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True life, real lives:

Revisiting the boundaries between ethnography and fiction

ABSTRACT

Ethnography and fiction have long been in dialogue in their common endeavor to understand human life and through their shared foundation on writing. Recently, anthropologists and sociologists have expressed concern that the worlds they study might be depicted more compellingly, accurately, and profoundly by novelists or filmmakers than by social scientists. Discussing my work on the embodiment of history in South Africa and on urban policing in France in light of, respectively, J. M. Coetzee's novel *The Life & Times of Michael K* and David Simon's television series *The Wire*, I analyze their commonalities and singularities. Using Marcel Proust's meditation on life and suggesting the heuristic value of distinguishing true life from real lives, I propose, first, to differentiate horizontal and vertical approaches to lives and, second, to complicate the dichotomy associating ethnography with the former and fiction with the latter. This reflection, which borrows from Georges Perec's rumination on the puzzle-maker, can be read as a defense of ethnography against a certain prevailing pessimism. [*ethnography, fiction, writing, life, imagination*]

The ultimate truth of the jigsaw puzzle: despite appearances, puzzling is not a solitary game; every move the puzzler makes, the puzzle-maker has made before; every piece the puzzler picks up, and studies and strokes, every combination he tries and tries again, every blunder and every insight, each hope and each discouragement have all been designed, calculated, decided by the other.

—Georges Perec, *Life: A User's Manual*

“True life, life finally discovered and illuminated, the only life therefore really lived, is literature; that life which, in a sense, at every moment inhabits all men as well as the artist.” So writes Marcel Proust in the last volume of *À la recherche du temps perdu* (1954:895). This final revelation, after some three thousand pages, constitutes both the conclusion of his magnum opus and its fictional beginning, since it ultimately opens the door for the narrator to the possibility and necessity of starting to write. The first part of the sentence—“true life ... is literature”—is certainly famous, but the second part—“that life ... inhabits all men as well as the artist”—although much less emphasized, is its indispensable complement, the democratic counterpart to what could otherwise be an elitist statement and an indication not that there is more truth in literature than in life but, rather, that each life lived possesses the traits of an artwork. What the artist strives for is thus to grasp the life that may escape the person who lives it and to rescue it not so much from death or oblivion as from insignificance. This is what the sentence immediately preceding the above quote formulates in an expression that powerfully evokes the prospect less of the lost time of the work's title than, more importantly, of the loss of true life:

The greatness of veritable art was to regain, to recapture, to make us know that reality at a distance of which we live, from which we separate ourselves more and more as the conventional knowledge which we substitute for it acquires a greater thickness and impermeability, that reality which we would run the risk of dying without having known, and which is quite simply our life.

One can hardly think of a more moving sentence in all of French literature.

But literature or, more generally, art is not the only domain claiming to capture life. Anthropology and, to some degree, the other social sciences share the same project of representing the reality and truth of life. Asserting this claim and this project does not mean that artists and social scientists consider them as exclusively defining their respective practices but simply indicates that life is the matter from which they elaborate their aesthetic or intellectual production. Indeed, it could be said that anthropologists deal and have always dealt with lives: others' lives and their life stories, how they live (what we call their "culture") and how they live lives (what we designate their "experience"). And, for the most part, anthropologists do so with the assumption that they "regain" something of reality and with the aspiration that they might "discover and illuminate" certain truths. This endeavor does not imply that they forget that reality is always construed or that they ignore the elusive nature of truth but, rather, that they try to grasp fragments of the real world—even when they speak of dreams, myths, or structures—and to arrive at more general truths—even when they study conspiracy theories, national imaginaries, or racist ideologies. Yet, as Gilles Deleuze notes, "To write is not to impose a form (of expression) on the matter of lived experience"; it is, instead, "a question of becoming, always incomplete, always in the midst of being formed, and goes beyond the matter of any livable or lived experience" (1997:1). This holds true for literature as well as for anthropology.

A crucial point should be emphasized here. Translators generally render *vraie vie* as "real life" (Proust 2003:298) rather than "true life," consistent with how one would understand the phrase in everyday speech. In contrast, I use the two words—*reality* and *truth*—not as equivalents but as concepts in profound and permanent tension: the real being that which exists or has happened and the true being that which has to be regained from deception or convention. Reality is horizontal, existing on the surface of fact. Truth is vertical, discovered in the depths of inquiry. "Literature," writes Martha Nussbaum, "is an extension of life not only horizontally, bringing the reader into contact with events or locations or persons or problems he or she has not otherwise met, but also, vertically, so to speak, giving the reader experience that is deeper, sharper, more precise than much of what takes place in life" (1990:48). I contend that anthropology is fundamentally an attempt to articulate the real and the true—the horizontal and the vertical—in the exploration of life. This endeavor may have been partially lost at times in the course of the history of the discipline, when imitation of the natural sciences led to somewhat rigid paradigms, whether evolutionist, functionalist, or structuralist, and when the fascination for literary studies sometimes headed in the opposite direction, with

social worlds becoming less significant than their representation in words. Yet even in those formalist or textualist moments, something remained of what Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1968) calls, with a slightly different intention, the "flesh" of human life—think of Claude Lévi-Strauss's story of the shaman Quesalid or Clifford Geertz's depiction of the Balinese cockfight.

By considering life in terms of tension between reality and truth, clearly, I endeavor to take it on a path that diverges from what have been the two major approaches favored by social scientists over the past few decades, each of which can be epitomized by a single word: *biology* and *biopolitics*. Both derive from the work of philosophers (actually, one may be tempted to specify, French philosophers, although there are other possible genealogies): biology from Georges Canguilhem and biopolitics from Michel Foucault, the former having been the mentor of the latter. In the first tradition, life, sometimes specified "life itself," after Francis Crick's book about the origin of life on earth, has been viewed as the fundamental infrastructure of human existence—"le vivant" (living matter), according to Canguilhem (1994:335), who regarded it as the material condition of possibility of "le vécu" (lived experience). This tradition has given birth to a rich field of research closely related to the social studies of science. In the second paradigm, life has been regarded as the site over which power is exerted, not so much in the negative sense of domination as in the positive meaning of production of knowledge about and regulation of—"biopower," the "power over life," defining, for Foucault (1976:184), the core of Western political modernity. This tradition has allowed the development of a fertile field of investigation that has profoundly transformed the orientation of political anthropology.

Certainly, some, such as Paul Rabinow (1999), Adriana Petryna (2002), and Peter Redfield (2013), have attempted to unite the two domains of biology and biopolitics. In my own work, I have proposed reformulating biopower in terms of biolegitimacy—the recognition of life as supreme good, which I consider the crux of contemporary political theology—and shifting from biopolitics to the politics of life, so as to integrate the ethical dimension of the dialectic between the absolute value of life and relative worthiness of lives (Fassin 2009). What all these approaches have in common, however, is that they are far from viewing life in its Proustian sense. Here the dialogue between literature and anthropology can definitely be heuristic, since writers share ethnographers' endeavor to bring together what Veena Das (2007), drawing from the Wittgensteinian legacy, expresses as "life and words." In their approach to life, social scientists have most recently been inspired by philosophers who theorize the living more than the lived, biology more than the ethic of life, biopolitics more than the experience of life, but it might be time for them to reengage in a conversation with novelists, poets, playwrights, and filmmakers—that is,

creators who use, as they do themselves, lives as the matter of their creation.

