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# Exploring Boundaries of Professional/Personal Practice and Action: Being and Becoming in Khayelitsha Township, Cape Town

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### Going ... beyond ... the academy: a starting point

Being modern thus entails that (now unfashionable) trait of being deeply interested; of being attached to both the present and to the form of one's relationship to it (Probyn, 2000, 183).

Get off your arse and do something; develop your life in a useful way (Wood, 2001, public comment).

As academic social scientists, human geographers are faced with a bewilderingly wide range of professional advice about the deployment or enactment of critical praxis. Elspeth Probyn's autoethnographic call to a deepened interest in, and attachment to, one's relation to the present, seems rather removed from David Wood's highly charged rallying cry to do something useful. Yet, discursively different, and theoretically far removed as these statements are, they can appear to be close bedfellows of praxis when contrasted with other arguments which would restrict the critical scope of academic work – for example, pleas for an objective unbiased geography, for an educational as opposed to a political or ethical approach, or for a division of labour which separates thinking and writing from doing. It so happens that for me, a deep interest in my relation to the present sometimes chimes strongly with the notion of getting off my arse and doing something, but that's me, and perhaps that's the point.

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In what follows, I am keen to deconstruct what I consider to be artificial boundaries which are often used to understand my academic profession and person. For example, I am currently involved in research (with Jon May and Sarah Johnsen) which focuses on the spaces and organisation of responses to urban homelessness. I have also been a night shelter volunteer, and a reader of *Big Issue*. So where do I draw the line between what is and what is not academic research? The truth is, I don't. I may be a university professional, but I am also (amongst other things) a partner, dad, son, friend, volunteer, passer by, socialist Christian, member of (what I like to think of as) a radical church community, consumer of news, academic writing and fiction, a guitarist, a player of electronic bagpipes, and an occasional visitor to a township in Cape Town. In all of this, the differentiation, between, academy/non-academy, professional/personal, research/everyday life is essentially fluid and dynamic. And I don't assert this as a smart Deleuzian comment, it's just the way it is with me (and I suspect many others). When I'm in the university, or engaged in academic work 'elsewhere', I don't find myself shutting off other aspects of me (well, perhaps the guitar and the pipes, but I often whistle tunes instead ...). Equally, when I'm outside the prescribed spaces of the Academy, I don't shut off my research fascinations, theoretical predilections or epistemological prejudices. Indeed, I find that aspects of 'everyday life' often inform my academic thinking rather than the other way around. I happen to subscribe to moral and ethical geographies that point to the need for action as well as talk and writing, but I couldn't tell you whether such a view has been formed within the academy or beyond it. Perhaps both, and yet neither, especially if these are held to be discrete categories.

So, I admit to not knowing where 'beyond the Academy' is. Rather than engaging in an exploration of the boundary, I prefer to suggest that there are processes by which we sometimes choose to move into a contact space, or contact spaces, which enables us as academic researchers to apply, protest, resist, make relevant, influence, make a difference. This contact space may be formed in rationally chosen or passionately engaged research projects (such as our homelessness research), or perhaps even in a deliberate focus on 'applied work', although this notion of 'applied' clearly represents a wide range of approaches and contact spaces. Alternatively contact spaces may arise from other involvements which are perhaps less easily or comfortably labelled as research; academics are involved in myriad personal, even private contributions which address sites and practices of oppression yet which are rarely made known in research terms.

In this chapter I mention a personal involvement in a small, ordinary activity, which started out as definitely non-research, and was never intended as fodder for conference talks or even book chapters! Indeed, for some time I determined not to talk or write about it because I felt it was somehow separated out from 'the academy', and it has only been with the encouragement of academic friends that I have relaxed that determination. Even so, I find myself sensitive to self-criticism about 'exploiting' activities which are best just done and not talked about. Equally I am sensitive to the broader charge of self-aggrandisement which is often levelled at autoethnographic contributions. So what follows comes with a caveat. I do not see the activities mentioned here as in any way heroic, special or well executed. However, I do regard these activities as illustrating the kind of contact space involvement which can be done, and is being done by 'academics' in a range of different spheres and with a range of different motivations. Such involvements may throw up interesting generic implications for radical and critical

geographies, although what I describe here may be regarded as neither ‘radical’ or ‘critical’ in some orthodox senses of those concepts. It is however, one illustration of how an academic’s deep interest in relationships with the present (and the past) has involved a ‘getting your hands dirty’ in the attempt to do something useful.

