

Simulacral, genealogical, auratic and representational failure: Bushman authenticity as methodological collapse

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Abstract

This article engages with the concept of authenticity as deployed in anthropology. The first section critiques authenticity as a simple reference to cultural purity, a traditional isomorphism or historical verisimilitude or as an 'ethnographic authenticity'. Demarcation of authenticity must take into account philosophical literature that argues that authenticity is an existential question of the 'modern' era. Thus, authenticity is offered to us as individuals as a remedy for the maladies of modernity: alienation, anomie and alterity. Authenticity is then discussed as a question of value within an economy of cultural politics that often draws on simulacra, creating cultural relics of dubious origin. The final section discusses various methodological failures and problematiques that are highlighted by the concern for, and scrutiny of, authenticity. The first is the simulacral failure. The subjects of anthropology are mostly real flesh-and-blood people-on-the-ground with real needs. In contrast is the simulacral subject, the brand, the tourist image, the media image or the ever-familiar hyper-real bushmen. Lastly, the article considers what Spivak calls 'withholding' – a resistance to authentic representation by the Other. Resistance suggests a need for a radically altered engagement with the Other that includes both a deepening, and an awareness, of anthropology as a process of common ontological unfolding.

Prelude

What are the ends of authenticity? Where does a discourse of authenticity lead? As Walter Benjamin (1969) and Theodor Adorno (1964) watched the world plunge into World War II, they viewed the very 'modern' angst that is authenticity as pathology of power and capital. Benjamin (in Jay 2006) saw in talk of authenticity the growth of fascism (as a political arm of capital) and eventually war. Adorno (1964, 1987, 2003) saw the extermination of the inauthentic and migrants by those who perceived themselves and their kin as autochthonous. Authenticity suggests: 'All arrivals are to be excluded and if they do not move they will be made to do so.' Think Nazi Germany, apartheid, Israel/Palestine, Rwanda, Bosnia and Serbia, Mbotu's Zaire, Idi Amin's Uganda, India and Pakistan after independence, and now Zimbabwe.

This prelude reveals my awareness of authenticity as an ideological device, one that has been used in the past and continues to be used as a means of exclusion, especially in the service of ethno-nationalistic agendas. Heidegger (1927) focuses on authenticity as being an individualistic attribute to a conception based in groups (Jay 2006). Authenticity presented as an attribute of a group is at its most dangerous, because it is at precisely this

had lost the ability to live in or with nature, the plants and animals found in their world of objects and subjects.

Another example of efforts to use Bushmen authenticity as a remedy for the maladies of modernity is the hope of recovery, a nostalgia for the past, and the varied calls for a return to source, i.e., 'auratic critique' (Mufti 2000: 88). Auratic critiques pertain to an object that is only accessible as an aura as a glimmer from the past. This epitomises the postcolonial moment, the rueful longing for an unrecoverable past, and the postcolonial as that which has been insufficiently mourned (Spivak 1999). These hopes of recovery are especially evident in attempts by the #Khomani to recreate the way of life of the 'real Bushmen'. My fieldwork was filled with one lament after another about the lost way of life. Such laments recall these auratic elements, those supposed aspects of San life that made it such a 'wondrous thing'. These elements of an imagined San past are offered to the #Khomani as an apparent treasure trove of development and livelihoods by government and NGOs. The challenges of authenticity and the failure of plans to use auratic cultural models as a means of making a living are typical of postcolonial subjects.

Authenticity as circulating value

Where authenticity operates as a question of value it is viewed by those who buy into it as part of an economy of cultural politics in which signs, as measures of value, circulate for the production of cultural commodities. Authenticity in this economy often draws on simulacra and cultural relics of dubious origin, and represents some of the clearest examples of Spivakian post-coloniality. This is a state of being where the colonial past paralyses the agents and keeps them living in a moment after the end of the anti-colonial struggle. The #Khomani reminisce and their recollections are ripe with nostalgic imagery. The simulacral bushman is offered to the outsider and to the world as a commodity, but the world is suspicious (see Dyll-Myklebust 2007). Some tourists, journalists, farmers, neighbours demand to know: Is this a 'real' Bushman, am I not buying a fake experience or thing?