Indeed, if Marc Augé (2011:214) is right when he asserts that writers and anthropologists share “the same fertile ground” of facts and events, then the question to be asked is: What do they do differently in their treatment of this “raw material”? And since both produce books from this material, one could extend the interrogation along a different line, that of their public reception: Why do people today read literature and not anthropology? Alban Bensa and François Pouillon (2012) suggest a disturbing response in their introduction to their edited volume about the “fieldwork of writers,” in which they explore the intellectual workshops of Arthur Rimbaud in Ethiopia, Alexander Pushkin in Russia, Rudyard Kipling in India, and Virginia Woolf amidst the Victorian bourgeoisie. The “lesson of ethnography by great authors,” as they phrase it, is a humbling experience for social scientists: “It was troubling to observe that, without disposing of the methods and concepts we thought in our possession, these authors had gone faster and further than we had in their account of events, characters, and conditions of living” (2012:8). By contrast, it was difficult not to be perplexed by “the unreal impression and tremendous boredom so often felt with anthropological and learned works which, by professional obligation, we had to read,” as if “the conventions and concepts of anthropology produced a smoke screen masking our relation to the world” (Bensa and Pouillon 2012:8). With a salutary irreverence, the two anthropologists wonder whether, ultimately, “Conrad and Stevenson tell us less about the tropics than Malinowski, and Chateaubriand or Proust less about man in society than Lévi-Strauss” (2012:8). These remarks should certainly not be taken too lightly, as mere manifestations of literary nostalgia or symbolic parricide, since they engage not only the present practice of anthropologists but also, to a certain degree, the uncertain future of their discipline.

How, then, can social scientists recapture lives? And how different is their enterprise from that of the creators of fiction? Are there different ways to gain life through writing, as the philosopher Jacques Bouveresse (2008) argues? These questions may seem broad and abstract, but they take specific and concrete forms in the work of many anthropologists today—probably more so than is the case for sociologists (Dubois 2005), despite notable exceptions such as Howard Becker (2007), who writes about Georges Perec, Jane Austen, and Italo Calvino as experimenters in social description and analysis. Actually, the questions are anything but new. One need only mention, in France, *L'Afrique fantôme* by Michel Leiris (1934) and *Tristes tropiques* by Claude Lévi-Strauss (1955) as conscious efforts to incorporate the living presence of the ethnographer and his subjects, Leiris at the very moment he was developing the African collections of the Museum of Ethnography of the

Trocadéro and Lévi-Strauss as he was elaborating the theoretical architecture of his *Elementary Structures of Kinship* (1969), as if there were a need for a form to reach what museography and theory had left out. Experiments in the United States have long adopted the genre of the anthropological novel as more adequate than the scholarly treatise to account for the life of a people—that of the Pueblo, for example, in *The Delight Makers*, by Adolf Bandelier (1890); of African American women in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, by Zora Neale Hurston (1937); and of the Tiv of Nigeria in *Return to Laughter* by Laura Bohannan (1954). These experiments were not without difficulty at the time if one considers that, for instance, the latter work was initially published under a pseudonym, Elenore Smith Bowen. In the mid-20th century, the success of the series “Terre Humaine,” directed by Jean Malaurie, which included Victor Segalen’s *Les immémoriaux* (1956) and Georges Balandier’s *Afrique ambiguë* (1957) as well as French editions of James Agee’s *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941) and Theodora Kroeber’s *Ishi in Two Worlds* (1961), was unprecedented and unrivaled for anthropological literature in France.

This enchanted literary moment, although perhaps most notably illustrated in the French ethnological tradition, as Vincent Debaene (2010) argues, was part of a larger endeavor to “popularize anthropology” (MacClancy and McDonough 1996), ending with the publication of *Writing Culture* (Clifford and Marcus 1986). The textualist turn is a critique not only of the authority of the ethnographer but also of the ethnography of the author. This is not to say that anthropologists have ceased to believe in the possibility of regaining life and lives but that they tend to do so in new ways, informed by the debates about narrativity and reflexivity, discussing their own writing projects (Abu-Lughod 1993), proposing styles of writing on the same matter (Wolf 1992), articulating biographical, archival, and poetic fragments (Biehl 2005), or associating text, field notes, and photographs (Bourgois 2009)—that is, distancing themselves from the obviousness of their relationships to lives through reality and truth.

It is therefore in this long history of exploration of a territory situated at the frontiers of ethnography (Archetti 1994; Benson 1993) that I inscribe the considerations that follow. My analysis is based on two “personal” cases, one related to my research on violence in South Africa, the other to my study of policing in France. The life tentatively regained is, in the first case, that of individuals involved in the turmoil of their time and, in the second case, that of collectives engaged in confrontational relations—respectively, biography and sociography. But in both cases, the passage from ethnography in its genealogical sense (fieldwork) to ethnography in its etymological meaning (writing) involved a silent conversation with fictional works—of a novelist in the first case, of a filmmaker in the second. In referring to these examples, however, I face two difficulties. First, I need

to tackle the description of empirical details that make the two cases understandable and heuristic, but I can do so only in a somewhat condensed and allusive way, which may seem to contradict my entire project. Second, I must focus on my own research, but that focus comes at the expense of other possible illustrations taken from the anthropological literature and at the risk of complacency with my parallel with fiction. I do not think I have been able to resolve these tensions, but they are probably the price I have to pay to make my case. Indeed, by engaging in this dialogue with literature and cinema, I want to reappraise, against a certain prevailing pessimism that I have occasionally shared, the power and limits of anthropology. But rather than undertake Proust's perhaps too ambitious project, I plead for a more modest—although no less demanding and no less powerful—program, that of the jigsaw puzzle in the opening reflections of *Life: A User's Manual* (1987), in which the author describes his work as an endeavor to literally re-create a world. Like the puzzle-maker, the ethnographer as writer brings together the many pieces at his or her disposal, including nonethnographic ones. It is from this perspective that I propose a tentative defense and illustration of ethnography.

Michael K, Magda A, and the question of violence: Biographies

“Making sense of life inside a book is different from making sense of real life—no more difficult or less difficult, just different,” writes J. M. Coetzee (Attwell 1993:11). Here lies an important clue in comprehending the difference between the novelist and the anthropologist (in Coetzee's case but certainly more broadly, since, even if his statement seems to contradict Proust's assertion about “life really lived,” one should not forget that it is not the author of *In Search of Time Lost* [2003] but the narrator who is speaking). The novelist makes sense of life inside a book by affirming that doing so is different from making sense of real life, whereas the anthropologist makes sense of life inside a book with the more or less explicit idea that doing so is connected to making sense in real life.

However, this distinction is certainly subject to debate. On the one hand, some novelists would presumably assert that they reflect real life in their books. One can think of Nadine Gordimer, a South African Nobel Laureate for literature like Coetzee, who has often been contrasted with him on this point. In fact, when Coetzee's novel *Disgrace* (1999) was published, shocking many because of its depiction of blacks as the perpetrators of and accomplices to the gang rape of a white woman who then refuses to file charges, seemingly accepting her fate as the price to pay for the violence of apartheid, Gordimer used the realist argument to criticize the book, affirming that “it is difficult to believe, indeed more than difficult, having lived here all my life and being

part of everything that happened here, that the black family protects the rapist because he's one of them” and adding apropos of Coetzee that she regretted that this would be “the only truth he could find in the post-apartheid South Africa” (Donadio 2007). At the same time, some anthropologists would probably reject the idea that their work mirrors real life. This is the case of Vincent Crapanzano, whose *Waiting* (1985), a book about the experience of whites in the waning days of apartheid, echoes Coetzee's novel *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), published five years earlier. Actually, contesting the authority of the author, as Coetzee does in his own work, Crapanzano compares the ethnographer to Hermes, the messenger who “presents languages, cultures and societies in all their opacity, their foreignness, their meaninglessness; then like the magician . . . he clarifies the opaque, renders the foreign familiar, and gives meaning to the meaningless” but makes his devices disappear in his writing, pretending that “his texts assume a truth that speaks for itself—a whole truth that needs no rhetorical support” (1986:51, 52). Thus, for novelists as well as anthropologists, the language of the “real” and the argument of “truth” serve to defend diverse and even contradictory ways to account for life and lives—in an attempt to avoid immutable dichotomies.

