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Life & Times of Magda A

Telling a Story of Violence in South Africa

by **Didier Fassin, Frédéric Le Marcis, and
Todd Lethata**

How to write about violence? Most recent anthropological works have dealt with this question in terms of either political economy, narratives, or performance. Using J. M. Coetzee's *Life & Times of Michael K* as a pre-text, an ethnological inquiry into violence is proposed through the biography of a young South African woman. The reconstitution of her life story through informal interactions and in-depth interviews embedded in long-term research in her home community attempts to inscribe her life in its times, in other words, to articulate an experience of extreme poverty and sexual abuse and later of living with HIV and becoming involved in AIDS activism with the historical condition of apartheid and its aftermath. Taking seriously the young woman's perspective on her biography implies both epistemological and ethical issues. As it unfolds through her narrative, relocated in its social context, her story can be read as the progressive appropriation of an imposed fate, the slow shift from subordination to subjectification and, finally, a form of political education to violence.

Less and less frequently do we encounter people with the ability to tell a tale properly. More and more often there is embarrassment all around when the wish to hear a story is expressed. It is as if something that seemed inalienable to us, the securest among our possessions, were taken from us: the ability to exchange experiences.

—Walter Benjamin, *The Storyteller*

At the end of J. M. Coetzee's *Life & Times of Michael K* (1985, 175–82), the protagonist, profoundly exhausted by an interminable journey across the country during which he has seen his mother die, has been robbed and abused, and has experienced the violence of civil war and confinement in a prison camp, meets on a beach with three people who offer him some bread and milk. As he regains his strength, one of the strangers asks him where he comes from. Considering that he owes it to his benefactors, he begins to tell them his life story in short, factual sentences. But suddenly he stops: "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." Later, unable to sleep, he realizes:

They want me to open my heart and tell them a story of a life lived in cages. They want to hear about the cages I have lived in, as if I were a budgie or a white mouse or a monkey. And if I had learnt storytelling, I might have known how to please them. When my story was finished, people would have shaken their heads and been sorry and angry and plied me with food and drink. Whereas the truth is that I have been a gardener, and gardeners spend their time with their noses to the ground.

After a while, he becomes restless: "It excited him, he found, to say, recklessly, the truth, the truth about me." Filled with this idea, he ends up thinking: "Perhaps the truth is that it is enough to be out of the camps, out of all the camps at the same time. Perhaps it is enough of an achievement, for the time being. I have escaped the camps; perhaps, if I lie low, I will escape the charity too."

Interest in Coetzee's work has recently shifted from the field of literature to anthropological arenas in a broad sense (Mascia-Lees and Sharp 2006). The archaeologists Lynn Meskell and Lindsay Weiss (2006, 91), in particular, have pointed out that the South African novelist was constantly "excavating the past" in order to make the present understandable and, although raising universalistic issues, was clearly inscribing his stories in an "immediate historical location." This presence of the past and this embodiment of memory are, however, never mechanical or deterministic, and in the writing itself a

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distance is created between biography and history. Michael K's story thus both intimately intertwines biographical and historical elements and engages reflexivity about the act of storytelling. This questioning involves not only the narrator's perspective—the sort of “truth” he tells about himself and the larger context of his life (Fassin 2001)—but also a contemporary sociological trend, the exercise of “truth-telling” as a mode of subjectification (Fassin 2000). Our paper is about what it means to narrate the story of one's life and times—what it means about one's biography, about the history it is inscribed in, about the act of storytelling itself, and about the possibility of its anthropological interpretation. In his discussion of John and Jean Comaroff's work (1991 and 1997), Donald Donham (2001) criticizes the tendency of anthropologists to overlook historical agency and privilege a static view of culture over a dynamic reading of material domination. Our inquiry into the story of Magda A is an effort to reconcile anthropology and history, to link culture and domination. This story is about the production and reproduction of violence in South Africa.

On March 30 and 31, 2004, Magda A sat down in an office on the university campus and started her narration. She lived in Alexandra, the oldest township still existing in Johannesburg, but we had agreed to record her story far from that noisy and overcrowded place. The academic setting seemed more propitious for anonymity and serenity. Although one of us spoke Sotho, which is her language, she had decided to talk in English as she generally did with us. She started abruptly:

Myself when I was there I was staying with my granny in Lesotho. And then my uncle was raping us every time and my mother come and say to my granny, “I want to take my child and go with her to Natal,” and then my grandmother say “Okay, you can take her because there is a problem.” And then my mother and my stepfather took me and came with me in Natal. And when we were there my mother go back to her mother's place. And then that man again sleep with us, sleep with me every day. Myself, I say, “What can I do?” But there is nothing I can do because that man he promised he can kill us.

With few interruptions, she continued in her monotonous tone for hours, telling how as a child from a poor rural family she was regularly raped by her uncle and father-in-law, how she later went to town and had sex with men to survive, how she eventually found a boyfriend who loved her but was violent, how they both discovered that they were infected with HIV after the death of their child, and how this revelation changed her life and threw her into activism for the prevention and treatment of AIDS.

We were in fact no strangers to Magda: she had known us for several years; we had come to see her quite often; we had met her former boyfriend and her aging mother; we had gone together to the funerals of young colleagues of hers working in the same non-governmental organization and victims of

the same disease as herself; we had had many conversations about the past and present, about violence and illness, about sex and death; every time we returned to her shack in the township she loudly expressed her joy. Thus many fragments of her life were already familiar to us, but this time we had asked her to put the parts of the puzzle together. Obviously there was something odd about her monologue, pronounced in this impersonal room of the empty anthropology department—an ethnological “non-place” (Augé 1995) that disrupted the traditional view of what the “field” was supposed to be (Gupta and Ferguson 1997). But at the same time, the unusual setting emphasized the artificial character of any ethnographer's presence; it made us conscious of the myth of the story that “tells itself” (Briggs and Mantini-Briggs 2003). It reminded us that we had with Magda, on the one hand, moments of life shared in the township and, on the other hand, moments of work formalized in the exercise of her storytelling. The story told here is an attempt to establish a link between the two temporal series.

Our aim here is to make sense of the violence in her life and times: domestic and gender violence, physical and structural violence. Although our empirical material comes from hearing Magda's story and sharing parts of her everyday life, we think that it becomes understandable as more than just an individual trajectory and a singular agency only when it is referred to its historical context, both during and after apartheid. Of course, we are aware of the problem posed, as in any effort to relate particular biographies and political economies, by the juxtaposition of Magda's subjectivity and the anthropologists' objectification (Farmer 1992; Scheper-Hughes 1992). We neither assume that her story as she told it to us is the mere representation of facts and events she experienced nor imagine that our writing is the final word on it. We believe that a major challenge for social sciences resides precisely in the articulation of the person's voice and the researchers' work. In fact, the experience South Africans have of their country's history is not separate from their own stories. To quote Mrs. Curren, the old woman fighting a deadly illness as she is confronted with the insurrectional situation of the last years of the apartheid regime in Coetzee's *Age of Iron* (1998): “A crime was committed a long time ago. So long ago that I was born into it. It was part of my inheritance. It is part of me, I am part of it.” Shifting from the side of the “criminal” to the side of the “victim,” we try to apprehend this place where the story and the history become part of each other.

The Anthropologist as Storyteller

Anthropology is about telling others' stories, but it is also about listening to others' stories (Angel-Ajani 2004). Literature is much more a matter of the former than the latter. When they analyze “the uses of life histories” (Fischer 1991), anthropologists deal with the epistemology of narrativity rather than with the ethics of receptivity (Bourdieu 1986). We

are more interested in the “truth” of the data we collect (Duranti 1993) than in the truth we “want to hear” (Richardson Bruna 2006). From this perspective, however, more than the changes in the social reality we describe it is the evolution of the social reality we acknowledge that has shaped the sort of “truth” we produce (Crapanzano 1986). For example, we could probably admit that it is not because there is less exploitation and domination today that we hardly read about them anymore and it is not because there is more suffering and trauma than in the past that we have started to be conscious of them (Fassin 2004). Our account of the social world thus reflects what we are willing—and able—to hear. Our informants usually readily understand this and, guided by our questions, give us the sort of facts that “keep our interest alive,” in Coetzee’s words. Magda knew that we were gathering biographies to explore the social conditions of exposure to the risk of HIV and the experience of patients living with AIDS. She knew what we wanted to hear.

Anthropology is thus also about encounters (Asad 1973). It supposes mutual expectations from the confessor and the confessed (Behar 1993). It implies a reciprocal relation of confidence between the ethnographer and the ethnographed (Frank 1979). It involves the mixed feelings of fraternal empathy and professional curiosity engaged by the anthropologist in an asymmetrical exchange in which the gift of the life told is counterbalanced by hypothetical counter gifts of the life written (Nelson 1996). What did Magda expect from telling us her story? It was not the first time she had told it to strangers. Journalists had already interviewed her. She had become a symbol of the obscure township activist, sick herself but devoting her time to the cause of HIV prevention and AIDS patients in her “support group” in Alexandra (Le Marcis 2004a). Thus her life story had been presented in national newspapers, and she was probably much prouder of this than she will be when it is published in an anthropological journal. But she had angrily told us that her biography had been truncated and falsified by journalists in response to the space constraints of the press columns and to the supposed public demand for stories of suffering and redemption. What she was interested in was “how well the tale [was] told,” as Paul Stoller (1994) phrases it. The question of how she would appear in the text was raised in our preliminary discussion. She did not care about being part of the collective signature, but she would have liked to have her real name used in the text. This was, however, counterindicated by the intimate and dangerous details she gave us and her wish to have her whole story told without our censorship, and we finally agreed to change her name.