It is telling of what the Other is aware of. Dawid learned over the years of interaction with researchers, information gatherers, tourists and the like, what kinds of information would be interesting to them – something like a beetle picking lice out of a child's hair – and he was able to offer this information on the spur of the moment. This is an intuitive ability to offer up types of stories to researchers. There are no vestiges of ancient traditions here, except those that are drawn from the simulacra to please global audiences. People travelled great distances to consult Dawid on matters herbal, medicinal and magical.¹³ He and his father and those around him shaped and sustained a micro-political economy – one that plays with nature, ecology, culture, magic, myth, fantasy and reality. Ersatz political economy or not, there is at least the germ of a small market in bushman-ness in the southern Kalahari that the #Khomani have tried to grow.

The #Khomani have turned bushman-ness into work, they have tried to make it pay, and they have tried to sell it on the open market. A key point in this genealogical reading is that attempts to commoditise bushmen-ness have almost always been mediated by outsiders like philanthropists, entrepreneurs, tour operators and NGOs. Such mediation has drawn on readily available stereotyping and racist iconography of the San, which

include popularly held perceptions about San bodies, culture, habits and language. The commoditisation of bushman-ness in this mediated form is seldom questioned, and its authenticity seldom interrogated. However, when the †Khomani obtained their own land and began to replicate mediated ventures like those that used to be managed by outsiders, consumers consistently questioned the authenticity of the enterprise.

Why do consumers question the San in their production of bushman-ness, but not the mediated undertaking? First, the desire for authentic experience is exactly what tourism delivers (Cohen 1988; McCannel 1973). McCannel (1973) argues the tourist is actually satisfied to purchase a 'performed experience' and may be completely aware of the contrivance. S/he is fine with experiencing an essentially fictional (can we say inauthentic?) encounter, as long as they know it is staged. Instead of focusing on establishing authenticity, anthropologists should be examining the processes through which 'authenticity is made' (Cohen 1988). In Erik Cohen's view authenticity is established through the imposition of subject distance between the tourist and commoditised culture; the greater the distance, the more authentic the experience even if it is an obvious contrivance. The example offered is of the conspicuousness of cash transactions. Exchange is usually handled through booking offices or administrators, thus tourists do not feel they have paid for something. The unmediated †Khomani tourist interactions often involved direct exchanges of money between the San and visitors. Tourists and outsiders on occasion felt that the †Khomani were begging or were somewhat forceful when they suggested payment for photographs or offered crafts for sale on the roadside. In these encounters very little subjective distance is placed between the San person and the tourists, who are confronted with very real human realities: money, food and poverty.

Another connection can be made to the existential take on authenticity, namely that of scripting one's own story or narrative employment (Baugh 1988). The imposition of 'subject distance' in the touristic encounter allows tourists to produce their own narrative, to have their own reading and thus create their own particular sense of authenticity. It is as if the production of authenticity is a carefully choreographed interaction that should not be forced onto the tourist but rather offered tentatively, in snippets, so as to not spook him/her.

A crude formula can be proposed from Cohen's argument; the more subjective distance the more authentic the experience seems (note experience). Conversely, the fewer attempts or the less successful the attempts at creating subjective distance are, the more the tourists see the people, their needs, their poverty, their misery and their humanity, and this mars the touristic experience. After all, tourism is about an exotic experience that allows tourists to escape the realities of everyday life that they leave behind in Europe and elsewhere. During these unmediated tourist encounters, observers confront the inauthentic directly. The inauthentic reminds us of the rawness of the lives of the rural poor. Visitors who question the authenticity of the encounter are not querying the cultural purity of the San, but rather the people-ness. They do not see bushman but they see the rural poor,¹⁴ they see the sick elderly, they see single mothers living with grandparents who have to support their great grandchildren. I ask the readers to ignore the simple aesthetic perfection of the bushman and spend a moment considering the raw life of the

various rural poor who inhabit and have moved to Witdraai and other farms in the Mier area, hoping for relief from their hardships and poverty.