It was therefore as a kind of challenge to these asymmetrical tensions that I decided to write, with two of my colleagues, a “story of violence in South Africa” (Fassin et al. 2008) whose construction mirrored that of Coetzee's work. The title of the resulting article, “Life & Times of Madga A,” was an obvious reference to the admirable *Life & Times of Michael K* (Coetzee 1998). Anecdotally, the name of the titular young woman was that of the main character of Coetzee's *In the Heart of the Country* (1977), and the three parts of her biography were titled after his *Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life* (1997). More significantly, our introduction opened with the last pages of *Life & Times of Michael K*, when the protagonist abandons his attempt to narrate his story to the strangers who, having satisfied his dietary and sexual needs, question him about his life. He recounts a few episodes from his gloomy odyssey through the country and then suddenly stops short: “It struck him that his story was paltry, not worth the telling, full of the same old gaps that he would never learn how to bridge. Or else, he did not know how to tell a story, how to keep interest alive” (Coetzee 1998:176). The following night, unable to sleep, he realizes that everywhere he goes he becomes an object of charity and curiosity for the people he encounters: “They want me to open my heart and tell them the story of a life lived in cages” (1998:181). But he regrets that he was never taught how to do so because he would have liked to please them:

I would have told the story of a life passed in prisons where I stood day after day, year after year with

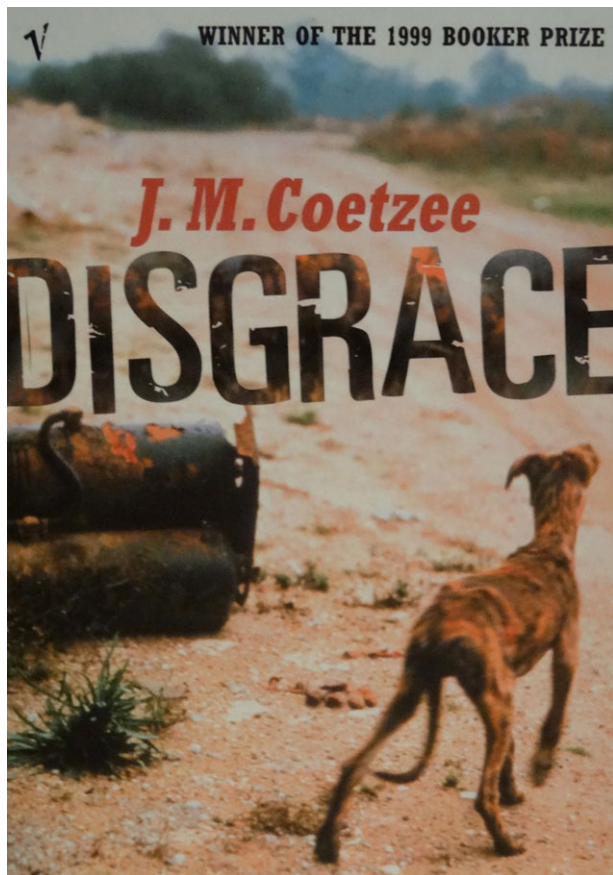


Figure 1. *Disgrace*. Cover page of J. M. Coetzee's novel. Despite the author's claim, the narrative was read at the time it appeared as mirroring contemporary South African society, and the rape of the main character's sister by a black farmer was considered a racist depiction of the postapartheid era. Photo by Didier Fassin.

my forehead pressed to the wire, gazing into the distance, dreaming of experiences I would never have, and where the guards called me names and kicked my backside and sent me off to scrub the floor. When my story was finished, people would have shaken their heads and been sorry and angry and plied me with food and drinks; women would have taken me into their beds and mothered me in the dark. Whereas the truth is that I have been a gardener, and gardeners spend their time with their nose to the ground. [Coetzee 1998:181]

The variations on truths, the discrepancy between the expectations of the audience and the competence of the narrator, the production of pathos on demand, and the anticipation of compassionate reactions—this was also what my colleagues and I were confronted with in Magda's story, or, rather, our rendering of it. And it was precisely to allow the reader—and ourselves—to keep a certain distance from the realistic illusion and emotional propensity associated with tragic biographies such as hers that we chose to parallel Michael (who abruptly questions the very act of

storytelling) by indicating the artificial setting of our interview with Magda (which took place in a university office). We were conscious of the “biographical illusion” (Bourdieu 1986), which consists not only in the existence of hidden, forgotten, or transformed facts in the story told but also, more deeply, in the very endeavor of reconstructing a coherence and meaning for one's life.

Magda A was a young woman suffering from AIDS. We had known her for several years when she agreed to recount her life, of which we had until then only a fragmentary view via informal conversations during our frequent encounters and participant-observation in various environments. We knew the father of her first child, some of her relatives, and several of her friends, which allowed us to verify the information she provided in her narrative. We had visited her in the shack in the township where she lived, accompanied her in her work for an NGO and with activist groups, traveled to the village of her stepfamily, where her daughter was buried, all elements that provided a certain depth to our understanding of her social background, at least for the recent period. This familiarity helped us to make sense of her story.

Born into a poor rural family in a village in Lesotho, a small landlocked kingdom in the heart of South Africa, Magda was raised by her grandmother because her father had deserted the household and her mother had gone to work in the mining region of the nearby Orange Free State. From the age of seven, she was frequently the victim of sexual abuse by one of her uncles, who was the head of the family and had the status of a classificatory father. As an adolescent, she joined her mother, who had rebuilt her life with another man in the province of Natal, but was again sexually abused, this time by her stepfather, whom she described as an individual she particularly dreaded. When she turned 18, Magda went to Johannesburg, where an aunt initiated her into what is sometimes known as survival sex, that is, the provision of sexual services in exchange for food or shelter, an activity she adamantly distinguished from prostitution. After several months of this precarious life, her material and affective situation improved somewhat when she started to work as a maid and met a young man with whom she had a daughter. Unfortunately, the child became seriously ill and was diagnosed with HIV, which led to the discovery that both Magda and the child's father were contaminated by the same virus. After their daughter's death, the couple broke up. A year later, Magda was again pregnant, this time with the child of another man who was also HIV positive. At that time, she was involved in the social movement known as the Treatment Action Campaign and was therefore in contact with AIDS physicians. This network gave her the opportunity to enter a clinical trial and receive antiretroviral drugs, at a time when such treatment was still not readily accessible because of government reluctance to promote it. Magda, whose medical condition had significantly improved, gave birth to a healthy baby boy. Working for the

support group of an internationally funded local organization assisting persons living with AIDS, she soon became a public figure occasionally interviewed by the media: Connected with activists, she seemed to embody the resilience of patients and the empowerment of women.

So goes the story of Magda, as she told it. But, whereas the account of her life we reconstituted closely follows the development of her narrative, we strove in our parallel analysis to resituate it within its broader context, making it a tragic coming-of-age story under apartheid. As we wrote, our intention was to “make of her biography a contribution to the understanding of violence” (Fassin et al. 2008:228). Therefore, in reference to our title, “the story told is not a mere expression of her life” and “its articulation with what is known of her times gives a sense of what violence was and meant in South Africa” during this period (2008:228). This assertion can be regarded as a sort of symbolic *coup de force*, though, since our interlocutor herself hardly mentioned any historical events or sociological facts suggesting that she was aware of or willing to leave any space for our interpretation. Emphasizing her remarkable silence about the context in which her life was inscribed, we commented, probably at the risk of simplifying the relationship between these subjects and their world, that, “as did Michael K, Magda A passed through the shadow of the national dramas politically unconscious and color-blind,” suggesting that this erasure revealed “how biography may be reconstructed on the obliteration of history” (2008:227). Consequently, the fact that she did not refer to events and facts we saw as intricately related to her existence did not mean they were not relevant to our understanding of how her trajectory and misfortunes manifested the powerful imprint of the past. Whether agents acknowledge it or not, history is deeply embodied, both objectively, through the material conditions in which they live, and subjectively, via the affects, narratives, and imagination they produce. In a never-resolved tension between the individual and the collective, Magda’s story of violence incorporates her country’s own history of violence.

