging imposed by the logics, histories and politics of hierarchies, dichotomies, boundaries and exclusions. The story stresses the need for conceptual flexibility and empirical substantiation. It equally challenges social scientists to look beyond academic sources for ethnographic studies or accounts of how such flexible and nuanced understanding of mobility and interconnections in Africa play out in different communities, states and regions of the continent.

Hierarchies in Immaculate's world are not that dissimilar to hierarchies in the world of knowledge. To what extent, if at all, is science superior to literature? When is literature entertainment? And when is it an insight into human nature? To what extent could science double as entertainment? These questions have preoccupied many. Eggington (2011), for example, argues that fiction plays 'a profound role in creating the very idea of reality' that science seeks to explain. He cites the example of Cervantes, in *Don Quixote*, who 'crystallized in prose a confluence of changes in how people in early modern Europe understood themselves and the world around them'.

In the twenty-first century, ethnographic fiction or 'anthropological novels' may have a role in revealing the 'fiction' behind multiple forms of discourses of dominance. While the idea of the ethnographic novel is gradually gaining suffrage in anthropological circles (Gupta & Ferguson 1997), Greenwood (2010) and Shule (2011) believe respectively that works such as *Intimate Strangers* 'traverse the boundary lines between fiction and ethnography' and suggest 'new possibilities in African literature'. This

augurs well for the disciplinary, conceptual and methodological intimacies and flexibilities suggested in this paper.

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