Magda’s story as she delivered it to us is not just a moment in her life during which she unveils to herself and to others the linearity and coherence of a life made biography. It is also a moment in six years of ethnographic research reported elsewhere (Fassin 2007). This can be understood both at an individual and at a collective level. First, it is certainly a crucial episode in our comprehension of her story, since it gives a

sense and a voice to the subject she is, but it is also inscribed in the informality of our frequent visits and discussions and our participation in ordinary or exceptional events that she was involved in. Her story, as we will present it here, is informed by this mundane knowledge of her life, by the contradictory assertions or facts we have been confronted with, by the documents she gave us and our interviews of her relatives and friends, by the scenes we have witnessed in her home and in the course of her work and her militant activity. Magda’s story is thus a node in a web of signs and meanings which, at some point, becomes her biography as we can reconstruct it. Secondly, although it obviously has its irreducible singularity, as is the case for the tens of life stories we have collected in the townships and former homelands, it is also part of the larger picture of South African AIDS that we have been putting together for the past six years. In contrast to the usual approaches in the biomedical and even the applied social sciences, which have promoted behavioural and culturalist models of the epidemic, our approach attempted to link an ethnography of gender violence, economic inequality, and racial discrimination with the epidemiology of the infection. Magda’s life is therefore to be read as an element of this collective investigation of the political economy of the disease. The articulation of the two levels—individual and collective—is to be found in what we conceptualized, following Thomas Csordas (1990) but with a difference, as “embodiment” (Fassin 2002). Collective history, we believe, is embodied in individual biographies in two complementary ways: as an objective condition resulting from the inscription of the social structures in the material existence of the person (Bourdieu 1977) and as a subjective experience through which the course of events is reinterpreted from the perspective of the vanquished (Koselleck 1997). Magda’s life and Magda’s story can be seen as reflecting respectively her condition and her experience.

However, as will appear in her narrative and the reconstruction of her trajectory which it permits, collective history as such remains relatively distant from individual biography, at least as reflected in her explicit telling. It is as if the events which shaped South Africa during her childhood, adolescence, and adulthood, from the 1976 Soweto uprising and the following insurrection to the 1994 elections and their aftermath, were an invisible context, never explicitly referred to (Worden 1994). This fact is the more noteworthy if one considers that in the late 1980s she lived in Natal, where confrontations among Zulus degenerated into carnage (Beinart 2001), and that she arrived in Johannesburg in 1990 as the democratic transition began but also as political violence between Buthelezi’s Inkatha Freedom Party and Mandela’s African National Congress reached its peak (Thompson 2001). Even more surprising, the racial discrimination and confrontation that are so overwhelming under the agonizing regime of apartheid never explicitly appear in the narrative. One could almost say that, as did Michael K, Magda A passed through the shadow of the national dramas politically unconscious and colour-

blind. Obviously, the absence from her biography of history—considered simultaneously as the succession of significant facts and as the process structuring society—is not complete. We will discover the historical watermark rising to the surface at various moments of her life. But this paradoxical silence about the context of the episodes of her existence may tell us much about how biography may be reconstructed on the obliteration of history.

How is one to write about the condition and experience of violence and, more specifically, for South Africa, in a context of segregated populations (Beinart and Dubow 1995) and commodified bodies (Scheper-Hughes and Wacquant 2002)? This difficulty is particularly obvious for women, whose relation to the public dimension of history often remains invisible or unspoken, as Mamphela Ramphele (1997) has shown in the case of political widowhood under apartheid. In her early works on Indian women abducted and sexually abused during the 1947 partition of the country, Veena Das (1995, 175) expresses skepticism about the possibility of producing accounts of this experience:

The discourse of the professional, even as he speaks on the behalf of the victim, does not seem to have the conceptual structures by which voice can be given to them. I am not suggesting that the experience of the victim can speak to us pure and neat, unmediated by intellectual reflection. I am suggesting, however, that the conceptual structures of our disciplines—social science, jurisprudence, medicine—lead to a professional transformation of suffering which robs the victim of her voice and distances us from the immediacy of her experience. In the memory of an event, as it is organized and consecrated by the state, only the voice of the expert becomes embodied, acquiring in time a kind of permanence and hiding from view the manner in which the event may have been experienced by the victim herself.

Literally giving voice to the victim by listening to what she says cannot be the solution to this profound aporia of any ethnography of violence—especially, as Valentine Daniel (1997) has shown in his study in Sri Lanka, if we consider the ambivalence of the victim herself about the telling of the events.

Therefore, we will not pretend that in reproducing parts or all of Magda's long narrative we are presenting "the" truth of her life, which would mean substituting our own regime of truth as scientific authority for her regime of truth as narrated experience. To use Susan Blum's (2000) distinction, we prefer to these two approaches a "coherence theory" of truth, deriving truth "from coherent relations within a given social, semantic, epistemological framework." It is in this direction that, for instance, João Biehl (2005) movingly explores the world of Catarina, the young Brazilian woman suffering from a neurological disease, in the place of social relegation called Vita. Thus we assert that by putting together Magda's story as she told it to us, her life, which we shared fragments of, and her inscription in the eventful times of the past three

decades, we make of her biography a contribution to the understanding of violence. Insofar as it is obviously problematic—for practical and ethical reasons—to be there when violence is inflicted and thus to develop a direct ethnography of it, the analytical triptych we propose—story, life, and times—offers the possibility of writing about what often remains out of reach of anthropological intelligibility. The story told is not a mere expression of her life; its articulation with what is known of her times gives a sense of what violence was and meant in South Africa at the time. In that sense Magda's biography contains no ultimate truth (Clifford 1980) but rather a configuration of heterogeneous empirical facts, the form of verification that anthropology is looking for.

Childhood: Scenes of Rural Life

Magda was born 33 years ago in Lesotho, the small kingdom landlocked in the centre of South Africa—caught between the province of the Orange Free State, which represented the Afrikaner heart of the apartheid regime, and the homelands of Transkei, KwaZulu, and Qwaqwa, where Africans were enclosed by supposed ethnic groups. Her grandmother had been brought up there by a family of migrant workers from Lesotho who had adopted her while they were temporarily residing in the South African mining city ironically called Welkom. Living in a village in Lesotho, she had had five children by different men, and Magda's mother, Anna, was one of them. Anna and her siblings were left with their own grandmother when their mother went to work on the other side of the border, where job opportunities were better. Visiting her mother on the farm where she was working in the Free State, Anna discovered that she had had three other children with a "boyfriend" there.

Anna became pregnant by and married a man from Lesotho when she was 15. Their child was called Magda. Magda's father was absent and abusive. He worked in the province of Gauteng, near Johannesburg, but he did not send money to his wife and daughter. Every time he came home there were violent quarrels. Finally the couple broke up, and Anna left for the Free State in search of work. Magda, who was only a few years old, was left in her grandmother's care. She thus spent her childhood in the large rural homestead where the whole family—Anna's three brothers with their wives and children—was settled. The older brother was married and had four children, two of them being twins. He did not work, stayed at home all day, and drank a lot. One day he decided to sell the twins to a traditional healer who said that he wanted to use their supernatural powers, probably by incorporating parts of their bodies in rituals and treatments (practices that are reported as persisting today). After a violent argument, his wife left the house, taking the twins with her, and he remained alone with his two other children. By that time, Magda was 7 years old. One evening when he was drunk, this uncle raped her, and from then on he abused her constantly. When the girl complained to her grandmother or to her other

uncles, they told her that they could not do anything about it: "Everybody knew what happened but they never took action. Nothing. They left the matter as it was." Not only was he the eldest man in the homestead and thus the head of the family but he was considered Magda's classificatory father, and in the absence of her genitor he had authority over her.

Magda liked school, but she often missed it because of her work at home. She had to cook and clean the house before going to school, and if she had not finished her grandmother hid her uniform. Back from school, she had to go out and fetch wood and cow dung for the fire. Every other week she was supposed to look after the small cattle. She had no time to play, and she often received physical punishment. But she liked her grandmother:

It is not nice to grow far away from your mother but I think with my granny it was nice but the problem was they were suffering but it was not bad because my mother she didn't like us. My granny even if the food was less she could leave the food for us saying, "This food is for sharing, we can share this food." My mother even when she came from Natal—maybe you're happy but she can hit you the same time. So sometimes I think my granny was better.

One day, when Magda was 15, her mother, who had learned about the sexual abuse, decided to take her to her home in Natal, where she was married to a Zulu man. But, surprisingly, she warned her: "My mother, she told me that if I tell her that her husband rape me she is going to kill me." For Magda, retrospectively, this threat suggests, on the one hand, that her mother considered her at least partly responsible for having been sexually abused by her uncle and, on the other hand, that she knew perfectly well that her husband was susceptible to having forcible sexual relations with her.

Anna's fears were not unfounded. Very soon, Magda was confronted with her stepfather's sexual desire and violence: "When he was from anywhere drinking, when he was drunk, every time, he would sleep with me, same like that. If he want to sleep with us he's not even going to say: 'Friend my friend.' He just say: 'Come, we can sleep.'" Sometimes, though, he gave her a kind of justification: "He said he wanted to do the child with me and then myself I say, 'So how?' and he said my mother is not making the baby, so he wants to make the baby with me." She was afraid of him; he made weapons and had threatened to kill her if she were to say anything. Besides, she had no relatives or friends to confide in. Anna herself pretended to be unaware of what was happening to her daughter. In the evening she often went out to see her boyfriends, leaving Magda with her husband. When she came home she would bring the food and money she had received. This sexual arrangement within the couple had an economic aspect, as they were involved in growing and trading cannabis. Magda herself had to help them plant the herb and harvest it; at some point, she even became their dealer and went around selling the illegal product. After three years in Natal, having finally revealed to her mother that she had been constantly

abused by her stepfather, she decided to go to Johannesburg, where one of her mother's younger sisters was living.

Incest has long been ignored in South Africa. This is why Zazah Khuzwayo's book *Never Been at Home* (2004) caused a sensation when it was published. For the first time, an African woman was writing about how she had been sexually abused by a violent father, a policeman who beat his wife and bullied his family. Her narrative revealed taboos about women's and girls' subordination to male domination. In fact, the subject of sexual coercion had remained largely absent from the autobiographical and even—at least until the late 1990s—the sociological literature. Significantly, studies on African women under apartheid mainly emphasized the effects on them of racial oppression and segregation. In the best-known investigation of the matter, Belinda Bozzoli's *Women of Phokeng* (1991, 236–39), the gender issue is approached from a political perspective. Although the author acknowledges that women's social engagement is specific, related to "life strategies" in particular, they appear as actors only in the public sphere; although she asserts that she wants to avoid the pitfalls of presenting women as "pathetic objects of colonialism, racism, oppression, poverty, patriarchy, and capitalism" or on the basis of "romantic, celebratory, and teleological assumptions," private spaces and domestic relationships remain outside the scope of her work. In the index of the book, "sexuality" is only mentioned twice: once in reference to the denunciation of girls' loss of moral sense by traditional leaders and once with regard to the provocation of black women's showing their breasts to white policemen in street demonstrations.