This interpretation was all the more important since the dominant discourse, in South Africa and elsewhere at the time, tended to essentialize violence through reference either to race (“the blacks”) or to culture (“the Africans”). Horrendous news about sexual abuses perpetrated against women, adolescents, and even infants had led to the trivialization of the idea that South Africa was “a society of rapists,” just as the rapid progression of the AIDS epidemic was interpreted as the result of a “sexual promiscuity” uniquely associated with South African women and men of color. Bringing history back countered the simplistic explanations that naturalized or culturalized the black poor. The appalling conditions in which Magda was raised could not be understood without taking into account the dislocation of African families by the dual logics of segregation, which spatially separated racially defined groups, and ex-



Figure 2. *Affliction*. Pietà depiction of a woman carrying a man at an advanced stage of AIDS, evoking the iconic image of an adolescent running with the dead body of Hector Pieterson, the first victim of the 1976 Soweto uprising, which is visible in the top left part of the poster. This serigraph was realized, posted in public places, and photographed on a wall in Durban by Ernest Pignon-Ernest, a founder with Jacques Derrida of Artists of the World against Apartheid. A sketch of the serigraph, generously provided by the artist, served as the cover for *When Bodies Remember*. Photo by Didier Fassin.

ploitation, which used cheap male and female black labor in the mines and cities. Similarly, the extreme hardships of survival sex that probably accounted for Magda’s infection could not be isolated from the general circumstances of impoverishment and marginalization of rural homelands, often leaving girls with no other option but to go to a mining area or an urban environment and exchange sex for food and shelter. Thus, the traces of the apartheid regime were everywhere in the lives of women like Magda. However, to assert these historical determinations does not reduce these women to a condition of victimhood. Through her trajectory as well as in her own telling, Magda demonstrated how she progressively realized her financial and residential independence, fulfilled her dream to have a child, rejected her disease outcome as fated, became an activist, and started a new life. These achievements do not make for a happy end to her story, though. There can be no teleology in the transformation of her relation to the world and

to herself. Her final words in our article—"I am not of a dying type"—do not imply that she will never face such experience.

In conformance with the editorial practice of the journal *Current Anthropology*, which published the article, our text was followed by a series of insightful comments by scholars—from South Africa, North America, and Europe. In one of them, João Biehl, while acknowledging the "attempt to identify the ways history is embodied and the ways biographies reflect sociological trends," wonders "how Magda herself conceptualized this 'obliteration of history' and whether her storytelling represents an effort to singularize herself, to take herself out of the stream of history and destiny" (2008:235). In other words, "is 'excavating the past' a prerequisite for making 'the present understandable,'" and "could we not interpret Magda's refusal to do so as a simple and profound statement of being-in-the-future?" (Biehl 2008:235). I am quite sympathetic to these suggestions, attentive to the young woman's side of the story, but I think her unawareness is less the result of "an effort" to liberate herself from history than the expression of the universal difficulty of thinking of oneself beyond one's biography and experience and of accounting for the social structures and political events that frame them. This is why, even if Magda does not relate her present to history, the social scientist remains entitled to do so—without denying her the right to oblivion and to "being-in-the-future." It is important to comprehend Magda's subjectivity and desire, yet it was perhaps even more crucial at that time to explore the part of her condition that had escaped her.

In another comment, Sarah Nuttall (2008:239) puts the parallel with Coetzee as the heart of her reflection. She admits that the question "How do we tell the story of a life of violence?" is one "that has long preoccupied the novelist," and she accurately distinguishes our intention to make this interrogation the condition of "possibility of anthropological interpretation," whereas, for Coetzee, "it is crucial for writing fiction" (2008:239). Paradoxically, she explains, it is in the almost identical titles of our article and his book that the clue to the difference between the two projects resides: Whereas we endeavor to take these two terms in our article seriously, "the 'life and times' of his novel must be seen in part as an ironic take on the act of telling someone's story" (2008:239). Indeed, for Coetzee, a fundamental point is "how to write without authority," since he is "acutely attuned to the fact that acts of narration are acts of violence at the figurative level." In other words, "his politics of agency" is to avoid "having his characters speak of or for their historical context" and to have them "float out of the grasp of his narrative" (Nuttall 2008:239). I cannot but agree with this analysis of the distinction between the anthropologist's and the novelist's undertaking. While admiring Coetzee's ethical suspicion toward the possibility of speaking for others, I admit that our deliberate intention in our article was to ren-

der visible and intelligible what may not be seen or grasped by the agents in our story. There is no irony in our affirmation that we study a life and its times. However, I would argue that Coetzee's view might have somewhat evolved over the years. Even if he gives a fictional turn to it, his *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007) is a realist reflection on contemporary issues—terrorism and intelligent design, Dick Cheney on torture and Tony Blair on war, asylum in Australia and raiding in South Africa—for which the distance introduced consists mainly in the presence of a second and a third subtext, with a narrative form occupying the bottom of each page. Even if he writes that "the truth is, I have never taken much pleasure in the visible world and don't feel with much conviction the urge to recreate it in words," it is as if the "evocation of the real" (Coetzee 2008:192) had become an urgent necessity for him in front of a certain state of the world.

My reading of *Disgrace* at the time I was writing my own account of the postapartheid years in *When Bodies Remember* (Fassin 2007) was, in a sense, an overwhelming experience. I felt the frustration of realizing how subtly Coetzee could approach the questions I was investigating and how deeply he could delve into the issues related to the very process of writing. His characters expressed the ambivalent relationships between whites and blacks, the combination of guilt and resentment among the former, of defiance and *ressentiment* among the latter. His writing instituted an ambivalent distance between him and his matter and subjects, leading many to regard his depiction of society as racist, despite his claim that literature should be emancipated from the actual world. Beyond his exceptional literary qualities, which I could certainly not match, I initially attributed the differences in our approaches to the freedom of the creator in contrast to the constraints of the analyst: He could invent a world, whereas I was limited to the one I had. Or perhaps, more precisely, he could deploy stories in the directions and with the uncertainties he wished, whereas I had to respect the narratives, observations, documents, and data I had collected. "The novelist is free to diversify indefinitely the social features he describes, to simplify or accentuate, as he wants, the affects of the group whose story he tells," writes the anthropologist Françoise Zonabend, and she continues, "The ethnographer, by contrast, must take into account all the data he collects directly or indirectly" (2003:236). In this intellectual division of labor, it seems as if, constrained by the rules of the discipline, the ethnographer is doomed to depict the thickness of the real world, while, liberated by the license of imagination, the novelist has the power to access a more personal truth. Is this distinction so simple?

Certainly, there is some accuracy in this typology—but only at first glance. On the one hand, novelists also draw much of their inspiration from the real, although that does not necessarily make them realists. Indeed, the paradox of the articulation between reality and truth in a novel resides in the fact that when an author attempts to grasp the

reality of lives too literally, he or she is always at risk of letting the truth of life escape. Indeed, what makes us think that we learn profound truths about humanity in Fyodor Dostoyevsky's novels does not stem from the knowledge that he based most of them on contemporary events in Russia that struck him when he read about them in the newspaper but that he creates or re-creates a social and moral universe through which we believe we might understand the world, others, and ourselves differently or even better. But, on the other hand, anthropologists can only access certain forms of truth, which they know are never definitive or absolute. The limitations of what they consider to be empirically valid and theoretically robust surely do not allow them to pretend that they have an integral or impartial view of reality. Yet the fragments they gather in complement with the layers they identify produce a specific approach to the truth of life and lives. Taking the liberty to explore beyond what the subjects of their research know and tell, they bring together biographies and history, storytelling and political economy, the text of the narratives they collect and the context in which they are inserted, the empirical facts they observe and the theoretical frames with which they interpret them. These decisions are undoubtedly acts of authority, but, as Coetzee himself admits when he writes in his diary, "Learn to speak without authority, says Kierkegaard," he, ironically, makes "Kierkegaard into an authority" (2008:151). He concludes, "The paradox is a true one." It might therefore be preferable to acknowledge the authority one has rather than deny it—and consider the ethical and political consequences of being granted this authority. This is the direction I explore in my second case study.