### **The ‘contact space’ of Khayelitsha**

This chapter draws on two seemingly distinct but essentially intermingled contexts. The first materialised when two close friends of mine spent some time in Cape Town, South Africa in 1996. Rachel, an orthopaedic surgeon, had elected to work for a period in one of the city’s major hospitals; Rob, a robotics engineer, had resigned from an academic post, and spent much of his time in South Africa looking after their young daughter. They went to Cape Town because they had a ‘heart’ for the country and the people, and had wanted to use the life opportunity that had been in part enabled (by the rotation system in medical training) and in part engineered (by relinquishing an academic job, and by choosing to work in Cape Town as opposed to other, possibly easier, options) to explore the possibilities of doing something about this ‘heart’ by visiting, living and working there for a few months. Using this idea of ‘heart’ clearly exposes the discursive specificities of Christian and/or charitable contexts, but conceptually it describes a process which has wider implications relating to an emotional/intellectual/ideological/perhaps unexplainable interest in, and even commitment to, particular people and issues at a distance, which prompt both a caring-at-a-distance, and more rarely an involvement which seeks to erode (however insignificantly) that distanciation.

One morning, while walking in the foothills of Table Mountain, Rob met a Black African pastor, Templeton, from Khayelitsha – a township in the Cape Flats at the edge of Cape Town which ‘houses’ more than one million people. As a result of this meeting, Rachel, Rob and their daughter responded to an invitation to visit Templeton and his church congregation in the township – a visit which was certainly unusual, and which was regarded by some local contacts as unsafe in the immediate post-Apartheid climate. This visit led to other meetings with people living in and working in Khayelitsha. Rachel and Rob’s e-mailed accounts of these events, places and people sparked off a potential for involvement in me, awakening latent fascination with South African affairs born of Anti-apartheid activism, avid reading of both ‘academic’ and ‘non-academic’ literatures and an unaccountable focussing of interest and care on this particular distanciated space rather than others. Interestingly this was not a fascination which had been expressed in ‘academic’ work, but Rachel and Rob’s pioneering visit had opened up the potential for a contact space in Khayelitsha.

Other visits to Khayelitsha followed, involving not only my personal ‘initiation’ into the ‘other’ space of the township but also scoping discussions with Templeton and others about how a form of partnership could be established between a church community in NW Bristol and groups of people amongst the Khayelitsha million. We were particularly concerned that any partnership should be ‘post-colonial’, although in practice that translated naively into attempts to facilitate projects decided on by our partners in Khayelitsha in ways of their choosing. This idea of ‘post-colonial’ partnership is too big to handle in this chapter, but suffice to say that an intellectual awareness of post-colonial theory was only a very partial preparation for the specific power relations encountered. Equally the fact that partnership was being attempted between church communities is

highly relevant. On the one hand, being part of a church community significantly enables group activity – there is a propensity to link spiritual philosophy with everyday life-action, there is a ready mechanism for group-building and fund raising, and there is an established trust and familiarity which spans different age ranges and life-cycle circumstances. On the other hand, churches are presumed to act *with baggage* – Christian caring at a distance has been equated with missionary zeal, and thinly-veiled colonialisms of conversion to ‘our’ ways of doing and thinking. Such caring has also been assumed to focus on church-to-church support, resulting in disinterest in beyond-church populations other than as targets of proselytization.

The emergent partnership was founded on these enabling organisational frames, and on these post-colonial concerns, but it has been worked out in the practice of doing things together, as being has melded with becoming. An initial ten year commitment to financial and temporal involvement has led to mutual visits, and support in various forms for social action programmes involving, for example, soup kitchens, pre-school provision, a craft market, an AIDS orphanage, as well as for wider social activity (such as street music) and more specific church-related activity. Thus far, the impact has been low level, often supporting existing initiatives rather than sponsoring new opportunities, although there are dreams/plans for schemes to provide new housing and employment training. Undoubtedly I, and others in the teams from Bristol who have worked in Khayelitsha, have benefited personally from the engagement. Equally, each time a visit is planned we offer instead to send the money-equivalent rather than people, and in refusing such offers our partners express to us something of their regard for the mutuality of benefit. But there are few illusions about what is being achieved – only a strong conviction that to do something is better than to do nothing.