Struggle for the real: the methodological problem of authenticity

Clifford Geertz (1971) raises a concern about the efficacy of anthropological methods in studying religion. Participants know that we are concerned with a subject like Islam, and whenever they encounter us as researchers, they don their Islamic identity. Geertz's question is the following: When are we as anthropologists watching a performance and when are the actions of the 'Other' 'real' or authentic? For Geertz it is not merely the interference of capital and modernity in the lives of the non-Western world which leaves us as anthropologists with mere remnants of former cultural glories to study in our far-off research sites. In the end, our ethnographies produce nothing more than accounts that reflect only what Benjamin (1969) terms an aura of authenticity, where every time an object is reproduced it only retains some minor semblance or aura of the original object. Nor is it simply a question of witnessing and capturing an uncorrupted, pure portrayal of non-Western culture, a sort of fossilisation and museumisation of 'people'. Rather, authenticity should be a central methodological concern for anthropologists. In part, Geertz suggests that it is useful to know how deep these identities penetrate into the 'being' of humanity. The 'struggle for the real' or for authenticity, in the Geertzian sense, means being able to penetrate this methodological veil and to decode the cultural.

In addition, it should be acknowledged that the presence of anthropologists impacts on the roles research participants choose to play. Put differently, our presence as anthropologists force participants to constantly wear their 'anthropological subject' hats. When do these real people emerge without their subject hats, or does our presence always keep our subjects in character? The ethnographic method suggested by Geertz has to be able to see beyond this character that the Other acts out in the research encounter.

In this last instance I offer a scene from Arundhati Roy's (2002) text, *God of small things*, to further illuminate what Geertz might have been after. In the passage two of the main protagonists, Rahel and her twin brother Estha, approach a temple to watch a performance of the kathakali.¹⁵ The narrator tells us that this particular temple is off the usual tourist routes and holds no significance other than its lack of audience. The performers come to placate their gods and ask forgiveness for encasing (sic) their religion/culture. The sense one gets from this scene is of a group who wish to practise their religious and cultural rituals earnestly, not for the voyeuristic touristic performances they have become. 'On these occasions, a human audience was welcome, but entirely incidental' (Roy 2002: 229). Geertz, in my view, wants this culture to be revealed; he wants these 'audience incidental' moments to be made clear by the ethnographic endeavour. I wonder whether the San ever wait for occasions where human audiences are incidental. Below I recount an incident that reveals the aversion to the audience and the Other's engagement with it.

In the last two decades the San, and more so the #Khomani, have been overrun with researchers from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds: natural, agricultural, nutritional, social sciences and humanities. The #Khomani often told stories of, and described, the research encounters they had with researchers. On occasion some of these stories were

told so as to ridicule researchers and the type of activities their research included. Kruiper often tells about various controls involved in experiments like only eating this or that bread, or only eating a particular maize meal, or of having to collect stool samples from his grandchildren. The San's accounts of researchers offer an unusual lens into how our efforts as researchers were interpreted and perceived by participants. What was related to me usually suggested that there may be problems with the data that were collected, that the participants were deceptive or may have been actively misleading. For me, the issue was the authenticity of the data. There is another way of reading it, however; the participants are actively scripting the ethnographies of their lives.

Abraham, in those days Dawid's frequent companion, occasionally asked me to interpret for him on guided walks through the San farms. One such tour ended at Dawid's house. I was sitting in his yard, where one of his grandchildren was playing nearby. I saw a tok-tokkie (darkling beetle/Tenebrid beetle) crawling across the sand and Dawid saw me watching it. He said: 'This beetle, you know, we use it to get rid of lice in children's heads.' He scooped up the beetle, put in the hair of the child, and walked off to a nearby fence in his limping gait. At first the child did not realise that a beetle was in her hair, but as soon as she felt it crawling she was startled by the sensation (she became suddenly wide eyed) and frantically brushed it off. Dawid laughed, looked away, the child ran off to find her mother.

Is the beetle really used to pick lice from children's hair? I seriously doubt it! Tenebrid beetles only eat detritus, they are not active predators that hunt, they are scavengers. I know Dawid to be rather mischievous and his reaction to the scene that played out suggested that he was making it up, his tell-tale laugh and his aloofness after the child had run off, left the impression that he had been caught out.