Sexual violence became a major issue only after 2000 in the context of AIDS, when series of tragic stories made headlines and numerous reports of forced sex revealed the importance of the problem (Jewkes and Abrahams 2002). The painful paradox is that post-1994 South Africa has ever since been presented as a "society of rapists" (*Mail & Guardian*, April 7, 2000) and child rape as "the scourge of the New South Africa" (*Pretoria News*, June 17, 2005). What makes the issue even more sensitive is that most public discourses implicitly—or even explicitly—associate rape and incest with African men. Most of those who denounce it consider sexual violence a feature of African culture. In the most exotic expression of this view, the "virgin-cleansing myth" (Leclerc-Madlala 2002), HIV-positive men are said to rape young girls because they believe that this will purify and cure them. A review of available reports fails to confirm this, but the myth has been disseminated all over the world as a major explanation of the prevalence of the disease.

Magda's story allows a different perspective. Forced sex cannot be considered separately from the production and reproduction of poor rural families. The three generations of women from her grandmother to herself seem to be caught in the same political economy of migration and its consequences in terms of family dislocation. As David Coplan (2001) phrases it:

Lesotho's women, driven like their men from rural peasant life into wage labor, have for some four generations now been constrained to perform as social actors in situations of extreme structural and material stressfulness and legalistic limitations. Under such conditions a great many, often quite publicly, have simply gone "bad." A remarkable number, however, have seemed to survive the battlefield of African migrant female life in South Africa with at least the core of the Sesotho behavioral values aspirationally, if not practically, intact.

Representations of Lesotho's women as "wicked" describe them as leaving their children with their mothers, founding new households in their new places, developing illicit activities of brewing beer or growing cannabis, and selling domestic and sexual services to men (Epprecht 2000). All these elements—which we actually find in Mazda's mother's and grandmother's lives—are not in fact cultural characteristics but structurally linked to labour migration and the consequent necessity of surviving in this context (Bonner 1990). The economic situation of the area explains—as far as we can understand from Magda's narrative and interviews with her mother—why she was raised by her grandmother under the traditional authority of her uncle, her parents having had to cross the border to find work in South Africa.

In fact, under the apartheid regime, especially after the 1963 regulations about "foreign blacks," it became more and more difficult to leave Lesotho without the official passes usually provided by mining industries and construction enterprises (Gay 1980). Once the migrants had succeeded in crossing the border and finding poorly paid jobs, their clandestine status made them vulnerable and prevented them from going home. On the one hand, Basotho women tended to become dependent on South African men who could support them, although many remained quite autonomous, usually through illegal economic activities. On the other hand, Basotho men had the alternative of migrating, which usually implied the definitive rupture of the family linkage as they started new lives elsewhere, or staying home in idleness, occupying their time drinking and pretending to maintain their authority over the domestic group, mainly composed of children and grandmother. Violence developed easily in contexts with hardly any state policing, contrasting with the strict control of the borders. It was exerted upon the most vulnerable and included sexual coercion of young girls (Kotzé and van der Waal 1995). Magda experienced this historical configuration during her childhood in Lesotho. When she eventually moved to Natal, she was confronted with a new element: the insurrectional situation of the area, where political and ethnic violence was fuelled by the white government. Her fear of her stepfather, with his guns, was inscribed in this context of conflict and of anomie, in which the boundary between ordinary criminality and political violence was systematically blurred (Glaser 2000). The withdrawal of the state from the homelands and, more generally, implementation of state policies under the

apartheid regime—whether to segregate populations or, somewhat contradictorily, to develop industrial capitalism—thus "shaped the nature of families" (Reynolds 2000, 142): on the one hand, the state remained almost absent in the bantustans, where it delegated its monopoly of legitimate violence to local ethnicized governments; on the other hand, it was repressively omnipresent outside them to control the flow of black populations.

Although these elements remain in the background of the young woman's story, it is not difficult to see the close relations between economic structures, political norms, gender roles, and sexual abuse. Social inequality, inscribed in local and national history, is embodied in the materiality of lives. Physical and sexual violence cannot easily be separated from "structural violence" (Farmer 2004). Considering it structural avoids psychological evaluation and moral judgement of social agents (the mother, the grandmother, even the uncle and the stepfather) we know little about in any case. This does not mean that we confine our analysis to a sort of social determinism; rather we simply acknowledge the limits of the individual perspective. Magda expresses this in her own way: "When I was young my life was not nice because I was staying with my uncles. They were hitting me the way they want. They told me, 'Your mother jumped the borders, she is gone' and they were telling me a lot of things."

Youth: Scenes of Urban Life

Coming to Egoli, the City of Gold (as Johannesburg is popularly named), in those years of political transition from apartheid to democracy, with their uncertainties about tomorrow and even today, must have been quite an experience for a young woman raised in a rural area. Magda's initiation to urban life was immediate. Two days after her arrival, her aunt—whom she calls "my sister"—gave her the tune:

When I am there my sister told me: "Okay, this is Joburg, you're going to get nothing if you don't have a boyfriend." "Hey," I said, "What can I do?" She said, "There are a lot of people, you can get a boyfriend, you see, there are other guys there, they are working, choose which one you want." And I said, "I don't want a boyfriend," and she said, "Choose, you are going to get nothing if you don't have a boyfriend."

Magda's aunt was speaking from experience. She took her young protégée to a bar evocatively called Kiss Kiss near the hotel where she was staying. "There we sit and the guys they were wearing nice and she say, 'There's the guys from the hotel, you can choose one.' Me I say, 'I want that one,' and then he buy me beer, dry we drink. We enjoyed that day and then, after that, we go and sleep." Her boyfriend, who worked in the hotel, thus offered her a bed to share in the dormitory on the eleventh floor where all the male employees spent their nights. Each individual space was isolated by curtains to maintain a very limited intimacy. Women were not supposed to

stay there, so they sneaked in late in the evening and left early in the morning.

Unfortunately, Magda's boyfriend did not intend to give her more than overnight hospitality. Receiving no money from him, she had to earn her own living. Since she could not find a job, she was dependent on the men she met on the streets where she wandered during the day:

To eat you can get another boyfriend, so that you can eat, because my sister she can tell me "If you're hungry, you must get yourself a boyfriend, so that you can eat." The guys sometimes if you find them by the street they can say, "Let's go to the room," and you go to the room and get some food there. Sometimes they give you to eat first, sometimes they can give you money, but not money because ten rands is not money or five rands, it's just for cold drinks. And you eat and you go and you do sex and you go. And then next day you come, maybe if you still want that side, when you are hungry you can go to see him again.

After six months of this precarious life Magda finally got a job as a maid in a Coloured family. She worked all day seven days a week cleaning the house, preparing the meals, and looking after the children. She ate leftovers alone in the kitchen and slept on a foam mattress in the dining room when everybody had gone to sleep. She earned 150 rands a month. She went back to her mother's every month and got cannabis that she transported and dealt in town. By that time, her existence was not dependent on the support of a boyfriend anymore. However, she often went to a night club named 702 to meet men, spent the night at their homes, and hurried back to her workplace in the morning. "I was having a lot of boyfriends at that time. First come, first serve." This is how she met Christos, a young man who had recently migrated from Limpopo (at that time called the Northern Province). They fell in love, but he was jealous of her other boyfriends, drank a lot, and easily became violent.

Magda spent three years working for the Coloured family. Then she quit her job and went to live with Christos, who was sharing a room in a friend's apartment. These years were happy ones, although they were not free from hardship. One day the girls she sometimes went out with took her to a place of prostitution in Hillbrow, the hot spot of the city, where they went regularly to supplement the meagre resources received from their official boyfriends. It was 100 rands a time, and they got several clients during the day, they told her:

They showed me the building where they were selling. When you enter that place, the guys they are many and they just bump and touch you like this. I screamed, and that lady she said, "Magda, you're supposed to keep quiet." I said, "No, it's better to take me home." It was not nice because you sleep with many boys. Today you find this one. Tomorrow you find that one. That day we left the other one, that girl, by the room, she said, "Hey, that guy, the tall one, me I'm bleeding because of him." And then she said if she

want to sleep with that guy she must sleep with the others first, because this one make her lose business. Sometimes they used to say they are using condoms. Sometimes they were just sleeping, those people.

Magda soon left the place and never went back.

With Christos's help she had now found a job in a factory and was earning 150 rands a week. A year later she had saved enough money to buy a shack in Alexandra: a kitchen and a bedroom illegally connected to the public electric system for which she paid 1,000 rands. For the first time, she could consider herself completely autonomous and even started to host members of her family for transitory or permanent stays. Her relationship with Christos started to deteriorate. When he returned to his village, she met a man from Zambia who supported her. She wanted to learn how to sew, and he bought her a machine and gave her material. During several months of this partnership, which she describes as economic and platonic, he maintained a relationship of affectionate protection with her that was interrupted only when his wife arrived from Zambia.

Thus Magda's years in Johannesburg represent a profound change in her life: the young rural girl gradually became a city dweller. The actor and columnist John Matshikiza (2004), returning to South Africa after 32 years of exile, wrote a piece celebrating the capital of the Rand. Calling it an "instant city" for its sudden growth and fast rhythm, he asserted that in its history "beerhalls, brothels and bioscopes rapidly outnumbered places of worship." Probably never was this description more accurate than in the years of political transition when Magda discovered the city. The demographic transformation of the centre from a "Whites-only" area into a mixed cosmopolitan quarter of which Hillbrow was the heart and the symbol had started in the 1980s with the relaxation of the economically counterproductive apartheid laws and the installation of a growing number of migrants from the neighbouring townships, the rural areas, and the rest of the continent (Morris 1999). It was in this peculiar urban context that Magda obtained her sentimental education. The naïve young woman had to learn quickly. The first lesson was to find a boyfriend. The second was to make sure that he supported her financially. Having understood the first rule but not implemented the second, Magda spent her days searching for men who were willing to have sex with her for the equivalent of a cheap meal.