### **A sense for the other**

The second parallel context is more recognisably academic, arising from a personal intellectual concern about how to deal with ‘otherness’, a much debated, but often abstracted issue within human geography. I have been challenged by the arguments of the French anthropologist Marc Augé (1998) about the need to be sensitive to two different strands of otherness. First, he suggests, we need a sense of the other in order to establish what has meaning for others and a strong sense of that which they elaborate upon. It is easy to conclude that many human geographers have been extremely active in this respect, generating rich veins of understanding about the processes and practices (for example) of exclusion and marginalisation. However, there have been well documented problems in developing this sense of the other. For example, there has been a tendency to lock ‘others’ into the thought-prison of the same (Doel 1994). Equally, there has been a tendency to illustrate ‘otherness’ in terms of a series of archetypal socio-cultural variables (age, gender, sexuality and so on) often without serious commitment to the people and issues involved, and without a more wide-ranging sense of the range of ‘other’ geographies (Valentine 1999). All of this has resulted in real difficulties in moving beyond ‘others of the same’ to ‘the other of the other’ in order to reflect on what is unfamiliar, unexplainable or even unrecognisable about otherness.

Augé argues that we also need to develop a sense for the other, an appreciation of otherness which is emotional, connected and committed. With notable individual exceptions (see, for example, Sibley 1995) it is less easy to detect this sense for the other

in human geography, at least in part because defining issues of academic professionalism (such as the nature of research funding, an increasingly competitive culture of individualism and the pragmatic criteria for promotion) conspire against long-term longitudinal research commitment to emotional connections with and for the other. In these circumstances it is often easier to pursue ethical thinking, writing and morality in terms of Kantian and post-Kantian (MacIntyre 1984) ideas about the experience of value, than through what Michael Shapiro (1999, 63) has termed the ‘recognition of an vulnerability to alterity’. Such vulnerability to alterity can be approached in different ways, but Shapiro argues that face-to-face encounter and the experience of the ‘other’ as a historical trace are crucial dimensions of an ethical responsibility. As I have written about elsewhere (Cloke 2002) the ability, or not, to develop a sense for the other is grounded at least in part in the individual and collective choices we make about how to ‘live ethically and act politically’ (Orlie 1997).

This second more academic context cannot for me be divorced from the first, more personal and practical context of emergent activity in Khayelitsha. Each references the other in the being and becoming of an academic researcher wishing to develop appropriate ways of living and acting. The academic and the personal perform such complex interactive manoeuvres that it is well nigh impossible to disentangle them. Personal concern about over-abstraction in academic thinking and research both prompted, and was prompted by, being and becoming in Khayelitsha (as well as equally important involvements in other contact spaces, notably those associated with homelessness). Academic writings were both interrogated for activity in Khayelitsha and interrogated by such activity. Any attempt to demarcate a boundary between the academy and beyond is doomed to frustration in such circumstances. Indeed, it is in the essential intertwining of these parallels that I find hope for the development of an appropriate sense for the other.

Such intertwining is vividly expressed in the ethical writings of liberation theologians such as Gustavo Gutierrez (1986, 1988) and Zolani Ngwane (1994), who engage in the ethical debate from the perspective of the poor and oppressed, and in the process exercise an epistemological privilege in ethical enquiry. Liberation theology has emerged with a two-pronged agenda of ‘denunciation and annunciation’ (Ngwane 1994, 114). It denounces the hypocrisy of the church which teaches equality, charity and love whilst demonstrating neither solidarity nor serious commitment to the cause of the oppressed. It also denounces the state whose devotion to law and order often legitimates the interests of the rich over the poor. At the same time liberation theology announces the good news of God’s work through the poor in their struggle for liberation, pointing beyond social and historical materiality to an eschatological dimension in which the poor shall inherit the earth. The academy would do well to heed carefully both the need to denunciate hypocrisy and (and this of course can be done in different ways) the need to communicate good news in action.