***The Wire*, the squad, and the politics of policing: Sociographies**

"Swear to God, it was never a cop show," David Simon (2009:1) says about his universally acclaimed and scholarly studied TV series *The Wire*. "And though there were cops and gangsters aplenty, it was never entirely appropriate to classify it as a crime story, though the spine of every season was certain to be a police investigation in Baltimore, Maryland" (2009:1). How, then, does Simon describe *The Wire*? "It is, instead, about that portion of our country that we have discarded, and at what cost to our national psyche we have done so. It is, in its larger themes, a television show about politics and sociology and, at the risk of boring the viewers with the very notion, macroeconomics" (2009:9). Creation, here, is an act of authority. The director goes on, "We staged *The Wire* in a real city, with real problems. It is governed and policed and populated by real people who are everyday contending with those problems" (2009:29). The claim to realism could not be more assertive.

In this quotation, the reference to and appropriation of the social sciences is certainly noteworthy—and even ironic, since it echoes sociologists' interest in the series (Chaddha and Wilson 2011). It is all the more so given that it reveals an inflection in the rationale Simon uses to explain and justify his project when compared with that expressed in the lengthy letter he wrote in 2001 to the executives of the HBO channel to convince them to produce *The Wire*. At the time, Simon (2009:31–36) insisted on two related arguments: one moral, the other psychological. On the one hand, the story would reverse network television's commonly held assumption when it came to programming that the social world is divided between good and evil, the police and the criminals: In his series, by contrast, law enforcement would be "amoral, dysfunctional," drug trafficking would appear to be "a bureaucracy," and the viewers would discover that "police work is at times marginal and incompetent," while "criminals are neither stupid nor cartoonish, and neither are they all sociopathic" (2009:33). On the other hand, the scenario provides depth and ambiguity to characters in a way that was previously foreign to television: inviting HBO executives to read the scripts of the first episodes, Simon explains that "these cops are behaving, thinking, surviving, and struggling with issues that no predecessors ever have" and "these drug dealers are more complex than anything the networks can imagine" (2009:35). Of course, the apparent discrepancy between the two discourses reflects not only the passing of time between his initial pitch and his retrospective analysis eight years later but also a difference in context and audience. Besides, this shift should not be exaggerated, and there is no major contradiction between the political and sociological and the moral and psychological since, ultimately, the intention of the author is to give life to "the America left behind," to the "excess Americans," to those "men and women on the streets of Baltimore who are, every day, reminded that the wave has crested, and that now, with the economic tide at an ebb, they are simply worth less than they once were, if they are worth anything at all in a post-industrial economy" (2009:9). So it is to be assumed that *The Wire* is a realist series.

At the same time, however, it is obviously a fictional work, which Simon qualifies as a "visual novel." And to underscore that each episode does not stand alone, he insists that baffled viewers of the initial shows watch the entire season. Simon himself worked for ten years at the *Baltimore Sun* as a journalist, spending time in inner-city neighborhoods and exploring the world of drugs and crime, and the coproducer of the series is a retired Baltimore police officer, whose frustrations with his department's hierarchy resembled those of the series' fictional hero, detective Jimmy McNulty. But to make the scenario and dialogue of the show more palatable to channel executives and subscribers, several acclaimed crime-fiction authors were recruited to aid in writing. *The Wire* is thus the collective creation of a story

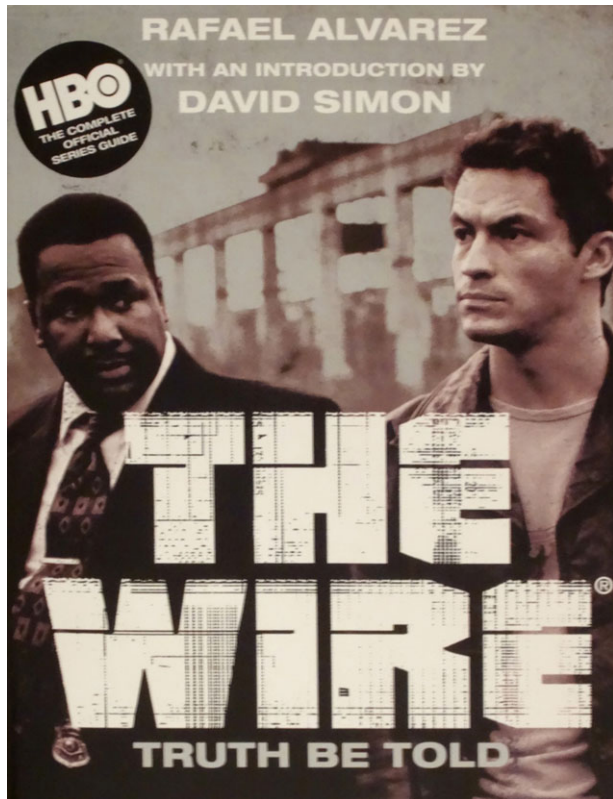


Figure 3. *The Wire*. Cover of Rafael Alvarez’s official guide to the HBO television series by writer and producer David Simon. The realistic style and the political intention of the author are clearly expressed in Alvarez’s subtitle. Police officers I met in the outskirts of Paris had never heard of the series. Photo by Didier Fassin.

“that can entertain and amuse, but also disturb and nettle an audience” (Simon 2009:11), the latter objective depending on achieving the former. The team of writers developed and refined the characters and tightened and enriched the plot, and there is no doubt that the success of the program resulted from the quality of this collective process. The sociologist William Julius Wilson, who taught a course on the series at Harvard University, affirms in an interview, “Although *The Wire* is fiction, not a documentary, its depiction of the systemic urban inequality that constrains the lives of the urban poor is more poignant and compelling than that of any published study, including my own.” And he continues, “What I’m concentrating on is how this series so brilliantly illustrates theories and processes that social scientists have been writing about for years” (Bennett 2010). The paradox is, indeed, that a fictional work may seem more real, or at least more convincingly reflect the real world, than academic studies, leading to its substitution for traditional surveys and interviews in providing examples, if not evidence, for sociological analyses.

Although I discovered *The Wire* in 2011, as I was finishing the French version of my book *Enforcing Order* (Fassin

2013), I became intrigued by the parallel between the two projects. I had started my ethnography of urban policing a few months before the riots of 2005, which flared up in numerous disadvantaged neighborhoods throughout France and resulted in the declaration of a state of emergency by the French government. Like dozens of similar, albeit more limited, episodes in housing projects during the past three decades, these disorders followed a deadly incident: Two adolescents had died and one had been severely burned in an electric transformer when they attempted to escape an anticrime squad chasing them. Although they had been accused by the minister of the interior of being involved in criminal activities, it later appeared that they were innocent and had simply been frightened by the police intervention, of which they were all too familiar, knowing that such operations generally resulted in identity check, body search, handcuffing, arrest, and release only after hours spent at the station, sometimes in custody; all three belonged to working-class families of immigrant origin, as did the dozens of others who had died in various circumstances during violent encounters with the police since the 1980s. However, my intention was not to study the riots but, rather, the everyday interactions between officers and inhabitants in these neighborhoods that could be called, in reference to their equivalents in the United States, “outer cities” and that are generally known under their French name as *banlieues*. I was convinced that the observation of the ordinary work of law enforcement could provide decisive clues for the understanding of these events that had degenerated into civil unrest. More broadly, I was interested in capturing the daily—and, in fact, often nightly—life of these neighborhoods from the perspective of police officers. This is what I focused on during 15 months in one of the largest precincts of the country, situated on the outskirts of Paris. Although the conurbation was characterized by relative social and ethnic diversity, the rate of unemployment and underemployment, the proportion of families in welfare programs, and the percentage of the population of immigrant origin were significantly higher there than in the rest of the region. Crime statistics were above the national average, and the police considered it to be a “tough” precinct.