Several aspects of this story are significant to the arguments about authenticity. First, the story points to the way in which authenticity is constructed out of extraordinary elements – a beetle becomes a medium through which to read bushman-ness, it feeds into the simulacral bushmen. Second, the methodological aspects of doing work among these heavily researched communities are highlighted; these communities have been extensively researched by the Centre for Communication, Media and Society (CCMS), and I will not attempt to cover those methodological strategies and debates. The argument here focuses on two particular processes: that of withholding (Spivak 1990) and that of 'common ontological unfolding', which often happens in the anthropological research process (Ramos 1992).

Deepening anthropologies: hyper-reflexivity and research intimacies

As a point of departure and because it speaks to some of the issues I want to offer as a conclusion, let us briefly mention some of the work by done by CCMS in the southern Kalahari. The research done by a long succession of students since the early 1990s highlights two invaluable sets of contributions: the first results from attempts by CCMS to develop 'a hyper-reflexive ethnographic methodology' (Kapoor 2004). Hyper-reflexivity is a method of engagement derived from Spivak's 'problem of the native informant'.¹⁶ The resolution of the 'problem' is to be found in an 'obsessive interest in self reflexivity' in which anthropologists are aware that they are 'intimately inhabiting and negotiating

discourse' in order to 'produce a non-hierarchical encounter with the other', and ultimately to make anthropological and all research 'engagement more accountable to the subaltern' (ibid). Examples of the methods used by the CCMS include auto-ethnographic work (see Tomaselli 2003, 2005, 2012; Tomaselli et al. 2013), 'campfire ethnography' (McLennan-Dodd 2003), and fieldwork friendships (Dyll 2003; Mhiripiri 2012).

The second set of methodologies can be classed as a series of ethnographic experiments that include not just a 'classic ethnographic approach' (here rather crudely understood as extended field stays and mixed methods), but also a range of other ethnographic elements linked to methodological concerns. The research efforts by CCMS are diverse and appear haphazardly organised or based on students' whims and preferences. These include: the production of ethnographic film, multi-vocal epistemologies (Dyll-Myklebust 2013), narrative analysis, semiotics (Tomaselli 2001a), tourist analyses (Barnabas 2010; Peters 2013; Tomaselli 2011; Wang 2001), art studies (Barnabas 2010, Finlay and Barnabas 2012; Lange et al. 2013), and rock art studies (Tomaselli 2001b). I mention here also that the work of Shane Moran (2009) and Michael Wessels (2010) has equally attempted to shift the boundaries of San scholarship, albeit through the deployment of different literary, textual, translation and theoretical strategies. The aforementioned falls under a Derridean critique that attempts to re-read the San archive in relation to the nostalgia for the lost origin (Wessels 2010). Overall, the mainstay of San studies is, for the most part these days, grounded firmly within a tradition of critique that aims to transcend what has been problematic in this body of scholarship.

In short, cumulative CCMS accounts have produced a meta-anthropology (an anthropology of anthropology) and a range of other techniques I call 'research intimacies', i.e., attempts at closing the subjective, epistemological and other gaps between researcher and researched (see Jeursen and Tomaselli 2002; McLennan-Dodd 2004). For all its seeming arbitrariness these diverse engagements have responded to an epistemological problem of studying the San and the range of representations as well as engagements and how these encounters have produced particular 'knowledges'. Moreover, the research has also responded to issues beyond epistemology. I argue that epistemology does not adequately capture the *problematique* of anthropology. What the work of some of these researchers contends with, is that they operate in a common dialogic process of revealing each other's most basic being. The question of a deeper anthropology is not simply: How do I get to know who you are? The more fundamental question of anthropology is: Who are you and who am I? (see Tomaselli 2013, in response to a critique of CCMS's reflective/reflexive position offered by Hitchcock and Biesele 2008).