I increasingly recognise a sense for the ‘other’ in terms of attempting to achieve solidarity – a development that grows best with our participation and involvement in the world of the ‘other’. As Gutierrez (1988) suggests, this is not a case of a conversion of the other, of converting ‘them’ into ‘our’ world. Instead it is a commitment:

to enter and in some cases remain in the universe of the poor with a much clearer awareness, making it a place of residence and not simply of work (Gutierrez 1988, 73)

So, we might see this as a conversion for the other, even to the extent of depriving ourselves of our normal comforts in order to develop solidarity. This will not ultimately be a question of speaking for others – as if somehow we have access to, or recourse to, their experiences – but rather we can risk ourselves for others by implicating ourselves in their lives and their spaces, extending our selves to cover the place of the other. Obviously such practices of implication require us to be conscious of our own finitude, and of the limitations imposed on us by the mediation of actors such as race and gender. Nevertheless, I believe that any re-radicalised geography will be measured to some extent by the degree to which radical and critical geographers achieve a going beyond the self in order to find a sense for the other in practices of conversion for the other.

To use the term coined by Mary Louise Pratt (1991) the task that faces us is a matter of converting the contact zone; that is, the space in which geographically and historically separated peoples come into contact with each other and relate to each other, often in terms of coercion, radical inequality and intractable conflict. A sense for the other will involve this contact zone – a transformation which as Jennifer Robinson (1996, 220) points out:

is always open to critique, which avoids closing off the identities of participants around old stereotypes, and which is constantly interrogating both the present and the past for the contradictions and the slippages which give us hope for a better future.

### **Interrogating Khayelitsha as a contact space**

I began by suggesting that academics sometimes choose to move into particular contact spaces, which enable their involvement in making a difference beyond the academy. Only a few pages later, I find that my academic search for a sense for the other has got sufficiently carried away as to suggest that the world's contact zones can be transformed through practices of conversion for the other. Such is the power of academic rhetoric that it so often needs to be interrogated by grounded experience in order to keep it in proportion. It is therefore important to review evidence from the Khayelitsha contact space in order to be critically realistic about both the abstract and grounded spaces between involvement and transformation.

First it is important to question the motivation which lies behind academic movement into contact spaces such as Khayelitsha. A critique of motivation will vary according to the specific nature of the contact zone, but in this case involvement could be reviewed critically in terms of bleeding heart liberalism, voluntaristic self-fulfilment, naïve recuperation, or a salving of conscience by do-gooders. Many of these lines of critique could well be significant in terms of the self-satisfaction gained by those people from Bristol (including myself) who have participated in the Khayelitsha partnership even though participants clearly express a 'heart' for the situation there. Rebecca Allahyari (2000, 4) has analysed volunteers' pursuit of self-betterment in terms of the practices and processes of *moral selving* which she describes as 'the work of creating oneself as a more virtuous, and often more spiritual, person'. Here she identifies a concern for the transformation of the underlying moral self through the assuming of particularly situated identities and subjectivities which can be framed by volunteering to help others. Even the riposte that Khayelitsha is a long way to go for a bit of moral selving can be counterposed by interpretations of involvement there in terms of the supposed cache of activity in far-off

(somehow exotic) places which in addition provide excellent touristic opportunities. There is no doubt that self-satisfaction, and maybe even conscience-salving play their part here, but the costs of involvement militate against easy activity for these reasons above. The partnership in Khayelitsha has involved reasonably long-term financial commitment, and takes up a substantial proportion of the annual leave entitlement of many participants. Team members often work a series of 12 hour days in the township, and return to Bristol needing a rest – the antithesis of normal touristic experience. I have repeatedly seen a going-beyond-the-self in these circumstances.