As time passed, however, I realized that rather than the complications related to my fieldwork in the company of law enforcement agents, mostly with the much-feared anticrime squad, the main difficulty I faced in this project lay in translating my observations into writing—so much so that it took me three years to engage in this enterprise. Because mine was the first ethnography of urban policing conducted in France, the challenge was even more significant. Actually, even in the abundant North American literature on law enforcement, there existed few examples, one recent and noteworthy exception being the study conducted by Peter Moskos (2008) in the Eastern District of Baltimore, precisely where *The Wire* takes place. This sociologist’s remarkable

decision to become a police officer himself, meaning that he attended the academy and spent one year in a precinct, puts him in the unique position of an insider, which is at once fascinating and problematic. In the opening pages of his book, he writes, “I miss working with people willing to risk their life for me. And as a police officer, I would risk my life for others, even for those I didn’t know, and even for those I knew I didn’t like” (Moskos 2008:1). In the last chapter, he expresses his genuine attachment to the institution even after he left it: “It was a month before I could use the past sense and tell somebody I ‘was’ a police officer. It was almost a year before I took my badge out of my wallet. It would take three years to turn my field notes into a dissertation” (2008:195). This sense of belonging and spirit of camaraderie deeply penetrates his writing on his experience as a beat officer and largely determines his depiction of police work. Beyond their common condemnation of the war on drugs for its deleterious effects on disadvantaged neighborhoods, Moskos is definitely more sympathetic than Simon is to his Baltimore colleagues who implement that war. In the account of my research, I wanted to introduce more analytical distance and create a heuristic tension between the understanding perspective of the insider and the critical view of the outsider.

No one has reflected as cogently and reflexively on the ethnography of law enforcement as John Van Maanen (1988) did in his famous *Tales of the Field*. As he explains, “the narrative and rhetorical conventions assumed by a writer shape ethnography,” and “all these ethnographic conventions are historically situated and change over time” (Van Maanen 1988:5–6). Against the idea that the problems of ethnography mostly concern fieldwork, he recognizes that “method is, to be sure, a problem,” but even when one believes it to be solved, the fact remains that “the fieldworker must still put into words what was learned of a culture” (1988:6–7). Indeed, “ethnography is a means of representation,” of which Van Maanen delineates three main genres: the “realist tale,” providing a “matter-of-fact portrait of the culture studied”; the “confessional tale,” focusing “more on the fieldworker than on the culture studied”; and the “impressionist tale,” proposing “fleeting moments of fieldwork cast in dramatic form” (1988:7). These genres are not mutually exclusive in a given work, nor is this list definitive, a “critical” version being another option, among others. The use of the word *tale*, Van Maanen admits, may surprise the reader, but it is aimed at stressing the representational character of ethnographic writing.

This question of how to represent findings from fieldwork depends very much on two things: what one wants to represent and for whom. Having observed, for almost a year and a half, the practice of law enforcement in the outer cities of Paris, I came to realize that the police did not do what people generally thought or said they were doing or were even supposed to do. Special units, most notably, the

anticrime squads, and specific operational techniques, including the practice of stop and frisk, had been deployed by the government to respond to the alleged sentiment of insecurity and risk of disturbances in urban areas. These units and these modalities were targeted almost exclusively at housing projects. Statistical data indicated, however, that these disadvantaged neighborhoods did not have higher crime rates than the surrounding territories and that serious crime had consistently declined during recent decades throughout the country. But beat officers compensated for the relative lack of infractions by focusing on two types of minor offenses: drug-law violations and violations of immigration laws, which allowed them to reach arrest quotas they were supposed to attain under the so-called *politique du chiffre*, that is, “politics of number,” initiated by the Ministry of the Interior to demonstrate its efficacy against crime. Marijuana users and illegal aliens were easy prey, but they barely corresponded to the sort of nuisance the population had in mind when expressing concern about crime. Moreover, this focus contributed to the banalization of racial profiling in police work, either indirectly, through the exclusive frisking of youths from the projects, who happened to be predominantly of North African or Sub-Saharan background, or directly, via the phenotypical identification of probable migrants for the purpose of checking their residence permits.

Seeking these offenses was not the only reason for the harassment of the residents of the disadvantaged neighborhoods, though. It was clear that the main objective of repeatedly stopping and searching the same youths, whom the officers knew, was not to verify an infraction but, rather, to provoke one: Indeed, a verbal or a physical reaction could lead to an arrest for “insulting and resisting a representative of public authority,” an offense whose occurrence had soared during the past two decades, following official incentives from the Ministry of the Interior. Sometimes these encounters developed into violent confrontations between neighborhood inhabitants and officers. Thus, whereas the official legitimization of the presence of special units and the use of specific techniques was to prevent insecurity and disturbances, this policy functioned as a self-fulfilling prophecy, finding its justification in the trouble it caused. It therefore contributed to the stigmatization and marginalization of populations and territories already affected by discrimination and poverty. In sum, rather than performing their expected law enforcement role, the police were simply enforcing order—an unequal order that engendered urban disorder.

Such was the complex landscape—obviously simplified here—that my fieldwork unveiled. How to represent it? The answer was directly related to another question: for whom? Because it seemed to me that the problems raised by the study were both crucial for the breaches of democracy they revealed and absent from public debate, at least in part

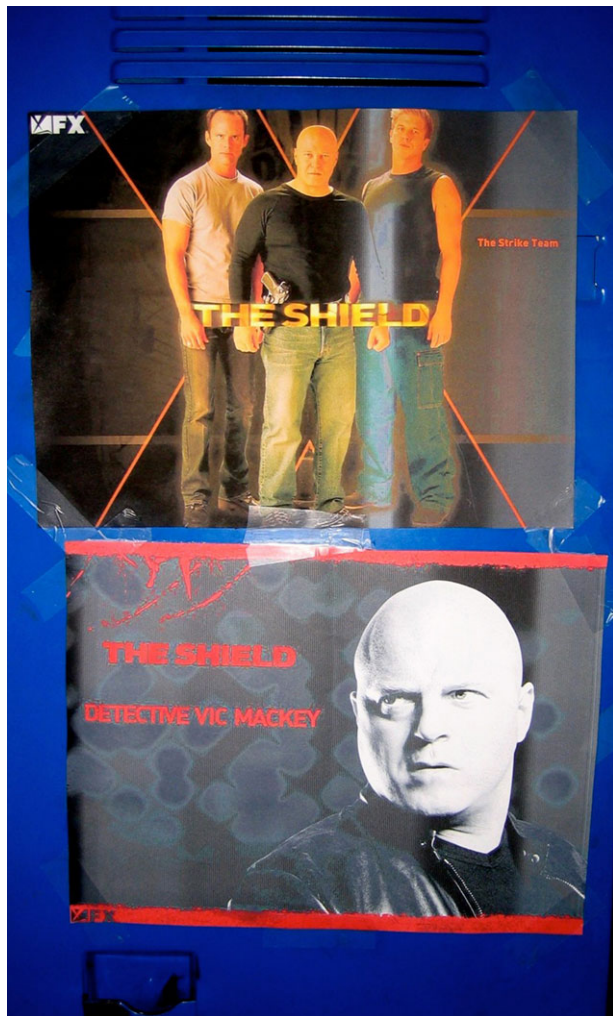


Figure 4. *The Shield*. Photos of the Fox network television series by writer and producer Shawn Ryan taped to a locker door in the French anticrime squad headquarters. Detective Vic Mackey was particularly appreciated by police officers who self-identified with the toughness and independence of the Strike Team that had been modeled after the real corrupt Rampart Division of the Los Angeles Police Department. Photo by Didier Fassin.

because of lack of available knowledge, I thought it necessary to try to reach a wider audience than the academe where I usually found my interlocutors. Here, I faced two rhetorical issues—of tone and of style. In terms of tone, I had to avoid the symmetrical pitfalls of denunciation, understandably used by human rights activists against police abuse, and euphemization, frequently found in the sociological literature, whose authors tend to shun, relativize, or justify police deviance for various reasons having to do with their familiarity with and proximity to the institution. Using the first approach, I would address only the convinced. Adopting the second, I would merely elude the issues. In terms of style, I had to find a form that would neither discourage a general audience nor trivialize the findings of the research. A narrative structure seemed to satisfy these two

criteria, since it rendered the empirical evidence needed to establish my theoretical argument easily accessible without the display of the usual scholarly apparatus of citations and notes, which I concentrated at the end of the book. It thus enabled me to insert my tales of the field within a relatively uncluttered critical perspective. This rhetorical strategy certainly had its merits, since the book was widely commented on and discussed in the media and on social networks as well as by human rights organizations, political forums, and even art venues. It had its limits too, since it did not conform to the habitual format of scientific works, which had to be developed through parallel papers. Moreover, it sometimes led to oversimplification or even sensationalism by certain protagonists in the public sphere, which was probably the counterpart of the creation of a space for a debate on policing.