Anthropologising the self and common ontological unfolding

The longitudinal aspect of the CCMS ethnographic encounter, together with its very serious consideration of the 'epistemic violence' (Ayotte and Husain 2005) the San have been subjected to through years of being studied and talked about in the West, creates a unique opportunity (read ethnological database/archive) that will allow us to 'anthropologise' not just the Other, but also Western epistemic travellers (researchers, journalists, media, tourists, government agents, NGO workers, etc.). For Rabinow (1986) the call to 'anthropologise the West' is an attempt to turn the gaze of the West and to use anthropology to problematise and interrogate the role of the West in constructing a non-

Western subject. However, anthropologising the West does not mean the simple production of an Occidentalism; it is rather a dialogue. Agamben (2004) speaks of the ‘anthropological machine’ – a particularly Western epistemic undertaking that creates an ethnological subject by granting it an externally imposed ontological status. The CCMS engagement offers a meta-anthropology that anthropologises bushman studies, the San and bushman students, by turning gazes and asking how the ethnographic subject is, in turn, created by the gazes.

I conclude with a question, a line of inquiry, a problematique. Why is the abovementioned methodological and meta-anthropological work necessary? Two aspects of my own ethnographic encounter and search for an authenticity stand out. The first is what I can best describe as following a process of ‘withholding’ on the part of the Other. Such withholding is the retreat of the other, our anthropological subject is withdrawing and our efforts to represent it clearly and even in a critically deconstructed state seem increasingly unlikely. Baudrillard (1998) alludes to the self-same resistance to representation by the Other or to a retreating Other.

Is this the now-familiar crisis of representation? Not quite, but this crisis does figure in the resistance/withholding. Withholding is not the simple catachresis, the continued use of concepts without real-world referents, as highlighted in the work of Spivak in her engagement with postcolonial theory. This is not the Western knower misjudging the exact identity of the Other through the misapplication of concepts and ideas. No, what I am conceptualising here is an active process undertaken by the Other, and its victim is not the Third-World postcolonial subject, but rather the Western European self. What I am dealing with here is the refusal to be represented, noted in literary characters such as Friday in J.M. Coetzee’s *Foe* (1986). In Coetzee’s text Friday eludes all attempts to represent him, the best that those who encounter him can do is hazard a guess.

In the field I often encounter people unwilling to speak to me or other researchers. Various ‘strategies’ are employed to resist or withhold participation, for instance, Pooi, the grandson of one of the last N|u speakers, would often shout loudly at journalists and filmmakers and threaten to lock the gates of the farms and not let anybody in. When I asked him about this he complained that ‘*everyone keeps coming in and taking their knowledge but bringing nothing back*’, and for this reason he refuses to participate in research and dislikes it when his mother or grandmother participate. On other occasions I noticed some San ‘pretending to be drunk’ in order to avoid researchers. Some are rude to researchers, others ask for large sums of money. Attempts were also made by organisations and legal representatives to limit and shape the contours of interaction with the San. The South African San Institute (SASI) drafted legal contracts that set out the terms of contact between the San and journalists, media, film makers, researchers, farmers, tour operators and the like. In an effort to enforce these contracts and their terms, the San people were asked to not participate in any research, nor to allow anyone to photograph them. Literally, this meant there was sometimes an actual silence, a reluctance to speak, but in addition to this the San and SASI thought it useful to also impose a visual absence or silence.

One of the most telling entanglements in this regard was the suicide of Dals in late 1999. Dals took his own life by jumping in front of a bus filled with tourists. I read this event as an attempt on his part to remove himself from the equation of representation. His suicide was a last-ditch attempt to place himself outside the grasp of an externally imposed representation. He took his own life, he placed himself in the path of the tourist bus; in my view he took back his voice and in the final act represented himself and wrote his own story in a classic existentialist move.

Withholding on the part of the Other is a process that complicates the production of an authentic ethnological subject. Anthropology among the San in the southern Kalahari is not experiencing the limits of a paradigm or a scientific consensus that can no longer explain what it is observing without creating a new, conceptual technical toolbox. Rather, we are witnessing a shift in the agency of the Other, who no longer behaves like a willing and docile research subject. We are now confronted with a self-asserting, sometimes silent, sometimes hostile, retreating other.