In her study of violence in the bars of Johannesburg and two of its townships, Janet Maia Wojcicki (2002, 268) analyses these practices in terms of "survival sex" and observes that other writers also use the term "transactional sex or informal sex work" to "describe similar non-commercial, non-professional sex-for-money exchanges." For Magda, as for many girls recently arrived from rural areas, the word "survival" is more than a mere equivalent of "transactional" or "informal": it must be taken in a strict sense. What "survival sex" means is reduction of the body to merchandise that is, moreover,

little valued in the market—the exchange of sex for food. In South Africa as in many other parts of the world, sexual politics may become literally a politics of bare life, to use Giorgio Agamben's (1998) expression. However, the indigent perspective on it reveals subtle distinctions.

Comparing the logics of sexual relations in different settings and various biographies collected north of Durban, Mark Hunter (2002, 101) proposes a useful differentiation between "sex for subsistence," which he often observed in the informal settlement where he conducted his fieldwork, and "sex for consumption," which he saw more often in the township where he did a parallel study. The former corresponded to situations of extreme vulnerability in which elementary needs were not being met: food was typically what entered the transaction. The latter involved young women attracted by fashion: gifts of cash or of consumption goods such as cell phones were characteristic of this configuration. Of course, the boundary between the two was often partially blurred. For Magda integration into urban life was marked by a passage from food to gifts, from the logic of subsistence to the logic of consumption, from mere responding to basic necessity to searching for pleasure and leisure. This passage is symbolically illustrated by her shift from the Kiss Kiss to the 702. In the meantime, she had made her own way in the city.

Contrary to what has been assumed by many experts (Padian 1988), survival and transactional sex, sex for subsistence and sex for consumption, have, in the local moral economy, very little in common with prostitution. When Magda goes to the brothel in Hillbrow, she is horrified by what she sees (the packed room), feels (the attempts to touch her), hears (the physical trauma of sexual intercourse), and imagines (the uninterrupted succession of men having sex with women). Significantly, she uses two distinct words to designate what her friends do and what she does. "They sell," she says, and the verb needs no explicit direct object, since it obviously refers to the body as commodity; in contrast, she describes her own practices as "phanding," a neologism based on the Zulu word *ukuphanda*, which literally means scratching the soil in search of food like a chicken and metaphorically designates the search for male companions who can support her (Le Marcis 2004, 247). In this linguistic evocation and its ethnographic context one recognizes how inadequate and problematic is the notion of "sexual promiscuity" which has served to explain the spread of sexually transmitted diseases in African populations—yesterday syphilis, today AIDS (Butchart 1998). In Magda's experience of the city, promiscuity is primarily physical: sleeping in the overcrowded dormitory of the hotel and having sex for food in shabby rooms, later being totally deprived of intimacy in her patrons' house, then sharing half a room with her boyfriend in someone else's apartment, and finally living in a two-room shack soon overcrowded by relatives who have left impoverished rural areas. Moreover, under these circumstances sexuality is highly determined by economic constraints: chronic underemployment and low wages make the financial support of boyfriends a

vital necessity as well as a social norm, although this does not mean that emotion and affect are absent from these relations. Reducing the material context of sexual transactions to behavioural features often essentialized through cultural models of Africanness, most medical and even anthropological studies have long ignored this political economy of sexuality (Packard and Epstein 1992). Although she also felt the sentimental loss of her boyfriend when Christos went back to Limpopo, Magda dryly commented, "Me I must get another boyfriend so that I can eat again."

Adulthood: Scenes of a Life with AIDS

Magda gave birth to a girl when she was 24. Christos was presumed to be the father. When she was nine months old, their daughter became sick. Christos asked Magda to join him in Limpopo, where he had found a job and was building a house for them. The child got worse and was admitted to a rural hospital, where she was determined to be HIV-positive. They had a serological test themselves and discovered that they were infected too. In the medical ward, they were stigmatized and excluded: "When coming to collect my results, I'm HIV-positive and I say, 'Okay, it's fine, matron,' and that lady she was telling me, 'Ya, you're HIV, you're sick, you're going to bring your disease here, because you're from Joburg.' The sisters in the hospital, they told these people coming from Joburg they bring AIDS here." As the medical condition of their daughter worsened, Magda and Christos took her to Johannesburg General Hospital, and she died there a few weeks later. At that time, antiretroviral drugs were not yet available in the public health system. The funeral took place in Limpopo, but Christos's family refused to bury the little body in the kitchen of the family house as was traditional, thus adding the humiliation of being rejected and anxiety for the baby's soul to their grief over the loss of their child.

In the following months the couple broke up. Christos had withdrawn his offer to marry Magda and pay the dowry to her family because, he told her, she had lost her economic value. They constantly quarrelled and fought. Christos decided to start a new life with a young woman from his village without telling her his HIV status. Magda went back to her shack, where five relatives were now living with her, and started a new relationship with a man who she discovered was suffering from AIDS too. "I get another boyfriend and I make sleep, but before I tell him I am HIV-positive, he say also he is HIV-positive, and then I say, 'Where did you get it?' He say from his girlfriend, the other one, and she had passed away." After months of depression following the death of her child, her obsession was to have another baby. In spite of the potential risk of reinfection, the couple had decided to have sexual relations without using condoms. "Myself on my mind I used to say, 'I can die, I don't care about dying.' We die, we can die, no problem I will see what is going to happen. And I used to say, 'Hey, the others, they have the babies and me, I don't have the baby, I want the baby.' And then I make

that and then I sleep with him until I am pregnant.” This time, she benefited from the new national policy of prevention of mother-to-child transmission and got an antiretroviral treatment when she gave birth to her second child, who was not infected.

At that time, her economic resources included the social grants she received for her illness and for her little boy. Compared with many women living alone in Alexandra, hers was a relatively privileged situation. Moreover, she had started working for a non-governmental organization which develops activities in the domain of AIDS, particularly a support group for the ambulatory sick and home-based care for bedridden patients. Soon she was receiving a salary, in compensation for which she had to give up her government grant. Her regular income represented more than twice the minimum wage. This job also sanctioned her new community involvement. In fact, for more than a year she had been active as a volunteer worker, with the promise that she would eventually receive a salary. Although her main reason for getting the job was economic, she thus became an actor on the local AIDS scene. However, she remained ambivalent about it because she experienced discrimination from employees who were not suffering from her disease and because she feared getting opportunistic infections through contact with patients. She admitted to us that if it were not for the good salary she was receiving she would certainly quit.

Much more significant of her social engagement was her participation in the Treatment Action Campaign. This national movement was created in 1998 to demand universal access to antiretroviral drugs. Its demonstrations against the pharmaceutical firms and the government are spectacular, often using elements of the classical anti-apartheid repertory such as toyi-toying protests and civil disobedience campaigns. It expresses its solidarity with patients not only by helping them while they are alive but also by attending their funerals, which became occasions for publicizing their fight. This was a completely novel experience in Magda's life. For the first time, she felt respected: here, people with and without HIV shared the same ethical values. For the first time also, she felt important: she was travelling all over to go to marches and being interviewed by journalists, even on television. Being a member of the movement also allowed her to be recruited into a clinical trial at the Chris Hani Baragwanath Hospital's special unit in Soweto. At a time when antiretroviral drugs were not yet available in the public sector, this was the only way for the poor to get treatment. A few weeks after she started taking her medicines, she was physically transformed, had gained weight, and looked radiant. She commented almost enthusiastically: “So what I can say, ‘Those who are having HIV, it is not the end of the world.’”

This last part of her biography corresponds to a heroic narrative of the epidemic recently promoted through various media. The first South African movie ever nominated for an Oscar (in 2004), Darrell James Root's *Yesterday*, tells the story of an illiterate woman raising her daughter alone in a remote

village in Natal. When she discovers she has AIDS, she keeps it secret for fear of the stigma, but as her physical condition begins to deteriorate, rumours develop. When her husband comes back from the city to die in his village, it becomes obvious to the villagers that he has infected her. Weakened by the illness, the woman devotes her last energy to ensuring her child's future by enrolling her in school, a rare opportunity in this rural context. Similarly, Magda is confronted with different layers of time: she must confront her present suffering, but it makes sense to her only in reference to her past (and the violence she has been the victim of) and from the perspective of her expected death (and the future of the child who will outlive her). On the one hand, she takes cruel revenge upon her mother: “I tell her that my child died because of HIV ‘and maybe that HIV I get from your husband I don't know where I get that disease and your husband already was having the signs and symptoms of AIDS and you never do nothing for us, and also maybe you are HIV-positive because your husband was raping us and maybe you will also get AIDS like us.’” On the other hand, she is constantly preoccupied by what will happen to her child when she is no longer here: “My worry is my son because sometimes the people they used to ask me, ‘What are you going to do with your son if you are going to die?’ Myself I used to say, ‘I will see what I'm gonna do, but I want to do something for my son before I can die.’” Violence in the past, suffering in the present, hope for the future: Magda's story involves all tenses.

The tragic situation of the AIDS epidemic in South Africa, where the estimated prevalence of the infection officially reaches 6 million out of a population of 45 million, has provoked an unprecedented social crisis. It turned into a political drama in 2000 when the president started to challenge scientific evidence by contesting the viral origin of the disease, emphasizing poverty as the main cause of its dissemination in Africa and finally interrupting the distribution of antiretroviral drugs for the prevention of mother-to-child transmission in South African hospitals (Schneider 2002). However, for many social scientists, the epidemiological tragedy was highly predictable; in the historian Shula Marks's (2002) words, AIDS was “an epidemic waiting to happen.” As was the case with syphilis (Jochelson 2001) and tuberculosis (Packard 1989) in the first half of the twentieth century, the progression of AIDS, which is particularly rapid in the black population, results from the combination of social, economic, and political factors rather than mere cultural ones. Magda herself epitomizes this combination: the migration of her parents in search of work dismantled her family and left her at the mercy of her uncle's incestuous relations; the routinized political and ordinary violence in the homelands exposed her again to sexual abuse; and the pauperization of both rural and urban segregated areas led to the multiplication of male partners in sometimes extremely precarious conditions. The culturalist stereotypes of “wicked Basotho women” and “violent Zulu men,” the essentialized features of female seductiveness and male brutality, cannot be maintained when con-

fronted with this historical evidence. Paraphrasing Elisabeth Drexler (2006), who showed that in Aceh the official production of narratives corrupted the forensic evidence of the crimes committed, we could say that the categories and logics through which violence is usually described and interpreted may corrupt the ethnographic evidence.