The particular circumstances of Khayelitsha have been fashioned by the spatial politics of Apartheid, and subsequently slightly refashioned by the lingering vestiges of economic and cultural apartheid. Clifton Crais (2002, 4) suggests that the evil of the political imagination of South African Apartheid represents ‘the very opposite of ubuntu, of hospitality and sharing and of those virtues that make one human and good and life worth living’. It can be argued that the involvement of white Bristolians in a township where white presence is still rare does enable a small revival of ubuntu amongst our partners. On two notable occasions – once when leading open air song-and-dance play with pre-schoolers, and also when playing an impromptu game of soccer – there have been specific and very positive comments about the importance of the sheer innocent presence of white outsiders in the township. The solidarity represented by such presence is a denunciation of the hypocrisy of racism, and may even be a symbolic annunciation of hope. However, there is a very real danger of over-expectation of the impacts to be achieved from this kind of partnership, which can easily also lead to false hope. The positive impacts achieved are materially negligible when compared to the needs of people in Khayelitsha as a whole, but I have come to believe that individual and small-scale collective ethical action is political, and the assessment of impact should be seen in the potential of the accumulation of such actions as well as in individual impacts.

Secondly, it is important to review any claim that this nascent partnership can be regarded as in any way post-colonial. The fundamental if naïve starting point here is this - most action (including church-related activity) in places like Khayelitsha has traditionally been mediated by NGOs or other organisations which are controlled and administered by white South Africans or other white foreign nationals. Control over resources and apparatus of accountability can be represented, and experienced as a cultural extension of historical Apartheid-related practices, so in establishing partnership without white South African intermediaries the idea was to provide resources (money, time, expertise) and apply them to objectives laid down by people in Khayelitsha. In practice, this idea proved to be a naïve attempt to restructure deeply entrenched power relations, an attempt which in any case has proved impossible to carry through in cases where provision of resources involved the bidding for institutional funding (usually with built-in functional and operations ties) rather than personal giving.

In any case, we immediately discovered that the most ‘successful’ social action projects in Khayelitsha were those run by organisations (such as traditional denominational churches) who often depended on local white intermediaries for resources and organisational structure. By contrast, independent church and community groups had no gatekeeper access to external resources, and by choice did not depend on external organisational structures. To such groups we quickly became pseudo-gatekeepers, and on several occasions when discussing ‘their’ needs and objectives we found we were being

told what ‘they’ thought ‘we’ wanted to hear – a continued form of colonialism by proxy. Equally, we found it difficult to establish suitable ideas about accountability and responsibility for resources, preferring to deploy (sometimes inappropriate) blind trust, and interpreting some financial practices as ‘cultural’ when perhaps they were not.

So we have lots of questions about how to practice post-colonialism! We have really enjoyed the opportunity to invite local leaders from Khayelitsha to visit us in Bristol and to advise us on our visions and practices in the city. However, in Khayelitsha it often seems as though we are being asked to have more decision-making participation than in theory we desire, and there is almost too much respect, and even deference, to us which is connected to the expectations that we raise just by being there. Some of this occurs when our position is translated into Xhosa, and sometimes amplified in that translation. We are also uncomfortable with the role of providing ‘legitimacy’ as white sponsors of local community projects and events, ranging from bids to buy land, to high profile presence at funerals.

Thirdly, does this involvement in Khayelitsha contribute towards establishing a sense of or for the other, or even a conversion for the other? Immediately I should point out that the visits of our team are almost always (necessarily) only for a short period of time, and that we have not learned local languages. Anthropologically, then, this does not constitute appropriate participation or observation in epistemological terms. Our interventions are channelled through key individuals in the local community, and our resultant grasp of what has meaning in Khayelitsha, and what constitutes the ‘other of the other’ is constrained and limited. Perversely, despite the sub-ethnographic nature of our involvement, there is a deep sense of emotional connection and commitment, which will be tested over the agreed minimum period of partnership and beyond. Face-to-face encounter, even if it is intermittent, does provide something of a historical trace and a continuing ethical responsibility.

However, the idea of a conversion for the other is hardly appropriate in this case. The involvement in Khayelitsha involves little by way of self-deprivation. For reasons both of security and an unwillingness to exploit the potentially overgenerous hospitality of Khayelitsha (who would further deprive themselves to ensure that visitors from Bristol were properly fed) teams from Bristol stay in modest accommodation beyond the boundary of the township. Our ability to hire vehicles and eat well stands in marked contrast to that of our partners. In relative terms there is precious little depriving of selves occurring here. Equally, in material terms, there is little apparent risk to our selves of our presence in Khayelitsha. Compared even to Rachel and Rob’s initial visit in 1996, the township has become a relatively safe place, and our sponsorship by local church leaders adds to that security, although (just as when conferencing in an American city) standard precautions are deployed. In these terms, then, partnership with Khayelitsha risks little in the implication of our selves in the lives and spaces of ‘other’ people.