Let me return to a point made in passing at the beginning of this text, where I noted that the prelapsarian 'Other' eludes us all the time and if we do not find the authentic, then anthropology seems pointless. Barriers (theoretical or methodological) do not seem to offer a ready way out. I have suggested a deepening anthropology (e.g., work done by CCMS), but I intuitively sense I may need to offer a different solution. The reason for this is that the problematic is not simply a theoretical issue of how the Western episteme interrogates or constructs an authentic view of the other. Far beyond this, the retreat and withholding by the research subject shows that the challenge for bushman scholars is located in both worlds, that of a Self and an Other. Once this realisation sinks in, then the parties involved can begin to tackle the problem not as a characteristic of this world or that world, but rather as an issue of 'common ontological unveiling' (Ramos 1992). Some of this is suggested from the field by research activities that are hyper-reflexive and intimate of the CCMS, and also by other ethnographic tidbits like 'lice-eating beetles', by withholding. In the end these suggest that any failed attempt at locating the authentic is a failure to locate not just the Other, but the Self as well.

Notes

1. The discussion that follows is based on ethnographic fieldwork I conducted between
2. People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola.
3. My supervisor notes that the 'fear', as much as it was real, was also drummed into the heads of the soldiers in these battalions by the SADF.
4. The communities, now living in Platfontein, 15km from Kimberly, have recently become the focus of extensive research by students from the University of KwaZulu-Natal. See Barnabas (2010) on art-making; Mhlanga (2006) and Hart (2011) on radio and Dockney (2011) on storytelling via video.
5. Here preservation is employed as it was used by members of the 'Preservation Committee' that is to have measures in place to preserve the culture, ways and lifestyle of 'a people'.
6. The reclassification of Bushmen as coloureds and no longer native means they do not need to be catered for as with other 'native' groups. Importantly, the state need not cater for their land needs; in terms of the policies of separate development the native must ideally be provided a homeland. From sources we see that the successive governments did not view a San-tustan as a possibility.
7. For more on the San homeland proposed in the 1930s, see Gordon (1995) and Boydell (1948).
8. I am not suggesting that the mere assertion of San identity is enough to cause its re-emergence: the identity is not simply voluntaristic, rather 'authenticity' is at once volunteered but needs other elements which are not solely the body (race elements), nor are they simply ethnic (culture elements).
9. The Afrikaans term 'Baster' literally translates as a bastard, but when applied to animals it can denote a cross breed, or when applied to dogs, a mutt. In earlier uses of this word, it referred to people who were first-generation offspring of a white male and a slave/indigenous woman. These persons occasionally enjoyed greater privileges than other slaves, but the laws of the colony became increasingly oppressive and many Basters left to farm beyond the frontier. Today the term is not widely used and seems to be confined to regions of the Northern Cape and the southern parts of Namibia. In the context of present-day Mier, it has gained more currency as an economic status category than a racial one. Bredenkamp (1991) suggests that the term 'Khoisan' be applied even to those who are historically termed Basters or Bastaards.
10. The example of painting is one also by Benjamin in his 'Mechanical reproduction'.
11. The CPA is a common property institution that allows groups (in the South African case, beneficiaries of land redistribution or restitution) to hold land as a juristic person. CPAs generally have defined membership based on various criteria, such as common dispossession or in the case of the †Khomani San, bushman-ness. CPA members elect an executive committee and other constituent bodies to govern the resources of the association.
12. I participated in wealth-ranking exercises with the extension workers of FARMAfrica. For some of the results see Bradstock (2006, 2007).
13. I have personally encountered a number of Xhosa-speaking people who had travelled from the Eastern Cape or Cape Town to visit Dawid Kruiper or one of his relatives. N/ooi (Dawid Kariseb) also receives many visitors from various regions of South Africa.

14. The 'rural poor' are probably as much a simulacrum as 'bushmen'. It is a matter of which simulacrum serves the people at any given time.
15. Dance dramas enacted from the holy texts reflecting the life of Lord Krishna, over 100 variations of these plays exist.
16. The 'problem of the native informant' is not a problem of the 'other'; rather it is an epistemic question and a representational issue. Simply put: Who speaks for the 'other'? Who is responsible for giving the world its image of the 'native' who is the recipient of assistance, of 'development'? Very often it is indigenous academics, intellectuals who speak to the 'West' about the subaltern, and these intellectuals are equally complicit in creating particular images of the other as impoverished, racialised, indigenised, etc. Hence, the problem of the native informant speaks back to Spivak's text 'Can the subaltern speak?' and its conclusions.

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