In a sense, the most recent developments of Magda's story demonstrate how it is—individually and collectively—possible to resist these attributions and, at least partially, these determinations. Having a regular job and a decent salary, being the owner of a house, taking care of others, and engaging in activism, she has taken over her own life, something that had appeared out of reach for so many years. Ironically, it is her lethal illness that has allowed her to do so. However, it is less through the exploration of the meaning of her disease (Becker 1997) than through the mediation of institutions: the state from which receives her grants, the non-governmental organization for which she works, the support group in which she meets other patients, and the activist movement in which she discovers the sense of collective action. Welfare, workfare, solidarity, and engagement: contrary to what is often said about the interiority of the experience of illness, her subjectivity as patient is resolutely turned outward and involves a citizenship defined by rights and duties. Her reconstruction through AIDS thus creates a form of biopolitical being-in-the-world.

At the end of Coetzee's novel, Michael K offers this confidence: "If there is one thing I discovered out in the country, it was that there is time enough for everything. Is that the moral of it all, he thought, the moral of the whole story: that there is enough time for everything?" Magda, as she finishes her autobiographical narrative, leaves us with a somewhat similar conclusion about her anticipated death: "People say, 'Yea, you're going to die because you're HIV-positive.' Myself I used to say, 'I am not of a dying type,' and then and then just let that I am living, I am being strong, because I am not scared of everybody now. And I even open my HIV status, I am fine and I am not worried of that disease."

Conclusion

A story never speaks for itself. Nor does an autobiography, even though it may take the supposedly transparent form of a confession. In a time when telling one's life has become a normalized way of being in the world, when the reconstruction of the nation has been implemented through the narratives of criminals and victims before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, when AIDS patients are summoned to leave behind them when they die a stereotyped trace of their existence through a memory box that includes a recorded life story, the exteriority and therefore the opacity of the confession could not be more evident. However, taken in its historical and social context, the narrative makes sense. We can understand what Magda tells us because we relate it to a larger picture in which the Basotho women's experience

of migration is a sociological fact, sexuality is inscribed in survival practices in South African cities, and AIDS has introduced new political subjectivities. The link we have tried to establish here between Magda's story, life, and times is precisely at this fragile point where the contradictory false transparency and discouraging opacity of autobiography may be partially transcended, making interpretation thinkable—even if it is in the form of what Michael Carrithers (2005) calls a "knowledge of possibilities and not just of certainties," an open understanding of the social world.

Here the shift, in Magda's biography, from forced sex during childhood to survival sex during youth opens a possible way of understanding the underlying forms of violence, physical (repetition of rape) and structural (commodification of sex), respectively. In psychological terms, the distinction between the two resides in the absence or presence of consent. However, the ethnographic approach leads us to articulate the two phenomena in a political economy of sexuality (how much bodies are valued) and a moral economy of gender (how much a girl or a woman is worth). Sexual violence cannot be understood outside of the social context and history of its production. No life is outside of its times. It has been too easy to erase decades of depreciation of human lives, human bodies, and human dignity and merely explain the incidence of sexual abuse and the progression of sexual diseases in simple terms of idiosyncratic and irrational conduct reified in the present. This asocial and ahistorical approach has had a high cost in terms of policy making for the prevention of HIV infection and the care of AIDS patients. In South Africa, it has provoked a sentiment of defiance towards authoritative truth about the epidemic and facilitated the emergence of scientific controversies about the disease and its treatment. Not acknowledging violence has led to violence regarding knowledge.

But adopting Magda's point of view on her biography is also trying to understand what it means or, more simply, what it is to live one's life under such circumstances of violence. In other words, it is considering her as a social subject rather than as a victim. The issue is not moral, however, as would be the classical critique of victimization, but purely ethnographic. The question here is not only how to explain violence but how to account for the experience of it. It is not merely to illuminate Magda's life by her times but to describe her life in her times. We analyse strategies and tactics, fears and hopes, depressions and recoveries. From this perspective, Magda's story can be seen as the progressive appropriation of her life or, in other words, as the expression of the ambivalence of subjection discussed by Judith Butler (1997), which implies both being subordinated through relations of power and becoming a political subject. Her biography as a whole illustrates the tension between the two but also the slow displacement from subordination to subjectification. This is perceptible both in her private life, particularly in the way she manages her affective and sexual relationships, and in her public life, remarkably in her engagement in an activism

that is not free of self-interested motivations. At both levels, her career can be seen as a political education in violence.

Like Michael K, Magda A avoids pathos when telling her story, no matter what terrible events she evokes. Concentrating on facts, she seems to deliver a truth about herself. But in contrast to the audience of Coetzee's hero, we have a profound interest—in the multiple meanings of the word—in her tale. However, putting her life in words and making a text of her narrative is more than a question of interest. It has to do with responsibility. We anthropologists are accountable for the intelligibility of the life and times of the subjects who share their stories with us. This means taking seriously the articulation of the two realities: a life inscribed in its times.

Acknowledgments

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Comments

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Magda A survived the inferno and found a new life in South Africa's AIDS world. This is an intricate and moving essay, a work of intense listening and care, and I am grateful for the opportunity to comment on it. Scene after scene and page after page, I was astounded by the rawness and complexity of the materials Magda offered. I was also greatly impressed by the anthropologists' steadfast commitment to linking her life and words to the violence of collective history and to contemporary social theory.

This is the plot: although the anthropologists are already

familiar with Magda's present-day travails as an AIDS patient and activist and with specific "fragments of her life," they ask her to record her biography and thus "to put the parts of the puzzle together." Yet something in Magda's narrative puzzles them: she does not account for history. The major political events and the racial discrimination that have shaped the nation's economy and Magda's life chances "never explicitly appear in the narrative." For the anthropologists this "invisible context" is itself a symptom of power arrangements and of the violence of history. They take it as their task to make this lacuna intelligible and to make Magda's story and history "part of each other."

I admire this attempt to identify the ways history is embodied and the ways biographies reflect sociological trends (in this case "truth-telling"), but I wonder how Magda herself conceptualized this "obliteration of history." Did her story-telling represent a different kind of drive, perhaps an effort to singularize herself, to take herself out of the stream of history and destiny, out of populations and categories of people historically excluded? Street-smart, life-loving, and politically engaged, Magda certainly does not come across as a subject caught up in illusions, nor do Fassin and colleagues think of her in these terms. Yet, is "excavating the past" a prerequisite for making "the present understandable"? Could we not interpret Magda's refusal to do so as a simple and profound statement of being-for-the-future?

From this alternative interpretive standpoint, Magda would thus seem less a subject of power and memory and more a subject of desire and literature. She herself speaks of a primacy of desire over power when faced with the death of her HIV-positive first child and her own medical demise: "We die, we can die, no problem I will see what is going to happen. And I used to say, 'Hey, the others, they have the babies and me, I don't have the baby, I want the baby.'" She was able to take advantage of the highly politicized AIDS treatment available and give birth to a second child who was not infected. As is evident in Magda's now flourishing life and AIDS work, "It is not the end of the world."

Magda's life speaks to the way subjects of desire empirically engage biopolitical instances. A microanalysis of such engagements can help us to understand the present and people not so much as territorialized by history but as makers of new systems of perception and action that come with specific sets of possibilities and limits. How are we to repopulate the political stage with the insights, ambiguities, and desires (alternative human capacities) that people like Magda now embody?

Fassin et al. use literature to frame and to think about Magda A's history-making practice. At the end, they write, "Like Michael K, Magda A avoids pathos when telling her story, no matter what terrible events she evokes." What else is she doing other than "avoiding"? Perhaps, as in a work of literature, she is "sublimating," that is, redirecting deadly forces toward socially acceptable creation—in this case, the family she lives for. This present creation goes far beyond lived experience and points to a vital experimentation that

millions of AIDS sufferers now face daily. As these researchers insightfully point out, storytelling may well be a crucial therapeutic means for life in-the-making.

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Fassin, Le Marcis, and Lethata assert the novelty of their approach on the basis of two things. One is methodological: by connecting their case study to works of literature such as Coetzee's (1985) they lay claim to having achieved new insight into the precise intersection between the past and the present and/or between individual biography and its broader social context. The second is substantive: whereas earlier studies of women (e.g., Bozzoli with Nkotsie 1991) assume a "political perspective" and portray women as actors "in the public sphere," their study, they say, provides evidence of the ubiquity of sexual violence in South African domestic settings. Their methodological insights, however, are less novel than claimed, and in failing to spot a crucial mediating factor between individual biography and the institutional setting in which it is embedded they miss a crucial clue to why Magda A was able to construct her biography in precisely the way that she did.

Life history as a tool of social science has been used (and much debated) for at least 20 years (for an early comment see Crapanzano 1984). Coetzee may be the best-known South African to have explored the intricacies of subjective experience by investigating the relationship between biography and its socio-historical context, but he is not the only or the first one to do so. Given that the present article is a work of anthropology rather than one of literary criticism, it might have been useful to refer, in addition or instead, to works of historical or anthropological biography such as Hyslop (2004), Murray (1999), Niehaus (2006), and Van Onselen (1997). What these works demonstrate—and what the more literary approach perhaps lacks—is a detailed and solid conception of the social background against which the particular life histories in question are played out.