As a journalist and, later, as a director, David Simon has consistently defended the idea that his work is meant to produce awareness in the public and, in the case of *The Wire*, “to provoke viewers—if not to the point of an argument, then at least to the point of a thought or two about who we are, how we live, and what it is about our society and the human condition that makes it so,” or more specifically, as in the first season of the series, to propose “a dry, deliberate argument against the American drug prohibition” by showing that the “war on drugs has mutated into a brutal suppression of the underclass” (2009:11). To produce this public awareness, the director has the power of fiction. This power is two-dimensional: rhetorical and artistic. First, although distinct from a documentary, the fiction is nevertheless presented as faithful to the reality of contemporary society and as delivering profound truths about it. Second, because it takes the form of a television show, it associates the imagination of the plot and the efficacy of the camera. These are the reasons why social scientists use it in their courses: Students learn about social issues through a fiction that seems more real and more true than the work of a sociologist, and they do so thanks to a scenario and images that are more compelling than academic texts and probably more compatible with their expectations and habits.

The last scenes of *The Wire*'s second episode provide an illustration of how fiction works. Three plainclothes police officers from the narcotics unit are drinking beer one night near their unmarked vehicle in the courthouse basement parking garage. One complains to his colleagues about the way a murder case related to drug trafficking is being handled. Frustrated with the meticulous criminal investigation being conducted, he proposes teaching the residents of the housing project where the victim was killed a lesson. “I say we go down there right now. We go to those towers, and we let them know. Let these motherfuckers know who you are.” When they arrive in the neighborhood, inebriated, they randomly stop and frisk a couple of young men, pinning them

to the ground, and they aggressively body search another man, emptying his pockets, tossing the contents, forcing him to pull his pants down, one officer scornfully putting his foot on his bottom after forcing him to lie on the asphalt. Then his colleague shouts in a threatening tone at the inhabitants of a nearby building, who are watching the scene from their windows: “We’re coming back!” When they return to their car, they find an adolescent flippantly leaning on the hood eating chips. “Move, shitbird,” orders one of the agents, who has been in trouble in the past for inappropriate use of his weapon but who is protected by his father-in-law, a district major. “I ain’t doing nothing,” replies the boy with a smile. “Really? I got ‘nothing’ for you,” yells the officer, as he knocks him in the face with the butt of his gun, causing the adolescent to bleed from his eye socket. “Who you gonna eye fuck, now, huh?” Appalled, his colleagues realize that this time they have gone too far. As the boy slowly retreats, painfully holding his head in his hands, empty bottles and television sets are thrown from the nearby building, breaking the windshield of the car. Panicked, the officers call for rescue and shoot in the dark before fleeing into the night, abandoning their vehicle. The next day, the lieutenant who commands the unit learns that the boy has lost his eye and that his mother is filing a brutality charge. Deciding to cover up the case despite his disapproval of his men’s actions, he asks the violent officer why he hit the adolescent. “He pissed me off,” is the answer. “No, officer, he did not piss you off. He made you feel for your safety and that of your fellow officers,” his superior coldly retorts, and he then makes up a plausible story to explain how the officers felt threatened by the boy, who was trying to attack them with a broken bottle. The officer who pistol-whipped the youth acquiesces to writing the report as suggested.

The three scenes are only six and a half minutes in duration. But during these brief instants, much is shown of how urban disorder may be generated: the inactivity, boredom, and frustration of poorly trained officers, their desire to confront the youth from the housing projects, the humiliations they unnecessarily impose on them, the language they use to address them, the brutality of their reactions to insignificant facts, the cover up of their abuses by the hierarchy. Visually, the gloomy environment of the courthouse parking garage and the wretched surroundings of the housing towers, the expression of hatred on the faces of the officers and the invisibility of the youths’ faces hidden under their hoodies, the bleeding from the eye socket and the raining of objects on the car all contribute to an effective dramatization of the scene. The brilliant scenario and powerful images thus provide a condensed and persuasive representation of the ordinary interactions between these special police units and the housing projects. During my fieldwork, I had personally witnessed and been told of several similar episodes of near riots. The police would de-

scribe them afterward as ambushes, implying that youths had set a trap for them and thereby denying their own initial provocation. The media would then repeat this interpretation, leading the public to consider the officers the victims and to call for more severity against the youths. Ethnography could give a significantly different version, but the narrative was definitely less compelling in a book than on television. The plot was not designed by the author but by the protagonists; it did not last a few minutes but unfolded over the course of several days; it did not allow for an invisible presence at all the decisive moments. The officers were less brutal when the researcher was observing them, and their superior would never suggest fabricating a story in his presence. Unlike the filmmaker, the ethnographer was neither omnipotent (he could not make the social agents act in accordance with what he wanted to demonstrate) nor omniscient (he did not know everything that happened or was said). When Linda Williams affirms that “the original genius” of *The Wire* is that it is a multisited ethnography, in which “cops and robbers inhabit the two sites of the institutional world that is the series’ initial frame” (2011:213), she unwittingly chooses a polysemic word—*genius*—that designates the distinctive creative dimension of the work but also the spirit that can be everywhere. The author of fiction has a gift of ubiquity that the social scientist cannot claim—he or she does not have this magical power that characterizes fictional work.

If it is undeniable that *The Wire* is more poignant than any work of ethnography could be, does this point to an insurmountable weakness of the latter? If it is indisputable that, through its scenes and characters, the television series brings life to a profession, a neighborhood, an entire social world, do not sociologists and anthropologists have their own valuable perspectives on life to propose? My answer to these questions, which, not surprisingly, argues in favor of the social sciences, returns to the distinction I propose above between reality and truth, distinguished by convention as, respectively, horizontal and vertical.

Although fiction may be inspired by events that happen “for real,” Simon recognizes that “the story is labeled as fiction, which is to say that we took liberties in a way that journalism cannot and should not” (2009:29). As a television series, *The Wire* was conceived to entertain and to educate. The spectacle and the message came before fidelity to facts: “Some of the events depicted actually occurred, a few others were rumored to have occurred. But many of the events did not occur, and perhaps the only distinction worth making is that all of them could have happened” (Simon 2009:29). The ethnographer cannot argue that his or her description is composed of happenings that were rumored to have occurred (unless, of course, the research is focused on urban legends or conspiracy theories) or that could have happened (that interpretations are always conjectural does not imply that they refer to hypothetical or

presumptive facts). I contend that ethnography's reliance only on facts that can be said to have "really" happened and are regarded as such by the public is essential not only for the ethos of the researcher but also for the impact his or her writing may have. Assuring that, with all the necessary epistemological precautions, the account corresponds to what was observed or told—and differentiating between the two—is crucial in defining the passage from fieldwork to writing and in establishing the credibility of a text. *The Wire's* scene of the police visit to the housing project and its tragic ending is riveting, but one can argue that it is dramatized for the sake of entertainment or exaggerated for the purpose of education. The various scenes of near riots I describe can be said to be "real." What difference does this qualification make beyond what can be considered the deontology of ethnography? I suggest it has a significant importance for public anthropology. The reception of my book by the media, youth, and the public, more generally; the reactions it generated among police unions, successive ministers of the interior, and several human rights organizations; and the debates it elicited were determined by the assumption that I depict reality rather than fictionalize it. This assumption reflects ethnographic authority in a way that can be seen—and has been rightly criticized—as problematic. One should remain modest about this authority, though. Ironically, when, during a television program, a historian of the police tried to disqualify my work by presenting it as belonging to the tradition of satirical pamphlets, thus implying exaggeration, it was an author of detective novels, recently awarded the prize for the "best francophone roman noir" for a book about an anticrime squad, who publicly defended me, affirming that my depiction was faithful to reality.