In other ways, however, this limited implication of the self can be regarded as significantly ‘risky’. The challenge of Khayelitsha is to western lifestyles, politics, attitudes and action. Implication of the self with Khayelitsha has as its aim a covering of the place of the other, but as its heart lies a reverse covering by the other of our place, ourselves. Perhaps the most frequent long-term reaction of people visiting Khayelitsha is that residing briefly in the place of the other causes a mirror to be held up to ways of living, being and becoming ‘at home’. I should make it clear here that I am not referring to



some trite conversion into ‘better’ people; exposure to otherness is soon wearied, and often quickly forgotten in the re-entry to everyday life. However, what remains is a nagging refusal to settle for inaction, an insidious unease about the potential hypocrisy of talking the talk but not walking the walk, a growing kernel of belief that caring at a distance can be mutually enriched by formal implication in other lives and other spaces.

### **Taking the academy beyond itself?**

For many critical geographers, the designation of appropriate contact spaces in which to apply themselves as academics to the tasks of making a difference will fall neatly into the realm of research. Some research can be portrayed as taking academic concepts, insights, resources and impetus ‘out’ beyond the Academy into spaces and lives in search both of a sense of/for the other, and of influencing material outcomes on behalf of the other. As critical geographers analyse such moves in terms of any wider re-radicalisation of their subject, they can quickly become mired by the inevitable contradictions of such ‘academic’ research. Not least, geography as a discipline is seemingly inescapably entwined in the new professional values and targets which imbue research. Thus research in contact spaces beyond the academy will inevitably be subject to the standards of this new professionalism. Does it display grant-winning prowess? Does it bring in adequate research funding, with (of course) sufficient overheads? Does it fit with the needs of (often privileged) ‘end-users’? Will it be published in top-flight journals? Will it demonstrate five-star (or now, with strangely non-ironic grade inflation, six-star) research reputation? While some critical geographers have been able to stay ‘radical’ in these circumstances, most of us have had to adapt any radicalism to prevailing circumstances. The point here is that the academy itself, through these professional mores, can serve to restrict the ‘going beyond’ by research, especially in the form of long-term, low-budget, emotionally committed research involvement with others. Re-radicalised geographies will make more of a difference to the world ‘out there’ when these kinds of involvements are re-valourised within the academy.

This view of the academy somehow shaping the way in which research ‘goes beyond’ should be set against ways in which the world beyond the academy offers particular contact spaces through the designation of contract or applied research. Here, the ‘beyond’ is actively shaping the academy, as the powerful institutions of governance and commerce seek research with inevitable strings attached. Many academics successfully use such research resources both to fulfil contracted obligations, and to go beyond the politicised restrictions imposed by sponsoring organisations. Critical geographers will want to assess here whether applied research in geography is sufficiently able to appropriate resources for the task (in Pratt’s terms) of transforming the contact zones involved.

It is my belief, however, that these contact spaces afforded by ‘research’ are only part of the story. Myriad human geographers, as part of their everyday lives, are involved in contact spaces which are less readily categorised as research yet which reflect some kind of going beyond the academy. Critical geographers will want to review such activity, particularly in terms of its motivation and impact, and clearly these involvements will not be immune from well-developed critiques of voluntarism and charity. However, while I’m sure that there are examples in which non-involvement is better than involvement, it may be that in sum these individual goings-beyond-the-self may represent an important

component of academics beyond the academy. Although the pinpricks of action may or may not collectively constitute the acupuncture of transforming contact zones, they demonstrate that taking the academy beyond itself requires a deconstruction of perceived boundaries between academic/non-academic, research/non-research, professional/personal. Radical and critical geographies will be expressed in everyday lives, whether in the 'academy' or seemingly beyond, whether in professionalized research contexts or in more private contact spaces. If radical and critical geographies are not to be found in the totality of everyday life inside/outside the academy, what does that say about the academic nature of our radicalism and criticality?

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