To come to the second matter: when Fassin et al. claim that the existence of domestically based sexual violence has been ignored, they may have a valid point (for exceptions, see Murray 1999 and Waldman 2007). Their assertion that such violence, where it has been noted, has been interpreted through a "culturalist" lens rather than as part of a recognition that "forced sex cannot be analyzed separately from the production and reproduction of poor rural families" is a convincing one. The fact that the article contains testimony from just one woman, however, prevents us from ascertaining whether this is widespread or more idiosyncratic—a shortcoming which the more socio-historical approach to biography would be well-placed to remedy. What Fassin et al.

perhaps do not sufficiently recognize is the extent to which subjective life-history narratives are constructed in retrospect and viewed through the lens of present experience. This was doubtless the case with the rather heroic narratives in the 1991 Bozzoli/Nkotsie book—whose format was certainly constructed by their tellers as much as by those who researched them—as it is with Magda A's own story. Speaking as one who has researched the experiences of volunteer/activists in South African NGOs (see James 2002), it seems clear to me that this protagonist's current ability to talk about the abuse she earlier suffered as "violence" as she does here owes much to her present-day position: as a volunteer working in NGOs and as an activist in a social movement pitted against the South African government's earlier stance on AIDS medication and treatment. Such experiences and new forms of quasi-employment, located at points of intersection between the state and civil society, have allowed a range of actors—particularly youths and women—to assume fresh perspectives on their earlier lives at the same time as accomplishing their own transformation into people of a different type. It is the mediating role of such social institutions which the article, in its somewhat dichotomous counterposing of a single life against its broader social-historical setting, fails to capture.

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Representing experiences of violence, not to mention accounting for them, poses a particular challenge for ethnographers. The challenges in representing sexual violence include the need to steer a course between cursory representations of violence that lend weight to the idea that it is normal and unimportant and accounts that depict it at a level of detail that verges on the voyeuristic—what Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois (2004, 1) refer to as a theatre or pornography of violence. In accounting for experiences of violence, one of the challenges is to do so in a manner which is sensitive but retains nuance and agency. For the majority of people, daily life in South Africa, as in many other countries, is played out against a background of the structural violence of poverty, racism, and low educational attainment, a violence of reduced opportunities. It is also played out against a historical layer of apartheid brutality. A further layer is provided by the moral economy of gender (i.e., how much women and men are worth) that rests upon structures of gender power and may translate in men into the sense of sexual entitlement and privilege. These layers shape and constrain the possibilities of everyday action, including choices made at a psychological level by men and women and experiences and possibilities that create hopes, fears, joys, senses of personal achievement, windows of luck, and experiences of power. In accounting for experiences of physical and sexual violence, it is critical to foreground its gendered nature. Masculinity is a

central element in any understanding of these forms of violence, and this relates acts of violence to men, their bodies, and their volitions.

Magda's biography is an account of multiple experiences of violence that shaped her vulnerability to HIV. Fassin et al. seek to situate her experiences of violence in the broader social and historical context of the country and argue that doing this is essential for appropriately representing and accounting for her rapes and ultimately her HIV infection. Extending beyond their individual subject, they argue that a failure to account for experiences of violence has provoked the AIDS denialism which is still rampant at high levels in the country. For a social researcher in South Africa, there is a level of undeniable validity to their arguments. Not only do they reflect an essential sociological truth—that one cannot understand violence in isolation from its context—but they remind us that many accounts of abuse and sexual diseases ultimately ring hollow because they fail to embrace a complex sociological reality. However, there is a danger in reducing so many differing aspects of social experience to a unitary notion of violence, as it can render agency invisible and obscure the centrality of gender in an understanding of certain forms of violence. Gender and ideas of masculinity were important in AIDS denialism; it was not coincidental that it coincided with a period of rape denialism, because neither AIDS nor rape could be confronted without engaging with the sexual entitlement of men. Thus, whilst denial of violence may have contributed to AIDS denialism, the ideas that fueled the latter also provoked further denial of certain forms of violence.

It is a truism that violence breeds further violence or, as Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois assert (2004, 1), that structural violence "inevitably translates" into sexual and intimate partner violence. South African social researchers have frequently documented trajectories from exposure to multiple forms of violence to perpetration. But it is also part of the sociological reality that many men, at least a large minority, are not sexually or otherwise violent (Jewkes et al. 2006). The history of South Africa is one of centuries of colonial brutality and exploitation, with a systematic assault on African families conducted through the pass laws, the migrant labour system, and forced removals. Historical records also suggest that rape and violence against women may have been much less common in the distant and recent past in the country than they are today and that ideals of African masculinity have changed over the past few decades to become more individualistic, harder, and less caring (Clowes 2005). This immediately points to the reflection that sociological reality and history have multiple narratives. Understanding this as well is important for work on a broader project of social change.

Representing violence as often born of violence is important in understanding violent men's complex histories and greatly increases the likelihood of being able to engage men in reflective processes of social change. This project also critically requires the foregrounding of masculinity, the essentially gendered nature of certain forms of violence, and the socio-

logical reality of multiple narratives of masculinity (Morrell 2001). The recognition that gendered socialization can take multiple forms and operate in multiple ways and that individuals have choices at a psychological level, even in a context of multiple and overlapping experiences of violence, is essential for any project to end violence.¹

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My intervention is inspired by my research experience in Katanga (Congo), where the mining pool is historically close to that of South Africa. In the twentieth century, the societies of Southern Africa were restructured by salaried work, migratory movements imposed by the mining industry, and Christianity. Protestantism was more readily adapted to the realities of South African societies. In Katanga, Catholic missionaries kept believers from having direct access to the Bible. Thus, the temporalities of the construction of social frameworks of memory differ between regions, and the industrial modernity to be achieved in the colonial framework took "domesticated" Christianity as the basis of its worldview. Life history as narrative of self (see Jewsiewicki 1995, 2002a) arises from this, but its temporalities vary according to group membership, gender (see Denzin 1990), etc. An artifact of social construction (Hacking 1999), it reflects the individual's capacity to (re)construct and to negotiate social connections (Latour 2005). As a form of "modern" representation, its mastery allows for a public display of a "modern" identity and stability based on the continuity of linear time. With Achille Mbembe, I acknowledge its importance, but I do not believe that, in postcolonial Africa, narrative is the subject's only means of accessing "sovereign" existence (Jewsiewicki 2002b).

Fassin, *Le Marcis*, and *Lethata* have been following this process, and experience in Lubumbashi (Katanga) allows me to historicize it. In the 1970s I found it impossible to obtain the life histories of men and women who had had little schooling, even though the research was carried out by local students. The individuals questioned produced lists: women recited births and miscarriages or dowry values, men listed the amounts of their salaries, the location of stores, etc. Twenty years later, the situation had changed. The neo-Evangelist Christian movements had introduced the notion of the witnessing of divine grace in the form of a life-history fragment and the personal reading of the Bible. Life history had become the primary means of self-construction and one that women in particular had taken on. In the wake of a deindustrialization that led to massive unemployment, women's informal activities fed families. In this society formerly organized around exclusively masculine salaried work, legitimate authority and

1. I thank Robert Morrell for his comments on the manuscript.

de facto authority were not the same. Women's new role sought recognition through the life history (the witnessing of divine grace) produced during collective prayer.

As Magda A says, producing and repeating this narrative and, eventually, seeing it put into writing and distributed means mastering a realm of memory (Nora, Kritzman, and Goldhammer 1998) of the self. The narrative is this realm in which memories work, and the "Christian" framework (Halbwachs 1994) allows people to compare themselves with one another. In a shared framework, each individual negotiates social connection and asks for recognition as a collective narrative takes shape and experiences are shared. In turn, subjects take strength from this process in order to give their lives a "modern" meaning (Jewsiewicki 2004, 2005).

This narrative construction, which unfolds linearly, projects the subject's goal and identification of action into the future and thus produces the coherence of life. The narrative and experience of Rigoberta Menchú (Burgos-Debray 1984; Stoll and Arias 2001) are an example of this. The success of her narrative is not unrelated to her Nobel Peace Prize and gives coherence both to her past experience and to the construction of her public personality as the author of that life history. Magda A's desire to broadcast the narrative under her own name demonstrates an awareness that political social action calls for representation. The narrative of an experience of a traumatic event (the narrative of divine grace) is an avenue for obtaining the recognition of others and turns the future into the accomplishment of the mission thus received. As a realm of memory of self, the life history provides the subject with the possibility of building a time (Fabian 1983) in the modern regime of historicity. It designates its "own" realm from which it can then launch strategic actions that go beyond the tactics of the dominated (de Certeau 2002).

Magda A's narrative can be compared to that of Marie Danielle Mwadi wa Ngombu, a former Congolese nun turned social activist and narrator of the conquest of the public space of the capital city Kinshasa by ordinary Congolese (Jewsiewicki with Mbuyamba and Mwadi wa Ngombu 1995). The construction of the narrative was inseparable from each author's life. Marie Danielle's life is reflected in her narrative even though she replaces herself with a little boy, an innocent Christian victim of the repression, as the subject of the action. Thus women's lives find new resources for the construction of their "modern" selves as political subjects and for society's recognition of this role (see Boltanski and Thévenot 1991).

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Fassin et al. effectively demonstrate the value of life stories for understanding experiences of structural and physical violence, sexuality, and AIDS in contemporary South Africa.

Life stories enable social scientists to reconcile anthropological and historical concerns and to discern how private domestic relations intersect with the public sphere. But, at the same time, such biographical writing poses unique challenges. Stories do not tell themselves, and they require us to articulate the voices of our research subjects with our own theories.

Magda's stories about her experiences of moving across the southern African social landscape, being raped by her maternal uncle and her stepfather, using sexual liaisons to secure a foothold in Johannesburg, contracting HIV, and becoming an AIDS activist illuminate broader intellectual issues. These enable Fassin et al. to suggest that it is more fruitful to view sexual violence in contexts of "structural stressfulness" than to view it through cultural glasses. In this respect, women's dependence upon men is more pertinent than ideational models of African masculinity or sexual promiscuity. Fassin et al. also recognize the important mediating role of institutions such as the state, NGOs, and activist organizations in shaping the trajectory of people's lives. Moreover, Magda's story shows the possibility of resisting structural determinations. Ironically, she achieves autonomy as a lethal illness takes possession of her.