But more than reproducing the real, fiction aspires to unveil profound truths about the state of the world. As Simon expresses it, "We understood that throughout our national culture, there was a growing inability to recognize our problems, much less deal honestly with them" (2009:5). It is these untold issues, which ethnographers using films sometimes try to explore with their cameras (Suhr and Willerslev 2012), that *The Wire* is supposed to reveal to the viewer. And, while my analysis here is focused on the first season, which concerns the work of the police in disadvantaged neighborhoods, one should remember that the show exposes the predicament of industry, education, journalism, and, more broadly, the city. Again, the plot and the images have a remarkable power of persuasion. But they can only allusively evoke phenomena and processes for which history and sociology can account in a more exhaustive and substantial way.

History shows, for instance, how, in the 1980s, two logics developed in parallel in France: On the one hand, the restructuring of the economy and the rise of unemployment following the oil crisis produced a decline in so-

cial mobility and an increase in social inequality, which affected working-class families of immigrant backgrounds living in the housing projects in particular; on the other hand, after the victory of the Left in the general elections, the emergence of the Far Right led the Conservatives to radicalize their positions on immigration and security issues. New forms of policing developed with the creation of special units and the deployment of specific methods principally oriented toward the neighborhoods where the most disadvantaged populations, usually those belonging to ethnic minorities, were concentrated. Sociology reveals, simultaneously, that the nation-state-oriented organization of law enforcement in France generates two major consequences: first, because of the national recruitment of officers, 80 percent come from country towns and rural areas but have their first posting in the most exposed housing projects, whose population is completely alien to them and systematically otherized by their institution; second, being accountable to the state and not to local authorities or constituencies, the police have been increasingly used as instruments to communicate the government's strategy as security concerns have grown.

Bringing these historical and sociological elements to the fore of the analysis allows for access to what could be seen as the ultimate truth of the sort of urban policing I have studied, that is, the development of zones of relegation, where society creates local states of exception. Stories and images show this phenomenon in a powerful way. However, ethnography, when linked to history and sociology, offers insights that may be more demanding but are also invaluable to its comprehension.

Conclusion

Social scientists have recently expressed their admiration for authors of fiction, whether novelists or directors, not only in relation to their art but also—and this is what seems relatively new—because of their capacity to depict the real and unveil truths. Even more significantly, distinguished anthropologists and sociologists have admitted that they find, in the works of these authors, more compelling, more accurate, and more profound accounts of the social worlds they explore than in those proposed by the scholars who study them—sometimes including themselves. *Compelling* suggests efficacy, *accurate* evokes reality, and *profound* refers to truth. This humbling experience was the starting point of my reflection. My efforts to interpret the embodiment of history in contemporary South Africa paled before J. M. Coetzee's insights into the ambiguities of the postapartheid nation. My book-length analysis of the enforcement of order by police special units in French housing projects stood in marked contrast to David Simon's concise exposition of law enforcement practices in Baltimore's poor neighborhoods.

Admittedly, *prima facie*, authors of fiction create a world and give it the form they wish, whereas social scientists interpret the one they study and sometimes inhabit. In this text, I have tried to complicate this picture, though, by exemplifying and comparing how, in their respective undertakings, the former and the latter capture life, either individually (biography), as in the cases of Michael K and Magda A, or collectively (sociography), as in the cases of policing in Baltimore and Paris. First, I have suggested that it is desirable to distinguish between horizontal and vertical approaches to life, the former representing reality in the sense of what did happen, the latter uncovering truths in the sense of what has to be retrieved. Second, I have proposed rejecting the idea that fiction explores truth and science depicts the real, since the artist may claim to represent reality whereas the anthropologist generally aspires to reveal some truth about the world. Third, I have argued that, while fiction could never claim to simply reproduce the real, the argument that it is faithful to reality gives ethnography a form of authority that has important ethical and political consequences. Fourth, I have contended that there are various ways to access truths, with the social scientist benefiting from the unique resources of positive knowledge, such as history and sociology. Taken together, these four assertions represent an intent endeavor to reinstate anthropologists and sociologists in a public sphere where their presence has been waning.

On this basis, how can we reframe the parallel between ethnography and fiction? The lives ethnographers insert in their work have a lot in common with the lives fiction writers put in their books or in their films. Yet they present a unique association of reality and truth. Not that ethnographers consider their stories to be true because the individuals are real, but the sort of truth into which they inquire articulates various levels of reality. If the fictional imagination lies in the power to invent a world with its characters, the ethnographic imagination implies the power to make sense of the world that subjects create by relating it to larger structures and events. Indeed, this imagination shares certain traits with that of fiction writers, notably, the attention to the significant details of life that render each individual singular, impenetrable, unpredictable. In an unwitting paraphrase of the quote from Proust with which I opened this article, Paul Willis writes that “the ethnographically imagined possibility of making connections between art and everyday life is relevant to all the social sciences” (2000:6). But this imagination reciprocally mobilizes the method and knowledge of all the social sciences to inscribe lives in the broader, sometimes indiscernible, sometimes obscured context that renders them possible and understandable, even, or perhaps above all, when it escapes the individuals it directly involves. In the words of C. Wright Mills, “The sociological imagination enables us to grasp history and biography and the relations between

the two within society” (1959:6), and this is what makes it political. The strength of this intellectual project could therefore reside in this conspicuous combination of imagination and science—but is not science always a work of imagination?

Ultimately, however, the proof is in the pudding. In his *Proust: Philosophy of the Novel*, French philosopher Vincent Descombes (1992) asserts that Proust is more ambitious and more innovative as a practitioner of the novel than as a theoretician of its philosophy. Actually, *In Search of Lost Time* (2003) tells us more about how to write about “true life” and “real life” than does *Against Sainte-Beuve* (1988). In a similar fashion, one could argue regarding anthropological work that, rather than in theoretical discussions such as the one developed in this article, it is ethnography that provides the ultimate evidence of its fragile solution to the difficult problem of bringing life into the text through the writing itself. Here one should be reminded of Proust’s metaphor of the jigsaw puzzle. Social scientists attempt, at best, to put together some of the pieces of the worlds they study, aware that these pieces had a previous life, which they tentatively re-create, but also conscious of the risk that, as the main character of *Life: A User’s Manual* had imagined, everything could, in the end, disappear.

Notes

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Translation note. Although there are several excellent translations of *À la recherche du temps perdu* into English, the remarkable variety of the titles—*Remembrance of Things Past* in the initial version by Scott Moncrieff becomes *In Search of Lost Time* in the recent one coordinated by Christopher Prendergast, whereas the last volume, *Le temps retrouvé*, appeared almost simultaneously as *Time Regained* in Britain and *The Past Recaptured* in the United States—indicates the difficulty of rendering the meaning and, Proust would perhaps say, “the tune” of the work. An additional problem arises from the fact that the author himself made substantial corrections to his manuscript, which has also been published in French with some variations. For this reason, I prefer to propose here my own translation of the 1954 La Pléiade version, especially considering that in the excerpts quoted, crucial differences existed. When I refer to the work in the text, however, I adopt the contemporary title *In Search of Lost Time* to make the reading easier.

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