I broadly agree with Fassin et al. on these issues and have argued many of the same points elsewhere (Niehaus 2006). Yet I feel that their emphasis on the epistemology of narrativity and on storytelling as a "mode of subjectification" should be balanced by more conventional concerns about the historical accuracy of biographical information (see Van Onselen 1993). They provide a remarkably thin description of Magda's life. The description contains few dates and hardly any attempt to interrogate local symbolic meanings and conveys little about Magda's views about the South African government's response to the AIDS pandemic. None of the three researchers found it necessary to interview any members of Magda's primary groups to cross-check the accuracy of her recollections. Nor do they reflect on how Magda's current engagement with the discourses of NGOs might have coloured her representations of past events. At certain points in the text a critical reader would most certainly demand greater substantiation. For example, Magda claims that her mother's older brother decided to sell his twins to a traditional healer so that the healer could include their body parts into his potions. Did Magda imagine this, or did her uncle really do so? At another point, Fassin et al. reject the claim by certain academics that men have sex with virgins to cleanse themselves of HIV, but they do not critically interrogate any of the evidence in support of or against this claim. Moreover, they argue that academics have ignored the topic of incest in South Africa. In so doing, they themselves ignore Russel's (1997) pertinent account of white South African incest survivors.

Life stories are more valuable for what they reveal than for their representivity, but even in the former capacity Magda's life story has definite limitations. It reveals how sexual violence is experienced by its victims but provides only indirect clues about the motives of those who perpetrate these hor-

rendous deeds. Here the life stories and direct testimonies of male rapists would be more illuminating. Magda was fortunate to have participated in clinical trials and to have benefited from AIDS counselling, antiretroviral therapies, and social grants. She came to the realization that AIDS was not the end of the world. Her life story therefore provides no insight into the hidden experiences of hundreds of thousands of South Africans who are currently in need of antiretroviral drugs but are not receiving them. This problem is no longer simply one of supply. Numerous people who are infected with the virus actively reject the biomedical paradigms for HIV and AIDS and respond to the pandemic with denial, fatalism, and silence.

Life stories can clearly offer anthropology a great deal, but we can only realize this potential by more accurately recording a broader spread of diverse life stories. We also need to ask what anthropology can offer life stories. Here the challenge of eliciting local conventions of storytelling, constructs of history, and concepts of personhood come to mind.

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How do we tell the story of a life of violence? This is the question at the forefront of the minds of the authors of this article, and it is a question that has long preoccupied the novelist J. M. Coetzee. For Fassin, Le Marcis, and Lethata, it is fundamentally about the possibility of anthropological interpretation. For Coetzee, it is crucial for writing fiction. The article attempts to draw anthropologist and writer into conversation with one another but stops short of the full implications of Coetzee's project.¹

Fassin et al. set out to tell the story of a South African woman who has been subject to various forms of violence. They are alert from the beginning to the fact that she may tell them the kind of story that she thinks they want to hear. As for what she expected from telling them her story, they observe that she was interested in how well the tale was told and especially in having her (real) name cited. They alert the reader to the poignancy and irony of the fact that what she really wanted—her name (in print)—she could not have in terms of “ethical” anthropological practice.

Much of Fassin et al.'s concern is the relationship between “life and times,” between individual biography and historical context. It is interesting in this regard that they write, “It was as if the events which shaped South Africa were an invisible

context, never explicitly referred to. . . . The racial discrimination and confrontations that are so overwhelming under the agonizing regime of apartheid never explicitly appear in the narrative.” Instead of staying with this anomaly, they return to it farther on, pointing to the “historical watermark rising” as the story continues. How would Coetzee have thought through this point of difficulty?

At the heart of Coetzee's enterprise is the question of how to write without authority. This question is formed in part from an encounter with the epistemological insecurities of postmodernism, in potent mix with apartheid itself, and the almost impossible dilemma of being a white writer “speaking for” others, especially black people. Coetzee refuses to see his subjects as in any way representative of their context. Here he is acutely attuned to the fact that acts of narration are acts of violence at the figurative level. In *Foe* (1986), Friday, the figure of the Other, is the site of a shimmering, indeterminate potency that has the power to overwhelm and cancel Susan Barton's narrative of him and, finally, the novel itself. *Foe* illustrates a way of seeing the violated figure without reinscribing that violation, without imprisoning it in the construct of victim. Coetzee gives himself over to a narrative that confronts its subject as a body and a narrative that he has been unable to master completely.

Fassin et al. also mark the limits of Magda A's victimhood—but not at the level of narrative form, which is where Coetzee's intervention is most acute. They write that her biography “illustrates the slow displacement from subordination to subjectification,” and this they take, too, as evidence of her increasing engagement with her political context. Coetzee would reject any such point of closure. Instead of having his characters speak of or for their historical context, he dramatizes the risks of doing just this. This is *his* politics of agency. The “life and times” of his novel's title must be seen as in part an ironic take on the act of telling someone's story. Interpretation is an exercise in power, and he finds a way of writing that displaces this power so that his subjects float out of the grasp of his narrative. It could be said that he is still the one who “floats” them out of our interpretative grasp, but he does so in such a way as to render them intelligible only to themselves. Anthropology relies on the fact that people may be, in part at least, obscure to themselves and that the anthropologist may therefore be able to see things that they cannot. It must do this because to float its subjects out of its grasp would be to refute its premise that we can obtain fundamental knowledge about other people. Fiction's conceit is that fundamental knowledge is to be found where people break loose from the narratives we set for them. Fassin et al. insist on reading the life into its political and historical context. Coetzee has been accused by some of not tying his subjects firmly to the mast of their “times,” but his texts are some of our deepest encounters with brutality and the possibility of freedom from its reach. They too speak profoundly of their historical moment.

1. I have found it useful to reread parts of Attwell's *J. M. Coetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing* (1993) and Jolly's *Colonization, Violence, and Narration in White South African Writing: Andre Brink, Breyten Breytenbach, and J. M. Coetzee* (1996) in thinking about these comments.

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Not long ago Thomas Csordas (1999, 157) rightly posed himself an open question: "If phenomenology offers an understanding of embodiment at the microanalytic level of individual experience, can it also address global issues of cultural politics and historical process?" "Life and Times of Magda A" seems to offer a positive answer to this question: not only is it impossible to divorce Magda's experience from the sociopolitical processes that have historically shaped her life world but also we can appreciate the lived dimension of such processes in the immediacy of her experience. Fassin and colleagues' approach in fact goes well beyond the appreciation of the agentive nature of the cultural subject on the stage of a structurally informed reality to show how embodied experience comes to be socially positioned within the lived experience of the subject. Aligned with the most recent literature (Biehl, Good, and Kleinman 2007), the cultural subject here is neither intended as solely overdetermined nor represented as a heroic individual capable of culturally emplotting her existence in a narrative social vacuum. On the one hand, as Richard Werbner (2002, 3) has pointed out, we need to "consider how far subjectivities are determined by discourses, political economy, state structures, and personal dispositions . . . beyond the analytic limits of individualism and the lone heroic actor"; on the other hand, agency can be understood in terms of the actors' capacity for critical engagement of the processes of their very construction/constriction. I believe that it is in this way that Fassin and colleagues manage to counterbalance the tendency (which has sometimes informed the anthropological literature on suffering and its narratives) of representing an essentialized view of both the victim and suffering as precultural, panhuman phenomena. We need an approach capable of combining an anthropology *from* the body (Csordas 1994, xi) with an anthropology *of* the body, the former concerned with "what the body produces" whereas the latter looks at "how the body is produced." The two approaches, in fact, have the potential to be reductionist if not combined. An anthropology *from* the body has the potential to show the active role of the body in producing culture and experience, but it runs the risk of positioning the body as a transcendent force devoid of history, whereas if we combine such a focus with an anthropology *of* the body we can counterbalance this tendency "by revealing that the body is always-already engaged in a specific social situation by means of techniques or rule-governed practices which are historically and geographically contingent" (Crossley 1995, 43–44). Fassin and colleagues' work sheds light on such historical facticity, alerting us to the importance of the dialectical, incomplete, fragmented, processual analysis of historical forms of embodiment.

The concept of embodiment is now certainly paradigmatic in anthropology, allowing analysis not only to focus on culture and the self but also to problematize the dialectical relationship between symbolic forms and social processes. In this guise the very issue of power comes to be reframed, once we ground it in the historical horizon of meanings and practices inscribed in the lived dimension of personal existence. Magda could be easily represented as an icon of *Homo sacer* (Agamben 1998): condemned to a life of violence, HIV-positive, target of humanitarian empathy, victim of social exclusion and economic exploitation, yet out of her marginality she is capable of renegotiating the terms of her existence. Despite the fact that, ironically, she can take possession of her life precisely in the form of bare life and therefore her novel mode of being-in-the-world emerges directly from bio-power, this does not limit her agency. Rather than considering her case a reflection of sovereign power hypostatized, nearly metaphorical, our task as anthropologists should be investigating ethnographically the tensions and contradictions between particular kinds of life and the processes of its manifold construction/constriction (Comaroff 2006). An anthropology concerned with violence and social suffering today is not a very charitable discipline, aiming at investigating the pathogenic role of human action and the silent oppression of the social order; it is an anthropology that rejects an extreme relativism as an answer to a blind and highly problematic universalism; it is an anthropology concerned with issues of social equity, constantly reflecting on its own concepts and on its own social and public role; it is an anthropology that investigates not only the social genealogy but also the political impact of its own interpretations of a reality that it cannot avoid being part of. Work such as that of Fassin and colleagues is badly needed today for those in anthropology who are sceptical both about the analysis of cultural representations alone and about a demystifying role for the discipline.

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Narrating the story of Magda A, Fassin, Le Marcis, and Lethata give a very vivid and convincing account of the experience and history of violence in South Africa. Linking biography with history, they succeed in pointing out the political economy of violence while at the same time remaining faithful to individual subjectivity and the experience of suffering. Without being reduced to an "example," Magda's life enables a focus on the interlinked contexts of apartheid, domination, border regimes, migration, exploitation, and gender relationships. Fassin and colleagues argue that the sexual violence that Magda has suffered can be explained not in terms of a particular culture but only in terms of a system of strict and brutal domination. In a paradoxical way, Magda's story is also

a success story. Having contracted HIV, she became an anti-AIDS activist and volunteer and was, as an employee of an NGO, for the first time able to live a kind of “regular” and autonomous life.

The article is an important contribution to the growing body of anthropology of violence. Focusing on sexual abuse, the authors argue that ethnography should avoid both culturalizing violence and individualizing it by attributing abuse to “idiosyncratic and irrational conduct reified in the present.” The ethnography of violence has to tread a narrow and difficult path that avoids committing “textual violence” by reducing the experience and subjectivity of a victim to either simply cultural or individual factors. I certainly endorse the authors’ arguments in this regard.

I still stumble, however, over their declared intention of making “sense of violence.” What does it mean to “make sense of violence”? The idea of making sense of violence is widely shared in the anthropology of violence. Mostly, it seems to imply putting violence into social and cultural context (e.g., Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois 2004). Because meaning is social and thus linked to particular perspectives, we have to ask more precisely: making sense for whom? Putting violence into context certainly helps *us* to understand why certain forms of violence occur in certain circumstances. Yet does this also “make sense” to the victims of violence themselves? Robben and Nordstrom (1995) argue that absurdity and incomprehensibility, perhaps “senselessness,” are essential aspects of the experience of violence and that in imposing order on such experience for the purpose of “making sense” these aspects, together with the “facthood” of violence, get lost. In other words, the “meaning” of violence is, perhaps, nothing but violence itself.

Fassin et al. do not specify for whom they intend to make sense of violence. It seems, however, that Magda herself aims at making sense of her own life by telling her story, for initially she insisted on having it published with her real name. Telling a life story, then, might have an almost therapeutical aspect of putting things in order. Kirsten Hastrup (2003, 312) has emphasized that victims of violence are silenced in the first place and that “the destruction of language is closely related to the destruction of the subject.” The regaining of one’s voice and language is, then, a first step toward regaining subjecthood and agency, a move beyond victimhood.

Magda’s ultimate escape is probably a significant element in making sense of her life. I suppose that because she was able to leave the vicious circle of violence she got the opportunity to tell her life. It seems that as an activist she came into contact with the authors and got the opportunity to narrate her story. This poses the question of all those mute life stories that have not found a way out of despair, that cannot be told, and to which nobody listens. What could be their sense? Finally, what could be the sense of sexual violence for the men who perpetrated it? Are we, as anthropologists, supposed, to “make sense” here, too? Making sense of violence for the perpetrators comes dangerously close to explaining

and perhaps even justifying violence. In my understanding, dealing with the antinomy of making sense of violence and rendering its senselessness is the most difficult aspect of any anthropology of violence.

Reply

What makes life specifically human, writes Hannah Arendt (1958), is that it is full of events which can be told and may thus found a biography. An important part of the empirical material anthropologists collect in the field is made up of such biographies or, rather, biographical fragments. However, much of this disappears as we write articles and books, theorize about social worlds, and engage in disciplinary reflexivity. What do we do with others’ life stories? What sort of text do we make out of the matter of their existence? More than anything else, our writing on and with Magda is about such an ethical interrogation. We are grateful to the commentators for giving us the opportunity to make this point clearer. But, of course, stories do not tell themselves; they are not lives, and our knowledge and understanding of others’ experience remain a partial and biased interpretation. How can we take these limitations into account without losing the power and frailty of language, especially when it comes to analyzing violence? How can we make sense of an individual biography by inscribing it in a larger collective history without losing the singularity of the former or the irreducibility of the latter? This was explicitly the epistemological challenge we were confronted with in Magda’s story, and here again, the comments we have received are welcome because they allow us to clarify our position.

Life history as narrative is a social construction, argues Jewsiewicki, recalling a time when it was impossible to collect such materials in Africa. He insists on the role of Christian movements in developing this social competence. Before him, Foucault (1994) emphasized the link between introspection and confession as characteristic of truth building under the pastoral power of religion. In South Africa, this historicization may be specified a little more. We have shown (Fassin 2007) that in the context of the AIDS epidemic nongovernmental organizations have shaped a paradigmatic form of storytelling through memory boxes, tape recording, and witnessing imported from the Western world’s activism but echoed by more local processes developed in the course of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s hearings (Posel 2002). Clearly, Magda’s performance of her own life as narrative cannot be understood apart from this background, particularly, as James comments, her involvement in the activist network. We could even add that our own interest in her tragic story is itself historically determined, as anthropologists have only recently discovered social suffering (Fassin 2004).

That Magda’s biography is a social construct is thus pre-

cisely what we want to call attention to by presenting the opening scene in which she tells her story in the artificial environment of an academic setting. However, should this lead us to discredit her discourse as a mere “biographical illusion,” in Bourdieu’s (1986) terms? Obviously there is a limit to our knowledge of what happened to Magda as a child and an adolescent. But does the fact that we did not go to Lesotho to hear her dead uncle’s side of the story or to KwaZulu-Natal to listen to her vanished stepfather’s justifications call into question any presentation and discussion of the violence she says she experienced as Niehaus suggests? Certainly, the long-term interactions we have had with Magda, our conversations with her mother, relatives, and boyfriend, and the more general knowledge we have gathered of this specific South African context enrich and thicken our understanding of her story, which, as our commentator himself admits, broadly converges with his own findings in the field. Nevertheless, they do not eliminate our uncertainty and lack of knowledge about her story. No matter how hard anthropologists may try to document biographies, they are forced to abandon the fantasy of getting to the ultimate objective truth of people’s lives (Crapanzano 1980). This epistemological prudence should not, however, lead to any such disenchanting renunciation as that of judges who deprive asylum-seekers of refugee status for fear of being thought too gullible (Fassin and d’Halluin 2007). We have to make do with what the subjects tell us about their lives.

Here Nuttall’s comparison of anthropology with literature is illuminating. By drawing a parallel between the life and times of Michael K and of Magda A, we certainly called for such discussion: it meant distancing ourselves from naïve realism, as we also did by invoking Zaza Khuzwayo’s narrative, Matshikiza’s memories, and Root’s film. In fact we think that there are two main differences between Coetzee’s project and ours, one having to do with facts and the other with authority.

First, we believe that however obscure some aspects of Magda’s story and problematic our reconstitution of it, she is not a character of fiction: she exists, as do her mother and her boyfriend, whom we know; she did lose her first child, whose burial caused family conflicts which we witnessed; she does have AIDS and receives treatment which has caused physical transformations that we have observed. While we were not there to testify to the facts she mentions about her childhood and adolescence, we know of several other stories which attest to the sort of violence she evokes (Le Marcis 2004a) and several studies which statistically establish the frequency of sexual abuse before the age of 15 (Jewkes and Abrahams 2002). We thus plead for a well-tempered constructivism which instead of systematically rejecting the facts related cross-checks them. This is what allows us to demystify the so-called virgin-cleansing myth as a typically culturalist invention on the basis of our own findings, our interviews with psychologists specialized in sexual abuse, and empirical surveys conducted by others (Jewkes, Martin, and Penn-Kek-

ana 2002), but it is also what makes us approach Magda’s life through the lens of a critical positivism.

Secondly, we assume that an important task for anthropology is to make sense of what would otherwise remain unintelligible, that is, either abandoned to irrationality or interpreted out of its social context: Magda’s life, we think, is understandable only within the broader context of her times, that is, within the political and moral economies of gender, race, and class under apartheid and in its aftermath. We consider that writing about others is an act of power which includes proposing interpretations beyond the narrator’s scope. Where the novelist would suspend his authority over his character, we accept it as an epistemological condition for ethnography (Clifford 1983). However, anthropological authority relies on a form of self-control involving all the theoretical analyses, methodological standards, and empirical studies that anthropologists have come to think of in terms of accountability (Strathern 2000). In the case of Magda, reconstituting her family and personal trajectory within the historical context of labour migrations, apartheid laws, insurrectional brutality, workforce exploitation, the subjugation and later emancipation of African women, the tragedy of AIDS and of its denial, and the emergence of AIDS activism—in other words, interpreting it in terms of the embodiment of history (Fassin 2002)—contrasts with interpretations that isolate the person’s supposed rational choices and cultural features from the social conditions of their production and reproduction. We are grateful to the novelist for not confining his subjects to this framework. As anthropologists we are, up to a point, accountable to ours by not leaving them outside of it.

Thus inscribing individual violence into social violence and historicizing them certainly pose problems, as Jewkes asserts. She underlines the risk of assuming the unity of violence and underestimating the specificity of gender issues. Certainly not all forms of violence can be assimilated, and sexual abuse should not be attributed solely to political oppression (Delius and Glaser 2002): the regime of racial segregation contributed to the deregulation of social norms within African communities, but there is no simple social determinism in violent practices. In fact, rather than thinking of violence in terms of a continuum (Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois 2004), we prefer to work on its different forms and configurations through ethnographies (Daniel 1997) in an attempt to apprehend their articulation.

This is the limited meaning we give to the expression “making sense of violence” on which Sökefeld stumbles. He is right in asserting that for the victim the experience of violence is probably that of senselessness. One can imagine—but only imagine—that this was the case for the young Magda subjected to sexual abuse by her uncle and later her stepfather. And it is also possible to suggest—but only suggest—that telling her story was, if not making violence meaningful for her, at least putting some order into her life, possibly with some therapeutic effects, as our commentator writes. Nevertheless, we would not go so far as to suppose that in the

absence of an encounter with anthropologists, activists, or any other listener, untold life stories would leave their protagonists without sense. We just do not know. It is important to insist on this point and, accepting Quaranta's invitation, to be quite precise about what we mean by "subjectivity." While anthropologists deal with "vanishing subjects" (Rorty 2007) and should therefore not allow themselves to explore their interlocutors' interiority, they still can reach an understanding of the political process of subjectification (Rancière 1998) as it is expressed here through Magda's participation in social movements and even more through her making her voice heard. Becoming a subject is a public act.

In the opening pages of her book on violence in daily life, Das (2006, 8) underlines her certainty and her doubt:

My interest is not in describing these moments of horror but rather in describing what happens to the subject and world when the memory of such events is folded into ongoing relationships. My wonder and terror is that it is from such fragile and intimate moments that a shared language had to be built and with no assurance that there were secure conventions on which such a language, in fact, could be founded.

It is on this uncertainty of a shared language that we wrote about and with Madga A.

—Didier Fassin, Frédéric Le Marcis, and Todd Lethata

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